

Researching men: Main issues and challenges in qualitative research

Katarzyna Wojnicka *University of Gothenburg* While research on men (but not masculinities) has a long history as the majority of contemporary social science refers to the male experience (Tosh, 2011; Yarrow, 2001) the lack of adequate methodology for researching men's lives from a gender studies perspective is still visible. Despite the dynamic development of (critical) studies on men and masculinities within the last 20-30 years (Hearn, 2004) we still "have been struck by the relative lack of interrogation of the epistemologies and methodologies involved in the study of men and masculinities" (Pini & Pease, 2013). Therefore, the main goal of this short paper is to enhance a discussion on men and methodologies by examining the most crucial issues from the field. The paper is based on the author's experiences in conducting gender-sensitive research on men and masculinities from the critical, feminist perspective.

According to Schrock and Schwalbe "qualitative methods provide the best insight into how men present themselves as gendered beings" (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) and this is why the paper focuses on this type of scholarly investigations. However, one acknowledges that research on men is also conducted in the quantitative paradigm but "quantitative researchers less commonly examine the more abstract social aspects of masculinities, such as gender differences and inequalities in social connection and exclusion within national populations" (Patulny & Pini, 2013) and therefore, the number of quantitative studies on men and masculinities is still rather low.

One of the most common issues in research on men and masculinities concerns the problem with

the recognition that men have a gender and their lives, experiences, problems etc., can and should be analyzed from the (critical) gender perspective as its inclusion (both on theoretical, analytical and methodological level) leads to a comprehensive understanding of the nature of problems that men deal with. Another challenge is connected to the ways in which the gender perspective is being used in such investigations. In other words, the simple inclusion of gender as a category will not shed light on the problem as long as men are viewed as a homogeneous group of individuals, who share the same position in the social structure, experiences, problems and privileges. Only a critical analysis of both men's privileges and the costs of masculinity as well as differences among men (Messner, 1997), preferably with the intersectional approach (Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Cershaw, 1989; Phoenix, 2008), can lead to the full understanding of the character of contemporary masculinities and men's lives. Focusing on just one of these issues is unsatisfactory and such an approach is not recommended. It is important to underline that in men and masculinities studies (e.g., in the research on men's health) one needs to be careful and does not focus exclusively on men who are stigmatized. Researchers should not treat them only as victims of the system since the notion of traditional, hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) plays an important role also when it comes to the cost of masculinity. In other words, it is important to critically analyze the impact of dominant and often toxic forms of masculinity construction on the health status of certain groups of men.

However, the main challenges in research on men and masculinities cannot be limited only to

theoretical dimensions as they are visible also on the analytical and methodological levels. In the process of analysis, one of the most crucial issues is the role of researcher and her/his positioning within the research. Such positioning depends on her/his gender, social class, ethnicity, migration background, nationality, sexuality, age, (dis)ability etc., which can all impact on the process of analysis and may result in drawing different conclusions. Depending of the social background, researchers can be more or less distant and critical regarding certain male practices, behaviors and narratives, which may influence their analysis and knowledge production in various ways. Therefore, in-depth reflection on his/her position in the research process, her/his motivation with regard to conducting research on this particular topic as well as the goal of her/his scientific intervention should be always part of the analytical process.

Several crucial challenges can be also identified at the methodological level, especially in the context of the face-to-face interviews. Firstly, researchers should be aware that what they hear from interviewees is strongly contextualized. Men might decide to perform different narrations when they talk to other men and different narrations when in presence of a female researcher. Many researchers claim that in the case of interviews on sensitive issues it is easier for men to express their closeness or emotions in front of women rather than men. In front of men, male interviewees often try to present themselves as 'real' men and not to reveal too much sensitivity (Williams & Heikes, 1993). Moreover, in some cases, men might be resistant to talk about certain problems with other men and avoid discussing their emotions, vulnerability, fear, sicknesses, body weakness etc. while it might be easier for them to open up in front of women.

Nevertheless, aside from the advantages of being female researchers there are also disadvantages, with power challenges and safety issues.

This is especially challenging when the research participants are men who represent rather traditional and dominant forms of masculinities,

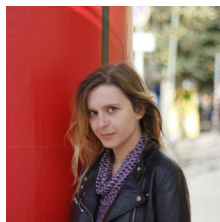
usually based on the assumption that the male gender dominates over the female one. In such situations, a female researcher is not able to create a partnered, non-hierarchical relation with the research participant which results in various implications - both for further analysis and for the researcher herself. Finally, female researchers deal with issues such as the impact of physical appearance on the interview process, body and safety issues as well as the problem of flirting or even the threat of harassment and therefore, women need to elaborate individual strategies that enable them to conduct research.

References

- Berger, M., & Guidroz, K. T. (2009). *The intersectional approach: Transforming the academy through race, class, and gender*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: United States.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Polity Press, Cambridge: UK.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1(8), 139-167. Retrieved from the University of Chicago Law School website: <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu>
- Hearn, J. (2004). From hegemonic masculinity to the hegemony of men. *Feminist Theory*, 5, 49-72. doi:10.1177/1464700104040813
- Messner, M. (1997). *Politics of masculinities. Men in movements*. Sage, London: UK.
- Patulny, R., & Pini, B. (2013). Counting men: Quantitative approaches to the study of men and masculinities. In B. Pini, & B. Pease (Eds.), *Men, masculinities and methodologies* (pp. 115-128). London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Phoenix, A. (2008). Racialised young masculinities: Doing intersectionality at school. In M. Seaman

(Ed.), *Ethnische Diversitäten, Gender und Schule: Geschlechterverhältnisse in Theorie und schulischer Praxis* [Ethnic diversity, gender and school. Gender relations in school theory and practice] (pp. 19-39). Oldenburg, Germany: BIS-Verlag.

- Pini, B., & Pease, B. (2013). Gendering methodologies in the study of men and masculinities. In B. Pini, & B. Pease (Eds.), *Men, masculinities and methodologies* (pp. 1-25). London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schrock, D., & Schwalbe, M. (2009). Men, masculinities and manhood acts. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35, 277-295. doi:10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115933
- Tosh, J. (2011). The history of masculinity: An outdated concept? In J. H. Arnold, & S. Brady (Eds.), *What is masculinity? Historical dynamics from antiquity to the contemporary world* (pp. 17-34). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Williams, C. L., & Heikes, E. J. (1993). The importance of researcher's gender in the in-depth interviews: Evidence from two case studies of male nurses. *Gender & Society*, 7, 280-291. doi:10.1177/089124393007002008
- Yarrow, S. (2011). Masculinity as a world historical category of analysis. In J. H. Arnold, S. Brady (Eds.), *What is masculinity? Historical dynamics from antiquity to the contemporary world* (pp. 114-138). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Katarzyna Wojnicka**

Centre for European Research at
the University of Gothenburg,
Gothenburg, Sweden

katarzyna.wojnicka@gu.se