

# **Sons of Feminists**

## ***Learning from Their Talk***

In recent studies, I and two colleagues investigated the influence that we as feminist academic mothers had exerted on our own children's educational experiences. Our intent had been to explore, in a collaborative format, the mother-child-education connection to determine what our sons' and daughters' experiences could reveal about our feminist stance and our impact on their identity formation. Selected findings from these studies have been published elsewhere (see Castle, Abbey and Reynolds, 1998; Abbey, Castle and Reynolds, 1998). In this paper I revisit the specific study with our sons and present other findings related to mother-son relationships. My focus here is on our sons' use of language during their conversations with us, their mothers. Since talk contributes to the construction of identity and serves to mark gender, our sons' language offered an avenue to explore their development and the role that we had played in their identity formation. This paper presents the key aspects of our sons' discourse and highlights the key lessons to be learned from their talk about schooling, our influence in their lives, and the unfolding of their masculinity. It is white, middle-class masculinity that is referred to here and throughout the paper.<sup>1</sup>

### **Theoretical framework**

Two main frames of reference guided both my exploration and analysis of our sons' talk.

### **Social constructivism**

A social constructionist position argues that concepts such as identity and ways of interacting in the world can be considered a social construct: "a system of meaning that organizes interactions and governs access to power and

resources” (Crawford, 1995: 12). From this perspective, gender becomes socially constructed and exists not in the individual but in transactions with others. While gender as a system then operates at different levels from the individual to the interpersonal to the social level, it nevertheless remains a social system.

Within this framework, language becomes a set of strategies for negotiating social landscapes. As such, talk is a powerful resource accomplishing a range of purposes such as influencing others, justifying one’s behaviors, or building relationships. Regardless of the situation or interaction, says Nofsinger (1991), the same language system is used, adapted for situations. When gender and language are considered together, both from this constructivist position, one can focus on questions such as how gender influences conversation, how interactions of status or power affect talk, and how one actually constructs one’s beliefs in relation to one’s talk. As well, one can ask how institutions such as education or the family construct and justify individual understandings of identity as a consequence of the language strategies they employ. It was these sorts of questions that led me to delve deeper into our sons’ storied recollections in our study. I was influenced by Davies (1993) and Heilbrun (1988) who argue that various “subject positions” are constructed by individuals in a culture, and that when we draw attention to what a text reveals and talk about the constructed subject positions, it becomes “a way of unravelling old realities/perceptions and thus making way for new ones” (Davies, 1993: 14). Exploring the language used by our sons then became “a vital entry point for examining the interaction between the individual and the society in the construction of gender” (Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 5).

### **Language analysis**

Within a framework of social constructivism, the analysis of talk calls for an approach focusing on interaction. This allows for an analysis of how different power relations among groups and individuals affect the kind of interaction and feedback offered and received. It also allows for an investigation of the ways in which gender as a system interacts with other constructed systems such as race, class, and status. The study of language, then, becomes part of a broader study of relations between language and social meaning (Ochs, 1992).

According to Tannen (1994), much of the research on language and gender has sought to describe the linguistic means by which men dominate women. Tannen argues, however, that the source of domination or powerlessness cannot be located in the specific speech strategies because the same linguistic means can have different effects in different contexts. Human interaction is a joint production, and so what occurs is a result of the interaction of all participants involved.

From this perspective, any exploration of language must consider gender in relation to other constructed systems such as race and class. Crawford (1995) argues for methodological plurality in such endeavors and claims that methods

such as modes of discourse (Mulkay, 1988) and speech act theory (Gervasio and Crawford, 1989) can serve feminist ends with careful attention to interactional context. Yet she also points to problems with such research, mainly as it relates to the concepts of relativism and interpretive readings, and she stresses that such analysis must be used reflexively in order to overcome these difficulties.

It was this human interaction perspective that guided my exploration of our sons' discourse. I focused on the topics they addressed and the ways they interacted in groups. I saw our sons' language as a source of understanding their lives and the impact of our feminist mothering on their identity construction.

### **Details of the study**

The original mother-son study was based on a number of interlocking conversations. We were three white, middle class mothers, all in our late forties, all working as professors in a faculty of education, and all espousing feminist views. Our three sons were single, ranging in age from their early to late 20es. The youngest was completing an undergraduate degree in computer science, while the other two had completed university and were working, one as an actor and one as a police officer.

The conversations in the original study had been directed by questions aimed at uncovering narratives related to personal experiences about schooling, mother-son relationships, and identity formation. The process first involved paired interviews between the mothers themselves and the sons themselves, but later involved open-ended conversations with all participants.

The focus in the present paper is on the content and nature of our sons' talk during the various interactions. Talking with one's peers is different from talking with one's mother and even different yet from talking with peers and mothers together. The large group conversations were not only mixed gender, but also inter-generational, and we as mothers held positions of power as mothers and project researchers. As well, the nature of these conversations was academic and purpose-oriented rather than familiar and informal, and this was a new mode of interaction among us as mothers and sons. As Lakoff (1990) notes: "unlike ordinary conversation, institutional and professional talk, has, until recently, been almost totally a male preserve, so the rules of male discourse are not only seen as the better way to talk but as the only way" (210). This, I felt, could complicate the power balance. I set out to explore what our sons revealed to each other and to us during these talks, and what their use of language revealed about themselves and mother-son relationships. In the two sections that follow, I summarize the five themes that emerged in their talk, and I highlight the two key strategies they employed during group interactions.

### **Themes in our sons' talk**

Because all conversations were part of a research study, we as the researchers had controlled the direction of the talk. Yet we had no overt control over our sons' responses; they chose what to focus on, what to emphasize, and what to

reveal about their schooling, our mothering, and their masculine identity.

### **Centrality of the teenage years**

In their talk about school and their own development, our sons emphasized the teenage years. They remembered little about elementary school, and revealed little about university life, but they were very verbal about secondary school. They portrayed those years as happy ones and mostly emphasized the social dimension of life at that time; this emerged as central to their self concept. They recounted having circles of friends, having many interests in and out of school, and of feeling good about themselves and about life.

This emphasis on the teen years was not unexpected given that these are years when one struggles to form one's identity. But our sons' positive recollections stood in contrast to the stories of angst generated by teenage girls (e.g., Gilligan, 1982). Yet whether talking amongst themselves or with us, our sons emphasized their teen years and painted a portrait of these years as very good ones.

### **School as a game**

A second theme that surfaced was the notion that school was a game. Our sons talked of doing well in school, but not of striving to be better or of attributing much importance to marks. They were in fact critical of the academic component of secondary and university schooling, claiming it was not relevant to them or the real world. All spoke of knowing they could do more academically, but of choosing to put school "in perspective"; it was a game with rules to be questioned and at times manipulated.

They recounted having numerous interests in and out of school and alluded that their self-esteem was related more to their social lives than their academic lives. They seemed to have resisted any message calling on them to excel in school and instead constructed their own lives around outside interests and used these to develop pride in themselves and respect from others. While interests such as acting, music and art were recounted as ways they channelled their energies and gained acceptance from others, the activity mentioned most was sports. All three sons recounted sliding easily into the sports culture from an early age. They talked of excellence in sports as part of the male ideal (not so with the arts they felt), and recognized the benefits to them of being able to fit the athletic mold, both in and out of the school context. They appeared to have learned this message early on, and not to have resisted it.

### **Gender inequities**

What also emerged repeatedly in our sons' talk was reference to differential treatment for males and females, right from an early age. They remembered manipulating female teachers in elementary school by being "cute," and then later influencing male teachers in secondary school by demonstrating their skills in sports. In university, however, they talked of a changing playing field; here they viewed females as receiving preferential treatment. They recounted

feeling disadvantaged, stressing that females always received the best treatment and the highest marks. They also talked of changing equity policies that influenced work force hiring procedures, and they suggested, albeit meekly, that in many cases this was discrimination against men. Yet with prodding, our sons acknowledged a certain privileged status. As one said: "I never remember as a young man saying 'Jeez, I wish I was a young girl....'"

### **Advantage of feminist mothers**

When recounting their lives with us and our involvement in their development, our sons were clear about our influence. They were highly positive about our impact, both in relation to schooling and life in general. They described us as "powerful" and claimed to be proud of us and our careers. We had, in the words of one of them, "always been there" for them.

Our sons also spoke of being brought up differently than many other young men. They recollected not always liking to "fend for themselves" when they were growing up and we were busy with work and careers, but they then acknowledged that males should be able to "cook and clean" and they felt able to do this now. They also claimed that some of their views about equality and fairness set them apart from their contemporaries, but they claimed they did not feel disadvantaged by this either. Only one called himself a feminist however; the others rejected any such label. They were clear about the need to support fairness and equal opportunity, but they denounced what they viewed as feminist views portraying men as villains succeeding at women's expenses.

### **The masculine ideal**

The final theme emerging in our sons' talk concerned masculine identity. It proved difficult for them to talk about what it meant to be masculine. In many ways their talk revealed traditional, stereotypical interpretations. One recounted growing up associating masculinity with images of the physically strong, aggressive, competitive male hero who could handle all situations and conquer all demons. Another stressed freedom of movement and choice and portrayed an image of masculinity that incorporated cigars, scotch, and football games. The third espoused a more relational view, seeing masculinity as the antithesis of femininity. All three sons seemed almost apologetic in describing such interpretations, and they acknowledged that such views developed as a consequence of social messages received from an early age. And even though none could identify any individual who fit their ideal male image, and even though they readily referred to themselves as different from other males, implying that they had resisted many of the messages about the ideal male, none offered a definition of masculinity to replace the traditional notions that came through the masculine culture.

### **Strategies in our sons' talk**

It is not only the content of one's talk that reveals constructions of identity,

but also the ways in which one uses language with others. Micro-social positions come into play, and aspects such as when, where and how the talk unfolds and which devices are used can contribute to gaining an understanding of the individuals involved. In the case of our sons, two particular aspects emerged as noteworthy.

### **Code switching**

Some of the group talk occurred among our sons alone, while at other times, it involved mothers and sons together. It emerged that our sons used different conversational modes in each group. Amongst themselves, they tended to be somewhat guarded, and their talk tended to be somewhat superficial, with comments kept brief and to the point. As well, their peer talk was at times punctuated with jokes or comments that would trivialize the statement or topic. However, when talking with us, their mothers, in an intergenerational, mixed gender group, our sons were much more verbal, much more serious, and much more assertive. Winning our approval seemed important here, and our sons appeared not to want to let us down. As well, however, they seemed to need to demonstrate power in the larger group. Their use of linguistic strategies such as interrupting others or using aggressive language demonstrated a need on their part to assert authority and dominate the conversation (Tannen, 1994).

### **Silence**

On many occasions our sons, the youngest one in particular, declined to comment or answer a question, both in the small and large group. In doing so they appeared to be demonstrating an understanding of the power of silence to guard their privacy and withhold information. Talk and the absence of talk can serve as powerful instruments both of inclusion and exclusion, and our sons' decisions to talk or not served to demonstrate their power. Frank (1996) refers to silence as "masculine hegemony" and as a highly rational, if not costly, choice on one's part. Yet it must also be considered that true communication is a complex process, one which was complicated further in this study by the power differentials across the groups. So while our sons had clearly opted at times to enforce their will to be quiet, their options for silence might have resulted from a desire to exert control as well as from a desire not to say the wrong thing in our presence.

### **Lessons learned from our sons' talk**

Smith (1995) claims that "for centuries, women have mothered male children without understanding the masculine culture of which their boys are part" (3). As we initiated our original study, the three of us, as feminists, felt we were well aware of the world of patriarchy and the ways in which family and school serve as cultural reproducers and also sites for resistance. As mothers, we saw our mothering role as raising well-adjusted sons who resisted traditional

male values Forcey (1987). As educators who knew how ingrained schools were in patriarchal teachings (Connell, 1989), we also intended our mothering to dispel patriarchal messages delivered in the educational system.

Our study with our sons taught us, however, that while we had been aware of patriarchy, we had not been sufficiently aware of the ways in which messages from the culture were received and negotiated by young men. My exploration of our sons' talk in this study showed just what they had accepted and rejected, and just how much their identity construction was laced with complexity. I summarize here the key lessons extracted from their talk.

First, our sons' talk revealed a positive construction of their own image, right from an early age, and a portrayal of themselves as fitting comfortably into the larger society. So while sons can be raised by feminist mothers who feel they demonstrate resistance to traditional gender socialization, it appears that those same sons can still slide into traditional patterns with relative ease and then be pleased with themselves for fitting that structure.

Second, our sons' positive recollections of their teenage years and our roles in their lives at that time revealed their perception that they had enjoyed the teen years and survived them relatively unscathed. Feminist maternal fears that sons might suffer and be unable to adjust during those crucial years are perhaps totally unfounded. Others have also reported findings supporting this. Mischel and Fuhr (1998) found that teenage sons from homes with busy working mothers had advantages over other teens—they had higher self-esteem, a greater sense of belonging, and better relations with others at home and at school. Smith (1995) found as well that sons benefitted from mothers with a life and career outside the home because they provided an identity with something males understand and value.

Third, our sons' talk about their schooling revealed a view on their part that they were privileged individuals with power to control their environment. For example, they reported choosing not to excel in academics but in other activities. Ironically, however, their referral to sports as a prime outlet served to reveal an acceptance of traditional masculine norms. Davison (1998) and Griffin (1995) stress that "lessons" of masculinity in school often center around sports, and that sports in turn serve a number of purposes which perpetuate traditional conceptions of masculinity. As a mother, however, I recall openly encouraging participation in sports, so I am left questioning the extent to which feminist mothers continue to indirectly accommodate traditional gender socialization.

Fourth, our sons' comments on their self image revealed perceptions that they held views that set them apart from other males. They attributed this difference to our feminist mothering and claimed to have gained advantages from this upbringing. Not only could they fend for themselves whenever needed, they said, but they could also relate better to females and more readily accept the changing social and work structures calling for equal treatment of men and women. Yet in their talk about university life, they complained of

preferential treatment for females without ever voicing the possibility that females might simply receive better marks because they perform better in class and complete superior work. And when talking about the work force, they still spoke begrudgingly about hiring policies they saw as discriminating against men. Even though mothers feel they deliver messages about gender equity, then, sons can still perceive themselves as automatically deserving of better treatment than females.

Finally, despite reported perceptions of themselves as different from other males, our sons had difficulty defining masculinity. They talked about traditional stereotypes of the ideal male while seeming apologetic about expressing such views. They suggested that the collective public ideal was lacking, but they did not put forth other standards or define themselves in ways that resisted traditional views. Arcana (1983) holds that while most North American mothers easily reject traditional masculine stereotypes, their sons adhere to them because they feel they are expected to. In our case it seems that our sons understood that another model was needed, but they could not articulate one. So even though mothers might model a female view of relationships with sons, those sons do not automatically internalize a view that feminine characteristics, including greater attention to the emotions, might be characteristic of the male ideal. As well, only one of our sons identified himself as a feminist. All three voiced clear acceptance of the standards of fairness and equity for all, but they did not equate this with feminism; they regarded feminism as something more radical. How mothers conceptualize feminism, then, is not automatically internalized by their sons.

Considered together, these lessons from our sons' talk help fill in one frame in a larger complex picture of the development of masculinity, at least as it applies to sons of feminists in a white, middle-class environment. Our sons' talk revealed that their identities had been shaped by outside forces, including us, but that they had also played a part in shaping their own masculinity. As they constructed their understandings of maleness, they had exercised the choice to accept some messages and resist others. The nature of resistance is also complex, however, and as Kimmel (1994) stresses, it is much more difficult for men to reject than to accept the dominant message; to Kimmel, men most fear not fitting in to a norm which in itself embodies oppression of others.

This fear of not fitting in as a male is also perhaps as strong for the mothers as for the sons. Feminist mothers recognize that the gender equity they promote could ultimately result in loss of privilege for their sons, which could then work against their best interests. Rich (1986) asks explicitly what it is that we fear: "Do we fear they will somehow lose their male status and privilege, even as we are seeking to abolish that inequality?" (206) So while feminist mothers claim to want to change their sons, they also must come to deal with the tension they experience from delivering messages that might disempower their sons. Our sons' talk reveals, however, that in their eyes at least they had not suffered from our mothering. But it is we as mothers who must come to terms with



whether indeed our sons have won or lost, at least in our eyes.

<sup>1</sup>The literature on masculinity is varied, with differing views put forth on male's experiences with, and construction of, identity, especially as this might relate to such factors as social class, economic status, race and culture. For varying views on masculinity, see, for example: Bell. (1982); Berger *et al.*, (1995); Bly. (1992); Brod and Kaufman (1994); Clatterbaugh (1990); Connell (1995); Frank (1997); Franks (1984); Haddad (1995); Hearn and Morgan (1990); hooks (1990); Jackson (1990); Johnson (1986); Kimmel (1996).

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