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Men and their Emotions

...where no one has felt before

‘Your desire to explore space is inefficient, your need for familial connections is a weakness.’ This is how Seven of Nine, one of Star Trek: Voyager’s main characters, a former human assimilated by the Borg (some dangerous and violent aliens), described humanity. It is a species driven by emotions. Indeed, one of Star Trek’s topoi is the juxtaposition of the emotional humans with the unemotional non-humans. First, there was Mr Spock, the cool and rational Vulcan, the butt of the volatile Captain Kirk’s jokes in the original series. Then, in The Next Generation, came Lieutenant Commander Data, an android in pursuit of humanity, a quest for (amongst others) the chance to feel human emotions, understand jokes, and to love Lal, his android ‘daughter’. Seven of Nine, a Borg, on the other hand, had to be pushed into humanity, especially since it implied giving up her orderly rationality and espousing the uncontrollability of emotions. Finally, another Vulcan, Subcommander T’Pol in the latest series, Enterprise, is also constructed as providing the cool and rational alternative to her captain’s more cavalier attitude.

One of the significant traits of what it means to be human is to be able to feel emotions. It is so human that in one of the feature films based on the television series (Generations), the Data character, who had by then been equipped with an ‘emotion chip’, cannot handle himself in a dangerous situation; the emotion is much too much for him to control. Bewildered by the experience, Data is even more in admiration of his human ideals, those who are able to feel emotions and not be overwhelmed by them.

The moment we leave the friendly and not so friendly aliens, or the more or less likely future, and come back from where no one had gone
before, however, we find that the issue of human emotionality is not so simple and straightforward as we might have imagined watching *Star Trek*. This is because, as much as the human race comprises men and women, it is only one of the two groups that is assumed either to have the ability to feel emotions, or to be able or want to express them in some way. The cultural models of men and masculinity are more often than not associated with the lack of emotionality. Apparently, a man is tough, does not share his pain, does not grieve and avoids warm feelings (see Jansz, 2000).

This book is about how men talk about their emotions. I want to demonstrate that men not only talk about their emotional experiences, but also relate them to men in general and masculinity. In this sense, this book is polemical. I intend to challenge not only these prevalent cultural models and stereotypes but, more importantly, quite a lot of academic constructs which describe masculinity as in one way or another emotionally impotent.

I shall develop two lines of argument throughout the book. First, I am interested in the relationship of emotions and emotionality with such constructs as masculinity, men, and gender identity. In contrast to quite a lot of academic writing on masculinity (see below), I am not really interested in constructing yet another model of masculinity, a theoretical construct whose rationale would basically be grounded in my own perception of reality, and underpinned by similar theoretical constructs. This book is data-driven because I am interested in real stories told by real men, with their own relevancies and constructions. Speaking about men, masculinity and masculine identities (and I shall problematise these concepts), I am predominantly concerned with their ‘lived’ versions. I would like to find out how men themselves construct their emotions in different contexts in relation to their identities. Second, I am also interested in the strategies men employ when they talk about their emotions. I shall explore these strategies, however, not only as some more or less abstract ways of speaking, but in terms of how they fulfil social functions. The way people speak about their emotions, as Bamberg (1997a, b) observed, is tied to the local context of interaction in which what is said furthers speakers’ communicative goals.

It is important to note that in contrast to most linguistic research on emotions in language, I am not interested in how people express emotion in discourse (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1989; de Beaugrande, 1992; Caffi and Janney, 1994; Bloch, 1996; see also Gallois, 1993; Planalp, 1999). There are relatively few studies of discourse strategies employed by people accounting for, explaining, or simply telling stories about