

## Oppressed and Oppressors? The Systematic Mistreatment of Men

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**ABSTRACT** This paper argues for a structural definition of oppression as systematic mistreatment. Using the work of Connell and other theorists, I discuss the implications of the proposed definition for the oppression of women and suggest that men, too, are systematically mistreated and therefore oppressed in modern societies. This structural concept of men's oppression is compared with the idea developed in the men's movement of the 1970s that men are oppressed by sex roles, and with more recent discourses of masculinity. I argue that men may have conflicting interests in relation to the gender order. While men are frequently the agents of the oppression of women, and in many senses benefit from it, their interests in the gender order are not pre-given but constructed by and within it. Since in many ways men's human needs and capacities are not met within the gender orders of modern societies, they also have a latent 'emancipatory interest' in their transformation.

**KEYWORDS** feminism, gender order, interests, masculinity, oppression, patriarchy

### **Oppression as 'systematic mistreatment'**

Recent disputes within feminism have produced one consensus at least: that oppression is multi-dimensional. The group of women, oppressed within the gender order, includes women who are privileged on other dimensions and in an oppressor role in relation to other, relatively disadvantaged groups of women (Bradley 1996:93). Similarly men, the oppressing group, may also be oppressed in terms of class, ethnicity and so on. (According to Hartmann (1981) patriarchy is a set of *hierarchical* social relations between men which enables them to dominate women.) Many studies of gender at work have recognised the oppression of men as workers, and that their attempts to make work meaningful often involve ideas and practices that are oppressive to women (for example, Willis 1978; Bradley 1999). But sociologists of gender hardly ever discuss the possibility that men are oppressed on the same dimension as women, i.e. in respect of gender relations. Almost all of those who now describe men as oppressed are part of the anti-feminist backlash,<sup>1</sup> who deny the oppression of women and even see women, especially feminists, as oppressors of men (for example, Farrell 1993). In contrast, I shall argue that both women and men are oppressed, but not symmetrically. While men are positioned to act as systematic

agents of the oppression of women, women are not in such a relation to men. Yet unsurprisingly, given the inescapably relational character of gender, the two oppressions are complementary in their functioning – the practices of each contribute to the reproduction of the other. In particular, the very practices which construct men's capacity to oppress women and interest in doing so, work by systematically harming men.

My argument depends on a certain way of understanding oppression, which must first be introduced and defended. Although oppression is undertheorised, we can distinguish several main approaches, often implicit in the sociology of gender. Subjectivist approaches make the group's self-concept the crucial criterion for oppression, while objectivist or realist approaches focus on whether the putative oppressed group is disadvantaged or harmed. Some realist approaches I shall call zero-sum, because they emphasise benefits accruing to an oppressor group which gains as the oppressed group loses. Others, such as the one I advocate, focus instead on the institutionalised nature of oppressive social relations, so that oppression can sometimes exist without a clear or enduring oppressor group.

'Common-sense' approaches to oppression are often subjectivist, assuming that an individual or group must be the best judges of what is happening to them. In more sophisticated versions, the meanings of social practices are seen as relative to cultural context.<sup>2</sup> In this view, judgements that clitoridectomy, footbinding or institutional rape are harmful or oppressive can only be validly made by 'locals'. For Laclau and Mouffe, for instance, subordination is only oppression if, under the influence of some external discourse, the subordinated see it as harmful and mobilise against it (1985:154). Actors' accounts are, therefore, our only source of knowledge of whether social relations are oppressive. Such a view is attractive to feminists who suspect realist approaches of silencing women or marginalising their experience.<sup>3</sup> 'It is wrong to undermine a person with the claim that she does not know what she wants or feels, or that what she wants or feels is inappropriate; and you cannot know *what* is wanted or felt and cannot discover oppression unless you listen to people' (Seller 1988:176).

It would be hard to justify a procedure for identifying and characterising oppression that did not see experience as significant. But oppression cannot be 'read off' experience, precisely because subjectivity is socially constructed. If we make actors' accounts key to the characterisation of social relations as oppressive, what are we to make of the conflicting accounts of the subordinated? Some women believe men are oppressed, some that the gender order is natural and non-oppressive, others that women are oppressed and so on. Subjectivist and relativist approaches reduce oppression to a rhetorical category instead of a valuable concept in critical sociology. In contrast, for realist approaches, the key criterion for oppression is not whether certain social relations are *perceived* as harming a particular group, but whether they *do* harm it, either directly or by depriving it of potential contextual resources.

A common, and ‘common-sense’, realist idea of oppression is the zero-sum conception. Here oppression is a relationship between groups, in which the oppressor group acts in ways that harm or disadvantage the oppressed, in order to gain corresponding benefits. Examples would be the relationship between the owners of the means of production and the wage-workers they employ (as understood in Marxist political economy), or the relationship between husbands and wives as conceptualised by Delphy (1970). While admirably clear, the zero-sum conception makes it hard to characterise some groups as oppressed, although they are systematically disadvantaged. Initially assuming a zero-sum position, Abberley (1987:7) writes:

To claim that disabled people are oppressed involves arguing ... that on significant dimensions disabled people can be regarded as a group whose members are in an inferior position to other members of society ... that these disadvantages are dialectically related to an ideology or group of ideologies which justify and perpetuate this situation ... that such disadvantages and their supporting ideologies are neither natural nor inevitable ... Finally it involves the identification of some beneficiary of this state of affairs.

But the identification of an oppressor group is tricky – the entire group of non-disabled or ‘TABs’ (temporarily able-bodied) can be seen as beneficiaries when considered as taxpayers, but become losers when considered as family members, potential carers and likely future members of the group of disabled people. Abberley later concludes that the main beneficiary of the oppression of disabled people is ‘the present social order, or, more accurately, capitalism in a particular historical and national form’ (1987:16).

Like Abberley, I do not believe we need to identify a clear-cut agent/beneficiary to speak of oppression. Sometimes there is one, sometimes not. I propose the following structural definition, which subsumes zero-sum conceptions when they are applicable, and allows us to recognise the very different, yet related, oppressions of women and of men.

*A group X is oppressed if, in certain respects, its members are systematically mistreated in comparison to non-Xs in a given social context, and if this mistreatment is justified or excused in terms of some alleged or real characteristic of the group.*

The key phrase, ‘*systematically mistreated*’ implies that as a result of institutionalised social practices, Xs’ human needs are not met, they are made to suffer, or their flourishing is not permitted, relative to other groups and to available knowledge and resources. While human needs are culturally mediated, some basic conditions for human well-being can be specified independent of social context (Doyal and Gough 1991:chap. 4). We recognise these as needs because undesirable consequences arise from a failure to meet them, though the severity of the price paid may range from death to discomfort. Unmet needs may result in forms of development that preclude

‘flourishing’, the term used by ecological feminist Cuomo (1998) in her feminist ethics. For Cuomo, knowledge of a thing’s nature can give rise to knowledge of what it is for it to flourish.<sup>4</sup>

‘*In comparison to non-members*’ means that Xs are disadvantaged in relation to non-Xs on some particular dimension or in a specific context – non-Xs may themselves be oppressed in other respects, which may sometimes result in similar (or more severe) disadvantages than those suffered by all or some Xs. ‘*Justified ... etc.*’ refers to the tendency to legitimise oppression by treating the oppressed group as different, less than human or actually malign, and therefore not morally requiring the treatment appropriate to one’s own group.

‘Oppression’ is a value-laden term which implies that, *ceteris paribus*, an oppressive state of affairs should be brought to an end; this definition is clear enough to allow such states of affairs to be investigated and identified. It recognises that oppression is rooted in power relations, without reducing it to formal relations of power. Treating agents’ accounts as evidence rather than essence, it can encompass complicity and denial on the part of the oppressed. It can embrace, as relevant sorts of harm, the ‘hidden injuries’ of class, ‘race’ and so on which fall through the net of purely formal definitions. ‘Systematic mistreatment’ covers not only material inequalities but also the deprivation of ‘recognition’ and other forms of inclusion necessary for groups and communities to flourish (Young 1990). By not making identification of the agents and beneficiaries central to that of oppression, the proposed definition allows us to recognise the oppression of fat people, disabled people, children and other groups where the agents are not always the same and the question of benefits is unclear. Yet this widening of the term sheds light on paradigmatic cases of oppression (such as that of women), emphasising the unintended nature of most of the social practices which bring about systematic mistreatment, and the constructed or indirect nature of some of the benefits involved.

The danger is of taking so wide a view that it ‘strips the concept of “oppression” of its political meaning and obscures the social relations of domination and subordination’ (Messner 1997:22). This point is reminiscent of discussions of the Marxist concept of alienation, as one of those terms which ‘in attempting to explain all, essentially explain nothing’ (Johnson 1973). However, the view that all are alienated (or oppressed), remains meaningful as long as different types of alienation and different alienating mechanisms are specified. In early Marxist theory, capitalists are alienated because as non-workers they are dehumanised, and as appropriators are cut off from fully human relations with the workers they have objectified (Ollman 1976:156). Yet without needing to abjure this theory, Marx was able to specify the structural conflict between capital and labour.

Drawing on both Marx and Foucault, Ferguson makes a powerful case for seeing bureaucracies as oppressing both women and men, by transforming them into

'objects of administration' (1984:14): 'There are, certainly, positions of superiority and privilege, but they stand within a context of universal domination' (p. 83). But while bureaucracies treat *all* workers in ways comparable to the subordination of women, the effects are gender-specific because of the interaction between the requirements of bureaucratic roles and the other obligations and gendered responses men and women bring to them (Ferguson 1984:83, 94). Analogously, *pace* Messner, the proposed widening of the concept of oppression to 'systematic mistreatment' is compatible with identifying the specific respects and dimensions in which concrete oppressions take place.

In the rest of this article the proposed definition is applied to women, and discussed in relation to the zero-sum views of 'male feminists' Connell and Messner. The following sections discuss gendered interests, the oppression of men, and the prospects for radical change of the gender order.

### **The oppression of women**

Applying the proposed definition to the oppression of women immediately brings into sharp relief its failure to include the agent/beneficiary, in this case obviously and notoriously – men. Women are, indeed, 'systematically mistreated' in relation to men on a range of dimensions. This mistreatment is variously justified: by seeing women's disadvantage as the result of their own agency, or by claiming that various supposed characteristics of women mean that their treatment is appropriate, and therefore not harmful. So far, the proposed definition of oppression seems completely adequate. But most feminists, indeed most sociologists of gender, would say that to stop here, without reference to male agency, is to tell only half the story. In his useful review of men's movements, Messner (1997:22) writes:

Oppression is a concept that describes a relationship between social groups; for one group to be oppressed, there must be an oppressor group ... The state of play of the contemporary gender order is characterised by men's individual and collective oppression of women ... Men continue to benefit from this oppression of women ... .

Similarly Connell sees male domination in the gender order as in the collective interest of men, especially heterosexual men.

The proposed definition in no way denies that men are frequently – most frequently – the agents of the oppression of women. In a minimal sense this is inevitably true, since oppression is relational. If Xs are oppressed because on some dimension they are systematically disadvantaged in comparison to Ys, Ys can be seen as oppressing Xs as long as they merely accept the status quo or act in ways which tend to maintain their relative advantage. In gender terms, such a stance would be part of what Connell calls 'complicit masculinities', which accept gender privileges but keep themselves distanced from direct displays of power (1995:114). Men undoubtedly oppress women in more direct ways than this. The maintenance of the

power differentials between the genders requires regular belittlement of women, continual discrimination against them, and a stream of misinformation about their capacities and liabilities. From various motives, men carry out the bulk of this work. They also oppress women by killing, beating, raping, harassing and sexually exploiting them, and by appropriating their unpaid work. Gendered power relations make such behaviour normal, in the sense of expected and intelligible, even though most of it is deplored and some of it is punishable. My contention is that men's agency in this regard is the *result* of their positioning within oppressive structures. It is not *caused* by, and does not *express*, the intrinsic nature of male humans, nor was the gender order erected by men in their own pre-existing interests. Gendered interests, including those of oppressors, are constructed within gender orders, and cannot pre-exist them. Men's agency is part of the explanation of women's oppression only in the context of a sex-gender system which also involves the oppression of men.

### **Connell: men's interests, men's agency**

Connell is a deservedly influential sociologist of gender who recognises the structural nature of oppression. He writes approvingly in *Gender and Power*: 'Women's Liberation groups argued that women are oppressed because men have power over them; and that changing the situation of women means contesting, and eventually breaking, this power' (1987:34). He rejects the search for origins, for a single answer to the illegitimate question 'Why are women oppressed?' which, if it is accepted, abolishes history and agency with it. For him, the power relations of gender are 'historically composed'.

Connell argues that gender relations are integral to capitalism through a 'gendered logic of accumulation' – a division of labour which ensures that women rarely accumulate wealth or control capital (1987:105). The solidarity of men is important in maintaining these exclusions. Similarly, men make a 'collective decision not to do childcare' which 'reflects the dominant definition of men's interests ... and helps them keep predominant power' (1987:106). He concludes that there is 'a unity in the field ... a unity – always imperfect and under construction – of historical composition' (1987:116). For Connell, when we see systematicity, what we are seeing is not structure but agency (or rather structure which is composed by interested agents): 'A high degree of systematicity is likely to reflect the dominance of a group whose interests are served by a particular gender order' (p. 116). The interests embedded in the structure produce agents whose routine and creative decisions reproduce the gender order, which must be understood as 'the outcome of strategy' – male strategy (p. 116).

Like many feminists, Connell usually assumes that interests in particular collective practices are given by the patterns of inequality they express or produce

(1987:138). This notion of interests as given by outcomes is central to the zero-sum conception of oppression. In this view, the advantaged always have interests in keeping their power and privilege, and the disadvantaged always have interests in gaining it. The gender order is thus seen as the ongoing creation of men. Similarly, 'the extent to which housing, finance, education and other spheres of life are all organised around the model of the heterosexual couple *reflects* the dominance of heterosexual interests and the subordination of homosexual people' (Connell 1987:117, my emphasis). Connell seems to be suggesting that male, or heterosexual, interests can account for the gender order itself, not merely its reproduction. Yet the word 'reflects' suggests the difficulty of establishing whether the interests of the powerful should be seen as cause or effect of their institutional privilege. For if, like Connell, we reject the question of the origins of particular oppressions, we must also drop the fantasy of a group of timeless heterosexual men sitting somewhere outside social relations, devising a world that would keep their slippers handy, their dinners nicely served and their sexual desires met for all eternity. Men's interests in patriarchy are inseparable from the social relations in and through which they are expressed, and cannot therefore be invoked to explain those relations.

This point is perhaps easier to see if we look at the oppressive gender work traditionally done by women. Although women are the main perpetrators of female genital mutilation (FGM), as they were of footbinding and are in Western nations of countless less dramatic preparations of daughters for subservience, feminist analysis of FGM sees it as in the interests of men to control the sexuality of women (Daly 1978). In this particularly horrible way, the man ensures that his wife is a virgin and remains 'faithful', using women as his agents (Saadawi 1981). That women should wield the knife against girls is seen as yet another twist in the oppression of women. But can men's interests be so simply 'read off' the prevailing power structure? Increasingly, men whose wives have been subject to clitoridectomy are (often cruelly) complaining about their lack of interest and pleasure in sex, and both men and women are involved in the campaigns against FGM.<sup>5</sup> The motivation of these men may well be complex, but the point stands that the obviousness of interests is relative to institutionalised practices.

Connell is certainly right in stressing men's ('formidable') conservative interest in maintaining and reproducing the gender order within which they are advantaged (1995:241). However, women too have a conservative interest in maintaining the familiar, known ways in which at least some of their needs are met and within which they have perforce constructed their personal identities. As a man taking a political position, Connell rightly emphasises male responsibility and agency, but in so doing he may under-emphasise the agency of women and make men's agency sound more conscious and organised than it usually is.

Certainly men all too frequently make 'collective decisions' to exclude women (formalised in the case of the Taliban, or the protective practices of male composers

described by Cockburn 1983:153). Strategic thinking is conscious thinking that names its goals and the steps to them. To describe the gender order as the 'outcome of male strategy' (Connell 1987:117) underestimates the reproductive power of routine (Giddens 1984). I can think of at least one institution of higher education with no women at all in the executive senior posts. Those senior managers may consciously strategise to keep out women, or may unwittingly attract and appoint clones of themselves, sincerely believing these to be 'the best men for the job'. After all, the best 'man' could not be anyone who might threaten the ways of being and doing with which they are comfortable. While the continuing gender imbalance in power results from their actions, these may not be strategic.

A second and more nuanced concept of interests is also present in Connell's work, when he acknowledges that interests may be 'inert' or latent, not automatically leading to collective practice, and recognises the complexity of relations between shorter- and longer-term interests (1987:264). It is evident in his attempt to account for his own anti-sexism: 'Even the beneficiaries of an oppressive system can come to see its oppressiveness, especially the way it poisons areas of life they share' (1987:xiii). The possibility of 'making a latent interest salient in practice' (1987:138) may allow important alliances within the field of sexual politics. Yet Connell's espousal of the zero-sum conception of oppression, which rules out the oppression of men, limits how far he can develop this train of thought.

### **The complexity of interests**

Together with the crisis tendencies in the gender order (Connell 1995:84), the complexity of interests offers the best hope for social justice in the realm of gender politics. The 'obviousness' of interests derives from common human needs, despite the different forms these take in different social contexts. Given what we know about the conditions of life and flourishing for human beings, given that money is the universal equivalent, if we know the gendered patterns of advantage and disadvantage in a given society we can to some extent predict how being positioned as male or female offers people reasons for acting in certain ways. But since interests also depend on cultural meanings and values, their construction and articulation is more complicated. There is always more than one way. Ehrenreich (1983) describes how right-wing women opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment defended the right to be a housewife, while Kandiyoti (1994) relates the existence of anti-purdah writing by Muslim men to their early dependence on their mothers.<sup>6</sup> If interests are reasons for acting in certain ways which will promote your individual or group flourishing, every person is a bundle of conflicting interests among which they have to chart a course in order to act. We can distinguish ideal interests, associated with the actor's ideal self and idea of the 'good life', from contextual interests where needs are produced and met within a relatively constant social context. We can distinguish and

relate individual and group interests, short-term and long-term interests, and conservative and emancipatory interests.

On one hand, short of the most severe, life-threatening oppression, almost everyone has a degree of 'conservative' interest in maintaining the status quo of the gender order. Its salience depends on the real immanent possibilities of change and how, as the sort of man or woman you are, you would be affected. Although women benefit less than men from the current gender order, they construct themselves to find what satisfactions they can within it (and anecdotal evidence suggests success, in that most women would not like to be men).<sup>7</sup> It is hardly ever true that oppressed groups have nothing to lose but their chains. On the other hand, while men are in general tremendously advantaged relative to women, there are respects in which the current gender order does not meet their human needs. The costs men pay are substantial and produce latent emancipatory interests in its transformation. Indeed, to end the oppression of women, it is in women's interests closely to examine the latent interests of men.

### **Are men oppressed? From sex roles to masculinities**

There has long been some support for the idea that men are psychologically damaged, and thus oppressed, within the gender order. In the 1970s this damage was theorised in terms of sex roles, drawing on psychological theories of social learning (see, for example, Pleck 1976). In the 1990s 'sex roles' were superseded by 'masculinities', understood as representations and styles of being a man and associated systems of gender practices which could be damaging to men as well as women (see, for example, Harris 1995). In *Backlash*, Faludi interviews one of the male feminists of the 1970s (1992:334), who now blames women for the oppression of men.

'Men are hurting more than women – that is, men are, in many ways, actually more powerless than women now.' Warren Farrell pauses to sip from the coffee mug that his female housekeeper has just handed him. In another room his female secretary is busy typing and tidying his files. 'The women's movement has turned out to be not a movement for equality but a movement for women's maximisation of opportunities,' he says.

Back in the 1970s, when Farrell was anti-sexist rather than anti-feminist, there were already two intellectual and political trends within the men's movement (Messner 1997:41). Both used sex role theory to argue that 'Men were ... conditioned into competitive, inexpressive, restrictive masculine roles which were both physically and psychically damaging, inhibiting expression of their authentic selves' (Segal 1997:68). But where 'anti-sexist' men emphasised men's agency in the oppression of women, and attempted to expose and resist prescriptive sex roles in order to undermine sexism, 'men's rights' activists were largely concerned with undoing the damage sex roles did to men. This divergence has persisted on the new terrain of

masculinities, with Messner's and Connell's anti-sexism and rejection of 'hegemonic masculinity' counterposed to the mythopoetic and men's rights movements' rejection of 'feminised' masculinity.

Indeed, many of the criticisms levelled at sex role theory (for example, Sayers 1986) also apply to the more fashionable discourse. Connell takes issue with the 'presupposition ... that the two roles are reciprocal ... oppression ... appears as the constricting pressure placed by the role upon the self. This can happen in the male role as readily as in the female' (Connell 1995:25). In Messner's view, this led to 'a falsely symmetrical call for women's and men's liberation from oppressive sex roles' which ignored the structure of gender relations (Messner 1997:38). However, this criticism could equally be levelled at the masculinities paradigm, with its focus on subjectivity and representation rather than institutional power and material outcomes.

Even in its newer discursive versions, the concept of 'masculinity' is inadequate to the tasks it has been assigned. Its over-extension is evident in the following passage from Segal (1997:123):

The closer we come to uncovering some form of exemplary masculinity ... the clearer it becomes that masculinity is structured through contradiction: the more it asserts itself, the more it calls itself into question ... [it] is not some type of single essence, innate or acquired. As it is represented in our culture, 'masculinity' is a quality of being which is always incomplete, and which is based as much on a social as on a psychic reality. It exists in the various forms of power men ideally possess ...

Like sex role theory, the masculinities paradigm has one foot in structure and one in agency, since masculinities both construct male selves and are constructed by them. We can use Archer's morphogenetic social realism to offer a temporary solution of this version of the structure/agency problem. Masculinities could be seen as cultural structures with emergent powers, within and through which men come to understand themselves as agents, and which they in turn elaborate (Archer 1995:193) This solution is probably compatible with the work of Connell (1995), Segal (1997), Brittan (1989) and other theorists of masculinities, and Connell's life stories put some flesh on its formulaic bones. But the old question, inherited from sex role theory, remains unresolved. If masculinities as cultural structures are drawn on in social relations (including those between parents and children) and enter into the construction of the self, can they also be said to 'constrict' the self? In the next section I shall argue that they can, but will first consider the objection that there can be no pre-social self to be constricted.

In her critique of sex role theory, Segal (1997:68) argues that sex roles can only be oppressive to the role-player if we postulate an 'authentic' pre-social self, separate from the role – a *reductio ad absurdum* for poststructuralists (see Frosch 1991:22). The objection loses its sting if we conceptualise the self as stratified (Bhaskar 1993).<sup>8</sup> Basic human needs, capacities and vulnerabilities, *are* pre-social in a sense, though

this is an odd way of talking. They are better understood as among the powers and liabilities of those structured emergent entities called human beings. They are only ever realised (i.e. made actual) in concrete social situations, in the continuing culturally mediated process of the construction and use of selves (New 1996). Still, we know enough about human potential and the influences on human development to be able to describe situations or types of social environment which tend to hurt or limit people, whatever the cultural context. Thus for instance Brittan, who understands oppression in terms of the denial of 'respect worthiness' and ultimately agency, argues that 'humans tend to resent being treated as objects, or more accurately, they resent being made to *feel* powerless' and that such an assertion 'does not entail positing a universal human essence' (1989:174). We can speak of a *tendency* to be hurt, although the form that hurt takes and how it is understood will depend on the local meanings of the situation or encounter.

### **Construction/constriction of the self**

Sex role theory described fathers' role in the installation of gender identity, and the greater anxiety attaching to the nonconformity of boys (Pleck 1976). Object relations theory addressed boys' early construction of self in negative terms, as the not-mother and not-feminine, as the result of fathers' early absence as parents (for example, Chodorow 1978). While theories of masculinity are less concerned to tell developmental stories, they also offer accounts of families and schools as 'sites where styles of masculinities are produced and used' and identities are negotiated (for example, Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 1996:52). A consistent picture emerges. Boys in Western societies, at least, are systematically restricted in their access to affectionate physical contact, especially with other boys – or such contact is sexualised and forbidden. They are discouraged from the expression of grief and upset through tears, and encouraged to suppress emotions (except anger) and to ignore physical and emotional pain. They are misinformed about their own and girls' and women's sensuality and sexuality, and offered a limited version of heterosexuality as the only permitted form of sexual expression and intimacy (Snodgrass 1977). Confusingly, they are told their gender requires them to be responsible, but also that men are bad and dangerously irresponsible, and this is somehow admirable. Their own irresponsible behaviour is likely to be permitted or colluded with, but may also be punished, often with violence (for example, Boyle 1977).

The area of emotional expression is one in which men are alleged to have been damaged by early childhood experience. The argument goes something like this: male human beings are potentially capable of as much emotional richness and interest in relationships as are women. They have similar capacities to express and reflect on their emotions, and a similar need to do so. The cultural structures of masculinity (and the relationships and practices they influence) inhibit the

development of these potentials in men, which frequently results in defensive emotional strategies, less developed capacity for empathy, and discomfort with intimacy (Pleck 1989; Hearn 1993; Parkin 1993). Such developments or failure to develop could be seen as the loss of men's potential, and therefore as mistreatment. However, because this very constriction prepares men to limit and control emotion within work organisations, it is more often seen as an aspect of men's privilege. The control of emotions is closely linked to the control of women. Thus Putnam and Mumby see the organisational 'myth of rationality' and 'neutral rules' as 'favouring masculinity', which they implicitly equate with 'benefiting men' (Putnam and Mumby 1993:42). My argument is that while the social construction of such constricted selves does indeed produce subjects who can function well in capitalist, patriarchal organisations and who can take their places as agents of women's oppression,<sup>9</sup> nevertheless men's loss of powers and the evidence of their suffering makes this mistreatment, and therefore oppression.

While feminists have stressed the material dimensions of women's oppression, they have also seen 'femininities' as *misrepresentations* constricting women's development and limiting their options, and therefore as oppressive. By the same token, masculinities may be oppressive. As already described, the misrepresentation of men's needs and capacities becomes part of the self. 'We would not object so strenuously to oppression if it did not ... elicit the complicity of the oppressed' (Ferguson 1984:94). Even if the subject retains ideas of their greater capacities and nature, they are adversely affected by being treated as other than what they are. It is hurtful to reduce women to their reproductive organs, or to interact with them while ignoring their subjectivity – girls' development, women's capacity to flourish, are arguably damaged by such practices (Miller 1978). Similarly, to treat males as 'hands' or 'guns' (or even 'officers'), as disposable bodies, or as naturally violent, is a form of mistreatment likely to damage their development and relationships. If this is granted, when institutionalised such misrepresentations constitute a form of oppression. Further, masculinities are used to justify material practices which injure men, and to deny or pathologise the resulting injuries (such as 'shellshock').

A postmodern critic might interject that harm and mistreatment are discursive products, which can only be identified in context, so that social realists making attributions of oppression frequently project their own values onto culturally different people. Even if Xs have strong reasons to believe that Ys are suffering as a result of certain practices (such as painful initiation ceremonies), this suffering may itself be important to Ys, even key to flourishing in their cultural context. By analogy, since in many cultures men's self-construction gives violence (for instance) important meanings, while men's institutionalised violence certainly harms its victims, we have no reason to suppose it is harming men as a group – unless they themselves think so (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Any realist idea of men's oppression would then have to be rejected.

Certainly we should be cautious in reaching conclusions about the suffering, needs, and conditions of flourishing of other groups. However, if men in certain cultural contexts seem to incur suffering and loss through masculine practices that are expected or near-compulsory, such as stoicism as a response to hurt or loss (Harris 1995) or humiliating initiations that require numb endurance (Shire 1994:155), non-men do have reason from survivors' accounts to believe the suffering is real enough. Outsiders need to investigate the meaning of these practices and the value attributed to them. Having done so, we may surmise that they are partly defensive in the psychoanalytic sense, and that other values may be immanent within that culture. Such an argument would require some idea of human nature and the construction of the self, but would not imply that it was either unitary, static or pre-social.

### **The systematic mistreatment of men**

The oppression of men is not only disciplinary or psychological. It also involves material effects of men's positioning which we only fail to see as oppressive because of the lack of an obvious agent or beneficiary. The examples offered below are mostly familiar from the literature on masculinity. What is unusual is to look at these practices and their effects as aspects of men's structural positioning rather than as resulting merely from hegemonic or minority masculinities, and to see them as genuinely oppressive to *men* rather than as the minor costs of privilege. Masculinities, as ideational justifying structures (ideologies), are crucial to the development of gendered subjectivity and therefore to the reproduction of the gender order. But men's institutional positioning through the division of labour in employment, in the family, and as citizens, is key to understanding their place in power relations and why they are both oppressors and oppressed. The following four features of men's oppression are not comprehensive, and many exceptions can be found to each aspect, but they are characteristic tendencies in Western societies. They are not exclusive – each aspect will in some circumstances apply to women. But this is inevitably true of women's and of all oppressions, given the open and complex nature of social life.

1. *Work*: I have referred above to objectification of men in modern societies, and their subordination to organisational goals. It is also true that capitalist (and former state-socialist) economies accumulate value at the expense of the living bodies of men, through the requirement to overwork in paid employment (Ishii-Kuntz 1993), whereas women's overwork, equally real, is more commonly the result of the combination of paid and unpaid work. The acceptance of overwork has traditionally been supported by the 'man as provider' ideology, now less widespread (Cohen 1993; Ehrenreich 1983), but also by the fear of unemployment

(Willott and Griffin 1996). Overwork falls also on middle-class and upper-class men, although working-class men are assigned the dirtiest, most dangerous and exhausting jobs. Their bodies are treated as disposable. The masculine ideology of strength and endurance encourages men to accept and even take pride in these destructive effects, with serious implications for men's health.

2. *Military*: Men are obliged, in certain circumstances, to kill and be killed in the service of the nation-state, and may be punished if they refuse. The armed services organise men's violence against other men in ways consonant with class and ethnic status. Enormous numbers of men are killed, injured and traumatised by warfare, but the misrepresentation of men's nature as inherently aggressive and violent (see, for example, Bowker 1998:13, cf. Harris 1995:189) prevents this being recognised as mistreatment, and continues to mask its economic functions.

We may argue about the constriction of the self, but death and injury clearly constitute harm. Their imposition is therefore mistreatment, although seen as a normal risk for men in war (and even in civil life deaths of women and children in accidents are considered more shocking than those of men). There is considerable evidence that becoming a killer requires prior mistreatment too. Karner interviewed fifteen Vietnam veterans with traumatic stress disorder. They had 'grown up with the idealised picture of the good soldier "doing his duty for God and country" while often simultaneously experiencing a reality of physically and emotionally abusive veteran fathers' (Karner 1998:207). Their readiness to kill other men was not chromosomally given; it was engendered both at home and in boot camp. Some described the erotic rush of killing, others remembered being unable to shoot and being threatened with death by their superiors, 'and he's screaming at me, "Shoot", you know, or be killed' (Karner 1998:229). As often happens, these men 'did not return heroes' (p. 231). After the war, they did not know how to live. Some felt like murderers, and all were punished if they continued the violent strategies that had been induced in the army.

3. *Criminal justice system*: Although the number of women in prison is rising, it is still true that criminal justice systems punish men more harshly for many crimes, frequently including sex with other men. The broad effect of 'justice' systems is to perpetuate the gender order, as well as the structures of class and ethnic inequality. Within prisons, men are often isolated, objectified and treated as intrinsically bad and dangerous. Many kill themselves. Violence between prisoners is taken for granted, either accepted or punished by isolation, deprivation and official violence (Toch 1998). Prisons are used to exclude and store men who were already targeted beforehand, such as African American men in the United States (Messner 1997:65).

4. *Mental Health*: Sociologists of gender and mental illness increasingly see alcohol and other drug abuse as psychological equivalents to women's depression and greater use of pharmacological drugs (Busfield 1996). Men's greater use of numbing and comforting drugs, their higher suicide rate, simply shows that they suffer, not necessarily that they are oppressed as men. But just as tranquilisers in the past and more recently anti-depressants function to keep women accepting their lot, so alcohol and other drugs function to keep men enduring aspects of their lives that cause them distress. Canaan's young working-class informants told her they sometimes went out, got drunk and picked a fight with a stranger as a way of expressing their feelings after a row with someone at home (Canaan 1996). The tobacco and alcohol industries have historically marketed their commodities as symbols of manhood (though not only as that), culturally linked with stoicism and restricted emotional expression. Alcohol is often used by young working-class men as a compensation for exclusion from means of consumption, and by men of all classes as a means of escape from overwork, injuries and ill-health. Large numbers of men become dependent on these substances and impaired by their misuse. Modern armies use alcohol formally, and illegal drugs informally, to facilitate endurance as well as for recreation: 'David ... had always been afraid he would fall asleep during an ambush and that was why he had begun taking liquid speed ... "It kept you up for a day and a half ... when it started wearing off, it was just like people tearing you apart. So you smoked a couple of joints to mellow off"' (Karner 1998:220).

Such arguments cut no ice with those who see the claim to be a member of an oppressed group as 'the ultimate legitimising move' for straight white men 'donning the mantle of victimhood for the sake of maintaining hegemony' (Yudice 1995:272). A feminist parody of the idea of men's oppression includes some of the points I have made in all seriousness:

Only men can be drafted – forced to go to war, and be killed.

Women can choose to have a career or not, but men are expected to bring in money. That's why in ghetto neighbourhoods where there are no jobs, men become criminals and drug dealers.

Our society does not allow men to cry. Instead, they are forced to repress their emotions, an unhealthy practice that can lead to mass murders, ulcers, heart disease and cancer.

[Anon., cited in Yudice, 1995:270]

Note, though, that the reason for this angry scorn is the zero-sum notion of oppression. It seems as though if men are oppressed, they are not responsible for the abuse they perpetrate.<sup>10</sup> But in fact the oppression of men, if we recognise it, in no way detracts from the serious and horrible nature of the oppression of women.

## Conclusion

The injuries inflicted on men are different in kind from the restrictions, hurt and alienation suffered by other oppressor groups, such as whites. Racism limits whites, by putting difficulties in the way of their relaxed, equal and close contact with the majority of the world's population. But whites are not targeted *as whites*, they are not treated as bad and disposable, as are both men and people of colour. The fact that men are also told they are superior and deserving of privilege does not cancel out the effect of this mistreatment, which can realistically be called oppression. Part of our reluctance to call it so stems from the fact that men act as the agents of their own oppression – yet we are not confused when women are the agents of *women's* oppression. Our reluctance also comes from the view that if men benefit from the gender order, they cannot also be mistreated within it. In fact it is possible that the very mistreatment of men – particularly the 'blunting' of their capacity for empathy, intimacy and emotional expression (Connell 1987:xiii) – inhibits men's aspirations to the richer relationships of equality, leading them to settle for the maintenance of the 'patriarchal dividend'. In this case, the mistreatment of men would be directly opposed to the interests of women.

However, if men are oppressed as men, it does not follow that their mobilisation in defence of their perceived interests would benefit women. Such an outcome cannot be automatic, but it should be possible, since in the current gender order in the West, which in many respects is present globally, the costs of being a man are 'linked to men's institutional power' (Messner 1997:108) and can only be avoided through a radical transformation of the gender order in alliance with women. The mythopoetic return to 'true manhood' and religious versions of gender essentialism cannot offer any real alleviation of the costs of male domination, because they are wrong about the nature of men. The recent gains of feminism mean that organisations like 'Families Need Fathers', which want to increase men's powers over their children *without* opposing women's oppression in relation to child care, are unlikely to achieve consensus even if they do get legal changes. But while feminism in the West can probably prevent a 'radical right' reactionary restructuring of the gender order, its anti-oppressive transformation will require the active mobilisation of large numbers of men as well as women. Necessary alliances and coalitions cannot readily be built on the basis of the view that men's oppression of women arises from men's true nature and timeless interests.

For Connell, the problem for men's politics is that 'the model of a liberation movement simply cannot apply to the group that holds the position of power ... the project of social justice in gender relations is directed *against* the interest they share (1995:235). I hope to have shown that second point is both true and false. It is in men's *conservative* interests to maintain a gender order that meets some of their human needs – although sometimes in very costly ways. But it is in their *emancipatory*

interests to create an order that meets their own needs better, without accompanying limitation and injury, and also meets the needs of others, because of the human natural capacity for empathy and identification which is crucial to social life. The question is how such an emancipatory vision can become practical politics.

#### NOTES

1. Brittan (1989) and Seidler (1991) are among the few exceptions.
2. Benton speaks of the 'paradox of emancipation' that plagues radicals, according to which 'I know better than you what is good for you' (1982:15).
3. See the protracted epistemological debate around 'feminist standpoint theory', which has profound implications for identifying oppression (Longino 1993; New 1998).
4. In the case of humans, our knowledge of humans as interdependent, creative, cultural beings, would be as relevant as our knowledge of their physiological requirements and functioning. Cuomo argues that the real, long-term flourishing of individuals requires that of communities (1998:76). These are arguments for an ethically naturalist concept of oppression, but they cannot make it a simple matter to identify the 'systematic mistreatment' of a group, since to do so involves the sort of claims and counter claims about the nature of its members that have raged for centuries with regard to women.
5. See for example the web page for 'African Men against Female Circumcision', which at the time of writing was at [www.fgm.org](http://www.fgm.org).
6. She writes: 'behind the enduring façade of male privilege lie profound ambiguities which may give rise both to defensive masculine discourse and a genuine desire for contestation and change' (Kandiyoti 1994:212).
7. It is perhaps in this light that Hakim's provocative claims should be understood (Hakim 1996).
8. Broadly speaking the self can be seen as a structured bundle of powers (including memory, reflection and identity), dispositions (to certain ways of understanding the world, certain ways of acting and responding), and liabilities (limits, conflicts and ways in which functioning can be impeded). These basic powers and liabilities are part of human inheritance or species nature, but which become developed and used, and to what extent, and through what symbolic system and sets of 'narratives' is a function of individual biography in cultural context. This rough description is consonant with many detailed psychological theories. It does not imply that the self is either unitary or static.
9. 'Men in our culture ... having come to repress their own needs for connectedness, often become intolerant of those needs in others' (Ferguson 1984:164).
10. 'The moralism of our culture ... tends to structure our thinking dichotomously, so we think that, if women are oppressed by men, it can make no sense to say that men are also oppressed ... But it is quite possible ... that women are systematically more oppressed than men and that men have considerable power in their individual and social relationships with women, without denying the oppression of men in capitalist society. Nor does this mean that all men are equally oppressed' (Seidler 1991:41–2).

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