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Developing profeminist practice with men in social work

by

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to highlight some of the theoretical issues and political dilemmas related to profeminist practice with men in social work. As a starting point in this inquiry, it is important to focus on is the invisibility of men, as men, in social work. Although there is a mass of literature in social work that has much to say about men and masculinities, this is usually presented in an implicit and untheorised way. Historically, the study of men, as men, has had little place in social work literature.

Feminists in social work have drawn attention to the prevalence of sexist attitudes and practices in social welfare and, during the last twenty years, female social workers have developed interventions and policies aimed at overcoming sexism. Feminist practice with women has thus made a significant contribution to critical social work theory and practice. However, feminist social work has not had a lot to say about men either. The key feminist social work texts of the 80's and 90's made only passing references to men and there is only one recent feminist text that looks systematically at feminist practice with men.

It is not surprising that attention has been directed toward women's issues in combating sexism in welfare. The majority of social workers and the majority of welfare clients are women. However, it is increasingly being recognised that addressing sexism necessitates an understanding of men as well as women. All social workers will have contact with men. Furthermore, the majority of the concerns that women bring to social workers are connected to their relationships with men (Hanmer and Statham 1988).

The contemporary male critical social work literature also neglects analyses of masculinity and practice with men. The focus of this literature is on challenging internalised oppression and empowering the disadvantaged; no mention is made of internalised domination. The only exceptions to this are Keith Pringle's (1995) book in the United Kingdom and Pease and Camilleri's (2001) edited collection in Australia.

The relative absence of men in the social work literature is concerning. It is my view that the refusal to name men, as men, in social work limits the potential for challenging gender injustice in welfare.

Portrayal of men as victims

To the extent that traditional social work literature has given attention to men, it has focused on men primarily as victims. Attention has been given to such issues as: restrictive emotionality, health care problems, identity crises, fathering difficulties, experiences of divorce and separation and male suicide.

Less attention has been given to men's domination. Even when the focus is on mens' violence and power and control issues, the tendency is often to pathologise men and turn them back into victims. The 'men as victims' approach connects with the subjective experiences of many men.

It is clear that in spite of their relatively advantageous position, many men feel disadvantaged compared to women. Farrell (1993) argues that if men do not feel powerful, then they are not powerful. He reduces power to a psychological issue and many men identify with this position. If they don't feel like powerful patriarchs then the
feminist analysis must be wrong. This then leads to a blindness to the institutional power of men (Schwalbe 1996, p. 149) and a lack of awareness of how many of the disadvantages suffered by men are part of a political system that substantially benefits the majority of men (Sterba 1998, p. 297). Traditional approaches to working with men attempt to address the needs of male clients. However, to the extent that work with men enables men to be more effective, it may also enable them to be more dominant (Rowan 1997, p. 14). The focus on mens' concerns and their needs for self-acceptance and resolutions of their problems contributes to men not taking womens' concerns seriously. Mens' reality is given paramount status, (Schwalbe 1996, p. 193).

The limits of sex role theory in understanding men The main theoretical framework that informs work with men in the human services is sex role theory. The sex role approach to masculinity utilizes the theoretical ideas underlying liberal feminism, wherein women's disadvantages are said to result from stereotyped customary expectations, internalised by both men and women.

Sex role theory informed the early mens' liberation movement of the 1970s, whose theorists maintained that freeing sex role conventions might also be good for men as well as women. Thus, men were encouraged to 'break . . . out of the straight-jacket of sex roles' (Farrell 1975, p. 8) and 'to free themselves of the sex-role stereotypes that limit their ability to be human' (Sawyer 1974, p. 170). The implication was that men could transform themselves without reference to wider social processes, the male role being something we could dispose of, allowing the human being in the man to emerge.

One of the major limitations of sex role theory is that it under-emphasizes the economic and political power that men exercise over women. Male and female roles are seen to be equal, thus enabling men and women to engage in a common cause against sex role oppression.

What is consistently missing in sex role theory is recognition of the extent to which mens' gender identities are based upon a struggle for social power. Men clearly suffer from adhering to dominant forms of masculinity. Many men are now concluding that the social and political gains of having power over women do not outweigh the physical, social and psychological health costs incurred (Newman 1997, p. 137). Most men, however, approve and support the overall system, in spite of the burdens and they simply want more benefits and less burdens (Bell 1996, p. 71). There is no evidence that liberating men from the traditional male sex role will lead to men relinquishing their privilege and social power. And yet this is where traditional approaches to understanding and working with men in social work are often heading.

To develop a critical framework for practice with men, we have to adequately conceptualise the issues facing men. These are confusing and unsettling times for many men. To make sense of this confusion it is important to understand mens' experiences within the context of the patriarchal structures in society and their relationship to class, race and gender regimes. Men and women who work with men in social work should have an analysis of the social construction of masculinities and they need to understand how the forces that construct dominant masculinities embed men and women in relations of dominance and subordination that limit the potential for them to be in partnership with each other.

To the extent that we ignore the social construction of masculinity, it blocks insight into the real trouble in mens' lives. Furthermore, if men do not grasp the basic notion of gender as a social construction, then feminist critiques of patriarchy, dominant masculinity and abusive male behaviours are going to be felt by men at a deeply personal level (Schwalbe 1996, pp. 187, 231).

Men often want things to change but they do not want to relinquish their power. A pro-feminist approach to working with men challenges the distribution of power in families and encourages men to rethink their power. This means, as Connell has suggested, disrupting mens' settled ways of thinking (1987, p. xii). Many of the beliefs men hold are the cause of the troubles in their lives. Thus, the starting point for work with men is to assess their beliefs. What beliefs does the man hold about masculinity? What are the sources of these beliefs? How are these beliefs associated with the difficulties the man is experiencing? What are the potential harmful effects of these beliefs? (Allen & Gordon 1990, p. 138).

Mens' socialisation leads to the individual beliefs that can promote abusive behaviours (Russell 1995). Mederos argues that all men are embedded in a personal patriarchal system and that all men share to some extent a sense of entitlement to make normative claims on women. The differences among men relate to the claims they make and how they attempt to enforce them (1987, p. 43). Thus, although mens' use of power and control is central in work with violent men, I believe that it is an issue in work with all men. Men need to be helped to acknowledge their tendencies to act oppressively and they should be assisted to devise strategies to change dominating behaviour. They should also be encouraged to develop wider repertoires of behaviour and models of masculinity not associated with violence, control and objectification (Pringle 1996, pp. 153-154).

The portrayal of men as a homogeneous group
While it is important to recognise mens' social power and domination, in some feminist social work texts, all men are seen as a coherent 'gender class' with the same vested interests in controlling women. Some radical feminists believe that men will never change and that their dominance is inevitable (Segal 1987, p. 17). Within this perspective, there is no basis for men to change. If all men are the enemy, then it is difficult to envisage the possibility of men and women working together against patriarchy (Edley and Wetherell 1995, p. 196). If all men are innately violent and controlling there is little optimism for change.

How meaningful is it to talk about men as a homogeneous group? When it is said that men control the mode of reproduction and that men dominate women in the public sphere, does this mean all men? Are all men violent? Are all men potential rapists?

One of the problems with this categorical approach to men is that it makes oppression definition of men. It implies that men oppress women by virtue of being men. Men do not all benefit equally from the operation of the structures of domination. Issues of race, sexuality, class, disability and age affect the extent to which men benefit from the patriarchal dividend. While the gender hierarchy involves mens' domination of women, it also includes a system of internal dominance in which a minority of men dominate the majority of men (Sabo and Gordon 1995, p. 10).

A categorical approach to men can also be used to obscure mens' privilege. In the presentation of mens' health statistics, for example, there is often little consideration of social divisions between men. So although the health status and life chances of some men in the gender order are advantaged, other sub-groups of men are systematically disadvantaged. Aboriginal mens' health, the health of men from low socio-economic groups, gay men and disabled men etcetera are disregarded in most discussions of mens' health (Wadham 1997, p. 21).

We are now entering a new stage in which variations among men are seen as central to the understanding of mens' lives (Kimmel and Messner 1989, p. 9). So, we cannot speak of masculinity as a singular term but rather should explore masculinities. Men are as socially diverse as women and this diversity entails differences between men in relation to class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, bodily facility, religion, world views, parental/marital status, occupation and propensity for violence (Collinson 1992, p. 35).

Differences are also found across cultures and through historical time. The discourse about 'masculinity' is constructed out of five percent of the world's population of men, in one region of the world, at one moment in history. We know from ethnographic work in different cultures how non-Western masculinities can be very different from the Western norm (Connell 1991, p. 3).

Men doing feminism in social work

In light of the following, is it possible for men to engage in practices that serve womens' interests? It is generally agreed that men cannot be feminists because we do not have women's experience (Reinharz 1992, pp. 14-15). However, can men engage in profeminist practice if they can fulfil certain conditions? Or are we locked into an ontological position within patriarchy because of our location in social structure?

I believe that men can change in the direction of feminism. Men have choices as to whether they accept patriarchy or work collectively against it. Before men can organise collectively, though, they must transform their subjectivities and practices. I believe that there are spaces in patriarchy for men to 'appreciate the possibilities of being different and being against sexism and against patriarchy' (Haam 1992, p. 19). Although we cannot individually or as a group escape our material position in patriarchy, I believe that we can change our ideological and discursive position. I draw upon feminist standpoint theory here. The advantage of the notion of standpoint is that it relates to both structural location as well as the discursive construction of subjectivity, allowing us to distinguish between a traditional 'mens' standpoint' and a 'profeminist mens' standpoint'.

A traditional mens' standpoint is based on the privileges and powers men have, and excludes the perspective of women. A profeminist mens' standpoint involves an ability to be critical of mens' position in society and how it contributes to the inequality of women and developing an ethical and moral commitment to addressing that inequality and discrimination because of the harm it causes (May 1998, pp. 342-346).

Thus I believe that it is possible for men to change their subjectivities and practices to constitute a profeminist mens' standpoint. The process of change is itself a requirement in formulating a profeminist mens' standpoint. Men have to change their vantage point if they want to see the world from a different position and this entails more than just a theoretical shift. It also requires men to actively engage in profeminist struggles in both the private and public arenas.

Men have access to some areas of male behaviour and thought that women do not have. In this sense, women cannot know the 'content of the deliberate strategies that men and male dominated institutions use to maintain their power' (Kelly et al., 1994, p. 33). Profeminist men can use their position to gain insights into how men construct themselves in a dominant position. And, given that men value masculine authority more highly, they should use it to
resocialise men.

On the other hand, there are dangers when men engage with feminist issues. Feminist scholarship is sometimes taken more seriously when men discuss it than when women do. There is also a danger that men will claim a place in feminism and that the dominance of men will assert itself on feminist knowledge as a right. Women will also bring to this issue their own individual experiences of men which will range from loving intimacy to violence and abuse. It is likely that women will continue to be divided between those who will work with men and those who will not. However, while many women continue to be sceptical about men’s involvement with feminism, a shift in opinion is occurring that is opening up possibilities for profeminist men and women to work together within a broader feminist movement.

Engaging men in change: Self-interest or ethics?

How do we best engage men in the process of change? There is a major division in masculinity politics between those who argue that men should change for enlightened self-interest reasons and those who advocate change on the basis of an ethical or moral position.

For those who argue the enlightened self-interest position, it is said that to oppress others, it is necessary to suppress oneself and that systemic male dominance not only oppresses women, it deforms men as well; for example, men more than women die of stress-related illness and violence and have a shorter life expectancy (Cockburn 1991, p. 222).

Some even go so far as to suggest that men’s everyday masculine identities are afflicted with psychopathology. It is suggested that men’s laconicism, hot and cold emotional responses, stoical defences against unmet needs, compulsive action driven grandiosity or omnipotence and refusal to acknowledge sickness, injury and incapacity constitute a form of borderline personality disorder (Ball 1997, pp. 27, 70). It is true that patriarchy distorts men’s lives as well as women’s lives. Many men feel grief and have been victimized as boys. One has to ask, though; in what ways would a mens’ movement, organised around mens’ enlightened self-interests, advance womens’ struggles? The risk in arguing that it is in mens’ interests to change is that men may adopt a strategy that benefits them, rather than focusing on overcoming the oppression of women. Furthermore, the issue of personal exploration as opposed to activism is a contentious one. Does changing oneself as a man help to challenge patriarchy at the structural level? Does personal change in particular mens’ practices undermine patriarchal relations?

For those who advocate the ethical and moral position, it is said that if men want to liberate themselves from the male malaise, they will have to let go of male privilege, rather than engaging in intrapsychic selfish-affirmation. Men have to ‘come to understand the injustice that has been done to women’ (Ruether 1992, pp. 14-15) and they must acknowledge the injustice of their historical privilege as men.

bell hooks (1992, pp. 13-14) is critical of the view that it is only when those in power understand how they too have been victimized, that they will rebel against the structures of domination. She says that ‘individuals of great privilege who are in no way victimized are capable via political choices of working on behalf of the oppressed.’ Thus, one can reject domination through ethical and political understanding. And, of course, it is important to acknowledge that, throughout history, men have taken principal stands on women’s rights. However, how does one articulate a moral stance that challenges men to consider the social justice implications of their behaviour in the world without alienating them? Understanding the experiences of an oppressed group does not appear to be sufficient, unless it involves ‘some kind of transformation experience, particularly of the sort that results in the unsettling of the person’s self and position’ (Babbitt 1993, p. 256). I do not see these strategies as being antithetical to each other. I think that mens’ interests can be reconstructed in ways that include a moral ethic. I believe that men have a stake in an egalitarian future and that feminism can enhance mens’ lives. So I see it as being very important to communicate how feminism is in mens’ interests; interests in transcending gender hierarchy rather than interests in taking a bigger piece of the pie (Brod 1998, p. 200).

It is feminist analyses that offer models of relationships based on mutuality rather than dominance (Ganley 1990, p. 25). Pence and Paymar, in contrast to their power and control wheel, which describes mens’ violence, have developed an equality wheel that includes economic partnership, shared responsibility, responsible parenting, honesty and accountability, trust and support, respect, non-threatening behaviour and negotiation and fairness (1993, p. 94).

Research shows that egalitarian couples have better communication than other couples and that both men and women are more satisfied in their relationships (Rabin 1996, p. 46). Such couples define equality in their relationships in three ways: a subjective appraisal of the level of fairness in the relationship, an equal balance of power in decision-making and equal sharing of household and parenting roles (Rabin 1996, p. 56). If we can help men see that new forms of partnership with women offer men more positive and fulfilling relationships, they may be more willing to let go of dominating and controlling behaviours.
Moving beyond the agency-structure dualism

To address these issues, however, we need to understand more fully how hegemonic masculinity 'gets into' men and how men might come to work for these changes. What are the mechanisms through which mens' personality and masculinity come to reflect the gender relations of patriarchy? We need to understand the ways in which dominant ideology is internalised in the psyches of men and how this ideology interacts with material conditions to shape men's experience.

Without a conceptual framework encompassing and reflecting the relationship between the lived experience of men and the institutional structures in which they are embedded, the possibilities for transforming mens' lives and the social relations of gender are doubtful. One either ends up in despair, immobilised by an overly socially determined self or one posits a voluntarist and idealist view of how men can change ignoring the material and social basis of patriarchy.

It is here that I think that the postmodern interrogation of critical theory is of most importance. From a postmodern critical perspective, masculinity is not an inherent property of individuals. Rather, we learn the discursive frameworks and work out how to position ourselves 'correctly' as male (Davies 1989, p. 13). Within these frameworks we are invited to take up or turn down different subject positions and a sense of masculine identity that goes with them. That is, each framework enables men to think of themselves as men in particular ways (Jackson 1990, p. 266). Such a perspective enables us to identify that the supposedly fixed position between anatomical sexuality and gender stereotypes can be broken. We are thus more able to legitimate behaviours that do not seem to derive from one's biological sex.

Through the recognition of a possible multiplicity of identities for men, we are able to challenge the view that it is not in mens' interests to change. Mens' interests can be reconstructed by men repositioning themselves in the patriarchal discourse and by men constructing alternative pro-feminist subject positions.

Avoiding collusion with men

When men work with men it is important that they recognise their kinship with fellow men. However, the common elements that exist between male workers and male clients present a number of problems. There is a fine line between emphasising the commonalities between men and men colluding with oppressive attitudes and behaviours (Pringle 1995, p. 215). When Bathrick and Kaufman audiotaped group sessions with violent men for their female supervisors, the women identified ways in which the male workers did not confront assumptions of privilege and dominance (1990, p. 113). If we do not challenge mens' abusive and sexist behaviour, we are colluding with that behaviour. This is a problem for relations between men more generally.

In light of these dangers, how confronting should we be with other men? How do we invite men to examine their behaviour without increasing their resistance? If we confront oppressive attitudes and behaviour too strongly, we may lose the engagement of the man being confronted. However, if we do not confront sufficiently, then we may well be colluding. Men should never act in a way that condones mens' victimisation of women and supports their demands for patriarchal entitlement (Brooks 1998, p. 79). At the same time, we have to connect with mens' experience. The only way through this dilemma is for men to critically reflect upon their own socialisation processes and engage with their own gendered subjectivity.

Practice with men in social work can either reinforce or oppose patriarchy. Thus work with men should be one aspect of a broader strategy for changing unequal power relations between women and men. We need to construct a new agenda for pro-feminist practice with men in social work. In my view that agenda has to acknowledge and grapple with the theoretical issues and political dilemmas that I have identified in this article.

References


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