



'You Sure Aren't a Real Man!' Space, Power, and Possibilities for Men in Social Care and Gender Studies

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"The way you talk about listening to women, and supporting feminism, you must be a faggot. You sure aren't a real man!" (Kimmel, 1998, p.60)

Introduction

I am a 'pro-feminist masculinist'. I always received laughs whenever I introduced myself as such in some of my graduate classes in Gender and Development Studies at The University of the West Indies at Mona. The chuckles were however not uninformed and as the only male in the class for most of the courses, I was accepted in this new socio-academic category which I had carved out for myself. As a social work practitioner at the community level, the response was never quite the same whenever I declared I was supportive of feminism. In all fairness, in my professional life, I have less declared myself a pro-feminist than a feminist, and this battle still rages within me for a number of reasons. Firstly, when I say I am a feminist, people misunderstand and of course a discussion has to ensue on who is a feminist - that being a person who supports efforts to ensure that women have the same rights, freedoms, opportunities, and privileges as men. The misunderstanding among many with whom I have had this discussion is, more often than not, a mistaken association of feminists and feminism with feminine or effeminate behaviours and attitudes, or with the bra-burning, anti-male sentiments and imagery that characterized the radical second wave of feminism in the 1960s. Whatever the association, in each case I have felt that I have had to justify myself so as not to seem to wholly betray my masculine gender identity or the 'manhood club' to which I putatively belonged.

Secondly, I am conscious of the possibility that by declaring myself as a 'pro-feminist' rather than as a feminist, I am perhaps engaging in a process that emphasizes the differences between men and women, and focuses less on the similarities among them. If the latter is true, then I am contributing, without desire

to do so, to the creation of a distinct space within feminism, for men who identify with and are party to the feminist project, but who also seek to maintain a separate space and position from women. This is of course not what I want to do, and given the generally accepted and simple definition of a feminist, I have no reservation in challenging the creation of such a space. I therefore challenge my previous pronouncement, and simply contend that I am feminist who is also a masculinist. This for me is not a paradox, but requires reflexive engagement with the institutions and ideologies that perpetuate inequality between men and women.

I am also a social worker, and while this does not conjure images of similar severity as saying 'I am a feminist', it may nonetheless be considered as setting me in a seemingly transgressive position¹. I seek in this paper, not to romanticize males who participate in female-dominated professions and areas of scholarship, but rather to reflect on my own experiences, and the challenges experienced by men engaged in gender studies or social care work. In reflecting on this experience, I make use of Giddens' theory of structuration to discuss the positioning of men who engage in work which challenges patriarchal structures and ideologies that promote inequality on the basis of sex.

Men in Social Care

The term social care is not a significant part of the discourses around the delivery of social welfare services in the region. The term is mainly used in Britain where it describes a variety of services aimed at helping people overcoming difficulties in their personal lives. It is popular in social welfare policy discourses and is used to bring the act of caring, previously within the private sphere through unpaid work done by women, into the public sphere as a means of facilitating 'good social functioning' and well-being among populations. Social Care seeks to meet the physiological and psychological needs of people by

providing care, support, protection, advocacy, and welfare services to individuals who are marginalized, excluded, or disadvantaged. In this paper, I focus on social work as a social care profession, but with the understanding that based on its original British context, social care includes the continuum of personal and human services including education, nursing, youth work, social work, counseling, and mental health services, among others. Social work is given focus because it is the area of work with which I am most intimately familiar. This paper however makes the assumption that what is experienced by male social workers can be generalized within the Caribbean to also be the experiences of males who work in other female-dominated professions such as nursing and perhaps even in teaching, given that research has suggested that female-dominated professions, whether feminized or originally feminine, tend to hold similar experiences for men who enter (Camilleri and Jones 2001, Williams 1995).

Activities now referred to as social work have always been associated with women. The feminine gentility which perhaps reached its pinnacle in the Victorian era demonstrated its virtue through charitable and philanthropic activities. This was as a matter of course guided by essentialist ideas of feminine virtue which emphasized women's putative essential and natural tendency to care for those in need. Women thus engaged themselves in welfare services and charitable initiatives to relieve suffering and to reduce vagrancy and poverty.

Given that social work developed out of women's philanthropic activities, social work has always been associated with women and logically is a profession dominated by women. Abels and Murphy (1981) support this view and argue that there has been a persistent belief that women have been the most appropriate persons to carry out personal services. As such, they contend that social work manpower has predominately been women's power. Consequently, women have for the most part tended to be at the forefront in the profession, and the very first attempt to outline a social work method was Mary Richmond's 'Social Diagnosis' in 1915.

Social Care professions usually have ideals of alleviating suffering and poverty and ending people's experiences of oppression and marginalization by enhancing their coping capacities, or by helping them to help themselves. Even though women have been a significant majority in most if not all social care professions, there has still been a reproduction of patriarchal gender ideologies that negatively affects both women and men. The patriarchal gender system presupposes that a natural barrier exists between men and women: hence, what is essentially male is distinctly different from, and is opposite to, what is essentially female (Flax 1990). As such, two observations can be made about men's participation in social work. Firstly, because of the feminine and caring images attributed to social care roles, very few men enter these professions and they are generally considered non-traditional professions for men (Christie 1998; Gillingham 2006). This kind of caring work tends to be undervalued and the professions devoted to providing care have less prestige than the male dominated ones. Secondly, when men enter social care professions, they tend to channel into specialities or sets of activities considered more masculine, or they quickly move into leadership positions; many of these areas/specialities often become male enclaves within the professions (Williams 1995).

Within social care and the human services, men have, unlike women, used practice more instrumentally as a stepping stone to management careers (Howe 1986). Dominelli (2002) also demonstrates how many male social workers choose to practice in those areas where they are not required to have the clinical training necessary for direct practice with clients; these include programme management, administration, and even community practice. Supporting this is the fact that questions are raised about men's suitability for working in sensitive areas such as children's services and care or domestic violence (Pringle 1992, cited by Dominelli 2002, p. 86). Conversely, some of the 'masculinised' areas of social work practice are coming to no longer be considered social work, but as professions in which the traditionally masculine elements are definitional. Christie (1998) for example, described how probation officers in the United Kingdom are no longer subject to training in social work,

but rather training in criminal justice and security. As such Christie (1998) notes that the legal and control elements of the Probation Officer's job are considered more masculine and male appropriate than the nurturing and caring roles associated with other areas of social work.

Social care as a field of professional endeavours is therefore a site where masculinity and femininity are policed to ensure there is conformity with patriarchal and essentialist notions about what is ideal or appropriate for men and women; what is men's work as opposed to women's work. Feminist social workers argue that the profession reproduces dynamics of male supremacy (Dominelli 2002), and as such, men quickly move away from the practitioner ranks into leadership positions as mentioned before. But it is also true that these dynamics also work to oppress and marginalize men who desire to go against dominant patriarchal ideologies and enter those areas of practice considered to be untraditional for men.

Lewis (2001, 68) contends that care work is problematic for men because one cannot divorce the act of caring or the labour of 'tending' from feelings of love and commitment. Gilligan (1982) cited by Lewis (2001, 71) posits that the feminine personality comes to define itself by its capacity to care, and the opposite goes for the masculine personality — a personality he contends is defined by separation. To this end, the concern for others rather than self in the first instance — the "ethic of care" becomes central to the understanding of femininity. Lewis critiques Gilligan as bordering close on biological essentialism, but nevertheless, the labour and love of caring has been socially constructed as a central capacity of the feminine gender, and if it is not so, then something is thought to be wrong or lacking. Similarly, when a man possesses a strong capacity and desire to care, questions are raised about the extent to which he is a real man by way of his relation to the hegemonic model of masculinity.

Men's gender identities are socially constructed through work and the gender

division of labour (McLean 2003), and through their relative activities in both the public and private sphere, they validate their masculine identities. Men therefore often refuse to enter caring professions because they require that men perform tasks and express themselves in ways that are subversive to hegemonic masculinity. This is especially so, since men's masculine gender identities are constructed and defined in opposition to femininity and homosexuality. As such, men who work in non-traditional areas are expected to demonstrate their masculinity and exercise the power and entitlement that comes with being male. They therefore tend to progress quickly into leadership and administrative positions. McLean (2003) contends that when men fail to show this kind of ambition, they tend to be marginalized, or they experience some amount of tokenism by their female counterparts. Additionally, men who engage in care work are also considered different because care by men is viewed within the context of sexuality. The task of caring includes activities that have been excluded from the definitional heterosexuality of hegemonic masculinity (Pease and Camilleri 2001), and the intimacy involved in caring is often viewed as an expression of homosexuality (Christie 1998) and as an expression of a feminine essence. In addition, the recorded higher participation of mainly gay men in some traditional female areas of work make those areas specifically gendered and leads to assumptions about the sexuality of men who choose to participate in those areas.

For men, it takes courage to care. When we choose to enter social care professions, we engage in a reflexive and decided refutation of dominant gender norms, and legitimate the feminist mantra that the personal is political, by legitimating public concern over private and personal issues. Additionally, men who decidedly engage in care work may be considered as relinquishing some of the power bestowed by patriarchal gender ideologies. Pease (2001, p. 16) agrees that many men desire to change unequal situations caused by the patriarchal gender order, but that they are often unwilling to give up power by moving into areas of work that require that they use skills and perspectives that are antithetical to hegemonic masculinity.

At the same time, men's participation in social care work challenges the ways in which masculinity has come to be socially constructed. The more men enter care work, the more they affirm that social care needs to be considered as a human activity and not a gender specific activity. Caring should not only be appreciated as an act associated with feelings of love and obligation, but also as an essential social process and an important human responsibility.

Men in Gender Studies

Something happens when men engage in gender studies. Firstly, by engaging in the study of gender as the social construct(s) of sexual difference, we acknowledge that gender is a social category and unit of analysis that is necessary for an understanding of social life as it exists. To engage in gender studies is to acknowledge that gender is a political construction that affords privilege and power to one sex at the expense of the other. Relations of gender have historically been characterized by female subordination and male domination (Chhachhi, p. 87). Many scholars of notable repute have sought to theorize gender, a concept for which a single philosophy, theory, or meaning is perhaps infinitely elusive. Connell (1995) on one hand contends that gender is a practice and product of social interaction and does not precede this interaction, while Butler (1990) provokes the thought that gender is neither a practice nor product of social interaction predicated on the meanings assigned to differences in biology.

This theorizing of gender is in actuality a quest to understand the situations of gender relationships as they currently exist with an effort to challenge the historical situations of privilege and/or oppression based on sex. It is borne out of a quest for justice, however conceptualized, and as such, to engage in gender studies is to become engaged in a politically motivated process towards equity, freedom and self-determination for both men and women. It is important to

note that not all those who theorize gender are involved in the same project, because it is indeed possible to engage in gender studies and make arguments in support of the ideologies that perpetuate oppressive and inequitable situations and unequal power relationships for the sexes or for those who fall along the continuum of sex(es), gender(s), and sexualities. However, I believe it is the naming of the 'project' that makes the difference, and identification with the language of the discourse within the named project(s) of 'gender studies' implies the objective of challenging the ideologies and institutions that establishes power relationships based on sex and gender in a manner that privileges one sex and puts the other in a position of disadvantage.

Many Caribbean men who engage in the study and theorizing of gender, whether on masculinity issues or other gender related issues, often occupy spaces outside the academic department dedicated to the study of gender. Additionally many of these men do not identify themselves as gender activists or gender scholars, or even pro-feminists; even though a substantial portion of their scholarship supports the feminist project and the reconstruction of masculinity advanced by many feminists. The area of scholarship which men tend to concentrate when they focus on gender issues, that is, the study of masculinity issues in the Caribbean, has not often been referred to as gender studies, and claims a name for itself – men's studies or masculinity studies. This is so even though more often than not their study of masculinity is in actuality the study of patriarchal gender relationships and gender constructions. This is not to say that there is no room for men's studies in the academy, but to suggest rather that as men, we sometimes need to be careful of unwittingly participating in the game of creating different and separate spaces for men, even when we share the same subject matter with women.

The term 'gender' still carries with it images of women, and elicits images of the feminist movement out of which the study of gender emerged. I argue therefore that because of this, many men avoid categorizing themselves as gender theorists and associate themselves with the more 'masculine' sides of gender

studies, even though this engagement is usually a challenge to hegemonic notions of masculinity. It is not surprising then that in the 15 years of the existence of the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, only two males have graduated from the graduate programme on the Mona Campus.

Approximately two years after I first wrote this paper (for the CGDS 15th anniversary Elsa Leo-Rhynie symposium), someone suggested we begin a group for 'men in gender' on a popular social networking website. I inquired what the value of such a site would be; the response was not positive or convincing. My inquiry was simply because I believed such a group would do more to advance the separation of men and women, even in a common area of scholarship. While there are occasions for distinct focus on sex-specific needs in some areas of research and practice, those of us who 'do gender' must challenge the potential creation of spaces where one sex holds an unjust position of privilege.

The way in which men participate in gender studies, as described above, is a result of a number of challenges that our engagement in gender studies presents to our masculine gender identities. Firstly, when we study gender, we undergo a process of knowledge construction that is based on subjective gendered experiences. This type of scholarship requires that we participate in epistemological processes that are not in keeping with positivistic empiricism which sees the knower as a 'featureless abstraction', without a sex, a gender and any other identifying feature (Code 1991, p.1). Gender studies requires that positivistic epistemological standards which lock women out of knowledge construction, be deconstructed and that new methodologies be fashioned in order to fully explore the dimensions of power and influence which characterize gender relationships (Leo-Rhynie 2004, p.420). The epistemology embraced by feminist scholars is a direct challenge to traditional and perhaps patriarchal ways of knowing. When men enter such processes, it can be interpreted as a betrayal of patriarchal privilege and power, and a challenge to the epistemological standards which have historically sought to lock women out of the scientific theory-building tradition.

Secondly, the study of gender requires that men acknowledge their position of privilege and power and the ways in which this position is afforded at the expense of women. It often also requires that we contend with this, not only in our scholarship, but also in our personal lives. Our study of gender requires that we engage in a reflexive process in which we question the extent of our commitment to a gender order that has privileged us, but which has also pressured us through entrenched ideologies, institutions and structures, to conform to its prescriptions on how we are to behave and live. It must be noted here, that in much of the work that examines men's oppression, (even where this oppression is attributed to women), patriarchy and its pressure on men to conform to hegemonic masculine ideals and its entrenched ideologies can always be found at the heart.

When men enter gender studies or into areas of social care which are thought to be transgressive of hegemonic masculinity, they are sometimes received with ambivalence by female counterparts. Christie (1998) for example, explains how women often become wary and fearful of men who enter child care areas of work because men are thought to be sexually aggressive and are more likely to be sexual predators. Similarly, Kimmel (1998) discusses the attempt of a small handful of feminists who are wary of men, who profess and do feminism, to identify the smallest iota of evidence that those men hold some allegiance to patriarchal power and privilege, thereby negating their profession of commitment to the feminist project. Hopkins (1998, p.41) locates this response to men engaging in gender studies within a problem of masculinity, for masculinity is believed to threaten every pure motive. This becomes even more problematic when essentialist assumptions are taken into account - that masculinity is not evident solely in behaviour and attitude, but is considered to be an inevitable possession and consequence of being male.

Men who engage in professions and fields of scholarship that oppose the privileging of males in society and oppose the social construction of masculinity in terms of detachment, separateness and oppression, experience a 'cognitive

dissonance' (Connell 1995), a conflict of thoughts, feelings and motivation in reconciling their masculine identities with their involvement in activities that are counter to and challenge the very foundations of those masculine identities.

Relinquishing Power

Kimmel makes the point that for men to support change in the present gender system, is for men to acknowledge their own powerlessness under patriarchy (1998, p.64). As such, the challenges to male participation in social care and gender studies are a result of patriarchal ideologies and institutions. There exists no one 'masculinity', but rather many different 'masculinities' that are defined by the different relationships between men and a hegemonic 'ideal' of masculinity (Connell 1995). Males who support changes in a gender ideology which putatively favours men are by the nature of their praxis, moving away from a hegemonic masculine ideal. This critique is perhaps sometimes an overwhelming part of the challenge affecting men's identification with, and participation in, both social care and gender studies. Many of the males with whom I have had discussions about why I chose to study gender, have confessed that they held assumptions about males who studied gender. I must note that the assumption was not about men who did masculinity studies or talked about manhood, but about those who spoke more about supporting women and changing the social relations of gender. I must confess too, that before I saw the need for a better understanding of gender issues, I too held assumptions about the young men who seemed to be supportive of feminism.

Patriarchy's sanctions on men engaging in these fields then is strong, especially for those of us who theorize the ways in which patriarchy oppresses men. By engaging in praxes that challenge age old structures of oppression on the basis of sex and gender, we subject ourselves to scrutiny; questions are asked about our sexuality because heterosexuality is a vital component of the hegemonic

masculinity which is protective of its patriarchal privilege. When there is an aberration of patriarchal 'proscriptions', patriarchy tends to lash out sexually (Kimmel 1998, p.64) and any man supporting changes in gender ideologies cannot be a 'real man', and hence he must be gay. This lashing out has not only come from men who have asked, 'why would and how could a man do gender and feminism?', but also from women. At least one of my female colleagues in the graduate programme in Gender and Development Studies also indicated to me, her own belief that gender studies attracts the men who are not 'straight' and as such are not 'real men'. Similarly, in a conversation about plans to change the name of the Bureau of Women's Affairs to the Bureau of Gender Affairs, a female friend expressed her opposition to the proposed change of name, on the grounds that if you replace 'women's' with 'gender', then 'all sorts of 'other people' will require services'. The 'all sorts' and 'other people' were in reference to homosexual (lesbian and gay), transgendered, and transsexual (including the inter-sexed and the androgynous), and queer persons, all of which are supposed to be taken into account when the term 'gender' is accounted for.

I have tried to justify to my male and female interrogators why it is that I 'do' gender studies and feminism, and how I believe that our awareness of gender inequality in its smallest form, and our attempt to correct that can create a better society. The response to my justification is almost always in the positive, and this gives me hope that the future of gender relations will be good, and that new and better cultural understandings of masculinity will come to be formed for a more equitable society.

Space and Possibilities

The theorizing of Anthony Giddens on the 'duality of structure' in structuration theory, and the 'double hermeneutic' of social science scholarship, seem to

capture most accurately the potential which I believe exists for men's participation in social care and gender studies, I make only brief reference to them here, but contend that the fundamental principles underlined by Giddens and which are now basic and commonplace to any student of sociology hold much meaning and promise for men who participate in nontraditional areas of scholarship and practice.

The 'problem' of masculinity must be analysed within the context of the institutional relationships or arrangements that produce inequality and create the 'tensions' that have brought masculinity under scrutiny (Connell 1995, p. 42). These institutional arrangements are products of a configuration of gender practice which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, so much so that as alluded to in a previous section, some women raise a backlash against men who enter gender studies as an academic discipline, claiming as Kimmel (1998) would put it, that as soon as women get a "foothold on a legitimate domain within the academy", men rush in to displace them and "set up shop" (p.62).

Since hegemonic masculinity has caused masculinity in its varied forms to come under scrutiny, it needs to be made clear that it is not a singular type of scrutinizing which takes place. I contend that the scrutinizing of masculinity is a dual process. In one sense, those of us who do gender scrutinize hegemonic masculinity and its oppression of both women and men. In the other, society in general scrutinizes and sanctions subjected and subversive masculinities. Connell (1995) posits that hegemony is only established if there is a positive relationship between a cultural ideal and institutional power; it is this relationship that makes patriarchy legitimate. Through this relationship, institutions employ patriarchal rules and resources which reinforce the dominant ideologies. I find some similarity in Connell's 'institution' and Giddens's 'structure'. In Giddens's theory of structuration, it is these rules, resources, norms, and patterns of social relationships that constitute a social structure which is both enabling and constraining of the actions of those within it. Giddens argues that structures are,

at the same time, both the 'medium and outcome' of social interaction. Simply put, structures are created through individual action and human agency, but at the same time, human action and social relations are constituted structurally (Bryant and Jary 2001, p.11). Given this duality, structures can change through the agency of individuals. There is no pre-political being, and personal and political motivation is still at the heart of human agency. Therefore, as we engage in social care work or the study and theorizing of gender, we, as men, have the choice to either seek to reproduce patriarchal structures and systems in spaces we formerly thought to be female-appropriate, or challenge the presupposition of an extra-biological difference between the sexes and support equality between men and women.

Those of us who challenge patriarchal structures, whether through our involvement in social care professions or in gender studies, acknowledge that these patriarchal rules and resources are not static and timeless, but are socially produced and reproduced, and thus can be changed. In the immediate, many of us perhaps do not see how our involvement in these two areas may contribute to changing patriarchal structures and eventually the patriarchal gender system, because such awareness comes after a reflexive analysis of the oppression inherent in this system for both men and women. Nevertheless, over time, this constant challenging of the patriarchal institution will see a gradual cultural shift in how gender, masculinity and femininity, are understood and appreciated, and how gender relationships are negotiated. This will not be without resistance, but men's constant engagement in non-traditional areas will eventually influence the structure, its rules, and its resources. The academy has a role to play in producing knowledge which legitimately challenges the structure and its institutions.

In theorizing the double hermeneutic, Giddens contends that the social sciences do not only study the social world as the manner in which the natural sciences study the natural world, but contends that scholarship and research in the social sciences also help to shape the practices and products of the social

world. As such, there is dialogue between those of us who seek to create knowledge and raise consciousness, and the general population who legitimates this knowledge. As men, we too are a part of this population that legitimates knowledge, because it is not only in our scholarship or in our practice that we pattern and encourage a positive shift towards equality and equity in the gender system, but through our social interactions and our personal relationships. We legitimate new knowledge of how gender relationships are ordered, as we engage in a self-reflexive practice in which we monitor our own actions and behaviours.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, I have structured this conversation of men's participation in activities to change the current gender system, within my experience in social work, a career that delivers social care, and my involvement in gender studies. I have discussed how participation in these two fields conflicts with hegemonic masculinity and impacts upon the masculine identities of these men. I have suggested that men's involvement in these areas of work and knowledge making has an important role in challenging and changing oppressive gender systems. Through time and continued effort, male practitioners in social care and gender studies, applying lessons from personal experiences and the experiences of women, will through their own social interactions contribute to an eventual shift in how gender and gender relationships are constructed and performed. This process includes a renegotiation of power and a reformulation of structures, as new spaces and possibilities are made open for both women and men.

¹ See for example: Thompson, W. (2011). Transgressive Realities? A phenomenological comparison of male social workers in two areas of social work practice in Jamaica. *Caribbean Journal of Social Work* 8/9

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