Masculinity studies as fetish and the need of a feminist imagination

This winter, a debate on masculinity studies took place in the Swedish journal Arena. Sara Edenheim (2009), who initiated the debate, criticized masculinity studies for not only being theoretically undeveloped, but also for having antifeminist tendencies. The following debate, where, among others, the editor of NORMA participated, mainly dealt with the relationship between masculinity studies and feminism (Hill and Hamrén 2010, Mellström 2010, Sandberg 2010). Even though the debaters had divergent points of view on some issues, Edenheim and the others agreed that masculinity research is not necessarily always feminist.

Among other things, Edenheim critiqued Raewyn Connell’s (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity for not deserving the attention it gets in gender studies. According to Edenheim, Connell’s typology of masculinities – which includes hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, and marginalized masculinities – is simplified and difficult to employ in empirical research. Critiquing Connell (1995) is, of course, not a novelty; in fact, there are today a number of detailed, critical discussions on the matter (e.g. Beasley 2008, Hearn 2004, Howson 2009). But despite the critique, Connell’s theoretical framework has been, and is still being successfully used to study patriarchal and homosocial relations. For instance, in the present issue of NORMA Per Ekstrand and Esa Kumpala depart from Connell’s theory of the body in order to study men and masculinities in health care. In their article, “Between men in health care – about sport, bodies and relations”, they convincingly show that sports are not
necessarily arenas for violence, homophobia or competition, instead sports activities could be used as resources for building alliances between male staff and patients and thus overcoming traditional hierarchies within health care.

What is remarkable about Connell’s theory, however, is its unparalleled impact outside academia, among activists and policy makers. In particular, the book *Masculinities* (1995) seems to be included in the theoretical canon of male feminists and pro-feminists, something that Lauren Stewart (2010) experienced in her study of a male group of anti-rape activists in a US college. She found that group members where well acquainted with Connell’s work and used her typology in their self-understanding and in their analyses of society. Linn Egeberg Holmgren (2008) has similar experience in her study of male feminist activists in Sweden, who shared more or less the same theoretical knowledge. As she puts it: ’[When] asking about domestic work I got Carin Holmberg when asked about sexuality or sexual desires I got Judith Butler and when asked about definitions of manliness I got Raewyn Connell’ (Egeberg Holmgren 2008, 6). As Marie Nordberg and Tomas Saar (2008) have shown, masculinity studies and Connell’s framework have also been used within educational policy in order to explain boys’ educational underachievement, which is seen as the result of an ‘anti-study culture’ where a masculinity characterized by violence, rowdiness, and status hierarchies is normative. In reports from Swedish educational agencies, hegemonic masculinity becomes equated with underachievement. According to Nordberg and Saar (2008), however, the problem is that gender relations are not studied as they intersect with other socially stratified identities based on, for instance, class and ethnicity. Employed in this simplified fashion, Nordberg and Saar (2008) argue, Connell’s theory is used to homogenize young men (arguing that they all invest in the anti-study masculinity) while simultaneously pointing out some young men as embodying hegemonic masculinity. In particular so-called ‘immigrant boys’ have been argued to be problematic and in need of discipline (cf. Jonsson and Milani 2009). One way of moving beyond this scurrilous portrait of immigrant men is to study how the men in question experience this Othering process, which Sune Qvartrup Jensen does in his article “Masculinity at the margins – Othering, marginality and resistance among young marginalized ethnic minority men”. Drawing on an ethnographic fieldwork among ethnic minority men in Danish youth clubs, he shows how the young men draw on the positive symbolical meaning that is latent in stereotypical portrayals of immigrant men. For instance, the young men borrow elements from Afro-American hip-hop culture in order to emphasize their marginality and the portrayal of immigrant men as dangerous.
A possible explanation for the popularity of masculinity studies in general, and Connell’s (1995) framework in particular, might be found in its double-edge function. It is useful in order to critique patriarchal relations, but without accusing (most) individual men. When exposed to feminist critique, it is not unusual that men recoil, feel personally accused, and argue that feminism has gone ‘too far’. Some men see themselves as the losers to the advancement of feminism, something shown in Leena Autonen-Vaaraniem’s contribution, "Men’s activism, moral reasoning and good fatherhood in post-divorce family context". Through a textual analysis of Finnish fatherhood activists’ material, she shows how men are portrayed as victims of women in child custody disputes. Mothers are seen as selfish, not acting in the best interests of the child, while (female) social workers are perceived as unprofessional and idealizing motherhood. My own experience is that men seldom recognize themselves in the hegemonic masculinity figure that a typologized use of Connell’s framework evokes. White, middle-class men would either argue that they work hard to financially support their family, or that they try their best in sharing household work and childcare relatively equal with their partner. For such men, the hegemonic masculinity figure has become ‘the Other’, a character distant from their own experiences. Other men are violent, oppressive, rowdy and macho, while they are ‘jämställda’ (gender equal) partners, and caring, involved fathers. The point I am trying to make here is that masculinity research may actually contribute to patriarchal relations, and Connell’s theory can, ironically, be used to maintain the hegemony of (white, middle-class) men and to conceal power relations. With that, masculinity studies becomes a fetish (Marx 1867/1992), obscuring the ‘true’ nature of social relations. Slavoj Žižek (2001) exemplifies the Marxist term through what he calls ‘Western Buddhism’, that is, the particular version of Buddhism that has become popular in Western cultures. According to Žižek, the popularity of Western Buddhism is based on the promise of having the solution to the side effects of capitalism, such as stress, and supplying tools for granting inner peace. However, Žižek argues, it is in fact ‘the most efficient way for us to fully participate in the capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity’ (2001, 13). The fetishist function of Western Buddhism lies in that it reduces our guilty conscience while successfully concealing the nature of capitalist relations. Even though the original intention was different, there is an imminent risk that masculinity studies are used as a similar fetish. In line with Edenheim’s (2009) critical discussion, I would argue that masculinity studies is in danger of being seen as feminism’s less ‘dangerous’ little brother; a research field where men (researchers, activists, policy makers, and other men)
could feel sufficiently comfortable, appear as progressive and gender-equal, but without facing their own participation in maintaining patriarchy.

What, then is the solution? Is there a way beyond a fetishist function of masculinity studies? One way forward, I believe, is to practice what has been called the feminist imagination (Bell 1999, Thorne 2010). The feminist imagination builds on Charles Wright Mills’ (1959/2000) classical concept ‘the sociological imagination’. According to Mills, the aim of sociology is to connect individual experiences with societal relations, and to ‘translate private troubles into public issues’ (Mills 1959/2000, 187). The sociological imagination enables the researcher to see beyond individual experience and reveals the relationship between history, individual biography and social structures. According to Thorne (2010), the sociological imagination is crucial, but the feminist imagination takes a step further in that it contains a political struggle for social change. It is also, in accordance with Edenheim (2009), a critical endeavor. Keeping in mind the risk for masculinity research of (unintentionally) reproducing power relations based on, for instance, gender, sexuality, class, race and age, I would add that a feminist imagination for masculinity studies also includes self-critique and self-reflection of its own activity.

The articles in this issue of NORMA are all good examples of studies of men and masculinity with a feminist imagination. Let me finally introduce Dag Balkmar and Tanja Joelsson’s article “The bionic man goes autoerotic – theoretic keys towards a refined understanding of men’s risk taking in public space”. In order to understand why young men are over-represented in mortal traffic accidents, they develop the terms ‘the bionic man’ and ‘autoerotism’. These terms show how cars and other vehicles could be seen as extensions of the (male) body, and the emotional investments men have in risk-taking behavior. It is such risk-taking behavior that exposes themselves and fellow road-users to danger. Through connecting individual men’s subjective relations to their vehicles with issues of traffic safety, Balkmar and Joelsson give us an example of how feminist masculinity research can be used to connect men’s individual biographies to public issues and enable social change.

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References


