It is 11th January 2016 and I have just heard that David Bowie has died. It is difficult to be aware of his music and his image without thinking about something that could be called masculinity. Indeed the very fact that he presented himself and was presented in ways that contradicted, parodied and blurred more usual ways of being a man emphasised that something was going on here around masculinity. The differences made the normalities more obvious, not only in his appearance and his art, but also in his professed sexualities – as when he pronounced himself gay in 1971, whilst being married, with a child, in the late 70s denying he had been gay or coming out as a closet heterosexual in 1993. He also reportedly left nearly $200 million.

This is just one example of how masculinity or masculinities might figure for social analysis. There are so many possibilities: some mundane like watching football on TV; some fashionable like hipsters’ beards; others old-fashioned like my father’s pipe smoking. These may all seen as ‘cultural’, but how about men’s more collective activities, such as long-term grooming of girls, boys and young adults by sex rings or the European Central Bank or simply online misogyny? These can be seen as collective patterns of masculinity. Masculinity persists well beyond individual or small group performances.

Over the last 40 years there has been growing explicitly gendered recognition of and concern with men and masculinities, in everyday conversations, politics, policy, and the social sciences.
When I became involved in anti-sexist activism and research around men and masculinities in the late 1970s, it was all thought very weird. And when doing my PhD in the early 1980s a senior colleague remarked: “But how can you study men? There aren’t enough books on the subject.” But actually, feminist sociologists have been researching men and masculinity/ies for a long time. Furthermore, academia, libraries, and canons are full of books by men, on men, for men – and about masculinity, manhood, manliness! In that sense studying men and masculinity, typically implicitly, is not new, not anything special, not necessarily transformative.

What has happened in recent years is the establishment of explicit discourses around masculinities. Now one can at least ask most men such obvious questions as “What’s it like being a man?”, and get some kind of “sensible” answer that was not so easy earlier, and might even have been positively dangerous in some situations, say, Friday night in the pub. There is, at least, for many men, some degree of reflexivity, perhaps irony, in being a man now, even if change in structural gender power relations is uneven. Some of this coincides with media interest, such as Grayson Perry’s recent “All Man” on UK Channel 4 or the BBC’s “Reggie Yates’ Extreme UK: Men at War”.

But there is a much wider context to all this: in the social, political, economic and cultural changes affecting gender and sexual relations. While men still dominate politics, economy, religion, sport, militarism and the state, there are now many uncertainties about what men and masculinities might be or become, ranging from loss of jobs for life to women’s entry into the professions to possible negotiations on sexual practice, for some at least. Similarly, there has been a major expansion of research on men and masculinities, some of it policy-driven, such as the EU 2013 Study on the Role of Men in Gender Equality. This addressed many policy concerns, such as those around family and fatherhood, crime and violence, boys and education, men’s health. In each case, “masculinity” may be seen as the culprit. The study also pointed to the large, fundamental variations in men’s share of unpaid care and housework across Europe (from 15% in Greece to 40% in Denmark, Finland and Sweden), and the need for policy focus on caring masculinities.

Understandings of men and masculinity have also changed. In truth, the concept of masculinity is tricky. In the 1960s and 1970s masculinity was understood as an internalised role, identity or psychological disposition, reflecting a particular, often US or Western, cluster of cultural values. In masculinity-femininity (m-f) scales traits were scored as ‘masculine’, such as ‘aggressive’, ‘ambitious’, ‘analytical’, compared with others scored as ‘feminine’, such as ‘affectionate’, ‘cheerful’, ‘childlike’. Such notions were critiqued in the 1970s as: confusing ideals and practices, ignoring which gender is assessing which, lacking power analysis, and ethnocentrism.

About the same time as sex role theory and m-f scales were being critiqued, some feminist critics were criticising the concept of patriarchy as too monolithic, and downplaying of women’s resistance and agency. These twin critiques, around masculinity/male sex roles and patriarchy, laid the foundations for new perspectives on men and masculinities. Masculinities were being interrogated in the plural, as in hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, and marginalized masculinities. Framed in relation to patriarchy, Raewyn Connell’s earliest outline of this approach, in 1979, was based in the sociology of men’s and boys’ bodies. (2) Much research,
since this time, has emphasized multiple, complex, intersectional masculinities and the connections of masculinities and other social divisions and statuses such as, class, migrant status, ethnicity, and racialization, for example, in educational achievement.

In addition, there is now a rather large literature that critiques and complicates the concepts of masculinity, masculinities, and hegemonic masculinity, from historical, materialist, postcolonial, queer or poststructuralist approaches. There is growing scholarship on separations of masculinity/ies from males and men. In raising these complications, I am not dismissing masculinities; far from it; but, if you mean to refer to men’s practices or men’s identity, it’s best to say so, not “hide behind” the gloss of ‘masculinities’. Indeed, there are some risks in using masculinities and hegemonic masculinity as primary ways to explain men’s power. You can change masculinities, but so what? … men’s dominant power can remain. Instead, it is more useful to go back from masculinity to men, to “name men as men”. (3) In short, the social category of “men” is more hegemonic than particular masculinities, hegemonic or not.

Feminist problematizing of the category of woman/women also implies problematizing the category of man/men. Man/men is a social category, as is woman/women. Just as postcolonial theory deconstructs and de-naturalises the white subject, so men and the male subject can be de-naturalised. In focusing primarily or only on masculinities, and in de-naturalising masculinities, there can be a danger of re-naturalising men. Naming men as men needs to be accompanied by deconstructing and problematizing “men” as a social category of power. Such a (pro)feminist materialist-discursive sociology of “men”, suitably de-naturalised (4).

Such a perspective raises many intriguing questions, and especially so when placed in a broad global context. More global approaches to research on men, and masculinities, are now developing fast. Two recent examples are the IMAGES Survey of men’s gender equal or unequal attitudes and practices in low and middle income countries; and Øystein Gullvåg Holter’s macro-level studies on how greater gender equality may be in men’s interests, through improved health and less violence, and, perhaps counter-intuitively, even more than women’s. Similarly, greater global awareness operates in activism and policy interventions with boys and men, for example, through the work of the umbrella activist organisation MenEngage, with over 700, mainly group and network members, many of whom are in Africa and other parts of the global South; their 2014 Global Symposium of over 1,200 people from 94 countries, produced the inspiring ‘Delhi Declaration and Call to Action’, something that would have been hard to have imagined 40 years ago.

Further sociological studies that engage in critical analysis are urgently needed on how men and masculinities figure in many global, transnational arenas: militarism; the central banks and global finance industry; multinational corporations; the environment, travel and transport; global sex trade; world religions; the bio-industries. Indeed the more we move towards global and transnational perspectives, the more the focus seems to be on flesh-and-blood men rather than masculinity. Finally, if you want to become famous, write a really good critical book on men and masculinities in the global finance industry – after all the size of that sector, run mostly by men, far exceeds, perhaps twelve-fold, the world’s GDP!
Notes:

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