

“Doing research on men and as men: politics and problems”

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ABSTRACT: What issues arise in doing research on men and masculinities, and doing research as men? What happens to feminist methodological norms and insights when they are taken up in such research? This paper addresses these questions to arrive at an outline of the possibilities for pro-feminist and anti-patriarchal research both on and by men. Dilemmas in such research are illustrated through discussion of a series of in-depth interviews undertaken with young heterosexually active men, interviews which investigated these men’s sexual practices and relations, meanings and discourses. I focus here on heterosexual men’s sexual story-telling and sexual talk, using these to flesh out what broader questions are at stake in such investigations.

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Introduction

The research project in which I am engaged is a feminist-informed investigation, *of men and masculinities, by a man*. It examines the sexualities of heterosexual men, through a series of in-depth interviews which focus on the meanings through which sexual practice and sexual relations, especially with regard to safe and unsafe sex, are understood.

In the first half of this paper, I will address the question, Can men do critical research on men and masculinities, and if so, how? Is a men's anti-patriarchal standpoint possible? In the second half, I will switch to the question of research *on* men, and in particular, the operation of masculinities in research between men.

1. Research by men

This first section offers a critical assessment of men's relationship to the production of knowledges, and a legitimation of the possibility of pro-feminist research by men.

The academic mode of production

The social relations of academic production are deeply gendered. This is evident most immediately in men's dominance of the academic hierarchy and gendered divisions of labour throughout university life, and evident too in the masculine character of routine academic practices. However, there is a deeper problem, grounded in models of knowledge production themselves. The problem is that the production of knowledge is *gendered*. All knowledge is socially located, and its constitution is mediated by power relations.

There are fundamental debates among feminist theorists over the specifics of this account of epistemology. Sandra Harding, one of the influential discussants in the feminist epistemology debates, characterises them as between feminist empiricist epistemologies, feminist standpoint epistemologies, and feminist postmodern epistemologies. I won't attempt to outline, let alone resolve, these debates here. Instead, I adopt a version of feminist standpoint theory, because it is most useful for questions of men's scholarship and men's relations to gendered knowledge.

The central tenets of feminist standpoint epistemologies are that knowledge is based on experience, and that women's experience provides a stronger basis through which to construct claims to knowledge. Given the fact of gender domination, in Harding's words, "Women's experiences, informed by feminist theory, provide a potential grounding for more complete and less distorted knowledge claims than do men's."

The word *standpoint* has two related meanings in this account. The first is the 'common sense' generated by unanalysed engagement with material and cultural life structured by power relations. The second is the self-conscious and liberatory perspective on self and society achieved through political and intellectual struggle against these power relations. With respect to gender, the former can be termed 'women's standpoint' and the latter 'feminist standpoint'.

Men's relation to knowledge

Men's relation to feminist knowledge is at the very least a problematic one, because of the characteristic constitution of masculine subjectivity and men's standpoint. Feminist critiques of the dominant modes of social inquiry suggest that they represent fundamentally masculine ways of viewing the world. Knowledge is disembodied and premised on the privileging of false 'objectivity', detachment, rationality and domination. Men come to experience ourselves through these same patriarchal modes of knowing, and we have believed that we speak as *man*, a category inclusive of men and women, in a claim to positionless 'truth'.

The general premise here is that *all* knowledge, necessarily, results from the conditions of its production, is contextually located, and irrevocably bears the marks of its origins in the intellectual practices of those who give voice to it.

Returning to the two meanings of 'standpoint', in relation to men, we can then distinguish between 'men's standpoint' and, if such a thing is possible, 'men's anti-patriarchal standpoint' or

'pro-feminist men's standpoint'.

This account raises crucial questions for the practice of research *by men*, and indeed, for the practice of research by any dominant group.

- Can *men* do feminist research, and can men develop feminist knowledge?
- Can men develop self-knowledge that will lead to the erosion of male power and privilege? Can liberatory knowledge be generated from elsewhere than the lives of oppressed peoples?

If you are inclined to give a 'No' answer to these questions, you need look no further than much of the literature which goes under the heading 'Men's Studies'. This is marked by a general *failure* to develop a substantial anti-patriarchal standpoint, and much of it is non-feminist, pseudo-feminist or out-of-date feminist.

Men's anti-patriarchal standpoint

A men's anti-patriarchal standpoint *is* possible, and it is possible for the same reasons that white anti-racist and heterosexual anti-homophobic standpoints are possible. It is possible because the ontology of privileged groups generally is not so determining that the production of alternative forms of knowledge is impossible. Men are not so fixed in the lived experience of privilege that no man can grasp anti-patriarchal knowledges. To do so requires a particular set of processes through which members of dominant groups can 'reinvent ourselves as Other'.

Sandra Harding sees it as politically vital that dominant groups take responsibility for their social locations, using the analyses of the relevant subordinate group to understand their lives, and thus adopt "traitorous social locations". Some white feminists in the last decade or so have made significant efforts to come to terms with the critique of white feminisms by women of colour, and in Harding's eyes appear to overestimate their own ability to engage in antiracist thought but to underestimate men's ability to engage in feminist thought. On the other hand, feminists' reluctance to bestow the term 'feminist' on men is understandable, given men's habit of colonising everything and some men's arrogant claim to feminist authority.

What does 'reinventing ourselves as Other', or adopting traitorous social locations and identities, involve? Its key principle is that those whose lives are constructed at the centre of the social order learn about these lives by starting our thoughts from the perspective of lives at the margins. For men, we must speak out of our own social locations as men though a critically reflective, but still *male*, consciousness.

Am I proposing here that dominant groups become aware of their privilege simply through an effort of will or moral conviction? If we take seriously the 'materiality' of epistemology, then this is inadequate. Feminist, lesbian and anti-racist standpoints arise out of the material experience of oppression, including silences, closures, intrusions and misnamings. For dominant groups to recognise the privileges of their ontological states, more is required, namely, a changed lived reality.

Fortunately, the ontologies of dominant groups themselves provide resources for such a shift. The conditions of men's lives include diversities, contradictions, ambiguities and absences through which these possibilities may be opened up. More specifically;

(a) Firstly, men who are subject to silences, misnamings and so on because of their social location as gay or bisexual, working-class, 'non-white' or disabled for example may be able to find points of contact with the feminist standpoints of women.

(b) Secondly, members of the category 'men' in general may be able to find such points of contact with women's experiences of domination, via critical reflection on their *own* subjection to domination—not as an 'oppressed' group, but as an aspect of the power relations between men themselves.

None of the above is meant to suggest that men's and women's experiences are the same, or that one must have experience of *some* kind of oppression in order to generate traitorous analyses.

But it is to suggest that there are possibilities for communication and dialogue between women and men.

Temporary experiences of 'otherness' may also contribute to men's ability to develop an anti-patriarchal standpoint. Such experiences come about when we are located in an immediate social context in which we are made 'other' and the original and oppressed 'Other' becomes in a sense the norm, problematising our identities and locations.

Not only is a men's pro-feminist standpoint possible; men's feminist-informed critical inquiry can make contributions to scholarship and political change which women *cannot* make. There are areas of masculine behaviour and thought to which male researchers have easier access than do female researchers, such as all-male institutions and informal masculine spaces, and men's 'inner' lives such as in the area of sexuality. Also, men can use men's institutional power for anti-sexist ends.

Having argued that men's anti-patriarchal research on men is both possible and necessary, the question arises; how this should be organised in institutional and disciplinary terms? One model is that of 'Men's Studies', but the weight of feminist opinion is that this is not an appropriate forum in which to pursue such research. Men's Studies has been seen as a colonising and reactionary response by male academics, as suggesting a false complementarity to women's studies, as sectarian, and as potentially marginalising or neutralising feminist knowledge. An alternative is the 'critique of men' proposed by Jeff Hearn and David Morgan, which I do not have the space to outline here, but whose character is implicit in the preceding account.

2. Research on men

Research on men and masculinities involves a paradox; while most literature is about men and male experience, few texts are explicitly signalled as such. That is, men have not have been *problematised*.

A further issue is the hopefully now diminished myth that feminist research has been only about women (and that the women's movement has implications only for women) [Canaan & Griffin, 1990: 207]. In fact, there has been a wide-ranging scrutiny of men and masculinities in feminist literature, a scrutiny bound up with the documentation and explication of women's subordination [Maynard, 1990: 284]. This embodies a recognition of the vital need for feminist research on men's world, based for example on the understanding that women and femininities cannot be understood without reference to men and masculinities [ibid: 283].

What are the issues then in doing research on men? These are of both methodological and theoretical interest. Methodologically they are of interest because they concern the validity and reliability of the interview accounts, the 'data' of this research. They are of theoretical interest because they concern the discursive and contextual organisation of heterosexual men's social and sexual lives.

• Listening to men (Dealing with accounts)

Firstly, how should we treat the accounts and understandings offered by men in interviews, diaries and stories? For example, should our theoretical constructs be based entirely on men's accounts, or should they transcend them? In some early feminist accounts of feminist methodology, there is a certain celebration of the notion of 'experience' and the meaning of women's accounts is treated as unproblematic. Other feminist positions such as that of Dorothy Smith suggest that we must go beyond experience or subjectivity to 'relations of ruling'.

An exclusive concern with subjective adequacy deflects attention away from social structural issues of power and domination. It may reproduce sexist regimes of truth, and this is even more the case in doing research on men. It is important that I come to heterosexual men's accounts of sexual relations having already found out something about *women's* accounts, and feminist understandings, of this area, because of the recognition of the power relations which structure knowledge. To give a simple example, men consistently underestimate their own sexually coercive behaviour.

Having established that in listening to men we need to be aware of the power and social relations which structure knowledge, how do men themselves talk?

Talking to men

Talking to men, interviewing men, raises its own particular issues and problems. There is a popular understanding that men are unwilling or unable to speak personally, and that our dominant ways of speaking are third-person, rationalistic, and factual. This is supported in some empirical work, and specifically in interview situations, as several studies show. In Brannen's study of marital troubles, she found that male respondents had not given or rehearsed their life histories before, were less practised in the art of being a respondent and were less co-operative [556]. McKee and O'Brien's examination of fatherhood produced similar results; the boundaries of masculine preoccupations and orientations produced "an inability to rehearse or anticipate what the interviewer *might want to know* or *what they might to tell*" [151]. More generally, the men were unaccustomed to discussing family matters or feelings with an outsider, used only to doing so with their wives [ibid: 152].

The gender of the interviewer is also significant here. According to some early research, especially when the content of the interview is sexual or personal, the following patterns are common, as Scully (1990) summarises: Male interviewers get fewer responses than female, especially with male subjects; Male counsellors elicit more information-seeking responses, while female counsellors elicit greater self-disclosure and emotional expressivity [12, citing Rumenik, 1977]. These results fit with general patterns of emotional disclosure among men: men are more likely to confide in women, especially those with whom they are sexually involved, while emotional intimacy among men is proscribed [Scully, 1990: 12]. Thus female interviewers may be at an advantage, and less subject to the frequently punitive, disinterested and jokey character of male/male talk [McKee & O'Brien, 1983: 153]. While they can therefore secure greater self-disclosure from male interviewees, they may also find themselves positioned as the female half of a conjugal relationship and subjected to flirting, sexual harassment or misogyny [ibid: 158].

These portrayals in the literature would seem to place me at a disadvantage as a male interviewer interviewing men, and when I started this PhD research I feared that in the interviews with young heterosexual men I would typically be faced with a stony silence and discomfort. While I had plenty of experience of intimate and revealing personal conversations about emotional and sexual matters with close male friends, I feared that this would not be possible in interviews with total strangers, and typically, men with more mainstream and hegemonic understandings. My primary defence to this criticism was that there are significant political and theoretical reasons why I as a male researcher should be conducting research on men, as discussed earlier, and any possible 'disadvantage' to doing so simply must be accepted as coming with the territory.

However, the interviews have been a welcome surprise in this regard. With all but two of the 22 interviewees there were high levels of personal disclosure and no obvious signs of discomfort such as not answering questions or resisting conversation. I also asked at the end of the interview if they found anything difficult about participating, and none (from memory) did so.

This result leads me to wonder if the patterns of disclosure described earlier in the literature are the product of more complex interview dynamics and reflect the operation not of 'masculinity' per se, but of particular masculinities structured by other social relations and of masculinities in *interaction*, namely between interviewer and interviewee. For example, the willingness of particular men to talk about emotional and sexual matters in an interview may be constituted by their age, their class, ethnicity, and so on. My young interviewees' relative comfort with disclosure may reflect generational differences among men, with most seeming familiar with talk about feelings and life histories, and it may also be shaped by their usually middle-class, tertiary-educated and Anglo backgrounds. It may also reflect the particular character of the interaction between myself and the interviewees — the ways in which we were able to slide into familiar, masculine modes of relating which facilitate personal disclosure, through our respective subject positions (including our similar ages) and conversational negotiations.

These possibilities raise a more substantial issue, to do with the premises on which concerns about men's 'greater' or 'lesser' disclosure may be based, and critiquing these gives a series of

further and stronger counter-arguments to criticisms of men's research with men. Talk of 'lesser' or 'greater' disclosure can imply a realist epistemology, which is also evident in the notion of 'matching' interviewer and interviewee. Matching research participants in terms of their positions in class, racial and gender relations is often advocated in methodological cookbooks, as a way of minimising power inequalities and increasing empathy and rapport. However, if we assume that accounts given in interviews are constructions rather than repositories of a unitary truth and that knowledges are situated, it becomes more important to analyse accounts within the context of the interview itself [Phoenix, 1994: 66].

Men's different ways of talking to men and to women are only a fundamental problem for research if we assume that there is some pre-social and pre-interactional account of life histories available to men, which we aim to somehow tap through interviewing. Instead, such accounts are usually given to particular people in particular contexts. The kind of talk the men give me, a male interviewer, is just as 'real, as important and as worthy of analysis as the kinds of talk they might give to a female interviewer. The male/male interaction in interviews, as in social life in general, is not predetermined by our shared occupation of the category male, but the product of negotiation and mutually effecting performance.

I would argue now that dominant masculine codes of speaking and relating are a *resource* for interviewing. For example, McKee and O'Brien earlier are cited as saying that female interviewers are less subject to jokey male talk — but such talk is an important aspect of male talk, and its more likely expression in male/male interviews therefore is a resource for this research. One strategy in men's research with men therefore is to use patterns of male/male talk to one's advantage, adopting them to encourage disclosure.

In my own interviews, forms of male homosocial talk such as the telling of sexual stories and jokey banter are an important source for insights into men's understandings of sexual relations, and I encouraged them and participated in them when they occurred. However, I did not explicitly *invite* a stereotypically masculine banter throughout the interviews, and this is less likely anyway given the participants (strangers rather than 'mates'), the location (my office rather than a pub or recreation room), and the interaction (a strange kind of conversation in which one participant mainly asks questions). Of course, other methods such as participant observation would have facilitated such an involvement.

There are other aspects of male/male conversation which are disadvantageous for this research, which I avoided at least practising myself in the interview. I am thinking of men's sometimes hostile and punitive reactions to other men's personal or emotional or sexual talk, reactions which involve challenging the speaker's masculinity or sexuality or sanctioning talk which ventures beyond the bounds of dominant masculinity. ("What are ya, a faggot?!") This of course was part of a broader interviewing approach centered on non-judgemental listening. At times therefore, I hoped that the use of less stereotypically masculine interactional and conversational styles, as well as general interviewing techniques, would lessen men's unwillingness to reveal their emotional and sexual lives.

While interview *talk* is one arena through which masculinities are performed and negotiated, there are also more subtle negotiations in play, for example to do with body language, dress and demeanour. I will now make some brief comments on the negotiation of masculinities in general in research.

General comment on masculinities in research

As my comments above suggest, gender is an object of negotiation and contestation in research, as it is in everyday life. Neil McKegany and Michael Bloor (1991) provide a useful overview of the influence of male gender on fieldwork relations; gender is both an object of fieldwork negotiation and part of the structural grounds on which negotiation takes place. Gender can operate at different times as an assigned status and as an object of negotiation. And the salience of the fieldworker's gender will vary for the participant.

For men doing fieldwork, there are different issues in same-sex and cross-sex research relations, and I concentrate here on the former.

Researcher's own familiarity with masculinity as a resource, and tensions between masculinities

In conducting research with men, men may draw on their own familiarity with and embeddedness in masculinity, and use culturally approved male-to-male relationships as enacted through drinking, sport, and so on. Such involvements systematically structure the kinds of data which can be collected, such as the topics which are covered and those that are taboo. And those who've done this research sometimes have also avoided typical aspects of these relationships, such as conflict and physical violence.

When men research men, our shared membership of this category 'men' does not itself rule out the possibility of tensions to do with masculinity; masculinity is structured by power relations *between* men as well as by the subordination of women. One of the most important axes through which power relations among men are organised is that of sexuality, and male/male research involves the negotiation of tensions and fears to do with homophobia and heterosexism. During each interview I was conscious of 'performing' sexed masculinities — does he think I'm gay (because of my earrings, dress or style, or the research topic itself)? Will that affect what he says about AIDS or gay men or anything at all? Do I casually mention a "girlfriend" to let him know I've done heterosexuality too, and do I step up the 'blokeyness' of my conversational idiom and style?

The intersection between masculinity and sexism or gender injustice poses further problems. For pro-feminist men, especially in hegemonically masculine settings or among mainstream men, fieldwork or interviewing typically involves listening to talk and being in the presence of practices which we find deeply offensive and disturbing. I found the interviews with some of the ADFA men in particular to be draining and indeed horrifying, as they told elaborate and apparently hilarious stories about their blunt mistreatment of women. I had already decided that I could not react in the way I would normally to such stories, and would attempt to laugh along and act 'neutrally', as part of a general stance of sympathetically adopting a similar demeanour to the interviewee's. This is still different to how a mate of the story-teller in this environment might react, slapping his thigh with laughter and telling a misogynist story of his own, and some interviewees undoubtedly were aware of my difference from them. Nevertheless, by acting in this way, effectively I condoned my interviewees' sexist practices and discourse. This was done for the sake of the interviews, of 'getting good data', and my ethical discomfort at doing so was only mitigated by my awareness of the wider political uses to which such research will be put.

For pro-feminist male researchers to conduct such research is to adopt the status of the 'outsider within'. We are positioned in a contradictory social location which involves inherent tensions, but which is also a critical and useful vantage point [Schacht]. I put on an impression management face to pass, conceal my true intentions, and suppress my emotional and political reactions to what is said or done. I pragmatically adopt a kind of emotional detachment to establish relations and rapport and to survive my feelings of self-estrangement. And all this can feel like a betrayal of one's values and a potential betrayal of the research subjects [Schacht: 7]. I would also argue that pro-feminist men's ability to conduct research in hegemonic or misogynist settings is facilitated by our *own* general training in masculinity, our pre-existing knowledge and experience of 'doing' masculinity and masculine relations.

Further issues in research on men

There are two further issues in doing research on men and masculinities, to do with two emphases in some feminist discussions of methodology, on research as *empowerment* and research as *activism*.

- Empowerment and the power relations between researcher and researched

Feminist methodology provides an ethically essential, and empirically useful, awareness of the operation of social relations, including the dimension of power, in research. Such an awareness is useful in attempting to minimise power imbalances and thus the potential for exploitation, and it also provides a more thorough understanding of the conditions of production of the accounts with which one is left. The relations between researcher and researched are constituted by the social positionings of all participants and by the negotiation and interaction which occurs in the

research process. Wider social relations of gender, race and so on enter the interview situation, but not in any unitary or essential way.

Feminist methodological ideals in the 1970s and early 1980s included the norm of egalitarian and empowering research by women on women. Visions of interviewing women represented it as therapeutic, in a liberal revision of the practice of consciousness-raising. More recently, such visions have been radically questioned, with acknowledgment of the diversities and power relations between women themselves and more complex understandings of research processes. What happens to the methodological norms regarding power when they're applied to *men*? There are times when we may want to 'interview without sympathy'; the most striking example of this I've come across is in Diana Scully's interviews with convicted rapists.

'Empowerment' should not be a goal of research with men *as men*, although it would be appropriate for men as working-class, as gay, and so on. However, perhaps empowerment would be a worthy goal if it were re-conceived, to mean offering resources and narratives to men through which they could resist dominant masculinities and adopt alternative subjectivities.

- Changing men

Finally, the issue of research and social change. In line with another feminist norm, I believe that one's research should 'make a difference'—it should increase the possibilities for progressive social change. The question is, however, is the research situation itself to be the site in which change is made? Again, there are multiple approaches to this question both within and outside feminism. In my own research, the interviews are not regarded as the key site of change-making. Instead, this research's contribution to social change is in the development of 'useful knowledge', a politically motivated critique of heterosexual men's sexuality, which can be fed into multiple loci of political activity.

Conclusion

At this point in my PhD, I continue to wrestle with the tensions between on the one hand a theoretical recognition of the complex and contradictory character of masculinities, and on the other the pragmatic demands of empirically based research. I hope that I've been able to give you a sense of how each can work, and inspired you to think critically and creatively about issues in doing research as men and on men.

[Epilogue: While the abstract for this paper included mention of heterosexual men's sexual story-telling and sexual talk, I was unable to incorporate this material into the discussion as it was unfinished.]

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Please note: This list is incomplete. Some references were stripped out of the above text in the course of preparing it for verbal presentation, and I have not gone back and put them back in.

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