Book Review

Masculinities, care and equality: identity and nurture in men's lives

by Niall Hanlon, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 272pp, US\$85 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-230-30021-7

Niall Hanlon declares a personal interest in the unequal and gendered division of care work dating from his youth and it is clear from his book that he is passionate about this important subject. Hanlon believes that care is central to human relationships and the division of care labour is a significant gender-equality issue. Furthermore, it is pivotal in terms of equality in economic, cultural, and political contexts. In *Masculinities, Care and Equality: Identity and Nurture in Men's Lives*, he explores the intersectionality of masculinities, care, and equality in an Irish context. In particular, he is interested in how care work is organized and supported and how the burdens and benefits of care are distributed. Through his exploration of these themes, he sets out to challenge the performance of hegemonic masculinity in the affective domain and to identify and explore nurturing ways of being male.

The text begins with an overview of the position of care in the study of masculinities and highlights the tensions in placing these themes together. Hanlon adopts a critical analysis of gendered power differentials and recognizes the complexities of avoiding analysis that is anti-feminist. The theories of Connell and Bourdieu inform the concept of gender. Connell's ideas on multiple masculinities, hegemonic masculinity, and globalized gender relations, combined with Bourdieu's theories of symbolic domination and the inscription of patriarchal power on bodies, illuminate the erasure of all that is feminine from masculinity. Alongside gender considerations, feminist and egalitarian care theorists inform Hanlon's conceptualization of care and how gendered care practices expose the complexity involved in defining and researching care. This lays solid foundations for the analysis of the care data generated through the empirical research with 31 Irish men situated within a neo-liberal context where care is archetypically defined as feminine, and where men are expected to be care-free.

Through a series of in-depth qualitative ‘care conversations’ with men from a range of backgrounds, and with a diversity of care responsibilities, Hanlon has gathered rich data about the often contradictory emotions men hold in relation to masculinity and care. The study undoubtedly has resonance in a wider global context where men are generally expected to have fewer caring responsibilities than women and where women do the majority of the world’s caring work.

The narratives illuminate the complexity and tenacity of most men’s uneasy and ambivalent relationship with care. In the data, women are perceived as natural carers, imbued with nurturing skills and attitudes and, as such, care is clearly constructed as the work of women by the research participants. It is perceived as highly skilled work, yet it is also feminized and, in the context of hegemonic masculinity, viewed as subordinate. The research participants distance themselves from this work, creating their own logic around their incapacity to do it, thus legitimizing their avoidance of intimate caring. They view care work as burdensome and challenging and an ideology of choice emerges in relation to doing work that reinforces unequal gendered power positions.

The data relating to breadwinning masculinities reveal the conflation of care with men’s paid work outside the home. Here, men care by earning, which in turn assumes that women will continue to do primary care work, support men to engage in the public sphere, and to be care-free; most of the men in the study aspired to having a care-free life.

Whilst these findings appear somewhat bleak, the seeds of hope are to be found in the data gathered from those men who were most actively involved in care work. Clearly, when men did care work, change happened; change in the gendered perceptions about care in gender relations and in understandings about gender equality. It is here, Hanlon suggests, that counter hegemonic nurturing masculinities emerged. The practice of caring had a profound impact on ‘carer’ men. It altered ideas about masculinity and it is in this data that the possibilities of unravelling hegemonic masculinity and the emergence of a caring and nurturing masculinity become most apparent. As such, the data suggest transformation at the personal level. However, the point is made that radical change in gendered care inequalities can only be sustained if supported at the wider structural level of the political, social, and economic arenas.

Hanlon concludes that a more gender-equal society would recognize that care and masculinity are not mutually exclusive. Such an environment would legitimize and value a caring masculine identity and men, therefore, have work to do in bringing about this transformation. However, Hanlon points out that within a neo-liberal context, where the needs of citizens as workers are prioritized over the needs of citizens as carers, it remains a challenge to realize significant shifts in gender equality relating to care work.

Reading this book, I am reminded of the tenaciousness of patriarchal hegemonic masculinity and its damaging impact on the lives of men and women.

Given a choice, most of those interviewed would choose a care-free life. Those who choose to undertake care work and heroically challenge hegemonic masculinity still did so from their privileged male position. Whilst not undervaluing their agency, they are doing work that women have done routinely, often without choice, and as a socially constructed moral imperative for many years.

Hanlon's study keeps to the fore the important debate about the gendered division of care work and the relationship of men to care. Where the global economic crisis has meant that more men are moving into full-time care roles, it helps to illuminate current themes relating to gender and transformation. The book makes a significant, timely contribution to the field of gender and equality studies and will be valuable reading for researchers, scholars, students, and wider audiences interested in issues of gender, masculinities, care work, and equality.

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