

So What Has Been, Is, and Might Be Going on in Studying Men and Masculinities? Some Continuities and Discontinuities

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Abstract

Following introductory remarks on how the terms “masculinities” and “men” have been used differentially in recent critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM), the article reviews some key aspects of CSMM - past, present and future. The diverse influences on CSMM have included various feminisms, gay studies, anti-imperialism, civil rights, anti-racism, green and environmental movements, as well as LGBTIQ+ movements, Critical Race Studies, Globalization/Transnational Studies, and Intersectionality Studies. In the present period, the range of theoretical and political approaches and influences on studies continues to grow, with, for example, queer, post-, post post-, new materialist, posthumanist, and science and technology studies, making for some discontinuities with established masculinities theory. In many regions, there are now more women working explicitly and long-term in the area, even if that is itself not new. CSMM have also become more geographically widespread, more dispersed, more comparative, international, transnational, post-colonial, decolonializing, globally “Southern”, global, globalized and globalizing; this

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diversifying feature is transforming CSMM. Key areas for future research are identified, including the relations of men and masculinities to: first, ecology, environment and climate change; second, ICTs, social media, AI, robotics and big data; third, transnational/global, transnational institutions and processes; and, fourth, nationalism, racism, authoritarianism, neo-fascism and political masculinism. Together, these make for a “lurking doom”. At the same time, there is a whole range of wider theoretical, methodological, epistemological and ontological questions to be taken up in CSMM much more fully in the future.

Keywords

men, masculinities, critical studies on men and masculinities, academic histories

In celebrating these twenty years of the journal, I have been asked to write briefly on some questions around and aspects of studying men and masculinities, as suggested by the Editor. My first reaction on receiving this request is that it is very difficult knowing what to choose and what to omit.

My second reaction is to do something easy: that is, to record *my very many congratulations* to the journal and all who are and have been involved.

Next, I want to say something about studies on men and masculinities. Here, I want to emphasize that I do not see studies on men and masculinities as either a neat, coherent *field* of studies or a discipline, but rather a rather messy and fragmented sets of activities, in short, a *subfield* of feminist, Gender and Women’s Studies. Studies on men and masculinities, whether they are called “Masculinity Studies” or, as I prefer, Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM), assuming, of course, that they *are* critical, are diverse, ontologically, epistemologically, and politically. A critical focus on masculinity or masculinities (though their meanings-in-use vary vastly) is fine, but that is not the whole story. For example, if “masculinities” is used as a decontextualized, free-floating framework of analysis out of the structural context of gender hegemony and patriarchal, not to mention capitalist, imperialist and further oppressive, power relations, that can easily take us back to a glorified role theory, except now with plural, multiple roles, masculinities, and discourses. In short, in studying men and masculinities, the possible empirical, theoretical, and political relations of the conceptual categories of (wo)men, (fe)male, and masculinities remain a key question (Halberstam 1998), probably increasingly so.

There have been growing moves toward sophisticated, often “post-,” analyses of the fluidity of gender, but at the same time, the pervasiveness, power, and taken-for-grantedness of the *social* category of men as part of existing structural features of most gender systems may be easily, perhaps oddly, forgotten. The category of “woman/women” has been well deconstructed (e.g., Riley 1988), that of “man/men” rather less so. Indeed, even critical studies of men and masculinities may take, or appear to take, the social category of men for granted. To forget that the category of men is *social, and socially and societally constructed*, or even to see a focus on the

category as somehow passé and irrelevant in critical work is, in my view, misguided. It is doubly unfortunate, as it weakens working critically on the current dominant material-discursive gender reality from which political action springs and from which feminist critical realist analysis seeks to unearth.

The critique of men is important not because men are determined as z or y or z; it is the opposite; it is that men constitute a social category of power. In one sense, although such a hugely influential, transformative, and leading book, I think it was slightly unfortunate that Raewyn Connell's (1995) *Masculinities* was entitled thus, and without the addition of the category of "men" before or after that one word. If it had been called *Masculinities and Men* or even *Men and Masculinities* (cf. Whitehead 2002), there might not have been such coyness in directly critiquing men from some Masculinity Studies scholars over the last twenty years or more. The remembering of "men" is certainly not to resort to anti-feminist or depoliticized visions of Men's Studies or to see men as fixed or reified; it is to deconstruct men and the category of men critically. In the longer historical perspective, this also raises the problematic of working toward the abolishing of "men," as a social category of power.

In laying out some of these issues, I think it is very important to always remember that there are many different motivations and reasons for studying men and masculinities (Messner 1997; Pease 2000; Ashe 2007), some of them quite contradictory and opposed, some progressive, some not. Studying men and masculinities may be to reduce or take power from men, to legitimate men working on gender, to create a space for men to speak authoritatively, to build careers, to do feminism(s), and to celebrate men or engage in fundamental change (cf. Lorber 2005). Then there is another recurrent misapprehension that studying men and masculinities somehow belongs to men and is primarily men's business.

For the remainder of this piece, I use the simplest of narratives: past, present, future—noting some continuities and discontinuities, as we go.

Past: so, how did we get here? Well, we got here primarily through a long history of social movements: feminisms; what was initially called gay liberation but that actually included a whole range of nonnormative genders and sexualities; and men's various responses to feminism, including activist responses. It may come as a surprise, or not, to know that Hanmer (1990) cited fifty-four Second-Wave feminist texts on women's lives and their relationships to men published by 1975. The edited book, *On the Problem of Men* (Friedman and Sarah 1983), with published papers from two feminist conferences from the early 1980s, was an important collection. Among many works of gay scholarship, Mieli's (1980) *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique* figured strongly, as have the historical and symbolic interactionist work of Weeks (1977) and Plummer (1981), respectively. An "early" synthesis of Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and indeed, technological studies was Balbus's (1982) *Marxism and Domination*.

For myself, I want to go back to the late 1970s, in fact 1978, that was when I got involved publicly in what was then called "men's politics," "men's anti-sexist politics," "men against sexism," or "profeminism." It took me a few years to realize

that my personal–political interests matched very closely to my academic, research, and writing interests, though slightly different languages were in use in those different arenas. The personal, the political, and the theoretical are intimately interconnected (see Hearn 1987, 2015b), bringing real excitement to understanding (and changing) that men’s (and my) many ways of doing, in work, family, sex, violence, history, culture, and forms of life, that were typically presented as neutral, normal, official, objective, and so on, were in fact intensely, intimately gendered—“all the way down” (cf. Haraway 2004). It was possible to ask such obvious questions as: do men have a gender? Are men gendered? Do men have gendered cultures, histories, life courses, and so on? This insight of the gendering of men and masculinities stays, and, in many senses, is still one of the bedrocks of CSMM, this journal, and similar publishing outlets.

Yet there were many further influences on the CSMM project from the beginning, including anti-imperialism, civil rights, anti-racism, the green and environmental movements, and dissatisfaction with class-only analysis, as well as from what are now referred to as LGBTIQ+, Critical Race Studies, Globalization/Transnational Studies, and Intersectionality Studies. Two key books from 1977 illustrate some of this: the edited collection, *A Book of Readings for Men Against Sexism* (Snodgrass 1977), brought together a gender/sexual diverse set of political and academic writings from the United States; and Andrew Tolson’s (1977) *The Limits of Masculinity* placed the changing conditions of British men and masculinities firmly in their class and postimperial context. Race and ethnicity and intersectionality have been crucial matters throughout. Special issues of the journals, *The Black Scholar* (1971) and *Ebony Magazine* (1972), both entitled “The Black male,” were published in the early 1970s; hooks (1984) wrote, in the context of Black anti-racism and feminism, on men as possible allies; and a little later I found Madhubuti’s (1990) still highly topical book, *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?*, especially inspiring. The many editions of *Men’s Lives* (Kimmel and Messner [1989] 2013) show clearly the centrality of race and ethnicity in CSMM. On a personal note, in my own teaching on men and masculinities, from around 1984, I tried to raise issues of transgender and intersex from the first course session, by way of asking the questions “What is a man?” “What counts as man?” Furthermore, one of the key shifts that took place in CSMM in the 1980s and 1990s was the placing of men’s violence and men’s relation to violence, and research thereon, as much more central to theory and practice.

Present: what now? The subfield of CSMM has, in the form of journals, book series, associations, conferences, and the rest, become more established (see Hearn and Howson 2019); it has also become more diverse, more professionalized, and arguably in many parts of the “global North” more separated from activism. The range of theoretical and political approaches and influences on studies continues to grow, with, for example, queer, post-, post post-, new materialist, posthumanist, and science and technology studies, making for some discontinuities with established masculinities theory. In many regions, there are now more women working explicitly and long term in the area, but, as noted above, that is nothing new. Indeed, it is

wildly inaccurate to see CSMM as separate from feminist scholarship and feminist theory, in at least some parts of the world, for example, Southern Africa, the Nordic region, and Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe, where feminist women make up some of the leading researchers and protagonists (e.g., Aboim 2010; Blagojević [2000] 2005; Ruspini et al. 2011; Shefer et al. 2018).

What stands out in these developments over the last twenty years or more is the mass of local, loosely ethnographic and qualitative studies on men and masculinities; these are accompanied by a more limited growth of quantitative and mixed methods studies. Overall, research and publishing on men and masculinities have become more geographically widespread, more dispersed, more comparative, international, transnational, postcolonial, decolonializing, globally “Southern” (Connell 2008), global, globalized, and globalizing. This is what is really transforming CSMM. The established presence of non-Anglophone and critical intellectual and political traditions on men and masculinities challenges the Anglophone and global “Northern” dominance of CSMM, as with most academia. This applies even within Europe, let alone in other continents. For example, in Sweden, there is a tradition from the 1960s and 1970s that combined critical sex role theory with patriarchy theory, such that the critiques of more static Anglophone sex role theory that led onto Anglophone masculinities theory would not apply (see Dahlström 1962; Liljeström 1968; Hearn et al. 2012). Another major example is the theorizing of men and masculinities in the Balkan context through the general frame of semiperipherality and the specific focus on misogyny (Blagojević [2000] 2005, 2009). The distinct apartheid and postapartheid history of South Africa has led to a very different corpus of research, especially around the intersections of class, gender, and race as socially and politically embedded rather than something “discovered” (Morrell 2001; Shefer et al. 2007, 2018; Ratele 2018). There is a sizable literature on men and masculinities in China and across the Chinese diaspora, foregrounding quite different conceptualizations (e.g., Louie 2015, 2016; Song and Hird 2013; Lin, Haywood, and Mac an Ghail 2017). Building on a host of local and broadly progressive policy, intervention, and development projects and campaigns working on changing men and boys, there is now a very significant literature deriving from India and other parts of South Asia (Chowdhury and Baset 2018). Moreover, in an increasing range of cases, there is a turn toward the investigation of international and transnational institutions.

Institutionally, CSMM, not just any old studies on men and masculinities, are now deeply articulated with, and at times integrated into, Women’s and Gender Studies, Sexuality Studies, Transgender Studies, and Critical Race Theory. As a recent illustration, the first doctorate in the discipline of Gender Studies was awarded in 2018 at Uppsala University, the oldest university in Sweden, on the subject of men’s friendships (Goedecke 2018). However, a significant difference now compared with the 1970s and 1980s is that Sexuality Studies, Transgender Studies, and Critical Race Theory have all become much more fully developed and established in their own right forged by and along with the respective social

movements. Yet there is still always the looming presence and possibility of some men wanting to go ahead and forge *their own* “Men’s Studies” or worse what has come to be called “male studies.”

While much research and publication has been done that is positive, current obstacles persist, including, on one hand, difficulty of theorizing hegemony (the water in which the fish swim) and, on the other, a distinct lack of interest and a simple lack of care, especially among men in the established disciplines, in addressing countergender hegemony.

Future: finally, where is CSMM going? What is the future of the subfield? What has been missed? What is being left to the next generation of scholars? and Where *should* CSMM go next? Such questions bear on both empirical research and wider politics and theorizing in and about CSMM.

Many areas of scholarship remain not just relatively undeveloped but desperately urgent. Key empirical areas or issues that are still relatively neglected, even if they are now being taken up more fully, include the relations of men and masculinities to: first, ecology, environment, water, energy, food, famine, and climate change (see Anshelm and Hultman 2014; Enarson and Pease 2016); second, information and communication technologies, social media, artificial intelligence, robotics, the singularity, and big data;¹ third, transnational/global, transnational institutions, and processes, notably the scale of global inequality,² the global corporate and financial system, racialized capitalism, organized crime and corruption (Portillo and Molano 2017a, 2017b); and, fourth, the nation, nationalism, citizenship, migration, racism and racialization, authoritarianism, neofascism, including some “old questions” about masculinism and “men’s rights activism,” albeit now with online misogyny, alt right and nativist movements (Ging 2017), as well as mainstream politics and political masculinities (Starck and Sauer 2014). Together, these overlap and also make for a “lurking doom.” In addition, while a lot of research has addressed boys and younger men (e.g., Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2001; Shefer et al. 2007; Kimmel 2008), especially when they are problematic in some respect, and increasingly aging and older men (e.g., Calasanti and King 2005; Sandberg 2011), the theorizing of the intersections of age and gender with the unmarked adult male/man is less obvious. To address this, more explicit, critical adult studies on adult men and masculinities are needed; age and aging concern all, not just something to be added onto analysis for the young(er) and the old(er), just as disabilities are also relevant for the able-bodied.

Careful, thorough, accurate empirical research on these and other issues is essential; at the same time, there is a whole range of wider theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and ontological questions to be taken up in CSMM much more fully. Some hinge on the intimate connections of the personal, the political, and the theoretical, while recognizing tensions that can occur between these three domains. My own personal–political–theoretical agenda includes the elaboration of the concept of gex, that does not prioritize either sex or gender over the other; developing material-discursive or material discursive analysis that is both more materialist and more discursive than most studies; problematization of the concept of masculinity;

critique of the persistence and changing forms of trans(national)patriarchies; and the continuing importance of the neo-Gramscian hegemony, as in the hegemony of men, as a more deep-rooted aspect of gender hegemony than hegemonic masculinity (Hearn 2004, 2015a; Howson and Hearn 2019).

These tendencies suggest the need for a much firmer and deeper deconstruction of the male/men, whether through the politics of refusal (Stoltenberg [1989] 2000), embodied writing and critique (Thomas 1998), sexual difference theory (Anemtoia-cci 2014), new materialism (Garlick 2016), or some other mode of theorization of/ against sovereign male identity/ies. Let us be clear that, even with flux, discourse, relationality, processuality, and the rest, tensions remain between the emphasis on social structure and kindred concepts and that on agency and kindred concepts. There is much that happens and accrues that is over and above individual action, and there is much that is experienced that is not determined or determinate.

Finally, there are the relations of CSMM to future “itself.” As I get older, I have become more and more interested in the future and possible gender/sexual scenarios, both positive and negative (Hearn 2014, 2015a). I think a major contribution of CSMM would be to spell out much more explicitly what kind of feminist futures these studies might be assuming, opposing, invoking, and working toward (see Segal 1987; Haraway 1988; Scott 2001; Walby 2011). I look forward to both more future-orientated studies and more studies of the future within CSMM that bring the personal, policy, politics and theorizing closer to each other, yet not necessarily integrated.

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Notes

1. The widely reported (e.g., in the UK newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*) recent allegations around electoral malpractice, involving Facebook, Cambridge Analytica, SCL, Aggregate IQ, Global Science Research, and so on, are probably one kind of indication of things to come.
2. Across the global economy, “(a)lmost half of the world’s wealth is owned by one percent of the population The bottom half of the world’s population owns same as richest 85 people in the world” (Fuentes-Nieva and Galasso 2014, 2–3, citing Credit Suisse 2013; Forbes 2013;

also see Hardoon et al. 2016). Latest projections from the UK House of Commons suggest that this figure may reach two-thirds of global wealth by 2030 (Savage 2018).

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