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# 11. Men, Masculinity and Social Work

John Bates and Neil Thompson

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## Introduction

In this chapter we explore the role of men as clients, carers, social workers and managers as well as men as part of the solution to the problem of gender-based discrimination and oppression. For many years now the importance of gender as a factor in social work has been recognised within the UK literature. However, the main focus has understandably been on women and femininity. Here we seek to balance matters out to a certain extent by focusing primarily on men and masculinity. This is not intended to undermine the attention given to issues of women and femininity, but rather to broaden the debate so that we can begin to work towards a fully holistic picture of the issues that affect both men and women in the social work world.

Our aim is not to provide a definitive statement relating to men in social work, but rather to present a number of points and arguments which, it is to be hoped, will encourage further debate, study and analysis.

## Men as clients

It has long been recognised that the vast majority of users of social services are women. However, we should not forget that a significant proportion of social work's clients are men. This leads us to pose the question as to whether we need a different approach in working with men. For example, Mullender (1996) asked whether one of the main reasons why men feature so little in social work is that their needs are not met by an approach that is geared primarily towards the needs of women. Feminism quite correctly placed women at the heart of the social work agenda, and it has been remarkably successful in developing services for women over the last few decades. Rape Crisis, Women's Aid plus numerous smaller but influential pressure groups and service providers have changed the landscape for

women service users and indeed the thinking and teaching of social work academics. Although it has been a momentous struggle, feminist social workers and their supporters have had their work recognised as 'woman-centred' practice which has been incorporated into mainstream social work and social work education (Hanmer and Statham, 1999). However, one outcome of this development may be the:

*... uncomfortable implications ... that men's behaviour may have gone unchecked and that we may have played a part in reinforcing stereotypes about women's caring role within the family and within the social welfare net.*

(Cavanagh and Cree, 1996, p5)

Another implication is that the focus on feminist social work has meant a paucity of serious discourse about men as recipients of services. This has its dangers, as the vacuum may well be filled by either anti-feminist literature and practices ultimately so damaging to men and women alike or by an analysis which sees the problem as the responsibility of one gender or another. The questions for both men and women practitioners are: How do we work with men? How do we construct an intervention that acknowledges the damage that patriarchal social relations inflict on both men and women? Although men's experience of gender oppression can never be equated with that of women, men too are casualties of patriarchal myths and stereotypes (Thompson, 1995).

Masculinity is an overlapping and complex knot of socially constructed expectations that shape how men are expected to behave (norms) and how they should think (attitudes). One example of this is the reluctance of men to ask for, and accept help. A factor that is well documented in the literature (Bowl, 2001). We may theorise that this relates to patterns of upbringing in which, amongst other things, men are socialised into roles of protector and

breadwinner. Such roles are not easily compatible with the notion of asking for help or accepting it when it is offered. This can lead to a number of problems for men for example, in not asking for help in the early stages of the problem. Intervention at a later stage may be much less likely to be effective because matters have developed to such an extent that helping becomes far more difficult. This is a parallel with health care matters where reluctance on the part of men to ask for help with their health problems may lead to many men reaching a position where their illness is no longer treatable because medical intervention has begun at too late a stage in the development of the disease process (Luck *et al.*, 2000). Male pride, as a feature of socialisation into masculine patterns of behaviour, can therefore be seen as something that can lead to critical, life or death situations, with many men suffering as a result of their socially defined attitudes towards help and assistance.

It is also important to note that the range of problems men face is likely to be different from those that women encounter in their day-to-day lives. While many of the underlying causes will often be similar (for example, poverty and deprivation), there are also likely to be significant differences because of the ways in which men and women operate differently within the social structure. For example, men's roles, not only in the world of work, but also in the domestic sphere of the family, show significant differences in terms of socially constructed expectations of the respective genders.

The reluctance of men to explore and articulate their feelings or acknowledge their vulnerability is well established (Seidler, 1994; Thompson, 1997). For many women the lack of emotional closeness with their partner can be seen as the prime cause of difficulties within their relationship (Hite, 1987). One of the basic, socially constructed qualities of 'masculinity' is being in control of not only oneself, but also of other people and things, thus exposing vulnerability becomes a challenge to the very nature of what it is to be a man (Bates, 1997). Emotional tenderness therefore exposes a man's vulnerability to ridicule or exploitation, thereby creating obstructions to the development of meaningful relationships with

other men and women. In other words, men cultivate the carapace of 'hardness', often with disastrous consequences for them and those around them. Masculinity provides a sense of wholeness or, as Giddens (1993) describes it, 'ontological security'. If, during times of acute stress, this sense of who we are becomes challenged or confronted, then the obvious option is to retire behind masculine excesses. If the oft-stated message to young boys in pain is not to cry, as big boys don't do that, the options are to stop feeling or to find other ways of expressing pain and distress (Riches, 2002). When that command comes from the same person who earlier 'kissed it all better', it is little wonder the confusing messages to little boys and young men comes back to haunt us all.

Many writers have pointed out the cost of maintaining this masculine persona and have emphasised the heavy burden of being able to express only a restricted range of feelings, of living in a world of distorted relationships, emotional illiteracy and distant communicating (Bowl, 1985; Harris and Sullivan, 1988; Thompson, 1997, 2001). One outcome of this is an inability to see when things are beginning to go wrong, perhaps exacerbated by the illusion of a trouble-free, compensatory home life. As Tolson argues:

*More often, deeply troubled masculine feelings are swept away by feminine tension management and the cost of harmony in the home can be a masculine superficiality towards feelings in general, in relationships within the family, and in a man's relationship with himself.*

(Tolson, 1977, p70)

This, of course, can then spill over into a reluctance to seek help when overcome with stress. In this regard, Busfield (1998) shows that the experiences of mental health problems are very different between men and women. Women are far more likely to experience depression than men, but men are likely to encounter other disorders at a higher rate than women. Men are also, on average, likely to have less social support than women. Of course, this is not to say that men are more deserving of help than women, but simply that their needs are likely to be different, and therefore need to

be addressed in a different way if we are not to make the mistake of oversimplifying the complex realities of men's lives and the problems that they face. For example, by returning to one of our earlier themes (that of emotional hardness and the high cost of this in terms of men's inability to make and sustain close relationships), we can recognise that holding out unrealistic expectations of men's abilities to assume greater responsibility for acts of caring is simply setting them up to fail. That failure may then rebound on them, and their families. We need to acknowledge that there is a much bigger project waiting, in the retraining of men to ensure that they can fulfil the roles required to challenge gender oppression. Otherwise, as Chesler (1990) points out: 'The disconnected men who have been socialised to reproduce sexism are the very men whom feminists have been calling upon to participate equally in child care' (cited in Richard-Allerdyce, 1994, p3). Change will be slow, but at least by recognising that there is a problem within traditional masculinity, we might be able to start redressing it. This is a theme to which we shall return below.

In addition, we need to consider the fact that, in many social work situations, men are considered to be problems in their own right, rather than people who have problems. That is, in many situations the problems that women and children encounter are as a result of the behaviour of some men. For example, although it is now established that many women do indulge in child abuse (Blues et al., 1999; Cawson et al., 2000), it remains the case that the vast majority of child abuse perpetrators are men. Similarly, while women may at times become violent towards their male partners, the issue of domestic violence remains primarily that of men being violent towards their female partners (Mullender, 1996). A clear danger to avoid here is that of demonising men, that is, seeing them primarily as sources of problems, rather than looking at the wider context with its many levels. For example, we need to enrich our understanding of the impact of socialisation and the stereotyping of men by engaging in the complex discourses around male identity as just one illustration. It has been argued that male identity is inherently unstable, being built around elements of masculinity that are themselves

oppressive (Jackson, 1982; Bowl, 1985; Thompson, 1995):

*The centrality of competitiveness, competence, aggression and objectification creates a masculinity characterised by anxiety and instability. Failure to impress, compete or acknowledge competence particularly in areas of sexuality may well lead to inadequacies and fears which, not surprisingly, can then be projected onto women and children.*

(Bates, 1997, p220)

We have to avoid the extremes of oversimplification. At one extreme, it would be naïve indeed not to recognise that the behaviour of some men is at times extremely problematic. However, we should not go to the opposite extreme of automatically seeing men as problems. This question of reductionism is one that has haunted work relating to anti-discriminatory practice in general and anti-sexist practice in particular. It is therefore a mistake that we are very keen to avoid here.

## Men as carers

Although there is little doubt that the world of caring is predominately a female world brought about by the socialisation of children into the traditional patterns of thought, behaviour and language which include the expectation of the woman as the 'natural' carer (Hanmer and Statham, 1999), we should not allow this to lead us into neglecting those men who do act as carers. Although in a minority, men are none the less a significant body of carers (Bowl, 2001). While research has shown that men as carers will often receive additional support compared with the levels of support offered to women, this remains a complex situation (Fisher, 1994). While not wishing to support an unequal distribution of support services between men and women we would wish to draw attention to the more complex problems related to the allocation of services and support to informal carers.

First, we would wish to return to the point made earlier relating to men's reluctance to accept help. It can be argued that women in general have many years' experience of

supporting and being supported which is something that is not always the same pattern for men. Men will often find it difficult to swallow their male pride and accept help. We therefore have a complex situation in which men as carers are more likely to be offered help, but also ironically are more likely to decline it, or are less likely to seek out such help in the first place. We should also recognise that the type of support that men need is likely to be different. For example, research undertaken by Lund and Caserta (2001) shows that men and women who had been bereaved as the result of the death of their partner experienced different problems because of their different lack of skills, that is, women found it difficult to cope without their husbands because there were skills and tasks which were performed by their husbands which they did not know how to complete themselves. On the other side of the coin, the men who had lost their wives also found it difficult to cope because of the absence of the practical skills that their wives had practised prior to their death. Concrete examples of this would be men finding it difficult to deal with day-to-day matters such as cooking, operating the washing machine and so on, while women in many cases had no idea about their financial position, insurance arrangements and so on, because these had, over the years, been dealt with by their husbands. The argument we would therefore wish to put forward is not that men or women should be regarded as more or less skilled, but rather that the allocation of skills and knowledge relating to practical matters within the household tend to be distributed according to gender. This means that, where people are in need of support, it is likely to be along gender lines. In view of this, those people offering support and services to carers should be careful to ensure that they do not:

- (a) Offer more support to men simply because they feel that men are less competent than women in household tasks and more in need of support.
- (b) Should not assume that both men and women will require the same type of support. What is clearly called for is an accurate assessment of specific needs, rather than generalised assumptions based on gender stereotypes.

## Men as social workers

Given that the vast majority of social workers are women and that social work, along with the other caring professions, is generally seen as 'women's work' (Davis, 1997), it is not surprising that men in social work are often viewed with suspicion.

Such suspicion tends to fall into three main categories. First, men may be seen as ambitious and only spending time in practice as a short stepping stone to the level of management and policy making. Second, men in social work may be seen as 'failures as men', that is, they may be seen as people who are not capable of getting work deemed more suitable for men. They are seen as not being real men, too weak and incompetent to do 'proper' men's work. This fear is well exemplified by Savage writing of the male nurse who:

*... is emasculated by taking on 'women's work' in which he is expected to demonstrate 'feminine qualities' such as caring and gentleness and in which, at least to begin with, he will be subordinate to women. And if his masculinity is in question, so too is his sexuality.*

(Savage, 1987, p76)

Third, men may be mistrusted because they are seen as people who wish to exploit their position, for example, in relation to children. This may be linked to stereotypes and discriminatory assumptions about gay men; the assumption is that gay men are a threat to children (Ruxton, 1992). Alternatively, there is the fact that child care is seen as a gendered occupation and, as such, largely the preserve of women which presents immediate tensions for men who enter it. Murray (1996) suggests that, in analysing the experiences of men in child care, we are 'more likely to reveal constructions of gender that may otherwise be obscured' (p1).

In view of the above, we need to ask the main question, namely: Can men be trusted as social workers? Hicks gives an example of this from his own practice:

*Many of the women, mothers of the children with whom I worked, told me that they were not used to men who did child care, or*

*actively listened to them. Instead, often the women themselves were the survivors of men's sexual, physical or emotional violence. They had every reason to distrust me as a man, and to distrust me with their children. However, I believe that my statements of 'outrage' and their violent treatment by other men, by declared opposition to such violence, and my re-framing of the abuse as being a consequence of men's violence, helped us to build a working and trusting social work relationship.*

(Hicks, 2001, p50–1)

This passage shows that men as social workers can overcome such mistrust and suspicions. However, as Hicks makes clear, it is necessary to do a lot of groundwork to be able to get past such problems. In many aspects of social work at least, men start from a disadvantage, in so far as they have to prove themselves as genuine carers in order to overcome the stereotypical assumptions about their role in social work. Another danger is to see men in children's services social work as the strong, masculine father figure. NCH research noted that some male workers felt that, on occasions, they had been pushed into acting as project 'policeman': 'They didn't want me because they wanted a caring man; they wanted me primarily as a strong disciplinarian father figure' (unnamed source quoted in Ruxton, 1993, p21). This 'disciplinarian father' is the very figure that causes so many problems and so much distress for women and children, and so it is vital that it is not recreated in a different guise.

Another issue relating to the potential or actual role of men as social workers relates to the matter of women's predominance within the social work world: i.e., given that the majority of social work clients are women, are men in a position to understand their perspective and their view of the world? This is a complex question, and so it is important to avoid simplistic responses. Sibeon (1991) introduces the concept of 'insiderist epistemology'. What he means by this rather strange-sounding term is the view that one has to have a particular experience in order to be able to understand that experience e.g. only women can understand women's problems; only black

people can understand black people's problems, and so on. While this argument has some degree of validity, there is also a danger of taking it too far. The naive assumption that being a woman *per se* gives insight into the intricacies of gender oppression has the risky potential of shifting the responsibility onto the victim. If we extend its argument to its logical extremes, no one would be able to work with another person, unless matched with that person in terms of their experience across a number of dimensions. Clearly this would be immensely complex and unworkable. It also misses the point of practising within an anti-discriminatory framework. The issue of fighting, and ultimately banishing, sexism has to be a joint project between men and women. What is required is the skill and flexibility to be able to make the effort to understand another person's perspective, to empathise with that person and to take on board what they are saying about their situation, their experiences and their feelings. While it can be argued that women are generally much better at such tasks than men, we should not allow ourselves to be led into making the mistake of assuming that men are therefore not capable of being empathic listeners and thus not able to be competent social workers.

## Men as managers

In recent years, authors such as Adams (1998) have been very critical of what they term 'managerialism'. This term refers to the process by which managers have amassed more and more power in organisations, giving less voice to their employees. In some respects this is a paradoxical development, as it has occurred in tandem with an emphasis on the notion that an organisation's most important asset is its people – its human resource. One distinct characteristic of managerialism is that it has emphasised what can be regarded as masculine qualities. For example, in recent years there has been a development of a strong emphasis on numerical indict – that is, a focus on counting and measuring and being able to justify decisions and the use of resources in statistical terms. This has paralleled the emphasis on evidence-based practice, a notion which has become more and more influential as

a result of its predominance in medicine and related occupations (Sheldon and Chilvers, 2000). The idea behind evidence-based practice is that whatever actions are taken, the person taking that action should be in a position to justify his or her practice on the basis of evidence or research to demonstrate the effectiveness of such steps. In management terms this has led to a very strong emphasis on such matters as performance indicators, targets and the importance of quantitative measures (Adams, 1998; Coulshed and Mullender, 2001).

The rise of managerialism as an approach to local government has led to a number of criticisms across public services generally and in social work in particular. These criticisms hinge on the argument that an overemphasis on statistical data and hard evidence fails to take account of the more human side of caring and supporting people through difficulties (Jordan, 2000). It has, therefore, been argued that the heart has gone out of social work as a result of this masculine tendency towards being able to account for everything in statistical terms. Some have argued that one of the main reasons for the development of managerialism has been the predominance of men in management positions. That is, while, as mentioned earlier, the majority of social work clients and indeed of social work personnel are female, the majority of managers are male. The argument, therefore, is that an over representation of men at the management level leads to typically masculine concerns being given considerable attention, while the more typically feminine concerns have to take a back seat. It is again ironic that such developments should take place in contexts of growing recognition in the management literature that women have an important part to play in management because of their generally less confrontational and more co-operative approach (Newman, 1995; Coulshed and Mullender, 2001). That is, women's recognised greater level of skill at an interpersonal level, greater ability to be able to listen and communicate effectively at various levels can be recognised as key management skills. However, traditionally these skills have been devalued in management with greater focus given to more executive concerns which are typically seen as being within the male domain.

An important conclusion to draw here, therefore, is that men in management positions need to look very carefully at the role they are adopting to ensure that they are not slotting into masculine stereotypes, that is, that they are not falling into the rut of assuming a managerialist statistical position without taking account of the more human side of the organisation in which they work, and the people that the organisation is intended to serve. Clearly what is called for here is a balance in which the need for evidence-based practice is not fulfilled at the expense of recognising the other more complex needs within the human services in general and social work in particular.

## **Men as part of the solution**

Bryson (1999) distinguishes between two main perspectives on the role of men in challenging sexism. First she quotes Hester (1984, p33): 'Whatever activities an anti-sexist man becomes involved in, and whatever opinions he chooses to hold as an anti-sexist man it appears that the motivation is egotistical and for his own enhancement' (p198–9).

However, she then goes on to counterbalance this by stating that other feminists argue that:

*... the analysis of men's patriarchal power cannot be so simple. Rather, it involves complex issues of structure and agency through which it may be possible to distinguish between male power and male persons, and to understand that the former is socially constructed rather than embodied in all biological men. Such an approach makes it possible to oppose patriarchy without assuming that all men are necessarily immune to the considerations of justice, denying the very possibility of non-exploitative relationships with men, or treating all forms of male support as automatically suspect. As such it can appear to provide a comfortable solution for the majority of feminists, who continue to have personal, working and political relationships with men.*

(Bryson, 1999, p199).

We have argued elsewhere that the challenging and ultimate elimination of sexism as an

ideology has to be a joint project (Thompson and Bates, 1997). Our starting point is well exemplified by Mason and Mason (1990): 'We believe that patriarchy damages men's quality of life as well as women's, that it constrains men rather than enabling them to develop' (p210).

For social work education, the training of future social workers allows one opportunity to begin the process of engaging men in the struggle. Current social work training programmes can provide an opportunity for exploring the nature of masculinity in particular and the gendered approach to social work in general. As men teachers of social work we have for many years attempted to produce a curriculum that places anti-discriminatory practice at the very core of everything we do, with anti-sexist teaching central to every element of the programme. As Mullender (1996) points out, the big danger of patriarchal thinking is that it not only pervades all of society's thinking but extends to 'professional thinking in numerous direct and indirect ways' (p37). For example, there exists a wealth of teaching and learning opportunities for social workers to begin to understand and make sense of this complex discourse. The Cleveland Report (1988) could be read as a straightforward account of a child care disaster but a closer analysis reveals a language that supports Mullender's earlier contention: 'The mythical "traditional" family, and by implication the role of the father within this – the father as patriarch – is defended' (Nava, 1992, p150).

Using social work reports can also enhance the sensitivity of men social workers to their use of language and the potential for collusion with male clients. This approach can encourage male social workers to challenge language in reports and case studies that minimises the oppression and violence of women by, for example, exploring phrases like 'marital dispute' or 'relationship problems'. Farmer and Owen (1998) report on the gendered nature of professional responses and how, for example, language can obscure the real story behind a situation. They observed a particular process when a male worker became strongly identified with the father's view of the situation under investigation, siding with his perspective that

the children were disobedient and failed to take action when the children were beaten: 'The father's abuse was reconstructed as discipline, albeit occasionally excessive' (p555).

The establishment of men's groups on training programmes can also allow opportunities for men social workers to engage in debates and discourses about the very nature of masculinity. Men's groups can allow the free exploration of such issues as 'emotional hardness' and how emotions in men have become a 'no go area' where feelings like tenderness, compassion and humanity become 'off limits'. By giving permission to put them back 'on limits' negative characteristics like competence, competitiveness, dominance and aggression can be replaced by nurturing, patience, sensitivity and kindness as *acceptable* attributes for men to aspire to. Themes for discussion like Segal's powerful quotation can also provide opportunities for men to explore normally forbidden territory:

*... there has always been a close link between misogyny and homophobia in our culture ... although the persecution of homosexuals is most commonly the act of men against a minority of other men, it is also the forced repression of the 'feminine' in all men. It is a way of keeping men separated off from women, and keeping women subordinate to men.*

(1994, p16).

We have also used techniques whereby identical case studies were given to men's and women's groups, with the result that the very different conclusions and recommendations allowed a much more profound debate as to how responses to problems are constructed. For example, using child protection case studies in this way allows trainee workers to challenge many current child protection practices which seek to make women responsible for the offending behaviour of men.

There is little hope for the future if we fail to engage men in the struggle, or simply see men social workers, clients, managers and students as people to blame. Changing men is a joint venture that, by its very nature, will be slow and problematic but, by engaging with them and attempting to demonstrate that traditional



masculinity is as damaging for them as it is for women, progress can be made. For men in social work it is vital that they address their own sexism and deal with it as not only a prerequisite to successful practice as a social worker, but also as a creative ally in the struggle against discrimination and oppression. What is needed is a desire by both men and women to see the world anew by engaging together in a fresh, invigorating debate which constructs a social work that embraces the changes already established and pushes back even further the limiting experiences of gender stereotyping.

*To be responsible inventors and discoverers, though, we need the courage to let go of the old world, to relinquish most of what we have cherished, to abandon our interpretations about what works and what doesn't work. As Einstein is often quoted as saying: 'No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew'.*

(Wheatley, 1994, p5)

## Conclusion

The issue of men, masculinity and social work is clearly a complex one. Much has been written about the role of women in social work, with relatively little attention given to men and the role they can play for good or ill. It is to be hoped that, in this chapter, we have enabled the reader to see the broader picture, to be able to recognise that simplistic assumptions about men and women have no place in a sophisticated analysis of the underpinnings of effective social work practice.

It is unfortunate that much of the literature relating to gender and social work has tended to oversimplify matters. Our aim here is not to present a full analysis of the issues, for that would leave us open to the charge of oversimplifying. Instead what we have more realistically attempted to achieve in this chapter is an outline of the broad range of issues that need to be considered in more depth. It is to be hoped that this chapter can pave the way for further research, further debate and a greater awareness of the complexities of the issues involved.

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