

# Review

***New Perspectives on Prison Masculinities* by Matthew Maycock and Kate Hunt (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 343 pages, (ISBN 978-3-319-65653-3)**

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## Introduction

Over 90 per cent of the world's prisoners are men (Warmlesley 2016). While the over-representation of men in prison has long been known, their gender has typically been 'backgrounded'. Given the relational character of gender and the homosocial and intensely hierarchical nature of the prison, the study of prison gender identities holds promise in making unique theoretical and empirical contributions to gender studies, criminology and feminist projects.

*New Perspectives on Prison Masculinities* is significant as it has been 17 years since a publication — the influential *Prison Masculinities* edited by Sabo, Kupers and London (2001) — has brought together such a varied collection of works that examine the gendered experience of men prisoners. It thus provides an opportunity to reflect on how this topic is currently approached empirically and conceptually.

## Overview of the book

The book is an edited collection of 13 chapters that draws mostly from qualitative ethnographic data. Collectively, the book serves up examinations of a range of engaging issues: fake tanning creams that enact health and connection to pre-prison lives (Maycock); medieval tropes that reveal how prison experience aligns with masculine projects in wider society (Earle); 'street codes' and spiritual conversion that help elucidate a black masculinities and desistance framework (Glyn); and the contradiction inherent to a parenting program which privileges personal responsibility while overlooking a prison's denial of prisoner agency (Curtis). Notwithstanding that the works are mostly confined to viewpoints from the United Kingdom and heterosexual cisgender men, through engagement of issues such as 'race', labour, feminism, embodiment, and neoliberalism, the book illustrates the varied and empirically rich developments made since *Prison Masculinities* was published.

## Theoretical approaches to understanding prison masculinities

Introducing the book, Maycock positions the volume within recent theoretical developments in masculinity studies, namely Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory. In doing so,

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the book is differentiated from *Prison Masculinities* (Sabo et al. 2001), which Maycock states focused on the 'ultramasculine' and came to be readily interpreted through Raewyn Connell's influential concept, hegemonic masculinity (1987, 1995, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity has been broadly understood as a pattern of practice relationally informed by normative male behavioural ideals in a particular culture at a particular period in time. This ideal exalts a masculinity that is dependent on the complicity and subordination of women and of other men who are seen to inhabit marginalised masculinities (for example, gay, queer and 'effete' men) (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Connell 1995; de Boise 2014). Hegemonic masculinity has attracted a range of criticisms including that it is transhistorical and tends to be referred to as a fixed trait or type of negative masculinity (Martin 1998; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, p. 839) and thus, it is claimed, has become unable to account for the diverse, nuanced and more 'positive' contemporary masculinities documented in the last decade or two (Beasley 2008; Anderson & McCormack 2016). In response, Anderson (2009) advised it was time 'other' men's experiences were investigated and theorised. These criticisms and Anderson's inclusive masculinity concept (Anderson 2009; Anderson & McCormack 2016) centrally inform Maycock's rationale and framing of the book. While this sets up a persuading premise for the book, engagement with the criticisms directed at inclusive masculinity among those who both reference and draw from this work would strengthen the book. The prison provides a ripe context to facilitate this.

Inclusive masculinity theory has been criticised for its central premise that homophobia and 'homo-hysteria' (the fear of being socially perceived as 'gay': Anderson & McCormack 2016) is declining in some cultures which thus allows men to express more diverse and inclusive masculinities that are not dependent on their anxieties surrounding gay and bisexual men (Anderson 2009; Anderson & McCormack 2016; Martino 2011). Although homophobia may have decreased in specific forms in certain cultures and locales, to claim it has decreased in the prison culture and systems is difficult, as prison-based research attests (Kupers 2010; Lara 2010; Simpson et al. 2014). Homophobic talk and attitudes were evident in several studies in this book. Maycock, in discussing his findings (Chapter 4), states 'that it may be more appropriate to recognise not a decline, but rather a specific manifestation of homo-hysteria in prison contexts' (p. 84). Discussion on how this problematises Maycock's rapport with inclusive masculinities and its application to a prison context would have been beneficial.

Di Viggiana (Chapter 5) examines how both *group* relations among and between prisoners and prison staff and larger *institutional* practices of the prison and wider society orientate prisoners and staff towards hegemonic organising principles that reflect a heterosexist masculine ideology. Such work illustrates how prison masculinities problematise inclusive masculinities' view of hegemony. While proponents of Anderson's theory claim that inclusive masculinities reflect and facilitate the end of hegemony, others claim they may at best disrupt hegemony at a group level only (what Demetriou 2001 refers to as 'internal hegemony') and leaves institutional practices ('external hegemony': Demetriou 2001) untouched. As such, the broader structural inequalities and hidden prejudices that continue to provide institutional privileges to some groups of men (de Boise 2014, p. 325), and maintain social disadvantage and pathways to incarceration for others, remain intact. Di Viggiana's contribution shows that if it is difficult to claim a declining internal hegemony (homophobia) in prison, it is even harder to claim a decline in external hegemony (institutional practices of prison and beyond).

Crewe and Morey (Chapter 2) illustrate complex identity work in relation to attitudes to work that for many disrupt the stereotype of the 'hardened' male prisoner. This disruption is interpreted cursorily through reference to how such prison masculinities have moved away from the hypermasculine characterisation 'described in a previous era' (p. 39). Market-led social change, mediated through a desire by some disadvantaged men to conspicuously

consume status markers (for example, branded clothes, body products and leisure activities), and inclusive masculinity theory are discussed earlier in the chapter to evoke sense of this progressive shift. Inclusive masculinity theory has come under fire for its lack of engagement and complicity in reproducing postfeminist logics that account for, yet erase, feminist histories and sexual politics through an optimistic and 'uncomplicated narrative' of inevitable 'progressive social change' (O'Neill 2014, p. 111). While moving away from hypermasculinity is something to be hopeful about, a lack of engagement in the ways social histories may have contributed to such a shift is likely to foster understandings and perspectives of masculinities, prison-based or not, that are partial.

## Conclusion

This is a thought-provoking, empirically rich book that makes an important contribution towards describing and bringing attention to the impacts and dilemmas of incarcerated men and the enactment of prisoners' masculinities. Like prisoner masculinity studies in recent years, the book is perhaps more nuanced at describing prison masculinities than theorising them, and as such is less critically engaged with wider theoretical debates in masculinity and gender studies. Although the book to a degree is coupled to recent theoretical developments in masculinity studies, its uncritical engagement with the idea of inclusive masculinity risks diminishing its application to a catchall phrase to reference various talk and behaviours that do not align with the male prisoner stereotype of the toxic ultramasculine man (de Boise 2014). Notwithstanding, many of the contributors make interesting use of diverse literatures, disciplines and theories, ensuring the book is an important resource for scholars and those interested in the lives and wellbeing of prisoners.

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