

Alexander Bentheim

»Men are not oppressed by patriarchy, but damaged.«

The MännerWege Questionnaire – answered by Michael Kimmel.

If there is one trajectory that defines my work over the past four decades with men and boys it is this: I am learning not to approach men and boys where I think they *should be* but rather where they *are*.

I began my career as a profeminist activist and researcher being angry at men. At least that's what I thought. I was opposed to patriarchal domination, opposed to violence against women, and supportive of women's rights. And I believed that it was men who were holding women down.

As my work deepened and developed, I came to think that it wasn't individual men who were the problem, but a system – institutional, social, po-

litical, and ideological – that justified continued gender inequality. This system, call it »patriarchy« or just »gender inequality« more generally, may oppress women, but it also ensnares men, encouraging us to believe that inequality is somehow »natural« or justified.

Consider the analogy with race. Individual white people may or may not be racist, but racism as a system is not simply a set of attitudes. It would be naïve to believe that if every white person, or every man, somehow had sufficient therapy, those attitudes would disappear and the races or genders would finally experience equality. No, inequality is deeply embedded in our institutions, not subject to individuals who want to »opt out«.



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Men are damaged by patriarchy. Not oppressed, mind you. But damaged. We cannot know what it would be like to see the world without those lenses of racial or gender inequality. And to that extent, we men are faced with a choice: we can continue to live, blind to the consequences of these inequalities, or we can recognize them and stand with those who are marginalized.



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My work took a turn towards compassion and understanding of individual men and boys, with the struggles they have towards finding an authentic, ethical and grounded identity.

Let me be clear: just as political analysis of inequality lacks the corporeality of lived experience, just approaching men and boys with compassion and understanding without that political analysis leads to a kind of unearned forgiveness, an abdication of inviting men into that analysis that explores not only the privileges of inequality but also the costs. Not as a false equivalence, but as a sense that patriarchy hurts all of us, even as it rewards some of us over others.

Seeing men through this lens has motivated me to find ways to reach men and boys that are less scolding, less normative, and more connecting, more empathic. I am one of us. In my work I've tried to approach that with humor as well as solid sociological analysis, to find a way to reach men without defensiveness, without resistance.

My research and writing has sought to blend this commitment to history and my commitment to gender equality. I've taken on »tough« topics, researching anti-feminist men, men's rights and fathers' rights activists, fraternity guys, as well as trying to ap the history of the idea of manhood in

the U.S. My most recent work looked at projects to enable men who have been violent extremists – white nationalists, neo-Nazis, Islamists – to get out of those movements and redeem their lives. These are men who have been to a very dark place, the world of violence, racism, antisemitism, and have found their way toward the light. The programs that work with them require accountability, but also approach these men with empathy and understanding. Run by »formers«, they know that these men cannot »jump« without knowing that there are others waiting for them on the other side. They are not »bad« men, though they may have done some bad things. They are not defined entirely by their actions, but also their purpose and new direction. They have been infected by the same poisonous ideology to which we all have been subjected. In that sense, perhaps, they are not deviant, but rather over-conformists to ideas about masculinity, about proving manhood, and reveal to us the toxicity of those ideas.

I think that's the major lesson I've tried to learn over these forty years of research and activism: to break down the false barrier between »them« and »us«, to seek to recognize the common humanity in each person, and to approach men with the humility of the student than with the arrogance of the teacher.

In addition to my life- and work-related overview, I would like to answer a few more questions from the questionnaire.

Michael, you've already talked about your academic approach to men's studies and politics, but might you also share something of your personal biographical approach to the subject?

I was born in the first generation after the Second World War. And it was the first generation in the United States where at least half of my graduating class from high school, half of the women went to college and ended up with careers, and the other half came home and were mothers and raised families. And I came from a family where my mother was one of those women who you might call the Betty Friedan generation. She read »The Feminine Mystique« and she realized she was unhappy. My mother and father both had careers. And they were both committed to their careers. My father was also very committed to being a very involved father. I very fond memories of very close connection with my father at a very young age. Which made it difficult for me to understand this mythopoetic movement, because those men were very much, you know, yearning for that connection with their father. Many of them projected it onto Robert Bly, as you know. But I had a very career-oriented mother and a nurturing involved father. So I would say that that kind of primed me to realize that work career is something that grown-ups do, right, not something that men do, and that nurturing and loving is also something that grown-ups do. That is to say by having that kind of family, they de-gendered career and family. So that's the first thing.

The second is: When I was in Graduate School, my partner worked at a shelter for battered women. And I, meanwhile, was doing my academic research. My PhD dissertation is on 17th century French tax policy, right, you know, which no one in their right mind has ever read. But she was working at a shelter and we had one car between us and it had a manual transmission. Now, in the US, most people don't drive manual transmissions, as you know, so I drove. And sometimes we would drive to a house to get the woman out of the house. So I met these women who had been beaten up. And I said to my partner: »I think the

work you're doing is so terrific, I want to be involved in that. I want to come work with you at the shelter.« And she said: »You can't, this is for women only. The only reason you know where the shelter is because I don't drive this manual transmission.« And I said: »Well, I really want to do something with this«, and she said: »I have a good idea: why don't you go talk to the men who beat the women up?« And I looked at her like she was crazy. I said: »Are you mad? I don't want to talk to them. They beat women up! They're bad. I want to talk with the women!« And she said, now this was 50 years ago, she said something that still resonates for me: »You have a natural constituency of half the human race. Go talk to them.« So that was my entry point to working with men. That's my origin, and so I got involved with the anti-violence work in California, Berkeley, where I was living, and then later in Santa Cruz where I moved to while I was finishing my PhD. And then I became involved in this national organization, known as NOMAS, the National Organization for Men Against Sexism. I became involved with that in California, and when I moved to New York to start my first academic teaching job, I stayed involved with that. I left direct service work, right directly working with those men, to be more involved politically in NOMAS. And also academically with saying: well, what are we? What do we read? How do we think about this? The first teaching job I had, I taught the first course in the state of New Jersey called »The Sociology of the Male experience«. And I was desperate. I didn't know what we should read, you know, we ended up reading pieces of literature because there was no social science research that I could point to at the time. There was a little bit of psychology that we used. So there was a hole in academia, which was study of men, and I came to it from a pro feminist perspective, as I think most of the early men's studies people did, saying Raewyn Connell or Jeff Hearn, Vic Seidler, myself, others. We all came to it from a place of supporting feminism when we first started to do our work. So the idea of men's studies was part of a political project, it wasn't simply academic. It was part of a political project designed to provide a literature that took the insights of women's studies, which is the academic arm of feminism, and we applied those insights to men.

Is there a very much lasting, important social or historical event that shaped the way you think in terms of gender, masculinities, in the context of your work?

There are two events that are interrelated. In the late 60s, early 70s, I was politically on the left. And so being on the left for me meant being against the war in Vietnam. The first event was when I was 13 years old. In 1964, I went to a demonstration against the war. It was one of the early demonstrations against the war and a time when there would be as many people on the roadsides yelling at us as there were people demonstrating. We were marching in Manhattan, New York City. Suddenly somebody yelled: »Go back to Russia, you communist!« And of course, being thirteen, I immediately jumped in and said: »No, this is patriotic, you should dissent from your government when you disagree with it«, and some more. As I said, I was 13 years old. And he continued yelling at me: »Fuck you, you commie jew faggot!« Aging 13, I didn't have the presence of mind to say: »Well, one out of three.« Then I tried to explain it to myself: what is the association of communism, Judaism and homosexuality? All three are not real men. Right? Jews are not real men. They're bookish, they're weak, etcetera. Gay men are not real men, in the public mind. And communists want to share everything. They don't want to let you keep what you have. So all three are feminized in the popular mind. That was so startling to me, it shook me. I remembered this thinking about it over and over, like: why those three? What was that about? And then being in the anti-war-movement in my teens and 20s, I was very visible and involved in organizations and of course my girlfriend was typing my speeches. And it never occurred to me that she might want to make a speech of her own then. I was leader, you know? And then feminist women started to critique the men of the anti-war-movement. And say: »Wait a minute, you're treating us in ways that you are now denouncing publicly!« That really shook me also. And I realized like they're right. What should we do now? I'll type my own speeches, and the whole thing was really a revelation for me. So, part of it was implicating me in those conversations as of now. The historical events, I suppose, are the critique of women to what I was actually

doing at the time. And the second-wave-feminism really gave a trajectory of the critique of the sexism within the civil rights movement and the anti-war-movement.

What gives you personal meaning and fulfillment in your professional and private relationships? Is there something connected to the work you did or you doing?

I tried to be the kind of involved father, in that way my own father was with me when I was little. And not to put my career first all the time. To work really hard at balancing work and family life. Now that I'm retired and my son has gone off – he's now working, graduated from university – I'm the family cook. I enjoy that. I make dinner for my wife and myself every night and, you know, I feel like there's a partnership, I suppose.

What makes the men you like to work or spend time with?

The relationships for me that have been the most sustaining are the ones with other men who also had positive relationships growing up with their fathers, with other guys. The men that I've maintained the deepest connections with have been men who also carry around a lot of love for other men. And related to my work with men who have experienced a lot of hurt and pain, first this: I've heard so many of them sort of say things like »I waited all my life for my father to say: I'm proud of you son« or for my father to say »I love you«, just once, and they never heard it. My earlier anger at men transformed over time into empathy when they were willing to engage with our work. Because I know that many are going through a tremendous crisis in their mental health, that there is depression and deaths from despair, that there are many men who say they don't have good friends, or that their networks are so fragile that they have nothing to sustain them. We can't just say: »Well, look at what you did.« If we want them to come to that conclusion, we have to be empathic and caring about the fact that they're in pain.

Which project would you like to realize if you have the opportunity to do so? Is there something left you still want to do? And what would you like to have achieved by the end of your life?

If I could wave a magic wand I suppose global gender parity and work and family would have been my wish. But there is not still the one big project. I enjoyed so much the work that I did at in different spaces. There were three spaces aside from the university, from the academic work and from writing in my public life. One was the work with corporations and with NGO's about working with people who are interested in promoting gender equality, e.g. identifying men to develop a men's network or inspire corporate leaders to develop more gender equal policies, the kind of things that I talk about in my [TED Talk](#). The second was working with government projects about the same topic, e.g. in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and I really enjoyed that a lot. And the third thing was working directly with boys in mostly in boys schools in South Africa, in Australia, in New Zealand, and some of course in the US. Working directly with the boys about what it means to be masculine – that was very gratifying. And right now I've involved in some new projects that are less involved with research and writing, also less involved with men and boys. I'm doing a sort of a family history and I'm enjoying that a lot.

Is there a question that was not asked but which you would like still like to answer?

I would like to answer a question that I think I should end with. And that is the question of creating resources for younger men. To this I would like to say: I'm very optimistic. I'm temperamentally an optimist. I think anybody involved in social change, social justice work has to be an optimist by temperament because you have to believe change is possible. So that's already an optimistic posture and I think this is important for us older men to recognize. I think young people today are modeling something that makes me extremely optimistic, and it has to do with cross sex friendships. I think this is one of the biggest changes in young people's lives. I look at my father's life. I look at the lives of men in that generation. And they had friends in high school and in college and

in their workplaces. But in the end, they ended up their friendship network was the husbands of my mother's friends from high school. Most of our friendships tend to be for men my age and older. They tend to be gender segregated. Most of us don't have a good woman friend. Most men with my mother never had good male friends. But young people today are so comfortable with cross sex friendships. Ask any teenager: »Do you have any good friends of the opposite sex?« And they'll all say yes. When I first started teaching, I would get like I would say: »How many of you have a good friend of the opposite sex?« When I first started teaching 40 years ago: maybe 10%. Now I walk into a class and say: »Does anybody not have a good friend of the opposite sex?« Never see a raised hand. So, think for a minute about the politics of friendship. Who do you make friends with? You make friends with people above you, below you? No, the word we use to describe our friends is: peers, equals. Young people today have more experience with gender equality in their interpersonal relationships than any generation that has ever lived. I think this can't help but be good, cause they can take that interpersonal experience of gender equality and bring it to the workplace. They know how to be better colleagues. They know how to be colleagues with each other and not have it be problematic. I think we older people need to learn from them. I think corporations would be very wise to have a reverse mentoring program. Not where older men tell younger men what to do or how to do it, but younger men tell older men: »Where's the new workplace?« And I am optimistic that they will bring this attitude from their friendships not only to their workplace, but also to their marriages and family life. I believe that the foundations are there. And the young people know what it feels like.

