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## On Patriarchs and Losers: Rethinking Men's Interests

Michael A. Messner\*

More than two decades ago, William Goode (1982) observed that when members of a superordinate group are even partly nudged from their positions of social centrality, they often experience this as a major displacement, and respond defensively. This, Goode concluded, is why men have so often resisted the movement for women's equality. Goode's analysis rested on an assumption fundamental to a feminist sociology: collectively, men have shared interests, opposed to those of women. In recent decades, social scientists have observed, measured, and described these opposing gendered interests with hundreds of studies of occupational segregation, glass ceilings, wage gaps, domestic labor, sex work, emotional labor, interpersonal violence, and media imagery.

The upshot of much of this research has been this: it is in men's collective interests to maintain the current relations in the gender order; it is in women's collective interests to change them. Casual observation will bear out the truth of this: overwhelmingly, it has been women who have put gender issues on the social agenda. While a few men throughout history have actively supported feminism (Kimmel & Mosmiller 1992), pro-feminist organizing by men never got much beyond the level of a loosely connected national and international network of men, most of them academics and therapists (Messner 1997).

Twenty years ago, as I drove one of those therapists back to Berkeley from my "men and masculinity" class at Cal State Hayward, to which he had delivered a guest lecture, he pointed at a young white guy speeding by in a pick-up truck with a gun rack. "I want *that* guy in the men's movement," he told me emphatically, "and to get him involved, we have to be able to convince him that the masculinity he has learned is self-destructive and toxic, and that feminist change is in *his* interests." I'm pretty sure that the guy in the pick-up never joined up. And I still wonder: is that because he didn't really *see* his "true" interests—he suffered from some kind of false consciousness? Or, is it perhaps because he *did* understand that his interests lie not in changing, but

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rather, in sustaining a gender status quo? Or, did perhaps his conception of his interests *as a man*—but also as a white man, as a worker, as an American, as a veteran, and, (as I imagined him) as a heterosexual—just get more and more complicated and contradictory as the years went by, leaving him with no clear sense of having interests that go beyond his individual self? Maybe he just needed, he found, a different car, a satellite dish, an iPod, better clothes, some purchased sex, and a men’s cologne that made a statement about his rebellious individuality?

In this essay, I will share some reflections on the concept of “men’s interests.” First, using broad brush strokes, I will discuss the development of the scholarly focus on “men and masculinities.” Then, I will draw examples from two of my recent projects as windows in to the ways that “mens’ interests” in the U.S. are currently being articulated, respectively in commercial culture and in political discourse.

#### *Multiple Masculinities and Men’s Interests*

By the late 1980s, the first scholarly collections of work on men—edited by Harry Brod (1987), Michael Kaufman (1987) and Michael Kimmel (1987)—grappled with a puzzle: how to take seriously and centrally the feminist critique of men’s global power over women, while recognizing both the “costs of masculinity” that many men pay, as well as the existence of vast inequalities among men—inequalities grounded in social class, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and international relations. The answer that most scholars settled on was to think of masculinities as multiple. Hegemonic masculinity—the form of masculinity that, for the moment, codifies the collective project of men’s domination of women—is defined in relation to emphasized femininity, but also in relation to marginalized and subordinated masculinities (Carrigan, Connell & Lee 1985; Connell 1987).

In practice, the idea of multiple masculinities was sometimes severed from its broad historical and structural moorings, and taken up by researchers investigating specific social contexts, resulting ultimately in a dizzying array of “types” of masculinities. Like 19<sup>th</sup> century biologists intent on building a taxonomy of the living world, scholars of the 80s and 90s seemed to find new forms of masculinity under every empirical stone, and seemed also intent on labeling them: The discovery of gay, Black, Chicano, working class and middle class masculinity were followed by the detection of Asian masculinity, gay Black masculinity, gay Chicano masculinity, white working class masculinity, militarized masculinity, transnational business masculinity, New Man masculinity, negotiated masculinity, versatile masculinity, healthy masculinity, toxic masculinity, counter masculinity, cool masculinity, and the one that I confess having deployed on occasion, complicit masculinity. Like all

such deconstructive projects, the danger inherent in the multiple masculinities discourse is that, ultimately, we risk deconstructing down to each and every man having his own distinct form of masculinity: My masculinity; your masculinity. But why stop with men? As Judith Halberstam (1998) has argued, some women embody and display the cultural markers of masculinity. With “masculinities” multiplying seemingly by the hour, and with the concept now severed from its connection with “men,” we now face the possibility of each and every individual on the planet expressing his or her own unique masculinity: Let six billion masculinities bloom!

What has kept the best social scientific studies of masculinities from devolving into a meaningless radical individualism is a mooring in the concept of social structure. In particular, the structured inequalities of race, class, sexual orientation and gender are—and should remain—at the center of our intersectional theories of power and inequality (Baca Zinn & Dill 1996; Connell 2004). Keeping these categories of analysis central reminds us that theories of “multiple masculinities” aim not simply to describe different masculine “styles,” but rather, to describe and understand complex group-based relations of power, and different—sometimes contradictory—relations to material interests (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner 1994). Hence, my focus on interests here is partly a result of my sense that we have reached the limits of the “multiple masculinities” language; it represents an attempt to re-focus on how gender plays out in group-based relations of power.

### *Thinking about Interests*

The two examples from my recent research that I am going to share with you relate to sport. Sport is not patriarchal in a simple, seamlessly binary fashion (all men on top; all women on the bottom). Sport is “male dominated,” but it is also constructed through what Don Sabo (1994) has called an “intermale dominance hierarchy,” that is characterized by a very unequal distribution of resources and privilege among boys and men: star athletes over bench-warmers; athletic directors and head coaches over assistant coaches and players; athletes and coaches in central sports (especially football) over those in marginal “minor” sports (like cross country, swimming, gymnastics, wrestling, and golf).

But some male athletes' experiences of marginality does not automatically translate into their seeing their interests as aligned with those of girls and women against the gluttony of football programs. Structural location does not always predict a group's perceptions of their interests. In a thoughtful essay, Bob Pease (2002: 170) argues that an analysis of “men's interests” cannot simply be reduced to a rational analysis of men's material interests in maintaining their patriarchal

privilege. He argues that “people do not have objective interests as a result of their location; rather, they *formulate*...their interests, and they do so within the context of the available discourses in situations in which they are located and that they coproduce.”

I offer two empirical windows into this situational formulation of men’s interests. These two sites are not necessarily the best places to look at the issue of men’s interests, but I draw from them because they are two research projects that I have been exploring over the past two or three years; they are the two windows that I have been looking through. The first is a study that I have been conducting with Jeffrey Montez de Oca, of beer and liquor advertisements in two mega sports media events aimed at male audiences. The second is a project I have been conducting with Nancy Solomon of the California Women’s Law Center: Nancy and I spoke at one of the U.S. Secretary of Education’s 2002 public hearings on Title IX, and together we have conducted an analysis of talk by the critics of Title IX. Though each of these two projects is broad, for my purposes here, I want to focus narrowly on how beer and liquor ads, and public arguments against Title IX offer us two windows into the situational articulation of “men’s interests.” I will suggest, across both of these empirical sites, that “men’s interests” are not usually articulated overtly *as* men’s interests; rather, stories about particular groups of men who are viewed as vulnerable, as actual or potential victims, serve as proxy for a larger articulation of men’s apparently threatened interests. I will suggest that the male “losers” that we see in beer advertising texts, and the male “victims” who are the centerpiece in the discourse of Title IX critics, are symbolic articulations of the supposedly threatened interests of *white* males.

### **Beer and Liquor Ads: The White Guy as Loser<sup>1</sup>**

The televised Super Bowl ads that we examined construct a white male “loser” whose life is apparently separate from paid labor. He hangs out with his male buddies, is self-mocking and ironic about his loser status, is always at the ready to engage in voyeurism with sexy fantasy women, but holds committed relationships and emotional honesty with real women in disdain. I will offer you three brief examples here from Super Bowl commercials.

Two young somewhat nerdy-looking white guys are at a yoga class, sitting behind a class full of sexy young women. The two men

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<sup>1</sup> This section of the presentation is drawn from a larger study, Michael A. Messner & Jeffrey Montez de Oca (forthcoming) “The Male Consumer as Loser: Beer and Liquor Ads in Mega Sports Media Events.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*.

have attached prosthetic legs to their bodies, so that they can fake the yoga moves. With two bottles of Bud Lite, these voyeurs watch in delight as the female yoga teacher uses her hands to push down on a woman's upright spread-eagled legs, and says "focus, focus, focus." The camera cuts back-and-forth from close-ups of the women's breasts and bottoms, while the two guys' gleefully enjoy their beer and their sexual voyeurism. In the final scene, the two guys are standing outside the front door of the yoga class, beer bottles in hand, and someone throws their fake legs out the door at them. As they duck to avoid being hit by the legs, one of them comments, "*She's* not very relaxed."

This ad contains, in various degrees, the dominant gender tropes that we found in the mega sports media events ads: First, men are often portrayed as chumps, losers. Masculinity—especially for the lone man—is precarious. Individual men are always on the cusp of being publicly humiliated, either by their own stupidity, by other men, or worse: by a beautiful woman. The precariousness of individual men's masculine status is offset by the safety of the male group. The solidity, primacy—and emotional safety—of male friendships are the emotional center of many of these ads. When women appear in these ads, it is usually as highly sexualized fantasy objects. These beautiful women serve as potential prizes for men's victories and proper consumption choices. They sometimes serve to validate men's masculinity, but their masculinity validating power also holds the potential to humiliate male losers. Wives, girlfriends or other women to whom men are emotionally committed are mostly absent from these ads. However, when they do appear, it is primarily as emotional or sexual blackmailers who threaten to undermine individual men's freedom to enjoy the erotic pleasure at the center of the male group.

To a great extent, these gender themes are intertwined in the Super Bowl "yoga voyeurs" ad. First, the two guys are clearly not good-looking, high status, muscular icons of masculinity. More likely, they are intended to represent the "everyman," with whom many boys and men can identify. Their masquerade as sensitive men allowed them to transgress the female space of the yoga class, but they couldn't pull it off, and were eventually "outed" as losers, and rejected by the sexy women. But even if they realize that they are losers, they don't have to care, because they are so happy and secure in their bond with each other. Their friendship is cemented in frat-boy-style hijinks that allow them to share close-up voyeurism with sexy women who, we can safely assume, are way out of these men's league. In the end, the women reject the guys as pathetic losers. But the guys don't seem too upset by it. They have each other, and of course, they have their beers.

Consistently in these ads, white guy losers risk punishment or humiliation from beautiful women, but the level of punishment faced by the very occasional black men who appear in these ads is more severe. In "Pick-up Lines," a Bud Lite ad that ran during the 2002 Super Bowl, two black males are sitting at a bar next to an attractive black female. Paul, the man in the middle, is obviously a loser. He sounds a bit whiny as he confides in his male friend, "I'm just not good with the ladies like you, Cedric." Cedric starts to whisper opening pick-up lines to him. The loser turns to the woman and passes on the lines. But just then, the bartender brings another bottle of beer to Cedric, who asks the bartender, "So, how much?" Paul, thinking that this is his next pick-up line, says to the woman, "So, how much?" Her smile turns to an angry frown, and she delivers a vicious kick to Paul's face, knocking him to the floor. After we see the Budweiser logo and hear the voice-over telling us that Bud Lite's great taste "will never let you down," we see a stunned Paul rising to his knees, beginning to pull himself up to his bar stool, but the woman knocks him down again with a powerful backhand fist to the face.

"Cedric" returns in another Bud Lite ad that ran during the 2004 Super Bowl. In this ad, the strutting, know-it-all pick-up artist falls victim to his own hypermasculine posturing. Thinking he's going to get a message from a beautiful African American woman, he has mistakenly stumbled in to the bikini waxing room. From behind a closed door, we hear him scream in agony, and then see him in the final scene with a towel wrapped around him like a skirt—feminized, punished and humiliated.

These Bud Lite ads—two of the very few ads that depicted relations between black males and black females—were the only ads in which we saw a man being physically beaten or physically humiliated by a woman. In both cases, the African American female-as-object turns to subject, inflicting direct physical punishment on the African American male. The existence of these very few "black" ads brings into relief something that might otherwise remain hidden: Most of these ads are about constructing a youthful *white* masculinity that is playfully self-mocking, always a bit tenuous, but ultimately lovable. The screw-ups that white guy losers make are forgivable, and we nearly always see them, in the end, with at least a cold beer in hand. By contrast, as Ann Ferguson (2000) has pointed out, the intersection of race, gender and class creates contexts of suspicion and punishment for African American boys and men. In the beer ads, this translates into the message that a black man's transgressions are apparently deserving of a kick to the face.

These themes may find resonance with young men of today because they speak to basic insecurities that are grounded in historic

shifts: deindustrialization, the declining real value of wages, cultural shifts brought about by over three decades of struggle by feminists and sexual minorities, and challenges to white male supremacy by people of color and by immigrants. This cluster of social changes defines the context of gender relations in which today's young men have grown toward adulthood. Examining beer and liquor ads gives us a window into the ways that commercial forces have seized on these destabilizing tendencies, constructing pedagogical fantasy narratives that aim to appeal to a very large group—18-34 year old men.

The sexual and gender themes of beer and liquor ads do not stand alone; rather they reflect, and in turn contribute to broader trends in popular culture and marketing to young white males. Television shows like "The Man Show," new soft-core porn magazines like "Maxim," and "FHM," and radio talk shows like the syndicated "Tom Leykus Show" share similar themes, and are targeted to similar audiences of young males. These magazines, television and radio shows construct young male lifestyles saturated with sexy images of nearly naked, surgically enhanced women; unabashed and unapologetic sexual voyeurism shared by groups of laughing men; and explicit talk of sexual exploits with "hotties" or "juggies." The erotic bonding among men is stitched together by a range of consumer products that include—often centrally, as in "The Man Show"—consumption of beer as part of the young male lifestyle. Meanwhile, real women are either absent from these media, or they are disparaged as gold diggers (yes, this term has been resuscitated) who use sex to get men to spend money on them, and trick them into marriage. The domesticated man is viewed as a wimpy victim, who has subordinated his own pleasures (and surrendered his paychecks) to a woman. Within this framework, a young man should have sex with as many women as he can while avoiding (or at least delaying) emotional commitments to any one woman.

At first glance, these new media seem to resuscitate a 1950s "Playboy philosophy" of men's consumption, sexuality and gender relations (Ehrenreich 1983). Indeed, these new media strongly reiterate the dichotomous bitch-whore view of women that was such a lynchpin of Hugh Hefner's "philosophy." But today's tropes of masculinity do not simply reiterate the past; rather, they give a post-feminist twist to the *Playboy* philosophy. A half-century ago, Hefner's pitch to men to recapture the indoors by creating (purchasing) one's own erotic "bachelor pad" in which to have sex with women (and then send them home) read as a straightforwardly masculine project. By contrast, today's sexual and gender pitch to young men is delivered with an ironic, self-mocking wink that operates on two levels. First, it appears to acknowledge that most young men are neither the heroes of the indoors (as Hefner would have it), *nor* of the outdoors (as the 1970s and 1980s beer ads

suggested). Instead, the ads seem to recognize that young white men's unstable status leaves them always on the verge of being revealed as losers. The irony works on a second level as well: the throwback sexual and gender imagery—especially the bitch-whore dichotomization of women—is clearly a defensive backlash against feminism and women's increasing autonomy and social power. The wink and self-mocking irony allow men to have it both ways: they can engage in humorous misogynist banter, and claim simultaneously that it's all in play. The humorous irony works, then, to deflect charges of sexism away from white males, allowing them to define themselves as victims, as an endangered species. We suspect too that this is a key part of the process that constructs the *whiteness* in these ads. Humorous “boys-will-be-boys” misogyny is unlikely to be taken ironically and lightly when delivered by men of color. Instead, the few “black” ads tend to *project* culturally delegitimized aspects of “traditional masculinity” on to black men, and then punish them for expressing it.

### Anti-Title IX Political Discourse: The White Guy as Victim<sup>2</sup>

The 2002 public hearings about Title IX offer an opportunity to examine the ways that the spokespeople for men's sports articulate their interests in a highly politicized forum. Nancy Solomon and I analyzed talk at the 2002 San Diego hearings that we attended, and at which we both spoke. We focus on the various linguistic strategies employed by the critics of Title IX, most of whom spoke for groups and organizations that represented men in “marginal” sports that claimed to have been hurt or threatened by the enforcement of Title IX. I will begin to introduce these themes with an excerpt from the statement by Jon Vegosen, a Chicago attorney representing the U.S. Tennis Association:

We support the tremendous strides that women have made through Title IX, and we want to preserve those gains. We are also concerned about its unintended consequences for both men and women... [including its] adverse impact on walk-ons. I was a walk-on at Northwestern and became captain my junior and senior year, and I was the first player to be selected at Northwestern to the All Big Ten Team. I experienced valuable life lessons, including goal-setting, time management, teamwork and travel. Today that wouldn't happen...I would be told, "Thanks for your interest, but there's no room for you," and that's what thousands of male athletes in tennis and other sports are told every year. They are turned away, while women's tennis teams struggle to fill their rosters... It is critical to appreciate the long-term impact of the unintended consequences of

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<sup>2</sup> This section of the presentation is drawn from a larger paper, Michael A. Messner & Nancy M. Solomon (in progress) “Social Justice and Men's Interests: The Case of Title IX.”

Title IX for tennis. If these trends continue, men's collegiate tennis will be jeopardized.

Vegosen's statement contained the major themes that we heard repeated in various forms by the Title IX critics. For my purposes here, I want to focus on the "walk-on" theme.

*The "walk on" as victim*

A number of the critics invoked the image of the male student "walk-on" as a victim of Title IX's illogical and bureaucratic "quota system." (A "walk-on" is a college student who is neither recruited to play sports, nor given an athletic scholarship, but who shows up and tries out for the team.) Sam Bell, President of the National Track and Field Coaches Association told several stories of past "walk-on" athletes who had become successful in various ways. He then delivered a passionate defense of the walk-on, as threatened by Title-IX roster management, and concluded, "We will lose a lot of this type of student athlete if we stay with quotas, with a quota mentality..."

The walk-on is a powerful image, we suggest, because it invokes the romantic ideal of the student-athlete as an untarnished amateur who loves the purity of sports. The invocation of this romantic ideal obscures the increasingly negative public image of the scholarship athlete in big-time college sports: He is viewed as spoiled by privilege, he is often in legal or academic trouble, he is not fully deserving *as a student*, and—crucially—in the public image, he is African American. The walk-on, by contrast, is first and foremost a *student*, who just happens to love sports. He does not seek fame and fortune; he just wants to be on the team. He is also, in the public imagination—like the character in the popular film *Rudy*—an admirably hard-working (albeit athletically limited) *white guy*. The critics' foregrounding the image of the walk-on is an accomplishment of political rhetoric: without mentioning race, white males are positioned as "regular kids," victimized by liberal policies gone amuck. The critics' image of the walk-on reveals the "unintended" victimization of white males as irrational, unfair, and un-American. The invocation of the walk-on, then, taps in to and reiterates familiar and highly charged sexist *and* racist anti-affirmative action narratives.

The image of the broken-hearted male wrestler or gymnast whose program has been eliminated is a powerful one, especially given the fact that some men's teams *have* been eliminated in recent years. Over the past twenty years, men's gymnastics and wrestling teams have declined in number. However, the critics of Title IX consistently fail to note that during this same period of time, the number of *women's* gymnastics and field hockey teams has also declined. And while many college women's sports have grown in number, men's participation in college sports has

increased in football, baseball, crew, lacrosse, squash, track and volleyball.

Despite these facts, the periodic high-profile cuts of men's programs tend to fuel perceptions that gender equity works against the overall interests of men. In fact, it is only possible to hold this view if one accepts the logic of the football lobby, and argues against including football in calculations of sex equity. Football's enormous financial drain on resources—a lion's share of scholarships, skyrocketing salaries for coaches, huge equipment, travel and recruiting budgets—are often safely hidden behind the nickel-and-dime debates over which "non-revenue" men's sports should be eliminated to ensure compliance with Title IX proportionality measures (Zimbalist 1999). The football lobby shields its own interests by backing the claims that marginal men's sports and male "walk-ons" are being victimized by Title IX. And many advocates for marginal men's sports participate in this debate by aligning themselves with the football and basketball lobby, despite the fact that such allegiance may seem to run counter to their interests. Given their control of resources and their massive budgets, football programs can hardly claim hardship with a straight face. Rather, they have sought support for the anti-equity cause from the more vulnerable "minor" men's sports. But evidence suggests that the vulnerability of men's marginal sports is not due so much to the "unintended consequences" of Title IX. Rather, the vulnerability of marginal men's sports is a *routine institutional consequence of the invisible and mostly unquestioned policy of affording football and men's basketball programs a privileged and untouchable status.*

An entire social problems course could be taught using football as the empirical point of departure. Football is often at the center of problems related to sexual assault, campus bullying, and other forms of off-field violence by athletes (Messner 2002). The recent controversies about sexual assaults by football players, and the use of alcohol and women strippers to recruit high school football players at the University of Colorado are only the latest glimpses of what so often lies below the tip of the iceberg of college football (Sperber 2000). High school and college football programs gulp down huge resources, while occupying a mythic status that protects them as almost untouchable. So why do so many marginal boys and men—and their mostly male coaches—seem to identify with the interests of the football lobby? Why don't more of the men in marginalized "non-revenue sports"—the wrestlers, tennis players, swimmers, gymnasts, cross country athletes—identify their interests as consistent with those of women? Nina Eliasoph (1998: 251) argues that people "discover their interests" in every day life, but the process through which they make this discovery "...is never a pure rational calculation." This echoes Pease's argument, introduced earlier, that

men's understanding of their interests cannot be explained simply by describing their social location. Instead, we need to consider how men formulate their interests through interaction, in institutional contexts. In the case of the Title IX hearings, the spokesmen for men's marginal sports most likely formulated their interests within athletic department contexts, and these contexts are characterized by professional hierarchies headed by men from the central sports of football and basketball.

Football has played a key symbolic role in the U.S. gender order over the past half-century. In this feminist era, football stands in as a symbolic reference point for a general articulation of "men's interests." And here, I think, is a place where the concept of hegemonic masculinity is applicable and useful, precisely because it is directly tethered to an analysis of the interests of men. Connell (1987) argues that very few men fully conform to what we think of as hegemonic masculinity. The fact that it is nearly impossible for an individual man consistently to achieve and display the dominant conception of masculinity is an important part of the psychological instability at the center of individual men's sense of their own masculinity. Instead, a few men (real or imagined) are positioned as symbolic exemplars for a hegemonic masculinity that serves as a *collective practice* that continues the global subordination of women, and ensures men's access to a patriarchal dividend. What makes this masculinity "hegemonic" is not simply powerful men's displays of power, but also, crucially, less powerful men's consent and complicity with the institutions, social practices, and symbols that privilege men. To adapt a term that is now popular in market-driven bureaucracies, hegemonic masculinity requires a "buy-in" by subordinated and marginalized men, if it is to succeed as a strategy of domination.

So, though a rational assessment of the situation of, say, boys and men who run cross country, who wrestle, swim, play tennis or gymnastics might suggest that their interests run counter to those of big time football programs, more often than not, these men in marginal sports tend to identify with, and act in complicity with, the dominant discourse of the football lobby. This discourse tends to invoke a language of male victimization by the state, which is seen as unfairly representing women's interests. The language of bureaucratic victimization of individual men—especially as symbolized by the threatened "walk-on"—may find especially fertile ground among today's young white males, who face a world that has been destabilized by feminism, gay and lesbian liberation, the civil rights movement, and major shifts in the economy.

### **Victims, Losers, and Men's Interests**

Beer and liquor ads, and public narratives of Title IX critics are obviously two different things, both in form and content. But they are also similar, in that they involve a strategic address to an audience: the former, in a commercial electronic media context; the latter, in a public political context. In neither case are the interests of dominant men articulated overtly as “backlash.” In fact, the interests of dominant men are not foregrounded against those of women. Instead, unfair or unintended victimization of heterosexual white males, and/or ironic humor serve as a façade, or as proxy for “men’s” supposedly threatened interests. Arlene Stein (2001), in her study of a gay rights struggle in a small Oregon town, illustrates how dominant groups’ appropriation of victim status allows them to sidestep their own shame, while stripping actual victims of moral authority. So too, I think, the cultural and political invocation of the white guy as victim/loser may offer white men a symbolic avenue of escape from the “hidden injuries” of a destabilized or insecure masculinity, while simultaneously delegitimizing the collective claims of women, sexual and racial-ethnic minorities.

Though they differ, the image of the walk-on in anti-Title IX narratives articulates neatly with the image of the “regular guy” in liquor commercials. We are encouraged to admire the walk-on, and to laugh at the loser. But embedded in both stories is an invitation to identify and sympathize with each, because both are potential victims: of the liberal state, of women’s collectively-articulated interests; of individual women’s put-downs. And both, we are led to believe, can rise above their victimization: the walk-on through heroic individual effort; the loser through consumption of beer with buddies.

So, in some objective sense that we can point to, are there “mens’ interests”? Perhaps this is not the best framing of the question. When we look at specific empirical sites, “men’s interests” seem both to be united and divided, albeit differently, by context. So perhaps it’s better to ask: What factors tend to unite men in gender projects that re-assert patriarchal power, and men’s social centrality? What cultural or institutional contexts tend to make salient an articulation of a seemingly unified “mens’ interests”? What unites men (*as men*), across class, race, and age? Military threat and anti-terrorist imagery tends to unite privileged groups of men with many white working class men, as evidenced by the huge amount of support that President George W. Bush holds with white men (Hochschild 2003). Automobiles, in various ways, tend to unite men across these various groups (Connell 1987: 110). Commercial sport tends to unite many men, across generations, and across class and race lines. So, apparently, does the combination of beer with sexist sexual voyeurism.

This raises a corollary question: What factors tend to divide men, perhaps in ways that encourage some men to identify with, and actively support feminist (and other) movements for equality and justice? Clearly, not simply having differential access to material resources. Unequal outcomes may, to many men, seem a “fair” outcome of individual competition with a meritocratic system. In fact, lower status boys and men tend often to look “up” to privileged men with admiration and identification (we see this with the slavish toeing of the football lobby’s line by men from marginal sports).

But there are also other signs that warn us of the need to be careful with categorical thinking about men’s unified interests. For instance, many of us are aware of stories of individual men who become overnight sex equity activists, when they find suddenly that their daughters have been denied access to sport, or have been offered substandard playing fields or unqualified coaches. In these cases, individual men clearly see their own interests as intertwined with the interests of their family members. But can this shift in the articulation of men’s interests occur at the group level? At the San Diego Title IX conference, attendees were moved by the presentation of Joe Kelly, the executive director of a national advocacy organization called Dads and Daughters. Kelly spoke strongly of the need for fathers to support their daughters to play sports, and to take an active role in public issues that effect girls’ access to athletic opportunities. Kelly told the Commission that gender equity in sports is not only good for girls—it is good for boys and men, too:

Title IX opens doors for boys, and one of the most important ways it does is when our sons grow up to be fathers... Don't force fathers into the limited world where sons and daughters are valued differently just because of their gender. Fathers need a strongly enforced Title IX.

Kelly’s speech—and the existence of his organization—suggest that it is possible for men to understand and articulate their own interests as consistent with those of girls and women, and opposed to the narrowly defined material interests of dominant men. How does this happen? Men’s experiences in families—especially as fully involved fathers—encourage some men to identify their own interests as consistent with those of their daughters, and to fight for their daughters’ rights within patriarchal contexts like sport. This example suggests that men do not always automatically see their interests *as men*, based on some rational calculation of men’s global relations of power with women. As we have seen, interests are formulated and articulated situationally, and this means that the construction of gender is potentially fluid and changeable. But this is not to say that contexts do not matter. People create gender within institutional contexts that are characterized by structured divisions

of labor and power, and that are saturated with the play of cultural symbols (Messner 2002). And to further complicate this picture, men (and women) move daily in and out of various institutional contexts (e.g., families, workplaces, schools, sport, and the street)—contexts that are characterized by very different, sometimes contradictory gender regimes. For instance, the relationship between the university (which has been dramatically contested by feminism and other social movements), and university-based sport (which still often operates as a semi-autonomous men's fiefdom), offers an empirical example of the tensions and contradictions at the intersection of very different gender regimes. Men's movement across these different gender regimes pushes them to experience their own interests in more complicated ways. The confusion or instability that results from moving across these different gender regimes undoubtedly makes some men more open to the appeal of the kind of white-male-as-victim discourse that I have discussed, or to the ironic cultural sensibility of the white guy as loser. And this victim/loser sensibility, I have suggested, smuggles in a covert backlash against feminism, and against other movements for social justice.

But confusion among young men about gender does not automatically result in a backlash against women's equality; it also creates opportunities for less privileged groups of boys and men to re-articulate their interests. Today's shifting gender regimes of social institutions—especially those that encourage boys and men to interact with girls and women in ways that foster respect and empathy—can provide an emotional foundation for a *dis-identification* with the narrow interests of dominant men, and a commitment to take action with girls, women, and other men who are interested in building a more equitable and just world.

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