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## Teaching Masculinity with MEF's *Tough Guise* and *Tough Guise 2*

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# **“Violence is a Men’s Issue”: Teaching Masculinity with MEF’s *Tough Guise* and *Tough Guise 2***

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## **Overview**

As masculinity becomes an increasingly divisive topic in public discourse, it is important that students understand it from a critical perspective. Courses that teach about masculinity through media studies can help with this goal. However, it is often difficult for students to critique aspects of American culture that are perceived as natural and go unquestioned, such as masculinity. Additionally, some students with privileged identities, particularly men, may react to material about gender and power defensively (Pleasant 2011, 234). By editing together innumerable examples, documentary films such as Media Education Foundation’s (MEF) *Tough Guise* and *Tough Guise 2* can help students visually and auditorily recognize patterns in the ways that masculinity is constructed via media.

In the following lesson plan, I first introduce students to the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity and have them connect it to their own lives through a series of prompted questions. Next, students watch a clip from MEF’s *Tough Guise* (1999) and the entirety of *Tough Guise 2* (2013). Students then debrief through self-reflection. Subsequently, they discuss the films in pairs, and end with a larger group discussion in which they consider the role that men’s violence plays in upholding hegemonic masculinity.

## **Rationale**

An ideal way to navigate classroom tensions and uncertainty when interrogating gender is through what Shaun P. Johnson and Barbara R. Weber (2011) call a “genderful pedagogy.” In this method, instructors acknowledge “plurality and [work] to appreciate that different bodies, practices, and identities can be identified as healthy and necessary” (139). By following this pedagogy, I seek to value all students’ experiences with patriarchy, both positive and negative. I recognize that masculinity, like any other gender construction, is deeply tied to class, race, sexuality, ability, and religion, and that students reflect this diversity in their own experiences. However, some students, oftentimes men, resist learning about feminism and are defensive in reaction to critiques of masculinity (Flood 2011, 142). Research has also shown that students who are part of dominant groups are sometimes more amenable to hearing about issues of gender, race, and class from members of said dominant groups (Wise and Case 22-23). In other words, in this case, some students may be more amenable to hearing a feminist critique of patriarchy from men than from a woman teacher. At the same time, other students may identify more with the position of the woman instructor. These preferences are not explicitly divided along gendered lines, but from my experience trend in that direction.

In *Tough Guise* and *Tough Guise 2*, narrator Jackson Katz, a white man, takes on the roles of both insider and expert, which makes him palatable for a large audience. While I do not intend to prioritize the feelings or experiences of privileged students over others, I do believe that lowering defenses and getting all students engaged in conversation is important because research shows that men who take gender studies courses may be uniquely positioned to influence others' deeply-held, problematic and stereotypical beliefs about masculinity outside of the classroom (Schmitz and Haltom 2017, 294). Additionally, when all students feel comfortable engaging in self-reflection and dialogue with peers who are different from themselves, class discussions can be more honest and productive. While Katz's presence in these films can ameliorate defensiveness in the classroom, I do not mean to limit the film or Katz's efficacy to this one point. Through its use of myriad examples from all aspects of mainstream media industries over several decades, and Katz's clear explanation of theories of gender and power, these documentaries are valuable resources for all students as an introduction into the study of masculinity, media, and violence.

The purpose of this lesson is twofold. First, this lesson introduces students to the study of masculinity and reaffirms that the concept of gender does not just apply to women or non-binary people, a common misconception students may have at the beginning of gender studies courses. Second, this lesson uses the documentaries listed above to help students critique mainstream media's portrayals of masculinity and violence. The film, combined with the preparatory reading material encourages students to ask: How do American culture and the entertainment media industries define masculinity? Based on this film, what is the relationship between masculinity and violence? How does violence help to uphold hegemonic masculinity? How do American media institutions participate in this process? The lesson described here offers numerous examples that help students see that masculinity as currently conceptualized in American culture is not a natural state, but one that must be carefully constructed and policed, over and over again.

I have used this lesson plan in an introductory course on gender and communication. The class is a 200-level course and generally enrolls first-, second-, and sometimes third-year students. Students who come to the class from a communication and media studies background typically are already familiar with social constructionism, or the theory that certain perceptions and institutions that organize our society are not natural, inherent, and fixed, but rather based off of meanings and symbols that humans have created over time (Hacking 1999, 6-7). We begin the semester with this assumption in mind and use it to guide analyses of gendered media stereotypes. As we advance in theoretical concepts through the semester, students learn to critique gender polarization, the idea that men and women are put into mutually exclusive, binarily opposed categories, and that anyone who deviates from these categories requires medical or psychiatric intervention (Bem 1993, 80-81). Finally, students also practice analyzing mediated gender portrayals through the lens of "doing gender." In other words, students understand gender as an accomplishment—something produced in interaction—rather than a fixed, natural state (West and Zimmerman 1987, 126). These theoretical underpinnings help students make sense of the documentaries and the idea of hegemonic masculinity, but the lesson can also be used without these theories. Accordingly, though my lesson was developed

in an introductory course on gender and communication, the lesson described here could be valuable for anyone teaching about gendered media stereotypes generally, or media, masculinity, and violence more specifically. The documentaries would also be useful for interrogating portrayals of gender in more specialized courses on the institutions from which the examples are derived, such as news media, the music industry, professional wrestling, or Hollywood films.

### **General Timeline**

The lesson plan described here lasts for approximately three 65-minute class periods. During the first class period, students watch the opening segment of the 1999 version of *Tough Guise*. Following this, they work in groups to discuss key concepts. The second class period is devoted to watching *Tough Guise 2*. The third class period is devoted to discussion of the film and its connection to theoretical concepts of gender and power. Instructors could assign the viewing of *Tough Guise 2* for homework if they wanted to condense this lesson into two class periods.

### **Detailed Lesson Plan**

#### **Class Period 1**

Prior to class period one, students should read the introduction to C.J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges' *Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity and Change*. I ask that before reading the chapter, students write out a definition of masculinity and that they bring it to class the following day.

#### **Group Work**

In groups of 3-4, students should answer the following questions:

- How did you define masculinity?
- How do Pascoe and Bridges define masculinity?
- Is Pascoe and Bridges' definition of masculinity different from the one you think most people would use? If yes, explain how.
- What is hegemonic masculinity?
- Can you identify and explain an example of hegemonic masculinity working in your own lives?
- How are qualities such as aggression, power, and violence related to hegemonic masculinity?

#### **Large Class Discussion**

I begin the large class discussion by asking each group of students to share their thoughts about Pascoe and Bridges' definition of masculinity and compare it to the definitions of masculinity that they wrote themselves before reading the material. Students often note that *Pascoe and*

*Bridges' definition emphasizes masculinity as a set of behaviors and practices. They connect these ideas to the concept of "doing gender," which we have previously discussed. They additionally often come to see their own preliminary definitions as essentialist. I then ask students to define hegemonic masculinity in their own words. Students begin to identify the practices that keep some men at the top of the hierarchy of masculinity while excluding others. Students identify bullying and violence as some of the most familiar techniques of gender policing that are used to maintain hegemony. They note that these techniques are often enacted through homophobia. I end the large group discussion by asking students to identify examples of times when they have seen such practices in play, whether in their own lives or via media.*

### **Film Viewing**

Next, students watch the opening montage from the 1999 version of the MEF documentary film, *Tough Guise*. The opening sequence consists of voiceovers from film and television that instruct men to be "tough." The film then transitions to a series of photographs of women with facial injuries, presumably because they had been abused by men. Finally, the film shifts into a montage of violent masculine imagery drawn from video games, films, television, news media, and sports coverage. As they watch, I ask students to consider the following questions:

- What is your impression of masculinity after watching that compilation?
- What effect does the editing have on the viewer?
- If you were studying American culture as an outsider, what would you learn about masculinity from this clip?
- Do these examples resonate with you? If yes, how? If no, why not?

### **Debrief**

Watching the opening sequence takes about 2 minutes and 30 seconds. I use the rest of the class period to discuss the questions above. I end with the final prompt, asking students whether or not the examples resonate. Typically, some students say that *the clips in the montage are outdated and that representations are not so bad 20 years later*. Some suggest that *in contrast to what the film shows, so-called nerd masculinity is "cool" now, because of shows like The Big Bang Theory*. Other students acknowledge that *shows like Netflix's Sex Education show all different kinds of masculinity and sexualities and that it also offers more racial representation than the clips they saw*. Still many students *challenge the idea that there has been a major shift in how America perceives idealized or even "normal" masculinity, often claiming that today's video games, in particular, showcase horrifying images of male violence and brutalized women and they are extremely popular*. I ask them to imagine what a re-make of the film would look like, using more updated examples. Students typically *cite video games, such as the Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty series, as well as the increasing number of superhero franchise films*.

If time or film access is a concern, instructors could skip the introduction of the original *Tough Guise*. However, I have found that using the opening clip from *Tough Guise* and contrasting it with that of *Tough Guise 2*, one, offers an increased number of examples for class discussion and, two, encourages students to question their assumptions about how today's masculinity is perceived as more "open" or "flexible" than that of previous generations.

### **Class Period 2**

During the next period, students will watch the film, *Tough Guise 2*. Alternatively, students may watch the film for homework between the described class periods 1 and 3.

### **Film Viewing**

To start class, I ask students to recall their answers to my question of what an updated version of the film might look like. I then share with them the parallel opening sequence from the actual updated version of the film, *Tough Guise 2*, made in 2013. The introductory segments of these two films are noticeably different. The first film opens with a montage of imagery of different types of masculine violence from film, television, and news media depictions. Though guns are arguably already hypervisible in the first compilation, they are even more so in the second film; its opening explicitly focuses on mass shootings. As they watch, I ask them to consider the same questions from the previous film:

- What is your impression of masculinity after watching that compilation?
- What effect does the editing have on the viewer?
- If you were studying American culture as an outsider, what would you learn about masculinity, from this clip?
- Do these examples resonate with you? If yes, how? If no, why not?

...as well as two new questions:

- What changed between 1999 and 2013?
- What is the "truth" that Jackson says we ignore about violence in American culture?

### **Debrief**

After watching the opening sequence of the second film, which takes about one minute and 30 seconds, I pose the last question to the entire class. Jackson's answer, which they often paraphrase, is that, "When we talk about violence in America, whether it's real or imaginary, we're almost always talking about violent masculinity." Jackson further asserts that, "violence is a men's issue." I ask students to keep these quotes in mind as we watch the rest of the film. I also give them each a list of the following questions to guide their notetaking. The remainder of the class period is spent watching the film.

### **Questions to Guide Viewing**

- How do the medical and scientific industries talk about masculinity and violence?
- How do news media report on masculine violence?
- How do entertainment media portray masculine violence?
- How are portrayals of violent men racialized and classed?
- What role has the government taken in addressing issues of men's violence?
- Which institutions support the idea of essentialized violent masculinity?
- How does the relationship between violence and masculinity hurt women?
- How does the relationship between violence and masculinity hurt men?
- How does the theory of hegemonic masculinity help us understand what is going on here?

### **Class Period 3**

During class period three, we debrief from watching the rest of the film. Because it has a lot of violent imagery, students often need time to process and may be reluctant to talk openly. Using a think-pair-share structure helps to prompt discussion and make students comfortable discussing this difficult topic.

#### ***Individual Brainstorm***

I begin class period three by asking students to free write for 5 minutes about the most surprising or interesting aspect of film.

#### ***Partner Work***

I then have each student find a partner and give them about 10 minutes to discuss. Next, I let each pair report back to the larger group. One point that always sticks with students is that *language used by mainstream news media decouples violence from masculinity*. In particular, students always comment on the phrase "violence against women" and how they *never before realized that it erases the fact that the majority of violence women experience is caused by men*. Another comment students often make is *that compared to the first film, the second seems to treat the material more "seriously."* Given that mass shootings have increased in frequency since the release of this film, the urgency of studying violence and masculinity resonates deeply with students. Every semester that I have taught this lesson plan, there has been at least one major national or international shooting. Because of this, viewing violent imagery and understanding how deeply this problem is embedded in American culture can be challenging for students and often leaves them feeling despair. In these instances, I show Jackson Katz's popular TED Talk, "Violence Against Women – It's a Men's Issue," in which he lays out practical steps that men can take to address these problems. The tangibility of the actions he proposes helps students see a way forward.

### ***Return to Theory***

Moving into a large group discussion, I ask students to return to their reading of Pascoe and Bridges and to identify any theoretical concepts that the film highlights. Typically, by this point, students have more insight into the concept of hegemonic masculinity and why it is important to analyze the ways in which some men maintain power over women, but also over other men. Students recognize that *homophobic slurs are the most popular way that men are gender policed*. In one particularly well-composed sequence, the film shows example after example of homophobic slurs and sexist insults drawn from media with which the students are familiar. Each semester, students comment that they *never realized how common it was, but seeing it all at once made it obvious*. Asking students how the relationship between violence and masculinity hurts both women *and* men using leads to self-reflection and insight from all students, even those who have previously expressed defensiveness.

In this same conversation, students also note that *Black and Latino men are portrayed as hyper-violent and dangerous to the public, whereas white men's violence is often justified for the greater good, such as in superhero films or cop dramas*. Students often struggle to identify examples of Asian masculinity at all, which leads into further conversations about racial representation, and who is considered "ideally" masculine.

In the class in which I developed this lesson we will have previously both engaged with and critiqued biological theories of gender. Therefore, students will also bring up essentialism and comment on how the *scientific industries claim biological understandings of gender that have not been proven*. For example, young men's shootings are explained by "too much testosterone" or a particularly active "area of the brain." Such statements are reified by mainstream media, especially newscasters on outlets such as CNN and Fox News.

### **Conclusion**

Both *Tough Guise* and *Tough Guise 2* do an admirable job of presenting students with a critical look at the relationship between masculinity and violence. Through teaching the lesson described here, I have found that Jackson Katz's narration makes theories of power accessible to students. This, combined with his position as both a critic and benefactor of patriarchy, makes these films valuable tools for teaching all students, even those who may be defensive, how to take a critical perspective on masculinity. The visual and auditory nature of the documentary films and the editing together of hundreds of examples show students just how normalized violent masculinity is. Scholars of masculinity and education have called for more pedagogy that centers masculinity as a topic of inquiry in order to dismantle it (Flood 2011; Johnson and Weber 2011; Pleasants 2011; Schmitz and Haltom 2017). Using these films as an introduction to masculinity studies helps to combat the resistance that many students feel towards the subject and opens the door to more productive analysis.



## Teaching Materials

### Reading

Pascoe, C.J. and Tristan Bridges. 2015. "Introduction - Exploring Masculinities: History, Reproduction, Hegemony, and Dislocation." In *Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity and Change*, edited by C.J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges, 1–34, Oxford University Press.

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*Tough Guise 2*. Directed by Jeremy Earp. Media Education Foundation, 2013.

Violence Against Women – A Men's Issue. Ted Talk by Jackson Katz, 2013.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/jackson\\_katz\\_violence\\_against\\_women\\_it\\_s\\_a\\_men\\_s\\_issue](https://www.ted.com/talks/jackson_katz_violence_against_women_it_s_a_men_s_issue).

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Wise, Tim, and Kim A. Case. 2013. "Pedagogy for the Privileged: Addressing Inequality and Injustice without Shame or Blame." In *Deconstructing Privilege: Teaching and Learning as Allies in the Classroom*, edited by Kim A. Case, 17–33. New York: Routledge.