

Introduction

Earlier this year, Dave McMillan, a former student of mine when I was teaching in the Psychotherapy programme at Auckland University of Technology, sent me a copy of an assignment that he and some student colleagues had completed for another training programme. The assignment was a literature review on counselling men with depression, and in their research report the students observed: “It was a disappointment to find only one essay specific to New Zealand (Culbertson, 2006).”

Dave’s comment tapped into a longstanding concern of mine about how little writing is done by New Zealanders, in the several fields of mental health, about dealing with male clients. In their seminal work on New Zealand culture, Bev James and Kay Saville-Smith (1994) claim that every national culture within what was once the British Empire is organised around one of three possible principles: race, class or gender. Gender, they claim, is the principle around which New Zealand culture is organised. While I’m not completely comfortable with this claim, since it ignores the significant, on-going and deep problems of race in this country and in our profession, certainly it is true that gender is a basic organising principle of almost every human culture, and ours is no exception. Yet gender issues are, for the most part, rarely foregrounded in the mental health literature originating from writers and experienced professionals here. Almost all professional materials on the ubiquitous power of gender in counselling and psychotherapy originate from England or the United States.

I was bothered enough by this concern that I approached the editors of the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling* about the possibility of my guest-editing a special issue on the topic of “working with male clients in New Zealand.” The editors graciously accepted my offer, and I began the task of soliciting submissions from colleagues in New Zealand who I knew to have an interest in gender issues among the various cultures of Aotearoa New Zealand. This issue of the *NZJC* is the result of my efforts.

I should declare my own position on the topic of gender, in order to put into context the reasons I solicited materials from these particular writers. To speak simplistically, academic work in the field of gender theory can generally be divided into two “camps”: the “essentialist” position, and the “constructivist” position. The essentialist position holds that one who is born with male genitals will be expected to grow up to be masculine, a universal identity category, and that any deviation from that template of masculinity will be judged a failure. The constructivist position, heavily influenced

by the work of Judith Butler (1990, 2004), argues that our genitals do not determine our gender identity or, for that matter, our sexual identity. Butler's argument is that we "perform" our genderedness and our sexuality according to the complex dictates of specific cultures and particular contexts. There are, then, to use terminology influenced by the work of Australian Bob Connell (1995), many "masculinities" within New Zealand culture, rather than just one. The public discourse on masculine identity masks these variations, however, particularly by its concentration on "being a bloke" as a goal towards which all New Zealanders born with male genitals are expected to aspire. The constructivist position, I firmly believe, is the only position that allows men to find a "way ahead" in their search for a caring, non-violent, healthy relational identity with women, children, and creation.

In the first essay of this issue, Matthew Bannister grounds his analysis of how deeply gender issues affect the lives of both men and women in this land by using his own experience as a late-teenage immigrant from Scotland. Matthew is well-known in academic circles for his work on gender issues. While not himself a mental health professional, he offers us a particular lens through which to understand how the identity of our male clients is determined by the gendered construction of culture, and how specific the range of gender expressions in this country is.

Of course, men start life as boys, and grow through the difficult stage of male adolescence. Research in gender argues that much of the pressure to be a particular type of masculine male is encountered during adolescence, and it is this search for a socially validated gender identity that causes so many young men to be troubled during their secondary education years. To make matters worse, essentialist definitions of masculinity often attempt to dominate constructivist definitions through the process of bullying, a problem still all too common in our New Zealand schools. Peter Bray and Emily Hutchinson have surveyed the literature on adolescent male identity development, arguing for a multi-systemic approach in assisting boys through the perilous journey of adolescence.

Combining professional and personal experience, Stephen Gaddis, Elmarie Kotzé and Kathie Crocket offer an essay that traces the slippery impact of essentialist gender messages and myths within everyday narratives. Since the work of Michel Foucault, we have been increasingly aware of the ways in which discourse "creates" reality, suggesting that we all need to pay meticulous attention to the way in which our words are used, as well as the meanings read into them. In their essay, analytical techniques are modelled, bravely, in an attempt to "trouble" the gender essentialism which so pervades human communication, thereby opening up new spaces for essentialism to be resisted or even subverted.

School counsellor Sarah Penwarden uses discourse analysis and motivational interviewing to challenge the call of “gangsta” discourse among adolescent males in the South Auckland school where she works. Her essay provides clear and careful examples of how the idealisation of a certain “masculinity script” can be challenged, allowing new identity choices to emerge which are more consonant with these young men’s own dreams and goals.

Brendan Hokowhitu, of Otago University’s School of Māori, Pacific and Indigenous Studies, addresses the restrictive space left open for Māori males in the postcolonial cultures of Aotearoa New Zealand. The traditional multiplicity of performed Māori masculinities has been severely constricted through an idealised hybridity of Māori and Victorian masculinities, eclipsing the “talkative, flamboyant, creative, feminine, and deeply humorous performances of Māori men” which were more normative prior to European contact. His essay challenges all of us to question our own levels of cultural competence and trust when we wonder “why Māori men won’t talk.”

Finally, Margaret Agee and I present the first of a series of publications on Pasifika ‘*afakasi* (half-caste) identity which are proceeding out of a two-year study funded by a University of Auckland staff research grant. This research proceeded, in turn, out of our work together as co-editors (with Cabrini Makasiale) of our recently published book, *Penina Uliuli: Contemporary Challenges in Mental Health for Pacific Peoples* (University of Hawai‘i, 2007). Here we discuss some of the problems and promises that are generated when masculinity is filtered through the lens of Pasifika issues of cultural and racial complex identity.

Sex is our biology, everything else is gender. “If you know that the difference is 100% biological, it’s a sex difference. Everything else must be considered a gender difference” (Nobelius Am, 2004). There is no escaping the gendering of identity performance—either in our clients, or in ourselves as counsellors. Every time we sit with a client, we are performing our gender for each other, and every problem that a client brings to us has some aspect of gender performance attached to it, as does every response we give to clients. Many of these performances retain their power by being invisible, and the dominant forms of masculinity are assumed to be the most invisible of all. For this reason, I am pleased to be able to present this excellent collection of essays about “working with male clients in New Zealand.” I hope you find it both enlightening and deeply challenging.

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