When I was invited to review *Masculinities in a Global Era*, I readily agreed and assumed the project would be informative and not especially difficult. Over the past three decades, I have taken pride in my familiarity with most of the principal offerings of men’s studies literature from psychological (Kilmartin, 2010; Levant & Pollack, 1995), sociological/historical (Kimmel, 1996), anthropological (Eisler, 1987; Gilmore, 1990), and feminist/political (Connell, 1995) perspectives. Furthermore, as a psychologist who has taught graduate classes in multiculturalism, I have recognized the need for critical analysis of men’s lives in diverse cultures to lessen ethnocentrism, stimulate dialogue, explain interethnic conflicts, and provide improved tools for mental health clinicians. However, I had not realized that I had not yet sufficiently broadened my conceptual lens and taken advantage of the work already done in the area of global masculinity.

In his introduction to this volume, editor Joseph Gelfer references the emerging literature in global masculinity, including Connell (1998), Pease and Pringle (2001), and Blazina and Shen-Miller’s (2011) *International Psychology of Men*. Given my lack of familiarity with this area, I approached *Masculinities in a Global Era* from the standpoint of one who is not a global masculinities scholar and is needier of an introduction than of an advanced course. With that perspective in mind, I don’t think it is unfair to say that this volume can be considered as “Global Masculinities II.” That is, most of the chapters seem to require the reader to have some degree of familiarity with scholarship in this field, as well as a deeper understanding of geography, international conflicts, and global political developments than most of us Americans have (sadly).

As I struggled with my sense of being overwhelmed by the breadth and provocative quality of this material, I eventually realized that Gelfer is not interested in providing the reader with comfortable assurances of what men have been and always will be. He is clearly more interested in introducing disquiet in terms of liberating thinking from fixed, essential, and
permanent definitions of masculinity. In his words, “masculinities are a continual site of contestation wherever you go” (p. 10).

Gelfer’s contention is made abundantly clear by the extreme range of and variations in this volume’s chapters describing widely differing forms of masculine identity around the world. Whereas feminist influences in the United States have introduced substantive changes in roles for women and have created new possibilities for men, matters have not changed at all in many parts of the globe. For example, for Muslim men the Islamic religion mandates that men remain dominant (“hard”) and women remain subservient (“soft”). Matters are not appreciably different in Taiwan, where dominant rituals and social practices (aluba, doing soldier, and flower drinking) reinforce traditional male dominance. Similarly, it is noted that in Guatemala, “The key axis informing all relations is of dominant, predatory Ladino man and submissive Mayan women. When someone fails to conform, they are attacked” (p. 196).

At the opposite pole of a continuum of commitment to normative/heteropatriarchal masculinity is the status of masculinity in the Netherlands. In a chapter on male emancipation projects, a description is provided of state-sponsored programs to support a shift from traditional masculinity values to more progressive and gender-equal values. According to the goals of that program,

an ideal emancipated man is an active citizen . . . an active citizen reflects, talks, negotiates, shows feelings, considers men and women to be equal . . . accepts homosexuality, spends time with his children and disciplines them by talking, and explains to them about sexuality. (p. 155)

Management of the dizzying variation in this book’s chapters is assisted by the editor’s attempts to bring some sense of organization by dividing the book into four sections: Theoretical Models, Masculinity and Stability, Masculinities Under Negotiation, and Sexuality. Although this structuring helps a bit, the reader will nevertheless be challenged to find coherence in the material as it seems to be coming from multiple directions. For example, the chapter that reviews gender role conflict research (twice as lengthy as any other chapter) seems exceptionally complex and likely to be of import primarily to those readers interested in this research perspective. The editor’s chapter on masculinity and the self is exceptionally thoughtful but not easily comprehended for those unfamiliar with more philosophical discussions of masculine identity.

**Masculinity and Stability**

Chapters in Part II, Masculinity and Stability, describe how deeply ingrained historical and cultural practices perpetuate traditional masculine values and behaviors in three disparate contexts. In Indonesia, the “quiet menace of the hypermasculine warrior” (p. 7) continues to shape youthful Javanese male subjectivity. The masculine culture of honor regulates behavior of men in the American South. For Muslim men in Scotland, the Islamic religion is the central influential aspect in construction of masculine identity (i.e., men as aggressive and rough, and women as soft and gentle).
In Part III, Masculinity Under Negotiation, the chapters look at how historical, political, and sociological factors force new paradigms of masculinity and masculine identity. For me, the least comprehensible chapter is that of Saayan Chattopadhyay, who analyzes the shifts in the Bhadralok, the traditional middle class in India. Without some basic familiarity with the history and geography of this region, the reader will be sorely challenged to appreciate the author’s thesis. Further complicating matters is the author’s writing, which at times is arcane and marginally comprehensible. For example, he states,

I argue that a reformulation of the concepts like “transnational business masculinity” is necessary to accommodate the complex and interconnected nodes of class associations, changing economic conditions and the formative influence of the media that are in play in the developing nations amidst globalization. Such reconfigurations . . . may open up categories like the “national” and “global” and even the “masculine” as empty signifiers, invested with the phantasmic promise that governs specific ways of being and dominant collective and individual social practices. (p. 125)

In another chapter in this section, Metz and Webb describe competing gender models in indigenous Guatemala. They illustrate how masculinity among the male Kaqchikel population has been affected by transnational labor migration between Guatemala and North America. They note that the current generation is beginning to question the divide between male–public and female–private as to becoming less dependent on subsistence agriculture and more dependent on the cash economy.

In Part IV, Sexuality, authors critique heteronormative definitions of male sexuality by exploring the experiences of three discrete populations. The subject of Kerry’s chapter in this section is the medicalization of hypospadias (a configuration of the penis in which the urethral opening is positioned along the shaft and not at the usual position at the tip). Kerry argues that medical approaches to “correct” hypospadias illustrate how narrow definitions of “normal” penile functioning produce unnecessary medical interventions. The experience of these individuals is considered similar to that of intersex persons who are oppressed by the single-gender schema of public bathrooms in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States.

In the second chapter of this section, Alcano presents an analysis of a peculiar form of masculine subjectivity resulting from forced participation of young men in sex trades in South Bali (Indonesia). In the final chapter, Mirandé contrasts the contemporary bourgeois sexual system that divides persons into distinct sexual categories with the Mexican/Latino sexual system that is not defined by object choice but is more responsive to the amount of power possessed in sexual relationships. The acceptance of the Muxes as a third gender in Juchitán (Oaxaca, Mexico) points to a sharp contrast with how people having a nontraditional sexual identity are treated in the United States.
Conclusion

After reading, and rereading, *Masculinities in a Global Era*, I can offer only tentative summary comments. First, this book is highly diverse, provocative, and unsettling of simple ideas of masculinity. It certainly is not an "introductory" text from the perspective of gender studies or cross-cultural studies. As a psychologist, I must add that this is quite unlike other multicultural works that I have encountered. It is a challenging and thought-provoking collection of loosely connected writings that will likely inspire reflection and revision of ideas. However, a reader will not complete this volume having acquired easily digestible information about clinical application or intervention principles.

*Masculinities in a Global Era* is, however, likely to stimulate needed challenges to many entrenched ideas about gender, manhood, and masculinity. I would recommend it to folks in academia, qualitative researchers, and any thinking person wishing to understand the critical relevance of the life experiences of men that have been underrecognized and underappreciated in most all previous men’s studies scholarship.

References


