



Conference Report

American Men's Studies Association 22nd Annual Interdisciplinary Conference, Considering Culture: Masculinities in International and Regional Cultures

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Between March 27-29th in 2014, the American Men's Studies Association (AMSA) held its 22nd annual interdisciplinary conference at the University of Washington campus in Tacoma, Washington State, U.S.A, which is located about an hour from Seattle. The American Men's Studies Association was formally established in 1991, although the roots of the organisation stem into the early 1980s. The U.S. is the site of many of the pioneers in studies on men and masculinities, several of whom were part of AMSA's formation (e.g. Harry Brod and Michael Messner). From AMSA's origins it has been an anti-sexist organisation. Although the organisation is open to approaches to men and masculinity that are not explicitly driven by feminist principles (e.g. the mythopoetic movement), the organisers indicated that there were nonetheless limits to this openness (e.g. certain Men's Rights Activist groups were no longer welcomed), and it was suggested that links to feminism informed an important aspect of the organisation's values.

The focus of the conference was explicitly on masculinities in international and regional cultures, and whilst the conference did focus largely on issues affecting American males, there was also clearly an effort to consider and include speakers from other countries and also those representing minorities within the U.S. This is reflected in the selection of the keynote speaker and the scholar-in-residence address. The keynote speaker was Professor Shahin Gerami, originally from Iran but having emigrated to the U.S., who discussed her personal academic journey as an Iranian women in the U.S., as well as some of the intricacies of Islamic masculinity and its relationship to Western fear and racism. The scholar-in-residence address was by Ty Kāwika Tengan, who discussed his experiences and analysis of a cultural organization in Hawaii which aims to revitalise indigenous warrior practices and philosophies with native Hawaiian men. These speakers broached notions

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of national and cultural identity, colonization, racism and Western imperialism, setting the tone of the conference through the acknowledgment of the multiple factors other than gender which shape men's lives and their experiences of masculinity.

Accordingly, issues around how masculinity in different contexts is linked to and affected by race and colonialism were present in many of the presentations. Although the presentations were from a range of countries, as a South African I found it incredibly interesting and illuminating to see the commonalities in the discourses surrounding race, racism and masculinity across contexts, even in such vastly different countries such as the U.S and South Africa.

The mission statement of AMSA includes that it "advances the critical study of men and masculinities by encouraging the development of teaching, research, and clinical practice in the field of men's studies." Accordingly, scholars, academics and practitioners alike were represented as presenters at this conference, and the interests of each of these groups appears to have been well catered for. Additionally, as the conference was interdisciplinary, it showcased a wide variety of distinct fields, demonstrating differences in approaches to masculinity studies from disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, anthropology, literary studies and public health, to name a few.

The fact that the conference consisted of both practitioners and academics and was also interdisciplinary provided a welcome balance in terms of content and approach. To give an idea, there was a panel which focused on masculinity within clinical practice, and other presentations which ranged from an historical analysis of media representations of white masculinity during the economic depression (Michael Goebel – *Beached White Male: Imperiled Masculinity in the Great Recession*); to a researcher's regrets and concerns about a participant relationship that ended badly (Zachary Morrisson – *Thanks for Using Me: A Researcher's Failure to Negotiate Closure*); to the perceived effect of gender-progressive legislation on males in Rwanda (Sarah Tlappek–*Men's Perceptions Of Threats To Masculinity From Women's Empowerment In Rwanda*), to a critical literary analysis of how masculinity and heterosexual romantic relationships are portrayed in some popular contemporary fiction (Elizabeth Mansley and Dana Hysock Witham–*Stalking As The New Courtship: Exploring The Portrayal Of Stalking Behaviors In The "Twilight" Saga And The "50 Shades Of Grey" Trilogy*). These examples demonstrate some of the diversity in terms of disciplinary approach to masculinity at the conference. (As there were multiple concurrent sessions, the use of these examples is clearly biased by the presentations I chose to attend, and for those interested in a more complete picture the AMSA website has a comprehensive listing of the conference presentations and abstracts).

Getting participants to actively engage with one another was another clear aim of the conference organisers. In one of the sessions, the conference was split into six roundtable

groups: Thinking on Men in Therapeutic, Educational, Social Justice, Cultural, Mediated and Community Contexts. This format was intended for delegates to be able to engage with others interested or working in similar contexts, and in a subsequent session the significant points that came up were presented to the rest of the conference. Whilst it seems like the experiences differed quite significantly from group to group, this did seem to have been a useful format for sparking discussion and for networking amongst delegates. There were also two 'cocktail hours' and dinners, and extensive breaks between sessions, which enabled more informal networking and socialising amongst delegates.

A significant theme of this conference was of not only providing academic presentations, but also of thinking practically about how theory and research on men and masculinities might inform working with men in a variety of different settings. Indicative of this theme, another presentation which stands out was by Andrew Smiler, Lisa Hickley and Bob Minor, *Reaching Men Where They Live: Getting Guys to Talk About Masculinity*. This presentation contained practical information from three experts who work with men in a variety of different ways, ranging from virtual forums, to books, to men's groups. The pre-conference workshop I attended on the *Men's Stories Project*, run by Josie Lehrer, was another example of a practical intervention and how others might apply it in their own contexts.

In terms of organisation and administration, this conference was run very smoothly. The organiser, Jeff Cohen, was very friendly and, helpful and responsive to emails and attentive to requests. The conference also had a downloadable cellphone app to assist with the conference programme and presentation venues. Following the conference, presenters were also invited to submit their work for a special issue of the *Journal of Men's Studies*, on some of the conference proceedings.