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Disabled Masculinities: A Review and Suggestions for Further Research

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the existing sociological literature relating to disabled masculinities, a field of enquiry that has undergone substantial development over the past two decades. I contend that previous studies have insightfully uncovered the social forces that have established a “dilemma of disabled masculinity” within contemporary Western societies, as well as the complex, contextualised and multiple ways in which disabled men negotiate this dilemma. To foster the further development of the field, I suggest three potentially productive lines for future enquiry. Specifically, I support greater attention to the issue of comparative diversity between impairment categories, a consideration of the generative role that disability may have in relation to masculinity, and more sustained enquiry into how changing constructions of masculinity inflect the lives of disabled men.

Keywords: disability, masculinity, literature review, qualitative research, sociology

Masculinidades con Discapacidad: Una Revisión y Sugerencias para Ampliar la Investigación

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Resumen

Este artículo proporciona un sumario de la literatura sociológica existente relacionada a la masculinidad discapacitada. Este campo de investigación ha tenido un desarrollo substancial en las últimas dos décadas. Argumento que sin darse cuenta los estudios anteriores han puesto al descubierto las fuerzas sociales que establecen un “dilema de masculinidad discapacitada” dentro de las sociedades occidentales, como también las múltiples, complejas y contextualizadas diversas maneras con las que los hombres discapacitados tratan este dilema. Para promover el desarrollo de este campo, sugiero tres líneas potencialmente productivas para mayor investigación. Específicamente, apoyo la cuestión de la diversidad comparativa entre categorías de discapacidad, una consideración al rol generativo que la discapacidad pudiera tener en relación a la masculinidad y una investigación mayor de cómo las construcciones cambiantes de la masculinidad influyen en las vidas de los hombres discapacitados.

Palabras clave: discapacidad, masculinidad, revisión de literatura, investigación cualitativa, sociología

The decentring of a singular “masculinity” produced through the employment of anthropological and historical material (Herd, 1981; Kersten, 1996), the increasing scholarly influence of the concept of “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1991; Nash, 2011), and the recognition of the patriarchal role of struggles and inequalities between distinct groups of men (Connell, 1995), have meant that it has become orthodoxy within the sociology of men and masculinities to talk not of a static, singular male gender identity, but rather in the plural form of “masculinities” (Connell, 1995; Segal, 2007, p. xxxiv). The purpose of this term is to recognise that the notion of masculinity cannot be adequately conceptualised using quantitative measures of differentiation, popular within socio-psychological studies that “calculate” masculinity through the deployment of standardised surveys (Carrigan et al., 1985, p. 566); but, rather, that the qualitative understandings, practices and outcomes of masculinity are inflected by, and shift according to, both distinct group memberships and historical/spatial contexts (Connell, 1995; Messner, 1997, p.7).

Scholarly deployments of the concept of intersectionality have, according to Jennifer Nash (2011), undergone a recent shift. Whereas previously, as exemplified in the work of African-American feminists (Collins, 1990), priority was accorded to mutually reinforcing and compounding forms of exclusion, recent engagements with intersectionality have examined interactions between distinct components of selfhood, without an a priori determination regarding their position within the binary of privilege/oppression. The opportunities such a shift presents are significant, allowing for a scholarly examination of how experiences of privilege are tempered by, or negotiated according to, alternate patterns of exclusion. It is within this ethic that the common contention that male gender, instantiated as the default position of humanity, is accorded a privileged invisibility (e.g. Kimmel, 1993), can be problematised; while such a claim may reflect the experiences of white, middle-class, nondisabled heterosexual men (although even this is debated, see Robinson, 2000), its veracity becomes more complex with regards to subaltern groups. It is often substantially (although not exclusively) through the “visibilisation” of a problematic male gender identity that patterns of homophobia, racism, and classism are expressed (Coston & Kimmel, 2012).

We may think, for instance, of the cultural distaste for the excessive femininity ascribed to gay men (Kimmel, 1994), the passivity and diminished phallic power socially projected onto Asian men (Han, 2000), or the uncivilised and homophobic hypermasculinity attached to African-American (Schmitt, 2002) and working class (Embrick et al., 2007) men.

In this article, I pursue a consideration of the extant literature within the field of disabled masculinities. In recent decades, a burgeoning interest has emerged in this area, inspired by the growing prominence of both the critical study of men and masculinities and disability studies. I begin the body of the paper by discussing the two themes that have dominated previous discussions of this issue – particularly focusing on, firstly, the social forces that seemingly establish an inverse relationship between masculinity and disability, and, secondly, how disabled men negotiate this. I will contend that this literature remains limited in three ways, relating to the problems of what I term comparative diversity, generativity and historicity. This paper intends to encourage further research in this area, by provoking questions that have hitherto remained at the margins of sociological inquiry. In conclusion, I stress the importance of maintaining a strong emphasis on feminist modes of analysis within this scholarly context, by maintaining an awareness of the complex patterns of privilege and disadvantage that disabled men negotiate.

The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity

As noted by Rosemary Garland-Thomson (1997, p.6), cultural representations of disabled characters have characteristically been strategically deployed as narrative devices, designed not to offer insight into the experience of disability, or everyday realities of inequality and exclusion, but rather as symbols designed to evoke broader cultural anxieties surrounding mortality, vulnerability and weakness (see also Mitchell, 2002). It is perhaps within the realm of filmic representation that the relationship between disability and masculinity within contemporary Western contexts has historically been most unambiguously expressed: disability, these texts imply, is antithetical to, or mutually exclusive with, masculinity – they are oppositional (Morris, 1991; Shakespeare, 1996; Longmore, 2003). The central character of the 1981 film *Whose Life Is It*

Anyway?, played by Richard Dreyfuss, who is paralysed from the neck down in the aftermath of an automotive accident, describes himself as “dead already”, “a vegetable” and “not a man anymore”. Paralysed during the Vietnam War in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), Tom Cruise’s character talks of his “dead penis”, crying with anguish “Who will love me?”. More recently, in the high grossing *Avatar* (2009), Jack Sully (played by Sam Worthington), has his manhood “sullied” by spinal cord injury, which can only be reclaimed through the virtual resumption of a normative, able-bodied selfhood, and the salvaged corporeal power and sexual virility that this implies.

The scholarly literature is replete with theoretical material and empirical evidence demonstrating conflict between “disability” and “masculinity” within contemporary Western contexts. Disability has been described as a form of “symbolic castration” (Shakespeare, 1999, p.57), setting in motion the “dilemma of disabled masculinity” (Shuttleworth et al., 2012, p.175), and threatening “all the cultural values of masculinity” (Murphy, 1990, p. 94). Disabled men, it has been contended, are, alongside a whole raft of social groups, positioned as “others” against which the norms of hegemonic masculinity are defined and legitimated, coming to signify everything which “real men” must repudiate in their quest to approximate culturally legitimated modes of manhood (Morris, 1991; Shakespeare, 1999; Gerschick & Miller, 2000, p. 125-6). The scope and variety of this literature render summation somewhat difficult, however five interrelated themes (as identified in the qualitative research of Gerschick, 1998, p. 193-203) appear to possess particular significance in understanding the tension between disability and masculinity within contemporary Western cultures: access to the labour market, independence, sexuality, embodiment, and sport. Each of these will be briefly considered in turn.

Firstly, a range of social forces have problematised disabled men’s access to the role of breadwinner. Two broadly coterminous historical trends associated with the advent of modernity are significant here. The emergence of the modern gendered division of labour positioned masculinity as defined and authenticated within the realm of the workplace, where one’s capacities to compete against (male) others, and provide for one’s family, were tested and valorised (Landes, 2003; Kimmel, 2010). Concurrently, the emergence of capitalism developed alongside the

materialisation of a factory system that required particular, standardised incarnations of embodiment in regards to size, capacity, shape and mobility, that often excluded disabled men (Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 1990). Disabled men were simultaneously both required to participate in the labour market by virtue of their gender, and excluded from it by virtue of their disability. While “post-Fordist” developments within contemporary Western labour markets relating to the decline of manufacturing, technological diversification, the growth of non-standard, flexible and/or risky work arrangements, and a growing emphasis on symbolic labour (Beck, 1992, p.139-50; Jessop, 1995), as well as the widespread entry of women into the workforce (Thévenon, 2013), have destabilised the foundations of this narrative, disabled men remain marginalised within the labour market. Contemporary evidence suggests that disabled men experience higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, precarious employment and poverty, and lower labour force participation rates and incomes, than nondisabled men – although, significantly, disabled men continue to accrue privilege over disabled women according to these indicators (Kidd, et al., 2000; Wilkins, 2004).

Closely linked to the exclusion of disabled men within the labour market have been historical associations between disability and dependency. Feminist psychoanalysts have contended that the construction of a male gender identity is centrally dependent upon the establishment of strong psychic and social boundaries around the self; to be masculine is to be a self-reliant, independent, separate “individual” (Gilligan, 1993; Chodorow, 1999). Social barriers that inhibit the accomplishment of daily activities may render disabled men dependent upon others for the fulfilment of their needs. This is evident within the context of social policy, which has conventionally defined disability in terms of a legitimate incapacity to work, rendering disabled people a group that can justifiably claim welfare without the stigma of mendicancy (Stone, 1984; Longmore, 2003). Yet, as Paul Longmore (2003) contends, this “privilege” comes at a cost, defining disabled people as categorically incapable, dependent and incompetent. Qualitative research has demonstrated the anxieties disabled men experience within the context of caring relationships: of feeling emasculated, not wanting to be a burden on others, and expressing

frustration at perceptions of powerlessness (Valentine, 1999, p.172-4; Joseph & Lindeger, 2007; Ostrander, 2008a, 2008b).

The performance of masculine gender identities is centrally bound up with the realm of sexuality, and in particular social expectations that require men to “prove” their manhood through (hetero)sexual conquest (Kimmel, 1994; Connell, 1995). Hegemonic constructions of male sexuality emphasise the rejection of homosexuality (Sedgwick, 1985; Butler, 1993; Pascoe, 2007) the corporeal performance of dominance over women (Rich, 1980), and affirm simultaneous patterns of homosocial connection/competition between men (Sedgwick, 1985). Recent sociological scholarship engaging with the intersection between disability and sexuality has moved beyond the medical model contention that disabled men simply cannot do “it” (although this may sometimes be the case, when sex is defined in narrowly heterosexist, penetrative and reproductive terms), to examine the panoply of social forces that establish barriers towards full sexual citizenship (Hahn, 1981; Weeks, 1998; Shakespeare, 2000). Disabled people are commonly represented as either asexual, or as existing in a child-like state of innocence, uninterested, or unable to participate, in sexual life (Shakespeare, 1999, p.55-8; Lindemann, 2010b, p. 436-8). The disabling barriers that inhibit disabled people from participation in mainstream educational institutions, workplaces, and leisure venues, render it difficult to meet potential partners, as does the discomfort that many personal carers and medical professionals have in terms of facilitating sexual encounters for disabled clients (Mairs, 2002, p.157-64; Shuttleworth, 2004).

The replication of male gender norms is further problematised by disabled embodiment. As noted by R. W. Connell (1995, p.45), “(t)rue masculinity is always thought to proceed from men’s bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body”. Historically, men’s bodies have been idealised through a series of gendered polarities – they are strong (not weak), active (not passive), subjects (not objects), competent (not ineffectual), productive (not redundant), invulnerable (not vulnerable), and hard (not soft) (Jefferson, 1998; Meeuf, 2009). Disabled men have historically represented the abject repository of all that has been expelled from traditional accounts of male embodiment (Morris, 1991; Gerschick & Miller, 2000, p.125-6). Recent developments

within the realms of consumer capitalism, and the formation of male beauty industries, have destabilised the edifice of this “hard” male body, inducing men to treat the physical form as (in part) ornamental (Lingis, 1994, p.30-3; Bordo, 1999). Yet, while this has troubled some of the static binary oppositions of gendered embodiment noted above, the construction of the “beautiful male body” remains problematic, in terms of its consumerist elitism, and its solid foundation within (white, middle-class) nondisabled corporeal norms (e.g. Taleporos & McCabe, 2002). Disabled embodiment, within our culture, is associated with neither masculine productivity (Stone, 1984; Longmore, 2003), nor masculine beauty (c/f Hahn, 1988).

Associations between disability and embodied lack are further legitimated within the realm of competitive sports. Sportsmen are exemplars of contemporary Western manhood because of their competitiveness, embodied skill, expertise in physical domination, and their inclusion in homosocial networks (Connell, 1995; Spencer, 2013). Sociologists have documented the function of sporting contexts as central locales for the routinised expression, regulation and development of masculine personal identities (Mangan, 1981; Messner & Sabo, 1994). Disability sports have grown in size and prominence over the past three decades, exemplified by the emergence of the Paralympic movement since 1988 (Thomas & Smith, 2003). However, disabled sportsmen tend to be positioned in an implicit hierarchy with their nondisabled counterparts, as evidenced by limited levels of media coverage, spectatorship and access to sponsorships. There is, further, a tendency to regard disabled athletes as inspirational “supercrrips”, whose primary contribution is to inspire a non-disabled audience, rather than being valued as exemplars of athletic prowess (Thomas & Smith, 2003; Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Purdue & Howe, 2012). Disabled men who are unable (whether because of physical ability, social exclusion, or a combination of the two) to engage in mainstream sporting contexts may subsequently be denied access to a central arena associated with the production of masculine selves.

Disabled Men Negotiating Masculinity

The “dilemma of disabled masculinity” (Shuttleworth et al., 2012), or the “status inconsistency” (Gerschick, 2000, p.1265), associated with identification as both male and disabled, has been perhaps the most

significant and consistent finding of the existing literature (e.g. Morris, 1991; Gerschick, 1998; Shakespeare, 1999). There has equally, however, been a recognition that the ways disabled men manage this dilemma is not static or straightforward, but rather reflects active and tactical patterns of identity construction that implicate a variety of social norms, resources, relationships and contexts (e.g. Charmaz, 1994; Valentine, 1999; Rapala & Manderson, 2005). In a classic, and widely referenced, paper, Thomas Gerschick and Adam Miller (2000) conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with ten physically impaired men, designed to interrogate their psychosocial experience and negotiation of gender. They proposed three distinct categories through which disabled men's responses to hegemonic masculinity could be framed. These categories, they note, are not static labels, but rather heuristic devices designed to capture contextually grounded social logics. Individual men may strategically shift between approaches depending upon a range of factors, including access to resources, institutional situation, life course position, and impairment type/severity/stage (Gerschick & Miller, 2000; Wilson, 2004).

The first strategy, reliance, involves a continued commitment to conventional ideals of strength, sexual virility, independence, self-sufficiency, athleticism and competence (Gerschick & Miller, 2000, p.30-3). Researchers have documented how disabled men may deploy tropes relating to sport, sexual prowess, sexism, homosocial bonding and homophobia in the pursuit of a culturally legitimated masculine identity (Wilson, 2004; Jeffreys, 2008, p.331-4; Lindemann, 2010a, 2010b). This tactic is somewhat compensatory, aiming to undermine associations between disability and emasculation (Lindemann, 2010a); yet, by privileging existing conceptions of hegemonic masculinity, disabled men can become complicit in the social hierarchies characteristic of the existing gender order, attaining privilege through the rejection of women, homosexuality and "other" (non-masculine) disabled men (Hutchinson & Kleiber, 2000; Gibson et al., 2007, p.510; Lindemann, 2010a). The strategy of reliance, further, fails to challenge the structural contradiction embedded within the dilemma of disabled masculinity, potentially generating feelings of inadequacy when the performance of idealised (ableist) conceptions of manhood is rendered unachievable due to an impairment (Gerschick &

Miller, 2000, p.30-1; Huchinson & Kleiber, 2000; Sparkes & Smith, 2002; Good et al., 2008).

Secondly, rejecting hegemonic masculinity is the most radical approach identified by Gerschick and Miller (2000, p.133-5), involving an eschewal of the gendered expectations and practices that embed a structural contradiction at the intersection between masculinity and disability within contemporary Western cultures. The way disabled men may reconstruct their sexual identities offers an insightful example of this strategy; Michael Tepper (1999), for instance, in the aftermath of a spinal cord injury, discusses the importance of “letting go” of masculine conceptions of sexuality centred around phallic penetration, spontaneity, control, the rejection of intimacy and the objectification of women (see also Shakespeare, 1999, p.58; Gerschick & Miller, 2000, p.134-5). This stance may also be evident in Paul Abbsersley’s (1996, p.68-74) theoretical rejection of labour market participation as the ultimate determinant of human value. This strategy may be the most politically progressive when judged from a feminist standpoint, but is nevertheless difficult, both in terms of the practical possibility of the wholesale rejection of masculine norms (Coston & Kimmel, 2012), and the social regulation and censure that may result from this rejection (e.g. Hutchinson & Kleiber, 2000).

Reformulation, finally, involves a pragmatic recalculation of the norms associated with masculinity. Rather than uncritically relying on conventional gender ideologies, or absolutely eschewing them, the strategy of reformulation involves the tactical development of an understanding of masculinity that is consistent with the specific resources and life-course situation that an individual confronts (Gerschick & Miller, 2000, 127-30). Tony Coles (2008, p.238) figuratively associates reformulation with mosaic art forms, involving individuals “drawing upon fragments or pieces of hegemonic masculinity which they have the capacity to perform and piecing them together to reformulate what masculinity means to them”. Daniel Wilson (2004, p.128-31), for instance, in his narrative analysis of the memoirs of polio survivors, notes how male authors came to reject the deployment of figurative discourses of war, violence and sport to represent their “battle” against disability as they grew older, increasingly accepting their bodies as mortal and fallible, while simultaneously maintaining a

narrative investment in the identity of a wizened, experienced form of elder masculinity (see also [Smith, 2013](#)).

Developing the Study of Disabled Masculinities

The structural contradictions embedded between disability and masculinity within contemporary Western societies, and the diverse, creative and contextually specific ways in which disabled men negotiate these contradictions, have been the pivotal insights emerging from the existing literature. In this section, I will critically identify three aporias or limitations characteristic of sociological representations of the intersection between disability and masculinity. In particular, I complicate narratives of the “dilemma of disabled masculinity” by highlighting the interrelated issues of what I term comparative diversity, generativity and historicity. The substance of each of these limitations will be demonstrated by drawing upon insights that emerge at the periphery of the scholarly nexus between disability and gender, but each, I will contend, requires further and more sustained development within the context of sociology.

Firstly, the field of disabled masculinities could benefit from more thorough engagement with the implications of the corporeal, sensory and cognitive forms of comparative diversity that exist within the category of “disability”. Russell Shuttleworth, Nikki Wedgwood and Nathan Wilson (2012, p.182-6) note that the extant literature expresses a consistent tendency to examine how “masculinity” interacts with “disability” as generic categories. However, the term “disability” as a generic singular concept can problematically reproduce the historical processes that have rendered conditions as diverse as visual impairment, autism, dwarfism and cerebral palsy, as somehow “naturally” similar or related phenomena (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.13). Shuttleworth, Wedgwood and Wilson (2012, p.179-80) specifically critique the articulation of a (seemingly) universal “disabled masculinity” on the basis of research examining men’s experiences of acquired physical disabilities, particularly spinal cord injuries. They subsequently call for future research highlighting the gendered experiences of men with degenerative, cognitive and early-onset impairments. Recognition of the gendered differences between disabled men has been affirmed in the past. Tom Shakespeare (1999, p.62), for instance, notes the importance of examining “differences between disabled

men, due to sexuality, ethnicity, class, as well as factors such as the type of impairment - visible, invisible, congenital, acquired". However, Shakespeare (1999) never substantively discusses how specific impairment categories inflect men's experiences of gender, instead reverting to the generic class of "disabled men".

Somewhat homogenous accounts of "disabled masculinity", and the prevailing bias towards men with acquired physical impairments, remain problematic. Recently, however, researchers have begun working towards the rectification of this problem by situating an increasingly diverse array of disabilities within the context of sex/gender. In a series of articles, research teams led by Nathan Wilson have examined masculinity within the lives of Australian men with intellectual disabilities. This research has documented the problematic tendency for intellectually impaired men to be represented within existing scholarship primarily in terms of a pathological propensity for violence, sexual aggression and crime (Wilson et al., 2010). They note that the conflation of cognitive deficits with the status of "diminished men" has tended to neglect the positive experiences that men with learning disabilities may derive from homosocial camaraderie, physical activity and sexual expression (Wilson et al., 2011, 2012, 2013). Using qualitative interviews with twelve visually impaired South African male school students, Lee Joseph and Graham Lindegger (2007, p.79-82) noted a persistent investment in hegemonic constructions of masculinity centred on heterosexuality, homophobia, toughness, aggression and competence. They further this argument by drawing upon Victor Seidler's work to examine the personal anxieties and limitations prompted by a commitment to hegemonic gender ideals, and the ways that visual impairment both informed, and restrained, contextually grounded enactments and understandings of idealised masculinities (Joseph & Lindegger, 2007, p.82-5). As a final example of the diversification of scholarship within the field of disabled masculinities, Gibson et al. (2007) have drawn upon Bourdieusian social theory to interpret the experiences of ten Canadian men living with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. They provide an analysis of the contradictory gendered implications of medical technology, that both enabled participants in terms of control and agency, while simultaneously marking them as "other" within interpersonal interactions, and signalling a form of embodied deficiency (Gibson et al., 2007, p.509-10).

While analyses of the gendered implications of diverse forms of impairment have been increasingly common, the different contributions remain somewhat fragmented, without much of an attempt to elucidate how different corporeal, sensory, and cognitive forms of functioning create distinct, socially contextualised “pathways” with regards to masculinity. The literature would benefit, in my view, from the emergence of comparative sociologies of disabled masculinity. Such research might interrogate how the gendered experiences of an individual with an acquired injury, who had previously had access to a nondisabled identity, differ from those of an individual with a congenital disability (Gerschick, 2000, p. 1265). Are there different forms, or “levels”, of gendered “otherness” ascribed to individuals with distinct styles of physical, sensory or cognitive functioning (Boyle, 2005)? Do gendered hierarchies relating to disability operate within the perceptions and performances of disabled people themselves? Might some forms of impairment render the notion of “gender” itself problematic, due to particular levels of cognitive or social awareness (Gerschick, 2000, p.1265; Wilson et al., 2012)? The purpose of asking these questions is not to revive a crude form of biological determinism, whereby aspects of individual functioning “determine” gendered performance; as we have seen, disabled men themselves negotiate gender identities in complex and creative ways – biology is categorically not destiny. However, comparative engagements between different forms of disabled masculinity offer the opportunity to more fully inspect the complex and multi-layered interactions between gender and disability, and to challenge the historical production of “the disabled” as a homogenous group.

Secondly, while the dilemma of disabled masculinity undoubtedly continues to exert substantial influence over the lives of many disabled men, the scholarly dominance of approaches that stress the structural tension between hegemonic gender identities and non-normative forms of corporeal functioning can engender its own limitations. The persistent iteration of the dilemma of disabled masculinity, I would suggest, needs to be supplemented by scholarship that engages with the interactional generativity of disability with regards to masculinity. The term “generativity” is morally neutral here; it signifies the possibility, in particular spatial contexts and historical moments, of disability contributing towards a sense of masculinity, rather than inevitably detracting from it.

This amounts to what Arthur Frank (2000, p.360) describes as a provisional reversal of normal priorities, strategically designed to render visible what dominant sociological conceptualisations of disabled masculinity may hide. Previous scholarship has recognised that disabled men may respond to the dilemma of disabled masculinity by pursuing ruggedly masculine personal styles (what Gerschick & Miller (2000, p.30-3) term strategies of reliance), however, this strategy has almost universally been framed in compensatory terms; masculinity has been diminished by disability, and must be reclaimed, whether through a commitment to new forms of physicality, sport and/or sexual virility (Huchinson & Kleiber, 2000; Sparkes & Smith, 2002; Good et al., 2008).

The potential “productivity” of disability within the field of masculinities has been insufficiently recognised within the context of sociology; however, both historical and anthropological researchers, attuned to the radical specificities of time, space and culture, have offered constructive insights towards redressing this limitation. Historical work examining the aftermath of military conflicts, for instance, has documented how particular visible, physical disabilities could act as corporeal evidence of fortitude, as “war wounds” that viscerally exhibited the heroic self-sacrifice of the returned serviceman. Physical disabilities, within these contexts, could establish gendered hierarchies both over those who had “shirked” their patriotic duty by avoiding combat (Gagen, 2007), as well as those who had acquired mental illnesses as a consequence of their wartime experiences, which were commonly interpreted as revealing personal weakness, rather than valiant heroism (Boyle, 2005). In a very different context, anthropologist James Staples (2011) recently conducted ethnographic research designed to capture the gendered meanings of disability within particular regions of contemporary India. While recognising the potentially “feminising” implications of disability within this context, he notes a number of contextually specific, countervailing potentialities. For instance, men with leprosy were commonly regarded as possessing a dangerously aggressive libido (Staples, 2011, p.551); “deformities”, alternatively, could be used to inspire a sense of fear by strategically deploying ideological connections between disability and monstrosity within the context of interpersonal confrontations (Staples,

2011, p.548). Staples (2011, p.557) subsequently stresses that “particular masculinities might be highlighted through a focus on disability”.

A further layer of complexity emerges through the consideration of what some have termed the “medicalisation of masculinity”, or the use of biomedical categories to legitimate the social regulation of particular constructions of “excessive maleness” (Shuttleworth et al., 2012, p. 187). Bioethicist Iina Singh (2002; 2005), for instance, has documented concerns about the increasingly widespread prescription of Ritalin to male school students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These interventions have been interpreted by some as reflecting the anxieties of teachers about (disproportionately male) students who do not conform to the ideals of middle-class pedagogical boyhood, characterised by self-discipline, composure, rationality, sedateness and compliance. The prescription of ADHD medication may be regarded (particularly by fathers) as involving the unwarranted suppression of boys’ “authentic” selves, characterised by a certain masculine rambunctiousness, defiance, activity and energy (Singh, 2005). Autism Spectrum Disorder, a condition also disproportionately diagnosed in males, has likewise been constructed as the consequence of what Simon Baron-Cohen (2004) has termed the “extreme male brain”. Autism, according to Baron-Cohen, is an extreme manifestation of male interpersonal difficulties with expressing emotions and verbal communication, and men’s preference for engaging with rationalised, routinised systems. These “medicalised masculinities” sit very uneasily with dominant narrations of the “dilemma of disabled masculinity”, reflecting less the feminising implications of a disability identity, than (what some regard as) the disabling consequences of masculine excess.

Thirdly, the implications of recent historical changes in the field of men and masculinity, and how these influence, inform, and are negotiated by disabled men, require further consideration. Previous scholarship in the area has not been unaware of, or insensitive to, the historical dynamism embedded within socially dominant conceptions of both masculinity and disability; indeed researchers have often provided insightful analyses of how the localised experiences of disabled men are implicated in broader networks of temporally shifting social matrixes (e.g. Wilson, 2004; Gagen, 2007; Staples, 2011). However, at present, disabled masculinities have not

been adequately situated within the context of scholarly debates relating to recent historical developments. Central elements in the construction of Western masculinities have arguably been substantially unsettled (although not eliminated) by historical changes over the past four decades. For instance, the decline of manufacturing industries, the increasingly fragmented and casualised labour market, the entry of women into the workforce, the diversification of household types, newfound emphases upon male beauty and appearance, changing social attitudes wrought by feminist, disability, GLBTQ and anti-racist movements, declining levels of homophobia, greater access to information, and globalisation, have all drastically altered the gendered social landscape that all men encounter (Connell, 1995; Bordo, 1999; Anderson, 2009; Kimmel, 2010). While each of these changes has been widely debated within the context of men and masculinity in general, their implications have not been sufficiently examined for disabled men in particular.

To take one example of a scholarly approach that could be productively applied and/or interrogated within considerations of disabled masculinities, a number of scholars working under the paradigm of “inclusive masculinity theory” have documented the historical emergence of a “softened” masculinity within a variety of youth cultures across the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia (Anderson, 2008, 2009; Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Adams, 2011; Barrett, 2013). These studies have examined the implications of declining levels of what Eric Anderson (2009) terms “cultural homophobia” amongst young men. This decline, it is contended, has engendered an increased willingness to engage in, and acceptance of, historically feminising endeavours due to the lessened stigma attached to the “fag” label (Pascoe, 2007), with researchers noting the prevalence of affectionate touching between young straight men (Anderson & McCormack, 2010), less rigid investments in (hetero)sexual identity (Anderson, 2008) and greater freedom to engage in non-hegemonic aesthetic presentations of the self (Adams, 2011). These studies are suggestive of an increasing investment in the production of “tolerant” social identities amongst particular groups of young men. However, due to this literature’s emphasis on the relationship between gender and sexuality, the question of whether the posited emergence of a “softer” masculinity, less

invested in the tropes of domination, aggression, and inequality, is also promoting the social inclusion of disabled men requires further exploration.

Other developments could have equally ambiguous consequences for disabled men. Two examples will be briefly noted here. Firstly, and as already noted above, while male beauty and fashion industries have enabled men to manipulate their appearances with lessened accompanying stigma (Bordo, 1999), they may further marginalise those with disabilities by consistently portraying nondisabled selves as aesthetic ideals, and by fostering a connection between beauty and consumption that is exclusive to all but the relatively wealthy (Shakespeare, 1999, 2000). Secondly, within the context of the labour market, the declining significance of “blue-collar” manual labour centred upon physical exertion, and the simultaneous growing complexity, affordability and ubiquity of information and communication technologies, have commonly been touted as panaceas to disablist social exclusion (Finkelstein, 1980, p.1-10). Yet, these technologies remain inaccessible or unusable for many people with disabilities, consequently reinforcing patterns of exclusion from masculinised public spheres of competition and achievement, rather than challenging them (Roulstone, 1998; Schartz et al., 2002). Examining how contemporary changes in the institutional structures, understandings and performances of masculinity are inflecting the lives of disabled men is a task requiring further consideration.

Conclusion

This article has identified and discussed the centrality of two themes within discussions of the relationship between disability and masculinity – namely, the social forces that establish a “status inconsistency” or “dilemma” in the relationship between disability and masculinity, and the complex and differentiated ways that disabled men negotiate this tension. The research that has been conducted within these frameworks has undoubtedly mapped important social terrain, and these logics will remain substantial and progressive bases for academic enquiry into the future. However, I have contended that accounts of the relationship between disability and masculinity could be rendered more complex by pursuing sustained

engagements with the generativity, comparative diversity, and historicity of disabled masculinities.

I would like to briefly conclude by asserting the continued importance of situating scholarly examinations of disabled masculinities within feminist frameworks. Commentators have noted that the sociology of men and masculinity, by recognising multiple, hierarchically related masculinities (Connell, 1995; Segal, 2007), can seemingly position men as the “true” victims of the existing gender order, and, subsequently, fall into the trap of advocating for the restorative reclamation of a legitimated manhood (Schacht & Ewing, 1998). This problematic tendency is perhaps most evident within the research conducted by Wilson et al. (2011, 2012, 2013), which has insightfully engaged with the gendered experiences of males with intellectual disabilities. These researchers have critiqued what they regard as the “misandrous” pathologisation of men with intellectual disabilities within the existing literature, which overwhelmingly emphasises tropes relating to sexual violence, aggression and criminality, rather than engaging with the particular problems or exclusions that these men experience (Wilson et al., 2010, p.2). In their empirical qualitative research, they suggest that men with intellectual disabilities often appreciate certain opportunities offered by male caring staff - such as homosocial camaraderie, physical forms of play, and a greater degree of openness with regards to masturbation – which female carers are understood as not being able/willing to offer (Wilson, et al., 2011, 2012, 2013). These studies, out of sympathy for the research participants and as an acknowledgement of their real investments in constructions of masculinity, tend to ultimately validate these gendered meanings and desires, rather than critically evaluating the historically situated and contingent norms that they reflect.

As Derek Nystrom (2002, p.41) puts it, “(it) is important [...] to keep reminding ourselves that we shouldn’t just do studies of masculinity, but specifically feminist studies of masculinity – that is, studies that take as their project the creation of a world of gender equality”. The marginalisation of particular groups of men does not, by necessity, generate any inclination towards feminism. Indeed, as Lynne Segal (2007, p.xxv) contends, it may be that “the very men who might seem to have the most to gain by distancing themselves from masculinity’s conformist competitive strivings for dominance are the very individuals whose daily indignities make the

unreliable promises of manhood the more seductively compulsive”. The objective, then, is to recognise the broad social dominance of men within the gender order, alongside the diversity that exists within this broad social dominance, and to examine how patterns of marginalisation within the “subfield of masculinity” generates both historical opportunities for the contestation of patriarchal social formations, as well as patterns of complicity with them (Coston & Kimmel, 2012).

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