

Chapter 21

Jars of Light: Queering Our Approach to Supporting College Men

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century adult male learner lives a multidimensional life with multiple identities impacted by their notion of masculinity and manhood. Traditional notions of masculinity offer consequential stakes for college men which can impact student success and retention. This chapter presents a study designed to examine experiences of diverse undergraduate male learners as they explore the ways of knowing and make meaning of their own notions of how they experience their masculinity regulated and how their perception of other men's notion of masculinity shape their relationship with other men. Utilizing Queer Theory as a framework, educators can reimagine how masculinity impacts lives and boldly reimagine what an affirming and inclusive identity looks like for college men. This chapter will help stakeholders serve as an anchor for men willing to contest dominant ideologies surrounding masculinity while offering strategies to support male student retention through culturally inclusive practices.

INTRODUCTION

Though men hold power and reap the privileges that come with our sex, that power is tainted. There is, in the lives of men, a strange combination of power and privilege, pain and powerlessness. Men enjoy social power, many forms of privilege, and a sense of often-unconscious entitlement by virtue of being male. But the way we have set up that world of power causes immense pain, isolation, and alienation not only for women, but also for men. This is not to equate men's pain with the systemic and systematic forms of women's oppression. Rather, it is to say that men's worldly power – as we sit in our homes or walk the street, apply ourselves at work or march through history – comes with a price for us. This combination of power and pain is the hidden story in the lives of men. It is men's contradictory experiences of power (p.59) – Michael Kaufman, 1999

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Jars of Light

It is 6 a.m., and Alejandro is working. He's been cleaning the offices in downtown Austin since 4:30 a.m to help support his mother and father. Each of his days begins with cleaning the types of significant and essential offices his parents never imagined themselves working. Alejandro cleans until 7:30 a.m. and rushes home to get ready for his 9 a.m. class. He has a full day of classes, followed by study hours in the library with his fraternity, along with a meeting planning spring formal. The business student sighs, riding the bus to his house, thinking about the long day ahead and the three papers that are due within the next two days. He is tired, overwhelmed, distracted easily by the current headlines in the news amid the current administrations shifting harsh immigration policies. He and his family are undocumented, all unprotected from deportation. He closes his eyes and reminds himself to push it down. Push down the tired, push down the anxiety, push down the pain. The waves of emotions Alejandro experiences daily leave him feeling devastated only to be reminded how to float in the next breath.

Alejandro lives two lives: School always represents success, happiness, stability. He then goes home and faces insecurity about work and finances. At a young age, Alejandro learned not to talk about his undocumented status, not even with his best friend. This was when he learned to put the lid on the jar of all his emotions, developing a coping mechanism of pushing down feelings, needs, and desires. His father is not an affectionate man, nor is he someone who takes the lid off of his jar of emotions. Mirroring this trait is something Alejandro has mastered. As one of the few men of color in his fraternity, Alejandro struggles with how transparent he is with his brothers. He often makes excuses as to why he cannot participate in social activities because he simply cannot pay for them; his money goes to support the family. The biggest fear in sharing his reality with his fraternity brothers is his belief he will be seen as less than in the eyes of others. Alejandro places the metaphorical mask of masculinity on each day, performing masculinity in ways he hopes will allow him to be seen as "one of the bros". There are so many times Alejandro yearns for the words to come rushing out of his mouth, allowing his brothers to see who he is and to hear what his life is like, but the sentences get trapped behind the steel fence inside his mouth. The only thing escaping the steel is silence ... Alejandro's silence not only represents his absence of words and sounds but his discomfort with vulnerability and authentic connection.

To quote bell hooks (2010):

The wounded child inside many males is a boy who, when he first spoke his truths, was silenced by paternal sadism, by a patriarchal world that did not want him to claim his true feelings. I want there to be a place in the world where people can engage in one another's differences in a way that is redemptive, full of hope and possibility. Not this 'In order to love you, I must make you something else'. That's what domination is all about, that in order to be close to you, I must possess you, remake and recast you.

Michael Kimmel advances the argument that "men both police and validate the gender performance of other men. While the assumption is men perform masculinities to attract the attention of women, ultimately, other men are the targets of men's masculine performances" (Kimmel, 2009, p. 18). College men across the country are struggling both in and out of the classroom, and this is largely due to how men construct their masculinity and perform it daily. (Harper & Harris, 2010). Landreau and Rodriguez (2012) assert this struggle is based on the hegemonic and very limiting role of masculinity within the United States that directly impacts men's ability to make meaning of what it means to have a healthy understanding of their gender and therefore directly links men to roles with violence, poor academic performance and health decisions (Harper & Harris, 2010; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Sallee, 2011). Due to socialization, predominantly hegemonic masculinity serves as the foundation in which college men

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