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Introduction: Masculinities in Crisis? Opening the Debate

Steven Roberts

Abstract: This chapter outlines the concerns as set out by Diane Abbot’s speech in 2013 in which she suggested that contemporary young British men are facing a crisis of masculinity. Situating this view of masculinity as part of historical trend towards crisis tendency, the chapter sets the tone for the collection by offering an opening response to Abbott’s claims. Recent developments in the theorising of men’s lives are brought to attention – especially Anderson’s theory of inclusive masculinity – to help interrogate this crisis talk, at the same time setting up a critical debate among authors on the best way to theorise multiple, fluid and complex expressions of masculinity.

Keywords: crisis; Diane Abbott; inclusive masculinity; Masculinities

Introduction

Following the emergence of critical masculinities studies in the late 1970s, academic research started to focus on men as gendered beings. The pioneering research of Raewyn Connell (1987; 2000) was central to such developments, with her theory of hegemonic masculinity being widely recognised as having an unparalleled influence on studies of men’s lives (Beasley 2012). Adopted by scholars across disciplinary boundaries, Connell’s conceptual framework provided researchers with a way to examine and document the negative components of masculinity, the existence of a plurality of masculinities (as opposed to a static, unitary form) and, importantly, the ways that men are hierarchically stratified within society, with the summit being occupied by those men who are ‘economically successful, racially superior, and visibly heterosexual’ (McDowell 2003: 11). In sharp contrast to previous studies of masculinity influenced by the field of functionalist sociology and sex role theory, Connell’s major departure was to locate a theory of power as a central focus to ensure a more thorough account and explanation for the intricacies of gender relations and the nature of intramasculine domination. Yet, despite the academic attention over a long period of time (e.g. Kimmel 1987, 2008; Hearn 1987, 2010; Messner 1994) given to the operation of power and the differences amongst men (as well as between men and women), public debates about whether masculinity is in crisis have often taken centre stage, especially in the popular press and in political debates. Such ‘crisis-talk’, and especially one particular recent rendition, serves as the key stimulus for this book.

In May 2013, as part of a lecture series for the Demos think tank, the Labour shadow public health minister Diane Abbott gave a speech entitled ‘Britain’s crisis of masculinity’. Abbott raised concerns about how rapid economic and social change has affected male identity and she suggested that this ‘crisis’ had created a number of largely unspoken problems.

Abbott’s sentiments, which were given wide print and broadcast media coverage, were met with a mixed reception. Critics from both the left and the right of the political divide were largely unified in criticising the comparisons she made with masculinity from a bygone era, an alleged ‘golden age’ when men, like her own father, ‘prided themselves on being providers – for their spouses, families and themselves’. Beyond
this comparison, though, Abbott contended that the contemporary crisis includes some more widely accepted ‘inescapable truths’. These include:

- Fewer men than ever are able to connect the fabric of their lives to traditional archetypes of masculinity;
- More people today are employed behind tills than in mining coal or working in other heavy industries;
- The decline of heavy industry and manufacturing jobs has meant many men feel uncomfortable about the kinds of jobs on offer to them – particularly service jobs.

Abbott also contended that there exists a lack of respect among men for women’s autonomy and a normalisation of homophobia.

This public discussion of the behaviours of boys and men points to a presumed need for policy intervention to act as a corrective to the apparent crisis in masculinity, which presents (young) men as both at risk and also a risk to others. In a way this follows developments where men have emerged from being the implicit and assumed recipients (and makers) of social policy, to being named explicitly as the concern of social policy (see for example Hearn’s 2010 account of men’s health, among other policy realms).

The claims made in Abbott’s speech, and the wider public concerns around boys, men and masculinity, then, are taken in this book as a first point of debate. Adopting a range of quantitative and qualitative methods, each chapter draws on empirical data exploring issues and performances of masculinities from a range of settings in order to critically interrogate the current public discourse that proposes that there is a crisis of masculinity.

Each chapter engages with and ultimately rejects the central thesis that pertains to masculinity in crisis. In building arguments to reject this position, the challenge for the authors is to spell out their view of how modern masculinities operate, how they are expressed and performed, and what consequences follow as a corollary. This, then, is the second point of debate with which this book concerns itself, and it is very much a debate about theorising modern masculinities. However, it is not the mission of this book to present a wide-ranging overview of the different ways in which masculinity/ies can be conceived, theorised or studied – plenty of good introductory (sometimes elaborate) texts exist to meet such a need (e.g. Reeser 2010; Kimmel et al. 2005; Whitehead 2002). Instead, taking a narrower focus, the collection is primarily concerned
with a discussion, critique and advancement of work associated with the area of the field known as *Inclusive Masculinity Theory*. There are good and very specific reasons for this. The key recent work informed by these approaches, such as *Inclusive Masculinity* (2009) by Eric Anderson and *The Declining Significance of Homophobia* (2012) by Mark McCormack propose a very different world from the one espoused by Diane Abbott and others commenting on the issues affecting contemporary men. Where Abbott sees *crisis*, Anderson, McCormack and others document *social change*, and as such aim to make sense of such change(s) and outline the implications for the lives of boys and young men but also the implications for critical masculinities’ theoretical toolbox. Diverging from hegemonic masculinity theory, then, Anderson and McCormack emphasise the range of behaviours now open to contemporary young men and they highlight a need to fully *re-examine* what it is to be a man, and to develop our understanding of how masculinities are constructed, performed and consumed after a period of significant social, cultural and economic change.

The shifting and complex nature of masculinity as a gender category belies and unsettles fixed normative definitions of masculinity such as ‘having qualities appropriate to or usually associated with a man’. This requires that we explore the opening up of behaviours conducive with maintaining a heterosexual identity. This book, with contributions from established and newly emerging experts in masculinities, considers the questions that Anderson, McCormack and others have invited us to discuss, document and debate at a time when the subject matter has attracted heightened public interest.

**Is masculinity in crisis?**

Before proceeding to present the contents of the book, the chapter first provides a response to Abbott’s interjection. The decline of manufacturing and heavy industry, the increasing participation of women in the workforce and the relative underachievement of boys in school are, indeed, realities of life today. But does this really constitute or underpin a ‘crisis of masculinity’?

To begin with, it is worth noting that, far from being a novel concern, the ‘masculinity-in-crisis’ theme as promulgated by Abbott is well rehearsed, and has a long history. Both historians and literary
scholars have identified historical periods, predating both the women’s movement and the development of the industrial order but also after, where masculinity can be deemed to have been in crisis (Beynon 2002). As an example, we can point to the discourse around a ‘crisis’ in masculinity that emerged in the 1890s. Stimulated by anxieties surrounding the losses of key battles across the empire, the rise of the US as an economic power and Germany’s imperial ambitions, this period emphasised concerns about the economic, the political, the social, the psychological and even the physical deterioration of English men (Kestner 2010). In terms of the latter, this period saw schools begin to focus not just on the cultivation of boys’ minds, but also on the development of their athleticism. This concern resulted in a moral panic over the supposed ‘softening’ of boys, and manifested itself in the British cultural obsession with competitive team sports that we now consider the norm.

Masculinity has also regularly been subject to ‘crisis talk’ as a result of changes to the nature and availability of work over the last 100 years. The 1930s Great Depression damaged many men’s efforts to be a breadwinner, while the development of Fordism and its associated simplification and standardisation of work practices had, by the 1950s, already started to undermine levels of skill and autonomy in the workplace. The de-industrialisation of the late 1970s and 1980s, with its peaks in unemployment and the start of an ongoing reduction of industrial and manufacturing based workplaces, also raised concerns for men and masculinity. In combination with the effects of some small victories for second-wave feminism in respect of women’s equality, this transition to a more ‘feminised’ service-based economy saw more women entering paid work – albeit often part-time work. Again, this brought with it concerns about the role of men in society. As noted earlier, during this period serious academic attention began to be given towards researching men as gendered beings, giving rise to the emergence of critical masculinities studies.

The more recent debates about the crisis of masculinity through the 1990s and much of the 2000s appeared to have taken the 1980s as a starting point and, quite often, emphasised similar concerns. But in addition, the mid-1990s witnessed a profound change in the level of political and research attention given to boys’ academic performance in the UK. This was stimulated, in no small part, by comparisons with the academic attainment of girls, who had by this time started to outperform boys at the aggregate level.
In this context, Mac an Ghaill (1994) critically interrogated the ‘crisis masculinity’ experienced by specific young men in his efforts to explore the insecurity faced by boys and men who considered their traditional masculine identity as being no longer relevant. Similarly, titled texts concerned themselves with whether boys were holders of ‘uncertain’ (O’Donnell and Sharpe 2002) or ‘redundant’ (McDowell 2003) masculinities. A host of other research attention has been given to the matter of masculinity and the school setting (inter alia, Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Griffin 2000; Francis 2010; Renold 2001; Connolly 2004; Ringrose 2012). This body of work has done much to destabilise and deconstruct the simplistic ‘boys are losing out to girls’ rhetoric. It has revealed that this worry has been underpinned by a ‘discourse of crisis and loss’ (Griffin 2000), which has focused on particular representations of masculinity and femininity and simultaneously neglected the intersection of social class and race with gender (Ringrose 2012), and the associated complexities of educational outcomes. It has also sought to recognise the way power can be and is enacted by boys, even in these apparent times of crisis for masculinity (e.g. Ringrose & Renold 2010; Keddie 2007a). Here, feminist researchers have revealed the privileges that boys maintain in terms of attracting additional teacher attention – which is often at the expense of girls – as well as demonstrating boys’ intimidating behaviour towards girls and even female teachers (see e.g. Frith and Mahony 1994; Gilligan 1997; Keddie 2007b; Robinson 2000). With ‘boy code’ encouraging them to think that their natural position is one of power (Kimmel 2008), boys can attempt to ‘subvert the traditional adult/child/teacher/student power binary to undermine their female teachers’ (Keddie 2007a: 24). Meanwhile, the notion that an additional influx of male teachers might provide the answer has also been debunked, with feminist researchers pointing out that men sometimes support boys’ behaviour, deliberately or otherwise, because they bring their own masculinity with them (see Skelton 2001; Jackson 2010). Despite this critique, concerns about the implications of the feminised environment upon boys persist right up to the present day, with female teachers being positioned as being ineffective in efforts to stimulate, interest and manage boys (Skelton 2012). Correspondingly, the days and weeks after summertime A-level and GCSE results in Britain still abound with media comment pieces from across the political spectrum on the nature of the gender gap in education (Roberts 2012). Other researchers have pointed to masculinities that are ‘far more complex, nuanced and fragile than any of the stereotypical
representations in dominant discourses’ (Reay 2002; see also Ingram forthcoming); yet, these dominant discourses prevail.

Looking beyond solely the educational sphere, the redundancy of male roles is also picked up by Geoff Dench in his writings, including in the September 2011 issue of Sociology Review, and in his role as a verbal respondent at Dianne Abbott’s speech. Looking at the ‘worthlessness’ felt by men, Dench echoes some of the concerns set out by Abbott, claiming that many young men seem under-motivated at school, are likely to remain workless and feel ‘unwanted’, in part due to the ‘success’ of feminism in making more women financially independent. These claims need to be considered with some caution. Dench’s claims might well apply to a minority of men, but his points are presented as if they might be more widely representative. Even though it is a great concern that many young people are unemployed, his comments about a lack of motivation and the links he makes to worklessness seem to run contrary to evidence. Academic research in this area suggests that the vast majority of all unemployed people want paid work (Shildrick et al. 2012), although much recent work in the sociology of education outlines the reality of young people’s positive aspirations (St Clair and Benjamin 2011; Archer et al. 2014). Dench’s remarks also serve to downplay the complex interplay of class, race and gender in educational achievement. For example, in 2011, only 26% of White British boys eligible for free school meals (FSM) obtained the benchmark GSCE level of 5 ‘good’ passes, compared with 32% of FSM-eligible girls. In other words, the majority of both boys and girls in this cohort did not achieve the benchmark, yet girls seem to be left out of this discussion. Many sociologists have pointed to the fact that gender has a smaller impact than social class or race, but this often remains overlooked (Roberts 2012; Ashley 2009).

Reverting to Abbott’s comments about the lack of young men who could plausibly replicate the masculinity of their fathers and grandfathers, this is likely a truism. However, these concerns appear to be rooted in the ‘discourse of crisis and loss’ (outlined earlier), which mourns the demise of masculine privilege. As with much of this crisis talk, we would do well to consider who benefits from the existence of such crisis discourses, who benefits from such crises being averted or resolved and just how much masculinity by its very definition requires crisis as a means for re-establishing and power and cultural legitimacy (Beynon 2002).

Such concerns should remain to the fore because it seems clear that those wedded to a discourse of crisis and loss fail to factor in that, although
boys are the ‘victim’ of the feminised education system and a labour market dominated by service work, girls still remain significantly unequal with regards to *lifetime* returns in the economic realm. Furthermore, no consideration is given to the relatively small number of women in positions of power and influence in both the public and private sectors.

In relation to the numbers of people working behind shop tills as opposed to in heavy industry, again Abbott correctly identifies observable shifts in employment patterns. This, however, is in tension with her next point that many young men do not *want* to work in such service sector roles. Although this is a commonly noted point in sociological research concerning unemployed young men, the lack of appeal of service sector work needs to be seriously questioned (Roberts 2013). In fact, far greater numbers of young men (and women) from working-class backgrounds can be found actually doing those front-line service sector jobs than suggested by those who claim that such young men would typically avoid these kinds of roles (Roberts 2011). This runs contrary to the views put forward by Abbott and also others in the sociology of youth, but this is because the *experiences* of men in front-line service work remain relatively overlooked, compared with *attitudes towards taking up* such employment. By looking disproportionately at the margins – in this case the experiences of the unemployed – we develop a misdirected generalisation regarding men’s attitudes towards service sector employment and its implications for their identities.

Abbott’s last point, about rising homophobia, also requires careful examination. The centrality of homophobia as a key component in the performance of masculinity and of our cultural definition of manhood has been widely noted by leading scholars in gender studies (e.g. Kimmel 1994). They have highlighted how homophobia regulates men in socially damaging ways, encouraging aggressive and violent behaviours while stigmatising emotional expressionism and intimate homosocial bonding.

However, recent scholarship – led in no small part by empirically driven IMT advocated by Anderson and McCormack, but not limited to these writers² – has sought to challenge the centrality of homophobia as a key component of men’s identities in the 21st century. Instead, these authors argue that we have witnessed a reduction of homo-hysteria (the fear of being thought to be homosexual) and they document increasingly accepting, tolerant and even supportive attitudes towards social and civil equality. While we have known for a long time that there exist multiple
forms of masculinities – as opposed to one single form – these writers have emphasised the greater range of behaviours now open to contemporary young men and have begun to insist that ‘men can be men’ without necessarily having to dominate, subordinate or police other masculinities or femininities. Men who rely on the model of masculinity that emphasises misogyny, homophobia, aggression and resistance to certain types of work do, of course, still exist. Indeed, rather than rejecting the existence of violence against women in the home, homophobic hate crimes, sexual violence against women and strong levels of resistance by men to gender equality initiatives and entrenched backlash responses by men rights groups, proponents of Inclusive Masculinity Theory seek to illustrate these remain as part of a range of behaviours that are open to men, but that in fact these reflect the lives of a minority of men. This is not to say that the existence of such issues is not problematic – it clearly is, both for the individuals in question and in many ways society at large. The point is that, for the many – especially among the younger generations – masculine identity does not always rely on those negative traits that apparently characterised masculinity in a bygone era. That gender inequality remains is, for the large part, a structural issue rather than simply an attitudinal one (Crompton 2010).

Finally, Abbott framed her concern about the ‘crisis of masculinity’ around the ways young British men are trapped between the decline of heavy industry and stable employment, and the fragility and false promise of many of Britain’s white collar industries, and zero hours contracts. This is correct. But such concerns also apply to the plight of young women. Youth researchers have noted that both young men and young women can often expect to gain work only in routine, subservient, low-paid, often insecure jobs (Gunter and Watt 2009). Meanwhile, the ONS has recently published statistics showing that more women are long-term unemployed than at any other period in the last 20 years. The crisis of masculinity discourse runs the risk of trivialising such issues and in doing so drawing attention away from the employment crisis that is facing many young people, especially at the lower end of the social hierarchy.

Debating modern masculinities: The chapters

The chapters in this book are concerned to tackle the issues of masculinities and how they have been very recently characterised in the public
domain. The first aim of each contribution then is for the authors to locate themselves within that debate. There is unity across chapters in the critical deconstruction of the masculinity-in-crisis discourse, and there is also agreement that masculinity/ies can be multiple, fluid, contextually situated and contingent. That significant social change has occurred also remains uncontested throughout the book. The chapters depart, however, in their degree of agreement in respect of the implications of such social change upon modern masculinities.

Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been recognised as a useful device for developing our understanding and use of social policy in relation to men, in that it engages with force and consent, and material and discursive power relations (Hearn 2010: 182), the contemporary relevance of the concept has been challenged by Anderson and McCormack, among others. Connell (2000) explains that sexuality is the most symbolically important line of distinction among men, with subordination occurring not only in terms of oppression of homosexual boys, but in the gender policing of heterosexual boys and men. Yet, through documenting a reduction in hegemony, that is a reduction (though not an elimination) of subordination, of domination and the relative (or even entire absence) of hierarchical stratification between men and boys, Anderson and McCormack leave us with a number of questions to answer. Can hegemonic masculinity exist in the absence of hegemony? Could less oppressive forms become hegemonic? What happens if and when gender policing becomes less regimented, less regular? What if all men do not have the drive for domination, the drive for power, for conquest? Can boys ‘become’ men without drawing on these traditional discourses of patriarchy? Should gender power be reduced to the logic of domination (Moller 2007)? How do we theorise the answers to such questions? These are the kinds of queries the following chapters aim to address.

Deviating from the usual approach in edited collections, rather than being stand alone or loosely, thematically connected, the chapters have been developed in dialogue with one another, a process that has involved varying degrees of critical engagement. While the chapters often ‘speak’ to one another, a range of perspectives are presented and it is hoped that the internal debate generated will act as a productive force in pushing forward the theorising of contemporary masculinities, whilst maintaining a grounding in empirical evidence.

The chapters, each of which considers the kinds of questions set out earlier, but in very different settings, proceed as follows. In Chapter 2,
Victoria Cann’s focus group data with 14-year olds shows the importance of youth taste cultures as an everyday space through which gender is experienced and policed, to varying extents by boys and girls. As a result, Cann argues that limits remain in respect of what is considered ‘appropriate’ for boys to like. Chapter 3, by Nicola Ingram and Richard Waller, argues that the crisis of masculinity is somewhat overstated and also that men still enjoy privileged positions within the social order. Their interviews with university undergraduates serve as the basis for their conclusion that masculinity is neither in crisis, nor radically reformed. Michael Ward turns attention to the experiences of working-class young men who are alienated, bullied and victimised for their apparent non-normative performances of masculinity in Chapter 4. His chapter notes contradictions in that, although identity is bound up with the ‘alternative emo scene’, non-normative performances of masculinity still evidenced many traditional discourses. In Chapter 5, the focus for Paul Simpson is the ways that middle-aged gay men capitulate to, negotiate with and resist homophobia. He explores how their ‘ageing capital’ (resources that come with ageing) can be thwarted by persistent homophobia that constrains self-expression, while tolerance towards gay men is explained rather as a form of civil indifference. Chapter 6 provides another unique point of entry for considering contemporary masculinities – the mosh pit. Drawing on a vividly described ethnography, Gabby Riches challenges taken-for-granted assumptions by revealing how even such aggressive, physically demanding spaces offer men opportunities to embody and perform multiple masculinities, becoming inclusive space for celebrations of marginalised masculinities. Taking the practices of metrosexual men into consideration, Chapter 7, by Brendan Gough, Matthew Hall and Sarah Seymour Smith, is clear in arguing that today’s men are less limited in their expressions of masculinity than previous generations. Despite a softening of masculinity, however, they note the continued operation of orthodox masculinities which may work to marginalise other men and women. The chapters just outlined can be read as critical, stand-alone pieces, but readers would benefit enormously from at least reading each intervention in conjunction with the book’s final chapter from Anderson and McCormack, which acts as lively rebuttal and rejoinder to many of the critiques put forth in the preceding pages. As well as providing a useful history of masculinity theory, alongside a more detailed account of the mechanics of IMT, they take the opportunity to contextualise the chapters of this edited volume. They proceed to argue
that, far from being a crisis of masculinities, the gendered changes in the social lives of contemporary young British men are positive and to be welcomed. Collectively, the contributions, and the debate herein aid the advancement of theoretical and empirical understandings of modern masculinities.

Notes

1 These two books are simply indicative, and are noted here in respect of the depth of their accounts. The theory developed in both texts underpins a vast array of publications in academic journals (e.g. McCormack 2014; 2011; Anderson and Bullingham 2013; Roberts 2013; Magrath et al. 2013; Michael 2013; Cashmore and Cleland 2012; Adams 2011; Ripley et al. 2011; McCormack and Anderson 2010; Anderson 2005).

2 See Haywood (2008) who, while not drawn towards the IMT framework, documents that othering of femininity, homophobia and celebration of heterosexuality were not taken up amongst 8–12-year-old boys in his study.

3 A wide range of critiques exist in respect to the theory’s coherence (e.g. Flood 2002, Demetriou 2001, Howson 2006; Beasley 2008).

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