

Caring Masculinities and Men's Friendships

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Background

My research with the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia is situated in the broad category of 'engaging men in gender equality'. Specifically, I am investigating 'caring masculinities', an emerging field in feminist research. Caring masculinities can be defined as alternatives to hegemonic, dominant forms of masculinity. They are masculinities based on care-giving and nurturing roles for men rather than the dominating, aggressive roles normally associated with hegemonic masculinity in western societies. Decades of feminist research and masculinities studies have demonstrated the harmful costs of hegemonic masculinity for both women and men. For men these costs include violence (against others and self), high-risk behaviour, lack of self-care, poor health and impoverished relationships with others. For women these costs include violence and aggression against women, wage disparities, unequal opportunities, harmful stereotypes and responsibility for the main burden of care work. Research into more caring, empathetic forms of masculinity is therefore both timely and crucial.

Some work has been done on caring masculinities within families, particularly in relation to childcare. My research focus is directed into another under-explored area of sociological research, friendship. Friendship is becoming ever more important in today's society as people draw support not just from their families and partners but increasingly from friendship networks too. Past research has shown that friendships between men do involve intimacy. However, this research also stresses that friendships between men often involve attempts to maintain an image of hegemonic masculinity through devices such as jokes, homophobia and the denigration of women. For these reasons, friendships have been identified as important spheres for fostering more caring forms of masculinity between men. I will, therefore, investigate this nexus of caring masculinities and friendships with empirical research. The theoretical framework for my research is built from feminist care theory, critical studies on men and masculinities and the sociology of friendship.

Fieldwork

The empirical component of my work is a comparative study of men in Germany and Australia. In Australia the idealised image of a man is one based on stereotypes such as the convict, the sportsman, the lifesaver or the bushranger. This image is also tied to Australia's immigration history. That is, hegemonic masculinity in Australia is still centred on white men. In Germany the dominant form of masculinity has arisen from the interweaving of, and contestations between, former East and West German masculinities. The West German model, based on career, political power, dominance and mobility has gained dominance in today's Germany. While there are differences between hegemonic masculinities in Germany and Australia there are also similarities. Dominant masculinities in both countries are tied into global, transnational processes and patterns such as globalisation and industrialisation. My comparative study will therefore investigate how caring masculinities within friendships play out in these different, yet linked, contexts of masculinity.

I will conduct qualitative, narrative interviews with men between the ages of 18 and 30 in Australia and Germany. The interviews cover topics such as - do these young men care for

their friends? How do they care for their friends? What does friendship mean to them? What does it mean to 'be a man' in Germany or in Australia? Monash University ethics approval has been granted for this research and interviews with participants in Australia have been completed. Narrative methods have been chosen for conducting the interviews as they enable participants to talk about issues that are not normally discussed. Issues such as men's care for their friends are so rarely considered that there is often no vocabulary available for discussing them. Narrative methods, however, involve participants telling stories from their lives about issues that they find important. Using narrative methods is therefore an excellent way to investigate people's values surrounding topics they might not normally consider. Narrative methods also embrace emotion and affectivity, and therefore connect well with my exploration of affective areas such as care and friendship.

Original contribution

Although the investigation of caring masculinities is an emerging field in feminist research, it is seen as crucial in the effort to engage men in gender equality. Tangible gender equality effects have already been observed as a result of men's greater involvement in care work. In Europe, for instance, men's greater involvement in domestic work is connected with women's greater involvement in paid work, which is generally seen as a marker of gender equality. Importantly, the practice of care work for men has been shown to help them develop more nurturing, empathetic and caring masculinities. That is, the more care work men do, the more caring they become. This practice-based model of caring masculinity poses a challenge to harmful, dominating roles for men and the costs of hegemonic masculinity for both women and men. It is therefore crucial that work be carried out towards making caring masculinities viable and valued options for men. Through my work I will contribute to this important project and help to develop understandings of caring masculinities.

My work will also increase knowledge about friendship, an area that is still under-investigated in sociology and feminist studies. Friendship is an important site that offers the possibility of analysing social life outside of familial and conjugal relations, aspects of society that are often privileged in sociological research. Friendship plays a crucial role in the lives of many and therefore warrants increased feminist attention. Without feminist investigations of friendship we see only a partial picture of affective life.