

The (im)possibility of male touch.

Jesus, trauma and the deconstruction of masculinity.

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Abstract

The 'noli me tangere'-motif is at first sight a powerful expression of hegemonic masculinity. Traditionally, masculinity is identified with acting and not with being acted upon, touching and not with being touched. In that interpretation, the male touch is potentially dangerous because the encounter between bodies takes the form of unidirectional rather than mutual touch and turns into violence rather than receptivity. Certainly, contemporary western masculinities tend to be more open to touch and tenderness, but the paradigm of domination has not been abandoned completely. This is especially relevant for males who have been traumatized. The violation they have experienced is almost by definition also a violation of the body, and one of the more frequent responses is to withdraw from touch and aim at a restoration of the old paradigm of masculinity. Jesus' words 'noli me tangere' may therefore at first sight be interpreted as a typical masculine post-traumatic response to touch.

There is, however, another reading, which takes its starting point in the fact that Jesus portrayed a masculinity quite unlike the hegemonic masculinity described above. Not only did he relate with men and women in much more receptive and equal ways, he accepted a life of suffering and affliction that deconstructs masculinity. This receptive masculinity can be connected to the story in which he asked Thomas to touch his wounds. Rather than hide from the openings in his body, he invited the touch. The dialectic relationship between these two texts will be explored as a reflection on the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity.

Introduction

An exploration of the notion of touch would not be complete without attention for its gendered meanings. Because our skin is at the same time the demarcation of the self from others and the possibility of contact with others, touch is the

exact point where bodily interaction makes the boundaries of persons meet, merge, and subside. This encounter of embodied persons is highly gendered as we can see for example in research on male nurses (Evans 2002). The recent influx of men in the nursing professions raises complex gender issues. On the one hand, their caring touch is easily interpreted sexually and read stereotypically as male sexual transgression. On the other hand, their being nurses often brings them under suspicion of being gay. These compounded readings of male nursing result in highly stigmatized and vulnerable roles. They have to exert great caution in negotiating these ambivalent suspicions and yet offer adequate care.

Touch and masculinity have a complicated relation. Boys receive less touching than do girls. Typically parents touch them less frequently, touch a smaller portion of their bodies, and refrain from touching at a much earlier age than they do with their daughters (SOURCE LOST). Fathers seem to offer even less touch to their sons, especially during preadolescence and beyond; compared to mothers their touch is less nurturing and more restricted to moments of rough play (Salt 1991). Consequently, males develop more touch-avoidance, especially toward other males (Martin & Anderson 1993). The 'noli me tangere'-motif then is at first sight a powerful expression of this hegemonic masculinity. Or at least: of western hegemonic masculinity, because many of these patterns seem to be less evident in non-western cultures. Even within the western world, contemporary masculinities tend to be more open to touch and tenderness than before, which at the very least means that my explorations should not be generalized.

In this paper, I explore this connection of touch and masculinity with two focal points: trauma and religion. I will start to discuss in some more depth the gendered messages of touch. Then I discuss how touch avoidance is exacerbated in posttraumatic responses, which can be seen as a restoration of hegemonic masculinity. Finally, I will describe posttraumatic responses that deconstruct masculinity. In both cases I will draw on religious narratives that may fuel these responses, without implying that modern categories apply to age-old stories. I am not engaging in exegesis here, but I use the narratives to highlight contemporary cultural and psychological issues.

Touch and masculinity

Why is touch so complicated for modern western men? A part of the answer to this question is probably found in the patterns of touch they received. The most fundamental gender messages are not articulated, but enacted. We learn what it is to be a man or a woman through the embodied practices we encounter. Masculinity and femininity then are primarily patterns of interpreting identity and social interaction, messages conveyed upon us because of our male or female body. These 'messages men and women hear' (Harris 1995) are different between cultures and even between families, but they usually entail specific forms of stereotyping.

Traditionally, masculinity is identified with acting and not with being acted upon, with touching and not with being touched. To be a man is to initiate, not to receive. Or even more, gazing at the male body usually is acceptable only in admiration for this men's achievements in for example sports, whereas the female body can be gazed at in lust, which is another form of objectification. It is only recently that passive male bodies figure in advertisements in postures that leave them vulnerable and seem to invite touch (Bordo 1999).

In this traditional interpretation, male touch is very complicated. As research on male nurses shows, active touching is easily equated with sexual predatory behavior, but it may also be read as violent aggression. That is, if touch is to be masculine, it has to be transgressive. Nurturing touch and receiving touch are less easily reconciled with traditional notions of masculinity, which may lead to labeling as effeminate or gay, thus non-masculine.

Posttraumatic hypermasculinity

These complicated meanings of being touched become even more pertinent for males who have been traumatized. The violation they have experienced is almost by definition also a violation of the body, which functions as a fundamental threat to core notions of masculinity. The objectified body is rendered passive and vulnerable, used as a means to dehumanize and emasculate the person. At the same time, the touch or even penetration of the body – either sexually or in physical harm – undermines the self-evident boundary between the self and the other. The double meaning of objectified powerlessness and forced loss of boundaries makes the traumatic experience the ultimate denial of masculinity.

One of the more frequent responses to traumatization in males then is to aim at a restoration of the old paradigms of masculinity or even hypermasculinity. This is sometimes labeled as acting out, because traumatized males may engage in diverse kinds of destructive behavior like aggression, substance abuse or overachieving. Obviously there are many individuals offering a different example, but by and large traumatized men tend to be more acting out whereas traumatized women tend to develop depression more often (Solomon, et al. 2005, Stewart & Harmon 2004). Even though there are certainly more factors involved, one of the reasons for this difference lies precisely in the different gender messages men and women encounter. For men, the threat to masculinity inherent to the traumatic experience compels them to develop compensatory behavior, which includes touch avoidance and emotional distancing.

Jesus' words 'noli me tangere' may therefore at first sight be interpreted as a typical masculine post-traumatic response to transgressive touch. Traumatized men may parallel their own experiences with the humiliation and emasculation of Jesus. The crucifixion narratives depict torture, mocking, and various forms of violence that all result in openings in the skin: flogging on his back, nails

through his hands and feet, a spear in his side. For many men, the 'do not touch me' would be a natural response to these woundings of the body and an effort to regain a sense of one's self and masculinity.

Posttraumatic receptive masculinity

There is, however, another reading, which takes its starting point in the fact that Jesus portrayed a masculinity that is quite unlike the hegemonic masculinity of our contemporary western world. His actions and interactions do not generally seem to indicate a form of hypermasculinity or touch avoidance. He related to both men and women in much more receptive and equal ways than was probably common in his days and, when transposed to our times, could probably merit to be called profeminist.

Moreover, the gospel narratives portray Jesus as accepting a life of suffering and affliction that effectively deconstructs masculinity. He seems unwilling to protect his life, body, and masculine self-esteem and instead allows those around him to hurt and humiliate him. One could argue that his sense of vocation and identity were so strong that he could allow these transgressions. His behavior then would indicate a strong type of masculinity, comparable to other masters of non-violent resistance like Mandela and Gandhi.

Reflecting on touch and masculinity however, I want to stress the fact that this type of masculinity is first of all a receptive one. It can be connected to another post-resurrection story in which Jesus asks Thomas to touch his wounds and enter his body. Rather than hide from the openings in his body, he invited the touch in order to reestablish Thomas' faith in him and thus restore their relationship. This type of receptive masculinity can be interpreted in light of the emerging research of posttraumatic growth, which highlights positive changes in perception, openness to change, and positive response to others. One need not respond to traumatic blows to masculinity with fierce restoration; it is also possible to develop a more receptive masculine identity.

James Nelson (1992) has described two types of masculine spirituality, both offering a positive view of body and sexuality that is grounded in theological notions of incarnation and resurrection. The first, often associated with traditional masculinity, can be termed 'phallic'. It is symbolized by the erect male organ and can carry meanings of power, dominance, and penetration. Nelson notes, however, that the male organ is erect only from time to time, separated by much longer periods of flaccidity. This symbolizes the second type of masculine spirituality that Nelson calls 'penile'. Penile masculinity is like the theological Via Negativa characterized by receptivity rather than penetration, creating space for others rather than dominating them. In penile masculinity, touch is welcomed, while it is highly ambivalent in phallic masculinity.

Touch and the deconstruction of masculinity

These two post-resurrection stories about Jesus and touch can symbolize two different responses to traumatic suffering. One calls to mind the touch avoidant response that aims at restoring hegemonic phallic masculinity, the other envisions a new type of receptive or penile masculinity. The first is a defensive response to unwanted touch, the second an open attitude toward future touch.

The choice between these two is a central theme in pastoral care of traumatized men. The response of withdrawal, touch avoidance, and restoration of masculinity seems to come natural to many, but there is always a price to pay. In this response, it comes at the price of foreclosing intimacy and connectedness. The defensive response buys into traditional notions of masculinity that were more or less destructive from the beginning. Instead of critiquing these notions, they are bolstered as if they are part of the solution. The response of receptive masculinity seems counterintuitive for many, because it allows the destruction of this masculinity that is threatened. This seems like accepting the message that one does not live up to the criteria for masculinity, that one is not a real man. The paradoxical outcome, however, is that this creates the space for a new way of living.

It is not too strong to call this posttraumatic spiritual transformation. The harmful and painful touch that figures in the wounds or scars inflicted on the body can be transformed into stigmata that carry spiritual significance. This spiritual transformation demands a careful balancing of the two dialectical positions: “do not touch me” and “put your fingers here”. If one only stresses the touch avoidant response to trauma, traditional masculinity is preserved and the wounds remain alien to the self. If one only stresses the receptive response to trauma, the masculine self is given up and the suffering is accepted uncritically. Spiritual transformation of scars into stigmata comes from the audacious effort to refuse both extremes (Ganzevoort 2007). It is a fragile balance, but it results in a deconstruction and not just destruction of masculinity. For pastoral care this means that we have to resist the temptation to succumb to and restore hegemonic notions of masculinity, but also the escape of explaining away the menace to masculinity. Spiritual transformation can be supported by keeping open the area between these two positions.

Conclusion

I am well aware that my contribution is somewhat essayistic. I cannot offer here a well rounded theory nor neatly elaborated empirical analysis. My main contribution might be a form of questioning the often unchallenged idea that touch is always beneficial. For men and for traumatized persons, and thus especially for traumatized men, touch is a very complex issue. Spiritual transformation post trauma involves a deconstruction of the implicit notions of masculinity. I would assume that something similar yet very different is the case for female victims of traumatization and the notions of femininity. “Touch

me” and “do not touch me” are in my view the markers of two responses to trauma that need to be kept in balance. We will need to move further in exploring the interferences of gender, trauma, and religion, exemplified in the notion of touch.

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