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Are Men Getting more Emotional? Critical Sociological Perspectives on Men, Masculinities and Emotions

Sam de Boise and Jeff Hearn

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Introduction

Profeminist commentators and campaigners have cited an increasing understanding of men's emotional lives, and getting men to understand their own emotions, as central to addressing gender inequalities (see hooks 2004; Kimmel and Holler 2011; Sattel 1976; Seidler 1991). A focus on the role of socialisation in shaping gendered-emotion narratives, has also been seen as key to tackling men's underreporting of mental health issues, both separately and in connection with high suicide rates (Balswick and Peek 1971; Branney and White 2008; Cleary 2012; Robertson and Monaghan 2012). These perspectives all suggest that emotions are related to, and reinforce, social structures and/or discourses and that improving men's emotional communication is key to fostering greater gender equality.

As Pease (2012) has argued, in studies of gender and emotions, social scientists have tended to suggest that men simply 'repress' emotions rather than exploring the ways in which men understand and interpret them, as well as how these connect to social structures. A growing body of, as well as existing, social research, *has* demonstrated that men not only have an active understanding of their emotional lives (see, for example, Galasinski 2004), but in many cases appear to practice a 'more emotional' form of masculinity (Forrest 2010; Holmes 2015; Roberts 2013) than previously documented or assumed. Such research, therefore, has clear, broader implications for gender equality. However, not only do these often neglect how men's privilege stems *from* certain forms of emotional expression, they also tend to overlook how many men's privileges are supported through and congruent with certain emotions (Pease

2012); men's emotions are always personal but they may not necessarily be politically progressive.

This article builds on previous debates on emotions in *The Sociological Review* and other sociological sources around the importance of engaging with emotions sociologically (Barbalet 2002; Burkitt 2002), especially in relation to feminist critiques of imbalances in emotion work (see Duncombe and Marsden 1995). Yet it argues that sociological work on men and emotions needs to engage critically with complex understandings of emotions, both 'inside' and 'outside' of sociology, in order to retain a critical perspective, whilst documenting potential changes in the social organisation of gendered emotions. The article starts by detailing how an interest in men's emotions has been shaped by feminist thought and how men's emotional stoicism has been related to the 'costs of masculinity' (Messner 1997: 5-6). It moves on to highlight how men's emotions have been theorized by different sociological approaches before problematising presumed links between expression and 'actual' emotion, and the separation of emotion from 'rational' action. The article outlines how emotions are context-dependent and historically contingent on patriarchal, colonialist frameworks. It concludes by considering how feminist, material-discursive approaches to affect can help frame emotions in a way which is neither biologically essentialist nor entirely determined by social constructionism, without neglecting dynamics of power.

Theorising Men's Emotions

Men's Emotions as a Feminist Issue

As many will already be aware, one of the key aims of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 1970s was to show how the 'personal is political' (Hanisch 1969). This meant placing women's personal lives and personal relations between men and women at the centre of political resistance. Many feminists during this period argued that emotional relations

between men and women were shaped by and related to patriarchal structures (see Firestone 1979 [1970]: 121, 129), demonstrating how seemingly ‘private’, personal experiences were necessary and productive sites of social struggle in changing ways of seeing and experiencing the world (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012). Research on care and parenting (Craig 2006; Hobson 2002; Johansson and Klinth 2008), as well as intimate partner relationships (Duncombe and Marsden 1995; Kimmel and Holler 2011), made the case for men being more active in doing ‘emotion work’ as part of more gender-equal relations (see also Chodorow 1978; Dinnerstein 1987).

Men, allied to leftist and feminist movements, have responded to calls for taking emotions seriously. Partly this emerged as a remedy to a Marxist focus on exclusively ‘productive’ over ‘reproductive’ labour and the recognition that ‘emotional labour’ was integral to capitalist societies (see Hochschild 1979; Illouz 2007). However, men’s relationships with feminist women, globally, through left-wing and civil rights activism, also impacted on attempts to engage men in talking about their emotions as a deliberate consciousness-raising (CR) strategy to align themselves with feminist concerns (Seidler 1991; White and Peretz 2009)¹. Personal experiences of ‘emotional distance’ with fathers and male siblings have also often directly impacted on the development of critical, academic work on men and masculinities (see hooks 2004; Messner 1997). Our own experiences of both men and emotions (including *our* emotions), in different contexts, too, have enormously influenced our interests and writing on the topic.

Far from treating emotional inexpressiveness as an innate biological trait, a range of gender-aware authors began to understand men’s apparent lack of emotional expressiveness in terms of societal power (Sattel 1976). Critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM), which emerged from strands of feminist, queer, Marxist and critical-race perspectives, with a largely sociological focus on power (see e.g. Hearn 2004), too, emphasised the transformative

potential of men's emotions. These argued that white, heterosexual, middle class, able-bodied, men's (WHAMs') privileges stem from their adherence to forms of rationality based on a persistent 'control' or repression of emotions (Connell 1995; Seidler 2007), linking WHAMs' personal perceptions of emotional 'control' to a Cartesian separation between mind, responsible for 'rational' action, and body, responsible for 'irrational' action (Seidler 2006: 95).

Critiques linking gendered emotional differences to socialisation were important for two main reasons. Firstly they challenged weak evidence that any observed emotional differences between men and women (based on evolutionary accounts, see Darwin 2009 [1872]) were *determined* by reproductive capabilities (Fausto-Sterling 2012; Shields 1987). To this end, cross-national, comparative studies, demonstrated that gender affects emotional displays, which differ from country to country (Fischer and Manstead 2000) and at different points in time. This suggests that *displays* of emotionality and unemotionality are conditioned by cultural factors which can be contested (Brody 1999; Timmers et al. 1998). Secondly, these perspectives highlighted that men's inclination toward 'rationality', which supported WHAMs' privilege in employment and social policy (Seidler 1994), in the West and global North, was neither 'normal' nor justified. This work expanded on earlier critiques of 'sex roles' as symmetrical, complementary or natural, incorporating a political emphasis on social power relations (Eichler 1980) as an explanation for men's emotional impoverishment.

Emotions and the 'Costs of Masculinity'

Sociological, social psychological, CSMM and 'Second Wave' perspectives all advanced the idea that it is an inability to understand, express or communicate, rather than an inherent inability to *develop* emotions, which men often struggled with. The distinction between 'actual' emotion and display, therefore, came to be understood a defining feature of some men's gender performance, emerging directly from social privilege. According to these perspectives, adherence to 'ideals' of masculinity, or gender norms, also impact on men's ability to express

emotions because they imply irrationality (Pease 2012), as well as dependence and therefore ‘weakness’ (Seidler 1994: 149).

To this end, a recurrent theme has been that men often learn to hide emotions or maintain emotional distance due to socialization (Balswick and Peek 1971). However, this also carries certain costs for men’s individual well-being. In fact, the so-called ‘costs of masculinity’ (Messner 1997: 5-6) have been directly related to emotions in various ways. Sociologically-informed perspectives have noted how men’s inability to talk about experiences of vulnerability, mortality, pain, grief and loss (McNess 2008; Thompson 1997), in line with cultural gendered constructs, have also been central to their underreporting of depression and other mental health issues.

Men’s relatively high suicide rates across various different countries have also been explicitly linked to an unwillingness to express or talk about emotions (Cleary 2012; Garcia 2016). This characterization of emotions has suggested that men need to be better ‘attuned’ to their bodies in order to express and communicate, their ‘inner’ lives (see Charteris-Black and Seale 2013; Monaghan and Robertson 2012) whilst emphasising that medical institutions need to be aware of how gender-constructs influence men’s emotional expression when making diagnoses of mental health (Branney and White 2008). Such approaches have, thus, also advocated increasing men’s emotional ‘intelligence’ and ‘literacy’ (Petersen 2004: 137), whilst presuming socialised differences.

Developing Perspectives

‘Classical’ social theorists such as Durkheim, Weber, Goffman, Elias or Le Bon *have* implicitly studied how men’s emotions are connected to social structures (see Barbalet 2002; Hughes 2010), even if they often did not always recognise the gendered dynamic. Yet as Pease (2012: 126) argues, whilst emotional inexpressiveness has been documented as a source of men’s

social privilege and ‘personal pain’, with a few exceptions (Galasinski 2004; White and Peretz 2009), sociologists have not devoted sufficient interest to the study of how men experience, engage with, or understand emotions.

In contrast to Connell and Seidler, particularly, Pease observes that despite critiques of socialised emotional difference, there is more of a recurrent presumption that men appear to be uncomfortable with emotions, with little further investigation. As he outlines, emotions form a connection between ‘psyche and subjectivity of the individual on the one hand and the wider social order on the other’ (Pease 2012: 127). It is largely through emotions, generated in relation with others, that people give meaning to and make sense of their actions (Burkitt 2002: 156). This means that exploring how men’s emotions are shaped by and help to reproduce structural inequalities are important for critical sociological perspectives on men and masculinities.

Recent research in the social sciences has paid more attention to men’s emotions. This is both in terms of men doing more emotion work in (heterosexual) relationships than previously assumed (Holmes 2015; Roberts 2013) and not being afraid to express emotions within relationships (Allen 2007; Forrest 2010). Much of this growing body of literature has demonstrated that men both have an understanding of their own emotional lives (Galasinski 2004) and are more prepared to show emotions in front of other men (Anderson 2008), leading to a ‘softening’ (Roberts 2015) of, or a challenge to, ‘hegemonic’ masculinity/ies (Lomas et al. 2016; Montes 2013). These changes, then, conceivably emerge a direct result of broader feminist critiques around gendered socialisation, power and emotionality.

Current sociological approaches to men, masculinities and emotions, at present, can be categorised into three themes. First, *softening masculinity* perspectives reject the language of ‘crisis’ but see men’s increasing capacity to express themselves emotionally, as fundamentally re-defining masculinity (Anderson 2008; Forrest 2010; Montes 2013; Roberts

2013; 2015; White and Peretz 2009). These tend not to explain emotions as such, but link evidence of men and boys' emotion talk to movements toward greater gender equality. Second, *hybridisation* perspectives (Allen 2007; Holmes 2015; Lomas et al. 2015), again, often do not define emotions explicitly but are cautious about the extent to which men and boys' emotion talk represents a fundamental shift in gender relations. Whilst they observe greater willingness in men's propensity to talk about emotions as important evidence of transforming gender relations, they also note the potential for newer forms of 'hybridised' masculinities to maintain gender inequalities despite such talk. Third, *constructionist* perspectives (Galasinski 2004; Pease 2012) explicitly treat emotions as emerging from discursive arrangements of power as well as linguistic and cultural differences. Importantly, these do *not* portray men's emotions, or men discussing emotions, as 'new' nor necessarily antithetical to masculinity/ies. Though, whilst rejecting notions of 'primary' or 'hardwired' emotions, they still tend implicitly toward understanding a specific number of culturally constructed emotions as guiding men's actions in interpersonal relationships.

Defining and understanding emotions themselves are crucial to how they are studied in relation to gendered power dynamics (Petersen 2004; Warner and Shields 2009) and outlining their potential for a transformation of gender inequalities. However, we suggest that, in much of the existing literature above, there is some conceptual confusion over whether researchers are interrogating how men *talk* about emotions, how they *express* them or how they experience physiological *states*. This stems from one or more of the following: the conflation of physiology with expression; an assumed correspondence between language and action; the underlying assumption that emotionality usually connotes 'positive' behaviour; a false polarity between emotional and rational action; and the assumption that emotions are concerned primarily with individual bodies. The political implications particularly in how social factors regulate the development and circulation of emotions, and how these necessarily shift with

social change, are often lost. Therefore, taking Pease's starting point that an analysis of men's emotions clearly has implications for structural gender equality, we argue for greater conceptual clarity in order to contribute to debates in this developing area of sociological inquiry.

Defining Emotions

Arousal, Expression and Action

Firstly, the 'discovery' of emotions is actually relatively recent, historically, supplanting previous understandings of passions and humours as fundamentally interconnected to the soul (Arikha 2007; Solomon 1993). The history of emotions, and their specifications, is bound up with the development of professional, secular psychology and the notion of individual physiology as responsible for guiding human behaviour (Dixon 2005; Reddy 2001)². William James' (1884) *What is an Emotion?* was one of the most influential pieces in shaping psychological and neuroscientific research into emotions (Solomon 1984). James' work, itself hugely indebted to Descartes' (1649) ideas of 'primary passions', and Darwin's (1872) 'basic emotions', argued that emotions should be understood as the physiological interpositions between perception and the arousal of the individual's autonomic nervous system (James 1884: 189).

His approach has been hugely significant in developing the study of emotions, which was believed to be best suited to the psychological sciences (Petersen 2004). Whilst there was some disagreement on the exact sequence of events required to experience an emotion (eg. Lazarus 1984; Schachter and Singer 1962), the idea that a finite number of discretely identifiable states are 'hardwired' into individuals, and objectively observable though *measurable* (Boehner et al. 2007) physiological changes in individual bodies, became the dominant paradigm by which emotions were studied throughout 19th and 20th Centuries (eg. Ekman and Friesen 1971).

Sociologists, whilst critical of the idea that human behaviour is biologically predetermined, have still often taken as a starting point that emotions are primarily individual, physiological changes which are influenced by social structures and which shape action. For instance, as Turner and Stets' (2005: 4) extensive and detailed handbook on the sociology of emotions notes:

Emotions emerge as the brain activates four body systems: the autonomic nervous system, the neurotransmitter and neuroactive peptide systems, the more inclusive hormonal system ... and the musculoskeletal system, which interacts with all of the other systems to generate observable emotional responses.

There is a relationship between emotions and behaviour, which undoubtedly involves physiological responses. Yet the notions that emotions *always* have observable indicators, and that these indicators *drive* action, can be easily categorised into 'more' or 'less', or are easily observable with reference to primary / basic emotions, particularly, have been heavily critiqued (see Wetherell 2012).

The physiological components of emotions are often ignored by constructionist perspectives which are (rightly) wary of biological determinism, or left unproblematized by those who have been keen to emphasise how emotions become embodied expressions as a consequence of the interplay between structure and agency (e.g. Probyn 2004). Feminist work is also justifiably cautious about engaging with physiological approaches to emotions, given their longstanding roots in evolutionary biology. However it is important to understand that there is considerable debate over what emotions are and how they link to behaviour in the psychological or natural sciences, rather than equating physiological accounts with naïve biological determinism. Interrogating the particular history of emotions as hardwired, unanticipated, autonomic responses is important in that the idea that emotions and emotional

expressions can be objectively measured through physiological indicators or objectively determined reactions, misrepresents the relationship between emotions and social action.

Critics of an ‘arousal’ approach have pointed to the fact that emotions are not always directly observable and not necessarily related to bodily actions or behaviour; a snarl does not produce feelings of anger just as a smile does not necessarily produce feelings of happiness. The reported perception of emotional experience, too, does not always correspond with physiological changes (Gabrielsson 2002), there is no necessarily direct link between physiology and expression (Laird and Lacasse 2014: 30), and emotions are not a direct precursor to individual *or* social action (see Hochschild 1979). ‘Arousal’ approaches to emotions have frequently advanced an implicitly behaviourist understanding of human action, more connected to instinctual responses rather than complex understandings of emotions (Barrett et al. 2007). Thus, even the idea that men’s emotions are ‘normally hidden’ or that men are/were ‘unemotional’, relies on a model whereby emotions are interpreted through outward physiological manifestations or unanticipated ‘leakages’ of ‘real’ emotion (Blackman 2008). This reifies a ‘feminization of emotions’ narrative which characterises emotions as defined through practices discursively and historically associated with women’s and/or ‘feminine’ bodies.

For sociologists, *valence* and *forms* of arousal (Barrett 2006) in social action are also important considerations that are seldom considered in a discussion of men and emotions. The same emotion-labels not only differ in intensity, depending on the circumstance, but one or more emotion-labels are often implicated at the same time. Different physiological indicators may also correspond to the same emotion-label, making it difficult or even useless to focus on the label itself as the precursor to action. For instance, men’s violence may involve feelings of anger, fear, sadness and frustration, but also satisfaction, pride, even happiness, depending on the context. Therefore, the binary model of emotions, as either ‘on or off’, present or absent, is

too simplistic to capture the *motivational* aspects of embodied experience (Clough and Halley 2007; Sedgwick 2003; Tomkins 1962). These considerations are vital for sociological approaches in seeking to theorise changes in men's behaviour, especially when interrogating why many men feel intensely about certain modes of behaviour which are detrimental to others *and* themselves.

Emotions and Rationality

Valence also matters for sociologists interested in power, gender and emotions in that emotions such as anger and rage have historically been related to masculinity (Pease 2012), and also help support the 'hegemony of men' (Hearn 2004). Yet such emotions can also often be regarded by others, as well as individuals themselves, as 'rational' responses to situations (Lewis 2000), precisely because of gendered privilege. Similarly, what makes some men happy (e.g. a football team winning or socialising almost exclusively with other men) may be considered a form of 'emotional' behaviour that is entirely 'rational', but may not be particularly progressive, even if it is 'positive' for the individual in terms of valence.

The notion, discussed above, that emotions are 'good' for gender equality, stems in part from the idea that they are 'less masculine' because they imply less of a commitment to rationality. Yet emotions are not as easily identifiable or as discretely separate from 'rational' action as is commonly presumed. Fundamentally, Turner and Stets (2005: 21-22) note that: 'when certain areas of the cerebral cortex, particularly the prefrontal lobe, are disconnected from subcortical emotion centers of the brain, individuals have difficulty making decisions of *any* kind'. The mental fatigue which would ensue incessantly weighing up potential outcomes to every social decision, means that, 'one function of emotion is precisely to solve the problems that a reliance on calculation would create' (Barbalet 2002: 3). Similarly, to be rational, often, is to, quite literally, *feel* rational (James 1879), often through the angry denial of those who are deemed to be acting 'irrationally' (Lloyd 1984; Mayer 2009).

Distinctions between ‘rational’ and ‘emotional’ behaviour become increasingly blurred when considering that a fear or worry of being judged as ‘unmanly’ by partners, peers or colleagues may actually support so-called cultural displays of ‘rationality’ (Bourdieu 2001: 52). The perceived ‘lack’, or ‘control’, of an emotional display can itself, therefore, be motivated by an attachment to certain modes of behaviour, which in themselves could be considered emotional responses (Blackman 2008: 26). Furthermore, the notion that ‘real men are not afraid to show their emotions’ builds on existing class, age and/or cultural distinctions between ‘weak, regressive’ men, who are afraid of being judged, and ‘real, enlightened’ men who are not (see Allen 2007).

‘Emotional labour’ is also functionally rational in a patriarchal, capitalist system (Hochschild 1979) and what passes for rational, and indeed privileged, behaviour is often made possible by what are considered emotions (Barbalet 2001). A more integrated model of body and brain is often advocated by feminist neuroscientists as an explanation for human action (Fausto-Sterling 2012; Fine 2010). Yet the clear separation of cognition and emotion, or emotionality and rationality, has persisted in sociological perspectives on men and masculinities (for instance Connell 1995; Seidler 2007), and sociology more generally, reifying the conceptual gulf between the two. Broadening definitions of what ‘counts’ as an emotion or emotional expressions, as well as detailing the link between expression, action and talk, are therefore important in thinking critically about men’s emotions in relation to social inequalities.

Display, Development and Context

Emotional displays are also culturally, historically and situationally context-specific (Author B: 41), as is men’s emotional ‘inexpressiveness’ (Sattel 1976: 475). Thinking of how men cry at football matches, gigs, births or funerals, amongst other situations, it is possible to see how the display of even supposedly ‘unmasculine’ emotions, in specific settings, become socially accepted (see Barrett et al. 1998; Ekenstam 1998). The physiological markers associated with

the display of ‘negative’ emotions (blushing due to embarrassment for example), emerge in situational contexts as a direct result of disjunctions between performance and culturally learned expectations (Goffman 1956; Author A). Thus, trying to establish levels by which to judge whether men in general are ‘more’ or ‘less’ open about their emotions, at different points in time, is either impossible or potentially misdirected.

By situating emotions in historical, cultural and everyday contexts, rather than attributing men’s emotions only to broader societal shifts, it is also possible to see that the idea there is something novel or historically unprecedented about men expressing emotions is untrue. Crucially, the discursive figure of the ‘until-recently-unemotional-man’ is premised only on certain men’s bodies and a reductive understanding of masculinity. As Segal (1990: 188) has suggested: ‘it is certainly of interest that the stereotypes of white masculinity - the typical silence on feelings and inability to express emotions for example - are so much at odds with the Black jazz, soul and reggae tradition, so expressive of Black men's (and women's) feelings and emotions. But it reveals no essential truths about masculinity’. Thus, the idea of increasingly ‘emotional men’ reifies the narrative that broader changes in men and masculinity are premised on narratives concerning WHAMs.

Furthermore, there have been innumerable examples of commentators inquiring into the nature of WHAMs’ emotions, as well as men demonstrating what we currently understand to be emotions (including ‘manly crying’ - see Ekenstam 1998), throughout history (Dixon 2005). In music, literature and art, WHAMs’ ‘authentic’ emotional expression has historically been championed as a source of creativity and ‘natural superiority’ (de Boise 2015; Forth 2008; Shamir and Travis 2002), mixing misogyny with ‘passionate’ expression in works appealing to audiences comprised largely of men and boys. These considerations are important when exploring men’s expression of emotions as ‘new’, as well as judging how far such expressions can be effective or progressive sites of transforming or undoing privilege.

In addition to *displays* of emotion, the development of emotions themselves are also shaped by cultural factors (Brody and Hall 2010). It is therefore a mistake to argue for increasing emotional communication without considering explicitly about how social and cultural structures and processes shape their development. For instance, Galasinski has critiqued Fischer and Manstead's (2000) study into gendered cross-cultural expressions of emotions, on the grounds that, as a native Polish speaker, certain 'states' – anger or guilt – do not actually translate, conceptually, into English (Galasinski 2004: 4)³. Similarly, studies which claimed to demonstrate the 'universal' existence of Descartes' and Darwin's 'primary emotions', through identifying facial expressions (Ekman and Friesen 1971), actually yielded less than 50% 'correct' answers in some cultural contexts. Emotions are structured by language and the relationship between culture and conceptual frameworks⁴. This also makes applying Anglo-centric models of expression or repression increasing emotionality, problematic.

The Role of Discourse

Whilst emotions tend to be thought of as individual responses to situations (even in much poststructuralist thought), with some pre-social or evolutionary function (Turner 1999), how 'experts' characterise, study and discuss emotions impacts on how people experience and interpret their own bodies. The scientific study of emotions, in 'Western' nations, developed as something distinct from philosophical study of 'passions' at roughly the same time as efforts were being made to distinguish men and women in terms of distinct bodily criteria (Petersen 2004: 5), in line with broad economic changes (Illouz 2007). The frameworks used to study, identify and categorise indicators of emotional response are themselves often shaped by heteronormative, colonialist and patriarchal frameworks (Seidler 2006: 95), which have emphasised qualities of emotions defined in terms of indicators most frequently associated in opposition to historical constructs of WHAMs (see Federici 2004).

Emotions are, therefore, not only relational in the sense that emotions are elicited in relation to others (Burkitt 2002), but in that current understandings of emotions are contingent on a history of ‘othered others’. What ‘counts’ as an emotion in Western nations, or as an indicator of an emotional state, is not just about individuals but constituted through historic attempts to *discount* others’ behaviour on the grounds of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class (Author B: 50-52). This is not the same as suggesting that men’s emotions are socially constructed (eg. Pease 2012: 127). Rather it suggests that thinking in terms of emotions themselves (as opposed to passions or humours) became a form of disciplinary regulation that has affected human understandings of their own bodies in contradistinction *to* other(ed) bodies. A discursive, historical reading of ‘emotional regimes’ (Reddy 2001) and claims about which bodies are becoming ‘more emotional’, in addition to people’s understandings of emotions, are thus important in developing research in this area.

Furthermore, some emotions have specifically socially desirable properties which are used to coerce people into normative, unequal forms of gender relations (Ahmed 2004; 2010). Emotions like ‘happiness’ or ‘love’ are discursively characterised as of more social value, have greater ‘social status’ or are valued for being more socially productive, than others (Binkley 2011; Warner and Shields 2009). The idea that these emotions, particularly, are inherently more progressive than others, even in intimate relationships, tends to obscure their how they may sustain gender inequalities. Even ‘men who love’ (hooks 2004) can help reproduce rather than challenge colonial, patriarchal structures (Illouz 2012; Jónasdóttir and Ferguson 2013). Rather than thinking about emotions, or particular emotions, as inherently progressive or regressive for men, or indeed for women, it is equally important to consider how emotions fit into, and circulate within, neoliberal-capitalist, patriarchal frameworks as a way of maintaining inequalities (Illouz 2007).

Emotion/Affect: Toward a Material-Discursive Understanding

Critical Approaches to Emotion/Affect

Existing research on men, masculinities and emotions veers uneasily between biological determinism - suggesting that emotions are inherent but 'hidden' - and constructionist determinism - suggesting that their development and exhibition is solely a product of cultural forces or discursive constructions. The former fails to offer an understanding of collective or individual change and ignores complexity. The latter prioritises a form of cognitivism which reinscribes the mind/body dualism by overlooking the importance of physiology in semi- and non-conscious action (Seidler 2007). In order to develop further the study of men's emotions as a sociologically productive area of inquiry, sociologists must advance accounts of emotions which do not reinforce nature/culture, cognitive/emotional, hardwired/constructed or irrational/rational binaries. It is vital not to talk in terms of 'more' or 'less' emotional bodies, but still recognise power and privilege in shaping experience of, and knowledge about, those bodies, as part of broad-based material-discursive approaches incorporating societal and environmental materiality.

It is imperative to retain a critical approach to men and masculinities, with a specific focus on power, rather than simply describing how men talk about emotions. Feminist 'turns' to affect (Koivunen 2010) offer promise here. There has been significant discussion on distinctions between affect, feeling and emotion, as well as the compatibility between different approaches to affect (for comprehensive summaries, see Pedwell and Whitehead 2012; Wetherell 2012). Yet the most important commonalities across these have been: a rejection of deterministic models of 'hardwired' or 'basic' emotions; outlining forms of semi- or non-conscious action which do not separate rationality from embodiment; theorising embodied experience as relational (based on intersections between gender, class, ethnicity, race, age and

environments particularly); and exploring the political dimensions of non-intentional practices which circulate *between*, rather than reside *in*, individual bodies.

Notions of ‘affective practice’ (Wetherell 2012), particularly, shift focus from men’s emotions as objectively determined toward questions of understanding intensity of attachment toward certain actions, how these emerge as well as the ends to which those actions are directed (see also Burkitt 2002). A practice-based conception of affect can help better-understand how men’s bodies develop the physical capacity to be affected by certain things in relation to sensory environments (see Waitt and Stanes 2015) *and* also how emotions are believed to do things for bodies in their circulation as cultural scripts (Ahmed 2010). This involves paying attention to both ‘positive’ *and* ‘painful’ experiences, such as shame, guilt (eg. Gorton 2007; Probyn 2004), which can be both progressive and regressive in relation to WHAMs’ privileges and men’s behaviour more generally.

Affective responses⁵ to situations, and attachments to certain gendered practices, may be extremely diverse and different (Probyn 2004: 257; Sedgwick 2003; Tomkins 1962). Yet it is important not to individualise affect and, in doing so, lose sight of how these are undoubtedly influenced by and help maintain structural inequalities (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012). Crucially it is important to understand men’s emotions, intersectionally, as both *affective* and *affecting* rather than individual states. Many white men in global Northern countries, for instance, *feel* discriminated against on the basis of gender and/or ethnicity. Focusing only on these feelings, however, risks detaching research from broader intersectional, feminist concerns around how power influences the dispersion and circulation of embodied affect. Similarly, whilst men’s rights activists (MRAs) and trolls often feel sufficiently compelled by other MRAs to act in aggressively misogynistic, racist and homophobic ways, self-professed ‘emotionally sensitive’ ‘nice guys’, too, berate women via dating apps in fairly chauvinistic ways. Both the

political potential of specific emotionally affective practices, and the role of affect in the reproduction of social inequalities, need to be considered.

Methodological Implications

Emotions are about ‘interpreting ordering and selecting ways to put the “emotional experience” into language. This is done, in turn, insofar as the linguistic resources and social practices allow us to’ (Galasinski 2004: 5). Yet social scientists often expect emotional experiences to be put into language culturally intelligible to *us*. This shapes what researchers register as ‘evidence’ of emotion. This easily leads to assuming that because some men are able to talk about emotions this necessarily translates to action, or because some appear unable to do so in culturally appropriate ways they are ‘unemotional’. Such assumptions reinforce a notion that emotions are whatever WHAMs do not ‘usually do’, which constructs emotions as somehow a *de facto* ‘softening’ influence.

Neither emotions nor affective responses, are pre-social, but over-reliance on language and emotion labels should be addressed in sociological research on men’s emotions. Focusing both on what is being done, as well as said, is important. Visible indicators in interviews – such as averting one’s gaze during topics, blushing, tension or irritation at certain questions, smiling when discussing a particular subject – could all be considered indicators of affective response which require clarification and interpretation. Video diaries, life histories, memory work and respondent-assembled collections are also methods where affective practices may be rendered visible without using pre-coded emotion vocabularies.

This perspective also has methodological implications for the conduct of sociological research. Rigorously structured observations, which are sensitive to bodies, language and historical discourses, provide keys into moments of affective discomfort – even when researched men use ‘acceptable’ emotion vocabularies. Conversely, researchers need to

be attentive to what appears as ‘unconventional’ emotion vocabularies. This means focusing not just on how men talk or write about emotions but on our own (the researchers’) assumptions around what constitutes evidence of emotional experience of men as objects of research. Moreover, researchers are, themselves, emotionally, affectively and intersectionally gendered too. Interrogating researchers’ own emotions is vital, especially in qualitative fieldwork, but also *inter alia* in analysis of transcripts, documents and visuals. For men researchers, this necessitates engaging critically, with our intersectionally gendered emotions throughout the research process, as elaborated elsewhere (eg. Author A; Author B).

Conclusion

Understanding men’s emotions and getting men to understand emotions are vital in working with gender inequalities, as well as improving men’s well-being and health outcomes. To this end, indispensable work *has* been and *is being* done on emotions in sociological research on men and masculinities. Yet as this article has outlined, it is often not clear what is under interrogation when interrogating emotions in relation to men and masculinity/ies. If the aim is looking to understand how men communicate emotions, then this is different from establishing whether men have a good grasp of physiological changes in their bodies or how non-conscious action develops and translates to greater gender equality; this has clear methodological and theoretical implications for the type of work that sociologists engage in.

The tendency to bifurcate constructionist and physiological accounts of emotions is perhaps largely a question of disciplinary expertise and one that is not specific to research on men and masculinities. The development and display of emotions must be understood as physiological, inseparable from ‘rationality’, contextual, situational and discursive. In order to develop the field, it is important at least to engage with debates within psychological and natural sciences, as well as draw from different strands of the social sciences, including those of broad-

based materialist sociology, politics, economics and political economy, and not only discursive or constructionist social psychology, cultural studies and micro sociology.

It is not enough to point out that men have emotions and that emotions are embodied, but evaluate the ends to which emotions are put, what they are directed toward, how intensely and how these circulate between bodies to sustain as well as challenge men's privileges. Recent discussions on affect may be useful in this respect but require a critical appreciation of physiological and cultural accounts (Wetherell 2012). Acknowledging how men of similar social backgrounds learn to be affected by similar things is not to resort to biological determinism. Equally, to understand the ways in which men interpret, organise and put those experiences into language requires an appreciation of both materialist (in embodied, societal and natural senses) and discursive perspectives that avoids caricaturing either or both.

Finally, it is important to think critically about how emotions themselves are defined and treated, as well as the different ends to which they can be put, without starting from the assumption that they are *de facto* antithetical to or progressive for men's behaviour. Paying attention to the roles of specific emotions, as well as defining what counts or does not count as an emotion, may be productive ways to look at questions of embodiment and motivation in studying men and masculinity/ies. Yet if the aim is to understand how to facilitate a qualitative shift in men's behaviour, as part of research into broader gender equalities, this requires critical sociologists and gender scholars to engage with critical neuroscience and psychology *as well as* critical environmental and poststructuralist thought. In doing so, it is possible to think about emotions and embodied forms of action in a large variety of ways that may be both progressive and regressive for gender relations whilst still understanding how the social shapes motivations. This is certainly not to resort to a biologically determinist understanding of emotions but to expand the remit of what type of transdisciplinary research may be possible within the emerging field.

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¹ From the 1970s there have been various broadly profeminist attempts by men to combine, or critically develop, elements of Marxism, historical materialism, Critical Theory or post-Marxism with psychoanalysis, whether in academic texts or in political organising and men's groups, such as the *Achilles' Heel* collective and Red Therapy. These have often valued men's emotional expression, whilst locating emotion within a more structural(ist) analysis of gender, class and race. In turn, the selective use of both feminism and psychoanalysis has been critiqued (McMahon 1993).

² The history of emotions is a rapidly developing field, largely outside the frame of psychology. Key historians here include Lucian Febvre and Peter Gay.

³ The same could be said of *vahingonilo* in Finnish, *vermodig* in Swedish, and *schadenfreude* in German, amongst innumerable examples from other countries.

⁴ See Solomon (1984), in his discussion of Utku-Eskimo communities.

⁵ From blushing, increased heartbeat, twitching, or slight discomfort to a general unease in the stomach, sweating palms or anticipatory excitement.