



THE TRAP OF MASCULINITY: HOW SEXISM IMPACTS BOYS AND MEN

The historical and ongoing impact of sexism on women has been documented and explored in a comprehensive way. As a society, we acknowledge that sexism exists in a myriad of ways, personally and structurally. There are laws and structures in place to address institutional sexism. This does not mean that we have solved the problem, but sexism is most often thought of as something that affects girls and women. What is less understood and mostly not acknowledged is the impact of sexism on our concepts of masculinity and male culture. The messages boys receive at an early age about what it means to be male are limiting, confining, stereotypical and very powerful, especially because they are not typically articulated as such. These messages come from family, peers, the media and elsewhere, telling boys and men how to behave and feel, relate to each other and girls/women, what their role and stature is in society. Some of these messages are harmful and have short and long-term consequences for themselves, their families, their community and society as a whole.

This middle and high school lesson will help students explore how we, as a society, view boys and men and understand concepts of masculinity. Students will reflect on those messages, identify where those concepts and stereotypes come from and begin to understand how they can be challenged.

See these additional ADL Resources: *Rosalind's Classroom Conversations'* "[Are Boys Really That Easy?](#)" and *Current Events Classroom* "[Stereotypes of Girls and Women in the Media.](#)"

Grade Level: grades 8-12

Time: 45-60 minutes

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

Learning Objectives:

- Students will reflect on the societal messages, concepts and stereotypes of masculinity.
- Students will identify and share examples of the different sources and ways those concepts and stereotypes are perpetuated in society.
- Students will share or listen to personal reflections about growing up male.
- Students will create a male story character with stereotypical and non-stereotypical male behavior.

Material:

- Blank sheets of paper (one for each student)
- Questioning “Masculinity” (The Good Men Project, January 13, 2014, <http://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/questioning-masculinity-gmp/>)
- [Where Do Stereotypes and Concepts of Masculinity Come From?](#) (one per small group; 6-10 copies)

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL’s [“Glossary of Education Terms.”](#))

- culture
- eradicate
- femininity
- generation
- gender
- homophobia
- machismo
- male
- masculinity
- notions
- outdated
- prejudice
- role
- sexism
- stature
- stereotype
- stigma
- stoic
- traits

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE MALE?

1. Distribute a blank sheet of paper to each student. Ask students: *What does it mean to be male in our society?* After asking the question aloud, have students write all the words, thoughts, feelings and phrases that come to mind when reflecting on what it means to be male in our society. Students can also include illustrations on their sheets. Explain to students that their concepts of what it means to be male can come from a variety of sources—their own ideas, the media, their family, friends, books and stereotypes (if necessary, define and give example of stereotype). Also, explain that just because they write the word or concept doesn’t necessarily mean they agree or believe it. Give students five minutes to complete this task.
2. After completing this task, have students talk in pairs about what they wrote. Students should take four minutes total to do this (two minutes each)—let them know when the halfway mark is.
3. After sharing with a partner, as a whole class, have students call out the words and phrases they have on their sheets. On the board/smartboard, capture as much as you can without interrupting the flow of their sharing.
4. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - From the words we shared, what patterns do you see?
 - What are the positive qualities on the list? Does everyone feel this way?
 - What are the negative qualities on the list? Does everyone feel this way?
 - What’s empowering about being male?
 - What’s limiting about our concepts of being male?
 - What happens to boys and men who don’t conform to these concepts of masculinity?

VIDEO: THE MASK YOU LIVE IN

1. Show the three minute video [The Mask You Live In](#). Explain that this video is a preview for the feature length film by [The Representation Project](#) which will be released later in 2015.

NOTE: It is important that you preview the video in advance of showing it to students. Most of the language is fine but there are a few slurs (shared as examples of language directed at boys) as well as some “mature” language.

2. After watching the video, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - How did you feel while watching it?
 - What did you hear?
 - What did you see?
 - What is the “mask?”
 - What is the message of the video?
 - Do you agree or disagree with the message and why?
 - What are the consequences (negative and positive) when boys or men don’t fit into the gender norms (traditional ideas people have about masculinity)?

READING ACTIVITY

Distribute a copy of the article “[Questioning Masculinity](#)” to each student. Give students 10 minutes to read the article silently and then engage students in a class discussion by asking the following questions:

- What is the overall premise or message of the article?
- Why did the author describe himself as two distinct men? What message was he trying to send by doing that?
- What did you learn about his background that contributed to his concept of masculinity?
- What are some of the ways in which he received messages about masculinity? Where did those messages come from?
- How does he propose to liberate man “from the dusty old definition?”
- Did anything in the article that you connect to and if so, what?
- Do you share the author’s point of view about masculinity? Why or why not?

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY: WHERE DO MESSAGES ABOUT MASCULINITY COME FROM?

1. Ask students: *What are the overall messages in our society about what it means to be male?* Refer students back to the original activity where they wrote down their associations with masculinity as well as the video and reading. Try to summarize what they share into overall categories. As you come up with each category, ask what is positive and negative about each and whether and how it impacts others. For example, “In our society, men are supposed to be protective of the family. What is positive about that? What is negative? How does that impact others?” Your list might look something like this:
 - Protective/Breadwinner in family

- Competitive
 - Aggressive
 - Sexually aggressive
 - Non-emotional
 - Confident
 - Independent
 - Risk Taker/Courageous
 - Logical
 - Strong
 - Leader/Take charge
 - Power
2. Elicit from the students that these notions of masculinity can be limiting because boys and men do not get to fully explore different aspects of being human, such as being in touch with their emotions, making themselves vulnerable, being nurturing or letting others take care of them. In addition, boys who don't conform to traditional gender roles are sometimes teased, put down, bullied and/or become victims of violence. They are sometimes harassed for being gay or transgender, whether they identify this way or not.
 3. After creating and discussing the list, ask students: *Where do these ideas and stereotypes about masculinity come from?* Brainstorm a list that includes the following categories.
 - Media (advertisements, video games, movies, internet sites, television, movies, social media, etc.)
 - Family (parents, caregivers, siblings, grandparents, extended family members)
 - Culture (messages from religious or cultural groups about what men should do, how they should behave and their role and stature in the family, community and society)
 - Books
 - Peers (friends, classmates, peer pressure)
 4. Divide students into five small groups, each of which will have a different topic from the list generated above (1. Media, 2. Family, 3. Culture, 4. Books and 5. Peers). Explain to students that they are to identify and discuss, in their groups, some of the messages about masculinity that come from their assigned source (e.g. Media, Family, etc.) and share examples using the [Where Do Stereotypes and Concepts of Masculinity Come From?](#) handout. Allow 10 minutes for students to complete this task.
 5. Give students 10 minutes to work in their small groups and then have each group present what they discussed in their groups with the whole class.

FISHBOWL ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL, 15–20 MINUTES)

1. If time permits, engage students in a “fishbowl” activity around masculinity. Explain to students that they are going to discuss their personal experiences with masculinity. If you have classroom guidelines, review them especially the ones about listening respectfully and the importance of confidentiality.

2. Explain to students that they will use a “fishbowl” strategy to discuss the topic. It is called a fishbowl because they will form a circle and some students will be inside the circle (like in a fishbowl) and the rest of the students will be observers looking and listening in.

NOTE: Due to the sensitive nature of these discussions about masculinity, depending on the trust and safety level in your classroom, instead of the instructions below, another option is to have students write about their experiences prior to the fishbowl and those essays can be shared anonymously in the fishbowl for students to discuss.

3. Ask for 3–5 volunteers who are willing to sit inside the circle and talk about their experiences of masculinity by responding to questions read by the teacher (ideally, it would be all males who volunteer but it is not required). Create a small circle with chairs for those sitting inside the circle. Arrange the other chairs to sit outside this smaller circle. Before discussing the specific ground rules for the fishbowl, review your classroom guidelines as strong feelings may emerge from the fishbowl.
4. Explain the ground rules for the fishbowl as follows:
 - a. The observers are not allowed to speak. Their job is to listen and learn from the fishbowl students. The observers will have an opportunity to discuss any issues that emerge later.
 - b. You (the teacher) will facilitate the fishbowl discussion and you will make sure everyone has the opportunity to talk.

Optional: Once the fishbowl discussion has happened for at least 8–10 minutes and you sense that others want to speak, you can allow a time where if someone in the observer groups wants to join the fishbowl, they can tap the shoulder of someone in the fishbowl and take their place. Use this step at your discretion.

5. Use the following questions to guide the fishbowl and at the same time, allow the conversation to move in a natural direction.
 - Growing up, what messages did you receive about masculinity/being male?
 - Where did those messages come from?
 - How do these messages impact your relationships with other males as well as females?
 - What do you like about being male?
 - What’s challenging about being male?
6. After the fishbowl, engage the students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - To the observers, was it difficult to not respond to the comments made during the fishbowl? Why?
 - To the fishbowl students: how did it feel to share your thoughts and feelings about masculinity?
 - Did you hear anything from the fishbowl that surprised you?
 - What did you learn from the experience?
 - What came out from the discussion about how it feels to be male?
 - What is the role that sexism plays in our concepts of masculinity?

WRITING ACTIVITY (SOME IN CLASS AND HOMEWORK)

1. Explain to students that they will write a story and a character that challenges some of the male concepts and stereotypes that are perpetuated in our society. They will begin this writing assignment in class and complete it for homework.
2. Explain to students that their story should contain at least one male character (boy, young man or man). This character does not have to be the main character and there should also be other characters in the story. Students should outline the basic plot and identify the characteristics of this male character. The requirements for the story are: (1) a male character, (2) a compelling storyline and (3) the male character should have some characteristics that encompass traditional or stereotypical concepts of masculinity but also have at least one characteristic that dispels or challenges those stereotypes. Students can work alone or in pairs to create the story.
3. Give students a few minutes in class to begin conceptualizing their story and then have them complete the project for homework. When the assignment is due, students are to read aloud their stories in class, reflecting on their processes for developing their story and character. If there is sufficient interest and time, consider having the students turn the stories into graphic novellas (using storyboards), a children's picture book or a video dramatization of the story.

CLOSING

Do a go-round and have students share something they learned over the course of the lesson.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [Tony Porter: A Call to Men](#) TEDTalk video (2010, 11 mins.)
- ["Boys don't cry" stereotypes harm masculinity](#) (Baylor Lariat, February 5, 2014)
- [Good Men Project](#)
- [How do Media Images of Men Affect Our Lives?](#) (Center for Media Literacy)
- [Men in America](#) (NPR, Special Series)
- ["Redefining Masculinity for the Greater Good"](#) (*Psychology Today*, November 4, 2014)
- ["The Confines of Masculinity"](#) (F Bomb, August 20, 2012)
- ["The Invisible Background: Cultural Expectations for Masculine Identity Building"](#) (Chapter 3 of *Teaching Boys Who Struggle in School* by Kathleen Palmer Cleveland, ASCD)
- ["The Manliest Thing About Me Is..."](#) (Good Men Project, November 27, 2013)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Writing
Standard 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

WHERE DO STEREOTYPES AND CONCEPTS OF MASCULINITY COME FROM?

Group Members: _____

1. What is your source of information? (e.g. Media, Family, etc.)

2. What are some of the messages about masculinity that come from that source?

3. List 3-5 specific examples (e.g. "In the movie *The Maze Runner*, Minho is portrayed as_____.")

- a. _____

- b. _____

- c. _____

- d. _____

- e. _____
