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“I’m not a man, I’m a graduate student”: academic discourses and the construction of gender in higher education

Jennifer Wolgemuth

Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia
jenni.wolgemuth@cdu.edu.au

The academy has long been critiqued by feminists for privileging masculinity: as another institution in which gendered power is constructed and resisted. While graduate school is where new academics are socialized into their disciplines, gender is infrequently considered as part of the process of becoming an academic, especially from the perspective of male graduate students. This study examined the production of gender in the academy by analyzing the academic discourses (evolutionary psychology, humanist, social science, [pro]feminist and poststructural) four male graduate students took up in a series of conversations about gender in the academy. Findings revealed discourses were drawn upon to theorize the nature of the gender order, most discourses resulted in reification of a binary gender, and that, even for men who identified as ‘feminists,’ feminist discourses were not taken up to critique other academic discourses. Only the poststructural discourse challenged the naturalness of a binary gender and permitted a fluid and active construction of masculinity in higher education. Implications for academic disciplines are discussed.

Keywords: academic discourse, gender, graduate education

Introduction

Higher education has oft been critiqued for privileging a ‘masculine’ way of being – favoring competition over cooperation, privileging rationality over emotionality, and valuing independent over collaborative work (Ellsworth, 1999; Leonard, 2001; Townsend, 1995; Whitehead, 2002; Wolgemuth & Harbour, 2008). This gendering extends up into (or down from) the disciplinary structure of academe itself, which is divided into the (rigorous) ‘hard’ and (less rigorous) ‘soft’ sciences (Keller, 1982; Harding, 1986, 1991).

But this is not to say the academy is a monolithically male space, nor is it to argue certain disciplines are inherently masculine. Indeed critiquing the academy as masculine, by relegating academic attributes to either side of the gender divide, invariably reproduces a binary gender order the critique would seem to want to dismantle.

Instead the academy is best seen as a place in which gender is both constructed and resisted, a space that is involved in the (re)producing and dismantling of gendered (academic) subjects (Leonard, 2001). The ideal place to study the production of (gendered) academic subjects is graduate school – where the aim is to socialize students into the mores and values, processes and procedures and expectations of academic life. And, as Hirt and Muffo (1998) note, most often “departments are guided not by institutional standards but by the *norms of their discipline*” (p. 18, emphasis added).

Yet gender is infrequently considered as part of the process of becoming an academic. More often than not, when gender enters the graduate student conversation, it follows a deficit model that treats women as in need of special services and remedial attention (e.g., Phillips & Pugh, 2005).

Even more rarely does the graduate student literature study or theorize *men's* experiences of gender in higher education. For example, while Ferreira (2003) asked young male academics about their awareness of the "inhospitable working environment that many of their women colleagues experienced," this study did not ask how the men were positively or negatively impacted by the same unfriendly environments (p. 982). Nor did it ask how the men may have resisted or attempted to change these environments. Overall, little is known about how gender plays out for men in higher education, especially at the graduate level.

This study takes as its focus one likely mechanism for the construction and of gender in the academy: the academic discourse. A discourse is anything that carries meaning and therefore involves the production of subjects (Foucault 1969/1972, 1984). An 'academic' discourse is thusly labeled because it is readily identifiable as taught and received in higher education; as circulating in specific academic disciplines or higher education in general. While recent research has examined how academic discourses are taken up to create *academic* subjects, such as how minority women construct scientist identities (Hughes, 2001), the role academic discourses play in the production of *gendered* subjectivities in higher education is relatively unexamined. The purpose of this study is exploratory; to examine the production of gender in the academy by analyzing the academic discourses male graduate students take up in conversations about gender in the academy.

Methods and analyses

This paper is part of a larger narrative study of the production and resistance of masculinity in graduate education conducted at a large university in the western portion of the United States (Wolgemuth, 2008a). Using an interview method called an inquiry of discomfort (Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006), this study engaged four male graduate students from four different disciplines: counseling (Graham), computer science (Franklin), media analysis (Clark), and social science (Jake) in conversations about masculinity and their experiences as graduate students. All names are pseudonyms. The interviews lasted from 1 to 2 hours each and were audio recorded. While no set interview protocol was established prior to the data collection, the interview series tended to follow an overall pattern, covering the topics of masculinity (2 interviews), graduate school (2 interviews), and heterosexuality (2 interviews).

The interviews were analyzed in three stages, likened to the process of painting portraits. The stages were deconstruction-trace analysis, which drew the preliminary sketch; argument analysis, which added detail; and resistance analysis, which brought in colour. Together the three analytical stages created subjectivity portraits, depictions of the selves the participants constructed during the interviews (Wolgemuth, 2008b). The argument analysis, which attended to the logic and structure of statements about gender, revealed the academic discourses the men took up most often during the interviews.

Results and discussion

The analysis identified five salient academic discourses the men drew on when talking about gender and masculinity in graduate school: sociobiology/evolutionary psychology, humanism, social science, (pro)feminist, and poststructural.

Academic discourses: explaining the gender order

The discourses the men drew on did not, most often, function to construct masculinity *characteristically* – the participants did not describe male academics as ‘logical’ and ‘neutral,’ for example. Rather, the academic discourses served a more theoretical purpose. These discourses were employed to *explain* gender and the gender order, as in the existence and nature of differences between men and women.

The following discussion describes the five discourses the participants relied on, and how these discourses coalesced and conflicted to explain the nature of the gender order and make sense of gender in higher education.

Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology

Graham, the counseling student, argued men and women are naturally different:

It doesn't matter if you believe we evolved this way, we were created this way, or something astronomical came and put us here this way, whatever. It just seems like there's some differences...

These differences were the basis for heterosexual relationships:

As a species, we're sexually incomplete and that's why we have sexual reproduction, it's not asexual reproduction. So I just feel like I'm the masculine half of that for our species.

Throughout his interviews Graham most often drew on sociobiological (Wilson, 1975) and evolutionary psychology (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992) discourses that explain behaviour in terms of evolutionary processes and principles (Petersen, 1998; Vandermassen, 2005) to describe and account for apparent differences between men and women.

Considering these discourse together, they constituted for Graham a natural binary gender order in which men and women were inherently different. But Graham also took up a feminist discourse from his counseling program, which talked about men and women as (unfairly) having differential power. He described himself as “caught between two worlds:” one of traditional masculinity and the other, of a feminist critique.

Graham's attempt to reconcile the conflict between the evolutionary psychology and feminist discourses involved acknowledging men and women's power differences, but ultimately suggesting difference does not imply better or worse:

...maybe it [relationship between men and women] should be equal, but I think there's evolutionary forces...that keeps it like that... If you look at everything in the human experience, I don't think women actually look at the things they have over guys. Not like a guy would say this, but when my wife had her kids, that's nothing I can ever do. That's an advantage she has that I don't. Another that's

purely fact is that baby boys die more than baby girls in the womb and also earlier. We die younger, women live longer. There's some benefits that men don't have... So I think women can really be taught that you have some power too...

In Graham's account, the feminist critique was attenuated by recouping sociobiological and evolutionary psychology discourses. In this sense, the feminist critique was combined with sociobiological discourses to explain and naturalize the characteristic, behavioural *and* power differences between males and females.

The intent of this paper is not to argue sociobiology and evolutionary psychology are inherently sexist scientific theories, although feminist critics certainly make this point (Segal, 1999), rather to note the way these discourses can be taken up to naturalize binary gender differences. From this perspective, it appears that Graham adopted the perspectives allowed by these discourses to construct men as naturally different and (mostly) rightly having more economic and social power than women. While feminism challenges the justice of this power divide, it is by taking up sociobiology and evolutionary psychological discourses that Graham could argue both genders (and their power differences) are necessary to create "harmony" in a binary gender order that insists on its own veracity.

Humanist

Both Franklin, the computer scientist, and Jake, the social scientist, took up humanist discourses to avoid talking about gender. The term 'humanist' refers to Franklin and Jake's appeals to a universal human subject whose admirable qualities are (or should be) accessible to both men and women. Yet neither Franklin nor Jake came to the humanist position qua humanism. They took up a humanist discourse because they felt talking about what it means to be a man in graduate school would reify gender bias (Franklin) and patriarchal power (Jake). Jake said:

It's hard for me to say what I feel like it means to be a man because I identify as gender savvy. And so there's a part of me that automatically says, "This doesn't have to do with me being a male. I try to be gender neutral. Even in my self-thought. I think that I probably police myself. I'm still like this is what I want to do because I want to be a good person. Not because I want to be a good man *per se*.

The humanist subject, however, can be dangerously indifferent to difference, shielded by a "veil of ignorance," "ignorant of its sex, race, class, ethnicity, gender, etc." (Samuels, 1999, p.94). Indeed, Franklin and Jake's constructions of the 'genderless' graduate student were often untenable, as when Franklin described the difficulties male graduate students face when confronted by the 'sexuality' of feminine bodies in graduate school:

Sometimes a woman will wear something that's more revealing than is appropriate for the office. And that's a little hard to get the work done. No pun intended... A woman wears a halter top to work and it lifts her breasts up and it makes them stand out, shows her cleavage... I'm sitting there and trying to talk about an algorithm and I'm like, "Jesus, nice rack."...

Jake and Franklin's taking up of humanism to challenge gender bias and patriarchy is ironic given the historical conflict between humanist and feminist discourses. Feminism's radical second wave critiqued first wave feminism, arguing 'liberty' and 'equality' would never

happen as long as men and women had unequal access to social, economic, and political power (Echols, 1989). Kimmel and Messner (1998) make clear why Franklin and Jake would not view their advocating of a gender neutral subject to be at odds with their feminist aims:

...men often think of themselves as genderless, as if gender did not matter in the daily experiences of our lives... For example, we treat male scientists as if their being men had nothing to do with the organization of their experiments, the logic of scientific inquiry, or the questions posed by science itself. (p. xv)

Jake and Franklin both viewed a humanist “gender neutral” stance as a means of meting out a feminist agenda. Neither Jake nor Franklin turned the radical critique ‘inward’ on their versions of humanism to examine how the humanist discourse constructs a masculine subject veiled as ‘human.’

Social science

Jake considered himself “gender savvy,” and most obviously drew on a social science discourse to construct and analyze the gender order. The discourse of social science is concerned with objectivity, neutrality, causality, and, in Jake’s case, empirical research. It has also been critiqued as androcentric, perpetuating a model of science that privileges masculinity and ‘male experience’ (e.g., Bordo, 1987; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1986, 1991; Keller, 1985; Longino, 1996). It was through the discourse of social science that Jake sought to understand the various impacts of gender in his graduate program. Via the metaphor of a regression equation, Jake struggled to understand the extent to which gendered behavior is determined by biological, social or power based factors. Jake and I had the following exchange:

Jenni: ... it’s like you have this constant regression equation running in your head and you’re trying to parse out the variability.

Jake: That’s the way I think. I mean I can’t... it’s hard for me to just give you an answer like, this is the way being a man is or this is why men and women are the way they are. This is clearly the causal chain of events. I just can’t do it.... It’s like I qualify all my hypotheses about causation. Unless I’m very, feel strongly about the data.

Taken up by Jake, the social science discourse simultaneously and ironically permitted him to adopt the stance of the ‘gender-free’ graduate student who stands outside gender, yet who conducts research which associates masculinity with male subjects and femininity with female subjects. This association is enforced in social science research that sees, as Jake said, “masculinity as the sociopsychological variable of being a man.”

Similar to the humanist discourse, the social science discourse conflicted with a feminist discourse during the interviews, especially when Jake attempted to speak about gender and power in his graduate program. But, in Jake’s case, it is perhaps less accurate to describe these discourses as always in conflict and more accurate to say they sometimes coalesced in ways that silenced or confused one another. For example, Jake’s largely unquestioning adoption of social science’s objectivity and neutrality clouded his ability to employ a critical gender critique of being a graduate student:

I guess it doesn't mean anything to me to be a man in my graduate program.... I don't think about the two in the same sentence. You know? I'm a man graduate student. I don't think about that.

Yet social science methods also complemented his feminist critique when he noticed men's "privilege to be heard" in group settings. Having learned men often dominate group conversations, Jake "studied the dynamics between men and women" in a graduate class. Jake used social science methods to achieve feminist aims, but the logic of social science insisted the subjects of this feminist research were socially or biologically either male or female. Just as a social science discourse (as any discourse) is an "inevitable precondition that shapes findings" of research studies (Yanchar & Williams, 2006), it too can be understood to shape the way people make sense of their everyday lives. It was through the logic of the social science discourse that Jake could associate 'gender neutrality' with being "gender savvy."

(Pro)Feminist

As seen in the previous sections, all the men took up feminist discourses, but their reasons for and the effects of doing so were considerably varied. For Graham, feminism was a worldview encountered in his graduate program that challenged his heretofore firmly held traditional masculine beliefs. Jake and Franklin took up radical (pro)feminist discourses to critique media and society's gendered messages.

The radical feminist discourse provided the men with a platform to talk about the social pressures of being a man in graduate school. Through this discourse, masculinity was not taken-for-granted as natural, but seen to be, at least to some extent, socially produced and enforced. For example Jake said:

...my mom has pressured me more about moving up than my dad. So maybe my mom's ideal of masculinity is operating in my career goals without me being aware of it being masculinity... So... her gender ideology might be part of that driving force....

The radical feminist discourse offered another construction, most notably mentioned by Graham; that of power-hungry and violent man. It is not uncommon in the masculinity studies literature, mostly informed by second wave feminist thought, to decry the masculine subject radical feminism is seen to put forward. As Kilmartin (2007) notes, "The stereotype of men as socially and economically powerful does not fit the experience of most men" (p. 184). If the radical feminist discourse positions women as the victims of men, then Graham's struggles in his "feminist oriented" program suggest he felt like a victim of discourse. Macnamara (2006) argues this effect is "a more sinister element of feminism" that leaves no option for the individual man to form a positive identity (p. 37). To construct a positive way of being a man necessitates mobilizing a different discourse. Franklin and Jake's taking up of a humanist discourse, for example, could be seen as an attempt to construct a positive way of being without relegating men to the oppressor position in the gender order. But, as noted previously, that attempt meant running the risk of nullifying the feminist critique.

Poststructural

Clark, the media studies student, drew on poststructural discourses to inform his ideas of gender and the gender order. These discourses are exemplified by the theories that critique the gender order as reductively binary (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004) and as reliant on a juridico-discursive model of power (Foucault, 1980, 1982; Whitehead, 2002).

The poststructural discourses allowed Clark to talk about masculinity in graduate school in terms of action, rather than a set of characteristics. Taking up poststructural discourses, the male body was taken as cultural (Bordo, 1999); a site of gender performance and contestation. The male graduate student Clark performed could mix gender codes and challenge dominant forms of masculinity in the academy:

I tend to move with my hips a little more in classroom, which is really funny. So I literally change the way that I walk. I mention certain examples in class that might lead people to believe that I'm thinking about certain issues, which I am, but wonder why do I bring up those issues up in class? Rather than other issues or other topics... So one [reason I do that] is to not be a threat in the classroom.

The poststructural discourse permitted Clark to view femininity as simultaneously constructed and a desirable form of masculinity. This is a far removal from radical accounts that position the effeminate man as a victim, or in Connell's (1995) terms, as a marginalized form of masculinity. For example, Clark envied women's freedom to wear tight clothing:

Why should just women wear tight clothes? When I go to the gym I wear speedo shorts and a shirt and shoes. And so, even though I'm doing masculine weight training, I still have this feminine dress kind of mixing those codes I guess. Because like the women you see at the gym usually, short-shorts... and so I'm like, oh I can wear that too.

But because Clark drew on a poststructural discourse that views gender as a performance, he donned tight shorts and a t-shirt and grew a scraggly beard. His male body was transformed into a site of gender contestation that suggests a breakdown of the gender order:

... sometimes I like wearing tight pants and having a beard because I feel like I really throw people for a loop there. Because it's like, what are you? What the hell? I don't even know what to do. Here's a gay mountain man? I'm not sure, should I make him pancakes or like a crepe? So yeah it's just kind of funny.

Clark noted the poststructural and radical feminist discourses were taken up in his department to create antagonistic camps in which the poststructural position functioned to denigrate the radical feminist challenge. He wondered at the "coincidence" that young male professors tended to adopt the poststructural position while older female professors argued radical feminist views. Clark said:

I don't feel comfortable bashing female professors or their ideas with my male professors because it's like, there's something going on here. It's more than just their ideas. You're discrediting them as a person and as a female scholar.

Clark revealed a kind of compatibility within the seemingly conflicting radical feminist and poststructural discourses. Or, more accurately, a productive tension and mutual engagement between the two discourses. The poststructural discourse permitted Clark to critique the radical and poststructural professors' attachments to their ways of thinking, and the problematics associated with positioning these two discourses as binary opposites. It would, however, limit his ability to note how the poststructural discourse wielded power in a dominant way. The radical feminist discourse allowed Clark to criticize the material impact of

the poststructural versus radical division, noting the way it functioned to devalue women in his department.

There is nothing new about the positive impact of joining poststructural and radical feminist critiques. The term “poststructural feminist” has been around and negotiated for over 20 years after its most notable introduction in Weedon’s (1996) text, *Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theory*. But importantly what Clark importantly suggests is the imperative of maintaining a persistent critique by continually taking up discourses and seeing what they can tell us and what they prevent us from knowing.

Conclusion

The male graduate students took up five salient academic discourses (sociobiology, humanism, social science, [pro]feminist, and poststructural) to construct masculinity and describe the gender order. Given their graduate disciplines, these discourses were largely predictable, as most were readily available in the men’s respective programs. The exception might be Franklin, the computer scientist, who said his racial perspective came from a humanities background.

For each participant these discourses combined and coalesced in different ways. Graham shows the potential danger of taking up one discourse against another. Faced with a feminist critique of male power, Graham retheorized the difference between men and women to include the concept of power. Through the lens of sociobiology, no longer were men and women just naturally different in their characteristics, they became naturally (rightly) different in the power associated with their gender. In contrast, Clark demonstrated the expansive potential of taking up multiple discourses. The difference between Clark and Graham seems to lie in the extent to which they desired the “truth” of their discourses; whether the discourses were taken up unquestioningly or critically. Graham, for example, was largely new to the feminist challenge. He was struggling with the implications of feminism and his traditional views of masculinity, experiencing what Butler (2002) refers to as a challenge to his sense of self. Yet his unquestioned/able sociobiological perspective meant his traditional views, at least for the moment, could be strategically recouped in the face of a feminist challenge.

Clark, on the other hand, never named himself a poststructuralist. To take up the discourses of critical theory therefore did not present a threat to his identity. Rather, he was able to maintain a (playful) level of distance between himself and the discourses that would identify him. It is this distancing that allowed Clark to ask the questions St. Pierre (2004) poses: What does this discourse allow me to think? What does this discourse prevent me from thinking?

This analysis suggests academic discourses are far from benign ways of seeing the world, but function to govern the kinds of subjects that can inhabit it. The complicity of academic discourses in the social construction of gender has important ethical implications. First, it suggests disciplines should be attentive to and responsible for the ideas and theories they put forward. Academics should be aware and critical of the dominant discourses in their fields and the implications for the production of gendered subjects. Second, graduate education, as the process of socializing bodies into disciplines, should involve an interrogation of the kinds of subjects and thinking different discourses allow and prevent. This involves the academy’s ethical obligation of *interdisciplinary instruction* that would expose graduate students to a variety of complementary and contradictory academic discourses. But, as observed with

Graham, simple exposure is insufficient. Therefore disciplines have an ethical obligation of *philosophical interrogation* and graduate supervision should involve students in critiquing the discourses of their disciplines, asking what truths, realities, and subjects they allow and prevent. The point is not to locate a right, true, or better discourse, but to engage students in a perpetual critique that resists the temptation to too strongly entrench in any one academic perspective. This critical distancing is what Foucault (1989) calls the ethic of an intellectual, “to engage a type of knowledge and analysis that is taught and received in the university in a way so as to modify not only the thought of others, but of one’s own as well” (p. 303). Engaging in academic critique that extends to one’s own firmly held beliefs is the telos and hallmark of academic inquiry in any discipline.

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