

# **UNDERSTANDING MEN: GENDER SOCIOLOGY AND THE NEW INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ON MASCULINITIES**

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## **1. Introduction: debates about men and boys**

In the last decade there has been an upsurge of concern with issues about men and boys. In the public realm there have been social movements focussed on the reform or restoration of masculinity, such as the "mythopoetic" movement, the Million Man March and the Promise Keepers (Messner 1997). In education there has been much talk of boys' "failure" in school and the need for special programs for boys (Connell 1996, Gilbert and Gilbert 1998). In health there has been increasing debate about men's health and illness (Sabo and Gordon 1995, Schofield et al. 2000). A popular therapeutic movement addresses men's problems in relationships, sexuality and identity.

In a way this is surprising, because men remain the principal holders of economic and political power. Men make up a large majority of corporate executives, top professionals, and holders of public office. Worldwide, men held 93% of cabinet-level posts in 1996, and most top positions in international agencies (Gierycz 1999). Men continue to control most technology and most weaponry; with only limited exceptions it is men who staff and control the agencies of force such as armies, police and judicial systems.

This used to be thought "natural", either prescribed by God or a consequence of biology. Essentialist views of gender are still popular, and are constantly reinforced in the media. However they are increasingly under challenge, not only in biology (Fausto-Sterling 1992), but also in everyday life. The rise of the women's liberation movement, and the many feminisms that have followed on from it, produced a massive disturbance in the gender system and people's assumptions about gender.

Questions about men are inevitable, once this disturbance began, because gender is a living system of social interactions, not a stack of watertight boxes. What affects the social position of women and girls must also affect the social position of men and boys. Large numbers of men now acknowledge that their position is under challenge, that what they once took for granted about must be re-thought. They may or may not like it, but they cannot ignore it.

## **2. New social research**

This cultural disturbance about gender and the position of men has given impetus to the social-scientific work on masculinities that has been accelerating since the mid 1980s.

Realization that masculinities are socially constructed goes back to early psychoanalysis, and in the social sciences first took the shape of a social-psychological concept, the "male sex role". The "role" approach emphasised the learning of norms for conduct, and has been popular in applied areas like education and health. But sex role theory is inadequate for understanding diversity in masculinities, and for understanding the power and economic dimension in gender (Connell 1987). Accordingly, recent research on men and masculinities has moved beyond the abstractions of the "sex role" approach to a more concrete examination of how gender patterns are constructed and practiced.

"Constructionist" research has used a range of social-scientific methods to explore the situationally formed gender identities, practices and representations of men and boys. The studies range from quantitative surveys (Metz-Göckel and Müller 1985, Zulehner and Volz 1999) to close-focus ethnographies (Klein 1993), life-history studies (Messner 1992, Messerschmidt 1999), studies of organizations (Collinson et al. 1990) and cultural forms such as films, novels and plays (Buchbinder 1998).

While most of the research has been done in those countries which account for the bulk of social-science research - the USA, Britain and Germany - concern with these issues has spread far beyond the metropole. Two semiperipheral regions - Scandinavia and Australasia - have been fertile in ideas and research on masculinity (Holter and Aarseth 1993, Donaldson and Tomsen 1998, Law et al. 1999). Research on men and patriarchy is building up in South Africa, following the end of Apartheid (Morrell 1998). Critiques of traditional patterns of masculinity have developed in Japan (Nakamura 1994), where a men's centre with a reform agenda has recently been established. Issues about men, sexuality and fatherhood have been debated and researched in Brazil (Ariha et al. 1998).

Discussions of these questions have now moved into international forums. In 1997 UNESCO sponsored a conference on masculinity, violence and peacemaking, which drew participants from Russia and eastern Europe as well as other parts of the world (Breines et al. 2000). In 1998 FLACSO convened a conference on research and activism about masculinities across Latin America and the Caribbean (Valdés and Olavarría 1998). An International Association for Studies of Men has been established. The IASOM Newsletter, alongside journals such as Men and Masculinities, now serve as forums for international research.

### **3. Significant conclusions**

We now have a growing library of studies from around the world, across a number of the social sciences, in which researchers have traced the construction of masculinity in a particular milieu or moment. They include studies of marital sexuality, homophobic murders, a body-building

gym, street gangs, a clergyman's family, an insurance office, a high school, a film, a political movement, professional sports, a police station, a literary genre, a media debate (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, Connell 2000). I call this the "ethnographic moment" in masculinity research, in which the local and specific is emphasised.

Though each study is different, there are many common themes. Some of the most important findings of this research may be summarized in six theses:

**1. Multiple masculinities.** Historians and anthropologists have shown that there is no one pattern of masculinity that is found everywhere. Different cultures, and different periods of history, construct masculinity differently.

For instance, some cultures make heroes of soldiers, and regard violence as the ultimate test of masculinity; others look at soldiering with disdain and regard violence as contemptible. Some cultures regard homosexual sex as incompatible with true masculinity; others think no-one can be a real man without having had homosexual relationships.

It follows that in large-scale multicultural societies there are likely to be multiple definitions of masculinity. Sociological research shows this to be true. There are, for instance, differences in the expression of masculinity between Latino and Anglo men in the United States, and between Greek or Lebanese and Anglo boys in Australia. The meaning of masculinity in working-class life is different from the meaning in middle-class life, not to mention among the very rich and the very poor.

Equally important, more than one kind of masculinity can be found within a given cultural setting. Within any workplace, neighbourhood or peer group, there are likely to be different understandings of masculinity and different ways of "doing" masculinity. In the urban middle class, for instance, there is a version of masculinity organized around dominance (e.g. emphasising "leadership" in management), and another version organized around expertise (e.g. emphasising "professionalism" and technical knowledge). Recent German discussions have spoken of "multi-optional masculinities" to emphasise the potential diversity (Widersprüche 1998).

**2. Hierarchy and hegemony.** Different masculinities do not sit side-by-side like dishes in a smorgasbord; there are definite relations between them. Typically, some masculinities are more honored than others. Some may be actively dishonored, for example homosexual masculinities in modern Western culture. Some are socially marginalized, for example the masculinities of disempowered ethnic minorities. Some are exemplary, taken as symbolizing admired traits, for example the masculinities of sporting heroes.

The form of masculinity which is culturally dominant in a given setting is called "hegemonic masculinity". "Hegemonic" signifies a position of cultural authority and leadership, not total dominance; other forms of masculinity persist alongside. The hegemonic form need not be the most common form of masculinity. (This is familiar in school peer groups, for instance, where a small

number of highly influential boys are admired by many others who cannot reproduce their performance.) Hegemonic masculinity is, however, highly visible. It is likely to be what casual commentators have noticed when they speak of "the male role".

Hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic not just in relation to other masculinities, but in relation to the gender order as a whole. It is an expression of the privilege men collectively have over women. The hierarchy of masculinities is an expression of the unequal shares in that privilege held by different groups of men.

**3. Collective masculinities.** The gender structures of a society define particular patterns of conduct as "masculine" and others as "feminine". At one level, these patterns characterise individuals. Thus we say that a particular man (or woman) is masculine, or behaves in a masculine way. But these patterns also exist at the collective level. Masculinities are defined and sustained in institutions, such as corporations, armies, governments - or schools (for a striking example in educational research see Mac an Ghail 1994). Masculinities are defined collectively in the workplace, as shown in industrial research; and in informal groups like street gangs, as shown in criminological research.

Masculinity also exists impersonally in culture. Video games, for instance, not only circulate stereotyped images of violent masculinity. They require the player to enact this masculinity (symbolically) in order to play the game at all. Sociological research on sport has shown how an aggressive masculinity is created organizationally by the structure of organized sport, by its pattern of competition, its system of training and its steep hierarchy of levels and rewards. Images of this masculinity are circulated on an enormous scale by sports media; though most individuals fit very imperfectly into the slots thus created.

**4. Active construction.** Masculinities do not exist prior to social behavior, either as bodily states or fixed personalities. Rather, masculinities come into existence as people act. They are accomplished in everyday conduct or organizational life, as patterns of social practice.

Close-focus research has shown how we "do gender" in everyday life, for instance in the way we conduct conversations. A similar insight has thrown new light on the link between masculinity and crime. This is not a product of a fixed masculine character being expressed through crime. Rather, the link results from a variety of men - from impoverished youth gangs on the street to white-collar criminals at the computer - using crime as a resource to construct particular masculinities.

Masculinities, it appears, are far from settled. From bodybuilders in the gym, to managers in the boardroom, to boys in the elementary school playground, a great deal of effort goes into the making of conventional masculinities. And this is true also of non-conventional masculinities. Recent research on homosexual men shows that for these men too, identity and relationships involve a complex and sustained effort of construction.

**5. Internal complexity.** One of the key reasons why masculinities are not settled, is that they are not simple, homogeneous patterns. Close-focus research on gender, both in psychoanalysis and ethnography, often reveals contradictory desires and logics. A man's active heterosexuality may exist as a thin emotional layer concealing a deeper homosexual desire. A boy's identification with men may co-exist or struggle with identifications with women. The public enactment of an exemplary masculinity may covertly require actions that undermine it. Close-focus research on men's sexuality (e.g. Dowsett 1996) is a rich source of evidence on tension and contradiction. Masculinities may have multiple possibilities concealed within them.

The complexity of desires, emotions or possibilities may not be obvious at first glance. But the issue is important, because these complexities are sources of tension and change in gender patterns.

**6. Dynamics.** From the fact that different masculinities exist in different cultures and historical epochs, we can deduce that masculinities are able to change. In the layering of masculinities we see one of the sources of change; and in the hierarchy of masculinities we see one of the motives. Historians have traced changes in masculinity as struggles for hegemony: for instance re-defining patterns of managerial masculinity in British manufacturing industry as economic and technological change re-arranged the balance of power (Roper 1994).

To speak of the "dynamics" of masculinity is to acknowledge that particular masculinities are composed, historically, and may also be de-composed, contested and replaced. There is an active politics of gender in everyday life. Sometimes it finds spectacular public expression, in large-scale rallies or demonstrations. More often it is local and limited. But there is always a process of contestation and change, and in some cases this becomes conscious and deliberate. This has happened, for instance, in the "men's movements" of contemporary North America.

Compared with earlier understandings of men and masculinity, the "ethnographic moment" has already had important intellectual fruits. This is not to say, however, that it is beyond criticism.

#### **4. Critique and new directions**

Among the problems of masculinity research are problems of definition. Hearn (1996) has raised doubts about the usefulness of the concept of "masculinities", and more recently (1998a) has spelt out the very diverse, and to some degree incompatible, positions that have been adopted in men's theorizing of men. Clatterbaugh (1998), working through definitions of "masculinity", has found them mostly vague, circular, inconsistent, or in other ways unsatisfactory.

Hearn and Clatterbaugh are undoubtedly right: there are real difficulties in defining "masculinity" or "masculinities". These terms are certainly used in inconsistent ways by different authors. They are often used in ways that imply a simplified and static notion of identity, or rest on a simplified and unrealistic notion of difference between men and women. Social science has put a lot of effort into mapping masculinities as actual patterns of conduct or representation. But in the language of

the mythopoetic movement, "masculinity" stood for an ideal existence of men, or a deep essence within men, set against the disappointing empirical reality - and this is a usage that seems to have had more resonance outside the academy.

Hearn and Clatterbaugh are both inclined to drop the concept of masculinities because they think the real object of concern is something else - "men". If, as Clatterbaugh (1998: 41) puts it, "talking about men seems to be what we want to do", why bother to introduce the muddy concept of "masculinities" at all?

But then, why would we talk about "men" in the first place? To talk at all about a group called "men" presupposes a distinction from and relation with another group, "women". That is to say, it presupposes an account of gender. And whichever conceptual language we use, we need some way of talking about men's and women's involvement in that domain of gender. We need some way of naming conduct which is oriented to or shaped by that domain, as distinct from conduct related to other patterns in social life. Hence the need for a concept of "masculinities".

Under the influence of Foucault, a school of gender researchers has studied how discourses ranging from medicine to fashion have classified, represented and helped to control human bodies, emphasising how systems of knowledge function as part of an apparatus of power. The approach has been particularly fruitful in relation to sport, where the interweaving of cultural images of masculinity with the management and training of bodies has been powerfully effective (Rowe and McKay 1998).

Foucault's work on power/knowledge is employed by Petersen (1998) and Star (1999) as the basis for a tilt at the whole basis of research and analysis on masculinity. Implausibly claiming that masculinity research neglects power (which is, in fact, a central theme in the field), Petersen more accurately argues that much of the discussion of masculinity smuggles in a kind of gender-essentialism. Others too have noticed this: how the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" tends to become a fixed personality type, something like the once-famous "Type A personality". Given this tendency, all the objectionable things men do - rape, assault, environmental degradation, dog-eat-dog business practices, etc. - can be loaded into the bag of "hegemonic masculinity". And the more extreme this image becomes, the less it has to be owned by the majority of men.

But the broader critique of masculinity research for assuming fixed identities, or stability in masculinity, is not accurate. Research on the social construction of masculinities has placed a good deal of emphasis on the uncertainties, difficulties, and contradictions of the process (Messner 1992, Thorne 1993, Connell 1995a). Whether the outcomes are stable or unstable, mostly fluid or mostly fixed, is surely an empirical question, not one to be settled in advance by theory. To adopt a view of gender as only performance, identities as inherently fragmented and shifting, is to lose a great deal. Butler (1990), the main proponent of a "performative" account of gender, is strikingly unable to account for work, child care, institutional life, violence, resistance (except as individual choice), and material inequality. These are not trivial aspects of gender.

There are some cases, both in research and in practice (e.g. in work concerning domestic violence), where patterns of masculinity are quite tough and resistant to change (Ptacek 1988). There are other situations where masculinities are unstable, or where commitment to a gender position is negotiable. In the innovative educational work of Davies (1993), for instance, the way people are positioned within discourses of gender is something that children in school can learn about, and can learn to change. It is possible to teach this skill, to develop classroom exercises where it becomes visible and discussable. In quite practical ways Davies shows how both boys and girls can move into and out of a masculine identity or subject position.

Recognizing this possibility raises important questions about when, and why, people hold on to a certain subject position, adopt or reject the possibility of movement. The importance of material interests in accounting for men's gender conduct is forcibly argued by McMahon (1999) in a critique of journalistic, psychological and academic talk about the "new man" and the "new father". Much of this talk turns out to be fantasy; most men have little interest in changing the patterns of child care and housework.

The question of material interests and material practices has emerged in several recent contributions. Godenzi (2000), one of the few people to have offered a serious economic analysis of masculine practices, points to the diverse and sometimes indirect strategies by which men protect their interests in the face of challenges from women. Hearn (1996), like McMahon, emphasises the material interests at play in gender practice, and raises the politically vital question of what mechanisms bind men together as a group. Hearn's (1998b) research on men's violence to women is an important example of how material practices - indeed, practices addressed to bodies - can be linked to the construction of meaning, the making of ideology. Holter (1997) presents a sophisticated "social forms analysis", showing that gender, masculinity and femininity are historically specific features of social life. They arise not from a timeless dichotomy of bodies but from the specific course of development of the large-scale structures of modern society. The argument emphasises the role of institutions - the family, and the workplace under industrial capitalism - as keys to the problems of gender.

But we cannot now speak of "capitalism" without thinking of its global dimension, and this points to another important critique of research on masculinities. The "ethnographic moment" has been wonderfully productive, but gender relations themselves are no longer local. The history of imperialism and globalization means that to understand specific masculinities we must look to large-scale contexts, ultimately to global contexts.

Moodie's (1994) superb study of black labour in South African gold mining provides a classic demonstration of this point. The Witwatersrand gold mines, products of colonial settlement financed by metropolitan capital, employed a large black labour force supervised by whites. Initially most of these workers were peasant proprietors who migrated temporarily to the mining district, and used their wages to build up the resources to establish a peasant household. A particular pattern of masculinity was associated with this adjustment to the colonial economy, which gave a good deal of authority to the women back in the homeland, as economic partners,

and allowed the custom of "mine wives", i.e. homosexual and domestic relations with younger miners, as part of the accepted life of mineworkers. By the 1970s the old moral economy of the mines was breaking down. Peasant agriculture was becoming unviable, mining wages were rising, and a more urban workforce was recruited. The old pattern of black masculinity was now displaced by one associated with the process of proletarianization, and closer to the European-derived masculinity of the Afrikaner elite: vehemently heterosexual, more open to violence, treating women more as economic dependents, and more insistent on masculinity as bodily superiority.

What is shown in this specific case is broadly true. The development of global social structures has meant an interaction between the gender orders of colonizers and colonized, sometimes resulting in hybrid or novel gender patterns (Altman 1996). Globalization has, further, created new institutions which operate on a world scale, and which provide new arenas for the construction of masculinities: transnational corporations, global markets, global media, intergovernmental institutions.

In these complex and large-scale social processes new patterns of masculinity may emerge. I call these "globalizing masculinities", appearing as they do on a global stage, oriented to a global gender order. Within the contemporary world gender order, the emerging hegemonic form seems to be a masculinity based in multinational corporations and international capital markets, which I call "transnational business masculinity" (Connell 1998).

Briefly, the most powerful group of men in the world are transnational businessmen and the politicians, bureaucrats and generals associated with them. The masculinities of these milieux are historically based on the bourgeois masculinities of the rich countries (Roper 1994, Donaldson 1998, Wajcman 1999). But some new patterns seem to be emerging: a shift towards mobile career structures with very conditional loyalties; a personalized rather than dynastic approach to marriage; the abandonment of commitments to social responsibility through the welfare state or corporate welfare.

While the embodiment of transnational business masculinity has yet to be studied in detail, two points leap to the eye. One is the immense augmentation of bodily powers by technology (air travel, computers, telecommunications), making this to a certain extent a "cyborg" masculinity. The other is the extent to which international businessmen's bodily pleasures escape the social controls of local gender orders, as their business operations tend to escape the control of the national state; along with globalization of business has gone the rapid growth of an international prostitution industry.

## **5. Uses of social research on masculinities**

Social research is useful at three levels: increasing understanding, solving practical problems, and guiding long-term change.

A better understanding of masculinities and men's gender practices is worth having simply because gender is an important aspect of our lives. If we value living in knowledge rather than in ignorance, this is a significant subject for education, research and reflection. And if we are to think about it at all, we need to think about the whole of the gender equation and all the groups included in it. So there is a purely intellectual purpose for research that illuminates the lives of men and the forms and dynamics of masculinities.

There is also a hard practical purpose. Contemporary masculinities are implicated in a range of toxic effects. These include effects in the lives of men themselves: high levels of injury, such as those caused by road crashes (four times as high among young men as among young women, in Australia: Walker et al. 2000); patterns of ill health and mortality resulting from poor diet, drug abuse, inadequate use of health services (Schofield et al. 2000); high levels of victimization (men are the majority of victims of reported violence) and imprisonment (about 90% of prison inmates are men in countries like Australia and the USA); patterns of conflict among men that easily lead to violence (Tomsen 1997).

They also include toxic effects in the lives of others: rape and domestic violence against women, homophobic violence, racism (Hearn 1998, Tillner 1997). They include patterns which may link these two types of effects, such as closed horizons in education, i.e. the rejection by many boys of humanities as areas of study, and personal issues as topics of reflection (Martino 1994).

In dealing with these problems at a practical level, one is constantly led beyond the immediate situation; for instance, a campaign against men's violence against women is led towards issues of prevention as well as immediate response (Hagemann-White 1992). Research on masculinities may also be important in opening new possibilities in gender relations (Segal 1997).

Research on the multiple forms of masculinity, for instance, may help people to recognize the diversity of masculinities, the open-ended possibilities in gender relations - and thus to see alternatives for their own lives. Here masculinity research fruitfully interacts with research on more democratic family forms and workplaces, for instance Risman's (1998) study of "fair families" in the United States.

Studies of men and masculinities may also help to identify men's interests in change. There have been two polar positions here: the idea that men share women's interest in changed gender relations, and the idea that men as the dominant group have no interest in change at all. The real position is more complex. Men as a group gain real and large advantages from the current system of gender relations; the scale of this "patriarchal dividend" is indicated by the fact that men's earned incomes, worldwide, are about 180% of women's.

But some men pay a heavy price for living in the current system, as the observations just made on toxicity go to show. Particular men, or particular groups of men, share with certain women

and interest in social safety, in prevention of discrimination, in more inclusive and less hierarchical economies. It is possible to define, for many issues, bases for coalitions for change.

Many people think that activism around issues of masculinity must follow the model of feminism; that it requires a general "men's movement" mobilizing for gender reform. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Connell 1995b), there are reasons why this model might not be appropriate. Given both the material interests of men, and the hierarchy of masculinities, the democratic reconstruction of the gender order is more likely to divide men than to unite them (in gender terms).

Yet there are many arenas where reform of men's gender practices can be undertaken with some chances of success. Health is an important case. It is possible to pursue men's health programs as part of a "backlash" anti-feminist politics, competing for funding with women's health initiatives. But it is also possible to pursue health issues for men in cooperation with women's health initiatives, creating coalitions around shared interests in reducing violence, alcoholism, road trauma, and other toxic consequences of contemporary masculinities.

History is not a one-way street. Things can get worse, and in the growing gender disparities of the former communist countries, and the decline of the welfare state in the West, we see examples of decline not advance in gender equity. But a more democratic gender order is possible, and some groups of men are working towards it (Segal 1997, Pease 1997). If we are to realize democracy in the gender order, many men must share the burden, and the joy, of creating it.

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