A Master’s Degree in ... Masculinity?

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Michael Kimmel stood in front of a classroom in bluejeans and a blazer with a pen to a whiteboard. “What does it mean,” the 64-year-old sociology professor asked the group, most of them undergraduates, “to be a good man?”

The students looked puzzled.

“Let’s say it was said at your funeral, ‘He was a good man,’ ” Dr. Kimmel explained. “What does that mean to you?”

“Caring,” a male student in the front said.

“Putting other’s needs before yours,” another young man said.

“Honest,” a third said.

Dr. Kimmel listed each term under the heading Good Man, then turned back to the group. “Now,” he said, “tell me what it means to be a *real man*.”

This time, the students reacted more quickly.

“Take charge; be authoritative,” said James, a sophomore.

“Take risks,” said Amanda, a sociology graduate student.

“It means suppressing any kind of weakness,” another offered.

“I think for me being a real man meant talk like a man,” said a young man who’d grown up in Turkey. “Walk like a man. Never cry.”

Dr. Kimmel had been taking notes. “Now you’re in the wheelhouse,” he said, excitedly. He pointed to the Good Man list on the left side of the board, then to the Real Man list he’d added to the right. “Look at the disparity. I think American men are confused about what it means to be a man.”

You’ve heard of women’s studies, right? Well, this is men’s studies: the academic pursuit of what it means to be male in today’s world. Dr. Kimmel is the founder and director of the [Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities](http://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/csmm/) at Stony Brook University, part of the State University of New York system, which will soon start the first master’s degree program in “masculinities studies.”

No, Dr. Kimmel joked, the department title doesn’t just roll off the tongue. But it’s called “masculinities” (plural) to acknowledge that there is “more than one way to be a man.”

And he would know. For nearly 40 years, long before anybody was particularly keen to listen, Dr. Kimmel has been touting understanding men and boys. “In the beginning,” he said, “people sort of looked at me cross-eyed and said ‘Huh?’ ”

He is the author of more than a dozen books, among them, “Angry White Men,” “Manhood in America: A Cultural History,” “Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men” and the “Cultural Encyclopedia of the Penis,” of which he was a co-editor. He is the founder of an academic journal devoted to men and manhood. He has studied manhood in more than a dozen countries. And he has a 16-year-old son. (He lives in Brooklyn with his son and wife, a professor at Fordham University.)

On a dreary Wednesday, in an open classroom, the young men and women had volunteered to be there. Some were involved in his center, created with a grant from the MacArthur Foundation. Others were simply interested in what the heck a workshop on “masculinities” might entail. (“I’m having flashbacks to high school,” a young man joked during a discussion of the word “wimp.”) One of the attendees, Jonathan Kalin, didn’t even go to Stony Brook; he had recently graduated from Colby College, where he had met Dr. Kimmel through a professor. He simply liked what Dr. Kimmel was preaching.

The workshop was a kind of introduction to the first [International Conference on Masculinities](http://menengage.org/events/international-conference-masculinities-new-york/) the next weekend (yes, that’s a real conference), which drew close to 700 people to the Roosevelt Hotel in Manhattan. With seminar topics like “Suicide and Men’s Health,” “Transforming Fatherhood” and “Breaking the Male Code: How Close Male Friendships Can Change Men’s Lives,” the event included academics, students, activists and a few prominent feminists, with the goal, as Dr. Kimmel put it, of “engaging men and boys for gender equality.”

“Men’s life expectancy increases by three to four years,” said Gloria Steinem, who was on stage during the event’s [opening gala](http://nymag.com/thecut/2015/03/gloria-steinem-explains-feminisms-perks-for-men.html), if you eliminate causes of death attributed to masculinity, such as death from violence, death from speeding and death from tension-related diseases. “What other movement can offer men three or four more years?” she added.

The case for women’s studies has long been clear. The first programs were founded in the 1970s during the height of the women’s movement, and served as a kind of academic arm to the era’s political struggle, said Barbara J. Berg, an American history scholar and author of “Sexism in America.” Women’s studies produced research, theory and activists who worked to write women into the history books from which they’d been largely absent. It’s safe to say that without women’s studies, we would not have many of the gains that women have made over the last 45 years, Dr. Berg said.

“Our job was to give people new ideas and to persuade them that they were true,” said Catharine R. Stimpson, one of the pioneers of women’s studies programs, and dean of the graduate school of arts and sciences at New York University. “It was to prove the pay gap between men and women, and to show the disparity in money spent on men’s and women’s health. The mere fact that we count the number of women in state legislatures — that we go through that exercise — is because of women’s studies.”

But until recently, men’s studies never really seemed … necessary. Literature was essentially a study of the things men wrote, art history an exercise in what men painted. “The joke was that men’s studies already existed,” said Dr. Berg, the author of “Sexism in America: Alive, Well, and Ruining Our Future.” “It was just history.”

That viewpoint has been changing, albeit slowly. The [American Men’s Studies Association](http://mensstudies.org/) was formed in 1991 from a series of men’s consciousness-raising groups called NOM, for the National Organization for Men, later renamed the National Organization for Changing Men. Over the years, a number of universities have begun offering courses in men’s studies: “[The Philosophy of Becoming a Man](https://www.callutheran.edu/news/story.html?id=3243#story),” say, at California Lutheran University, or, at Dartmouth College, “[The Masculine Mystique](http://dartmouth.smartcatalogiq.com/en/2014/orc/Departments-Programs-Undergraduate/Womens-and-Gender-Studies-Program/WGST-Womens-and-Gender-Studies/WGST-34-03),” a play on the famous [Betty Friedan book](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/02/11/the-feminine-mystique-at-50-three-feminists-on-betty-freidan-s-legacy.html).

But a full-fledged program for the study of masculinity, Dr. Kimmel said, would incorporate scholarship across disciplines — from social work to literature to health. It would ask questions like: What makes men men, and how are we teaching boys to fill those roles? It would look at the effects of race and sexuality on masculine identity and the influence of the media and pop culture. It would also allow scholars to take seemingly unrelated phenomena — [male suicide](http://www.psmag.com/health-and-behavior/why-men-kill-themselves-in-such-high-numbers) and the fact that men are less likely to talk about their feelings, say, or the financial collapse and [the male tendency for risk-taking](http://nymag.com/news/businessfinance/64950/)— and try to connect the dots.

“We’re looking at it as a science,” said Daphne C. Watkins, the president of the American Men’s Studies Association, the first woman to hold that post. “Many men still define masculinity as someone who can provide for his family, who can wrestle a tiger and protect,” Dr. Watkins said. “What I would love to see is for us to broaden those definitions.”

That stance is not without controversy, of course. Like many new fields, masculinities studies brings with it varying degrees of skepticism. Some academics have suggested that it’s too trendy to be of serious academic inquiry. Others fear that it could siphon money away from women’s studies. And a small but vocal group of champions of male studies (not to be confused with “masculinities studies”) views Dr. Kimmel’s work as [insufficiently pro-men](http://ideas.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/04/12/feminism-vs-male-studies/). “He is waging war against what I say is real men,” said Dr. Edward M. Stephens, a New York City psychiatrist and the chairman of the nonprofit Foundation for Male Studies.

But Dr. Kimmel’s audience is growing. At the Manhattan conference, U.N. Women, the United Nations arm dedicated to gender equality, announced it would work with Dr. Kimmel to develop a series of workshops for men on college campuses beginning this fall on topics ranging from sexual assault to male reproductive health. There was a screening of a documentary, “[The Mask You Live In](http://variety.com/2015/film/markets-festivals/sundance-the-mask-you-live-in-examines-americas-boy-crisis-1201412965/),” which examined what the director, Jennifer Siebel Newsom, had described as the “unintended consequences” of our narrow definition of manhood, from undiagnosed mental illness to rape. In May, the American Men’s Studies Association hosted a three-day workshop on “Teaching Men’s Studies” for the first time, simply because the demand to teach it is suddenly so high, the organization said.

That urgency is the product of a few things, Dr. Kimmel said. For starters, the discussion of women’s equality seems to be everywhere (including the familiar debate about whether women can “have it all”), with new attention being paid to the role men play in [helping women achieve equality](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/opinion/sunday/sheryl-sandberg-adam-grant-how-men-can-succeed-in-the-boardroom-and-the-bedroom.html), and why it’s good for them, too. Over the last 40 years, there’s been a huge shift in gender roles for men and women, and yet most of the academic study has focused solely on its impact on women. A recent survey by the [Shriver report](http://awomansnation.org/21stcenturyman/) found that four in nine men said it was harder to be a man today than it was in their fathers’ generation, with most citing women’s economic rise as the reason.

And then, there’s the sad reality that everywhere we turn, it seems, there is another news story about men in crisis: mental illness, suicide, terrorism, rape, mass shootings, jetliner crashes or young black men being killed by the police.

If we had a better understanding of men, scholars wonder, how many of the world’s ills could we solve — or, at least, attempt to?

“This stuff is all around us,” said Dr. Kimmel, seated in his living room. It was the day after the masculinities conference, and he’d gathered a group of men for an informal salon. “We have a mass shooter in the U.S. every few weeks. And every time it happens, we talk about guns. We talk about mental health. But we don’t talk about how all of these mass shooters are male.” He paused, then said, “We need to understand how masculinity affected their experience.”

Cliff Leek, one of Dr. Kimmel’s graduate students, chimed in. “This touches so many aspects of our lives that you almost don’t notice it,” he said.

“As partners and husbands,” Mr. Leek said. “Whether we do our fair share of housework and child care. Whether we opt to take paternity leave.” (Even when companies offer paternity leave, research [has shown](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/upshot/paternity-leave-the-rewards-and-the-remaining-stigma.html) that many men are reluctant to take it.)

“Our relationships with other men,” Mr. Leek said.

“How fast you drive,” added Mr. Kalin, the Colby College graduate. “Whether you choose to serve a ball underhand or overhand.”

“The idea that you’ve got to be tough, that you’ve got to fight,” said Dhakir Warren, 35, a senior manager at Hunt Alternatives, a social justice foundation in Cambridge, Mass.

“You can literally apply this to anything,” Mr. Leek said. “Take the Disney movie. For a long time, we’ve been having the conversation about how princess movies are bad for girls. But what are they telling men?”

“The men swoop in and interrupt the woman’s story,” he said. “And then we’re surprised when [men interrupt women](http://time.com/3666135/sheryl-sandberg-talking-while-female-manterruptions/) in boardrooms.”

The men laughed. Mr. Leek had closed the loop.

“There is a Pentagon document,” Dr. Kimmel said, “in which Lyndon B. Johnson is quoted saying he didn’t want to pull out of Vietnam because he wouldn’t be viewed as manly.

“This is the president of the United States proving his masculinity.”

***Correction:****August 16, 2015*

*A picture caption last Sunday with an article about a master’s degree program focused on “masculinities studies” misstated the surname of one student. He is Cliff Leek, not Lee.*