

REVIEW: WORKING WITH MEN

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Kate Cavanagh and Vivienne E. Cree (eds.), **Working with Men: Feminism and social work**. London: Routledge, 1996, ISBN 0415111854, £14.99, pp. xxv+212

Working with Men is the latest volume in Routledge's 'The State of Welfare' series. This particular edited volume is set in a Scottish context and aims to make visible the place of men in social work practice, education and research. At the outset it may be worth explaining what the book is not about. The subtitle of the book, 'Feminism and social work', is somewhat misleading as the book does not address in any systematic way the relationship between feminism as a body of knowledge and values, and social work as a body of knowledge and values. There is, therefore, no discussion of how a social work value base, both old (having a positive regard for all clients) and new (anti-discriminatory practice), sits with some feminist beliefs - for example, that there is a need for all men to change and that practice with men should only take place if it benefits women. A review written from outwith the feminist framework, therefore, might well begin by questioning if there is a way for men to be social work clients in their own right.

What then is the book about? It is primarily a collection of feminist social workers' accounts of doing social work. It is a feminist project which, while it does not start from one particular feminist standpoint, assumes that to effect change in women's oppression, direct work must take place with men. As the code of practice at the end of the book states:

Women are our first priority and ... work with men is done in order to improve the quality of life for women. (p.183)

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The project of change is seen as central to this work and it is assumed that this applies to *all* men. The editors do not, then, differentiate between abusive men and men who have not been deemed problematic, for example, men who voluntarily seek counselling support.

The collection also addresses the question of *how* work with men should take place. It focuses on three areas of social work - training and education, research and practice - and encourages contributors to locate their own professional and personal history within their accounts. This review critically focuses on key themes arising from these three areas, and while it touches on some issues about feminism in relation to the nature of the social work project, for the most part it reviews these themes from within the framework offered by the editors.

SOCIAL WORK, MEN AND FEMINISM

The absence of debate about working with men within social work has left a gap which the editors warn could be filled by a masculinism rooted both in the growth of the men's movement and, in the last five years in Britain, a masculinist literature which prioritises male self actualisation over political commitment to tackle oppression.

At the same time, the growing emphasis within criminal justice social work in Scotland on addressing men's offending behaviour, may, as the editors note, also carry dangers for feminist practice if it concentrates on cognitive behavioural approaches outwith social and political contexts. (For an example of a text which largely addresses working with male offenders outwith an explicit feminist framework see Newburn and Mair 1996.)

The general argument of Cavanagh and Cree is that social work's failure to debate practice with men may lead to a predominance of masculinist discourses which are at best ill-informed about women's experiences and, at worst, are actively anti-feminist. Making men visible is part of a wider project within the social sciences (Morgan 1992) and **Working with Men** contributes to this project by questioning the tendency to problematise women and concentrate social work practice on them.

Clearly, the editors feel some apprehension about tackling practice with men, describing it as a previously 'taboo subject'. The critique the authors are most sensitive to is, in short, that 'real feminists don't work with men'. Arguments against working with men touch on issues of resource management (will services to women and children suffer as a result?); safety of women and

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children (will, for example, women be offered false hope by their violent partners' participation in treatment programmes and then subsequently be placed at higher risk?); political implications (will the political agenda be reordered towards therapy for men rather than justice and protection for women?); the likelihood of change and how to evaluate such change (what investment do men have to change and how will we know if they have done so?).

The issue of the likelihood of effecting change in men is integral to the argument about who should take responsibility for this work. There is a not very good social work joke which asks how many social workers it takes to change a light bulb. The response is just one - but the light bulb has to really want to change first. For some feminists, the same could be said to be true for working with men: women should not take on responsibility for effecting change in men; the impetus has to come from men themselves. For the writers in this collection, the response is different. The job, they argue, is too important to be left to men on their own, and women, they believe, must be active in setting the agenda for this work and monitoring how it is carried out. Partly this is because there is too great a risk of collusion from male practitioners or of a drift into practice which is not informed by women's experiences, but there are other reasons too. Women who are involved with men want this work to take place and, in any case, women (and men) in social work are *already* working with men, challenging their behaviour and attitudes.

HOW TO WORK WITH MASCULINITIES WITHIN A FEMINIST FRAMEWORK

At least half the volume is given over to practitioners' accounts of working directly with men: with sexual offenders in a prison environment (Knox); in a group work programme with men who have been violent to their partners (Wilson); with boys in a voluntary community project (Hainsworth); with young men on sexual health and relationship counselling issues in a voluntary setting (Wright); and with divorced or separated men as part of a pilot counselling project (Forster). It covers, then, both voluntary and statutory intervention with men of different ages who have different needs and problems. What connections are to be made?

Nearly all of these authors touch on the assumed link between men's perceptions of powerlessness and their need to exert power. This dynamic is central to much therapeutic literature on working with men (Frosh 1995) and

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is found in different forms throughout this collection. For example, Knox describes male prisoners' attempts to control their families because of the lack of power they feel through incarceration. Forster observes that divorce may leave many men feeling victimised both by former partners and by legal and social systems. Some of their disruptive behaviour after divorce, she argues, can be both an attempt to regain lost control and an attempt to punish their ex-partners.

The idea of men's contradictory experience of power - in other words, that men's social power also carries a cost for individual men - is frequently discussed in the literature on masculinity (Kaufman 1994). While it is recognised in this collection that there is not a single masculinity, there is clearly a tension in tackling the impact of systematic oppressive practices against women while responding in practice to the idea of masculinities. This is revealed in the ambivalences and contradictions within some practitioners' accounts.

Jane Forster, for example, when discussing her counselling work with divorced men, recognises that, to some extent, she dealt with the difficulty of responding to men's vulnerability and power by distancing herself from the women in the men's accounts.

This echoes the point made in the introduction about what it would mean for men to be social work clients in their own right. Men who seek out counselling voluntarily are presenting themselves as clients and, within a counselling framework, would be entitled to be treated as having independent needs. The difficulty is how to meet these needs while acting within the book's feminist code of practice which focuses on changing men and prioritising women and children.

Such tensions between vulnerability and power need to be made explicit to practitioners, not only because of the abusive impact men's perceptions of themselves as powerless and victimised can have on their partners and families, but also because of the way men can respond to professional intervention by similarly attempting to gain power and control. This theme is looked at in more detail below.

TECHNIQUES OF CONTROL

Practitioners and researchers in their various accounts in this volume offer insights into the manifold ways in which men as clients, research participants or fellow professionals attempt to divest female professionals of their

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legitimacy or authority. Lewis and Cavanagh, in their account of interviewing violent men, for example, refer to men's attempts to use humour or to personalise the research encounter to shape the interview process. While Arshad, in the context of anti-sexist training, identifies the figure of the 'anti-sexist sexist', a man who effectively uses the language of equality but whose attitude and behaviour - even in the context of a training group - continues to be oppressive.

What is interesting is that control techniques are not just a feature of work with men who have been deemed problematic by the social work system but also in work with men who seek counselling or other forms of voluntary help. Wright's article on counselling young women and their male partners about pregnancy highlights this point. Her case studies illustrate young men's stories about how they view their partners' bodies and clarify the links between power, gender and sexuality involved in decisions, or non-decisions, about contraceptive use. This is one of several points in the book where discussion of practice would have benefited from being placed in the context of recent feminist research (Holland et al 1994; Wight 1994).

CO-WORKING: WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES AND MEN AS ROLE MODELS

Discussion of workers' gender in the book tends to take three forms: the need for female professionals to keep alive women's perspectives; the value of male workers' 'role modelling' different ways of being male; and the value of male and female workers' modelling egalitarian relationships when co-working. The need to keep alive women's perspectives is summed up in Hainsworth's argument that youth work cannot be properly anti-sexist without the involvement of women: 'Our expertise as women is needed to inform this task' (p.179).

This touches on an ambiguity within the book about whether the women's perspectives being drawn on are those of women generally, women social workers or feminist social workers. The equating of women and children's experiences of victimisation - and the idea that female social workers can instinctively represent the experience of both to male clients - also needs further work, not least because of the absence of any discussion of the position of male child victims.

Arguments about the benefits of male workers as role models are heard throughout the collection, with Wright noting that male workers will need

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considerable training to take on this role. Hainsworth's chapter engages more critically with the notion of male role models. She draws on Bea Campbell's writing to argue that the problem has not been a lack of male role models in young men's lives but rather a saturation of them, and that the real problem remains male contempt for women.

While various contributors point to the positives of modelling egalitarian working relationships between themselves and male colleagues, there is no real discussion of the difficulties that can arise in the course of practice with men as co-workers. And yet within practitioners' accounts it is possible to hear traces of what it feels like to work with male colleagues. Knox, like Wright in her account of co-working a boys group ('it felt like I was being allowed to watch something rather private which belonged to a different way of being', p.145), describes feeling like an 'intruder' when working in the male environment of the prison. Could these descriptions be telling us something, too, about the experience of co-working with men?

Knox's account, particularly when describing the impact on female workers of realising they are the object of sexual abuser's fantasies, raises the issue of male supervision for female workers. Talking about sex with men can seem like a sexual act itself. In recent interviews I carried out with professionals who were involved in working with young sexual abusers, female professionals noted their unease at male colleagues observing their work with sexual offenders. The act of being observed discussing sexual issues can make female workers feel vulnerable - particularly if there is a feeling of being unable to differentiate the colleague's maleness from that of the client. There are clearly also issues of identification which need to be worked through for male workers in working with abusive men. Failure to address gender issues in co-working situations with men can leave female workers in an extremely vulnerable position.

MEN AS PARENTS AND CARERS

Working with women as mothers and carers is a large part of social work practice. The absence of men from work with families has been well documented, and yet parenting is clearly a gendered process. It is disappointing, therefore, that the book does not attempt to address work with men as parents and carers, particularly as it has been a concern of feminist practitioners for some time that it is women as parents, not men, who are targeted by the child care system. This omission may well be a result of a bias within the book towards focusing on work in specialist projects or the

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voluntary sector rather than on practice with men within local authority social work. Over and above family work, however, many of the men being worked with in projects such as CHANGE (a Scottish criminal justice based re-education programme for male perpetrators of domestic violence) or attending counselling services are fathers. Working out how to integrate work with men with services for the women and children who are influenced by their behaviour has to be a cornerstone of practice with men.

Scottish social work services do not have a statutory duty in respect of women but they do in relation to children. Making sure that there are clear procedures for co-working between agencies, for example in relation to men who are violent, has consequences for the protection of children. Otherwise, the danger will be not that men remain invisible within the social work system but that work with men becomes separate from and unaccountable to the rest of social work practice. Given that all the contributors to the volume are based in Scotland, it feels like a missed opportunity not to make more of the specific context of Scottish social work. In terms of issues around integrating services for men with those for children, this would include addressing co-working between children and families teams and criminal justice teams. This discussion also needs to be placed in the context of recent legislative changes in Scottish social work. The introduction of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 will have serious implications for working with men, not just abusive men in relation to child protection issues but also men more generally because it will introduce a new procedure for unmarried fathers to acquire parental rights and responsibilities with the agreement of the mothers.

SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH AND TRAINING WITH MEN

Lloyd and Degenhardt's chapter suggests there could be a trend for male social work students to choose placements in community care, with its culture of resource management. This is a reminder that the position of male social work students is closely tied to the changing character of the social work profession. This issue is also present in the chapter by Cree, who addresses the issue of why men care. Given the changing nature of social work this is no longer synonymous with her sub question of why men go into social work.

There is a tension in Cree's chapter, rooted in her use of the BEM Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) - an inventory which treats masculinity and femininity as measurable and independent variables. There is the obvious danger that in using such inventories feminist researchers end up reinforcing rather than

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measuring categories of masculinity and femininity. The differences within masculinities and within women's experiences cannot be quantified on such a continuum and so its use seems rather at odds with Cree's belief that we should be forefronting masculinities and treating women's experiences as diverse.

Questions about how to use feminist research to investigate men's lives are at the heart of Lewis and Cavanagh's chapter in which they draw on their experience of interviewing violent men. Central to their discussion is how to challenge men's patriarchal views during research interviews while at the same time collecting 'valid research data' (p.94). Aware, too, that men are unlikely to want to disclose details of their offending behaviour, Lewis and Cavanagh see their task as devising a 'data gathering instrument' which can address this difficulty. Their solution to both issues is to use challenge without confrontation. Challenge, they argue, confronts the methodological issue of needing to penetrate denial without 'contaminating' data while politically and ethically it addresses the need not to collude with or reinforce men's justification for their behaviour:

Some felt uneasy when they realised that the excuses and denial usually proffered to partners, family members, criminal justice personnel, doctors and social workers would not be so easily accepted in the unique context of a research interview.
(p.101)

While the aim of challenging the men's accounts is both ethically and politically justifiable, feminist researchers need to be cautious about underestimating the engrained nature of abusive men's distorted thinking and the impact research interviews have on changing this. The above quotation implies that the men had never really been properly challenged. Bearing in mind that these men are all connected with a treatment programme (although the chapter does not make clear, and it would have been useful to know, at what stages in the programme the men were interviewed) is this likely to be the case? How 'unique' is the context of the research interview for men who are in treatment programmes? Lewis and Cavanagh do not address the resources men may draw on to understand the nature of the research interview. Could the format remind the men of challenges made in treatment or police or court settings and are their research responses shaped by their experiences in these other settings? If so, it becomes a more complicated process than just penetrating denial to arrive at 'the truth' or valid research data. Cavanagh and Lewis treat the issue of arriving at valid accounts as a technical one - a question of devising the correct data gathering instrument -

hence their discussion of whether or not challenge is more or less likely to have men saying what they 'really think'. In doing so, however, they overlook issues of how the interview data is constructed in the first place.

CONCLUSION

As the introduction to this review suggests, **Working with Men** could be criticised for the lack of attention it pays to the nature of social work and hence to some of the tensions of integrating social work and feminist practice and values. Within the framework set out by the editors, however, this is a useful introductory text for both students and practitioners and presents a strong case both for working with men and for locating this work within an explicit feminist framework. While the code of practice offered at the conclusion of the book is perhaps stronger on principles than detailed strategies for working with men, it is a useful starting point. It is a pity that the editors were not able to pull together some of the implicit and explicit contradictions and tensions that contributors outlined throughout the book and which it is likely social workers setting out on a path of feminist practice with men are also likely to stumble upon. Yet some of these omissions probably speak more to the huge task of considering feminist social work practice with men in areas as wide as practice, research and training. For those who did not need to be won over either to the argument that this work with men needs to be done, or that it should be done within a feminist framework, the book perhaps offers little that is new, although reassurance is to be had in reading other women's accounts of the professional and personal difficulties of doing this work.

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