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On masculinities: navigating the tension between individual and structural considerations

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In this short piece the author uses the recent publication of an edited collection, *Men, Masculinities and Intimate Partner Violence* (Gottzen et al, 2021) as a springboard to focus on the pertinent questions this raises within feminist academic, policy and practitioner work. This book highlights a greater awareness of the multiplicity of masculinities and the impact this is having on work in the domestic abuse sector, particularly in perpetrator interventions. Focusing on individual experiences of masculinity and associated traumas humanises perpetrators, but the risk is that it individualises abuse perpetration away from a structural understanding of patriarchy. This is a tension within the movement, which raises questions about how we seek to understand men's individual lives with respect, yet view masculinity through a feminist lens.

**Key words** masculinities • men • perpetrators • patriarchy • domestic abuse

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There is an increasing recognition in the gender-based violence field that constructions of masculinity directly affects men’s and boys’ lives, identities and experiences. A newly published collection, entitled *Men, Masculinities and Intimate Partner Violence* (Gottzen et al, 2021) brings together a diverse range of authors who open up the discussion of how we can give space for a deeper understanding of masculinities in relation to experiences of violence. A strength of this work is the multi-faceted approach taken; chapters home in on analysis of masculinities within violence prevention, victimisation and perpetration across the globe. The focus on masculinities goes deeper than an essentialist question of male prevalence of both victimisation and perpetration of abuse and instead scholars are starting to ask; what is it about masculinity itself which impacts on how men experience, perpetrate, recover and desist? How are men’s unique experiences fundamentally gendered? This edited collection draws on masculinity studies as a starting point but draws attention to the enduring gap in masculinity research to look at violence in intimate partnerships. Gottzén and colleagues (2021) note in their introduction that major masculinity journals have a notable gap in violence research, whereas gendered violence journals lack a masculinity lens. As noted by Hearn (2021) in the collection; ‘researching men’s violence in a profeminist way is difficult, methodologically, emotionally, politically’ (p 22). This collection attempts to close this gap by bringing together scholars who focus on this overlap. In this article I use this collection as a jumping off point to explore the tension between focusing
on masculinities in the context of abuse on an individual and structural basis and consider how the tension this creates can be reconciled. Alarming, as men’s individual experiences have become increasingly viewed through a masculinity lens, there has been an increasing reticence to frame violence (and subsequent treatment) in a way which is distanced from feminist and structural understanding of abuse. This leads us to the contentious point; how do we make space for individual masculine identities and male experience of intersectional oppressions, while maintaining a political standpoint on patriarchy in the context of gender-based violence?

The deconstruction of gender into performances is not a new one, it is part of a long conversation around ‘doing gender’ which has spanned across both gender studies, sociology and criminology for many years (Connell, 1987; 2005; West and Zimmerman, 1987; Messerschmidt, 2005). The deconstruction of a monolithic, singular conception of ‘masculinity’ and its replacement with understanding of plural ‘masculinities’ was largely down to the advance of the gay liberation movement. It was men in this movement who began to frame men’s experience of enacting oppression as well as experiencing it from other men (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The concept of a hierarchy of masculinities originated from homosexual men’s experiences of abuse, violence and prejudice from straight men. Within the concept of the hierarchy of masculinities the importance of the local context has been emphasised as important. Structured relations among various local masculinities exist in all local settings, which all aim to achieve a specific localised version of hegemonic masculinity. ‘Boys will be boys’ differently, contingent on their relative position in the wider social structure, which dictates their access to power and resources (Messerschmidt, 1994: 82). A distinction has been made in relation to multiple masculinities which moves away from the notion of hierarchy with hegemonic masculinity at the top, but instead urges the focus to be on the way that masculinities that men perform change through time during the life course (Goodey, 1997). As Javaid noted, ‘Masculinities are multiple, malleable, dynamic and contradictory’ (2021: 99). The move to focus on diverse localised masculinities has opened up a wider consideration of the existence of multiple and nuanced masculinities, which has been enriched by an understanding of intersectionality.

Exploring power and inequality is a complex and messy business, with individuals simultaneously having power over others, as well as having power exerted over them. This leads us to a further conundrum, which Crenshaw (1991) alerted us to through the conceptualisation of intersectionality. In short, not all men benefit from a patriarchal dividend in the same way (Connell, 2005). An intersectional lens is, as ever, pertinent in work with men on violence prevention (Boonzair et al, 2021; Flood, 2021; van Niekerk, 2021). The intersections of race, class, sexuality and gender identity all impact on the ways in which masculinity is experienced and the opportunities and limitations men face. As Boonzaier et al (2021) note, ‘Poor black men, as those who continue to be subordinated within a white, hetero-patriarchal, hypercapitalist system are constructed as the “threat”’ (p 53). Thus it is ever important to focus on the experiences of men who are ‘simultaneously subordinate and subordinated’ (p 61). Black and minoritised men are easy targets for a biased criminal justice system and are routinely cast in a way that makes their masculinities appear more dangerous and confrontational than white counterparts (Glynn, 2014). Intersectionality, as a core feminist theoretical approach needs to be applied in a way which enables us to see how men are also embedded within a web of constraints which are multi-faceted.
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and as nuanced as those with which we are used to viewing women. As Flood notes, ‘all men have “culture” and “ethnicity” and all men are located in multiple social relations, involving both privilege and disadvantage’ (2021: 163).

Within mainstream radical feminist thought there has been a longstanding tendency to essentialise men, with little space for masculinity as a distinct discussion (Berggren et al, 2021). Violence perpetration has often been presented as a binary: men as violent, women as victimised. This has been supported within a context of wider gender inequality and a strong evidence base showing men are predominantly the primary perpetrators in gender-based violence (Hester, 2013). However, there has been an increased focus on the nuanced grey area, which is that many men who harm have been harmed and the victim/perpetrator dichotomy is too simplistic. Gadd focused on masculinity in order to explore the differences between young men, some of whom were violent while others were not. They urged academics to look at the nuanced area between the opposites of victim and perpetrator, agent and victim. Gadd et al (2015) conducted a multi-faceted study into the experiences of young men who had perpetrated or been victimised themselves by domestic violence and abuse (DVA). Academics were asked to neither ‘demonise those young men whose conduct problems lead to exclusion and criminalisation nor idealise them as vulnerable children whose brave resilience represents only a remarkable resolution to tragic circumstances’ (Gadd et al, 2015: 127). Understanding and working with problematic and abusive masculinities is surely key to violence prevention work.

There has been a research trajectory in focusing on not just hegemonic masculinities, but also the inversion of this: the coexistence of vulnerable masculinities (Glynn, 2014; Deuchar, 2018; Maguire, 2019; Levell, 2020). Vulnerability can be an expression of harm and hurt among men, but can also be a key driver for violence perpetration itself (Berggren et al, 2021). Therein lies a conundrum: to understand that violence and vulnerability are two sides of the same coin. To explore this can be a humanising process whereby the traumatic experiences of men and boys are brought to the fore. This aspect has been sorely left out of historical feminist approaches which instead sought to essentialise male bodied people as structural oppressors no matter what. I note from my own research (Levell, 2020) into childhood victims of domestic abuse who later become gang-involved, that a nuanced and broader approach to understanding violent experiences is vital both to violence prevention strategies, and a broader understanding that not all victims under the umbrella of ‘violence against women and girls (VAWG)’ are female. This is particularly important in the case of experiences of childhood domestic abuse and sexual exploitation. The ‘adverse childhood experience (ACE)’ literature has been part of driving forward an awareness of multiple disadvantage and adversity on young lives. The impact the ACEs and risk factor framework has had on the support sector, including youth offending, has been vast in recent years (Almuneef et al, 2017; McGavock and Spratt, 2017; Lacey and Minnis, 2020). However, there are increasing calls for an ACE framework to be used in a more nuanced way, highlighting the potential for the ACE checklist to be used in a reductionist and over-simplistic way to denote determinism and stigma (Lacey and Minnis, 2020; Case, 2021). Ultimately, organising people into categories of victimisation and perpetration without an understanding of the complex overlaps is limiting.

The move to analysis of masculinities is welcome. Walby et al (2014) focused on the way in which gender-based violence has historically been annexed within
criminological studies of violence, as has explorations of gender. They noted that research into DVA and gendered violence has developed separately from mainstream disciplines which has impacted on the way in which the issue of gender in violence has been annexed from the main debates in sociology and criminology. Criminological investigations into violence often focus on the criminality of acts, rather than analysing the underlying context, gender and motivations, which leaves DVA unexamined. They noted that gender is notable for its absence in mainstream criminological texts which is ill-integrated if present (Walby et al, 2014: 191). However, we are increasingly arriving at a point in which the balance is tipping the other way, with perpetrator services now looking to understand the nuances of violent men’s lives to an extent which is producing a reticence in labelling DVA perpetration within a structural feminist approach (Gottzen et al, 2021).

Hester and Newman (2021) point out that we are now seeing an increasing move away from a structural understanding of DVA as both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Instead there is a shift towards an individual medicalised model – where men’s experiences are individually pathologised and their own ACEs and trauma are the focus. We have already seen in Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service perpetrator programmes distancing themselves from the Duluth model of DVA, instead drawing on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), a biopsychosocial (biological, psychological and social factors) change model and desistance theory (HMPPS, 2019). However they have not undertaken an evidence based review on the success of this approach as compared to their prior work with a feminist standpoint (HMPPS, 2019). In a systematic review of a range of European domestic violence perpetrator programmes by Akoensi and colleagues (2013) they looked at a range of programmes which were pro-feminist and psychoeducational but concluded that there is insufficient data on differences in effectiveness between the two. In a recent review of DVA perpetrator services in the UK, Bates and colleagues (2017) found that the feminist approach was still very influential in voluntary programmes but that CBT approaches were gaining popularity. They noted that one key concern of many practitioners was the way that the Duluth model rendered female, same-sex and trans perpetrators less visible or catered for. To address this they recommended departing from a feminist model entirely, calling it an ‘ideological and inappropriate model’ and recommending a move away from a feminist gendered analysis, suggesting instead the adaptation of existing intervention models for violence offenders applied to the domestic violence context (Bates et al, 2017: 27). However in the Project Mirabel review of perpetrator work, Kelly and Westmarland (2015) note that the critique of a profeminist approach being ‘ideological and inflexible’ originates from simplistic accounts of gender which focus on the sex differences of perpetrators rather than a nuanced understanding of gender as a social practice. These competing discourses on the role of gender in domestic abuse typifies the tension between viewing it as an individualised or structural gender-inequality issue.

In the Duluth model, as discussed previously, DVA is situated as a cause and consequence of gender inequality, with patriarchal power structures centralised. This is in contrast to the psychosocial focus which is the alternative offer discussed earlier. Taking a psychosocial approach within criminology has been accused of, ‘going too far in sympathising with the perpetrators, thus excusing their behaviour and moving the focus away from the harm they cause’ (Berggren et al, 2021: 43). Hester and Newman (2021) highlighted that the discernible shift towards the focus on the
mental state of the perpetrators has occurred concurrent with a lens of ‘treatment’ rather than punishment. This led them to conclude that, ‘we have ended up with programmes that may be more tailored to individual men’s needs, but that perhaps may ignore the wider contexts of gendered inequality and power over women that sit at the root of IPV’ (Hester and Newman, 2021: 151).

The move away from a focus on structural inequality was echoed in Bob Pease’s (2019) book Facing Patriarchy, where he critiqued the increasing corporatisation of the violence against women sector, noting that it has caused a ‘deradicalization of feminism and gender analyses, strategies for engaging men that overemphasise reconstructing masculinity rather than challenging patriarchy, a “not all men” refrain from so-called “good men”, and a greater acceptance of anti-feminist backlash politics within the mainstream’ (Pease, 2019: 5).

Pease makes a case for a recentring of the language of ‘patriarchy’ in order to fully convey the fundamental gender inequality that is at the core of gender-based violence. To not problematise abuse in this way risks the ‘colonisation’ of GBV discourse by more traditional political thought (p 63). This was also discussed by Blais (2021), who focused on the impasse which has been created by masculinist discourses which are motivated by active antifeminist motives. There is a grave risk that an enhanced focus on masculinities could be co-opted by organisations who wish to centre the individualised experiences of men outside the lens of wider structural gender inequalities. This has led to attempts to downplay or neutralise the role of gender in abuse, coined by Eaton (2018) as ‘Whataboutery’. This is where the insistence of the inclusion and consideration of men’s experiences has been driven by an urge to ‘derail’ women’s organising on gender-based violence and to instead centre men’s experiences (Eaton, 2018: 394). We need to find a way forward whereby an understanding and appreciation of masculinity as an axis of both privilege and struggle is used in a way that is united and complementary to the wider movement to end gender-based violence.

Ultimately, we are in a moment where humanising men through understanding their own experiences of masculinities within a patriarchal system is gaining prominence in shaping violence prevention work. However, this has not occurred within a vacuum, but rather in a global context where there is also an ongoing and increasing corporatisation and gender-neutralisation of the DVA sector and its ideals. As DVA policy becomes mainstream, along with broad individualised ‘treatment’ programmes for domestic abuse, for instance, it risks an overall de-politicisation of the very behaviour it seeks to address. This leaves the sector with many fundamental questions: how do we understand and deal with masculinity sensitively and yet reconcile this with a feminist framework? How do we widen access and participation to perpetrator services (increasingly pertinent with the rise of voluntary provision due to a largely ineffective criminal justice response) without diluting the core function of holding perpetrators to account? Ultimately, how do we be sympathetic and understanding of men’s limiting and pressurised experiences of masculinity yet also offer support in a context which frames their experiences in the context of the patriarchal dividend yet grounding this in intersectional practice? How do we appreciate men’s struggles without derailing women’s? These are pertinent questions for both the academic, policy and practitioner sectors to grapple with going forward.
Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References


