



Men's Interests in Change

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Abstract Broad social pressure on men to change is opposed by these men's interests apparently being met by staying where they are. I label this the "centralisation impasse", and argue that this impasse prevents straight white men from articulating a direct self-interest in change to gender arrangements. After examining how a variety of writers deal with this impasse, I focus on work by Bob Pease, who suggests men should act upon an ethic that sees the costs to women of men's privilege as being unacceptable. In addition, he suggests men's pain may be worth exploring as a possible motivator for engagement, and that it is worth seeking to understand men's pain in terms of their position in gender relations. I take Pease's work further by arguing that, rather than focusing only on men's role in women's oppression, it is crucial to use experiential data from straight white men's lives in order to develop an understanding of gender relations that includes the actual lived experiences of these men. In order to collect and assess this data, I argue that Pease's "social empathy" should be focused by men on themselves rather than on women. This social empathy is needed because the construction of the straight white male subject position integrally entails a disembedded and disembodied stance and experience that is "naturalised" by discourse so that both the political significance of emotional pain itself, and the awareness by straight white men of painful experiences, are structurally muted, downplayed or redirected. It may well be that when the full dimensions of men's pain are more visible, the pain involved in taking up the centralized straight white male position is itself a motivator for such men to engage in gender change – thus forming the basis for a direct self interest among straight white men, and constituting a way through the centralization impasse.

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Introduction – The Centralisation Impasse

In this essay I don't discuss "men" as a general category. Rather, my interest focuses on a small group of men: straight white middle class men (I use the acronym "swhim"). My focus sits there firstly, because I am such a man and can speak with some experience of that position, and secondly because this group of men is at "the centre" - not explicitly marginalised by any major social discourse, in contrast to men who are non-white, gay or working class. Men in this "central" position appear to have no intrinsic interest in progressive social change, and especially no interest in what I

call “gender change” – i.e., significant change in what Connell (1987) calls ‘the gender order’.

The very existence of a discourse about gender change itself implies that gender change is possible, and feminists almost by definition believe in its possibility as well as its desirability. Accepting its possibility then, I think it is self-evident that for the change process to proceed at all, men must become involved in some way. This involvement may simply be limited to a reluctant acquiescence, or may manifest as fierce opposition that is eventually overcome in pitched battle. The feminist stance, and indeed the stance of many people both male and female who value consideration of issues of social justice and moral fair dealing, is that men and especially swhim SHOULD actually become actively engaged in gender change. It is in the sense of active and to a great degree willing participation that I use the term “engagement” here.

The pressure on swhim to become involved in gender change does not only come from the moral domain. The social changes brought about by feminism in the last 30-40 years are now a fact, and that men can easily identify with the plethora of “men-in-crisis” artefacts now gracing the public domain shows there is a sense in which men are experiencing a broad-based pressure to respond to a process of change that is going on whether they like it or not. I think that swhim face choices of being dragged kicking and screaming into gender change, being passive respondents to gender change, or we can find motivations to actively engage with it.

Engagement in the active sense that I use it here is not just about ideas or ideals. Individuals engaging in gender change (or any social change) must perceive substantial personal benefit from such engagement to make all the pain and disruption worth it. As one of Pease’s (2000; 114) research subjects put it, “if there isn’t anything in it for you, why the hell are you going to do it?”. Liberatory movements such as feminism and the aboriginal land rights movement clearly portray the possible benefits to participants, usually in terms of increased access to power and recognised subject positions, and increased subjective assets like self-worth and respect. But swhim as a group are not marginalised in the sense used by liberatory discourses. The centralised position of swhim means not only that conventional liberatory logic cannot be used to theorise swhim’s experiences in the way that feminism “explained” many offensive and painful experiences of women. Liberatory discourse also is not able to offer enticements to swhim to engage in gender change since, in liberatory thinking, “the centre” already produces the benefits desired by those seeking liberation. As Connell points out, “the group with predominant social power cannot be liberated” (Connell 1987; 276).

So there is, for swhim, a tricky little impasse. There is pressure on swhim to engage in gender change but there are no positive reasons for that engagement readily accessible to individual swhim other than the pressure itself. Social and cultural operations that position swhim as the group with ‘predominant social power’ foreclose the possibility that swhim could need or want anything other than the social goods which predominant social power allocates to them. In other words, on the one hand feminist and other progressive social forces prompt swhim to shift, and on the other hand swhim’s centralized position means they have nowhere to go. I call this the “centralization impasse”.

In the following section, I summarise a range of writers on masculinity from the viewpoint of how they deal with the centralisation impasse. In later sections I examine a work by Pease, and build on his work to suggest that his suggestion of “enlightened self-interest” is an insufficient motivator for swhim to engage in gender change. Instead I put forward a more direct self-interest based on an expanded definition of Pease’s “social empathy” and a post-modern analysis of men’s pain.

Ways of Dealing with the Impasse

Writers on men’s issues have employed a range of strategies to try to deal with this centralization impasse. One approach is to deny the positioning of men in the centre. Warren Farrell, in “The Myth of Male Power” (1994) sets out to show that women have the same amount of power as men, but in a different sphere. Side by side with the patriarchy is “the matriarchy”, and that, while patriarchy produces benefits for men, the interaction between the two systems results in men being “the disposable sex” (ibid; 16). Farrell almost exclusively examines one-to-one relations between men and women, and ignores the larger social structures in which such interactions take place.

David Thomas, in “Not Guilty” (1993) takes a different tack in saying that, while men have power, things are not as simple as portrayed by the idea of patriarchy. “Men’s public power is matched by private disadvantage.” (ibid; 12) He lists the many difficulties faced by men in a wide range of areas of social and personal life. Thomas’ discussion of men as individuals rather than as a group of people sharing similar subject-positions has the effect of disconnecting men from their gendered implication in “the centre”. So, although to some extent Thomas recognises the complexity of the “centre” position, his prescription for action revolves around a male response to radical feminist accusations rather than a positive step forward in the whole debate.

In dealing with the centralisation impasse the so-called mythopoeists, like Bly (1990) and Biddulph (1994), turn away entirely from issues of power and instead concentrate on men’s pain. They take the view that men are wounded by disconnection from traditions of “deep masculinity” (Biddulph 1994; 24) and the solution is to learn to connect emotionally with men. This view holds sway among activist men in Australia at present, mainly because (I think) it has the advantage of offering clear personal benefits to those who engage with it: closer, more affective and supportive relationships with other men. As I point out in my introduction, the portraying of benefits is a key requirement to support men to engage in gender change, and the benefits of deeper relations between men is indeed tangible. However because Mythopoetic theory, principally Bly’s work, does not connect its key myths with power structures, creating instead what Prentice (1988; 10) calls “psychologistic” solutions, it offers no scope as a basis for broad engagement amongst men.

Another approach to the centralisation impasse is simply to endorse it. Writers such as Connell (1995) and McMahan (1999) take this stance. McMahan describes social representations that help people come to terms with feminist demands for equal sharing in the area of housework at the same time as supporting the gender status quo. His conclusion is simply that men have no interest in gender change, and that they are effectively standing in the way of change (ibid; 206).

Connell, a well respected writer, develops a tripartite model of gender, taking into account relations of power, production and emotional attachment. He created the widely used term “hegemonic masculinity” – the exemplary masculinity that holds

sway at any moment, and in which possibly a minority of men actually engage. His approach also sees no hope of men engaging in gender change in their own interests: the way forward for men is “alliance politics” (Connell 1995: 238) – supporting those who may be considered to have a “real” claim to wanting social justice, rather than finding a more direct self-interest for men (ibid; 243). Both McMahon and Connell see men as primarily individuals rather than as a potential cohesive social force.

In terms of *swhim*'s positioning in the centre, a potential strategy is to move out of the centre and to take up one of many marginalised positions. Although this possibility is not covered in the literature I review here, I myself engage in this sort of strategy by wearing highly unusual clothes, including garments usually regarded as “women's clothes”. The advantage of this strategy lies in being able to use already existing liberatory ideas, rhetoric and strategies, and simply adapt them for a new constituency. But, given *swhim*'s positioning in “the centre”, I note above there are major structural problems in deploying existing liberatory discourses in the interests of *swhim*. There is, moreover, a major strategic drawback to this approach. Speaking from experience I can say that, strategically, taking a marginalised position is not a sensible move. Power is a necessary resource in order to achieve gender change goals. Stepping away from sources of power thus does not make sense strategically or structurally.

Developing Positive Interests

I note above that *swhim* can be dragged to gender change, we can be passive respondents, or we can find reasons to actively engage with it. The last possibility is often canvassed by writers who frequently style themselves “profeminist”. An oft-used approach among this group is to develop a clearly articulated moral commitment to new forms of gender relations and to undertake activities that express and reinforce such a commitment.

For example, John Stoltenberg (1989) describes a “male sexual identity” (ibid; 33) that men ascribe to. This identity includes “rapist ethics” (ibid;4) in which men redirect responsibility for their actions onto women. In order to change this ethic

...it requires, minimally, both the capacity and the commitment to regard another person as a whole self. (ibid; 55)

Stoltenberg proposes that a ‘moral identity’ (ibid;115) can be developed which sees women as equally valid beings to men. This moral identity can exist alongside a man's male sexual identity, and recognises that this juxtaposition of the two identities can produce huge inner tensions in a man. Various acts and articulated commitments indicate that a man is developing this moral identity, and these acts and articulations thus become badges of belonging to a group of progressive men. Despite the soundness of his morals, Stoltenberg's emphasis on a strict adherence to these badges implies such a group is beleaguered and on the defensive, and Stoltenberg appears to doubt that many men would engage with his stance.

The ideal approach to the centralisation impasse, I believe, is to articulate a positive interest in change that engages with both personal motivations and with the political arena. Bob Pease (2000) clearly understands the importance of this, and suggests that this is a central task for activist men (ibid; 134). He canvasses the sorts of interests generally ascribed to men, and finds two broad types of interest. “Material

interests” describe the interests of men as presented both by mainstream society and by much feminist work: the “subjective, material and rational conceptions of what men want” (ibid; 130). He suggests that such interests appear as unitary in that “men’s interests are seen to flow directly from their location in social structure, assuming that there are unitary interests between men” (ibid; 133). It is this “material” construction of men’s interests that makes up one pole of my “centralisation impasse”.

Pease also discusses “enlightened self-interests” as the interests arising from recognising the costs of masculinity:

While men’s position carries with it more power and status it also brings the burden of responsibility that could lead men towards their liberation. (ibid; 16)

Although he recognises that validating men’s pain is an important step in supporting men to empathise with others, he cautions that using the “burden of responsibility” argument as a basis for men’s positive interests risks simply adopting “a strategy that benefits them, rather than focusing on overcoming the oppression of women” (ibid; 17). Enlightened self-interest, then, is an interest in reducing the suffering or costs to others of one’s power. The implication is that somewhere a benefit will accrue to oneself.

Pease sees a two-pronged approach to redefining men’s interests. Firstly, like Stoltenberg, he sees the conscious taking up of a new personal ethics as crucial. He calls this “social empathy” – effectively an ethically-based understanding of the costs to women of men’s privilege. Secondly, men’s pain can be harnessed for social change if it is reinterpreted “based on a new conceptualisation of need” (ibid; 134) and if it can be understood as connected to “their position in the social relations of gender” (ibid; 135). Unfortunately Pease does not make clear how such work may benefit men, and we are left uncertain as to whether any benefit could arise from enlightened self-interest.

Critique of Pease

In terms of my focus upon articulating a positive and attractive interest for swhim in gender change, Pease’s work alone, of all those reviewed above, recognises the issues at stake. In what follows I explore some problems with Pease’s view and suggest a further development on his two-pronged approach.

Although Pease is awake to what he describes as the “unitary” alignment between current gender arrangements and men’s interests, he betrays his own adherence to such a view in his caution about using the “burden of responsibility” argument, discussed above, as a basis for men’s positive interests. He comments that the risk of such an argument is in producing a “strategy that benefits” men. Surely the articulation of an interest in gender change must inherently involve articulating the benefits to men of that interest. Without benefits there can be no interest. Yet Pease falls in to the trap of assuming that men’s benefit equals costs to others. This is indeed a reading off of men’s interests from men’s position in social gender arrangements, and shows the extent to which such “reading-off” is deeply entrenched.

Another criticism of Pease is that he does not define his use of the terms “men” or “women”. Pease notes that both he and his research subjects are straight and white, leading me to believe that he is in fact really only talking about swhim (i.e. straight

white middle class men) and their interests. In the following discussion I will take his use of the term “men” to mean swhim.

A further and very significant criticism I have of Pease is that his ethical prong of the redefining of swhim's interests is not actually focused on the interests of swhim. Instead, his “social empathy” is focused, not on the costs to swhim of patriarchal privilege, but the costs to others, especially women, and swhim's interests (now clearly seen as enlightened self-interests) are seen as being read from the interests of others. I suggest that this is a continuation of what has been a major theme in patriarchal constructions of masculinity, namely the decontextualisation of the particularity of male lives. Benhabib suggests that ideologies of masculinity construct men as “disembedded and disembodied”, “mushrooms” that simply appear with no prior commitments to relationships of any sort (Benhabib 1987; 81). While Pease clearly sees swhim as located in relationships with others and especially women, he appears to gloss over the other pole of relationships, namely swhim themselves. He does not consider that “social empathy” may be focused on swhim, or indeed that it needs to be. Although in his other prong he suggests that men's pain needs to be reinterpreted and understood as part of the social structure of gender, he appears to separate this prong from the ethical prong, which is focused on others.

Towards a New Interest

It seems to me that in fact both ethics and the reinterpretation of men's pain must be brought together in order to successfully espouse a positive interest for swhim. At the same time as taking the ethical stance that the marginalisation of women and others is unethical, we must also assume the stance that the pain that swhim experience is likewise unethical, and arises from unethical arrangements as does the marginalisation of others. An ethic of “social empathy” or something very similar has opened up spaces where the stories of women have been heard with empathy and used as data from which the rich feminist array of analyses and perspectives has been developed. Such an approach, I suggest, reflected a shift from the patriarchal stance that there is something wrong WITH women (for example Freud's penis envy), to the more empathetic stance that there is something wrong FOR women (for example that social gender arrangements marginalise women).

A similar shift needs to occur in order to allow space for exploring the subjectivities and experiences - the stories - of swhim. While Pease suggests the focus of his social empathy should be on the suffering of women and swhim's role in such suffering, I suggest that it is much more directly in swhim's interests that swhim's social empathy be focused upon the suffering of swhim and the role of swhim, others and society in such suffering. Given swhim's centralised position in social arrangements, this approach cannot portray swhim solely as victims. Pease suggests that it is important to understand how swhim's pain arises in connection with their position in gender arrangements – i.e. a position of domination. I suggest that such an understanding can really only be arrived at by taking precisely the ethical approach to swhim that feminism took vis-à-vis women: that there is something wrong FOR swhim.

This approach is crucial in order to collect complete data about the actual lived experiences of wielding power, of being “in the centre”, and of being a dominator. Without an empathetic approach, readings of swhim's stories can reinforce the picture

of men as wrong and bad. An example is Stoltenberg's dismissing of men's remorse after raping or bashing as simply a "perplexing", but structurally irrelevant, "ritual" of the "erotic substructure of rape" (Stoltenberg 1989; 134). Such a reading reinforces yet again the disembedding important to the ideology of masculinity, by taking for granted that the impact upon men of men's relations with others, in this case the victim, are irrelevant.

A more empathetic reading of such stories accepts that I can rape someone and suffer pain myself as a result. This empathetic reading cannot exclude considerations of the experiences of the victim. I am merely suggesting that the empathy be extended to all parties to the event in order to get a more complete understanding of the situation. Such an approach accepts it is possible that swhim's pain arises as a result of domination, and it is this acceptance that can then form the basis for a new interest for swhim: the position of domination itself becomes the motivator to engage in gender change.

However, I want to point out that the shift to this more empathetic approach towards swhim cannot be a simple dualistic either/or switch, in which only one pole of the dualism can be considered at a time. It is not a matter of saying that there are things wrong for swhim and therefore there is nothing wrong with swhim. It cannot be denied that men carry out a wide range of brutal, revolting and fatal actions; nor do I want to deny that there is a personal responsibility that must be accepted for these actions. Substantial existing discourses, such as the judicial system, support and indeed demand this operation. However to truncate the domain of responsibility at the personal is merely repeating a key operation of the ideology of masculinity (and indeed Benhabib (1987) suggests of the discourse of the moral agent) that I note above – that men are "disembedded" in that they exist as stand-alone units, unconnected with others or society. In addition, believing that responsibility for brutal and revolting actions resides only with individual men requires a belief that masculinity is not a social construct, that masculinity is brutal and revolting by nature, and that therefore others and society bear no responsibility for such actions. Clearly, what is needed is to move beyond dualistic thinking to develop theories of masculinity that incorporate the various vectors of responsibility from personal to interpersonal to social.

I suggest above that the focusing of social empathy upon swhim leads to seeing the position of domination itself as a motivator for swhim to engage in gender change. The idea that people with power and privilege could find that their power and privilege motivates them to engage in any sort of social change appears contrary to common sense, but this is only because it raises extremely major issues that strike at the heart of modernity and the modernist project of material power through rationality and "knowledge". Although a thorough discussion of these major issues is obviously beyond the scope of this essay, I want to briefly discuss two points that support my central thesis.

Firstly, I want to suggest that, while power is almost by definition powerful, it does not follow that power is always or necessarily valuable. Modernity rests upon a value system that sees power as the most valuable social good, while other essential aspects of life, such as morality, emotions, affectionate relationships, embodied experience and spirituality, are accorded much lesser value. Within such a value-system, it makes no sense that swhim's dominatory position within structures of power can be a motivator for swhim to change those dominatory arrangements.

But value systems can be changed, and I believe in this case **MUST** be changed. bell hooks sums this up eloquently when she calls for “a commitment to reorganising [Western] society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires.” (hooks 1981; 195)

Swhim are of especial interest in this regard because of the alignment of the swhim subject position with power. As I have discussed in the first section above, swhim are not marginalised by any social discourses, and it does not make strategic sense for swhim, in an effort to reduce the problems attached to power, to simply move to the margins. In addition, I suggest it is self-evident that there is no realistic chance of dismantling existing power structures or of reducing the amount of power currently deployed. From the swhim viewpoint, I believe the only sensible option is to re-value power as one of several centrally important aspects of life, along with morality, emotions, affectionate relationships, embodied experience and spirituality. Power, rather than occupying the pinnacle of value systems, then may exist within a dynamic web of considerations taken into account as individuals shape their lives and make decisions, and also taken into account in the public arena by decision-makers and by institutions.

Such complex considerations already face individuals all the time in many life issues. For example, a common issue is that of balancing children with work: clearly my relations with the kids are very important for me and them – but so is money and self-esteem through working with others. A major implication of swhim developing such an interest as I canvas in this essay is a restructure of social relations broadly so that these considerations do not take place solely at the level of the individual but rather become incorporated into social structures and into culture.

Secondly, I have put forward an argument to say, basically, that the position of domination involves so much pain that such pain becomes a motivator for those in that position to engage in social change. I have also suggested that the ideology of masculinity through its construction of male subjects as “disembedded and disembodied” acts to make men’s emotions and relationships (and thus their pain) irrelevant. But can it really be possible that swhim suffer so much pain as to motivate them to change the gender arrangements that privilege them so much?

I want to take up a postmodern perspective at this point, similar to the perspective used by Pease to support his construction of new “profeminist subjectivities” (Pease 2000; 40). Judith Butler (1990) makes the point that part of the effect achieved by the deployment of what she calls “juridical systems of power” is that their operations as discourses and the creation of their discursive effects appear to be natural.

[J]uridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not “show” once the juridical structure of politics has been established. (Butler 1990, 2)

I suggest that these exclusionary practices include arrangements whereby it appears natural that the emotional and relational landscapes of individual swhim are simply deleted as significant considerations in the juridical structure of politics. Butler’s view can explain why it is that emotions and relationships “naturally” are not political considerations – i.e. of moment in public life. One conclusion of Butler’s view is that, even with a high degree of awareness amongst small groups of individuals of

the personal costs of domination, swhim may well be unable to find ways to make such costs relevant politically, and thus are unable to use those personal costs of domination as a basis for broad political action for change. This, I believe, is the plight of the mythopoetic men's movement.

In addition to the constraints of what is considered "political", there is also the matter of how subjects experience and embody their subject positions. The notion of "swhim" that I have used here is just a notion. Although I have white skin, a penis, prefer sex with women, and have middle class demeanor and values, I cannot in truth say that I "am" a swhim in the sense I use the term swhim in this essay. Rather, as Pease suggests, swhim is a subject position that I am offered within discourse which allows me to connect with what it means to have all those attributes (Pease 2000; 35). In taking up that position I take up a particular relation to discourse and power, but it is not a seamless or total or complete taking up. I inevitably disrupt that position in all sorts of ways as well. I may, for example, take up other positions and other discourses as well as or instead of this swhim position.

In saying above, then, that swhim are disembedded and disembodied, I am in effect saying that, to the extent that I take up the swhim subject position, I am disembedded and disembodied. The subject position "swhim" constitutes a particular range of emotions and qualities of relationships that are integral to that position. Taking up other positions, for example, drag, can support a whole new set of forms of relating and expressing.

Thus, in considering the interests of swhim in gender change, it is important to undertake a Foucauldian "genealogical analysis" (Butler 1990; 5) in order to get a clear understanding of the extent to which the emotional and relational range considered "natural" for swhim at present deletes, downplays or redirects the emotional pain experienced by swhim, and how the discursive construction of the swhim subject position may obscure both the subjective experience of pain and the connection between that pain and domination.

Conclusion

In this essay I have noted the apparently opposing forces that face swhim when they consider engaging in gender change: broad social pressure to change versus swhim's interests apparently being met by staying where they are. I have labeled this the "centralisation impasse", and examined a variety of ways of negotiating this impasse. These ways, in summary, are to deny men are privileged; show that men's advantage is mixed with disadvantage; sidestep the impasse to concentrate on men's pain; endorse the impasse; and act upon an ethic that sees the costs to others of men's privilege as being unacceptable. Bob Pease has taken the last position and suggested that, in addition, men's pain may be worth exploring as a possible motivator for engagement.

To summarise my position, I am suggesting here exactly what Pease suggests – that we have to understand men's pain in terms of their position in gender relations. However I take Pease's work further by suggesting that, rather than focusing only on men's role in women's oppression, it is crucial to use experiential data from swhim's lives in order to develop an understanding of gender relations that includes the actual lived experiences of swhim. In order to collect and assess the experiential data, I suggest that the "social empathy" that Pease suggests should be focused by men

towards the impact of men's actions upon women really needs to be focused on swhim themselves.

In addition, I suggest that the construction of the swhim subject position integrally entails a disembedded and disembodied stance and experience that is "naturalised" by discourse so that both the significance of emotional pain itself, and the awareness by swhim of painful experiences, are structurally muted, downplayed or redirected. A genealogical analysis of the emotional and affective range of expression appropriate to the swhim subject position may make clear how this is brought about.

A crucial strategic step that must be taken in order to carry out this genealogical analysis is to accept that the privileged value-position enjoyed by power in the modern era is itself a discursive effect, and that other crucial areas of life – morality, emotions, affectionate relationships, embodied experience and spirituality – are of equal value with power, but are excluded as discursive objects. In other words we need to approach swhim as *prima facie* moral, emotional, affectionate, spiritual beings who experience their bodies as vivid sources of pleasure, and then explore by what means such aspects of swhim's lives get to be excised. I suggest a major device which excises these aspects is the brutalisation process which coerces men into being centralized dominators. If this is true, it casts centralization and being a dominator as hugely costly at the personal level directly for swhim themselves. With the costs of centralization revealed, it is possible for swhim to find a way through the centralization impasse that is empowering for them personally – i.e. is directly to their personal benefit, and thus has a much higher chance of being attractive to swhim on a broad scale.

It is apparent in this essay that postmodern perspectives, especially a Foucauldian perspective as employed by Butler (1990), play a key role in opening ways forward for swhim to step beyond the centralisation impasse to find ways to positively engage with gender change. Given swhim's centralised position in modernity, it makes sense that only critical tools that seek to move beyond the modern paradigm may be of assistance to swhim in this regard. However the application of postmodern tools to swhim is barely begun (Petersen 1998). Pease's work is one example, and I hope this essay represents another contribution.

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