

SHAVING IT ALL OFF: EXAMINING SOCIAL NORMS OF BODY HAIR AMONG COLLEGE MEN IN A WOMEN'S STUDIES COURSE

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As a field only four decades old, women's studies has undergone sweeping changes since its inception in the early 1970s. Striving to shed light on the trappings of gender roles, the dangers of patriarchal power, and the fundamental inequalities that drive social relationships, women's studies has always prioritized progressive social change (hooks 43; Shrewsbury 9). Responding to criticisms by sympathetic feminists of its overly White, middle-class orientation, women's studies programs and departments have devoted significant effort to recruiting and retaining a more diverse group of scholars, students, and faculty. In particular, women of color, sexual minorities, older women, and men have entered the field in greater numbers and have changed the face of women's studies across the U.S. and throughout the world. Women's studies programs report more men taking women's studies courses, more male women's studies majors and minors, and more male women's studies faculty members than ever before (Wiegman 106); efforts to recruit and retain gay men have been particularly at the forefront of recent women's studies program priorities. Despite this, men's experiences in the field of women's studies remain an understudied phenomenon, particularly for the pedagogical and structural implications of designing and implementing effective, far-reaching women's studies curricula that account for gender diversity and men's lived experiences.

Men in women's studies courses are often faced with a number of unfamiliar predicaments: they suddenly find themselves the minority in the classroom (particularly for men in business and

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science, where men are typically overrepresented), they confront stereotypes about feminist professors and must decide how to relate to them, they engage with topics that challenge patriarchal power (and perhaps their own assumptions of power), and they question whether and how men identify with feminism and women's studies more broadly. Men in women's studies courses typically examine deeply personal experiences, particularly their sexuality and body practices and the way that their day-to-day behaviors reference sexist norms and power hierarchies. Taking seriously the mantra that "the personal is political," men may face questions rarely asked of them (e.g., "Do I receive undeserved privileges?" or "What does it mean to have sex in a culture that prioritizes men's sexual experiences over women's?").

The few studies about men in women's studies courses, often with small sample sizes, have demonstrated mixed results about the impact and significance of the field in men's lives. Male students, like some female students, admitted resistance to feminist ideas and course content and sometimes dismissed it as irrelevant to their lives (Webber 181), and some men expressed more negativity toward feminism after taking a women's studies course (Thomsen, Basu, and Reinitz 419). That said, several studies found that both men (note small sample sizes) and women who took women's studies courses reported a more progressive gender role orientation, more control over their lives, lower prejudice against women, more support for affirmative action, greater involvement in the women's movement, more engagement with activism, and more identification with feminism than students who did not take such courses (Bryant 131; Case 426; Harris, Melaas, and Rodacker 969; Stake 43; Stake et al. 17). Still, men who dropped out of women's studies courses before the semester ended expressed difficulty with feeling like the minority in the classroom, as they felt left out, fearful of other men's responses, and uncomfortable even while they gained a greater appreciation of women's experiences (Miner 452). Students of both genders were also generally more critical and derogatory toward women's studies faculty even when they rated those instructors highly (Hartung 254). Pedagogically, both men and women benefitted most from experiential assignments that prioritized reflection and "applied feminism" rather than merely cataloging existing scholarship (Copp and Kleinman 101).

Underscoring the importance of concretely examining, challenging, and questioning social norms of gender in the classroom through applied feminism, this study showcases the written reactions of a group of eight men from diverse backgrounds in a recent 65-student course entitled, "Critical Perspectives on Sexuality," that I taught at a large southwestern university in Fall 2009. Two weeks into the course, these men were asked, as an extra credit class exercise, to shave their body hair (pubic hair, armpits, and legs) for a period of 12 weeks, and to write about their experiences in both a response paper and a weekly log. This article begins by discussing some of the relevant literature about masculinity and body hair, weaving in some literature about men in women's studies courses. This study then examines the method and general results from this "body hair experiment," and concludes with a discussion of how asking men in women's studies courses to experimentally shave their body hair might facilitate analysis of the relationship between social norms, personal practices, and gendered (in)equalities.

Literature Review

Historically, body hair appearance has long been associated with gender, as hairiness signifies manliness and virility, while hairlessness connotes womanliness, youthfulness, and passivity. Though men have not always gone unshaven (e.g., ancient Egyptians prized hairless male bodies) (Luciano 53), current standards still dictate hairiness as a standard for masculinity, even if men occasionally trim or groom their facial or body hair. Indeed, hair has often been associated with vigor and power, so men are expected to have it, while women are expected to remain hairless (Toerien and Wilkinson, "Gender and Body Hair" 333). The growth of hair has signified power, status, prestige, masculinity, and control, while hair removal has in some cases signified submission to God (e.g., nuns and monks who routinely shave their entire bodies and/or their heads), men's "adult" status (compared to women's adolescent status), and men's differentness from women (Basow 83; Toerien and Wilkinson, "Gender and Body Hair" 333). Hairiness is a required component of masculinity, just as hairlessness is a required component of femininity in the U.S. With the exception of male athletes (e.g., swimmers and

runners who shave for aerodynamic reasons), communities of queer men, and a growing percentage of men who “manscape” (that is, trim or groom) their genitals or groom some of their body hair for cosmetic reasons (Anderson 1), the norm of men growing their body hair and letting their hair remain “natural” persists in the U.S.

Few studies have systematically examined men’s body hair practices, as most of the body hair literature focuses on women’s compulsory experiences of shaving and depilation. Studies have shown, for example, that 91.5% of U.S. women shaved their legs, and 93% of U.S. women shaved their armpits (Tiggemann and Kenyon 873), though these numbers are sometimes as high as 99% (Toerien, Wilkinson, and Choi 399), indicating that body hair norms that emphasize women and men’s “differentness” are likely strong for both genders. Though some variation exists about shaving—as the Western, developed world demands greater compliance with shaving norms than other parts of the world—women increasingly shave their armpits, legs, and pubic hair in response to social norms that dictate such behavior as normative, raising questions about how this translates in communities of men.

Studies about men’s shaving practices show far more inconsistent results. One study (Boroughs, Cafri, and Thompson 637) found that as many as 63% of men practiced some kind of hair removal below the waist at some point in their lives, particularly in the groin (74.7% of men who responded “yes” to the shaving question), the chest (56%), and the abdomen (46.7%), though less for underarms (33.3%) or legs (18.7%). This study, however, did not specify the frequency or intensity of these shaving experiences, the duration of depilation, or whether participants shaved completely or simply trimmed or groomed, though “sexual attractiveness” was the key reason they removed hair. In contrast, another study found that body hair removal in men was not at all associated with sexual attractiveness to women (Dixon et al. 29), though research has not assessed its role in gay male couplings. No other studies have examined rates of men shaving their armpits, groin, or legs, though many mainstream media articles have described men’s “manscaping” as a more frequently occurring phenomenon (Cosenzi; Dyce).

Studies have shown that women face negative consequences when not shaving, though research has not established what social

consequences men may face for shaving their body hair. Several studies have established that women who resisted shaving felt evaluated as “dirty” or “gross” (Toerien and Wilkinson, “Exploring the Depilation Norm” 69), and that women negatively evaluated other women who did not remove their body hair (Basow and Braman 637). Similarly, men negatively evaluated women who did not shave (Tiggemann and Lewis 419), though studies have not examined women’s attitudes toward men who remove their body hair. With regard to men’s attitudes about *not* shaving themselves, results were mixed. One study examining men’s body image found that men were far more dissatisfied with their weight, muscularity, and penis size than with their head or body hair. Most men found their body hair tolerable, and having hair did not predict negative self-esteem (Tiggemann, Martins, and Churchett 1163). The reverse was true, however, for gay-identified men, who described their body hair and their muscularity as causing them the most dissatisfaction with their bodies compared to head hair, height, penis size, and body weight (Martins, Tiggemann, and Churchett 248). Thus, those with male partners—whether male or female—typically felt more pressure to shave in order to comply with cultural demands for hairlessness.

Issues of race, class, and sexual identity may also play into body hair norms, though no systematic studies of men’s body hair have examined race and class. While women’s race and class backgrounds have been shown to affect their relationship to body hair—as women of color and working class women felt more strongly averse to growing body hair than did White women (Fahs and Delgado 13)—no studies of men have been conducted on this subject (though media imagery suggests some associations between shaved heads and athleticism, particularly for male athletes of color).

Changing norms of sexual identities, however, have been well-documented in recent years. The concept of the “metrosexual”—in essence, men who adopt more feminine behaviors and grooming practices—has received attention in the last decade. Anderson (1) found that, from the early 1990s through 2005, more heterosexual-identified men started adopting “feminine” behaviors like visiting spas and salons, having plastic surgery, eating healthy foods, carrying a purse, wearing makeup, grooming pubic hair, and using proper etiquette. She also found that, after 2005,

hegemonic norms of traditional masculinity reappeared, inspiring fewer men to adopt the “metrosexual” lifestyle by instead opting for a stereotypically masculine lifestyle emphasizing sexuality, sport, violence, machismo, and a rejection of fashion and health interests.

Only one study has examined men’s motives for shaving, finding that, among the men who did remove body hair, they did so for (in rank order) cleanliness, sexual appeal, body definition, better sexual experiences, youthfulness, to avoid teasing, and for better healing following injury or surgery (Boroughs, Cafri, and Thompson 637). Though more women removed hair far more frequently, their motives were somewhat similar, as women reported removing hair in order to achieve femininity, attractiveness, self-enhancement, a feeling of cleanliness, confidence, and sexual comfort (Tiggemann and Hodgson 889). Additional studies are needed to better examine the similarities and differences between men’s and women’s motives for shaving and/or growing body hair. The fact remains: the majority of men do not remove body hair with any frequency, while the vast majority (usually over 90%) of women remove hair with great frequency (Tiggemann and Kenyon 873).

Several questions remain: *Why* do men comply with the social norm of growing body hair, particularly in light of the pervasive cultural hatred in the U.S. toward *women’s* body hair? Why do men feel more confident in their “natural” state than do women? How might men feel if they removed their body hair temporarily? What kinds of conversations and self-analysis would emerge in such an experiment? Would shaving lead to emasculation, the provocation of homophobic sentiments, and negative self-esteem, or would it provoke new definitions of masculinity that easily accommodate such shifts? How do issues about body hair relate to the larger issues at play in a women’s studies classroom? This study addresses these latter four questions in detail.

Method

This study asks two central research questions: What do men’s experiences with temporarily shaving reveal about gender, masculinity, sexuality, and the body? Also, how do their responses speak to larger issues at stake for male students in women’s

studies courses? The findings emerge from a content analysis of an experiential class assignment undertaken by students enrolled in a women's studies class focused on theories of sexuality at a large public southwestern university.

Two weeks into the Fall 2009 semester, 65 students were recruited to participate in an extra credit assignment that asked them to reject the current shaving norm for a period of 12 weeks. Though this was an upper-division women's studies course, none of the men reported having taken more than one previous women's studies course, and most had never taken a women's studies course before. This was the third semester I had conducted the "body hair experiment" and the first semester in which a group of men participated. The assignment asked men, regardless of their current hair practices, to shave their underarm, leg, and pubic hair for the duration of the semester. For women, the assignment asked that they grew their body hair out in these regions for the duration of the semester. Students kept weekly logs of their personal reactions to their body hair, others' reactions to their (lack of) hair, any changes in behavior noted, and thoughts about how changes in body hair affected their health and sexuality. They were asked to turn in their logs and a reflection paper about these issues at the end of the 12 weeks.¹ Though no "official" class time was devoted to discussing the experiment, informal conversations occurred before and at the start of class regularly, particularly between students who sat nearby each other. Participation was optional, as students were given two points (the equivalent of 1% of their overall grade) for successful completion of the assignment. If students terminated the assignment early, they were given one point for turning in a paper about their experiences along with their partially completed logs. No official "checks" were ever completed to confirm whether students were participating; students simply informed the professor (and often

¹The assignment specifically asked them to reflect about the following four sets of questions: (1) What did you feel like emotionally when adopting the "non-masculine" norm of shaving? What was this experience like for you?; (2) In what way (if at all) did this affect your sexuality, health, and/or your feelings about your own body? Did anything change behaviorally? What about internally?; (3) What kind of external feedback, if any, did you receive about this? How did others respond? What did that feel like?; (4) How has this experience allowed you to reflect upon the social construction of bodily norms, particularly as they relate to sexuality?

times, their classmates) of their participation and kept track of their feelings and reactions throughout the semester.

While 65 students enrolled in the class, 42 participated in the assignment, including 8 men and 34 women. The sample for this study, which includes the 8 participating men, included 50% men of color (4 White, 2 Latino, 1 African-American, 1 Asian-American), all but one of whom were under age 30.² Data was not directly collected about students' sexual identities, but within the response papers, the gender of their sexual partner(s) appeared in all but two of the papers (e.g., "my girlfriend" or "my boyfriend"). Half of the men described having had a female partner at some point, while one man described having both male and female partners, and one man described having only male partners. Also, two participants did not mention having any partners. All eight men chose to sign the Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent forms, allowing their responses to be used for research purposes.

Responses were coded using a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 77), whereby the response papers and logs were first read and then re-read in order to generate initial codes (e.g., "accusations of gay identity") of the most common patterns. Themes were then generated, reviewed, defined, and named in order to produce rich and textured examples of the most common themes within the response papers. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to disguise their identity. Drawing from student narratives about temporarily shaving their body hair during one semester, this study utilizes those themes in order to illuminate the way that temporarily shaving their body hair provoked thinking about gender, masculinity, sexuality, and the body.

Results and Discussion

Four categories of responses were coded from the response papers and logs turned in by the eight male students who participated in the study. These categories included: (1) Initial surprises, including their reactions to shaving as time-consuming as well

²I do not specify the racial backgrounds, ages, and sexual identities of participants (unless absolutely necessary for the analysis) so that I can protect their anonymity, as the group was relatively small and these features could easily identify them to their classmates from that semester.

as anticipation about others' reactions; (2) Physical reactions and sensations, including strategies for shaving and behavioral changes they underwent during the semester; (3) Questioning masculinity, including confrontation with externalized and internalized homophobia, a recognition of gender differences between women and men, and negotiating others' judgments of their masculinity; and (4) Tensions between lessons learned and resistance to the assignment, including their relationship to "blaming" the professor, their personal feelings of rebellion, and a newfound awareness of the power of social constructions.

Initial Surprises

Nearly all men who participated in the assignment discussed their initial reactions to the assignment, particularly their first negotiations with learning how to shave their bodies. None of the men had previously shaved all of their body hair until this assignment, though a few had "manscaped" their pubic hair. Most found the act of shaving difficult. For example, Ben remarked on the difficulty of shaving, ultimately deciding to "masculinize" the experience by using a sharp knife to shave:

So I shaved today. It took like forty-five minutes in the shower. I swear to god when I signed up for this I had no clue what I was getting myself into. Big mistake. Forty-five minutes in the shower shaving and that was for just below the knee. It looked like a wookie (like Chewbacca from *Star Wars*) went through a woodchipper in the shower. There was hair all over the place. And when I got out, I realized I had missed huge sections of hair that apparently had needed like a tenth pass with the razor or something. I decided not to go back into the shower. I decided to use my buck knife to cut the rest of the hair off my legs. It's super sharp. I cut into my ankle a little bit. It bled a little bit.

A common reaction among the male participants was to arrive in class and complain to nearby women about the amount of time and effort they spent shaving, which was met with little sympathy and even some glee and laughter from the women students in the class. Sergio commented in his paper about the difficulties of shaving and his newfound respect for women who must shave:

I had difficulties for the plain and simple reason that [shaving] is alien to me. I found myself spending about 10–15 minutes shaving thinking I did

a good job, just to step out of the shower, put on my glasses, and realize that I did not do so well. I would then stop and go back and try to do it again, which was very frustrating. I slowly began to realize what women go through just to fit in . . . I did not cut myself but I am fairly certain there was some razor burnage. I have a weird feeling in my armpits as little tiny hairs too short to be eaten by the razor are poking me. Quite irritating.

For some men, the time-consuming quality of shaving gave them more sympathy for women, even while they still expected women's hairlessness. For example, Aaron recognized the difficulty of shaving yet still wanted a female partner to remove her body hair, saying, "I literally spend a half hour a day doing this dumb shaving thing. I think I've got better things to do. I feel sorry for women who have to spend time doing useless things to their body but I still wouldn't want to sleep with someone who's not shaved."

Initially, men also anticipated others' reactions and worried about being judged or mistreated because they were shaving. Max wondered about the judgment of his male coworkers in his log: "What will the guys at work think? I usually wear shorts when I'm out on runs but not anymore. They'll tease the shit out of me." Thus, even *before* confronting his coworkers responses, Max worried that his hairless legs would cause trouble for his masculinity at work. Sergio also felt self-conscious at first, hoping to find an ally in shaving: "OMG, when I looked down to see the results of my efforts, wow. I am not entirely sure how to describe it, but I felt all-together feminine. I am not saying this is good or bad, but this is how I felt . . . I have noticed myself looking at other people's legs on campus everywhere I go, looking to see if anyone else is rebelling against cultural messages of beauty. Big surprise, everywhere I look the women are hairless. Once last week I almost thought a guy had shaved his legs but upon closer inspection he had hair, it was just hard to see." Even their anticipatory feelings expressed concern for others' judgments about their non-normative body hair practices. Notably, men expressed far more concern about how other men would react, than how their (mostly female) partners or other women would react; this differed greatly from the female participants who were not shaving, as unshaven women expressed preoccupation with their (mostly male) partners' disgust reactions toward their body hair.

Physical Reactions and Sensations

Most men described physical reactions and sensations to body hair removal that surprised them, sometimes inspiring behavioral changes as well. Tom noted the discomforts of shaving: "I have razorburn all the time, nonstop. I can't believe how itchy and gross it is though my girlfriend never says anything about it." Jason also noticed several physical reactions to shaving that he found unpleasant:

I forgot about ingrown hairs, so when the new ones started to grow my skin became tender to the touch and very itchy. Normally when I have ingrown hairs on my face I just pull them out with a stick pen I use. However, I had new hairs growing on my groin areas, and I was quite apprehensive about using a stick pen for this area. It got to the point where I had to do something . . . I found myself scratching my genitals, arm pits, and buttocks in public, which generated stares from people and at times I found it embarrassing. On the other hand, I was uncomfortable so when it came time to scratch, I did it without any reservations.

Jason's response reveals the tension between self-consciousness and physical discomfort, as he had to reconfigure his changing body while also deciding how to address the unpleasant symptoms of shaving; interestingly, his approach reveals a stereotypically masculine way of interacting with his body: he chose to unabashedly itch and scratch at will (something women would be socially prohibited from doing). Here, Jason claimed gendered body privileges as he could scratch in public environments while women are typically not allowed to engage in public displays of bodily discomfort in the same way.

A few men talked about their strategies for shaving, noting that women's ways of shaving were essentially too feminine. These strategies often carried various masculine twists on body hair removal, thereby establishing distance between themselves and their female counterparts.³ Michael resisted shaving creams, labeling them as too "feminine": "I just shave dry now. It's bad

³During one class, a male student told other students that he had tried Nair and had over-applied it to his body which resulted in negative side effects like a burning rash. As a low point of this experiment, this student's use of a self-identified "female" approach to body hair removal was met with intense laughter and a few homophobic reactions from nearby men.

enough to do this assignment in the first place so I'm definitely not using lady creams and pink razors and stuff." Ben, who could never quite figure out how to use a regular razor, said, "My use of the buck knife and box cutter made me feel more intimidating and masculine. I caught many people's attention by shaving in public at my convenience. That part was kind of fun." Here, Ben has notably masculinized the act of shaving, preferring knives and box cutters as his tool rather than a razor, and opting to use shaving as a means of publicly rebelling during boring classes. This suggests that men normalized body hair removal far more than women normalized body hair growth, perhaps as a consequence of men's bodies having more cultural and discursive freedoms than women's bodies (even across racial and sexual identity lines).

Questioning Masculinity

Questioning masculinity, and specifically confronting homophobia, was by far the most common reaction men had to this assignment, regardless of sexual identity, age, class, or race.⁴ Men expressed a preoccupation with others—particularly other men—perceiving them as gay. Ben expressed concern about his family's reactions, saying:

Initially, I felt that shaving my legs and armpits would be a very emasculating experience. I feared facing difficulties from my family especially, since they are very conservative/ex-catholic. I was raised to be afraid of catching the gay, or becoming gay, and my dad did his best to involve me in programs that would reinforce masculinity and stave off homosexuality . . . My fears were not without at least some basis in reality. My father started off on rants about homosexuality, and my mother kept bothering me about it, her concern over me shaving quite palpable . . . My dad kept using the gay comment. I really hate it when he assumes shit. I keep telling him that it's nothing big. I'm JUST shaving my body.

Regulation by parents also occurred for Aaron, whose conservative Latino parents and brother associated shaving with homosexuality: "My parents treated me like it was this big problem, a sign of

⁴Because of the small sample size and small number of men of color (only 4), I chose not to analyze their responses by race or class in order to focus instead on the more salient gender and sexual identity issues discussed by all eight men.

not being a Man. My brother teased me about it, called me a pussy and a fag. I can't believe how much they seem to care about it even though I told them I was only doing it for extra credit."

For some, the assignment caused them to question their own internalized homophobia, such as Jason, who situated others' reactions as a litmus test for his own comfort with his budding sexuality:

I knew people might perceive me as having gay tendencies or some type of metrosexual thing, so my attitude was like, "Whatever." . . . Maybe though deep down I did care especially when the question of sexual orientation came up. I didn't want people to think I was gay or had gay tendencies. It was shortly after that that I began to realize I may have some self-negation about my own sexual orientation. How could I possibly let others assume I could be gay? After this thought, my feelings changed from excitement to paranoid.

For someone like Jason who actively questioned his sexual identity, the experiment provoked questions about gay identity and homophobia in a sustained way. Sergio, who sensed homophobia in a more vague way, expressed a similar predicament while at a campus urinal: "I was standing there using the urinal and it was almost like I was worried that someone would just know that I shaved my pubic hair. Why would it matter though? It really has caused me to think."

In addition to grappling with issues of homophobia, most men commented at least once that they had a greater appreciation for how hair was gendered. Tom expressed surprise at the permission he received to shave, but also noted a double standard: "I mentioned the assignment to a group of guys, and they said it was fine for men to shave but disgusting for women to not shave. Just the look in their eyes about it made me feel bad for women who weren't shaving." Sergio started an online blog about the experience of not shaving and discovered that women provided advice and support about the experience, while men expressed discomfort and disgust about it. He joked in his paper: "Most women supported what I was doing with a 'you should wax' thrown in for good measure." Chris also felt aware of gender differences, saying, "I know I can be manly with or without hair but women can't be feminine with hair. It's a double standard. I didn't make it that way." In sum, men sensed that it was more acceptable for them to

shave than it was for women *not* to shave, particularly when they did not directly face homophobic reactions from others; as long as they fully claimed their heterosexuality, they had permission to do whatever they liked with their bodies (a notable difference from women in the class).

Resistance and Lessons Learned

Most men commented that they learned a great deal about gender and social norms from the assignment, though a few called it a “waste of time.” For some, the experiment provided them with an opportunity to confront their own sense of agency about body hair removal as they expressed a tension between “blaming their women’s studies professor” and admitting that they *chose* to do the experiment. For example, Sergio defended his choices to a friend and consequently felt conflicted about his justification for shaving:

I had an encounter with a friend of mine whom I thought would get a kick out of it and be supportive; little did I know. She asked me if there was something wrong with me. I felt really defensive, I had to defend the act by saying it was for a class project and not of my own volition. This more than anything else showed me just how caught up in social constructions we really are.

Max also discussed his reliance on, and awareness of, blaming the professor, using external attributes to explain the stigma he faced: “As long as I could blame it on you, I enjoyed it. I would never do this otherwise but halfway through I started wondering why I kept repeating that it was for a class assignment to people who asked me about it. Why couldn’t I just say that I did it because I felt like it? I’m a man. I don’t need a reason.” Here, gender bending is both *emasculating* and also a potentially *masculine* assertion of the self, which has eerie similarities to Ben’s description of shaving with box cutters and buck knives. In both instances, these men resisted gender norms by shaving but also reconfigured shaving into an assertion of masculinity (e.g., Ben: “I’m scary and intimidating”; or Max: “I don’t need a reason”).

For others, the experiment provided an opportunity to reflect upon the tension between deviance and compliance, which underlies the key tensions presented throughout the class about the

social constructedness of sexuality. Chris reflected on his need to fit in *and* rebel: "I usually think of myself as a rebel and an outcast but I still want to be liked and appreciated by other dudes. I guess hair matters. I'm not gay but I like their approval." Jason also commented on his desire to be socially normative while also challenging such norms:

The very fact that I told some people about this assignment suggests I didn't after all want to be considered too deviant. I guess some forms of deviancies are considered okay, just so long as they are not too extreme . . . I now understand my own perception about my body image is based upon social norms. Knowing is not enough for me because now I must change my thought patterns . . . I want to be seen as attractive by social standards for men. I think we as men are conditioned by society to have these needs. To be looked upon by other men with envy and desired by women . . . I never thought such a simple assignment would have this effect on me. This was totally unexpected. I now understand that I must take social construction very seriously, because our very lives are based upon it.

Classroom Dynamics and Impact

The body hair experiment provided a platform upon which to explore larger issues of gender, masculinity, sexuality, and the body with the men who participated. Notably, men in the classroom expressed much ambivalence about participating in the assignment, and many seemed encouraged by a vocal few who expressed that it was "no big deal." For example, Sergio announced his blog in class one day early on in the experiment, and after that, several other men decided to join the experiment. This speaks to the ways that, even though the men were supposed to *rebel* against norms of not shaving, they sometimes followed the group norms set up in the classroom.⁵

Men in women's studies courses face unique challenges, and as such, instructors must find ways to encourage men to find women's studies scholarship *relevant*, *personally meaningful*, and *provocative*. As evidenced by these men's comments about doing the body hair experiment simply because, as Max said, "My crazy feminist professor told me to," men in women's studies courses

⁵See Fahs Forthcoming and Fahs and Delgado 13, for a more thorough discussion of women in the body hair experiment conforming to classroom pressures.

may generally feel conflicted by settings that question and criticize their privilege. Providing men with an opportunity to confront social norms with “permission” from an instructor may help them to grapple with some of these complexities. Instead of addressing these issues by reading articles about others’ experiences, these male participants addressed these issues concretely, *in their bodies*, which created new knowledges and insights that united theory and practice.

Clearly, the men who participated generated exceptionally thoughtful and insightful responses, commenting upon social constructionism, the meaning of gender and masculinity, tensions about confronting others’ homophobia or disapproval, and their emerging self-identities as young men. Even while they confirmed some stereotypes about men and masculinity, they also resisted and rebelled against these stereotypes, at times recognizing the difficult plight of women, or sensing the daily trappings of masculinity. They even found ways to “masculinize” the “emasculating” act of shaving—by using box cutters instead of razors, claiming they “don’t need a reason” to shave, or openly itching and scratching when they felt discomfort from shaving. For most men, their masculinity appeared somewhat flexible, able to negotiate competing pressures to confirm and rebel, to please the instructor while also clearly establishing autonomy and agency.

While this study is of course limited by the extremely small sample of a single class in one university—itself representative of the unique challenges men face in women’s studies courses, where they comprise a small minority compared to a female majority—this study provides some insights into how instructors can concretely help men in women’s studies courses to more closely consider their motivations and feelings about gender, masculinity, sexuality, and the body. Any number of experiential assignments could facilitate this, as men consistently grapple with the difficult conundrums of power and privilege. That said, age differences, exposure to the “metrosexual” images of the last decade, and geographic location would likely affect the results of any experiential shaving exercise (e.g., men at more progressive campuses may find body hair less threatening on women, so shaving their own body hair might also matter less). This study also suggests that classroom dynamics can sometimes take on a life of their own, as new norms are always created and recreated throughout

the course of any given semester. Though I have conducted this experiment on three separate occasions (and plan to do so several more times during the coming years), and there are some consistent themes across semesters, each semester brings a different group of students who negotiate power and privilege differently. Thus, while I strongly encourage other instructors to replicate this experiment, I undoubtedly expect that students will respond differently each time. Each rebellion against shaving norms provokes different responses and new threads of conversation in the classroom. In this case, men helped to recruit other men into participation, even while having their own private reflections about the exercise. Further, they used the experiment as an opportunity to reflect upon the meaning of social constructions—no small feat for those of us in women's studies who want to engage men with issues of privilege, power, and the social elements of the self. The men grappled with the pervasiveness of homophobia, provided vivid descriptions of the double standards they sensed between men and women, and found new ways to negotiate the tensions between deviance and compliance with their masculinity. As Chris said, "Body hair seems so simple but really it's not. Get out of line from what you're supposed to do, and 'Bam,' you'll find that out real quick."

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