

PART 1

**EXAMINING
MASCULINITIES**

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Debates about men, new research on masculinities

ISSUES ABOUT MEN AND BOYS

In recent years, questions about men and boys have aroused remarkable media interest, public concern and controversy.

In the United States two 'men's movements' gained large, if temporary, followings in the 1990s, one based on new-age therapy, the other on right-wing evangelism. Both raised questions about men's identity and offered remedies for troubles in men's lives. In other English-speaking countries such as Australia and Canada, where identity movements have been weaker, there have been vigorous and sometimes bitter public debates about men's violence, men's health and boys' supposed 'disadvantage' in education.

There is no doubt about the historical source of these debates. The new feminism of the 1970s not only gave voice to women's concerns, it challenged all assumptions about the gender system and raised a series of problems about men. Over the decades since, the disturbance in the gender system caused by the women's movement has been felt by very large numbers of men. A growing minority of men has attempted to grapple with these issues in practice or in the realm of ideas.

Concern with questions about boys and men is now worldwide. Germany has seen pioneering feminist research on men,

programs for male youth, and debates on strategies of change for men. There is an active network of researchers on men and masculinity in Scandinavian countries, where the post of Nordic coordinator for men's studies has recently been created. In 1998 Chile hosted a conference on masculinities in Latin America, which drew researchers and activists from as far apart as Brazil and Nicaragua.

In Japan there have been changes in media images of men, companionate marriages and shared child care, renegotiations of sexuality, and explicit critiques (by men as well as women) of traditional Japanese ideals of masculinity. A new 'men's centre' publishes papers and books exploring new patterns of masculinity and family life. In 1998 the South African feminist journal *Agenda* published an issue on new directions for men in the democratic transition after apartheid. In 1997 UNESCO sponsored a conference in Norway on the implications of male roles and masculinities for the creation of a culture of peace, which drew participants from all over Europe and some other parts of the world.

Concern with issues about masculinity has not only spread to many countries, but also into many fields. Health services are noticing the relevance of men's gender to problems such as road accidents, industrial injury, diet, heart disease and, of course, sexually transmitted diseases. Educators are discussing not just the idea of programs for boys, but also the practical details of how to run them. Criminologists have begun to explore why boys and men dominate the crime statistics, and violence prevention programs are taking increasing notice of gender issues.

Questions about men, boys and gender have thus ceased to be a specialist concern of a small group of intellectuals. They have moved into the public arena, and though media attention will wax and wane, there is no reversing that move.

So the intellectual debate on masculinity now has practical consequences. How we understand men and gender, what we believe about masculinity, what we know (or think we know) about the development of boys, may have large effects—for

good or ill—in therapy, education, health services, violence prevention, policing, and social services.

It matters, therefore, to get our understanding of these issues straight. We need to know the facts, connect policy debates with the best available research, and use the most effective theories. That is the principle on which this book is written.

Issues about masculinity are important but not easy. They are made no easier by the recent influence of a school of pop psychologists who offer a highly simplified view of the problems of men. Their central idea is that modern men are suffering from a psychological wound, being cut off from the true or deep masculinity that is their heritage. A whole therapeutic movement offers to heal the wound by re-establishing bonds among men, with initiation rituals, retreats etc.

The popularity of books like *Iron John* by Robert Bly, *Fire in the Belly* by Sam Keen and *Manhood* by Bly's Australian follower Steve Biddulph, suggests that they have tapped into some real problems, at least among the middle-class white men who are their main audience. I think the key point they have realized is the importance of men's emotional lives—which strikes many in this audience as a revelation, precisely because conventional middle-class western masculinity tends to suppress emotion and deny vulnerability.

To emphasize that men do have emotional troubles, that masculine stereotypes can be damaging, that men suffer from isolation, and that men too can hold hands and cry—this is not a bad thing. Writers like Keen, especially, have eloquent things to say about the distortions of men's emotional lives, and how they are connected with violence, alienation, and environmental destruction.

But in pop psychology these understandings come at a considerable price. With the aid of the later and crazier works of Carl Jung, this school of thought has constructed a fantasy of the universal 'deep masculine', which is as stereotyped as anything in Hollywood (and which is contradicted by actual research, as will be seen throughout this book). Trying to find cross-cultural proof of the deep masculine, Bly and his followers

raid non-western cultures for stories and symbols of masculinity which they rip out of context in a startling display of disrespect. The 'rituals' invented to fill the void in men's lives, though they can have an emotional impact, are as authentic as Disney World. Pop psychology itself rests on the authors' ability to tell persuasive and entertaining stories, not on their grasp of the facts. Some of the 'cases' in the American pop psychology literature about men are undoubtedly faked.

But the biggest problem of all in the pop-psychology approach to masculinity is its nostalgia, a persistent belief that solutions to the problems of men can be found by looking backwards. Pop psychology idealizes a pre-industrial past (a mythical one, in fact), when men knew how to be men, women knew how to be mothers, and there was no homosexuality or equal opportunity legislation to muddy the waters. Hence the weird result that pop psychologists' solution to the current problems of alienation and misunderstanding between men and women is often to argue for *more* gender segregation.

I was trained as a historian, I love studying the past, and I am confident that the human spirit is enriched by knowing the tumultuous path human society has travelled. But I also know that we cannot solve contemporary problems by nostalgia. We need new and more democratic patterns in gender relations, not re-runs of discredited patriarchies.

THE NEW SOCIAL RESEARCH ON MASCULINITY

To build a more civilized, more survivable, more just world is not a matter of wishful thinking. It is a difficult task, in which all the resources we can gather will be necessary. One of the more important of those resources is knowledge.

In grappling with problems about men, boys, and masculinity we have an important new resource, the social-scientific research on masculinities that has been building up over the past fifteen years or so.

This recent research has a pre-history, which goes back as far as Freud. From the beginning of the twentieth century,

psychoanalytic research has shown how adult personality, including one's sexual orientation and sense of identity, is constructed via conflict-ridden processes of development in which the gender dynamics of families are central (Lewes 1988). Psychoanalytic case studies showed men's character structures to be internally divided, even contradictory; and showed both masculinity and femininity as the product of psychological compromises, often tense and unstable (Chodorow 1994).

Some researchers—most famously the Frankfurt School in its studies of the 'authoritarian personality'—grafted a social analysis onto the psychoanalytic base. This work began to trace alternative paths of masculine development and to debate their role as underpinnings of democracy and fascism (Holter 1996). In due course feminist psychoanalysis picked up this form of argument, though focussing on patriarchy rather than class as the structural background (Dinnerstein 1976).

Psychoanalysis, however, was regarded with suspicion by many in the social sciences. Around the mid-century a different framework became more influential. The concept of 'social role', which developed in anthropology in the 1930s, became immensely popular as a common language for the social sciences. A social-psychological version of role theory was applied to gender, producing the idea of 'sex roles'.

Sex roles were understood as patterns of social expectation, norms for the behaviour of men and women, which were transmitted to youth in a process of 'socialization'. In effect, social behaviour was explained as a massive display of conformity—which somehow seemed appropriate in the 1950s. A great amount of thin paper-and-pencil research was produced around this idea. Nevertheless the idea of a 'male role' also led to some intelligent studies of changing gender expectations for men, and difficulties faced by men and boys in conforming to the norms (Hacker 1957).

In the 1970s the 'sex role' idea was radicalized by feminism. The idea of gender-as-conformity became an object of dismay rather than celebration. Feminist analysis of how women's sex role oppressed women soon led to a discussion, among both

feminist women and pro-feminist men, of the way men's sex role oppressed men.

This idea underpinned a burst of writing, even a small social movement, on the theme of men's liberation as a parallel endeavour to women's liberation (Pleck & Sawyer 1974). But it led to little new research beyond the existing conventions of paper-and-pencil masculinity/femininity scales. A vague concept of 'the male role' or 'men's role' persists in much recent talk and writing, but means little more than stereotypes or norms or even just sex differences.

In the 1980s a third approach to the gender of men matured, sometimes called social constructionism. Its main academic base is in sociology but there are vigorous branches in anthropology, history and media studies. Key intellectual underpinnings are the feminist analysis of gender as a structure of social relations, especially a structure of power relations; sociological concerns with subcultures and issues of marginalization and resistance; and post-structuralist analyses of the making of identities in discourse, and the interplay of gender with race, sexuality, class and nationality.

With ethnographic and life-history methods as key research techniques, in the last two decades there has been a cascade of studies of the social construction of masculinity in particular times and places. The locales include:

- a highland community in Papua New Guinea (Herdt 1981);
- a private school in inter-war England (Heward 1988);
- Hollywood films after the Vietnam war (Jeffords 1989);
- a high school in rural Texas (Foley 1990);
- a clergyman's family in nineteenth-century England (Tosh 1991);
- two body-building gyms in California (Klein 1993);
- a gold mine in South Africa under apartheid (Moodie 1994);
- an urban police force in the United States (McElhinny 1994);
- British industrial management (Roper 1994);
- official debates in colonial India (Sinha 1995);
- two gay communities in Australia (Dowsett 1996);
- the US Navy (Barrett 1996);

- drinking groups in Australian bars (Tomsen 1997);
- a US corporate office on the verge of a fatal decision (Messer-schmidt 1997);
- garages in an Australian working-class suburb (Walker 1998b).

We might think of this as the 'ethnographic moment' in masculinity research, in which the specific and the local is in focus. To say this is not to suggest the work lacks awareness of broader issues—Moodie's research on South African mining, for instance, is a classic study of the interplay of race, class and gender structures. Nor is ethnography, in the strict sense of anthropological field observation, its only method. Life-history studies are almost as common, and there are even some broad statistical surveys, especially in Europe (Holter 1989, Metz-Göckel & Müller 1985). The historical work of course uses archives, private letters, diaries and other documents as its sources.

There is, nevertheless, in most of this work a focus on the construction of masculinity in a specific setting, a concern to document and explain the particular patterns to be found in a definite locale.

The ethnographic moment brought a much-needed gust of realism to debates on men and masculinity, a corrective to the abstractions of role theory. This social research moved in a very different direction from the trend in popular culture at the same time, where vague discussions of men's sex roles were giving way to the mystical generalities of the 'mytho-poetic' movement and the extreme simplifications of religious revivalism.

KEY CONCLUSIONS OF RECENT RESEARCH

Though the rich detail of individual historical and field studies defies easy summary, certain empirical conclusions emerge from this body of research as a whole, which have more than local significance. I will present them here, as a general introduction to the field. These conclusions as a group are relevant to many practical problems, so I will refer back to this summary in a number of later chapters.

Multiple masculinities

It is clear from the new social research as a whole that there is no one pattern of masculinity that is found everywhere. We need to speak of 'masculinities', not masculinity. Different cultures, and different periods of history, construct gender differently.

There is now massive proof of this fact in comparative studies, especially ethnographies (e.g. Cornwall & Lindisfarne 1994). Striking differences exist, for instance, in the relationship of homosexual practice to dominant forms of masculinity. Some societies treat homosexual practices as a regular part of the making of masculinity (Herdt 1984); others regard homosexuality as incompatible with true masculinity.

We might therefore expect that in multicultural societies there will be multiple definitions and dynamics of masculinity. This proves to be true. The importance of ethnicity in the construction of masculinity is emerging strongly in recent work (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner 1994 [USA], Poynting et al. 1998 [Australia], Tillner 1997 [Austria]).

Diversity is not just a matter of difference between communities. Diversity also exists *within* a given setting. Within the one school, or workplace, or ethnic group, there will be different ways of enacting manhood, different ways of learning to be a man, different conceptions of the self and different ways of using a male body. This is particularly well documented in research on schools (Foley 1990), but can also be observed in workplaces (Messerschmidt 1997) and the military (Barrett 1996).

Hierarchy and hegemony

Different masculinities do not sit side-by-side like dishes on a smorgasbord. There are definite social relations between them. Especially, there are relations of hierarchy, for some masculinities are dominant while others are subordinated or marginalized.

In most of the situations that have been closely studied, there is some hegemonic form of masculinity—the most honoured or desired. For Western popular culture, this is

extensively documented in research on media representations of masculinity (McKay & Huber 1992).

The hegemonic form need not be the most common form of masculinity, let alone the most comfortable. Indeed many men live in a state of some tension with, or distance from, the hegemonic masculinity of their culture or community. Other men, such as sporting heroes, are taken as exemplars of hegemonic masculinity and are required to live up to it strenuously—at what may be severe cost, in terms of injury, ill health, and other constraints on life (Messner 1992). The dominance of hegemonic masculinity over other forms may be quiet and implicit, but may also be vehement and violent, as in the case of homophobic violence (Herek & Berrill 1992).

Collective masculinities

The patterns of conduct our society defines as masculine may be seen in the lives of individuals, but they also have an existence beyond the individual. Masculinities are defined collectively in culture, and are sustained in institutions. This fact was visible in Cockburn's (1983) pioneering research on the informal workplace culture of printing workers, and has been confirmed over and over since.

Institutions may construct multiple masculinities and define relationships between them. Barrett's (1996) illuminating study of the 'organizational construction' of hegemonic masculinity in the US Navy shows different forms in the different sub-branches of the one military organization.

This collective process of constructing and enacting masculinities can be traced in an enormous range of settings, from the face-to-face interactions in the classrooms and playgrounds of an elementary school (Thorne 1993) to the august public institutions of imperial Britain at the height of world power (Hearn 1992). In different historical circumstances, of course, different institutions will be more or less prominent in the construction of masculinity. The institutions of competitive sport seem peculiarly important for contemporary western masculinities (Whitson 1990).

Bodies as arenas

Men's bodies do not determine the patterns of masculinity, as biological essentialism and pop psychology would have it. Men's bodies are addressed, defined and disciplined (as in sport: Theberge 1991), and given outlets and pleasures, by the gender order of society.

But men's bodies are not blank slates. The enactment of masculinity reaches certain limits, for instance in the destruction of the industrial worker's body (Donaldson 1991). Masculine conduct combined with a female body is felt to be anomalous or transgressive, like feminine conduct combined with a male body. Research on gender crossing (Bolin 1988) shows that a lot of work must be done to sustain an anomalous gender.

Gender is the way bodies are drawn into history; bodies are arenas for the making of gender patterns. This was a point underplayed by 'male role' discussions, and is underplayed even in some of the more recent research. It is important, then, to register the importance of such processes as violence (Tomsen 1997) and body culture (Klein 1993) in the construction and politics of masculinities.

Active construction

Masculinities are neither programmed in our genes, nor fixed by social structure, prior to social interaction. They come into existence as people act. They are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given social setting.

Thus, the exemplary masculinities of sports professionals are not a product of passive disciplining. As Messner (1992) shows, they result from a sustained, active engagement with the demands of the institutional setting, even to the point of serious bodily damage from 'playing hurt' and accumulated stress. With boys learning masculinities, much of what was previously taken as 'socialization' appears, in detailed studies of schools (Thorne 1993, Walker 1988), as the outcome of intricate and intense manoeuvring in peer groups, classes and adult-child relationships.

Walker (1998a, 1998b), in a study of young working-class men and car culture, gives a striking example of the collective

construction of masculinities in adult peer groups. The friendship groups not only draw lines to fend off women's intrusion into masculine social space, but draw in a whole technology as part of the definition of masculinity.

Internal complexity and contradiction

One of the key reasons why masculinities are not fixed is that they are not homogeneous, simple states of being. Close-focus research on masculinities commonly identifies contradictory desires and conduct. A striking example, in Klein's (1993) study of bodybuilders, is the conflict between the heterosexual definition of hegemonic masculinity and the homosexual practice through which some bodybuilders finance the making of an exemplary body.

Psychoanalytic research on men has long been aware of contradictory desires and conduct, though the emphasis on this point has fluctuated. Recent psychoanalytic writing (Chodorow 1994, Lewes 1988) has laid some emphasis on the conflicts and emotional compromises within both hegemonic and subordinated forms of masculinity. Life-history research influenced by existential psychoanalysis (Connell 1995) has similarly traced contradictory projects and commitments within particular forms of masculinity.

In Chapter 5, I document some contradictions within the exemplary masculinity of a professional sportsman. Tomsen (1998) points to another example, the ambivalence in anti-gay violence, which helps to make such violence a systemic feature of contemporary Western life, not just a matter of individual pathology. Poynting et al. (1998) describe, for an ethnic minority, the contradiction between young men's claim to authority and their experience of subordination under the pressure of racism. Masculinities are often in tension, within and without. It seems likely that such tensions are important sources of change.

Dynamics

There is abundant evidence that masculinities do change. Masculinities are created in specific historical circumstances

and, as those circumstances change, the gender practices can be contested and reconstructed. Heward (1988) shows the changing gender regime of a boys' school responding to the changed economic and social strategies of the families in its clientele. Roper (1994) shows the displacement of a production-oriented masculinity among engineering managers by new financially oriented generic managers.

Since the 1970s the reconstruction of masculinities has been pursued as a conscious politics. Schwalbe's (1996) close examination of an American mythopoetic group shows the complexity of the practice and the limits of the reconstruction. In a very different context, a conscious reconstruction of gender practices is now on the agenda in southern Africa (Morrell 1998).

Yet the gender order does not blow away at a breath. Donaldson's (1998) study of ruling-class men shows a major reason why—the persistence of power and wealth, and the active defence of privilege. The eight 'men's movements' which Messner (1997) has traced in the United States have different, and sometimes sharply conflicting, agendas for the remaking of masculinity. The historical process around masculinities is a process of struggle in which, ultimately, large resources are at stake.

These emerging conclusions represent a major advance over earlier understandings of masculinity. They are, I think, the necessary starting point for all future work on problems about masculinity.

Nevertheless there are limits to what has been accomplished, and we still need to move forward. The descriptive work on masculinities must be thought through conceptually, and linked to a workable theory of gender. I will attempt this in Chapter 2, which discusses theories of masculinity and proposes a research agenda. A key argument is that the 'ethnographic moment' in masculinity research, just reviewed, needs to be supplemented by work on a larger scale. This problem is taken up in Chapters 3 and 4, which address issues about masculinities on the scale of world society.