Sociological Forum

Sociological Forum, 2021
DOI: 10.1111/socf.12693

Breaking Up the Stag Party: Jessie Bernard's Pioneering Work on Men

Michael A. Messner[1]

This essay is part of a special section entitled "Legacies of Sociology's Past. My work addresses the contributions of Jessie Bernard.

KEYWORDS: disciplinary ancestors; gender; historical sociology; intellectual legacies; Jesse Bernard; sociological theory.

INTRODUCTION

I never met Jessie Bernard. But I did see her once. At one of my first ASA meetings, sometime in the late seventies, I was chatting in a hallway when someone pointed to a group of women walking by, and blurted out, "That's Jessie Bernard!" We gawked at this celebrity sighting. "Jessie Bernard," one of our entourage informed us, "wrote some of the first stuff about men and masculinity." "That's interesting," I thought, as this small woman ducked into a meeting room with a gaggle of women wearing hats.

When I was in graduate school, starting in the late 1970s, I was reading all the feminist literature I could find. Around 1982 or 1983, I was working as a teaching assistant for Bob Blauner's class on men and masculinity—one of the first such courses—and he helped me to build a reading list. I complained that all I could find was a few articles by a handful of psychologists—Robert Brannon (1976) and Joseph Pleck (1976) most prominent among them. This work was often insightful, but it had nowhere near the theoretical or historical depth of the radical and socialist feminist writings I was steeped in at the time. Have not any sociologists written about men and masculinity, I wondered?

Bob Blauner pointed me to some pre-feminist work, by Mira Komorovsky (1946) and Helen Hacker (1957), and to the then fairly recent work by Jessie Bernard. I learned that for much of her academic career, Bernard (1980) had focused on what she called "the female world." Her work pierced the myth that marriage and motherhood are always desirable for women (Bernard 1975). She argued instead that marriage tends to benefit men more than women. In retrospect, we can see that this work was more than simply a corrective to sociology's singular focus on men. It was a first parry in a continuing quest that not only made women's experiences visible; it

[1] Department of Sociology, HSH 314, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-1059; e-mail: messner@usc.edu

also made men visible *as men,* rather than as falsely universalized human beings. In short, Jessie Bernard helped to raise "the man question."

THE GOOD PROVIDER ROLE AND BEYOND

Soon, I discovered a then-recent piece written by Bernard, "The good provider role: Its rise and fall." It is significant that this 1981 piece was published in the *American Psychologist,* and that Bernard's sources included the works by psychologists I was reading: Brannon, Pleck, and also future men's rights gurus Warren Farrell (1974) and Herb Goldberg (1976). There just was not that much to draw on from sociologists at the time. But I could also see that Jessie Bernard's work was deeper and wider than the other works I was reading, and it helped to stretch my thinking. The Good Provider Role, Bernard asserted, had a history: it became "a specialized male role" during the industrial revolution, and received its death notice in 1980 when the U.S. Census "declared that a male was not automatically assumed to be the head of the household" (Bernard 1981: 2). With the historical rise of the Good Provider Role, men came to identify their manhood as synonymous with their jobs, Bernard argued, which in turn reduced the amount of time they had for personal interaction and intimacy within families. The Good Provider Role had its costs for men: "emotional expressivity," Bernard observed, "was not included in the role." But these costs were linked to rewards: "He was," Bernard emphasized, "a bread*winner*" (Bernard 1981: 3-4).

In retrospect, we can see how Bernard's work on men was limited by sex role theory, and her early functionalist assumptions. By the end of the 1980s, feminist sociologists had thoroughly dismantled sex role theory as, in Raewyn Connell's words, "not a social theory at all" (Connell 1987: 50). But Connell also credited sex role theory for its historic role in opening conceptual space for thinking of sex categories *as social*. Jessie Bernard's gesture toward the social in examining men's lives hinted toward two important directions that have animated my work for decades.

First, in illuminating both costs and privileges in the Good Provider Role, Bernard anticipates a cleavage in men's gender politics that I have analyzed in my work (Messner 1998). Men's liberation of the 1970s held that "the male sex role" awarded men privileges over women, but also cost them emotionally, relationally, and in poor health and low life expectancy. Radical feminist scholars of the 1980s were often suspicious of any emphasis on the "costs of masculinity" to men. When I was a new assistant professor in 1987, my senior colleague Lois Banner disparaged this concern as what she called "the Poor Dears" approach to studying men. Many scholars, however—including me—believed that understanding the empirical links between the privileges and costs of masculinity was key to building a critical study of men.

Before long, Banner's concerns had taken concrete form. Anti-feminist men's rights activists—sparked by the works of Goldberg and Farrell—seized on the "costs of masculinity" claims, while discounting, ignoring, or denying feminist claims about men's power and privileges over women. Jessie Bernard's quote from Herb Goldberg's *The Hazards of Being Male* in her "good provider" article seems chillingly prescient in retrospect: Goldberg sympathetically relates a middle-class breadwinner's

"deepening sense of bitterness, frustration and anger," at his wife and children, whose lack of appreciation, Goldberg laments, "enrages" him (Goldberg 1976: 124). In today's contested #MeToo moment, these cleavages have deepened and become more vitriolic—especially when we consider online men's rights propaganda that celebrates misogynist terror against women feminists, and websites that incite the resentful sexual entitlement of "incels," who sometimes act out their anger with violent outbursts at women (Messner 2016).

Second, despite the limits of her "two worlds" sex roles perspective, Bernard's work hinted at an understanding of what 1980s masculinities scholars were calling "variations among men." She notes that some men's resentments with the burdens imposed by the good provider role were leading them to reject it, in favor of seeking more freedom and independence. The hint of optimism in this observation revealed a pitfall—painfully evident in Bernard's "good-provider" article and elsewhere: the idea of "the male sex role" smuggled in a view of men that was grounded in the experiences of white, middle class, and heterosexual men whose privileges had better positioned them to rebel against the constraints of the provider role.

Within a few years after Bernard's piece was published, women of color would rock feminist scholarship for, in the words of Maxine Baca Zinn (1986) and her colleagues, "falsely universalizing" white, middle-class women's experiences. Simultaneously, the burgeoning literature on men was seeking theoretical language through which we could hold fast to the feminist critique of men's power and privileges over women, while also attending to differences and inequalities among men. A language of multiplicity, of matrixes of domination, of intersectionality, was not to be found in the work of Jessie Bernard (Baca Zinn & Dill 1996; Collins 1990). For many in sociology who were building a scholarly study of men, it was Connell's (1987) theories of multiple masculinities that supplied the theoretical language we sought. There was no "male sex role." Instead, there were collective constructions of gender, with hegemonic masculinity always provisionally constructed in relation to emphasized femininity, and to marginalized and subordinated masculinities.

Jessie Bernard came of age as a scholar in an almost entirely male profession. In a 2000 piece, Jean Lipman-Blumen highlights Bernard's 1964 book, *Academic Women,* as a kind of transitional pre-feminist work. Lipman-Blumen asserts that Bernard accounted for women's unequal treatment in academia as resulting from bad choices made by women, "…without tracing the discriminatory practices that force women into such 'choices.'" In an attempt to describe the processes that excluded women from the informal communication system among academics, Bernard introduced the term, the "stag effect" (Lipman-Bluman 2000: 51).

Here—and I purposely use an idea that Betty Friedan (1963) introduced only a year before *Academic Women* was published—Jessie Bernard addresses a sort of "problem that has no name" that confronted women academics. Her odd term "the stag effect"—"stag" being now a mostly outdated descriptor for an all-male homosocial gathering—was an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to name this problem. But we can intuit in retrospect what it might have felt like to be a solo woman, crashing a professional stag party—in one's academic department, or at the American Sociological Association meetings—and confronting all of the informal processes, microaggressions, and forms of harassment that we now understand work to marginalize

women, people of color, or queer people in professional contexts. And we might conclude that when a few other younger women started showing up at the party—say, in the 1970s and 1980s—Jessie Bernard was there to help them navigate what had, by then, been given a name: institutionalized sexism.

It is not yet time for us to run a feminist victory lap. But I do think it is important to appreciate how we can draw a line—though certainly not a straight one—from Jessie Bernard to the present, celebrating how far we have come, navigating the way forward together in a continuing and expanding (no longer entirely "missing") feminist revolution in sociology.

REFERENCES

Bernard, Jessie. 1974 (1964). *Academic Women*. New York: Meridian Press.
Bernard, Jessie. 1975. *Women, Wives and Mothers: Values and Options*. Chicago: Aldine Press.
Bernard, Jessie. 1980. *The Female World*. New York: Free Press.
Bernard, Jessie. 1981. "The Good Provider Role: Its Rise and Fall." *American Psychologist* 36: 1–12.
Brannon, Robert. 1976. "The Male Sex Role: Our Culture's Blueprint of Manhood, and What It's Done for Us Lately," in Deborah S. David and Brannon, Robert (eds.), *The forty-nine percent majority: The male sex role*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin-Hyman.
Connell, Raewyn. 1987. *Gender and Power*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Farrell, Warren. 1974. *The Liberated Man*. New York: Random House.
Friedan, Betty. 1963. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W. W. Norton.
Goldberg, Herb. 1976. *The Hazards of Being Male: Surviving the Myth of Masculine Privilege*. New York: Signet.
Hacker, Helen. 1957. "The New Burdens of Masculinity." *Marriage and Family Living* 3: 227–233.
Komarovsky, Mira. 1946. "Cultural Contradictions and Sex Roles." *American Journal of Sociology* 52: 184–189.
Lipman-Blumen, Jean. 2000. "Bernard, Jessie." *International Encyclopedia of theBbehavioral and Social Sciences* 18: 49–56.
Messner, Michael A. 1998. "The Limits of 'The Male Sex Role': The Discourse of the Men's Liberation and Men's Rights Movements." *Gender & Society* 12: 255–276.
Messner, Michael A. 2016. "Forks in the Road of Men's Gender Politics: Men's Rights vs. Feminist Allies." *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 5: 6–20.
Pleck, Joseph H. 1976. "The Male Sex Role: Definitions, Problems, and Sources of Change." *Journal of Social Issues* 32: 155–164.
Zinn, Maxine Baca, Lynn Weber Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Bonnie Thornton Dill. 1986. "The Costs of Exclusionary Practices in Women's Studies." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11: 290–303.
Zinn, Maxine Baca and Bonnie Thornton Dill. 1996. "Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism." *Feminist Studies* 22: 321–331.