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## **Men's Rights Activists and the Ray Rice Domestic-Violence Case: Using Critical Communication Pedagogy to Counter Hegemonic Masculinity**

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### **Abstract**

Some groups in society communicate in ways that attempt to marginalize others. One such group is the Men's Rights Activists (MRA) who use language to attempt to normalize the subjugation of women through its rejection of feminism. This activity is designed to engage students in a dialogue about MRA's response to the domestic-violence incident involving Baltimore Ravens' running back Ray Rice and his fiancé, Janay Palmer, in a hotel elevator. Specifically, the activity allows students to learn about MRA members and their hegemonic ideology, to examine/view the domestic-violence incident, and to use critical-communication pedagogy (CCP) as a means to examine a MRA's blog that was devoted to the incident. Overall, the activity allows instructors and students to engage in a meaningful dialogue about MRAs through the lens of CCP in order to respond to instances of hegemony in their own lives.

### **Courses**

Gender Communication, Women's Studies, Men's Studies, Sports and Communication, Public Speaking, or Intercultural Communication.

### **Objectives**

- Students will recognize the principles of critical communication pedagogy and how the principles can be used to respond to marginalization.
- Students will examine the Men's Rights Activists' hegemonic ideology.
- Students will examine the Ray Rice domestic-violence incident.
- Students will apply critical communication pedagogy to the Men's Rights Activists' blog statements in order to determine how students can respond to an instance of hegemonic masculinity that they encounter.

### **Introduction and Rationale**

Scholars, activists, and communication instructors recognize that some movements in society advance marginalizing messages. Such movements perpetuate marginalization toward groups whom they deem to be a threat to their own ideologies. One such movement, the masculinist movement, actively speaks against women and feminist movements in an attempt to silence their voices (Blais & Dupuis-Deri, 2012). Unlike feminist movements that work against marginalization directed toward women, masculinist movements seek to perpetuate it. Thus, their

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marginalizing messages result in hegemony. Gramsci (2005) explains that hegemony functions as ideological domination. As one ideology becomes dominant, others are silenced. He states that ideology is transmitted by language. As society shapes what people believe, they engage in domination by consent. As Gramsci (2005) explains, although people may not agree with a dominant ideology, they tend to adopt a fatalistic attitude about it, believing that they have no power to counter the dominant ideology. Thus, when masculinist groups use language to subjugate women and their role in society, masculinist groups often succeed with their goal of normalizing subjugation and attempting to make women (and pro-feminist men) believe that the marginalization that they experience is normal and even acceptable. Masculinist movements succeed when people adopt the fatalistic viewpoint. Gramsci explains, “Fatalism is nothing other than the clothing worn by real and active will when in a weak position” (2005, p. 337).

Unfortunately, the hegemonic ideologies of masculinist movements are often overlooked in gender-communication courses (Blais & Dupuis-Deri, 2012). I argue that gender-communication courses should present students with the opportunity to examine the hegemonic messages that these masculinist groups use to advance their cause so that students learn to uncover and to challenge these marginalizing messages of domination.

### **Description of the Activity**

Given the need for gender-communication courses to address this important topic, the activity demonstrates how students can study the ways that masculinist groups perpetuate hegemony. This activity helps students learn to identify and to evaluate marginalizing messages as well as how these messages can have the effect of sustaining society’s power structures. This activity also provides students with an opportunity to respond to hegemonic masculinity through the application of critical-communication pedagogy.

This activity focuses on the domestic-violence case involving Baltimore Ravens’ running back Ray Rice. This case has garnered much media attention; therefore, students are largely aware of the incident’s specifics. Because students are not aware of the masculinist groups’ responses to the incident, this activity asks students to examine the ways in which a masculinist group uses this event to perpetuate hegemony.

Students will engage in the following four-step process, the activity’s objectives. First, students will learn about critical-communication pedagogy and how it can be used to respond to marginalization. Second, students will study the Men’s Rights Activists and its hegemonic ideology. Third, students will examine the Ray Rice domestic-violence incident. Fourth, students will apply critical-communication pedagogy to the Men’s Rights Activists’ blog statements about the Rice incident in order to determine how people can respond to instances of hegemonic masculinity that they encounter in their own lives. Each of the four steps is discussed in the following sections.

#### **Step #1: Learning About Critical Communication Pedagogy (10 minutes)**

In this step, students learn about the principles of critical communication pedagogy (CCP) in order to, later, respond to the MRA’s hegemonic blog comments. Thus, this first section follows a lecture format where instructors explain the CCP’s ideology to students. This lecture is followed by dialogue. To aid instructors in facilitating the lecture and dialogue, the following section provides a brief description of CCP.

**Critical communication pedagogy.** Instructors should discuss the idea that CCP is a pedagogical approach that examines language and meaning in order to uncover power imbalances in society (Kahl, 2011). Allen (2011) explains that the goal of CCP is to make learners, both teachers and students, consciously aware of how power benefits some groups and subjugates others. Specifically, CCP accomplishes this goal by examining the role of race, sex, gender, social class, and economic status in society (Kahl, 2013, 2014). Thus, CCP works to make power visible and “hold power and authority accountable” (Giroux, 2014, pp. 40-41). Hegemony, a social construct, is a system that privileges one ideology over another by shaping what people believe (Gramsci, 2005). As society shapes belief, people adopt that ideology, thinking that they are powerless to counter the dominant ideology. CCP often employs conscientization, a process to analyze and respond to hegemony (Freire, 1970). Conscientization involves a) gaining a heightened awareness of hegemony and b) identifying ways to respond to hegemony when they encounter it (Freire, 1970).

To assess students' understanding of CCP, hegemony, and conscientization, instructors can pose the following discussion questions: How would you describe hegemony? Why is it important to be able to recognize hegemony? What effect does hegemony have on our lives? Are there ways to respond to hegemony?

### **Step #2: Examining the Ideology of Men's Rights Activists (20 minutes)**

In this step, students examine the MRA's ideology and its hegemonic beliefs regarding women. To help students understand the MRA's ideology, instructors should provide students with a background of the MRA movement. Instructors should discuss that masculinist groups, such as the MRA, are generally comprised of white, heterosexual men who believe that feminism puts men in crisis (Wood, 2013) and that women are to blame for the socio-economic problems that men face. MRA members believe that feminist movements have become too powerful and have harmed men. Specifically, MRAs “deny any idea of men's power and argue that men are the real victims” (Flood, 1996, p. 22), claiming that “women have become the true power holders in our society” (Maddison, 1999, p. 39). This ideology originates from the belief that “the gender equity pendulum has swung too far and, as a result, men are now disadvantaged and discriminated against” (Maddison, 1999, p. 39). Blais and Dupuis-Deri (2012) describe this belief system as the “scapegoat thesis” (p. 24). This belief system leads MRAs to work in opposition to feminism by “revalorizing masculinity” (Wood, 2013, p. 224). To accomplish their goals, MRAs attempt to use masculinity to subjugate women. Because of these beliefs, MRAs tend to be more sympathetic to the goals of liberal feminism which “holds that women and men are alike and equal in most respects” (Wood, 2013, p. 69). Thus, like MRAs, members of the liberal feminism movement strive for equality between sexes in terms of “rights, roles, and opportunities” (Wood, 2013, p. 69). Alternately, MRAs tend to be more hostile toward the goals of cultural feminism which “holds that women and men are fundamentally different and, therefore, should have different rights, roles, and opportunities” (Wood, 2013, p. 69).

To assess for understanding about the MRA's ideology, instructors can pose the following discussion questions: Why do MRAs exist? How would you describe the MRA's ideology? Why might men believe that they, not women, are subjugated in society? Is the MRA's ideology dangerous? Why or why not?

### Step #3: Examining the Ray Rice Domestic-Violence Incident (15 minutes)

In this step, students view a much-publicized domestic-violence incident involving Baltimore Ravens' running back Ray Rice and his then-fiancée, Janay Palmer, which occurred in February 2014. In the footage captured by a security camera inside a casino elevator in Atlantic City, NJ, Rice is seen punching Janay Palmer, knocking her unconscious, and dragging her outside the elevator. Because of the video's graphic nature, instructors need to gauge whether or not it is appropriate to show the video to their students. This video is available at <http://www.t TMZ.com/2014/09/08/ray-rice-elevator-knockout-fiancee-takes-crushing-punch-video/>. One of the primary benefits of viewing the video is to contrast the obvious violence inflicted upon Janay Palmer with the MRA's lack of objection to it on its blog (which is discussed in Step 4).

To assess the students' understanding of the video, instructors can pose the following discussion questions: What is your reaction to this video? How does this video represent hegemony regarding gender roles? How is Janay Palmer marginalized in this video?

### Step #4: Applying Critical Communication Pedagogy to the MRA's Blog (30 minutes)

In this final step of the activity, students apply their knowledge of CCP to accomplish two goals, gaining a heightened awareness of hegemony and learning to respond to its presence in society. Specifically, students read sections of an MRA blog where masculinists provide their marginalizing views of the Rice incident. Doing so affords students the opportunity to conclude the activity with a focus on praxis.

**Gaining a heightened awareness of hegemony.** To help students become aware of the hegemonic language that MRAs use regarding this incident, students read entries in the MRA reddit.com blog posting titled "Ray Rice: The elevator video." The blog where the MRA's comment about the incident can be accessed at [http://www.reddit.com/r/MensRights/comments/2fsvse/ray\\_rice\\_the\\_elevator\\_video/](http://www.reddit.com/r/MensRights/comments/2fsvse/ray_rice_the_elevator_video/). The reading and subsequent discussion of the blog help students to accomplish the first step of conscientization, gaining a heightened awareness of hegemony. To do so, instructors should ask students to read the blog in order to examine the marginalizing language that is generally used in the responses. Some examples follow. One post uses metaphoric language to attempt to explain Janay Palmer's subservient role to Ray Rice: "It isn't the lion's fault that they're a lion, it's the zebra's fault for poking the lion when it's just a zebra." Other posts justify Rice's actions: "Retaliating would be following a person a beating the tar out of them. Retaliating would be, continually hitting the person. He used just enough force to stop her continual attacks." Some MRAs' posts blame the handrails in the elevator for injuring Palmer. One MRA stated:

It was her head hitting the rail that caused the knock out. The blow seemed to just knock her off balance. If the blow was bad enough, there would be pictures. I have yet to see pictures of significant bruising.

Another MRA member, after calling for the removal of handrails from elevators, stated that "Ray Rice should be playing football this Sunday."

To assess the students' understanding of hegemonic masculinity that is advanced by MRAs, instructors can pose the following discussion questions to small groups of students: Despite the evidence against Rice, why do the MRA's blog posts tend to indicate that Ray Rice

is not at fault? How does the MRA's language subjugate women? How do the comments justify male violence against women? How does the language silence women's voices? How do these blog postings reflect the MRA members' beliefs about power distribution? How do these comments advance their cause? How does society empower MRAs in ways that legitimize these rationalizations for Rice's actions?

**Learning to respond to hegemony.** Students engage in the second facet of conscientization, identifying ways in which they could respond to hegemonic messages. Because most students have not previously engaged in conscientization (Kahl, 2014), they do not know how to respond to hegemonic masculinity. When discussing the following questions, students learn to become active participants in society by recognizing that they can respond to the hegemony that they encounter. To assess the degree to which students are learning to become active participants in society, small groups of students should discuss the following questions: How could you respond if you heard someone make these comments? How could you assist someone who has been affected by the MRA's disparaging language? How could you make other people aware of the damage that the MRA's messages perpetuate? What challenges would you face from MRAs if you did respond?

Dialoguing with students about these questions is an important step because it helps them to understand hegemonic messages and to work toward action (praxis) (Freire, 1970; Smith, 2002). Freire (1970) discusses the idea that praxis is informed action, an important means to enact change in society. Students often state that, when they apply CCP and conscientization to analyze the blog, they become aware that critically minded citizens should use their understanding of the effects of MRA members' language to move to informed action.

### **Assessment of the Objectives**

This activity allows students to meet the objectives set forth at the outset of this paper. First, students learned about CCP and how it can be used to respond to marginalization. Second, students discussed and viewed the Ray Rice domestic-violence incident. Third, students studied the MRA's ideology to learn about how the group marginalizes women. Finally, students applied CCP to the MRA's blog to determine how they could respond to instances of hegemonic masculinity that they encounter in their own lives.

In this activity, instructors established dialogue as a form of assessment, allowing them to gain important information about student progress and depth of understanding. By using dialogue as an assessment procedure for each step of the activity, instructors discerned the following: whether this activity aided students in becoming better prepared to engage in praxis regarding instances of hegemonic masculinity and in becoming critically engaged in society (Kahl, 2013) through the practical application of their knowledge (Kahl, 2010).

### **Debriefing**

Students often acknowledge that they were not aware of the negative consequences of hegemonic language prior to engaging in this activity. Therefore, instructors could ask students to reflect on their new awareness by posing the following question: How has this activity helped you to realize how damaging the MRA's hegemonic language can be? This final question helps students to reflect on what they have experienced in order to make a connection between the activity and their lives.

## Appraisal

This activity develops critical thinking by using a dialogue process that allows students to share their opinions and experiences to gain new levels of awareness about oppression. This activity possesses utility because it has the potential to actively involve diverse students in important civil discussions about hegemony, marginalization, and MRAs. Specifically, the dialogic aspects allow students who come from different backgrounds to express their opinions. This activity helps students to recognize that they can respond to hegemonic masculinity through their public speeches, their intercultural interactions, their discussions about gender and sex, and/or their knowledge of the relationships between sports and society.

Additional benefits for the activity are that the examination of hegemony is applicable to a variety of courses in the communication discipline. For example, beyond the obvious application in courses involving gender communication or sports and communication, the application of the activity in a public speaking course allows further discussion about how hegemonic masculinity could affect a speaker and his/her interaction with an audience. The integration of this activity into an intercultural communication course could allow detailed discussion about the ways in which masculinity and violence are perceived similarly and differently across cultural contexts.

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## **Handout**

### **Discussion Questions**

#### **Step #1: Learning about Critical Communication Pedagogy Questions**

How would you describe hegemony? Why is it important to be able to recognize hegemony? What effect does hegemony have on our lives? Are there ways to respond to hegemony?

#### **Step #2: Examining the Ideology of Men's Rights Activists Questions**

Why do MRAs exist? How would you describe MRAs ideology? Why might men believe that they, not women, are subjugated in society? Is the MRAs ideology dangerous? Why or why not?

#### **Step #3: Examining the Ray Rice Domestic Violence Incident Questions**

What is your reaction to this video? How does this video represent hegemony regarding gender roles? How is Janay Palmer marginalized in this video?

#### **Step #4: Applying Critical Communication Pedagogy to the MRAs Blog Questions**

##### **a. Gaining a heightened awareness of hegemony.**

Despite the evidence against Rice, why do MRAs blog posts tend to indicate that Ray Rice is not at fault? How does the MRAs language subjugate women? How do their comments justify male violence against women? How does their language silence women's voices? How do these blog postings reflect MRAs beliefs about power distribution? How do these comments advance their cause? How does society empower MRAs in ways that legitimize these rationalizations for Rice's actions?

##### **b. Learning to respond to hegemony.**

How could you respond if you heard someone make these comments? How could you assist someone who has been affected by the MRAs disparaging language? How could you make other people aware of the damage that the MRAs messages perpetuate? What challenges would you face from MRAs if you did respond?

#### **Debriefing Question**

How has this activity helped you to realize how damaging MRAs hegemonic language can be?