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From a Hegemonic Politics of Masculinity to an Ontological Politics of Intimacy and Vulnerability? Ways of Imagining through Karen Barad's Work

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Abstract

In this article I investigate emancipatory spaces in masculinity studies with the guidance of Karen Barad's work, and in particular concepts such as diffraction and interference. For my purposes, Karen Barad's work opens up for understanding critical differences within regulated emotional spaces and stale relationalities of masculine gender configurations. Diffracted readings in masculinity studies could extend the symbolic space for acceptable forms of intimacy and possibly create emancipatory openings for hegemonic and dominant forms of lust communions. I argue that a sensual and conceptual key to alternative routes of masculine gendered subjectivities is intimacy and vulnerability. As such, vulnerability also connotes and produces a range of conceptual and embodied dyads and triads; empowered-disempowered; embodied-disembodied-able-bodied; homosocial-homoerotic-homosexual; potent-impotent; human-nonhuman; old-young, to mention a few. Vulnerability is also an onto-epistemological vantage point that hopefully and possibly could work our way around classical binaries and do a well-needed job as a form of emancipatory compass.

Introduction

[1] As a scholar in masculinity studies I share with my feminist colleagues a deep-rooted commitment to thinking beyond and differently about gender binarity. In masculinity studies we address both the collective identifications of biomen and many diverse forms of culturally constructed masculinities. From my perspective, masculinity is an onto-epistemological nodal point and a political condition where contemporary questions of power, difference, and agency can be effectively addressed and understood. More to the point, it is the dominant gender configuration in a patriarchal world in need of change. From a political reform perspective, one might even claim that it poses probably one of, if not *the*, biggest challenge(s) to work in social engineering. This involves a large scope of activities, ranging from activist work on changing men's behavior and attitudes as well as onto-epistemological scholarly work within masculinity studies. Feminist theory and activism have a long history of conceptualizing, challenging, and undermining patriarchal domination. In my opinion, this approach needs to be more fully integrated into

work on men and masculinities. My argument in this article works along these lines of thought. So, if there is one area of gender configuration where ideas and materializations of different forms of 'entangled relationalities', and where Donna Haraway's aim "to diffract the rays of technoscience so that we get more promising interference patterns on the recording films of our lives and bodies" (95) could have truly profound effects on a relational ontology, it is no doubt different forms of masculinities, ranging from 'female masculinity' (Halberstam) to 'hardcore masculinities'. The latter are defined as forms of masculinity that have resisted gendered change and reform, and that cling onto traditional patriarchal core values in social communities that exclude women and non-hegemonic forms of masculinity (Mellström, "Moving Beyond"). To include 'hardcore masculinities' in thinking through a relational ontology for masculinity studies might be wishful thinking, but nonetheless an optimistic opening worth considering in a political climate where vulnerable queer bodies are challenging repressive political regimes on a global scale.

[2] For my purposes, Karen Barad's work opens up critical differences within regulated emotional spaces and stale relationalities of heterosexual masculine gender configurations. Barad opens up ways of imagining, working, and thinking in terms of methodological specificity and conceptual precision to provide an ontological politics of vulnerability and intimacy, where different forms of lust, passion, and desire possibly could point beyond conventional desire and penetrative sex for heterosexual men. In particular, Barad's insistence on an onto-epistemological point of departure which emphasizes the radical openness of materiality in its many forms, and where diffraction as a physical phenomenon and methodology manifests the liveliness of the world, can in my opinion be closely coupled/entangled with vulnerability as a state of intense affect and intellectual alertness (Barad, *Meeting* 91). In line with this, vulnerability is to be regarded as an ontological condition and as a form of epistemological situatedness that we could use to productively explore the nature and specificity of entanglements. According to Barad, diffraction attends to specific material entanglements (88) and I believe consideration of diffraction and interference could provide a methodologically fine-tuned way to open up the open-endedness of becoming as a material-discursive practice in masculinity studies. Vulnerability is, as Sara Ahmed points out, a particular kind of bodily relation to the world, and I would add an intellectual relation, as well.

[3] It is from such a starting point that I would like to formulate/reformulate ontological dimensions of masculinity politics. Diffracted readings in masculinity studies could, in my view, work towards extending the range of acceptable forms of intimacy and possibly create emancipatory openings in hegemonic and dominant forms of intimate communions. In this pursuit, diffracted readings and interference patterns take our efforts at conceptualizing and dealing with differences and ontology in new directions. What is most important is that diffraction opens up in new ways the question of the nature and character of the relations and interactions between differences to empirical investigation (Moser 7). In contrast to and as alternative to intersectional figurations, the optical quality of diffraction and interference visualizes how differences work not only to support and reinforce each other, "but also operate in complex, unexpected and surprising ways, and produce quite contradictory effects" (Moser 7). In accordance with Ingunn Moser I also believe that we fail to start from a point, a location, where different axes of differentiation,

social hierarchies, and power systems meet and intersect with gender, and classify the subject in a production of differences and inequalities. Neither do we start from a subject that *is*, nor from a singular and undisturbed production process. "Rather, the notion of 'interference' encourages us to look for the coming together, the combination, but also the disturbance, clash, or neutralization of different ordering processes and enactments—the 'wave motions'—in which such positions, identities and differences emerge" (Moser 9). As Barad has it, "diffractions are attuned to differences—differences that our knowledge-making practices make and the effects they have on the world" (*Meeting* 71). Our challenge is thus empirical: "that of investigating the *particular patterns of interference* of differences in concrete situations and settings, and of accounting for contingencies, discontinuities, clashes, neutralizations and undoing as well as continuity, reinforcement and doing" (Moser 8).

Looking for the Vulnerable

[4] Looking for the vulnerable in concrete empirical processes is also to look for particular patterns of interference, implying that cracks and surfaces are exposed and integral to the open-ended process of becoming in the world. Vulnerability is currently discussed in a lot of feminist theory (e.g. Dahl "Femmebodiment"; Ahmed; Cvetkovich; Shildrick *Embodying, Dangerous Discourses*), but unfortunately less so in discussions of masculine subjectivity and masculine ontological politics, although vulnerability is certainly an underlying theme in many studies of, for instance, male migrants and laborers in repressive class and racial contexts (e.g. Lindquist; Mellström *Masculinity*). In recent debates, vulnerability has been taken up in relation to phenomenology, psychoanalysis, interdependence, femme figurations, and so on (Dahl, "Femmebodiment"). I am interested in vulnerability as an ontological status, as a political condition—and, to repeat, vulnerability is a particular kind of bodily and intellectual relation to the world that attention to could have profound effects on our knowledge making practices. A conventional understanding of vulnerability is that it entails a sense of being under attack, anticipating a possibility of being harmed—and it is a state of dependence that most often connotes 'the feminine' (Dahl "Femmebodiment"). As such, it has always been a precarious topic for feminist theory but has, in my opinion, gradually and productively been transformed into an onto-epistemological location, oscillating between layers of toughness and nakedness, a state of intense affect and analytical alertness. Following Ulrika Dahl: "It is the crack in a seamless armor, the uncanny moment of undoing, a threshold" ("Femmebodiment" 7).

[5] In Baradian terms I interpret this as diffraction gratings that produce patterns marking emotional differences (*Meeting* 81), where the skin is the surface exhibiting wave motions, intensifying and filtering relational entanglements. In line with Karen Barad's work on touching ("On Touching"), I would argue that vulnerability could be seen as a state of intense affect that can be transformed by touching, generating constructive or destructive interference patterns. Touching produces an "uncanny sense of the otherness of the self, a literal holding oneself at a distance in the sensation of contact, the greeting of the stranger within? So much happens in a touch: an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times—are aroused" (Barad, *Meeting* 210). As many other scholars have also shown, touch is the most fundamental means of contact with the world, the simplest and most straightforward of all sensory systems, vital to the

wellbeing of humans as well as animals (Geldard; Barnett; Goodwin). As Marjorie Harness Goodwin explains, following Edith Wyschogrod, "the body as a whole is the tactile field sensitive to pressure, temperature and surface qualities" (Wyschogrod 39; cited in Goodwin 2). The body is the origin of activity, and through touch the body interacts with things and knows the world. One could thus claim that touch organizes different types of social relationships and forms of inclusion and intimacy (or exclusion and disdain) that are performed through the ways in which bodies mutually entangle or distance themselves (Goodwin 10). The verb entangle is here crucial and is also one of Barad's key terms. As such it, as Vicky Kirby explains, "points to matter's inherent openness, and its identity is found to be 'profoundly entangled and compromised'" (Kirby cited in Hinton 179). Such a dynamic openness would in my interpretation take its point of departure in vulnerability as a form of onto-epistemological situatedness. In the following section, which discusses the rethinking of masculinity politics I will also point out that with the close entanglement between touch, vulnerability, and desire, the last term is then to be seen "not in terms of what is missing or absent, not in terms of depth, latency or interiority, but in terms of surfaces and intensities" (Grosz, *Space* 179; see also Dahl "Ytspänningar", "Femmebodiment").

Rethinking Masculinity Politics

[6] I would like to connect my argument about vulnerability with the need for rethinking masculinity politics in regard to the current discursive limits of gender equality politics from a Nordic/Scandinavian perspective. To cut a long story short, it seems that we have now reached the limits of the previous radical and liberal feminist paradigm/s and that: "the binary and normative points of departure of the gender equality project creates a risk of not only contributing to the reproduction of power regimes, but also of potentially de-radicalising feminism as it is being co-opted into the state bureaucracy, on the premises of the gender equality project" (Egeberg Holmgren 62, my translation).^[1] A new generation of masculinity studies scholars has recently outlined the discursive frames of contemporary masculinity politics and has pointed to the respective inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms in the Nordic context (Sandberg; Egeberg Holmgren; Gottzén and Jonsson). These critical voices have pointed to how heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and Nordicism have been taken for granted as a conceptual basis for the Nordic gender equality project. These normative conceptual underpinnings have also been the assumed theoretical premises of much of masculinity studies in the Nordic context.

[7] Within masculinity studies, the most important line of research that has been produced in the Nordic countries has been the so-called fatherhood work that focuses on men's parenting practices and the state-legislated reforms that try to make men take a greater responsibility for family life. It is through fatherhood that we find the key to how (heterosexual) men can improve as a 'gender'. The emancipation of men has been (and still is) visualized through an active and equal parenthood lens within the discursive frames of a projected nuclear family (Mellström, "Masculinity Studies"). As such, Nordic gender equality politics have, not surprisingly, mainly been a heterosexual, white, and middle-class project, although as mentioned, recent work in masculinity studies, inspired by queer and postcolonial perspectives, has now productively delineated the discursive limits of this project. As this brings us to a sort of discursive end in terms of an emancipatory imaginary, it also opens up for thinking differently

beyond what Egeberg Holmgren calls a hegemonic masculinity politics.

[8] In line with what I have outlined so far, I would like to advocate for and understand such rethinking in light of a general reconfiguration of intimacy and an increasing multiplicity of forms of desire—where vulnerability is the onto-epistemological key to such a reconfiguration. With a certain ironic twist we might return to non-heterosexual forms and structures of desire in masculinity studies, in order to shed light on the dominant forms and regulations of sexuality and intimacy. These are intimately (in the double meaning of the word) connected to the heterosexual couple as the legitimate form for the sexuality order. Thus, men desiring men seems to be a recurrent analytical entry into the understanding of heterosexual men's conventional intimacies and sexual politics, and also to point to new ways of configuring emancipatory challenges in masculinity politics. Hence, there is a specific wave of arguments that seem to recur with a certain regularity. For instance, Tim Carrigan, Raewyn Connell, and John Lee, in their classic 1985 article "Toward a new sociology of masculinity", write that, "Gay Liberation politics have continued to call in question the conventional understanding of what it is to be a man. ...The gay movement has been centrally concerned with masculinity as part of its critique of the political structure of sexuality" (551). In connection to Lee, Carrigan, and Connell I would argue that acceptable forms of desire form the locus of the politics of sexuality. With regard to conventional masculinity, acceptable forms of desire (including desires produced in close intimate friendships) have been confined to the heterosexual couple as the legitimate form. The fear of intimacy has thus regulated masculine relationships through homophobia, as well as through historical ideals of invulnerability and heterosexual bravado.

[9] The theme of homosocial and homoerotic desire is something that Sedgwick also addressed in her important work some twenty years ago:

Homosocial is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with homosexual, and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from homosexual. In fact, it is applied to such activities as male bonding, which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality. To draw the homosocial back into the orbit of desire, the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between the homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted.
(1-2)

[10] The homoerotic space regulating intimacy between hetero-men is accordingly something that has changed radically in different periods of western history. Peter Nardi has, for instance, shown how passionate and romantic friendships between young men were practiced in the early nineteenth century. Through letter exchanges, Peter Nardi portrays how young men express lust and desire towards each other in ways unthinkable one hundred years later, and following, among other things, from the pathologization of homosexuality.

[11] In an interesting combined analysis of family and queer studies, Andersen outlines how the configuration of intimacy has also affected men's friendship relations with regard to the family and the

heterosexual couple. Andersen argues for a queering of intimacy by drawing the homoerotic 'back into the orbit', opening up for an acceptable multiplicity of desire and friendship communions among men. Andersen's argument also points to a more dynamic relationality of masculine gender configurations, an interference pattern of possible combinations for expressing desire among contemporary men, which makes masculinity/ies in general a less invulnerable ontological position.

[12] In a gradual 'democratization' of intimacy such as we have seen in the last decades, for instance partnership laws in many European countries, we have not only witnessed how minorities have been given rights, but we have also seen a gradually extended space with regard to which intimacies are given legitimacy. Furthermore, as Jens Rydström argues, "The opening up of marriage or marriage-like arrangements for same-sex couples of course has to do with the ongoing redefinition of marriage itself in Western society" (112). In this process, the regulated emotional space of intimacy that many conventional heterosexual men have had within marriage has been challenged. Accordingly, to have close relationships outside of marriage or the family unit is given higher and higher priority and status among contemporary men in western countries (Allan; Holter et al.; Plummer). As Arnfinn Andersen argues, in the 1960s men would fear being stigmatized as gay if they maintained close friendships (8ff.). The previously marked difference between men and women with regard to close friendships is now less accentuated, although men still express that they miss close friendships to a larger extent than women (Holter et al.).

[13] In her book *Intimacy*, Lynn Jamieson discusses two forms of the concept: the intimacy of the self and the intimacy of the body. As previously argued, these two forms have for many men in Western societies been encapsulated within marriage, but we are now moving in the direction of a wider array of intimacies for heterosexual men, possibly including homoerotic or homosocial desires, or at least opening up possibilities for such emotionally charged aspects to men's relationships. A diffractive methodology is productive here in looking for particular interference patterns of difference, and in accounting for the complexities of the unpredictable desire that recognizes same-sex intimacy and touch in a state of vulnerability. Thus, to draw the homoerotic 'back into the orbit' not only recognizes homoerotic desire, but also contributes to liberating sexuality from its mono-causal connection to couple relations, as well as localizing friendship relations within the imaginary and possible logics of structures of masculine desire, and notably vulnerability (see also Andersen 13). As intimacies of the self and the body are conflated in various ways, we also open up a politics of intimacy where different forms of lust, passion, and desire raise the possibility of communions that go beyond conventional desire and penetrative sex for heterosexual men. Possibly, as Linn Sandberg puts it, "Intimacy and touch hold the potential for destabilizing the boundaries between the sexual and non-sexual and reconfiguring male sexual morphologies" (250).

Conclusion

[14] I believe that the sensual and conceptual keys to opening up alternative routes to masculine gendered subjectivities are intimacy, touch, and vulnerability—especially in a political climate where hegemonic ideals revolve around the independent, competent, strong, and successful subject; in short,

the invulnerable. Vulnerability also connotes and produces a range of conceptual and embodied dyads and triads: empowered-disempowered, embodied-disembodied-able-bodied, homosocial-homoerotic-homosexual, potent-impotent, human-nonhuman, old-young, stressing an ontological politics of diffraction gratings and interference patterns.

[15] Ultimately "what is at stake is nothing less than the possibilities for change" (Barad, *Meeting* 46). To think differently and to see possibilities for change in masculinity studies requires "a deeper understanding of the ontological dimensions of scientific practice" (Barad, *Meeting* 42). In my understanding, vulnerability is such an ontological dimension within this field of research, primarily because allowing oneself to be vulnerable is also potentially transgressive (Cvetkovich; Dahl "Femmebodiment"). As many others have pointed out, it is a difficult bodily relation to the world that requires a daring openness, but promises an exponential increase in intellectual and bodily sensations. As such, vulnerability could hopefully work its way around the classic binaries and do the job of an emancipatory compass, with the help of a diffractive methodology that emphasizes the inherent openness of becoming, desiring, and being touched. As Karen Barad explains:

living compassionately requires recognizing and facing our responsibility to the infinitude of the other, welcoming the stranger whose very existence is the possibility of touching and being touched, who gifts us with both the ability to respond and the longing for justice-to-come. ("On Touching" 219)

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Notes

1. Original Swedish text: "Jag menar att jämställdhetsprojektets binära och normerande utgångspunkter inte bara riskerar bidra till att producera maktordningar utan också att feminism potentiellt avradikaliseras när dessa idéer 'sugs upp' i statsapparaten på jämställdhetspolitikens premisser."
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