

# ***SOFT-BOILED MASCULINITY***

## ***Renegotiating Gender and Racial Ideologies in the Promise Keepers Movement***

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*This article examines the tensions in the identities of men who belong to the Promise Keepers (PK) movement by uncovering the social conditions that lead men to rethink gender and racial ideologies. Using participant observation and in-depth interviews, the author draws on gender and social movement scholarship to reveal how contradictory gender and racial ideologies shape PKs' identities. Furthermore, the PKs' impact on gender and race relations is also contradictory. PK fosters men's growth on an interactional level, allowing men to embrace a more expressive and caring masculinity that includes cross-racial bonding. Simultaneously, however, PK ignores, and indirectly reinforces, the structural conditions that underpin gender and racial privilege among white men.*

**Keywords:** *masculinity; gender and race relations; social movements; religious movements; ideologies*

**M**asculinity is like an egg. In its multiple manifestations, the institutional power and privilege accorded to its hegemonic form make for a hard-boiled variety. Yet reconfigurations of family and work relations in postindustrial societies have brought about "crisis tendencies" in the practice of gender relations, fueling the emergence of men's movements that focus on renegotiating the conditions of men's power in society (Connell 1995; Messner 1997). What was once a hard-boiled masculinity is now more fragile as many race- and class-privileged men struggle to reestablish their positions of authority. Fabrizio Pelak, Taylor, and Whittier (1999) argued that men's gender-based movements have become major players in reconfiguring gender and family relations. In the 1990s, the Promise Keepers (PK) was at the forefront of these mobilizations as it sought to transform and alter the norms of masculinity by challenging men to reestablish their leadership role in the family (Donovan 1998).

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Scholarly studies and media accounts have characterized the movement paradoxically as both an antifeminist backlash and a movement producing sensitive husbands and fathers (Messner 1997; Newton forthcoming). These contradictory depictions struggle to assess the significance of a men's movement that centers on the changing meaning of manhood and seeks to unify men of different races and socioeconomic backgrounds under a single Christian banner. From a feminist perspective, does PK help men to reform or to shore up power in their families and society? To answer this question, this article analyzes narratives of PK husbands and wives concerning their gender and racial ideologies. I examine how men from comparatively privileged backgrounds incorporate both progressive and reactionary ideas into their personal identities as Promise Keepers and consider what the ensuing transformations in men's lives imply for social change.

### **CONTRADICTIONARY GENDER AND RACIAL IDEOLOGIES IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

Studies examining the leadership and organizational materials of this movement underscore its backlash tendencies (Messner 1997). Scholars and journalists stress the right-wing leanings of Bill McCartney, former football coach at the University of Colorado, who has vocalized pro-life and antigay sentiments in diverse arenas and has blamed irresponsible male heads of the family for what he characterizes as the moral and social deterioration of U.S. society, a common argument of the religious right (Johnson 2000; Stodghill and Ostling 1997). As founder of PK, McCartney realized his dream to fill a football stadium with Christian men as the movement grew from a single meeting in 1991 to 22 stadium events nationwide that attracted roughly 1.1 million men in 1996 and, in 1997, staged a million-man assembly called Stand in the Gap (SITG) in Washington, D.C. By 1999, the total number of participants at PK events was estimated at 3.5 million, an astounding number that might establish PK as the largest men's movement ever (Newton forthcoming). In the late 1990s, PK experienced a financial crisis brought on by the enormous costs of SITG and the organization's decision to stop charging admission to the rallies and rely on donations. PK survived by scaling back rallies, which now attract about half the participants who attended in 1996 (Niebuhr 2001). The movement's continued existence can be partially attributed to financial assistance from allies on the religious right, including Pat Robertson, the former presidential candidate and leader of the Christian Coalition, and James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family and adviser to Presidents Reagan and Bush Sr. (Johnson 2000; Mathisen 2001).

The right-wing ties of the PK movement point to its potential to promote anti-feminist and conservative family values. In his analysis of the "terrain of politics" for men's movements, Messner (1997) placed PK in the center of the "sphere of antifeminist backlash." He described how PK emerges out of a historical ebb and flow of masculinity politics within fundamentalist Christianity in the United States.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a religious movement called muscular Christianity (MC) swept across the United States with the goal of remasculinizing the church (Kimmel 1996). Led by sports hero Billy Sunday, MC responded to Christian men's fear of being feminized by the church and their shifting place in society that stemmed from feminism and modernization. Messner characterized PK as the turn of the twenty-first-century parallel to MC by attempting to reestablish men's leadership roles in reaction to a perceived national crisis of the feminization of American men. With roots in the "moral majority" and other antifeminist, antigay, and antiabortion organizations, Messner argued that the political agenda of this men's movement expresses "a backlash that is antithetical to movements for equality and social justice" (p. 99).<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, PK promotes changes in men that are mostly reactionary.

Scholars have also identified possible backlash tendencies in PK as a movement of men who are predominantly white and relatively class privileged (Messner 1997). Attendance at PK rallies has consisted mostly of white men, with participation by men of color ranging from 5 percent to 14 percent (Newton forthcoming). According to a Washington Poll conducted in 1997 at SITG, 49 percent of Promise Keepers earned more than \$50,000 a year. Twenty-seven percent earned between \$30,000 and \$50,000 and 14 percent between \$15,000 and \$30,000. Although PK is disproportionately a movement of white men, the notion of "racial reconciliation" has been a central focus from PK's inception, building on the theme of the new evangelical reconciliation literature of the early 1990s. Glynn (1998) described reconciliation as a call to evangelicals to pursue better relations with believers of different races mainly through the medium of public apology. PK speakers advocate breaking through racial barriers by recognizing the sin of segregation and creating friendships with men of different races. PK has also made racial diversity a goal for its leadership; by 1999, one-third of its staff and one-fourth of its board of directors were men of color. The consideration of racial inequality and diversity distinguishes PK from most conservative, predominantly white movements that either ignore race or promote ideas of white supremacy (Blee 1996; Ferber 2000). Despite this focus on diversity, the demographics of PK participants have remained relatively static (Messner 1997).<sup>2</sup>

More recent studies of PK based on field research and interviews have shown the movement promotes disparate perspectives on gender and race (Williams 2000). In his study of PK men who met in small groups, Bartkowski (2000) found PK gender relations to be neither exclusively traditionalist nor solely progressive but a mixture of the two. Lockhart (2000) demonstrated that PK movement literature promotes four different gender ideologies that range from traditional to more egalitarian. However, male leadership has become a dominant frame of the movement (Donovan 1998). Allen (2000) analyzed the perspectives of leaders and participants concerning PK's goal to overcome racial divisions among Christian men. He concluded that participants are supportive of the idea of racial healing, but most do not support governmental programs to implement racial equality. Newton (forthcoming) claimed that in some evangelical homes, the idea of men as servants/leaders allows

PK men to become more loving and hard-working mates. Likewise, she argued that PK's emphasis on building cross-race relations might lead to progressive social change, although its lack of focus on structural inequality would be an Achilles' heel.

To explore how PK men's identities promote and/or impede social transformation, I draw on scholarship that links social movements and gender. Social movement scholars have combined gender and social movement literature to theorize how race, class, gender, and sexuality shape identities in the organization of social protest (Brush 1999; Einwohner 1999; Fonow 1998; Hercus 1999; Marx Ferree and Roth 1998; Taylor 1999; Thomas 1999; White 1999). These theorists have sought to understand how people create collective identities based on shared experiences (Fabrizio Pelak 2002). Taylor and Whittier (1992) conceptualized collective identity based on (1) forming group boundaries that establish differences between the challenging and dominant group, (2) building an oppositional consciousness to define the challenging group's interests, and (3) negotiating and politicizing everyday actions to resist domination. These three factors interact to form identities based on grievances that mobilize social protest. Yet there is a lack of research that investigates the formation of identity among groups that mobilize around more reactionary ideas. Morris (1992, 363) asserted that in studying political and social action, "social scientists have tended to underemphasize the political consciousness of dominant groups while focusing on the oppositional consciousness of subordinate groups such as workers, blacks, and women." He argued that political consciousness is found not only in struggles to end domination; instead, some groups mobilize to secure privilege and power.

Theorists who examine collective identity among dominant and oppositional movements often assume a distinct boundary between the reactionary or hegemonic and the progressive or oppositional. Yet contradictory gender and racial ideologies can fuel collective identities and social movements. Connell's conceptualization of masculinities captures how gender, race, class, and sexuality interact in ideology and practice. He defined hegemonic masculinity as denoting the masculinity that occupies the dominant position in the gender order at any historical moment and articulates with emphasized femininity, a form of femininity that is "defined around compliance with . . . subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men" (Connell 1987, 183). Yet Connell maintained that there is no singular masculinity; rather, there are multiple and marginalized masculinities based on race, class, and sexuality that differ from the hegemonic form. For example, white gay men might mobilize around an identity that challenges their marginalized sexuality while both adhering to and contesting certain hegemonic gender and racial ideologies. Collective identities do not singularly affirm or challenge ideologies based on gender, race, class, and sexuality but usually involve a combination of reactionary and progressive ideas.

Contradictory gender and racial ideologies were apparent in the actions of the men who participated at the 1995 Million Man March, which brought an estimated

800,000 mostly African American men to Washington, D.C. These men based their collective identity on an oppositional racial consciousness while reinstating a conservative view of gender relations (Messner 1997). Contradictions in ideologies are especially likely to characterize movements that mobilize around a desire to secure privileges based on gender, race, class, and/or sexuality. Blee (1996) found that for women in racist movements, activism becomes a defense to fend off social forces that they believe threaten their families. These women hold conflicting gender ideologies as they rely on male racists to provide ideas about white supremacy but also seek to challenge their minority status in a male-dominated movement. Racist women selectively adopt aspects of the racist movement that fit within their belief systems and lives, while many criticize the movement for its sexism. They simultaneously reaffirm white privilege and challenge their minority status as women. Other movements borrow elements from progressive movements for reactionary ends. Ferber (2000) uncovered the commonalities between the mythopoetic men's and white supremacist movements as each borrows language from the women's movement to show that it is actually white men who suffer. White men in these movements seek to get in touch with their "true masculine" selves for a sense of empowerment. Ferber asserted that both men's movements represent a backlash against the women's movement and other movements that have destabilized taken-for-granted ideas about identity. Men in these movements struggle with issues of masculinity as they try to reaffirm their positions of authority in society. Studies such as these underscore the importance of addressing the tensions that can exist in people's identities.

In this article, I address the tensions in PK men's identities by uncovering the social conditions that lead them to rethink gender and racial ideologies. I apply Taylor and Whittier's three elements of identity formation—boundaries, consciousness, and negotiation—to reveal the contradictory gender and racial ideologies that shape their identities. I argue that PK's impact on gender and race relations is likewise contradictory. PK fosters men's growth on an interactional level, allowing men to embrace a more expressive and caring masculinity that includes cross-racial bonding. Simultaneously, however, PK ignores, and indirectly reinforces, the structural conditions that underpin gender and racial privilege among white men.

### STUDYING PK MEN AND THEIR WIVES

From 1997 to 1998, I conducted ethnographic research on PK members in the Sacramento area. On 4 October 1997, I attended a gathering of about a thousand PKs at the capital in Sacramento, California, held in conjunction with SITG in Washington, D.C., which was broadcast on several wide-screen televisions. As the men performed activities in concert with the men in Washington, D.C., I stood on the outskirts and talked with several wives who had come to support their husbands. At the end of the day, I informally interviewed 7 white men about their reasons for

attending. In October 1998, I attended the "Live a Legacy" rally in Sacramento with more than 50,000 men. During this two-day event, I spoke with 8 white men and 2 men of color about the personal changes they claimed to have made as a result of their involvement in PK.

In 1998, I also conducted in-depth interviews lasting approximately two hours with a snowball sample of 10 Promise Keepers and their wives in Sacramento, California. I conducted the interviews with both the husband and wife present, which allowed me to get a sense of how the couple interacted (Reinharz 1992). I asked the men about their participation and attendance at PK events, changes they had made in their lives, and the purpose of the organization. The questions addressed to the wives concerned their support of the PK, the goals of the organization, and their feelings about not attending events. I asked both men and women about the meaning of male headship and followed this with questions concerning their decision-making processes, the division of household labor, their occupational choices, and how they divided responsibilities in the family. A disadvantage to interviewing couples jointly might be a reticence on the part of the women and men to discuss their lives and marriages candidly when the other partner is present. On the other hand, interviewing couples together allowed me to observe how they negotiated their interpersonal interactions and gender ideologies. Often, the women were more willing to discuss difficult topics, such as how being more emotional and expressive might be seen as a threat to masculinity. Because the couples did not always agree, I was able to observe how they challenged each other's interpretations. In the end, these interviews document how the couples wished to represent themselves and their relationships to the outside world.

All 10 couples lived in the Sacramento area. Four couples attended a Presbyterian church, 3 a Baptist church, 2 a Community Baptist church, and 1 the Church of God. The couples were predominantly middle to upper-middle class: Two reported before-tax household incomes of \$100,000 or more annually; 6 reported incomes of \$60,000 to \$100,000; 1 reported an income in the \$15,000 to \$25,000 range; and 1 reported \$15,000 or less. The wife in this last couple was the primary wage earner for the family. Six men who self-identified as white were married to white women, 2 of the couples self-identified as Black, and the 2 interracial couples consisted of a white man married to a Latina woman and a Latino man married to a white woman. Ages ranged from 26 to 63. Most of the men had professional jobs, including an economist, program analyst, telecommunication analyst, and personnel director. One was not working at the time, and 1 was a pastor. Of the 10 women, 6 had professional careers, including a teacher, accountant, and nurse. Only 2 worked full-time, 4 worked part-time, and 4 were full-time homemakers. Three men had graduate degrees, 3 were college graduates, 2 had some college, and 2 were high school graduates. For the women, 1 had a graduate degree, 4 were college graduates, 3 had some college, and 1 was a high school graduate.

Both the husbands and wives in this study subscribed to the conservative Protestant tradition. The beliefs of the respondents match those characterized by

contemporary conservative Protestantism, namely a strong commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible (Bartkowski 1997). All of the men interviewed identified themselves as Promise Keepers. All had attended at least one stadium event, and six were involved in what PK calls “accountability groups” that consist of three to five men who meet regularly in the men’s hometown. In these groups, men use study guides to focus on prayer and confession. One man described the purpose of these meetings as an opportunity to hold each other accountable for living a “Godly” life. At one church, men met together at a monthly breakfast, where speakers would discuss concepts that were addressed at the large stadium events. I found that the men and women I interviewed were eager to discuss how PK had brought about changes in the men’s lives. I analyzed the interviews using a grounded theory approach with the assistance of Atlas.ti, a software program for qualitative data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Through the men’s interpretations of being Promise Keepers and the discussions between husbands and wives, I identified three themes that were central to the men’s identities—redefining gender and racial ideologies, building a consciousness based on these definitions, and negotiating the contradictions in their ideologies.

### **BOUNDARIES: HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY REDEFINED**

In identifying themselves as Promise Keepers, the men in this study described the changes they made in their lives based on being “born again” or accepting Jesus as their Savior. All 10 men I interviewed except 1 said they had been born again before becoming a Promise Keeper; all felt that accepting Jesus was integral to recent transformations in their lives. In particular, the men described how PK helped bind men together as Christians and introduce non-Christian men to Christianity. Gary, a new father, thought that Christian men needed to get together to support one another. He explained, “I think it is about bringing men together to be accountable to each other, to reach out to non-Christians, and to understand what a Christian community is between men.” George, a 63-year-old white professional, felt that PK was about encouragement: “The important step is for men to encourage each other. It helps them know that they are not the odd one out if they really change their lives.” Several men asserted that PK provided an arena where Christian men could talk about issues they struggle with, such as how to guard against sexual temptation. These men felt it important to create bonds with other Christian men as a support network.

Many PK men also identified race as an important issue in pursuing relationships with other Christian and non-Christian men. About a third of the white men and all of the men of color I interviewed informally at rallies mentioned race as a barrier to bringing men together. In my formal interviews, 6 of the 10 men talked about segregation and the need for reconciliation. George, a white man in his 60s, asserted,



The way our society has gone, it is torn apart with segregation and hate in so many areas involving different people. One goal of PK is to heal these differences and make you more accountable in how you act with your fellow men.

The 3 men of color I interviewed identified the concept of racial reconciliation as central to their participation in PK. James, a 38-year-old Black professional, stated,

They stress racial reconciliation and it was really good to hear. A couple speakers at the event approached it from a Biblical point of view, challenging men to put barriers aside and see we are all brothers in Christ and not this race or that race.

Ed, a 32-year-old Black man, felt that being involved in PK was "a new experience where a bunch of men from all different races were together, hugging and loving." Being unemployed, he described how interacting with other men gave him hope and support. Whereas the men of color embraced the idea of racial reconciliation as central to their participation, not all the white men adopted the concept as significant to their involvement. Only 3 of the 7 white men I interviewed talked about the need they felt to pursue relationships with men of different races and backgrounds. Roger, a white man in his 50s, felt that PK "allowed men to unite in the worship of the Lord. It is to connect the brotherhood of races in a nondenominational type of worship that brings all kinds of people together." George, an older white man, told about his efforts to "build more relationships outside my own group." He referred to a couple of "fellows at work who are Hispanic and Black" with whom he was seeking to build rapport. Yet when I asked him what he had done to build connections, he was at a loss to answer. Nonetheless, involvement in PK was pushing him to think about racial issues that he had not considered before. While PK has provided a space for white, relatively privileged men to learn about how men of color are marginalized in church and society, the bonds created between Christian men do not necessarily cross racial boundaries. The white men I interviewed attended PK events with other white men, and those who attended accountability groups reported that most of the men were white.

Although one focus of PK rallies is recognizing differences between men based on race, as a religious men's movement, masculinity and Christianity are master identities that bring the men together. All 10 men whom I interviewed, as well as the men I talked to informally, asserted that perceived difficulties in negotiating masculinity as Christians united them regardless of their differences. They discussed how PK was a support for men, filling a gap in their lives. The men themselves initiated participation in rallies and accountability groups, and their wives confirmed that their husbands had decided on their own to attend. All of the men expressed a desire to attend same gender gatherings that had been lacking for men but were frequent among women. Daniel, a white man in his 30s, discussed the lack of men's ministries:



At our church, I pick up the bulletin and there are women's ministries, children's ministries, but few men's ministries. Men don't want to get together to do things, because they feel it is better to do it on their own. We don't need help from others.

Daniel's statement presents a recurring theme in my interviews: the problem of male independence and isolation that impedes men's ability to recognize their need for community and sharing.

Gathering men in a stadium to partake in religious activities provided a safe environment that allowed men to build bonds with other men and form accountability groups. Ted, a 36-year-old manager, described the benefits of these groups:

The men you sit with or you sleep with in the campground become your group. We started a study. And then we learned to open up and share, and that there is a true value in it. It's not just that you're doing it, but you begin to feel a longing to share. Most men long to have relationships with other men, but they don't know how to go about it and are quite frankly ashamed to admit that they need it.

This statement reveals a desire for male relationships that is not generally associated with hegemonic masculinity. Research shows that heterosexual men do not generally form intimate emotional ties with other men, whereas gay men subvert the norm of masculinity by becoming emotionally involved with one another (Nardi 1992; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001). The men I interviewed expressed a need to challenge this norm of masculinity. Jeff, a 39-year-old white father of three, describes how PK rallies allow men to express the fragility they feel as men:

There are 50,000 guys praising the Lord, realizing that we are all fallible, we all make mistakes, and we all need Jesus as our Savior. It's singing, worshipping, hugging, and emotions—things that guys struggle with.

The men's ability to challenge masculine norms was based on a Christian identity. Jeff later described a difference between Christian masculinity and the standards of the non-Christian world: "PK encourages men to live by a higher standard than the world sets before us; the higher standard is set by Jesus—of someone who handled things the way he did." Jeff felt that Jesus is an example of a man who had integrity and was loving and emotional.

In the dominant culture, sentimentality and openness about emotions might be viewed as nonmasculine, effeminate, or "gay." Connell (1995, 78) asserted, "From the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily assimilated to femininity." Masculinities that are labeled homosexual or feminine are relegated to the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men. By performing activities not conceived of as traditionally male, men and boys can be expelled from the circle of legitimate masculinity. Yet the men in this study were not afraid to discuss how they were able to feel more emotionally available to other men during the stadium events. Roger

remarked, "I think that one thing about the rallies people would probably have trouble understanding or believing is that men's feelings could be shared so deeply." The wives agreed that their husbands had become more expressive as a result of PK. Sally, a white educator in her early 50s, described how attending PK events had enabled her husband to touch and hug other men. She noted that her husband never used to hug his father but that now he felt comfortable doing so. In an enthusiastic description of PK, Alice, a 55-year-old "housewife," exclaimed,

When you see that many men together and there is no game, no sports event—they're all praising the Lord, they're singing, holding hands and no one is looking at them funny—what a wonderful thing.

The implication of others looking at the men "funny" is that activities such as singing and holding hands might put their masculinity in question or be perceived as gay. Non-Christian men often use disparaging remarks, calling each other "fags" or "pussies," in all-male environments like the locker room, to ensure heterosexual status (Curry 1991; Messner 1992). Offensive language is barred from Christian masculinity, but in its place, PK members use the rhetoric of family ties and brotherly love to ensure that male-bonding practices are desexualized (Bartkowski 2000).

Another way for PK members to ensure that male-bonding practices do not result in an "effeminate" masculinity is excluding women from rallies and accountability groups. Both husbands and wives asserted that men could be emotionally available to one another because women were not present. Part of the appeal for the men was the fact that the events were held in football stadiums where they could bring their coolers, wear "team hats," and chant team slogans. These activities allow the men to perform sports-type rituals to reaffirm their masculinity (Faludi 1999). If they are hugging, crying, and holding hands, they are doing these things surrounded by the trappings of hegemonic masculinity. The absence of women helps to establish the sport-like atmosphere. Gary noted that the rallies were like "getting together for a baseball game but it's to worship the Lord." According to Lucinda, a 35-year-old Latina professional, adding the two genders together would change the group dynamic. Sally asserted that men would be more self-conscious if women were present:

I felt that going to Promise Keeper rallies would be a place where men could be themselves and do what men do without worrying about what women will think of them or making an impression. They could be emotional or cry without worrying about women seeing them or feeling like they have to take care of them.

Several of the women discussed how being more emotional did not impinge on men's masculinity. Alice stated that women wanted men to be more emotional but "they also wanted men to be *men*." By this statement, she implied that women might

perceive men who display too many emotions in settings other than a stadium event as nonmasculine. A bounded masculine space enabled these men to express themselves in a manner that did not challenge their masculinity, making limited emotive displays possible in mixed-gender settings.

### CONSCIOUSNESS: BORN LEADERS

A crucial aspect of consciousness that unites PK men is resistance to the secular values of non-Christians. The men described a need to challenge secular, masculine norms that focus on career and material acquisition. Jeff, a 39-year-old personnel director, explained,

Men are cornered by society to make more money, have more things, which are not the measures of success according to Biblical standards. The Promise Keepers' intent is to be in the world but not of the world.

Jeff felt that it was important to make lifestyle decisions that would bring his family and himself closer to God and to focus away from acquiring "worldly goods." Ted, a 36-year-old manager, described how he had recognized at a rally that he cared more about work than family:

One of the things that I saw myself change is that I was finally willing to let go and let God take control. As a result, God showed me a lot of areas where I needed to change. One of the things that hit me during an event was family. I was working a lot. I essentially came to the realization that I loved my job more than I loved my family. Now, I do spend more time at home.

Recognizing that he should let God take control, Ted began to put more energy into his family and less into work. Gallagher and Smith (1999) contended that socioeconomic changes in postindustrial societies have destabilized the ability for Christian men to act as the sole breadwinner in the family. Making family involvement more of a focus of their identities provides PK men with an alternative to an identity based solely on the breadwinner role (Donovan 1998).

Class differences played a role in how the men described changes in their lives. The men who earned less money did not discuss a temptation to live materialistically. In contrast to the above descriptions of the need to focus away from career and worldly acquisition, James and Linda, a Black couple in their late 30s, discussed the difficulties for James who was working long hours and traveling to meet clients. Linda stated,

Sometimes I feel that it is so much on him to have to work, and he can't turn the work down. When you work for yourself you just don't say no, but you have to sleep. His clients are in San Francisco, so sometimes he has to travel.

Even with his difficult work schedule, James described how, since being a Promise Keeper, he thinks more about his family and their needs:

I have definitely made some changes. What it [attending PK rallies] mainly made me do is look at how I treat my wife and kids. Am I the kind of husband and father that God wants me to be or am I just going along however I want?

A recurrent theme centered on efforts these men were making to become better husbands and fathers. The 10 men I interviewed claimed that PK helped challenge them to better themselves to be more responsible and thoughtful in their relationships with their wives and other men. George felt that PK had encouraged him to think more about his wife's desires:

I just have a better feeling about myself and about our relationship. I want to be a better husband. I don't always think about the niceties that a woman would appreciate, but I think I probably would now, more than some guys.

Jeff credited PK as helping him to realize how important it is "for a man to honor his family, his wife, and his pastor, and to try to live by a higher standard than the world sets before us as men." These men see themselves resisting mainstream masculine values that are incongruent with being a "family man" and taking steps to become more involved with their families. The wives agreed that PK helped men be more supportive at home and more sensitive in general. Edith, a 36-year-old white professional married to Daniel who is Latino, stated, "What I see is that he always puts me first, that he is very concerned about my needs." Linda described a change in James: "Before he'd say that he would try to do something, and then it would be totally forgotten. Now, he really tries."

Five men described changes not only in their family lives but also in how they dealt with other men. For three of the white men I interviewed, the question of racial barriers was not something they had grappled with before attending PK events. Ted, a white man in his 30s, discussed his own discovery of the painful consequences of racism:

Many churches have turned their head and said no we're not really racist, but in reality there is a lot of hurt out there I didn't know about. At one event, a Korean minister said Americans tend to be a little bigoted, and even if you don't think you are, that's how we tend to feel about a white person. This was quite enlightening.

George credited PK with bringing "to the forefront a conscious awareness of what you should be doing to build relationships" with men of diverse backgrounds. Not all the men, however, had a positive response to PK's focus on racial barriers. Jim, a white man in his late 50s, expressed frustration with the recurring theme of reconciliation:

I think it is one of the things they kind of overdo myself. In Oakland, [McCartney] spoke, and I felt that he was preaching to the choir. We got harangued all day from a group of speakers, and I felt they were talking to the wrong people.

Other studies have found a range of responses to the issue of racial reconciliation from white attendees (Allen 2000; Newton forthcoming). Mathisen (2001) asserted that controversy over the theme of reconciliation may have contributed to the decline of the movement. Although the PK leadership promotes the idea of breaking down racial barriers, the variety of responses by participants reveals that it is not essential to the identity of white men in PK.

Whereas PK has helped some white men begin to consider racism, the real influence of the movement has been to help men rethink their positions in their families and society. Unlike movements whose participants form a collective identity based on issues of discrimination or subordination, PK men have formed their identities around a perceived need to deal with a fragile masculinity and to make changes in their family relationships. Yet these changes are predicated on ideas that do not ultimately challenge men's position of authority. The changes in men's consciousness are based on what the movement promotes as the natural leadership qualities of men. Although the men willingly submit to God's will for their lives and recognize their frailty, movement literature and sermons remind them of their ability as "born" leaders to be assertive, independent, self-confident, and in control (Beal 1997). While the men I interviewed described personal changes such as a willingness to help their wives with household chores, they also explained that PK guided them to take responsibility as the head of their families. Jim claimed, "God is using a movement to raise up men to take leadership and spiritual responsibility." When I asked about PK's goals, the men all responded that a major goal was to help them to be responsible leaders.

Although the movement literature portrays men as "born" leaders, both the husbands and wives felt it difficult for men in contemporary society to perform a leadership role. Alice felt that PK events provided a context for establishing a sense of manhood:

Men . . . for all these years have not had a base. They've been on their own trying to make it, trying to support their family, and they are constantly being sucked in by what the world says they ought to do. Finally, men are going to be men.

Alice suggests that "the world" tempts Christian men to act in a manner that is not supportive of their families. Her statement—"Finally, men are going to be men"—points to the idea of an underlying essential nature that all men possess. At the same time, she implies that masculinity is socially constructed in the idea that men need a base to perform gender. Sally explained,

I think that men don't know exactly where they stand anymore. It used to be that men's roles were solidly defined as the person in charge. Now, women are doing more, and it makes men feel uncertain about what their place is.

The wives' assertions that men need to reestablish a masculine identity took on a rehabilitative and patronizing tone, underscoring a fragile masculinity in which men need help to "feel like men." Although the men discussed a need to embrace an expressive masculinity, the wives appeared to be the emotional caregivers, enabling the men to be more sensitive. This finding confirms other studies of the evangelical Christian community in which wives promote the concept of male leadership to sustain a harmonious family environment (Gallagher and Smith 1999; Stacey 1998; Stacey and Gerard 1990). Since many men feel uncertain about their masculinity, involvement in PK helps reaffirm what it means to be a man.

This gentler notion of masculinity speaks to the cultural image of the "New Man." According to Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner (2000, 63), there is "a shared cultural image of what the New Man looks like: He is a White, college-educated professional who is a highly involved and nurturant father, 'in touch with' and expressive of his feelings." This notion of hegemonic masculinity is juxtaposed against the "traditional, sexist, and macho" masculinities attributed to some men of color and working-class men. The concept of the New Man refers to how white, class-privileged men perform a masculinity that incorporates traditionally feminine characteristics, such as emotionality and sensitivity. Yet this type of masculinity maintains its hegemonic status as superior to other masculinities, because expressiveness and sensitivity do not necessarily challenge the structural conditions that maintain its dominant status in society. The focus of PK on men's place in the nuclear family provides a context to organize around an image of a Christian version of the New Man, as opposed to the more authoritarian form of masculinity attributed to some fundamentalist families (Bartkowski 1997). This follows from an understanding of gender in which God has designed men differently from women. Cindy, a 44-year-old white teacher, asserted,

Men were designed to be leaders. This doesn't mean women were meant to be slaves. It just means that when you take that away from a man, you change the way he feels, and that sets the whole domino factor thing going.

Cindy's statement suggests that women must bolster men's masculinity for it to be effective (Stacey 1998). By helping "men to be men," the wives promote a hegemonic masculinity that allows men to be involved husbands and fathers while maintaining their privilege as men. The men consciously define themselves as PKs by distinguishing themselves from non-Christian men through a soft patriarchy that, on one hand, is sensitive and caring and, on the other, bolsters their positions within the family.

### **NEGOTIATION: EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE**

Both the husbands and wives employed the language of equality while discussing the need for men to retain authority within the family. The references to equality

reflect a central organizing principle of the women's movements in the 1960s and 1970s that critiqued unequal gender relations in the family. By incorporating the language of the feminist movements into their conceptualizations of familial roles, these men and women seemed to participate in a postfeminist sensibility. Stacey (1998) suggested that postfeminism is best defined as a gender consciousness and strategy that allow many contemporary women and men to distance themselves from a feminist identity while being profoundly influenced by feminist doctrines. For example, the men described what it means to be head of the household by asserting that leadership does not mean domination, demonstrating an awareness of the critique of the relations of domination and subordination between men and women that have characterized many "traditional" marriages. The wives and husbands managed the language of equality in describing their relationships by focusing on the need to recognize difference.

For these women and men, negotiating masculinity depends on understanding gender relations as "different but equal." George asserted,

We are a team. We make our decisions together. I can't state any specific thing that I've made the sole decision on. As far as knowledge about what's going on out there I have a heavier lead on that. She's the nurse and I don't know what's going on in nursing. This is not a domineering relationship and it never has been.

For George, the relationship is not one of domination; yet he declares his superior understanding of how the world operates, relegating his wife's knowledge to the field of nursing. Megan emphatically affirmed the equality of her relationship with Gary. In describing who does what, she seemed to recognize that the division of labor does not appear equal. She then used the analogy of making pie to focus on the fact that they both were busy taking care of what needed to be done:

It is equal; it's different equal but it's equal. [My husband] is the financial provider for the family and I am the housekeeper, child care giver, taxi driver, and maid, ha, ha, ha—no, I don't mean to be negative. But, I take care of the baby and the house. I think it is divided equally. I think he is making cherry pie and I am making apple pie, but we're both making pie. . . . We are both busy doing things.

The idea of "different but equal" portrays equality as equal commitment to and responsibility for gendered tasks while skirting the issue of the structural advantages involved in such a division of labor. Megan's sarcasm as she lists her duties provides a glimpse into her struggle to define her relationship as equal. The men I interviewed focused on responsibilities of being the financial provider or protector. Jim paternalistically declared,

We are both equal but we have different responsibilities. God didn't make Eve from Adam's head to rule over her or from his foot that he might trample over her, but he took her from his rib, which is close to his heart that he might protect her.



Ted explained that the Biblical passage regarding headship is not about male superiority:

I read that passage and accept it as my responsibility. . . . If God has built it that way and that's how he desires it then I accept that responsibility. But, I don't see that verse saying that a man is better than his wife.

Defining equality in negative terms, that is, the husband is not better, circumvents a positive accounting of what equality might mean. From this perspective, men maintain their authority while modifying what might be perceived as archaic views on gender relations.

The hegemonic masculinity rearticulated by these men involves gender displays that speak of a softer and gentler man but are still grounded in dominant masculine norms concerning authority, leadership, and heterosexuality. The wives and husbands described a hierarchical ordering that places husbands as an intermediary between God and their wives and children. Linda asserted, "I only have to answer to him (my husband); he has to answer to God, and that is a big responsibility." Gary underscored his direct responsibility to God:

[My wife] has more responsibility for the family as far as kid things. I shouldn't say—that doesn't take away responsibility from me. But, when it comes to answering to God, I am ultimately more responsible for the marriage in that way.

In this ordering, women are not only subject to God as sinners; they are subject in terms of their gender. The men and women portrayed a clear differentiation for accountability and decision making based on men's financial responsibilities. Most of the women worked at least part-time, but even in the cases where the women worked full-time and made more money than their husbands did, these couples still described the husband as ultimately responsible for the finances. Alice, a homemaker in her 50s, claimed, "I think [a decision he would make] would be more of a major financial decision. I think he would be more in the lead in that." Yet the decision-making processes described by the husbands and wives were much more akin to Stacey and Gerard's (1990) "patriarchy in the last instance," in which the man makes the final decision only when an accord cannot be reached. The conversations I had with the couples revealed a complex negotiation process in which the men sought to make changes and share decision making with their wives based on an unquestioned position of authority. Thus, the couples seemed to adhere to a more nominal equality.

PK also incorporates the language of equality used by the early civil rights movement to show that all men are equal and to ultimately end "race-thinking." Rick, a white professor, described the reaction of a Black colleague who attended a rally with him:

My friend is a consummate teacher; his classes are always full. Right before my eyes I saw God directly calling him to supplication. The speaker from an all-Black church in

Washington, D.C., told the men, "I want each one of you to go out onto the highways and bring in every redneck you can find. I want them to be bright red, nigger haters; those are the ones that I want you to bring." The message is that reconciliation cuts both ways—Black, white, or whatever color you are, it doesn't matter in the eyes of God. That's the message of the Bible. I looked at my friend, and he was crying. He said, "I've been wrong—it's not about focusing on difference but on similarity." He now teaches his classes differently, and his enrollments are even larger.

Rick's interpretation of racial reconciliation is about bringing people together, because "God doesn't see color." The focus on breaking down racial barriers reflects the early civil rights rhetoric of a "race-free" society and the current neoconservative stance of a "color-blind" society (Omi and Winant 1994). The goal is to move toward a society where racial considerations are never entertained. Instead of seeking institutional, political, or structural solutions to the problem of racism, PK focuses on spiritual solutions to purge individuals of the "sin" of racism (Allen 2000). The focus is on building relationships with men of different racial backgrounds. Although the idea of racial reconciliation has pushed some white men who attend rallies to seriously consider the effects of racial segregation within the church, the lack of focus on institutional racism means that these men do not support political means for change. When I asked Rick about barriers to racial equality such as institutional racism or economic disparities, he responded that "racial reconciliation was about dealing with the wounds caused by racism, and this could only be accomplished through God's love." Not all PK men thought about race, but the three white men who did consider it were willing to make changes based on a personal and interactional level, ignoring the political system that produces racist ideology and structural inequalities. A focus on equality allows these men to negotiate an identity based on key concepts of the women's and civil rights movements without challenging the structural conditions that these movements sought to transform.

## CONCLUSION

Examining identity formation for PK men provides several insights into the possibility for social change in movements with members who predominantly occupy threatened positions of privilege in society. First, social changes among groups that hold a privileged, vulnerable position are often attempts to rehabilitate that position. As a movement, PK provides a forum for Christian men to grapple with contradictory gender meanings so that these men can make positive changes in their lives around issues of masculinity without challenging their position of authority. On one hand, the men I interviewed joined the movement to embrace a Christian masculinity that allows for better communication and understanding in their family relationships. They undertook these changes on their own initiative, not because their wives pressured them. The men felt that these changes were what God wanted for them, so they were willing to be introspective and admit their mistakes.

Resisting the credo of masculine norms that prescribes inexpressive and unemotional behavior in men, PK men let loose in stadium events and expressed emotions in ways often marked as homosexual or gay by a heterosexist society. These men based their consciousness on notions of masculinity that encourage them to act in a loving and supportive manner toward their wives, and some sought to grapple with racial prejudice and share with men of diverse backgrounds. A focus on equality in relationships between men and between husbands and wives provided a framework for these men to "do" gender differently on an interactional level from mainstream models of masculinity (West and Zimmerman 1987). The men willingly admitted their mistakes and their need for guidance, and they based their identities as Promise Keepers on what they see as necessary changes in how they do masculinity.

On the other hand, it appears that these men were willing to make changes in their lives on an interactional and personal level because the movement does not challenge them to grapple with the structural conditions that undergird their privilege. Their worldview follows from a tradition of American Evangelical Christianity that focuses on individuals rather than social structure. Concentrating on individual spirituality may not be a conscious attempt to maintain power. Yet the lack of attention to structural inequality does, in fact, reinforce existing power relations.

The discussions between the husbands and wives showed that the changes the men made were predicated on maintaining a hierarchical and authoritarian understanding of gender relations. On a structural level, the focus on equality among PK men appeared nominal. The men and women in this study discussed how they negotiated the idea of masculinity to help men be more emotionally available and considerate of their families while allowing "men to be men" or maintain the idea that they are in charge. The men's collective identity is bound by practices that reaffirm hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality through references to essential gender differences, a focus on heterosexual family relationships, and the absence of women and gay men from rallies. As sensitive husbands, Promise Keepers can reap the benefits of building emotional relationships with other men and characterize their marriages as egalitarian without ceasing to be "on top" or maintain an image of themselves as leaders. This allows the men to make changes in their lives to build a more harmonious family environment without considering the privileges they have as men, such as taking the liberty to portray men's knowledge of what's going on in the world as superior to that of women.

Second, groups that adhere to hegemonic ideas can form a collective identity based on contradictory gender and racial ideologies that renegotiate the terms of resistance used by social protest movements. PK men employ a discourse of equality that incorporates the language of the women's and civil rights movements while defusing criticism of hierarchy and structural inequities to focus on personal relationships, emotions, and health. The white men I interviewed felt there should be equality in their relationships with their wives and with men of different racial backgrounds, but their descriptions of equality were couched in ideas concerning leadership and color blindness. Unlike the men in the mythopoetic and white

supremacist movements that Ferber studied, PK men do not try to show that it is really white men who suffer. The white men in this study willingly admitted that they needed to make changes in their lives to improve relations with their wives and to build relationships with men of color. However, the manner in which the men portrayed these changes both challenged and reaffirmed hegemonic gender and racial meanings. The men pushed the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity through practices that made them more emotionally supportive of their wives and other men, while they endorsed hegemonic masculinity by embracing ideas about their natural leadership qualities and their essential differences from women. Likewise, several of the white men sought to break down racial barriers by building relationships with men of color but endorsed a therapeutic form of color blindness that emphasized the need to heal the wounds of racism and ignored institutional racism.

Similar to movements of social protest that form group boundaries to establish differences between the dominant and challenging group, PK men form a group boundary around a concept of Christian masculinity that opposed “worldly” values and allowed men to explore emotional intimacy with other men. The men’s descriptions of involvement with PK reflect a key strategy used by women’s movements to provide empowerment to women, namely, feminist rituals that emphasize the primacy of relationships between women (Taylor and Whittier 1995). Because mass culture portrays women as more emotional than men, feminists embraced these negative stereotypes by expressing emotions that unite them through movement activities. Similarly, PK men embrace an expressive masculinity that is frowned on by the dominant culture. Paradoxically, they bolster this expressive masculinity as essentially masculine through an emphasis on heterosexuality and ritual performances in an all-male environment surrounded by the trappings of masculinity. Given the emphasis on personal expression, the collective identity achieved by Promise Keepers may not be as cohesive as that of a social protest movement, since these men are focused on personal change and many are unwilling to embrace certain ideas put forward by the leadership, such as racial reconciliation. At the same time, members of movements with more solidly defined collective interests can also selectively embrace certain ideologies and not others depending on their life experiences and social location. This speaks to the contradictory nature of identity formation and how most identities will contain aspects that are both reactionary and progressive.

By analyzing the three components of collective identity for PK men—boundaries, consciousness, and negotiation—I have sought to explain how resistance to hegemonic masculinity can interact with a desire to reinstate men’s position of authority in the family and society. In their day-to-day interactions, PK men seem willing to embrace a soft-boiled masculinity that empowers them to be more sensitive and caring husbands and fathers. Yet this soft-boiled, reformed masculinity is made possible by ignoring the structural conditions that empower men and provide payoffs based on claims to manhood. Ultimately, the prognosis for progressive social change among PK men is at once promising and disturbing. The best-case

scenario might be that as PK men become more emotionally available, they could continue to resist the trappings of hegemonic masculinity to let go of the idea of leadership and color blindness and to focus on egalitarian relations. In terms of daily life, these men might become willing to take on many of the activities of the second shift that so many men resist, such as driving the kids to soccer practice or changing the baby's diapers. However, given the lack of attention to addressing men's institutional privileges, few PK men seem likely to embrace a progressive forum for social change. The right-wing and conservative commitments of PK leadership pointed to by Messner ensure that antifeminist and antigay sentiments will continue to percolate under the surface of invocations for men to transform themselves. Although PK men seem willing to embrace some meaningful personal changes, the shell of hegemonic masculinity is not easily broken.

### NOTES

1. Although the Promise Keepers (PK) political agenda is largely antifeminist, antigay, and antiabortion, it has attempted to address issues of race and class inequality, presenting the possibility of some social justice perspective. I note how effectively PK addresses these issues later in the article.
2. Because racial inclusion is not a priority of most conservative, right-wing movements, it is difficult to compare PK's composition to other "similar" groups.

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