

Bringing men into the light? Women's Studies and the problem of men

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ABSTRACT: Men can be a 'problem' for women's studies in at least three ways: as objects of feminist scholarship, as students of feminist scholarship, and as agents of this scholarship. First, studying men is an established and desirable aspect of feminist research. But to what extent does the emergent literature on men and masculinities extend or undermine the insights of feminist theory? Second, what issues does male students' participation in Women's Studies classes raise for feminist pedagogy? Third, can men themselves produce and teach feminist theory? While "Men's Studies" has failed to engage with the complexities of feminism, I argue that men can develop pro-feminist or anti-patriarchal knowledges. I explore these issues with reference to my qualitative research on young heterosexual men's understandings and practices of safe and unsafe sex, and my experience as a student and teacher in Women's Studies.

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Introduction

Men have long been a ‘problem’ for Women’s Studies. In the first place, men *are* the problem: forms of men’s power and privilege over women have been the subject of sustained feminist critique. But men are a problem in three other ways. First, there is a rapidly expanding literature focused self-consciously on men as men, whose relationship to feminist theory is not always sympathetic. Second, men are turning up as students in Women’s Studies classes, which raises issues for the processes of feminist education. Third, men are taking on, writing and even teaching feminist theory, which raises issues about epistemology and men’s relationship to feminist knowledge. I address each area in turn.

(1) Men as objects of feminist scholarship

The study of men as men is an established and desirable aspect of feminist research. Despite the common perception that feminist research has been only about women (Canaan & Griffin, 1990: 207), there has been a wide-ranging scrutiny of men and masculinities in feminist literature, a scrutiny bound up with the documentation and explication of women’s oppression and subordination (Maynard, 1990: 284). This embodies a recognition of the vital need for feminist research on men’s world, based on the understanding that women and femininities cannot be understood without reference to men and masculinities (ibid: 283; Kelly, Burton & Regan, 1994: 33–34).

Alongside this, there is a literature focused on men and masculinities *per se*, and often by men, which some have termed “Men’s Studies”. “Men’s Studies” has been criticised for failing to develop a feminist-informed and critical scholarship. “Men’s Studies”, and the American “male role” literature in particular, has paid only lip service to feminism and failed to engage with its complexities and contradictions (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1993: 30–32; Ramazanoglu, 1992: 340), shown an outdated reliance on sex-role theory (Connell, 1987, 1995), used feminist rhetoric to secure ‘fair play’ for men while disregarding wider questions of power and presenting masculinity as benign (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1993: 32; Maynard, 1990: 284), ignored questions of individual and collective political strategy (Canaan & Griffin, 1990), focused on white and privileged men (Brod, 1987), given an homogenising and essentialist treatment of the category ‘men’ (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1993), and failed to consider homosexual experience and to tackle contemporary issues of sexual politics (Dowsett, 1993a). “Men’s Studies” is also criticised in institutional terms as a colonising, marginalising and pseudo-complementary response to women’s studies (Hanmer, 1990; Canaan & Griffin, 1990: 209).

However, other authors writing on men and masculinities counterpoise themselves to “Men’s Studies”. They take seriously the political and theoretical, epistemological and institutional issues at stake in these criticisms, and they attempt to develop scholarship which is collaborative with rather than colonising of academic feminism, informed rather than ignorant of feminist scholarship (Harding, 1991: 292; Hearn, 1994; Hearn & Morgan, 1990: 203–205; Maynard, 1990: 284–85). I position my own research within this profeminist and critical scholarship on men and masculinities.

Women’s Studies and Gender Studies

Growing academic attention to masculinities is one factor fuelling the shift, at least in name, from “Women’s Studies” to “Gender Studies” in higher education. Chilla Bulbeck notes that close to half the Australian web-sites she surveyed referred to both Women’s Studies and

Gender Studies or just to Gender Studies, and that most sites have been touched by the debate over nomenclature (Bulbeck, 2000: 4–5).

There are two interrelated dangers in the growing rhetoric of “gender” and “Gender Studies”. One is that the legitimacy of focusing on women only is undermined, and women’s lives as subjects for research disappear (de Groot & Maynard, 1993: 153). I agree with Mary Evans that it is just as important as it ever was to study women, for example because of the persistence of systematic inequalities between men and women (Evans, 1991).

The second danger is that the interests of women and men will be seen to have converged. We will still study difference, but not unequal difference, and questions of power and privilege will be marginalised (de Groot & Maynard, 1993: 154–55).

The rise of “Gender Studies” may bring the defusing and depoliticising of feminist issues (de Groot & Maynard, 1993: 154). While I do not believe that the term “Gender Studies” necessarily brings with it such regressive consequences, and in fact I’m sympathetic to the term, these possibilities are ones of which it is worth being aware.

The second issue I address is men as *students* of feminist scholarship.

(2) Men as students of feminist scholarship

From the very beginnings of women’s studies and feminist scholarship, questions of the politics and processes of the classroom were central. Women’s Studies entered the academy with a profound challenge to traditional models and methods of teaching and learning, particularly to pedagogies which are hierarchical and teacher-centred and which position students as ungendered empty vessels to be filled with objective knowledge. Feminist pedagogies have emphasised learning and teaching which are egalitarian, democratic, participatory, cooperative, experiential and empowering (NWSA, 1999; Robinson, 1993: 11–12; Storrs & Mihelich, 1998: 101–2). They have stressed the relationship between the personal and the political, and questioned the boundaries between disciplines.

Feminist pedagogies themselves have shifted, with the recognition of teachers’ institutional power, debates over the ongoing gaps between content and process, and struggles in teaching across difference (Robinson, 1993: 12). It can be difficult to apply feminist ideals in education: students resist and rebel, and classrooms are embedded in wider relations of dominance (Storrs & Mihelich, 1998: 102).

I have three initial points about men as students of Women’s Studies. First, it is important and in fact vital that men learn feminist theory. Feminist knowledge should be an essential aspect of any university education, and is a critical ingredient in men’s commitments to changing gender relations in progressive directions.

Second, Women’s Studies can be taught to men and feminist pedagogy can be used with male students, even stereotypically masculine students in stereotypically masculine settings. Jennifer Scanlon (1994) describes her gender sensitivity workshop for members of a men’s rugby club, while Holly Devor (1988) found that male inmates of a medium security prison took as much from her Women’s Studies course as did other groups of Women’s Studies students.

Third, men who do Women’s Studies courses do undergo intellectual and personal change as a result of their participation. For myself, I found that Women’s Studies gave me critical tools and perspectives with which to further resist and undermine male privilege, and was a forum which was both challenging and inspiring. Men in Women’s Studies classes are outnumbered, positioned away from the centre (because women and women’s lives are the topic) and

marginal. They say that they feel highly visible, they are quieter than in other classes, and they are subject to stereotyping and a loss of individuality (Miner, 1994: 453). Madonne Miner argues that what's important about Women's Studies for men is that it offers them the experience of being outside the circle, of being marginal, and this "minority experience" is a significant learning one.

However, none of this addresses the impact on *women* of men's presence as students in mixed-sex Women's Studies classrooms. Two pieces written in 1983 argue that, as Renate Klein states, there is "*no room for men in Women's Studies, none whatsoever*" (Klein, 1983: 413). When men are present in the Women's Studies classroom, gendered power relations and gendered constructions of authority and knowledge are said to constrain women's ability to develop feminist understandings.

Pat Mahoney observed (in the early 1980s) that in Women's Studies courses, some male students quickly realise the ways in which feminist understandings threaten their vested interests, may react aggressively, and are able to monopolise the space such that it remains fixed in male definitions e.g. of 'men being got at' (Mahoney, 1983: 332). These interactions constrain women's potential feminist understandings, and reinforce to women the dangers of confronting patriarchal norms and controls (ibid: 332–34).

Klein (1983) identifies three typical 'styles' among men, which are not exclusive to Women's Studies and which are shared among men as students, teachers, or administrators. There is the *expert*, who treats feminist theory as just another body of knowledge which can be wielded with his masculine expert authority. There is the *ignoramus*, who tells women that he has no idea what Women's Studies and feminism are, and would the women please tell him. And there is the *poor dear*, who say it's awful and a terrible burden to be a member of the dominant group, and who looks towards women to save him (Klein, 1983: 415–418).

Each of these forms reproduces traditional gendered patterns of relating. Men claim attention and take up space, while women are invited to defer to masculine expert authority, deal with men's problems, rescue and ego-massage them, and to heap praise on the signs of understanding from men that they would take for granted from women (Klein, 1983: 417–420).

If feminist classrooms are supposed to be egalitarian and empowering, then men's presence clearly may undermine this ideal.

Such patterns perhaps are less likely when men are in the minority in the classroom. At ANU, there are usually one or two men among 25 or 30 students, around five percent. And notwithstanding Klein's findings, such men may be less likely than other men to participate in patriarchal codes of interaction, given their choice of Women's Studies in the first place.

Furthermore, men's absence does not guarantee egalitarian classroom relations. As recent accounts of feminist pedagogy stress, power relations also operate along other axes of difference such as class, race, sexuality, personality, and indeed teacher/student. So the questions of who speaks, how they speak, and who is silenced are pertinent ones for Women's Studies classrooms regardless of the sex of their participants.

However, there is the argument that the presence of *any* man diminishes the possibilities for feminist pedagogy. In particular, men's presence blocks the potential for consciousness-raising among female students: the potential to share, discuss, theorise and politicise their personal experience, and thus to 'make the personal political'. In the early second wave of feminism, consciousness-raising was an important element in the construction of feminist knowledge (Eisenstein, 1984: 37–38). Regardless of the actual behaviour of men in a Women's Studies class, their mere presence may shape what female students are prepared to discuss (Mahoney,

1983: 332–33). For example, women are probably less likely to volunteer their experiences of rape or abortion in the presence of men.

On the other hand, consciousness-raising is increasingly marginalised as an aspect of the Women's Studies classroom. Teaching and learning methods which emphasise students' reflection, such as small group discussion of personal experience, diaries and journals, are relatively rare in contemporary Women's Studies courses.

Moreover, early feminist notions of “experience” have been problematised, as feminist scholars have begun to think about how experience and theory interact, and to question why they are thought of as separate entities (Robinson, 1993: 16). But this does not mean that contemporary feminist pedagogies refuse to engage with women's personal experience. For example, some poststructuralist teaching methods invite women (and men) to reflect on the formation and negotiation of our gendered subjectivities, to critically examine the processes and discourses through which we are constituted as particular selves (Davies, 1994: 77; Davies, 1992: 57–5).

I am unsure of the significance men's presence or absence would have for such pedagogical practices.

There is every reason to think that men will continue to be a regular minority of students in Women's Studies classrooms. So we are faced with the need to develop strategies to minimise gendered dynamics of power, such as teaching practices which subvert and undermine such dynamics. If we are keen to encourage reflection on students' own gendered lives, we may invite students to form discussion groups outside the classroom or to join existing groups.

(3) Men as agents of feminist scholarship [writing and teaching...]

The final area I address is men as producers, and teachers, of feminist scholarship.

Men's relation to feminist knowledge is a problematic one, because of the characteristic constitution of masculine subjectivity and men's standpoint, and masculine models of knowledge itself. Feminist critiques of the dominant modes of social inquiry suggest that they represent fundamentally masculine ways of viewing the world and the production of knowledge about that world. The production of knowledge has been organised through the ‘god trick’ of seeing everything from nowhere (Haraway, 1988: 581). Knowledge is disembodied and premised on the privileging of false ‘objectivity’, detachment, abstraction, rationality and domination (Morgan, 1992).

Men come to experience ourselves through these same patriarchal modes of knowing, through the historical identification of masculinity with rationality. We have believed that we speak as *man*, a category inclusive of men and women, in a claim to positionless ‘truth’ (Davies, 1992: 54).

Drawing on feminist standpoint theory, one can distinguish between ‘men's standpoint’ and, if such a thing is possible, ‘men's anti-patriarchal standpoint’ or ‘pro-feminist men's standpoint’.

A men's anti-patriarchal standpoint *is* possible, and it is possible for the same reason that white anti-racist, heterosexual anti-homophobic, and privileged anti-classist standpoints are possible. It is possible because the experience of privileged groups generally is not so determining that the production of alternative forms of knowledge is impossible.

Sandra Harding argues against the idea that *only* the oppressed can generate knowledge and that one can contribute to the growth of knowledge only out of one's own *oppression* (Harding, 1991: 278). She argues that feminists have contradictory identities and social locations which

can be turned to epistemological advantage, and that the social situation in and through which knowledge is generated is *not* determined exactly by one's gender, or race, or class, or sexuality.

Harding sees it as politically vital that dominant groups take responsibility for their social locations, using the analyses of the relevant subordinate group to understand their lives, and thus adopt "traitorous social locations". That we become traitors to privilege and domination.

Some white feminists in the last decade or so have made significant efforts to come to terms with the critique of white feminisms by women of colour. Commenting on this, Harding writes, "I find it paradoxical—and frankly, suspicious—that most of the European-American feminists I know who admire, learn from, and use the understandings of feminists of color appear to overestimate their own ability to engage in antiracist thought but to underestimate men's ability to engage in feminist thought." (Harding, 1991: 277).

On the other hand, feminists' reluctance to bestow the term 'feminist' on men is understandable, given men's habit of colonising and appropriating everything and some men's arrogant claim to feminist authority (*ibid*). And I certainly agree that men should not adopt the term 'feminist' for ourselves, but opt instead for 'pro-feminist', 'feminist-informed', 'anti-patriarchal' or 'anti-sexist'.

How can members of dominant groups adopt traitorous social locations and identities? Harding says we do so by 'reinventing ourselves as Other'. Its key principle is that those whose lives are constructed at the centre of the social order learn about these lives by starting our thoughts from the perspective of lives at the margins (Harding, 1991: 269).

I will not go into the strategies men can use to 'reinvent ourselves as Other', but in relation to men in Women's Studies, it is worth noting that temporary experiences of 'otherness' may contribute to men's ability to develop an anti-patriarchal standpoint. Such experiences come about when we are located in an immediate social context in which we are made 'other' and the original and oppressed 'Other' becomes in a sense the norm (for example through sheer force of numbers), problematising our identities and locations (Stanley & Wise, 1990: 33, citing Bulkin).

Not only is a men's pro-feminist standpoint possible; men's feminist-informed critical inquiry can make contributions to scholarship and political change which women *cannot* make (Harding, 1987: 12). There are areas of masculine behaviour and thought to which male researchers have easier access than do female researchers, such as all-male institutions and informal masculine spaces, and men can give access to features of their and other men's 'inner' lives, such as in the area of sexuality (Harding: 1987: 11–12, Morgan, 1992: 198). Also, men can use men's institutional power for anti-sexist ends, strategically and carefully exploiting the masculine authority which men in general are trained to value (Harding, 1987: 12).

So, men can develop feminist knowledges — knowledges that serve the gender interests of women and erode men's privilege.

But what about men *teaching* Women's Studies? I was asked by the Women's Studies staff at my university to write and teach a new first-year course in feminist theory, and I begin this in a few weeks. While I am very excited by this opportunity, I have several concerns as well.

Most of all, I am concerned that my appointment will lend symbolic legitimacy to the conservative notions that Women's Studies or Gender Studies *should* be taught by more men or that the sex of the teacher is irrelevant to feminist scholarship. I fully intend to continue my practical, intellectual and political support for the development of feminist scholarship in general and Women's Studies in particular.

Across difference

When men produce theory on gender, and when men teach on gender, they are *working across difference*. Similar issues are involved when white women write or teach about race and Aboriginal women's experience, when heterosexual women write or teach about sexuality and lesbians and gay men, and so on.

One argument against men teaching in Women's or Gender Studies rests on the premise that personal experience is the basis of feminist pedagogy, such that "only those who have experienced gender oppression have the knowledge and right to speak about it" (Storrs & Mihelich, 1998: 103). Storrs and Mihelich criticise the essentialist "politics of experience" they find in this argument. They state that a politics of experience rests on universal notion of women's experience and ignores diversity; a politics of experience often reduces one's complex identity into its most visible component; and this politics hides the relationality and fluidity between male/female, black/white and other dichotomously constructed identities and social relations (ibid: 103–4).

Another key argument for female teachers in Women's Studies is that the development of rapport between them and female students enhances teaching effectiveness (Storrs & Mihelich, 1998: 103). Again, Storrs and Mihelich argue that given the diversities constructed through multiple axes of social differentiation, being a woman does not inherently provide female teachers with insight into the lived experiences of all women or the ability to teach it (ibid: 107).

This suggests that whether one is female or male, queer or straight, rich or poor, teaching in Women's Studies and elsewhere inevitably involves questions of how to work across difference. Having said this, I remain aware that for men to teach and work in Women's Studies is to occupy a delicate, problematic and controversial position, which brings both particular responsibilities and challenges.

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