
Any man who reads *Taking Care of Men* is likely to feel berated. And there are many who would argue that this is quite right, too. Anthony McMahon has presented considerable and diverse evidence to suggest that when it comes to domestic duties, most men are laggards.

McMahon wrote the book with the hope of adding something elemental yet apparently overlooked in the analysis of men and social change. That is, “a serious recognition of the central role men’s material interests play in their motivation to defend the gendered status quo.”

It is interesting in itself that this possibility has apparently been so overlooked by sociology that in the dying days of the twentieth century it alone can motivate a whole new book. Another social scientist – an economist, say – might regard it as a perfectly rational state of affairs. After all, to an economist any rational individual is concerned with maximising his or her utility from a given bundle of resources. Unequal (and uncomfortable) it might be, but economically speaking nothing is remarkable in a husband declining to do the ironing unless the utility he gained from a sense of equality exceeded the utility he gained from a week’s worth of shirts freshly pressed by someone else.

By taking the reader through a genuinely depressing journey of unmade beds, unwashed children and uncooked meals (or, more likely, a thoroughly exhausted wife attempting to do it all), McMahon presents a possible new way of thinking about men. That is, the conclusion that “men constitute a social, not a biological category, one based upon the appropriation of love.” In other words, a man is not a man without commandeering his wife’s affections. This is an ugly picture but one that McMahon has based on a wide range of popular and academic literature. Indeed, the unusual breadth of source material analysed is one of the strengths of the book.

It is worth noting up front that the analysis in *Taking Care of Men* focuses on men within marriage – that is, husbands. This is clearly stated, and rather than being an indication of heterosexism, the author contends that it stems from his desire to critique the privilege accorded to heterosexual marriage and the rhetoric that supports it. However, it could be argued that McMahon’s main conclusion falls victim to exactly that.

From his wealth of source material, McMahon shows that there is but one factor that determines whether a woman will bear more than her fair share of the domestic burden. It is not class, nor race, nor level of income or education. Rather, it is marriage: a co-habiting man does not increase a woman’s domestic workload as does a husband.

In interpreting this evidence, it should be remembered that there are many men who are not husbands. Over forty percent of the adult population is not
married and, while this was once regarded as a transitory space either to or from marriage, current trends show an increase in the never marrieds. So while all husbands are men, the converse does not always hold.

The interchange of the words “men” and “husbands,” and the consequent equation of the two concepts, reflects a somewhat heterosexist assumption that in itself privileges marriage as the state that creates a true man. This is reinforced by the author’s perspective on gay men. While gay men are explicitly excluded from the analysis, McMahon writes that “men fear even being in the same room as a homosexual man.” In other words, a homosexual is not even considered part of the group “men”.

So while the literature cited in Taking Care of Men shows that it is being a husband, rather than being a man, that determines one’s domestic slovenliness, McMahon asks the reader to accept that it is men (rather than husbands) who exploit women’s (rather than wives’) labour. It is this heterosexist perspective that allows the subsequent conclusion that it is men (rather than husbands) who “constitute a social, not a biological category, one based upon the appropriation of love”.

In interchanging the concepts “men” and “husbands,” the analysis also appears less able to follow through with its critique of heterosexual marriage, despite the introductory promise of undermining “the romantic ideology of modern sharing marriage” that appears in the introduction.

There is a second major theme of the book: the way in which popular sentiment can overwhelm and even contradict evidence. McMahon shows that while the weight of evidence suggests that married men are domestic dinosaurs, popular and even academic discourse is more than willing to see a change. Many studies are cited where dismal accounts of husbands’ contributions are almost excused on the grounds that change appears to be on its way. In some ways, this has become self-perpetuating: the more that husbands and fathers are researched, the more this is seen as representing a change in their approach to domestic duties.

Interestingly, this optimistic take on life has not been confined to male or “backlash” commentators. Many women with well-established feminist credentials are cited as adding “sweeteners” alluding to change in reports that are otherwise quite critical of the part played by husbands. The allure of the “new man” or “new father” is presented as almost intoxicating.

This is a valuable lesson to everyone involved in conducting or interpreting research. McMahon has clearly demonstrated the importance of going back to the evidence and making one’s own interpretation, rather than relying on third hand accounts. At risk is the perpetuation of truisms that the research itself may have sought to dismiss.

It is possible that this section of the book contains a missed opportunity. The motivations behind feminist women offering such apparently over-optimistic accounts of men’s change would seem ripe for dissection. Surely they do not share the desire of more conservative elements to moderate what
could potentially be seen as a further attack on marriage? Nor would they feel the defensiveness that could be understood (without being necessarily excused) coming from a man. Then again, perhaps it is the job of another writer to sharpen the focus of the beam McMahon has quite rightly shone on this issue.

Despite the disappointingly heterosexist equation of husbands and men, Taking Care of Men offers a contemporary and lively perspective on the places occupied by each partner in marriage. This is a timely call to order for all those inclined to take the pollyanna perspective on gender relations. It will be interesting to see how men in particular respond to the challenges raised by this book.

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This book analyses the relationship between households and the labour market in a county in Vermont, USA. It uses detailed interviews with local people, as well as other survey techniques, to develop a picture of the myriad of ways in which working-class families earn a living, but it also looks inside households and considers the changing relationships between women and men in the midst of economic change. The analysis is presented in an anonymous way: “Coolidge county” and the various places and businesses are pseudonyms for real places. The argument draws an important distinction between “good” and “bad” job households. “Good” jobs are regular, full-time wage work that offers benefits such as annual leave, sick and medical insurance. “Bad” jobs are casual, low-paid, short-term work with little or no job security and few benefits. One of the key contributions of this work is to chart the overarching significance of this divide in the labour market across a range of areas: standards of living, family formation, gender relations, and relationship to the labour market.

There is a refreshing sense of detailed engagement with the survival strategies of households, which goes beyond the commonplace reliance on aggregate figures by policy makers and economists. One of the strengths of this book lies in the combination of statistical and oral sources. The hundred or so respondents have a clear presence in the book; they tell their stories and relate their struggles, and this gives life to the statistics and tables. The authors begin their analysis with an outline of the developments of the US economy from the 1960s, when the “glue that held the postwar economy began to dissolve” (13).