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Book Review: Men and Gender Relations

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Men and Gender Relations. By Bob Pease. 2002: Tertiary Press, Croydon, Victoria
216 pages including bibliography and index. Paperback \$29.95. Reviewed by: Jane E. Prather,
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According to author Bob Pease, *Men and Gender Relations* is a text based upon a progressive male standpoint which can be critical of men's status in society, can delineate the potential contributions of the standpoint to women's inequality, and can promote an ethnical commitment to addressing that inequality (p.4). In short, the author believes that the objective of this book, like that of the study of men, should be to strive for gender equality. A commendable, if not, lofty goal. In addition, the back cover of the text states that the book examines issues that confront men throughout their lives and asserts these themes are comprehensively reviewed. This last objective was not met. Many topics were presented, but only a few in a comprehensive manner.

The book is divided into four sections: (1) an overview of theoretical perspectives, (2) summary of the major substantive issues impacting men, (3) elaboration of the inequalities differentiating men and (4) a visionary notion of moving from domination to equal partnerships. The features and the problems with each section will be discussed, particularly in light of the value of this book as a teaching text.

The scope of the theoretical and political perspectives impressed this reviewer, but the lack of depth in presenting the major tenets was disappointing. Included in this unit are the typical biological, psychological and sociological theories about gender and masculinity. Then the chapter moves to the more contemporary and tangential notions as materialist theories and postmodern deconstruction of men. The problem with this important theoretical section is that each theory encompasses no more than three pages. Thus, each perspective is distilled, summarized and critiqued in an abbreviated form that they would be meaningless for most students attempting to learn the basic arguments of the various gender and masculinity theories. For example, Freud's psychoanalytic perspective is reduced to one paragraph followed by several paragraphs of critiques of the psychoanalytical perspectives by several researchers. The problem with such a short summary of Freud is that most students taking an introductory course in gender or masculinity have such a limited exposure to Freud and other psychoanalytical perspectives, that they cannot fully grasp the approach. Hence the critiques are insignificant. It would have been more useful for students to have longer discussion of the theories and less review of the literature criticizing the theories. In contrast to the very brief theoretical discussion, the chapter on the men's movement contains details of various dimensions of the men's movement in the United States, Britain, and Australia including many short-lived men's rights groups. One's impression from reading this chapter is that the men's movement is widespread in first world countries when, in fact, the movement encompasses a very small percentage of men.

The second and largest section of the text comprises substantive areas of men's lives beginning with boyhood experiences including relations with parents, peers, sports and schools. Other chapters include overviews of men's sexuality; of emotions and obstacles to men's emotional literacy; of men's family work and strategies for persuading men to be more involved in families; of men at work; and of men's health. These themes are the major issues that confront men through their lives and as the author argues these themes are presented from a feminist theory perspective. But these issues are not comprehensively reviewed. Instead, the coverage of major topics in each chapter is very restrictive. To illustrate, the boyhood chapter includes only

sketches of the issues, reading like a quick review of the literature rather than a substantive description of growing up male. The paucity of information is even more notable in the presentation of the significance of schools in perpetuating and reinforcing traditional masculinity, which is limited to four paragraphs. This reviewer would recommend an entire chapter dedicated to such an important topic. The examination of the contribution of sports to masculinity identity is so disappointing because the topic consists of one page. Most male students (as well as female) would, in my experience teaching gender, welcome an opportunity to read a comprehensive chapter encompassing a wide range of topics around the significance of sports to male culture. Perhaps the best chapter in this substantive section deals with pleasure and performance in men's heterosexuality. More description and more elaboration of the issues are provided in this chapter than in others. Especially relevant is the discussion of objectification of women and of the view of non-patriarchal sexuality. Unfortunately, another extremely important chapter on men and intimacy is too short consisting of less than 8 pages. Outstanding, however, is the introduction to the notion of emotional literacy. The contrasts between addictive and intimate relations is presented as a table with clear explanations. The chapters on men in families and men at work include some excellent discussion of major points but more elaboration and illustration would prove beneficial to gender students. Finally, the chapter on "Masculinity as a Health Hazard?" provides vital information and statistics on such topics as accidents, illness, alcohol, drugs, smoking and suicide. Much more research should be included. Well-written are the explanations for the differences in health status between men and women. Three possible approaches are discussed: biological, sex role and critical theory. In short, the very important topics need to be expanded and illustrated so that students could fully comprehend the issues.

The third section focuses on inequalities in men's lives with such clever titles as "queering men," "aging men", and "racializing men." The chapters dealing with race and age read like brief literature reviews with multitudes of references, but insufficient content. The idea of looking at how men stratify themselves in terms of sexual orientation, age and race is not new. Yet, these chapters incorporate new ways of looking at these topics but the coverage is far too brief.

The final section investigates the notions of domination and violence, ending with an idealistic revisioning of an equal partnership with women. The most serious limitation to the book as a text lies in this chapter on violence. The lack of depth of coverage of the issues does not provide the tools for analysis essential for understanding the destructiveness that violence has upon women, children, other men as well as the man himself. Similarly, the discussion of violence as it erupts in political situations and warfare is too minimal. The author does not include anything on media such as the role of advertising, films, MTV for perpetuating violence or masculine dominance. Nor does the book include global economy issues such as the impact of multinational corporations on men's lives whether it be the exploited worker in first or third world countries.

In summary, *Men and Gender Relations* attempts to fill a need to include more men and masculinity texts in the ever-expanding gender courses in all disciplines. The topics chosen are excellent. The discussion questions at the close of each chapter are highly relevant. Excellent suggestions for further reading are included at the end of each chapter. Although the bibliography is extensive: regretfully, each chapter is not. Most students, in this writer's experience, prefer a comprehensive and rich discussion of a few perspectives to a sketch of many issues presented with a multitude of references to other, if not conflicting, studies. More details, more discussion, and more examples in all chapters would be beneficial. If one is looking for a

short introduction to men's issues with a long list of further reading, this brief text is ideal. Otherwise this text expects a lot of additional input from the instructor and the class.