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Chapter 3 (pp. 35-54): Male Agents of Change and Disassociating from the Problem in the Prevention of Violence against Women

Author: Stephen R. Burrell (Department of Sociology, Durham University, UK)

Abstract

This chapter explores the complex and contradictory nature of political masculinities within efforts to engage men and boys in the prevention of men's violence against women. It discusses findings from 14 expert-informant interviews with activists who have played an influential role in developing this work in the UK context. These interviews drew attention to how, for male agents of pro-feminist change, political masculinities are also profoundly personal. Transformations in the self are thus as important as bringing about change in others in this work – otherwise men risk reproducing the same patriarchal inequalities that they seek to dismantle. One significant barrier to critical self-reflection for men involved in preventing violence against women is that of disassociation; a perception and construction of oneself as being separate from the problem in relation to other men, men's violence itself, and patriarchal relations. Resisting disassociation is therefore vital in order for pro-feminist men to recognise how they continue to be implicated the perpetuation of violence against women. This requires male agents of change to move beyond a sense of shame about their position within patriarchy – and to understand how they engage in political masculinities as they work to prevent men's violence against women.

Keywords: men and masculinities, men's violence against women, engaging men and boys, patriarchy, pro-feminism, violence prevention, gender inequality

2.1. Introduction

This chapter explores political masculinities within efforts to engage men and boys in the prevention of men's violence against women. In particular, it examines some of the personal and political issues that can arise for men involved as agents of change in this work, which

could include practitioners, advocates or activists in both formal and informal anti-violence activities. The primary task for such men is typically seen as cultivating individual and collective change among other men and boys which can help to tackle the societal roots of men's violence against women (Pease, 2008). Work of this kind is built around the idea that, with men being primarily responsible for perpetrating violence towards women, they also the potential, and a responsibility, to play an important positive role in challenging and preventing it (Flood, 2011). These prevention efforts are typically based around feminist theorising of men's violence against women – including domestic violence, sexual violence and sexual harassment for example – as being both a cause and consequence of patriarchal social inequalities (Westmarland, 2015). For many of the organisations in this field, this means that their work forms part of broader efforts to build a gender just world, with many of the men involved defining themselves politically as pro-feminist (Flood, 2015).

Political masculinities are therefore highly relevant and conspicuous within this work. On the one hand, the everyday nature of challenging men's violence against women demonstrates that masculinities can always be understood as being political, entwined as they are in the reproduction of unequal gendered power relations. However, the concept of 'political masculinities' also helps to draw attention to the construction of masculinities within explicitly political spheres, which are likely to have a particularly significant influence upon gender relations more broadly (Starck & Sauer, 2014; Starck & Luyt, 2018). The field of men's violence against women prevention can clearly be seen as one such sphere. Men who are active in this context are likely to have a heightened awareness of the political dynamics of masculinity and gender, and seek to problematise and make those dynamics transparent to others. Masculinity is therefore consciously and explicitly politicised, and challenged on a political basis, in this setting.

Violence prevention work often encourages men to scrutinise their own constructions of masculinity, and work to reformulate them in more equitable and non-oppressive ways (Pease, 2008). Indeed, some campaigns may seek to critique and move away from norms of manhood altogether – even those which could be perceived as being 'healthy' (Flood, 2015). This is based on the notion that there can be no 'healthy' version of masculinity if we conceive of it as socially constructed expectations predicated on dominance over femininity and the maintenance of patriarchal relations (Stoltenberg, 2000; Murphy, 2009).

These tasks are far from straightforward, given how deeply rigid codes of masculinity are socially ingrained in men and boys throughout their lives (Connell, 2005). Furthermore, masculine norms are closely interwoven with the legitimisation and reproduction of patriarchal social arrangements that men cannot simply extricate or absolve themselves from (Pease, 2015). Attempting to disrupt attachments to these structures of inequality, therefore, provokes a number of personal and political contradictions, which can create ongoing tensions for men involved in preventing men's violence against women. Political masculinities within such efforts are thus often complex, contested and oscillating, and this chapter will explore some of their contradictions further.

Based on expert-informant interviews with individuals playing a key role in this field in the UK, it explores the potential for pro-feminist men to inadvertently reinforce the same patriarchal relations that they seek to dismantle. There are myriad issues which can arise when members of a dominant group become agents of change in attempting to deconstruct their own power and privilege. Critical self-reflection and accountability to women are therefore seen as core aspects of practice for men who seek to support feminist efforts to end violence against women (Edwards, 2006; Bojin, 2013; Linder & Johnson, 2015). However, there can be a number of internal obstacles to this, given the ways in which men are socialised to unthinkingly go about protecting their hegemony. Defensive responses to the challenging of male privilege and entitlement can be deeply embedded and can inhibit honest self-critique and change (Watt, 2007; Pleasants, 2011).

This chapter focuses on one possible form of defensiveness which was raised and alluded to in several of the expert-informant interviews: that of disassociation, when male agents of change risk perceiving and constructing themselves as being separate from the problem of violence against women. The chapter makes the case that, in order to effectively promote transformations both in themselves and in others, pro-feminist men must work to resist this disassociation, and attend to the ways in which they too share complicity in men's violence.

2.2. Method

This chapter has arisen out of research investigating the contemporary landscape of efforts to engage men and boys in the prevention of men's violence against women in the United Kingdom (UK). 14 expert-informant interviews (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009) were conducted with a range of activists identified as playing an important role in shaping the

development of this work in the UK context. These individuals (or the organisations they represented) were perceived to have had a significant influence upon practice and/or policy in relation to engaging men and boys and preventing violence against women, including through their own practice, advocacy and/or research. Expert-informants were contacted based on my own prior knowledge of the field, together with recommendations from participants themselves.

The choice was made to mainly interview men, because of specific interest in scrutinising the perspectives and experiences of male agents of change. Thirteen of the participants were, therefore, men, and one was a woman, who was contacted as a representative of a highly influential violence prevention organisation recommended by some of the interviewees as being important to include in the study. Work with men and boys is not necessarily conducted *by* men, and a great deal of such work, as with efforts to prevent violence against women more generally, is carried out and led by women. It is therefore important to avoid generalising from the specific experiences of male agents of change to all work to engage with men and boys.

One of the goals of the research was to help critically inform the development of efforts to prevent men's violence against women in the UK, so it is important to note that I can to some extent be seen as an 'insider' in relation to the work of the research participants. This means that I am very much implicated in the same issues that this chapter raises. It must, therefore, be recognised that the critiques made here about male agents of change could equally be applied to my own positions, practices and experiences, which I endeavoured to critically reflect on over the course of the project. Whilst the pronoun 'they' is used when referring to men within the field of violence against women prevention in this chapter then, it should thus be read as including myself.

The qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted between May 2016-March 2017 and ranged in length from 40 to 85 minutes. Eight were carried out in person, and six through a Skype online video or voice call. The identities of the participants have been anonymised to ensure that their comments remain confidential so that they felt able to express their views as honestly as possible. Ethical approval for the study was received from the Durham University Department of Sociology Ethics Committee.

An audio recording of each interview was digitally transcribed, and then analysed using the inductive thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview topic guide asked

relatively generic questions about the participants' own work and personal experiences; their knowledge and awareness of engaging men and boys; and their perspectives and opinions on such efforts. The interviews were therefore taken in some unanticipated directions by the interviewees, and the themes identified in the analysis were developed somewhat independently from the broad foci of the interview topic guide. This chapter explores a subset of themes that were found across several of the interviews, relating to the personal nature of men's anti-violence work, the potential for and the need to resist disassociation, and the importance of moving beyond shame.

2.3. The Personal is Political and the Political is Personal

One of the biggest issues that the expert-informants described facing in their work was its highly personal nature. Learning about men's violence against women had raised numerous provocative questions about participants' own lives; from their relationships, to their day-to-day practices, to their view of the world. The implication from the interviews was that the more that one examines gender inequalities, the more one starts to comprehend how they pervade every aspect of our social worlds. A central focus of engaging men and boys in preventing violence against women is encouraging men to recognise and question their own gendered power and privileges, placing this personal component at its very core (Casey et al. 2013). The longstanding feminist perspective that 'the personal is political' (Schuster 2015) therefore appeared highly pertinent across the interviews, which demonstrated how political masculinities are also deeply personal.

It was suggested by some of the participants that this can leave few clear boundaries in terms of where the work begins and ends. They discussed how opportunities for taking action are potentially infinite – starting from their own day-to-day lives:

“Because it is pervasive, what it means is, there's so many opportunities to try and do something about it. I mean you don't have to look hard, it's everywhere, and...it's about trying to get people to realise that actually, you can raise these issues, you can talk about these issues, in almost any kind of context.” (Andrew: 7, 264–267)

It was, therefore, suggested that, given the prevalence of everyday practices of sexism and misogyny which dehumanise women and help to legitimise men's violence, there is constantly the potential for interventions of varying scales in the diverse contexts and settings in which we live. Even closer to home, some of the participants alluded to how bringing about change

in the *self* is a fundamental aspect of work for male agents of change because this will subsequently shape every aspect of one's violence prevention practice. In the words of Kate (15, 640–642):

“I think that’s part of the challenge of it, is that, that you know, it’s transformational, and it’s very personal, but also completely societal, so, there’s just so many different, different aspects to it.”

It was implied that this could be one of the most difficult elements of prevention work, because of the profoundly challenging nature of serious personal reflection and change in relation to one's own position within patriarchy. Even for men who are experienced in pro-feminist activism, it can be easy to make mistakes, and the potential to revert to sexist assumptions and behaviours always remains (Pease, 2008). One interviewee, Carl (16, 677) therefore emphasised that *“one of the first tasks, really the first task, is to get our own house in order”*, because it is so important for pro-feminist men to embody the change that they seek to achieve, if they are to successfully enlist the support of other men.

Some of the interviewees pointed out that these personal dimensions can create tensions within men's anti-violence work, as it requires them to continuously undertake critical self-reflection and personal change as part of their activism. When male agents of change do not do this, it can lead to ineffective practice, damage to reputations and relationships of trust, and can potentially cause harm to others:

“I think there is an issue about men who want to do the right thing, in this area of work, but they haven’t really thought that through, or done the work themselves, and thought about their own, attitudes, behaviour, values, sufficiently. You know, because this area of work isn’t easy, and there are all kinds of elephant traps, to fall into, and I think there’s quite a lot of guys who just, topple right into them, and they don’t even know they’ve done it, you know? And so they, they can act insensitively, they can take over women’s spaces, you know, not be sufficiently informed about some of the issues, some of the impacts...all of these are potentially difficulties.” (Edward: 12, 503–511)

Problems of this kind could risk tarnishing the rationale for work with men and boys itself, by suggesting that it is simply not possible for men to be involved as meaningful agents of change in the prevention of violence against women – that it is too risky to entrust such a responsibility to members of the dominant group. Some of the interviewees suggested that this can be a

particular issue when men are used as public representatives for prevention campaigns if their behaviour is then found to contradict key messages, as Edward continues:

“I mean it comes up for organisations like White Ribbon as well, so if you...try and define, well men in particular as ambassadors, for the programme, it’s perfectly possible that one or more of those ambassadors are going to fall from grace. They’re going to do things which are patriarchal, sexist, criminal even, you know? And that, can undermine your whole approach really. So you’ve got to be very very careful about the basis on which men, enter into this work, and you know, there needs to be a lot of critical reflection I think, and I know there are White Ribbons that have suffered from some of this.” (Edward: 12, 511–518)

These problems might be particularly likely to arise in prevention work that is relatively superficial, if it asks relatively little of the men it engages with, as described by Gareth (9, 361–368):

“I guess I’m saying I’ve been really disappointed by, you know, sometimes when you get, things which seem very tokenistic ... does it make any difference to people? Um, I’m not sure that it does.”

Organisations in the field, therefore, need to address the possibility that men involved in violence prevention can themselves enact oppressive or abusive behaviours. This demonstrates the importance of men reflecting on their motivations for becoming involved in the prevention of violence against women in the first place – and asking how serious male agents of change are about this work and making substantive transformations in their own lives (Messner, Greenberg, & Peretz, 2015). This is significant because men’s motivations for becoming involved in pro-feminist, anti-violence activism can often be complicated (Edwards, 2006). For instance, they may in part be consciously or unconsciously based upon a desire to impress women (Brod, 1998). Organisations working with men and boys should, therefore, ensure that they are prepared to respond appropriately and accountably, and in support of victim-survivors, if problematic or abusive behaviour was to arise.

This is one among many ways in which men can reproduce patriarchal inequalities even whilst involved in work to tackle them. Another issue which was discussed in this respect was the platitudes that men often receive for speaking out about violence against women. It was pointed out that, even within (pro-) feminist spaces, men’s voices can unintentionally be valued and

respected more than women's. Men can also be applauded and valorised for doing relatively little, or for saying things that women have already said without receiving the same degree of recognition (Marchese, 2008; Wright, 2009). Messner and colleagues (2015) describe this regular granting of unearned praise to pro-feminist men as the 'pedestal effect'. This pattern was summed up by Kate (10, 410–413) as follows:

“The second men do anything, like a little bit, it's like, oh amazing, oh brilliant, oh look what you're doing, oh great, and then you realise all these, women that have been working away at the same thing, saying the same thing for like, 40 years.”

Kate went on to discuss how this highlights one of the tensions within work with men, between the need to nurture and encourage men's adoption of feminist ideas, including by lauding steps forward that are taken, whilst being careful to avoid bestowing praise (which women would not receive) too easily, for comparatively small levels of effort:

“I always find it challenging, because you know, on the one hand, it's, you totally get everyone's frustration, and you feel it, but on the other hand, you know, men do need to be doing this work, men do need to work with young men and boys, this sort of stuff does need to happen. So, there's definitely bits and pieces of that, or where you see, men trying to work with women's organisations but replicating the same sort of patterns, of behaviour in terms of, letting women do all the work, getting a bunch of credit for it.” (Kate: 10, 413–419)

Some of the participants, therefore, emphasised how important it is that male agents of change actively seek to counteract the potential replication of patriarchal dynamics within work to prevent violence against women. This could include, for instance, ensuring that proper credit and recognition is given to the women upon whom pro-feminist men's work is based; taking on emotional labour and caring roles that women are frequently expected to fulfil; and being mindful about the influence of men's presence within the movement to end violence against women, such as by taking a step back from the spotlight when appropriate.

This underscores one of the fundamental political contradictions facing efforts to prevent men's violence against women; that involving more men can potentially both exacerbate and mitigate the patriarchal inequities that can accompany that involvement. On the one hand, the presence of more men could increase the likelihood of male dominance permeating within violence prevention work. However, on the other, if more men are taking action against violence towards

women, then it might be seen as a less exceptional and more normalised for them to do so, and so the potential ‘pedestal effect’ they receive could be reduced for example. Finding a balance within this contradiction requires men who become involved in preventing violence against women to do so carefully and reflexively, in support of and accountable to feminist women’s activism.

2.4. Distancing Oneself from the Problem

An issue raised by several of the expert-informants in different ways concerned the politics of how men involved in the prevention of violence against women choose to relate to other men in their work. In this regard, it was suggested that as they become committed to ending men’s violence against women, there is a risk that male agents of change might perceive themselves to be separate or disassociated from the problem. Interviewees suggested that not only would this be inaccurate, but also unhelpful and counterproductive to violence prevention:

“I do see that as a danger. You know, again, anything that kind of others that kind of others, others this process, that says it’s, you know, it’s out there somewhere, it’s not in here. And of course that, that always tends to happen, so one has to resist it very carefully, because it’s such a, it’s such a temptation, and it’s such a good defence, not because it’s true, but because it’s an easy one.” (Andrew: 12, 517–520)

As Andrew elucidates, disassociation from the problem can often be understood as a defensive response to being confronted about one’s own position within patriarchy, even among longstanding pro-feminist activists. Three main types of possible disassociation from men’s violence against women were identified from the interviewees’ comments.

2.4.1 Disassociation from other men.

Some of the interviewees alluded to how, as male agents of change become well versed in feminist theory and activism, it may be tempting to see them as being different from most other men. In some ways, this *should* be the case as pro-feminist men bring into question the sexist and misogynistic practices that can be commonplace within men’s peer groups. However, preventing violence against women requires recruiting other men and boys to take up a commitment to do so too, and bringing along as many others as possible in collectively moving beyond patriarchal oppression. An approach where practitioners construct themselves as being

in some way separate from the men and boys that they are working with is unlikely to yield a sympathetic response.

There are several different ways in which disassociation from other men can easily, unknowingly be carried out. For example, it could arise out of notions of being more ‘progressive’ than other men, from which some sense of superiority might be derived. This may be an unconscious, undefined idea rather than a deliberate viewpoint, which many pro-feminist men may have felt on occasion; for example, when expressing frustrations about dismissive responses they receive from other men or pessimism about the potential for other men to change. However, there is not something inherent within male agents of change that makes them in some way ‘better’ than other men that explains why they have taken on feminism and other men have not. Rather, they have been in a position where they have been able to encounter and engage with feminist ideas and choose to take them on board. In this respect, it was pointed out that it is important to avoid essentialising pro-feminist values as if some men are simply born with them:

“For a long time men who kind of actively espouse a pro-feminist politics get asked, you know, where the hell did that come from, why are you a feminist. And one of the kinds of narratives that I think it would be easy to adopt, that I try not to, is the kind of essentialist, or foundationalist narrative, that says I’ve always been the kind of man who, x,y and z, or I’ve always believed this, you know. I don’t think, that’s the case.”
(Carl: 2, 57–62)

Carl made it clear that there is a range of what he calls *“personal and social influences”* (2, 64) which can help enable men to embrace feminism. For example, many of the interviewees had an existing involvement in political activism and commitment to social justice, and had feminist women present in their lives who had significantly influenced their views. Structural privileges which, for example, help to enable higher levels of education are also likely to make productive engagements with feminism more possible (Tolman et al., 2016).

At the same time, whilst structural factors can make it easier for men to learn about and adopt feminist ideas, many men in privileged positions do not choose to do so. Indeed, it could equally be argued that men who have themselves experienced marginalisation and oppression may be more likely to sympathise with feminist arguments, based upon a sense of solidarity and understanding. A range of social factors could, therefore, play a role in influencing men’s

gender politics, yet there is no essentialist, intrinsic reason why some men and not others would be able to take up feminist ideas, and a key task is to make it as easy as possible for more to make that choice.

It is therefore important to recognise the role of both structure and agency in enabling and shaping men's decision to support efforts to end violence against women. Patriarchal social structures mean that it is easier, and in many ways in their own interests, for men to maintain the status quo that perpetuates violence against women. However, men do have agency through which they can choose to resist those structures – and they should be held to account on this basis if they choose not to do so. Yet that agency is situated in ways that will make that choice easier and more possible for some men than others. Structure and agency, therefore, interact in complex ways in mediating the positions men take in relation to violence against women.

Another issue raised within the interviews was the need for men involved in the prevention of violence against women to examine their own constructions of masculinity, which are likely to be interwoven with – rather than separated from – those of other men. This means making explicit how male agents of change enact political masculinities as they undertake violence prevention work. It is not a straightforward task for men to relinquish their ties to dominant gender norms, because of how deeply they are instilled and reinforced across society throughout the course of our lives (Connell, 2005). Aspects of the personal and political identities that pro-feminist men construct may, therefore, continue to be shaped in part by hegemonic expectations of masculinity, even as they seek to help others to unlearn them. Some of these may be harmless; however, constraining and oppressive norms can also linger on, not least because men may not be aware of their influence, or of an alternative way for them to be.

In this respect, the interviews suggested that men and boys who have already been encouraged to question norms of masculinity may have a 'head-start' in their potential to politically embrace feminist ideas:

“I think sometimes the guys who come to feminism, pro-feminism, have come through this slightly alternative, self-defined route somehow. That they've seen the sort of dominant norms, and they've thought, that doesn't relate to me. I mean maybe we could all say that, but there's only some of us who sort of, really clicked with that, and thought, yeah I've got to, find something different, there must be a different way of

being male than this, there really must be more to it than this, you know?” (Edward: 17, 713–719)

It seems likely that boys who grow up in environments where they face fewer pressures to conform to particular expectations of manhood, and who are not discouraged from expressing emotionally sensitive, empathetic and caring behaviours for example, may subsequently be less resistant to feminism. Rather than anything *inherently* separating these boys from others, the context in which they were socialised may have provided a more conducive environment from which they could tread a path towards politically embracing feminism. This illustrates how the social settings in which boys learn to become men can play a significant role in shaping their expressions of agency within patriarchy. Yet harmful standards of masculinity are enforced from a myriad of different societal sources, so the pursuit of such paths cannot be taken for granted regardless of men’s upbringing.

2.4.2 Disassociation from men’s violence.

The interviews suggested that a second potential form of disassociation which can be enacted by male agents of change is to separate oneself from violence and abuse itself, as if this was something entirely distinct from their lives. This could include a perception that it would be impossible for them to ever perpetrate such acts; that there is something intrinsic to them which would make this inconceivable. This obfuscates the reality that using violence and abuse is a choice which is made, and whilst pro-feminist principles can make such a decision less likely, men with progressive views can and do perpetrate violence against women too. It cannot be assumed that one’s attitudes and behaviours are always necessarily consistent (Pease & Flood, 2008). In this respect, some of the participants made clear that it is important not to see men who have used violence against women as being inherently different to other men in some way (Hearn, 1998). For example, Kate suggested that this might indicate a weakness with some ‘bystander’ approaches to prevention:

“There’s a lot of talk of, bystander work, and I think, it’s a really great approach and stuff, but then there’s other things about, that just this sensitivity about actually, you know, young men are potential perpetrators, all young men are potential perpetrators, all young men are potential perpetrators of men’s violence, like you know, that’s uncomfortable.” (Kate: 10, 390–394)

Furthermore, whilst violence itself is not enacted by all men, an important task for male agents of change to reflect on the continuum of violence against women (Kelly, 1988) and its underpinnings in sexism and misogyny, and consider the range of different behaviours towards women that they may have enacted, colluded in, tolerated or condoned. With this in mind, it is likely that every man has, at some time or another, played a part in the upholding of men's violence against women in everyday life. Disassociating from the violence and abuse perpetrated by others can therefore thwart men from examining the various ways in which they too may have been, and continue to be, involved in its reproduction. The interviews therefore underlined that pro-feminist men cannot compartmentalise themselves off from the complicity that helps to perpetuate men's violence against women (Pease, 2015). For example, Harry articulated the need for practitioners to recognise the ways in which unhealthy behaviours and relationships may have existed in their lives too:

“The sector itself, also perhaps needs to wise up a bit, about that, because that's where the continuum, if you're thinking about perpetrators and ordinary men, sits. You know, we're always drawn to the nasty people at the end of the continuum that put women in refuges, or make women need to go into refuges because they fear for their safety. But I suspect almost everybody in the sector has an experience of a relationship where either they or the other person didn't really take those, weren't willing to tolerate those level of risks, that are required for that sort of emotional, learning.” (Harry: 12, 518–524)

In this regard, some of the participants also talked about the need for prevention work to avoid replicating the 'othering' of men's violence, as if it is primarily enacted by those belonging to different social groups from one's own. This was discussed in relation to attempts to associate violence and abuse with specific ethnic minority groups:

“The other thing I get increasingly worried about nowadays, is this kind of focusing – this is a tricky one this, this is a real can of worms – increasing focus on minority ethnic groups. And that's not to say that there might not be some particular issues in relation to some minority ethnic groups, or some groups, you know, or that there might not be variations in the way that men's oppressiveness is expressed culturally, to some extent. But I'm extremely sceptical about, again, this othering process, that it's men from this particular minority, which distances it from the majority ethnic group.” (Andrew: 12, 501–508)

Andrew illustrates that linking violence against women solely with ‘other’ social groups can obscure a necessary focus on the role of men, masculinities and gender relations more broadly (Montoya & Agustín, 2013). Male agents of change might, for example, perceive their own community as being more ‘enlightened’ and conducive to supporting feminism, and one in which violence and abuse was thus less likely to occur. It is important to counter these discourses of othering within violence prevention work, because they obfuscate rather than addressing the roots of the problem. For this reason, Ben suggested that policy approaches which focus predominantly on perpetrators of abuse rather than on men more broadly have limited potential to address the pervasiveness of violence against women throughout society, not least because attention is typically restricted to marginalised groups of men:

“It shouldn’t just be thought about in terms of focusing on those people, or those men, who are labelled as perpetrators. Not a word again I like much, but it’s the word that’s used. Because it’s like, that’s a minority, and actually, the men who get involved in the system, as perpetrators, inverted commas, you know, that also is linked to other issues, like class, and so on, and ethnicity.” (Ben: 7, 281–286)

There are understandable reasons why male agents of change would seek to view themselves as being disconnected from violence and abuse. However, to be able to honestly and critically reflect on, recognise and transform one’s own practices it is important to understand and recognise how anyone can enact violence against women, and how all of us share complicity to varying degrees in its perpetuation (Hearn, 2012). Disassociating from men’s violence could therefore provide an entrenched barrier to even pro-feminist men acknowledging the ways in which they are implicated in the problem, and understanding how it is sustained.

2.4.3, Disassociation from patriarchy.

Another potential form of disassociation among men involved in efforts to prevent violence against women that was discussed within the interviews was the perception of being detached from the relations of patriarchy. Support for feminism does not automatically imbue in men an ability to identify and eliminate all of the various ways in which they are entangled with patriarchal inequalities in their own lives. Nor does it necessarily mitigate the power and privilege that men are denoted with as a result of their position within the gender order. Involvement in work to prevent violence against women does not disconnect men from the

‘patriarchal dividend’ (Connell, 2005), and whilst gender inequality persists, even pro-feminist men will continue to accrue it.

However, this does not mean that male agents of change should refrain from seeking to diminish the structural advantages that they receive over women. In addition, some of the interviewees highlighted the importance of taking into account how privilege is distributed unevenly among men, especially as a result of intersecting systemic inequalities such as those of class and ethnicity, which lead to many men being subordinated in relation to other men (Connell, 2005; Peretz, 2017). Indeed, the embrace of feminism by men can itself lead to punishments, rejection, and subordination, based on the perception that it represents a form of emasculation or gender betrayal (Hearn, 2012). Fred discussed being acutely aware that he was much more socially privileged than many of the young men taking part in his programmes, and sought to recognise this and ensure that what his work was relevant to its audience:

“They don’t know my story, but they’re pretty aware that I’m not the same as them, and so there’s this idea of, you know like, mate you don’t get it, like, there’s always going to be violence here. So, that was something we had to learn, you know we tailor our approach...” (Fred: 11, 476–479)

No matter how hard male agents of change may work towards dismantling patriarchal inequalities, they cannot view themselves as being separate from them. Participants, therefore, emphasised the need to develop an awareness of the multitudinous ways in which patriarchy penetrates men’s psyches, perceptions, and practices over the course of their lives. The extent to which male dominance and the oppression of women is embedded in the ways that we see the world and conduct ourselves in it means that we cannot simply divorce ourselves from that system if we wish to do so:

“We can’t separate ourselves from those processes, and for me, personally, that was always the most difficult thing. And still is. To try and be honest with yourself. And to realise that. On the other hand, I think if you can actually try and do that, it can be an asset I think. I think not to do that when you’re doing this work is kind of, really dangerous actually. Because you know, just to separate yourself off and say, I’m this good role model, and I’m going to change these other men, I think that’s really dangerous, because it’s not real, you know?” (Andrew: 9, 371–377)

This highlights that if men involved in preventing violence against women see themselves as being detached from patriarchy, then manifestations of male privilege within their work could, in turn, go undetected. Failing to recognise and address the ways in which gendered inequalities pervade all areas of social life, including our own, heightens the risk that they will be reproduced unchallenged within the field of engaging men too. This illuminates another one of the fundamental contradictions within this work; that whilst it seeks to disrupt men's connections to patriarchal power relations, it must also recognise that it is operating within that same system, and cannot consider itself to be entirely distinct from its inequalities and injustices.

2.5. Resisting Disassociation

A number of different forms of disassociation from the problem can, therefore, arise among men involved in the prevention of violence against women, including from other men, from men's violence itself, and from patriarchy. Interviewees suggested that this distancing can hamper effective prevention work, by creating barriers rather than connections between practitioners and participants. This underscores the importance of male agents of change developing an awareness of the potential for such perceptions and responses in themselves as well as in others, and obviating them wherever possible. However, resisting disassociation is challenging; not least because it means recognising one's own relationships with the very things which violence prevention efforts are attempting to confront. It may, therefore, appear incongruous to suggest that men should *not* see themselves as being separate from the problem. However, interviewees implied that men can contribute most effectively to dismantling patriarchal inequalities by identifying the ways in which their own lives are enmeshed within its structures;

"I'm very wary of anything that actually puts a barrier between us and them, okay? It's just too convenient to have barriers between us and them. And I think it's really important to recognise that, to some extent, them is us, and us is them. And only if we have that kind of, if we break down that barrier, are we really going to get at this stuff."

(Andrew: 12, 494–498)

Yet men's connections to patriarchy can also mean that they are well placed to help undermine it from within. This gets to the heart of the positive contribution that men can make in the

prevention of violence against women; it is precisely because they are part of the problem that they can play an important role in tackling it (Brod, 1998):

“Because as a group, we are collectively responsible for the problem. And therefore, this sort of flies in the face of, there’s a stock phrase that you can’t, dismantle the structures of the master using the master’s tools, and that’s quite convincing, but in a sense, if you know how the master built the thing, then you can it ... if you’ve got, if you’ve got the plans to a machine, you can take it apart.” (Ian: 10, 425–430)

This is also why it is so vital that male agents of change continuously critically reflect on their own assumptions and behaviours, and are honest with themselves about their own difficulties, biases and mistakes. In this regard, some of the interviewees suggested that no man ever becomes a ‘fully-formed’ pro-feminist, and that everyone makes mistakes, which is why reflexivity through which they can be learned from is so important. Ian described how prevention work is an ongoing educative process for practitioners as well as for participants:

“It’s not a transmission model, like the hypodermic transmission of knowledge model which, simply doesn’t work, and wouldn’t, it particularly wouldn’t work in this, because it would assume an expertise on the part of the, the coach, which isn’t really a viable kind of concept, because nobody’s perfect, and we’re all constantly learning. So it changes over time, there’s no assumptions of expertise or perfection, so it’s a kind of a co-constructed dialogue, where we would expect, and I think is frequently proved to be the case, is a learning journey, as much for the coach as it is for the young men on the courses.” (Ian: 3, 90–96)

These issues underlined the importance of being accountable to feminist women for many of the participants. Being open and receptive to being held to account, and seeking out critical feminist commentary, can help to ensure that if men are engaging in ineffective or problematic practice, it can be identified and addressed (Pease, 2017). Accountability, therefore, has to be enacted in a way that communicates a willingness to listen and learn, together with a readiness to accept that no one is beyond reproach. It can be easy to respond defensively in such instances, which is why it is so important to start from a position of welcoming feminist critiques (Pease, 2017).

Some also felt that honesty and openness with regards to one’s own position within patriarchy could contribute to more productive practice in engaging men and boys. Disassociating from

the problem can lead to the espousal of what some of the participants saw as a ‘holier than thou’ approach. Whilst discussing domestic violence perpetrator programmes, Harry remarked that:

“I suspect most, of the people that would be doing the work, as I said you know, would have to look quite long and hard at their own, mistakes, and I think that’s difficult, because, there’s only so much that you can reveal to the people you’re working with, in practice. I think if you go in with that kind of holier than thou approach, which some programmes do, it makes the men defensive, it makes them look for quick fixes to be someone different, rather than the more gradual journey, really.” (Harry: 13, 538–543)

Practitioners may thus be able to engage with men and boys in more meaningful ways if they are as honest as possible about their own challenges, and can demonstrate that they understand the struggles involved in personal change from experiences in their own lives. A message based on solidarity and shared struggle for pro-feminist change with other men and boys is likely to be more relatable than one which demarcates practitioners from participants, or simply admonishes men and boys as if there is something about them specifically that is ‘wrong’. Interviewees suggested that a perception of being reprimanded may be more likely to alienate participants compared to one which articulates the shared need for collective change among and in dialogue with men and boys:

“You don’t want them to be walking into your workshop thinking, I’m here because of a punishment. You want people to be open minded, and most of the time, we can, like change that round, but it involves, getting them to talk about it, rather than talking at them.” (Marcus: 8, 341–344)

The interviews, therefore, highlighted that resisting disassociation requires a theory of change that recognises that, for pro-feminist men, there is no such thing as an endpoint, or a conclusion which can be reached in engaging with feminist ideas (Kahane, 1998). Some of the participants alluded to how personal transformations for men in this field are ongoing, lifelong processes, which are constantly and continuously struggled with. Men might be able to take steps forward (and backward) in their understanding and actions with regards to different feminist issues, but there will always be new issues to confront, and new knowledge to learn and potentially unlearn. In this way, pro-feminist men can be seen as being permanent ‘works in progress’,

especially whilst patriarchal ideologies continue to permeate the world around them, ready to be re-embraced and re-applied:

“I and other men, we’re constantly, and women too, we’re constantly invited back into sexism, back into misogyny. Constantly invited by media, by peers, by structural, circumstances, to live in gender inequitable ways, and so resisting that, you know, is a kind of daily process.” (Carl: 16, 692–695)

Regardless of the depth of awareness that male agents of change may build around men’s violence against women, they cannot fully understand the harmful, oppressive and constraining impacts that it has in different ways on women, in the same way that women’s lived experiences inform their perspectives. This demonstrates why accountability to women is so vital, because men’s privileged standpoints, together with masculine norms which suppress empathy for women’s experiences, inhibit their ability to comprehend the consequences of patriarchal oppression (Harding, 1998).

This connects to the simplistic distinctions that some prevention campaigns draw between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ men. Dichotomies of this kind suggest the existence of a clear line separating the two categories of men, with individuals falling definitively into one or the other (Castelino, 2014; Flood, 2015; Seymour, 2018). Yet differences between men in everyday life within patriarchy are likely to be much more blurred, with all men engaging in a mixture of practices that can be seen as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ over the course of their lives.

Furthermore, artificially separating men in this way suggests that those who are ‘bad’ cannot change, with the implication that those who fall into this category inevitably enact sexism. This, in turn, minimises their responsibility for their behaviour, as well as obscuring how such men may outwardly project themselves as being ‘good’ (or even pro-feminist) in order to conceal their problematic practices. Many men who engage in sexism will choose not to change – because they benefit too greatly from patriarchy for instance – but that does not mean that they cannot do so, and should thus be held to account on this basis. Yet many ‘good’ men are also likely to have participated in some form of sexist practices in their lives, and this dichotomy conceals their capacity to do so, implying that they are fully transformed or unblemished individuals who are beyond critique. Such constructions can thus encourage male agents of change to view themselves as being distinct and disassociated from so-called ‘bad

men'. Yet if 'good' men exist, then at what point do they enter into that category – and what would it take for them to be removed from it?

Men's practices are therefore much more complicated and compromised in relation to patriarchy than dichotomies such as that of 'good/bad men' allow for. Indeed, it could be argued that this problem also exists to some extent with other common terms used in the field of engaging men, such as 'male ally' and indeed 'pro-feminist'. The latter, at least, describes a set of beliefs that an individual holds, and which men's practices can be held to account against, rather than the ascription of a fixed category. However, even this may construct simplistic, artificial distinctions which can encourage demarcations between men whose lives are in reality much more complex and intertwined.

2.6. Moving Beyond Shame

One challenge suggested by some of the expert-informants, which could help to explain why men involved in preventing violence against women may seek to disassociate themselves from the problem, is a sense of guilt or shame about their own positions within patriarchy (Watt, 2007). Since it is likely that all men have, at some point or another, engaged in some form of sexism and misogyny, it is understandable that learning about feminism would evoke feelings of shame and embarrassment about that. For example, when discussing the challenges faced in his work, Fred remarked:

“When you're talking to boys about these issues, when you're talking about why it's not okay to call someone a slut for example, if you're working with a Year 10 group, pretty much every boy in that room will have done that at some point. I know that I did when I was their age, because it was normalised. But it's not okay, and, you know, we need to talk about that issue, but, of course there's inherently a little bit of, shame or embarrassment from the boys, because they're thinking, oh shit I've done that, I've said that before.” (Fred: 10–11, 437–443)

A sense of shame can, therefore, be seen as a justified response to realisations about women's experiences within patriarchy, and one's own role in that system. However, on their own, these emotions do little to help create change, and so it is crucial to encourage men and boys to respond to them constructively. Dwelling on such feelings excessively within prevention programmes or fostering a sense of shame among men and boys may elicit defensive responses rather than productive reflections, as Fred (11, 458–460) continues: *“You've got to be careful*

there, to not alienate people, because if you come in with that, all guns blazing, like “you’ve done this and it’s wrong” approach, you’re just going to alienate people and they’ll entrench their views more.”

For instance, this could push men and boys towards disassociating from the problem, based on the assumption that if in their eyes they have never personally practiced violence, then they should have nothing to be ashamed of, and cannot be implicated in the problem.

This demonstrates how disassociation can provide a significant obstacle to engaging men and boys more broadly, as articulated by the frequent response of ‘not all men’ to feminist campaigns against men’s violence towards women. This retort reflects the perception that men’s violence only represents a problem with the men who directly commit it, and has little to do with men more generally (Castelino, 2014). In the words of Gareth, *“men are quite able to walk past posters and adverts, and go: yep, that’s for somebody else.”* (9, 358) And as described by José:

“Men don’t want to be associated with an ending violence campaign, in case they’re tarred, they’re tarred by it, or associated with it in a negative way. So you end up saying, well look I’m not violent against women, but we need to end it, so there’s always this sort of conditional, introduction to it, you know?” (José: 13, 551–554)

In order to tackle such a response effectively, it is important to help men and boys to make sense of how individual men’s varied behaviours and experiences, the wider cultural context of masculine norms, and the patriarchal structures of society interrelate with one another. This includes illustrating the role that the social context plays in facilitating individual practices of violence and abuse, including through routine sexism and misogyny that most men *have* taken part in. Illustrating these relationships, and how they relate to men’s lives personally and politically, could help them to critically (re)assess their own behaviour and move beyond defensive reactions. Rather than simply admonishing men and boys, such an approach encourages them to play a positive role in contributing to social shifts away from the patriarchal inequities which might justifiably incur a sense of shame.

There are thus connections between male agents of change and men and boys more broadly in this respect. Temptations to separate oneself from men’s violence against women may arise among experienced pro-feminist activists and men new to feminism alike, and this kind of defensiveness can remain a difficult issue to overcome in different ways throughout one’s life.

It is important, then, that men make use of any shame that they feel in relation to their part in the maintenance of patriarchal injustices. Contemplating their role in legitimising men's violence against women can help men to make sense of the ways in which the problem is reproduced, and how it can be resisted. Whilst such practices cannot in any way be excused, it is important to understand how they come about, in order to comprehend how to tackle them. This means making men's shame productive, and using it as a motivator for personal and political change.

Meanwhile, if pro-feminist men overly fixate on shame, there is a risk that it can become an excuse for inaction, rather than a driver for change. Andrea Dworkin (1983) discussed how this reflects a self-indulgent response based upon male privilege, in which men have the luxury of focusing on their guilt whilst the patriarchal status quo remains in place: *“men have the time to feel guilty. We don't have the time for you to feel guilty. Your guilt is a form of acquiescence in what continues to occur. Your guilt helps keep things the way they are.”* This demonstrates another contradiction at the core of men's efforts to end violence against women; their guilt and shame in relation to patriarchy are simultaneously warranted, necessary, and unproductive on its own. It is crucial then that pro-feminist men move beyond the shame they may feel so that it becomes a source of inspiration, rather than an excuse for passivity.

At the same time, many of the participants also sought to emphasise that being involved in efforts to end men's violence against women had been a positive experience for them. Whilst it was not suggested that this should be the primary motivation for undertaking such work, several of the interviewees affirmed that engaging with feminist ideas and activism had been and continued to be a powerful and inspirational experience:

“I've found extraordinary kind of joy, and pleasure, and power, in taking on feminism as a personal project, and it's enriched in really profound ways my intimate relations with women, and my friendships with women, and with other men, and my parenting and so on.” (Carl: 16, 696–699)

Some of the participants thus suggested that taking up feminist ideas had been a liberating experience, for example by helping them to feel free from the pressures to conform to rigid codes of masculinity. They described how it had enabled them to develop more fulfilling and egalitarian relationships with the people in their lives, and to feel better equipped to understand and deal with their own emotions and personal difficulties. In the words of José (14, 593–595):

“It’s one of the steps towards getting men and boys back to our true selves, back to where we’re humane, and connected, and loving, and caring, and so that’s why I think it’s really really important.” Whilst engaging in a serious way with feminism and the prevention of violence against women is profoundly and rightly challenging for men in a number of ways then, it appeared that it can also provide a significant source of hope and optimism.

2.7. Conclusion

The interviews discussed here demonstrate the contradictory nature of political masculinities within efforts to engage men and boys in the prevention of men’s violence against women, which highlight the tensions that lie within the field. On the one hand, this work seeks to politically challenge, change, or even dismantle constructions of masculinity altogether. On the other, it cannot escape the patriarchal structures and masculine norms which permeate around it, even as it seeks to bring them into question. Political masculinities can, therefore, oscillate between being transformative and complicit – between being more humane and egalitarian, and sometimes still normative or dominating – within pro-feminist men’s day-to-day practices. Whilst engaging men and boys offers significant potential as part of efforts to end men’s violence against women, there is thus also a danger that male agents of change can reproduce patriarchal inequities within that same movement.

Preventing violence against women is therefore deeply personal and political work for men, and is as much about changing oneself as it is about changing the wider world. A central focus for male agents of change must, therefore, lie in critical reflexivity towards one’s personal and political commitments and practices (McCarry, 2007), together with making oneself accountable to feminist women – and engaging in mutually supportive and critical relationships with other pro-feminist men (Kahane, 1998). These strategies could be particularly helpful in countering disassociation, which was raised in this research as a key mechanism learnt by men and boys as part of the conscious and unconscious defence of male privilege.

Disassociation can be employed by men – including those striving to act as agents of change – as a way of distancing themselves from the problem of men’s violence against women. By constructing themselves as being separate from patriarchal inequalities, men can avoid acknowledging or confronting the ways in which they are implicated in their maintenance. Disassociation, therefore, provides a significant barrier to the reflexive work which is crucial for men who aspire to put pro-feminism into practice. This applies equally to pro-feminist

scholars such as myself, who cannot detach ourselves from the gendered social relations that we seek to study. It is therefore vital that men involved in critical studies on men and masculinities do not view ourselves as disconnected from our research participants in our own relationship with patriarchy, or with political masculinities.

Resisting disassociation should, therefore, be encouraged as a continuous, everyday task for men involved in the prevention of men's violence against women – and indeed for men and boys more broadly. This could be aided by a greater understanding and critical appraisal of how male agents of change engage in political masculinities. Disassociation highlights the nature of personal and political pro-feminist change as an ongoing struggle, not least because it is difficult to acknowledge one's own complicity in the reproduction of patriarchy. Yet this chapter argues that moving beyond a sense of shame in relation to this complicity is a crucial part of the process of pro-feminist transformations. A commitment to ending violence against women thus requires recognition of how men's positions and practices are deeply entangled with those of other men, with men's violence, and with patriarchy itself. For the impact that male agents of change can have in challenging the perpetuation of violence against women among men and boys will be diminished if we are unable to change ourselves first and foremost.

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