

(Re)Constructing Men's Interests

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Do men have too much to lose to be reliable allies with women in challenging patriarchy? This article addresses this question by exploring feminist views about the "man question" and reflecting on a dialogue in a pro-feminist electronic discussion group about whether it is men's interests to change. It challenges the view that men, as individuals, have objective interests that arise as a consequence of being men in a patriarchal society and argues that while men may construct interests toward their own material well being, they may also construct ideal interests that are formed by support for more abstract principles. It is thus suggested that men formulate a sense of having particular interests and that they behave on the basis of this formulation. The implications of this view for reconstructing men's interests toward support for feminism are discussed.

Key words: men's interests, changing men, feminism, objective interests, material interests, emancipatory interests, gender justice

The potential for men to change and the reasons why they might do so have been the subject of considerable debate within feminism. It has been said that one belief a feminist needs for working with men in progressive movements is that "men are capable of change, indeed that men are demonstrating change in their individual relations to women and to each other" (Cockburn 1988, 304).

Some feminists have pointed out that men will not change simply because women want them to and that they will not relinquish power and privilege on request (Phillips 1993, 16; Segal 1989, 12). However, a total withdrawal from men is likely to lead to a lessening of demands on men. The more women pressure men to change, the more men will be forced to examine the presumptions and prerogatives of masculinity.

How are men expected to respond to these demands? Three feminist readings of men and change can be identified. These three views each give a

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different emphasis to men's material self-interests, men's enlightened self-interests, and men's responsibility to take a stand against gender injustice.

MEN'S MATERIAL SELF-INTERESTS

Some early radical feminist writers identified men as intrinsically violent and women hating. Men were seen as having too much to lose to be reliable allies with women in challenging patriarchy. They argued that men will never change and that their dominance is inevitable (Segal 1987, 17). In this view, men oppress women because it is in their interests to do so. Within this perspective, there is no basis for men to change.

Furthermore, it is argued that men have the ability to undermine the threat of feminism by incorporating their critique and adjusting their ideology. In this view, it is in men's interests to co-opt feminism. If female qualities become more highly valued, then they can simply be incorporated into men's power base. In support of this view, Leonard (1982, 159-60) argues that men use feminist analysis to exonerate themselves and to deflect attention from male privilege and men's behavior toward women.

At one level, it can be seen as logical for men to oppose women's liberation because, in the short term, men will lose out as women compete with them for status and money. Men benefit materially from women's oppression, from their privileges in the labor market and public life, and women's greater share of unpaid labor. But is this a sufficient explanation for men's resistance to change? Many other levels of resistance have been noted, including men's fear that women's equality will emasculate them (Marine 1972, 264), that those who dominate cannot conceive of any other alternative other than being dominated themselves (Figs 1972, 52), and men not being accustomed to being held responsible for anything negative about themselves (Hanmer 1990, 27).

Whatever the reasons, one has to acknowledge that most men seem particularly resistant to the idea of adapting to the changing role of women. While some individual men have changed and there have been some shifts in the dominant ideology and practices of the state, there is little evidence of any overall change in men's dominance. In this context, it is understandable that men who are genuinely trying to change themselves and challenge other men will sometimes be accused of collectively seeking ways to preserve old privileges. When such men befriend feminism, in the view of some feminists, they will discover that "they can do no right" (Wilson 1983, 234).

MEN'S ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTERESTS

While men's position carries with it more power and status, it also brings the burden of responsibility that some feminists believe could lead men

toward their liberation. According to Adair (1992, 62), to oppress others, it is necessary to suppress oneself, and systemic male dominance not only oppresses women but deforms men themselves; for example, men die more frequently from stress-related illness and violence and have a shorter life expectancy (Cockburn 1991, 222). In this view, the reason for men to change themselves is "to save their lives" (Ehrenreich 1983, 140). Gloria Steinem (1975), in an introduction to a book by an early male writer on masculinity, praised "the enlightened self-interest" of the author, making "him a more trustworthy feminist ally than any mere supporter or sympathizer could ever be" (p. xiv). In this view, men can be trusted if they admit that their own self-interest can be served by feminism.

It is true that patriarchy distorts men's lives as well as women's lives. Many men feel grief and may have been victimized as boys. One has to ask, though, In what ways would men's politics organized around men's enlightened self-interests advance women's struggles? Starhawk (1992, 28-29) fears that men in the men's movement will blame women for their problems and defend their own privileges. Brown (1992, 97-98) is also angry at the tendency of the men's movement to portray men as victims, arguing that the newly developed ability to cry needs to be combined with a commitment to listen to the pain of others. Segal (1990, 284) points out the limits of promoting psychic change in men without changing the wider social relations within which men and women are embedded. Thus, the risk in arguing that it is in men's interests to change is that men may adopt a strategy that benefits them, rather than focusing on overcoming the oppression of women.

MEN'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR GENDER JUSTICE

Starhawk (1992, 28-29) suggests 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 self-affirmation in ways that avoid awareness of sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of social injustice. Men must "come to understand the injustice that has been done to women [and] the way it distorts all social relations" (Ruether 1992, 14-15). The struggle to overthrow patriarchy must be a movement of both men and women, in which men must acknowledge the injustice of their historical privilege as men.

bell hooks (1992) 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" (13-14). Thus, one can reject domination through ethical and political understanding.

Many men are extremely sensitive to ethical and moral issues especially when expressed as a belief that they should take care of women. However, if

such men are inclined to be fair-minded, they should look at the overall system and construct a notion of what an ethical relationship between men and women would look like (Hite 1987, 702). The most compelling ethical basis for reconciliation between men and women is the feminist principle “that women are also persons” (Ehrenreich 1983, 182). If a man adopts ethical principles regarding dignity and a just society, he is concerned not only about his own partner but also about women in general (Gondolf 1987, 347). It is certainly important to acknowledge that, throughout history, some men *have* taken principled stands on women’s rights.¹

MEN ON LINE: VIRTUAL PRO-FEMINISM

Which of these conceptions of men’s interests offers the most hope for changing men? This is a question that pro-feminist men are also divided about. The issue has been one of the most divisive questions on an electronic discussion group on men, masculinities, and gender relations called *profem*. This is an international discussion list, set up in 1997 and hosted in Australia, which has more than 100 members including some widely published pro-feminist writers and experienced feminist and pro-feminist activists.

The purpose of the list is to promote dialogue and networking among men and women concerned with gender justice and the elimination of sexism and gender inequalities. There is an expectation that general support for feminism should be the background for any discussion. At the same time, the list is interested to represent a hopefulness and optimism about men. (Flood and Orkin 1997). These espoused pro-feminist and male positive guidelines have been in tension since the list’s beginnings.

There has been considerable debate on this list about whether we should emphasise how it is in men’s interests to support feminism or whether we should emphasise the moral and ethical reasons why men should change. In the context of this discussion, Michael Flood asked the following question of those advocating ethical reasons for men to change: “Do you see any benefits for men from adopting pro-feminism? Do you see any ways in which men’s lives will be enhanced by the kind of changes we hope for?” In response, Carl Seele commented,

I don’t see how any personal benefit I may have accrued from my support for feminism to be all that relevant. I personally think that support for really radical causes only makes life all the more harder, much more of a struggle.

Michael Kimmel, on the other hand, answered positively in the following way: “I feel that trying to live a more ethical life and to be visible and public about it has changed my relationships dramatically.”

Michael Kimmel commented that when he is addressing men on the topic of feminism, he is often asked, "Why should I support feminism? What's in it for me?" When he says, "Because it's right and just and good to do so. It's on the side of justice and equality and freedom," the room goes silent. So he also tells them that: "They will have better relationships with women and with men. They will feel better about themselves as men if they support these struggles."

Jason Schultz also expressed concern about the effectiveness of a moral exhortation strategy:

As one morally committed to feminist ideals, I am willing . . . to take these risks and bear the consequences. . . . But I guess my doubt comes in the form of wondering if a majority of men will ever take such risks, or if, the best way to gain their support is to work to lower the risk they take.

These views have led many pro-feminist activists to adopt a "male positive" view alongside their pro-feminism and to explore how feminism will also enhance men's lives.

As Michael Flood expressed it:

The male positive principle is intended to represent a hopefulness, an optimism about men, a belief that men can change and support for men's efforts at positive personal and social change. . . . And it's got a more fundamental significance too in reminding me that I do this work not just for women but for ourselves and other men too.

However, some others on the profem list are critical of the premises underlying a male positive stance. Carl Seele comments, "I don't see how the term *male positive* does any useful political and educational work. I associate it more with men celebrating their maleness and patting themselves on the back for how sensitive they are." Martin Dufresne agrees:

Those who have defined it clearly see it as necessarily supportive of some form of manhood. But for those of us who agree that manhood is a construct, the rule of continuing male positive is and should be a problem.

Thus, while some men argue that we need to construct a nonoppressive masculinity, others argue that we should reject notions of masculinity altogether. Some participants on the list argue that men should give up manhood and develop an ethic of justice based on our common humanity. Martin Dufresne says,

Feminism is not in the interests of male human beings as "men," that is, a social construct predicated on us being in control of the other gender. It is in the interests of all human beings. But males who identify as "men" in our male-supremacist culture will forever find it not really in their interest to support or

tolerate feminism and its challenge to them. And any focus on men's interests will fail women.

I believe that this division within feminism and pro-feminism about whether it is in men's interests to change versus whether men ought to change for moral and ethical reasons is the wrong way of posing the question. I think that a more relevant approach is to ask, How are men's interests constructed, and how can they be reconstructed?

RETHINKING MEN'S INTERESTS

Do men have objective interests that arise as a consequence of being men in a patriarchal society? McMahon (1999) argues that they do: "If men are able to dominate women and in particular to receive benefits from the exploitation of their labour, it is not at all clear that we need to theorize specific psychological mechanisms which produce a desire for domination" (p. 192).

Interest theories, such as these, are premised on the assumption that men are rational and that they will act to advance their own interests through a process of rational calculation. Thus, men's interests are seen to flow directly from their location in social structure, assuming that there are common interests between all men. The view that it is not in men's interests to change is based on "categoricalism, . . . the assumption that men as a category are driven to oppress women as a category" (Sibeon 1991, 32-35).

Connell (1995) in support of this view says that "a gender order where men dominate women cannot avoid constituting men as an interest group concerned with defence and women as an interest group concerned with change" (p. 82).

I would acknowledge, of course, that the vested male interest in present structures is greater than that of women. I also agree with the proposition that patriarchy does more harm than good to individual women and more good than harm to individual men (Kahane 19, 216).

However, I would argue that simply because the status quo benefits some men disproportionately does not necessarily mean that all men will act in ways to maintain the benefits. Membership of collectivities such as white, upper-class men may predispose particular men to think and act in particular ways, at particular times and in particular situations, but it does not necessarily predetermine the nature of their interests. I argue that persons do not have objective interests as a result of their location; rather, they "*formulate* [emphasis added] a sense of having particular interests" and may behave on the basis of this formulation (Sibeon 1991, 32).² Men formulate their interests, and they do so within the context of the available discourses in situations in which they are located and that they coproduce.

When we acknowledge that interests are open to assessment, then “their specification is open to dispute” (Hindness 1986, 120). What I am arguing here is that interests are not merely transmitted between men’s social location and their behavior.³ Interests can thus be very wide-ranging, from doing something because it will make one feel better, to doing it because if one does not, it will be diminishing one’s integrity as an ethical being. If one is going to address the question of whether it is in men’s interests to change, one has to distinguish *which* interests one is talking about and assess their relative importance to different men. If we reject the idea of objective interests for all men, there is space to explore unintended consequences of patriarchal domination (Marshall 1994, 150). The problem with the notion of men’s objective interests is that it does not enable us to identify the sources of change among men. How is it that some men will come to depart from external criteria of what their interests should be?

Clearly, there is a level at which patriarchy *is* in most men’s interests, as these interests are currently constructed. However, while men may construct interests toward their own material well-being, they may also construct ideal interests that are formed by support for more abstract principles (Jonasdottir 1988b, 36). I would thus argue that men’s interests cannot be ascertained solely on the basis of what a theory of patriarchy says they are. As New (1996) comments,

Men have an interest in preserving the status quo because like women they have constructed their personal identities, values and ideas of themselves in terms of the options socially available to them. . . . In any case, material benefits are not the only source of interests. . . . Men’s interests in using women’s unpaid labour, in possessing women and in controlling their sexuality are rooted in needs and wants that are produced not given. (Pp. 92-93)

This understanding has been corroborated in assessments of women’s interests. The notion is constructed by feminist theorizing and consciousness raising, and it does not flow automatically from “women’s natural interests” (Grant 1993, 103). Women “do not simply know their material interests but have to form conceptions of them” (Watson and Pringle 1992, 66). Women’s interests are thus historically produced and are capable of redefinition, and we can therefore argue that men’s interests can be redefined and reconstructed as well.

I am not suggesting here that there are no social structures that are pervasive and enduring. While I am arguing that men do make decisions and act on them, I acknowledge that their means of acting on them are influenced by forces outside themselves. Thus, men can act “under conditions that are only partially under their control” (Hindness 1989, 97). I acknowledge that men cannot adopt entirely new ways of thinking of their interests as a matter of will.

Furthermore, while individual men can formulate a sense of their interests, the collectivity of men cannot.⁴ Radical change in gender relations, of course, depends on changing the material and structural conditions on which patriarchy rests. Obviously, the structures of patriarchy exist beyond the individual actions of particular men and are embedded in the institutions and practices of our society.

On the other hand, implicit in materialist theories of gender domination is the notion that male dominance and men's practices are reflections of each other (Roper and Tosh 1991, 2). In some materialist theories, all men are seen as a coherent "gender class" with the same vested interests in controlling women.⁵ Such analyses are deterministic and the political prognosis is pessimistic. 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, 196).

RECONSTRUCTING MEN'S INTERESTS

Men's interests are often overlooked in accounts of changing men and it is important that they are acknowledged. However, in my view, these interests are not given, and they are not the only source of men's subjectivity. Men are capable of learning from the level of fulfillment that flows from the pursuit of their interests, and on this basis, they may decide to pursue alternative interests (Menzies 1982, 93). As men begin to articulate dissatisfaction with their own lives, numerous discourses are available to enable them to make sense of these dissatisfactions in ways that are quite compatible with the patriarchally constructed interests of men. The political task for pro-feminist men, therefore, is to articulate notions of nonpatriarchal interests of men. How do we construct discourses that challenge patriarchal frameworks of meaning? What we require is a theoretical articulation of men's interests that can encourage men to see beyond the options that are available to them within the prevailing patriarchal discourses.

To encourage men to change their perception of what constitutes their self-interests is to be involved in the reconstitution of their social and personal identities (Benton 1981, 181). To be successful, these alternative conceptions of interests must be based, to some extent, on the life experiences of men. The question is, how does one invite these alternative conceptions within the framework of patriarchy?

Various suggestions have been proposed, from promoting universal interests to save the planet, through to appealing to men's interests as fathers of daughters, and offering men the promise of greater intimacy and connectedness through redefining their relationships with women.⁶

Michael Flood put it this way on the profem list:

Feminism offers men the possibility of freedom from a way of life that has been isolating, violent, obsessively competitive, emotionally shut down, and physically unhealthy. Sure it demands that men let go of our unfair privileges too, but that is a small price to pay for the promise of more trusting, honest, pleasurable, and fair relationships with women.

While I believe that the above constitute the “emancipatory interests” of men, they are not self-evident to most men. Political strategies are required to create the discourses in which reasons for change will motivate men to reposition themselves.

I propose that two related ways toward the reconstruction of men’s interests are first, through the encouragement of social empathy in men by increasing their understanding of the consequences of men’s structural power and privilege, and second, through the reconceptualization of men’s pain based on a new conceptualization of need.

May (1998, 91, 96) argues that men have an underlying moral responsibility to challenge patriarchy because they are collectively responsible for the harms attributable to it. He argues that men should feel some shame for their group’s complicity in, for example, the prevalence of rape. But how does one articulate a moral stance that challenges men to consider the social justice implications of their behavior in the world without alienating them? How does one create the discomfort necessary to generate the willingness to change but not elicit fear and resentment among those necessary to implement changes?

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, 256). To change one’s sense of self-interest involves a process of becoming unsettled, and strategies are thus required for this purpose.

A strategy that I have used toward this end is the facilitation of Patriarchy Awareness Workshops based on the Racism Awareness model. These workshops use presentations, small-group discussions, and simulation exercises to explore such issues as analyses of patriarchal culture, men’s experience of power and domination, alternatives to patriarchal power, the impact of men’s domination over women, social and personal blocks to men’s ability to listen to women, and visions and potential for men to change. The workshop provides an opportunity for men to move beyond their feelings of powerlessness in relation to gender issues and to identify ways of moving pro-feminist men’s politics beyond the arena of personal change to incorporate collectivist and public political action.⁷

A second strategy to encourage men to reposition themselves is to reconceptualize men’s pain. Thompson (1991, 14-16) argues that if men deny their own feelings and their own pain, they will not be able to

acknowledge the pain of others; men will be unable to recognize their privilege unless their pain and their hurt have been validated. Of course, the acknowledgment of men's pain on its own is not enough; the plethora of masculinity therapy books and workshops for men are testimony to that. Rather, what is required are strategies for connecting men's pain to their position in the social relations of gender.

One such strategy that I have used in this regard is collective memory work. Memory work is a method that builds on, yet goes beyond, consciousness raising. The method was developed by Frigga Haug (1987) to gain greater understanding of the resistance to the dominant ideology at the level of the individual, how people internalize dominant values, and how their reactions are colonized by dominant patterns of thought. Haug (1987) describes memory work as "a method for the unraveling of gender socialisation" (p. 13). Her argument is that it is essential to examine subjective memories if we want to discover anything about how people appropriate objective structures (Haug 1992, 20).

By illustrating the ways in which people participate in their own socialization, their potential to intervene in and change the world is expanded. By making conscious the way in which we have previously unconsciously interpreted the world, we are more able to develop resistance against this "normality" (Haug 1987, 60) and thus develop ways of subverting our own socialization. Furthermore, by recounting histories of oppression, suffering, and domination, those who occupy positions of dominance can find ways to recognize their privilege and their pain and form alliances with the oppressed (McLaren and da Silva 1993, 77).⁸

Furthermore, it is my experience that when men become actively involved in social and political projects to challenge the social relations of gender, they recreate themselves as subjects in their ethical activity and so further reconstitute their interests.⁹ They change, and their interpretative background changes, and thus they evaluate their desires and their interests differently (Babbitt 1993, 252). When this occurs, ethics are not at odds with self-interest; rather, it changes our sense of what constitutes our self-interest. Such a view enables us to move away from a repressive view of ethics as simply something that stops us from doing what we want toward a reconstitution of our self-interest as ethical beings. This understanding enables us to move beyond the dichotomizing of self-interests and social justice as alternative explanations of how to encourage men to support feminism.

NOTES

1. See Kimmel and Mosmiller (1992) for a history of pro-feminist men's support for feminism in the United States from 1776 to 1990.

2. I am aware that many Marxists will take issue with this conception of men's interests. They assume that interests are able to be objectively identified, and they believe that class interests are

“given in the structure of class relations” (Hindness 1986, 113). They do not rely on subjective awareness on the part of those whose interests are being identified.

3. McMahon and Connell would likely protest that they are not arguing the idea of an unmediated interest of men that mechanically determines the behavior of individual men. Nevertheless, I would argue that they overemphasize the structural determination of the interests of individual men.

4. When discussing the relationship between men's interests and domestic labor, it is interesting to note that McMahon (1999) qualifies his position to state that “men *on the whole* [emphasis added] perceive that their interests are best served by maintaining the sexual division of domestic work” (p. 31).

5. Many materialists acknowledge that because of class and race relations, some men are oppressed as workers and as blacks and that there are negative side effects to the exercise of power. They recognize that patriarchy is contradictory and that it does not work perfectly in men's interests. However, these amendments are not seen as detracting from their general proposition about men's interests.

6. See Connell (1993, xiii) for suggestions along these lines.

7. See Pease (1997) for my account of a patriarchy awareness workshop that uses experiential pedagogies to address these issues.

8. See my use of memory work in exploring father-son relationships (Pease 2000a) and in rethinking men's sexual objectification of women (Pease 2000b).

9. See Singer (1993) for a similar view, not specifically related to sexual politics.

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