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Reply to Borkowska

Rachel O'Neill

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to respond to Katarzyna Borkowska's reply to my article "Whither Critical Masculinity Studies?" (O'Neill 2015), in which I developed a critique of inclusive masculinity theory (IMT) as elaborated by Anderson (2009). While I was excited to learn that this piece had elicited a formal response, I was curious—and somewhat perplexed—as to why Borkowska felt moved to reply. What is it about the arguments I put forward that Borkowska finds so provocative? Why is she so aggrieved on Anderson's behalf and so concerned to rescue his work from critique? Given the challenges to IMT that have been made by scholars elsewhere (Bridges 2013; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; de Boise 2015), why has Borkowska chosen to reply to my article in isolation from these broader debates?

In this short response, I address some of the issues raised by Borkowska. I should make clear, however, that I do not intend to reiterate my critique of IMT here by way of defense. Instead, I want to use the space provided by this exchange to invite discussion on the status of masculinity studies as a field of critical enquiry, most especially in relation to the feminist or profeminist standing of the field, and to further consider "the ongoing quotidian struggle over the place of both feminists and feminism in the academy" (Franklin 2015, 15).

My earlier article sought to examine IMT in terms of the broader social and cultural context in which it has emerged. I argued that IMT reflects and reproduces the central logics of postfeminism—understood as a cultural landscape in which feminism is both "taken into account" and "undone" (McRobbie 2009)—through the inattention of its authors to sexual politics. Specifically, IMT presents issues of sexual politics as already settled or in the process of being settled. Through this critique of IMT, I raised concerns about the direction of masculinity studies more generally and highlighted a problematic lack of engagement by scholars in this field with current developments in feminist theory, notably feminist scholarship on postfeminism.

Borkowska makes clear that she is not interested in these larger concerns and states at the outset that she will not engage my arguments regarding postfeminism—though she later goes on to do just that, about which I will say more below. Instead, Borkowska claims that the purpose of her article is to "bring up for discussion an author's oversimplified understanding of inclusive masculinity theory" (p. 1). And while Borkowska evidently intends to extricate IMT from the supposedly facile reading I offer, beyond repeatedly stating her disagreement with me she does little to overturn or undermine my arguments. For example, Borkowska contends that I am incorrect when I claim that Anderson attempts to replace hegemonic masculinity with IMT and posits instead that Anderson "expands on Connell's (1995) theory" (p. 3). Yet displacing hegemonic masculinity is precisely what Anderson is attempting to do when he argues that "Inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2009) supersedes hegemonic masculinity by explaining the stratification of men alongside their social dynamics in times of lower homophobia" (Anderson 2011, 570–71, cited in O'Neill 2015, 104). Although Borkowska cites my article

repeatedly—including a number of selectively chosen and carefully cropped quotes—she does not provide evidence from Anderson's own work to substantiate the more generous reading she permits him; indeed, she does not directly quote his work at all.

Yet for Borkowska, it is not simply that I have failed to properly understand and appreciate Anderson's work. Rather, in my simultaneously "excessive" (p. 6) and "dismissive" (p. 6) critique of IMT, I expose my own lack of what Borkowska terms "academic modesty" (p. 6). I must admit to being unfamiliar with this phrasing and unable to locate any obvious source as to its definition beyond Borkowska's own usage. I am, however, struck by the strongly gendered character of this accusation. Directives toward modesty, after all, have long been used as a means to police and constrain women. With this indictment—and it is no offhand accusation, indeed "academic modesty" appears among her article's key words—Borkowska not only calls into question the content of my argument but more fundamentally its character. In this and other respects, her response exemplifies the operations of what Sarah Franklin, borrowing from Marilyn Frye, terms the "double standard" or "double bind" of critical work. This double standard "allows some people to be celebrated, supported, encouraged and literally lifted into positions because they are critical while other people are blocked, obstructed, shamed, and penalised for exactly the same kinds of activities" (Franklin 2015, 27, original emphasis). While Anderson has forged an academic career based largely on a critique of the work of Raewyn Connell, my own singular intervention is deemed improper and unseemly. Attempting to regulate the terms of legitimate scholarly debate in this way, Borkowska's reply takes on a distinctly disciplinary bent. But her plea for respectful academic dialogue rings hollow when made as part of a defense of Anderson, an academic known for making scornful and arguably ad hominem attacks against other scholars (see, e.g., Anderson and McCormack 2014). If Borkowska is serious about raising the standards of scholarly exchange within masculinity studies—a laudable goal, no doubt—I would suggest that her efforts may be better directed elsewhere.

Another grievance raised by Borkowska is that my article "seems to challenge the academic value of Anderson's work" (p. 4). On this point, she is entirely correct. I am skeptical as to the academic value of Anderson's work. I believe the empirical basis on which IMT is founded is weak and have concerns about Anderson's methodological practice. I am not alone in these concerns, which as I noted in my earlier article have been discussed by others at greater length. But I also have serious doubts about the political value of IMT. Certainly, few gender and sexuality studies scholars would disagree with the contention that the cultural contours of homophobia have changed dramatically in societies of the Global North over the past three decades. However, the image of "softer" and more "inclusive" forms of masculinity Anderson purports to document not only fails to take account of but actively obscures ongoing permutations of sexism and misogyny—from "lad culture" (Phipps and Young 2013) to "rape culture" (Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2016) and "popular misogyny" (Banet-Weiser 2015). Against this backdrop, Borkowska's admonishing riposte that "research may be undertaken from diverse perspectives and for diverse purposes" (p. 5) seems to me a rather weak defense for Anderson's indifference toward issues of power and inequality, especially in relation to women.

While my earlier article focused on Anderson as the primary proponent of IMT, the intent of this piece was to prompt consideration about the meaning and purpose of masculinity studies more generally: hence, the titular question, “Whither Critical Masculinity Studies?” I was and remain particularly concerned by the lack of engagement among masculinity studies scholars with contemporary currents in feminist theory, a long-standing problem that appears to have been exacerbated in recent years (Beasley 2013). In order to demonstrate how feminist scholarship on postfeminism may facilitate new areas of enquiry within masculinity studies— thereby signaling not only a lack but also an opportunity for scholars in this field—I outlined a series of questions which could provide a starting point for thinking about men, masculinities, and postfeminism. Borkowska’s dismissive and erroneous response to this proposal is that such questions have already been addressed by men’s studies scholars. In doing so, she not only collapses important distinctions between variants of masculinity studies (such as between men’s studies and critical studies on men and masculinities), but perpetuates precisely the same erasure of feminist scholarship that I originally set out to problematize.

I am again returned to the question of why Borkowska felt moved to respond to my article, not least because her own work was not the subject of nor implicated by my discussion. In this regard, it is worth considering once again the strong affective appeal IMT exerts. I evidenced this in my earlier paper by noting the repeated references made by scholars endorsing Anderson’s work to the feelings of hope and optimism IMT inspires. As one especially effusive reviewer put it: “It’s not often that an academic study makes one feel better about being in the world, yet Eric Anderson’s Inclusive masculinity does” (Adams 2010, np, cited in O’Neill 2015, 107). In refusing to accede to the prevailing emotional consensus, I take on the positioning of the “feminist killjoy”, to use Sara Ahmed’s evocative phrase (2010a, 2010b). To be a killjoy is to become the problem you name; that is, you are seen to create rather than describe the problem. To be unhappy is to threaten the happiness of others: “It is not just that feminists might not be happily affected by the objects that are supposed to cause happiness but that their failure to be happy is read as sabotaging the happiness of others” (Ahmed 2010b, 66).

Borkowska’s response to my article can thus be read as an attempt to restabilize the happy affect Anderson’s work makes available and thereby shore up the more optimistic orientation within masculinity studies that IMT promises. That she is completely indifferent toward the substantive arguments I put forward about the politics of masculinity studies more generally lays bare a fault line within the field that needs to be addressed. My hope is that our exchange may prompt reflection among masculinity scholars about the meaning and purpose of our work vis-à-vis feminism and feminist scholarship. For those of us who work across these fields, this means sustaining a certain willfulness: “a refusal to look away from what has already been looked over” (Ahmed 2010a, 8). The stakes are high, and we cannot afford to be cowed by the dictates of so-called “academic modesty”.

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