



Gender and identity

Is masculinity in crisis?

The decline of manufacturing and heavy industry, the increasing participation of women in the workforce, and the relative underachievement of boys in school are constant themes of life today. But does it mean there is a 'crisis of masculinity'?

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

Abbott's sentiments, which were given wide print and broadcast media coverage,

FAR FROM BEING A NOVEL CONCERN, THE 'MASCULINITY-IN-CRISIS' THEME ACTUALLY HAS A LONG HISTORY

were met with a mixed reception. Critics from both the left and right of the political divide were mainly unified in criticising the comparisons she made with masculinity from a bygone era, an alleged 'golden age' when men, like her own father, 'prided themselves on being providers — for their spouses, families and themselves.'

However, it is important to consider what light sociology can shed on this matter. In fact, recent sociological research gives us a more informed view to enlighten such debates. It also provides us with very powerful tools to analyse both the changes and the continuities in the nature of gender, class and culture, and their impact on identity formation.

Signposts



Here, Steven Roberts takes a sociologically-informed look at what some have identified as the 'crisis of masculinity' affecting many of Britain's young men in the twenty-first century.

As a starting point he looks at a well-publicised speech by MP Diane Abbott on this point, and addresses the major issues she raised. He then examines the views and evidence of other writers.

Finally, Roberts gives a brief summary of his own research, showing that the issue is far more complex than many assume, and also drawing attention to the often-neglected issue of how girls and women are affected by changes in the nature and availability of work.

This article should be of interest to all students for its discussion of issues of class, gender and inequality in contemporary Britain.

Summer Homework 1: Read this article and answer the below questions on separate paper:

1. What is a crisis of masculinity
2. What evidence is there to support Diane Abbott's view that Britain is suffering a crisis of masculinity?
3. What evidence is there that the crisis has been over exaggerated?
4. Do you believe that there is currently a crisis of masculinity in Britain? Explain your answer with evidence. (about half a page)

availability of work over the last 100 years. The 1930s Great Depression damaged many men's efforts to be a breadwinner, while the development of Fordism and its associated simplification and standardisation of work practices had, by the 1950s, already started to undermine levels of skill and autonomy in the workplace.

The deindustrialisation of the late 1970s and 1980s, with its peaks in unemployment and the start of an ongoing reduction of industrial and manufacturing-based workplaces, also raised concerns for men and masculinity. In combination with the effects of some small victories for second-wave feminism regarding women's equality, this transition to a more 'feminised' service-based economy saw more women entering paid work — albeit often part-time work.

Again, this brought with it concerns about the role of men in society. It was during this period that serious academic research into men as *gendered* beings began, leading to critical masculinities studies.

The current 'crisis'

The more recent debates about the crisis of masculinity through the 1990s and early 2000s seem to have taken the 1980s as a starting point and have, quite often, appeared to be emphasising similar concerns. But in addition, the mid-1990s

MORE PEOPLE TODAY ARE EMPLOYED BEHIND TILLS THAN IN MINING COAL OR WORKING IN OTHER HEAVY INDUSTRIES

witnessed a profound change in the level of political and research attention given to boys' *academic* performance. This was stimulated, in no small part, by comparisons with the academic attainment of girls, who had by this time started to outperform boys at the aggregate level.

In this context, we had Mac an Ghaill (1994) using the phrase 'crisis in masculinity' to describe the insecurity faced by boys and men who considered their traditional masculine identity as being no longer relevant. Similarly-titled texts concerned themselves with whether boys were holders of 'uncertain' (O'Donnell and Sharpe 2002) or 'redundant' (MacDowell 2003) masculinities. The redundancy of male roles has also been picked up by Geoff Dench (2011). Looking at the 'worthlessness' felt by men, Dench claims that many young men seem under-motivated at school and are likely to remain workless.

This is the context in which Abbott's comments must be situated. Nonetheless, for Abbott, the contemporary crisis includes some 'inescapable truths'. These include:

- Fewer men than ever are able to connect the fabric of their lives to traditional archetypes of masculinity.
- More people today are employed behind tills than in mining coal or working in other heavy industries.

Customer service and personal interaction: often viewed by young men as the most important aspect of their work

Masculinity in crisis (again)

Far from being a novel concern, the 'masculinity-in-crisis' theme actually has a long history. For example, historians and literary scholars can show that back in the 1890s there was a discourse around a 'crisis' in masculinity. Stimulated by anxieties surrounding the losses of key battles across the empire, the rise of the USA as an economic power, and Germany's imperial ambitions, this period emphasised concerns about the economic, political, social, psychological and even physical deterioration of English men.

In terms of the latter, schools began to focus not just on the cultivation of boys' minds, but also on the development of their athleticism. This concern resulted in a moral panic over the supposed 'softening' of boys, and manifested itself in the British cultural obsession with competitive team sports that we now consider the norm.

Masculinity and work

Masculinity has also regularly been subject to 'crisis talk' as a result of changes to the nature and

February 2014

Many men believe they should share the hard work, as well as the joys, of raising children



THAT GENDER INEQUALITY REMAINS IS, FOR THE LARGE PART, A STRUCTURAL ISSUE, RATHER THAN AN ATTITUDINAL ONE

An interesting development, however, was that rather than expecting women to tidy up because it is 'their job', these young men believed that women will do so because they are more 'offended' by messy living conditions. The young men's ambivalence here partially complicates the idea that men are inherent 'beneficiaries' of all forms of domestic labour.

Regarding childcare, all my sample suggested that they should — and would — share the burden of hard work, as well as the joys, of raising children. However, many also identified the role that social policies and other institutional barriers play in reinforcing women's position as a primary caregiver. That is, rather than insisting on a male breadwinner model, they often understood that structural factors — such as unequal pay, maternity rights and so on — are at least as important, if not more important, than 'attitudinal' factors in shaping the working arrangements of couples.

Masculinity and homophobia

Abbott's last point, about rising homophobia, also requires careful examination. The centrality of homophobia as a key component in the performance of masculinity has been widely noted by leading scholars in gender studies. They have highlighted how homophobia regulates men in socially damaging ways, encouraging aggressive

and violent behaviours while stigmatising emotional expression and intimate homosocial bonding.

However, recent works such as Eric Anderson's *Inclusive Masculinity* (Routledge 2011) and Mark McCormack's *The Declining Significance of Homophobia* (OUP 2012) have sought to challenge the centrality of homophobia as a key component of men's identities in the twenty-first century. Instead, these authors argue that we have witnessed a reduction of homo-hysteria (the fear of being thought to be homosexual) and they document increasingly accepting, tolerant and even supportive attitudes towards social and civil equality.

We have known for a long time that there exist multiple forms of masculinities — as opposed to one single form — but, alongside my own research, such writers have emphasised the greater *range* of behaviours now open to contemporary young men and have begun to insist that 'men can be men' without necessarily having to dominate, subordinate or police other masculinities or femininities.

Conclusion

Men who rely on the model of masculinity that emphasises misogyny, homophobia, aggression and resistance to certain types of work do still exist. But these caricatures I would argue reflect the lives of a minority of men. This is not to say that the existence of such issues is not problematic — it clearly is, both for the individuals in question and in many ways society at large. The point is that,

Diane Abbot's point that young men do not want to work in service sector roles needs to be questioned



for the majority — especially among the younger generations — masculine identity does not rely on those negative traits that apparently characterised masculinity in a bygone era. That gender inequality remains is, for the large part, a *structural* issue, rather than an attitudinal one.

Finally, Abbott framed her concern about the 'crisis' of masculinity around the ways young British men are trapped between the decline of heavy industry and stable employment, and the fragility and false promise of many of Britain's white collar industries, and zero hours contracts. This is correct. But such concerns also apply to the plight of young *women*. Youth researchers have noted that both young men and young women can often expect to gain work only in routine, subservient, low-paid, often insecure jobs. Meanwhile, the Office for National Statistics has recently published statistics showing that more women are long-term unemployed than at any other period in the last 20 years.

The crisis of masculinity discourse runs the risk of trivialising such issues and in doing so drawing attention away from the employment crisis that is facing many young people, especially at the lower end of the social hierarchy.

References

- Dench, G. (2011) 'Rethinking the sociology of the family', *Sociology Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1.
- Griffin, C. (2000) 'Discourses of crisis and loss: analysing the "boys' underachievement" debate', *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 167–88.
- Mac an Ghail, M. (1994) *The Making of Men: Masculinities, Sexualities and Schooling*, Open University Press.
- O'Donnell, M. and Sharpe, S. (2002) *Uncertain Masculinities: Youth, Ethnicity and Class in Contemporary Britain*, Routledge.
- Roberts, S. (2013) 'Boys will be boys... won't they?: Change and continuities in contemporary young working-class masculinities', *Sociology*, Vol. 47, No. 4.

Steven Roberts is a lecturer in social policy and sociology at the University of Kent. He has a particular interest in the experiences and attitudes of 'ordinary' young people as they attempt to engage with the labour market.



Many young British men are trapped between the decline of heavy industry and stable employment

▪ The decline of heavy industry and manufacturing jobs has meant many men feel uncomfortable about the kinds of jobs on offer to them — particularly service jobs.

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

The truth of such claims

Using insights provided by recent sociological research we can consider these issues one by one and challenge these claims. Before addressing Abbott's speech, it is worth noting that as sociologists we should be careful with generalisations. For example, Dench's claims appear to apply to a minority of men, but his points are presented as if they might be more widely representative.

Positive aspirations

Even though it is a great concern that many young people are unemployed, his comments about a lack of motivation and the links he makes to worklessness seem to run contrary to evidence. The evidence suggests that the vast majority of unemployed people *want* paid work, and much recent work in the sociology of education outlines the reality of young people's positive aspirations.

Gender has a small impact

Dench's remarks also serve to downplay the complex interplay of class, race and gender in educational achievement. For example, in 2011 only 26% of white British boys eligible for free school meals (FSMs) obtained the benchmark level of five 'good' GCSEs at grades A*–C, compared with 32%

THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT THE VAST MAJORITY OF UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE WANT PAID WORK

of FSM-eligible girls. In other words, the majority of *both* boys and girls in this cohort did not achieve the benchmark, yet girls seem to be left out of this discussion. Many sociologists have pointed to the fact that gender has a smaller impact than social class or race, but this often remains overlooked.

Masculinity and employment

Abbott's comments about the lack of young men who could plausibly replicate the masculinity of their fathers and grandfathers are likely to be accurate. However, these concerns appear to be rooted in what Christine Griffin (2000) refers to as a 'discourse of crisis and loss', which mourns the demise of masculine privilege.

Those who favour such views fail to factor in that while boys are the 'victim' of the feminised education system and a labour market dominated by service work, girls still remain significantly unequal with regards to *lifetime* returns in the economic realm. Consideration is also not given to the relatively small number of women in positions of power and influence in both the public and private sectors.

In relation to the numbers of people working behind shop tills as opposed to in heavy industry, again Abbott is correct in identifying observable shifts in employment patterns. This, however, is in tension with her next point that many young men do not *want* to work in such service sector roles. Although this is a frequent point in sociological research into unemployed young men, the lack of appeal of service sector work needs to be seriously questioned. In fact, far greater numbers of young men (and women) from working-class backgrounds can be found actually doing those jobs than suggested by

those who claim that they would typically not want to do them.

A research example

My own qualitative research with a sample of young, heterosexual, working-class men employed in the retail sector provides a vivid example of the ways in which young men actually responded very positively to customer service situations and constructed personal interaction as an important, often *the* most important, aspect of their work (Roberts 2013) (Box 1).

This runs contrary to the views put forward by Abbott and also others in the sociology of youth, but this is because the *experiences* of men in front-line service work remain relatively overlooked, compared with *attitudes* towards taking up such employment. I would argue that by looking disproportionately at the margins — in this case the experiences of the unemployed — we develop a misdirected generalisation regarding men's attitudes towards service sector employment and the implications for their identities.

My research also serves to undermine Abbott's point about young men's attitudes towards women's autonomy. In terms of their perceived future lives as potential partners and fathers, these young men presented themselves as equal partners regarding domestic housework and caring responsibilities for children. With the former, there seemed to be a slightly problematic preference for tasks they 'didn't mind doing' such as preparing and cooking meals, rather than, say, doing the washing up.

Box 1 The research

- This research used qualitative, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with a purposive sample of 24 young men.
- The respondents were moderately qualified (their qualifications ranged from GCSEs to A-levels or equivalent) and all worked in the retail sector.
- The sample was accessed using a multilevel approach, first involving the cooperation of employers, then using a snowballing method, where those already involved helped the researcher to recruit further participants.
- The interviews were held in neutral venues such as cafés and pubs, and were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees.