

Jekyll and Hyde¹: Men's Constructions of Feminism and Feminists²

Abstract

Research and commentary on men's responses to feminism has demonstrated the range of ways in which men have mobilised both against and for feminist principles. This paper argues that further analyses of men's responses require a sophisticated theory of discourse acknowledging the fragmented and contradictory nature of representation. A corpus of men's talk on feminism and feminists was studied to identify the pervasive patterns in men's accounting and regularities in rhetorical organisation. Material from two samples of men was included: a sample of white middle-class 17-18 year old school students and a sample of 60 interviews with a more diverse sample of older men aged 20 to 64. Two interpretative repertoires of feminism and feminists were identified. These set up a 'Jekyll and Hyde' binary and positioned feminism along with feminists very differently as reasonable versus extreme and monstrous. Both repertoires tended to be deployed together and the paper explores the ideological and interactional consequences of typical deployments along with the identity work accomplished by the men as they positioned themselves in relation to these.

Keywords: masculinity, discourse, feminism, identity, interpretative repertoires

Whilst feminism is first and foremost a social movement for women, it has obvious implications for the lives of men. A central tenet of feminism holds that gender relations are power relations, which implies that any improvement in the position of women must, in a sense, be 'off-set' by a reduction of the power and influence wielded by men (Segal, 1990). Heath (1987) has argued that feminism "makes things unsafe for men, unsettles assumed positions [and] undoes given identities" (pg. 6 - see also Hearn, 1999). It is little wonder, therefore, that many men have felt it necessary to engage with feminism and feminist arguments especially when feminism has unsettled what is taken for granted as 'normal practice' in the kitchen and the bedroom. It is not something that can be ignored.

One of the main ways in which men have responded in the public arena is by launching a counter-offensive (Faludi, 1992; Ford, 1985). Evidence for this kind of anti-feminist backlash can be found in the writings of academics such as Warren Farrell (1994) and Neil Lyndon (1992) who have both attempted to argue that patriarchy is nothing but a feminist myth. Farrell claims that it is men who are the real victims in society and that it is their position, rather than that of women, that is in most need of state protection. Baker (1994) has suggested that similar kinds of sentiments are to be found in wider society too. For instance, she notes that on both sides of the Atlantic there are many who feel that feminism has undermined the rights of fathers and destabilised the institution of the family. This has resulted in the formation of a number of different pressure groups determined to contest things like the current legislation on divorce and child custody, as well as the criminalisation of rape within marriage. It is also claimed that a further way that men have fought back is through the production of a heavily negative

stereotype of feminists themselves. Percy and Kremer (1995), for example, have noted how media representations of feminists portray them as both militant and physically unattractive. One of the main consequences of this, they argue, is that many women are put off from identifying as feminist (see also Griffin, 1989 and Renzetti, 1987).

There have been other commentators, however, who have painted a more positive picture of the ways in which men have responded to feminism. Dominelli (1999), for example, argues that whilst some men have resisted feminist arguments point-blank, others have attempted to embrace them. Once again evidence of this can be found within the academy which, in recent years, has seen a number of publications which are both written by and critical of men (egs. Brod, 1987; Brittan, 1989; Connell, 1995; Coyle and Morgan-Sykes, 1998; Hearn and Morgan, 1990; Kaufmann, 1987; Kimmel, 1989; Seidler, 1994; Wild, 1999). There have also been promising reports of attitude change outside of the academic domain. In Thomas' (1990) research, for example, she claims that feminist arguments can be seen to have had a positive impact upon (at least some) men's thinking about themselves and the world they inhabit. In general men's responses to feminism, the subject positions they take up and the social consequences of their discursive and ideological manoeuvres will be inflected by their other social identities such as class and race. The 'new man', for instance, emerging in the 1980s represented a particular racialised, middle-class construction of masculinity.

While welcoming this attention on men's mobilisations in response to feminism, we want to argue that such research requires a more sophisticated

analysis of discourse and the ways in which collectively shared discursive resources operate. There needs to be more attention paid to the nature of these discursive resources and the ways in which they produce subject positions and identities and work ideologically to maintain power relations. One feature of existing research, for example, is the tendency to imply that men, both inside and outside of academia, can be neatly divided into different categories or camps: radicals and reactionaries, New Men and traditional men, pro and anti-feminists (see also Connell, 1995). Indeed, this is done most explicitly in Thomas' (1990) research in which she uses factor analysis (Q-Sort) to generate a schema of eleven different masculine identities including 'liberal pro-feminist', old-fashioned masculinity' and 'self-consciously macho'. In line with previous work in discursive psychology on global forms of sense-making (Billig, 1991; Billig et al., 1989; Wetherell and Potter, 1992), we anticipate that men's discourse on feminism will be more varied, fragmented and heterogeneous and, indeed, that the ideological thrust of discourse (in maintaining oppressive power relations) depends precisely on contradiction, dilemma and the complex multi-faceted positionings of self and other which can be mobilised in multiple rhetorical directions with varying consequences for social relations.

In this paper we report on some of the main patterns in a large corpus of men's discourse around feminism and feminists. The analysis of this material is conducted according to the theory and method of discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Harre and Gillett, 1994; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) in particular the more synthetic and global form of analysis characteristic of more critical discursive psychology (Wetherell, 1998). In keeping with our previous work in this area (Edley and Wetherell, 1996;

1997; 1999; Wetherell and Edley, 1998; 1999), we combine a focus on the local organisation of talk with an interest in the organisation of the broad, social and culturally resonant interpretative resources participants draw upon. Thus, on the one hand, we try and study how talk is organised as social action in its immediate context, the subject positions in play and the rhetorical and interactional consequences of this organisation, focusing on participants' orientations to clarify and identify these elements. On the other hand, we assume that talk (particularly about a 'social issue' such as feminism) assumes regular patterns that reveal the shared sense-making resources of a sample or which may be specific to a site, institution or characteristic of a broader social context and historical period. These resources are always, of course, customised for the particular discursive context but are revealing about the taken for granted and indicate the marks of power relations. Inevitably, depending on the size of the discourse corpus being investigated and the particular research questions, analysis will emphasise one of these focal points more strongly than the other. In this study, we are dealing with a large corpus and our research aim is similarly broad. Our aim is to summarise and identify the regular and most pervasive patterns in our samples' ways of talking about feminism and feminists and to discuss the implications of these. Analysis, therefore, will be relatively global in nature. (For a detailed discussion of the epistemological and methodological difficulties in combining more fine-grain conversation analytic and ethnomethodological approaches with Foucauldian and post-structuralist theories of discourse and a justification for this combined approach see Wetherell, 1998).

Materials and Procedure

The corpus of discourse used for this study comes from a relatively large-scale project on the construction of masculine identities (Edley and Wetherell, 1995; 1996; 1997; Wetherell and Edley, 1998). Part of this project involved a period of fieldwork conducted in and around the sixth form common room of a UK-based independent boys' school which included tape-recorded and transcribed interviews with small groups of 17-18 year old male students. Each group of three young men was interviewed (by Nigel Edley) around eight times in school time over a period of approximately three months. The participants in this study were ethnically homogeneous and all came from white English backgrounds. A second source of data comes from a set of 'one off' small group discussions with over 60 men, aged between 20 and 64 years. This sample was more ethnically diverse but predominantly white and came from a wide range of occupations and social class backgrounds. All these participants were at the time doing foundation courses on various Open University degree programmes and were mature distance learning students. The participants were volunteers, whose anonymity is guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms. In the extracts that follow, each comes with a "post-script" identifying the interview from which the material is taken. Codes "A2" and "B5", for example, represent extracts taken from the second meeting of Group A and the fifth meeting of Group B of the sixth form study. Whilst "OU1" and "OU 7" represent data from the first and seventh Open University interviews respectively. In this paper, the data from both studies are combined as the main discursive patterns we wish to discuss were found strongly across both samples.

The interviews were designed to explore a range of different issues central to men's lives, including work, relationships, images of men in popular culture and feminism and social change (see Wetherell, 1994 for full details). The topics of feminism and social change were introduced in the interviews using variants of three standard questions: (i) What is a feminist (or feminism)? (ii) What do you think of feminism? (iii) What do feminists want? These questions and their variants set the discursive environment and the discursive tasks for the participants. They were designed to explore the interpretative resources men might have available for making sense of feminism. We wanted the men to engage in both descriptive and evaluative work and we were interested in the 'theatre of characters' men might construct in relation to feminism. These aims are reflected in the particular formulations used and the focus in the questions on feminists as actors.

We assume that men's responses to these questions would be both occasioned (produced for the particular context of the interview) and yet also revealing of the collectively shared discursive constructions of feminism which make up the social contexts in which feminism is negotiated in private and public arenas. The interviewer (NE) did not elaborate his own views on feminism to the participants but we note that the general discursive context in which the responses were produced includes participants' readings of what might be appropriate for an interview conducted as part of a gender studies research project.

Analysis proceeded by first building up a data file of all the discourse related to feminism and feminists mostly generated in response to the three

questions listed above but including any extended discussion of feminism in the interviews. In this discourse analysis, as noted, we will be particularly concerned with global patterns across the corpus, presenting data extracts to illustrate pervasive patterns. In line with our aim to clarify men's shared broad interpretative resources and with our chosen mode of analysis we will not be so concerned to explicate the occasioned deployment of these resources except where this is relevant to revealing the general organisation of the men's sense-making in this area.

Analysis and Discussion

Jekyll and Hyde: Constructing the Janus Faces³ of Feminism

One of the most pervasive patterns in our corpus was the presence of two competing interpretative repertoires or accounts of feminists and feminism. An interpretative repertoire (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) is a recognisable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterisations of actors and situations. Such repertoires become evident through repetition across a corpus. The collectively shared social consensus behind an interpretative repertoire is often so established and so familiar that only a fragment of the argumentative chain needs to be formulated in talk to count as an adequate reference and for the participants to jointly recognise the routine that is developing.

One of the two contrasting interpretative repertoires evident in this corpus can be seen in Extracts One and Two.

1. **NIGEL:** What are feminists (.) what are they after?
HARRY: Women? What do women want?
NIGEL: What do feminists want (.) yeah
HARRY: Equality
NIGEL: Right (.) just that?
HARRY: Just that (.) equality (.) they er (.) that's all they need
(OU18: 21)

2. **NIGEL:** Okay, so what (...) do you think feminists are after?
JASON: The way I see it is equality
GREG: I was gonna say in one word equality of opportunities put
[inaudible] opportunities yes but equal rights in (.) in everything
(OU 12: 37)

This liberal feminist repertoire of feminism was frequently presented in this very straight-forward, even minimal, way which portrayed feminists as simply wanting equality. The obviousness of the argument is such that 'one word' is sufficient.

The second very pervasive interpretative repertoire evident in the corpus differed in a number of important respects. First, it tended to be a much more complex or elaborate construction, composed from a larger array of recurrent themes. Second, it tended to be an embodied account personifying feminism (picking up on the possibility for this in the formulation of the interviewer's question). Here a highly theatrical character was routinely constructed for the feminist. Most commonly, answers included details about the supposed physical appearance of the feminist, her sexual orientation and her general attitude towards men. This repertoire worked principally through the overt subject position constructed for the feminist (see Davies and Harré, 1990).

3. **NIGEL:** Give me an imaginary picture of a feminist.
ADRIAN: I seem to think of a feminist woman as like ugly women (.) with like shaved hair (.) stuff like that you know (.) who can't get a chap and so they think "I'll become a feminist"
NIGEL: Right
ADRIAN: Lesbians (.) that sort of thing (.) I don't know (A1: 8)
4. **NIGEL:** What do you think feminists want of men? [laughter]
SIMON: Well, I think they want us all to jump in the river don't they really? Kill ourselves? I dunno (.) slaves? (...) I think at times they seem to have us under siege and always blaming us for some of the most ridiculous things and I think to myself "What the hell do these people want? Do they want us dead or what?" I mean they don't want to find any common ground (.) they just hate men (.) regardless (.) all men (OU2: 45)

As is clear from Extracts Three and Four, the third major point of difference between the two repertoires concerned their evaluative status. Indeed, the two repertoires worked in a 'Jekyll and Hyde' or 'good cop/bad cop' fashion. Like Jekyll, feminism and feminists in the first interpretative repertoire have a benign, sane and rational, positive or neutral character. Feminist desires for gender equality were usually reported as simple, ordinary and quite reasonable matters of fact. Yet, when feminism and feminists turn into Hyde, they become highly coloured. In line with the fictional reference, the feminist was now portrayed as something of a monstrous ogre or fiend.

So far, we have presented these two repertoires separately with the implication that men could perhaps now be categorised into two types according to which repertoire represented their basic attitudes to feminism. In practice, men's accounts of feminism moved backwards and forwards across the discursive field established by these two interpretative repertoires,

often through the process of arguing and puzzling described by Billig (1987).

There were a number of instances within our interviews where the two repertoires formed the basis of arguments between participants about the true nature of feminists. A few turns after the end of Extract 3, for example, saw another member of Group A challenging Adrian's portrait, claiming instead that they were "just people who feel strongly about being put down". Similarly, within another part of the sixth form study, one of the participants told of his English teacher's pronouncements on feminism where, once again, the same two representations are set up as competing truth-claims.

5. **NATHAN:** He's (.) well seeing as we're (.) we're in my group doing a feminist novel in the *French Lieutenant's Woman* and he's giving us his opinions on feminism (.) how feminists (.) they don't want equality with men they want to be better than men and they want to destroy all tradition without having anything to put in it's place (.) and there's a kind of anarchy sort of thing but I don't know (.) personally I could take some of his arguments but I think it's more trying to be equal
(B3: 31-2)

In the remainder of this analysis, we want to examine the ideological and interactional consequences of the Jekyll and Hyde style 'binarisation' of discourse around feminism and feminists. We will argue that much of the ideological thrust of men's discourse on feminism is carried by the ways in which the two sides of this polarised, and often embodied and personified, Jekyll and Hyde type binary are worked together and the rhetorical relations this allows. We will examine the regular and routine ways in which these two repertoires are deployed together and the typical rhetorical

consequences of that deployment. In this discussion we will pay attention also to the 'identity work' being accomplished and the consequences for men's own positioning. For example, if we look again at Extract 5, Nathan seems to be doing far more than simply advancing the truth-status of a particular representation of the feminist. At the same time, he is positioning himself by implication as a modern-day, 'reconstructed' man.

Feminism, Equality and Extremism

As noted, the most common pattern of accounting saw speakers constructing an image of society in which both repertoires of feminism and feminists had real-world referents. This emerged time and time again where participants were called upon to make general statements about feminism or feminists.

6. NIGEL: Erm what do you think of feminism?

(long pause)

WILLIAM: It depends on what kind of feminism (.) if it's the (.) the extremist feminism I got no time for it at all because I think they do women's issues a great deal of disservice (OU 3: 32).

7. NIGEL: Well what do you think feminists are after?

NATHAN: Who knows? (laughs) well (.)

KEITH: It depends which feminists (.) like if you'd got something like some official commissions on sexual equality then they're probably more like to be just for equality but if like you get some far-left women's libbers or something then they're going to be far more (.) not so much equality but pro (.) pro-feminist if you get my meaning

NIGEL: No (.) not entirely

KEITH: Above not equal (B3: 32)

8. **CHARLIE:** I think before you carry on with this conversation (.) like most things (.) you have to decide on what level you're gonna actually discuss that subject (**NIGEL:** Okay) whether you're gonna discuss feminism in the extreme of the word feminism as we were describing it as women with big boots on (.) short hair or whatever (.) or [laughter] or we can look on it as feminism as women trying to succeed and being looked on as equals within society (OU 30:9)

As we can clearly see from these extracts, by far the most prevalent pattern was to set the two repertoires up as a common sense choice between "the extremists" and the rest (sometimes a residual, generally untitled, category and more usually the 'reasonable' feminism of equality). The use of the notion of extremism is, of course, no accident, for within the context of many Westernised, capitalist societies, the concept stands almost as a synonym for unacceptability. Wetherell and Potter (1992) have noted, for example, how within the discourse of white (Pākehā) New Zealanders, the label "extremist" stood as a term of abuse. What is more, they showed how the related assumption that a healthy, balanced and rational mind avoids extremes and treads a 'middle path' pervades, not just common sense, but also the academic domains of social, political and economic theory⁴ (see also Billig, 1982; Hall, 1986). This common sense was clearly apparent within our own data, for as we can see in the next sequence of extracts, constructions of the "extreme" feminist typically placed great emphasis upon their supposed irrationality and unreasonableness⁵.

9. **NIGEL:** Right (.) so I mean do you think there's different sorts?
SEAN: Of feminists? (**NIGEL:** Hm m) yes (.) you're gonna get your extreme (.) well (.) extreme feminism is (.) I don't know (.) they tend to be (.) maybe it's back to what you [i.e. Terre] said about irrationality (.) they just get (.) they're just at it straight away (.) (**NIGEL:** Hmm) totally

emotional (.) there's no approach to it as (.) no (.) "men are dominating society (.) we've got to do something drastic to stop it" (OU 21: 5)

10. **SHAUN:** I would say among the extremists (.) amongst the group of feminists (.) I mean you get some take (.) I mean they really do go to the extreme where they're banging and shouting and I mean going around and this bra burning business (.) I mean (.) what a load of rubbish. (OU 9: 46)
11. **NIGEL:** What's a feminist?
AARON: Generally (.) I dunno (.) there is an extreme feminist who you'd see as like (.) if you open the door for 'em you'd get a slapping. (C5: 47)

It goes without saying that in constructing these representations of 'the extremist', speakers are simultaneously invoking its counter-point; namely, the rational, middle-of-the-road type of feminist. Of course, this is precisely the subject position that is also, implicitly at least, being claimed by most of the speakers (after all, it is from that standpoint that the unreasonableness of the extremist becomes visible). Significantly, however, it was also seen as the position that was occupied by the other group of feminists (i.e. Jekyll). In this respect too there are parallels to be found in Wetherell and Potter's analysis of racist discourse. A number of their interviewees, for example, produced a similar distinction between the 'hard-core', 'militant' Māori and their 'normal', run-of-the-mill counter-parts - where the latter were said to share the same attitudes and outlook as the white, Pākehā majority. One of the main rhetorical strengths of these constructions lies in the fact that they allow the speaker to bolster their own image as a model of rationality. For whilst the extremist feminist may 'hate men, regardless' of what they are like

as men (see Extract 4), the speaker appears to resist acting in kind, taking instead, a more judicious, reasonable or moderate stance towards the other.

Moreover, if we look again at the repertoire of the feminist with whom the speakers are aligning themselves (i.e. Jekyll), we should see that it is designed in such a way as to maximize the ease of this alliance. The minimal nature of their representation - they are constructed as women who 'just' or 'simply' want equality - serves to emphasise their relative normality. It implies that, in all other respects, they are indistinguishable from ordinary (i.e. non-feminist) women. Even the specific focus on the value of equality also works to undermine any radical difference, for as a number of academic studies have shown, people today present themselves as overwhelmingly in favour of gender (and racial) equality (see Cochrane and Billig, 1984; van Dijk, 1984; Wetherell, Steven and Potter, 1987; Billig, 1991; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Gough, 1998; Edley and Wetherell, 1999). Equality has become a cultural truism or *commonplace* (see Billig, 1987), an argument of principle which stands beyond question. Defined in this way, therefore, the moderate feminist gets absorbed into the majority, to become an identity that is not only available for normal women to adopt but also, more significantly, ordinary men as well (see Extract 12).

12. **MIKE:** I'm a feminist (.) (**NIGEL:** Yeah? okay) I kept being told by one woman that I can't be and that was a feminist (.) but I am a feminist because I really do believe that women should have equal opportunity with men (.) and all that goes with that (.) equal value pay (.) everything (OU 9: 44)

The rhetorical robustness of the equality principle also played a crucial role in the construction of unreasonableness in the Hyde repertoire. Of course, the very fact that it is defined against the Jekyll repertoire implies that something other than equality is at stake. Indeed, as we can see in Extracts 13 and 14 (and also 7 above), in the Hyde version, feminists were frequently represented as striving for precisely the *opposite*.

13. WILLIAM: I think a moderate feminist is someone that just wants parity with a male in in jobs (.) opportunity etc (.) be treated as an equal (.) nothing more than that

NIGEL: Hm m (.) yeah (.) anything else?

NICK: No (.) just equality I think (.) that's it

NIGEL: And (.) okay (.) so what's different about radical feminists (.) what are they like (.) what do they want?

NICK: I think I get the impression they want to be superior

WILLIAM: I think=

NIGEL: =Sorry (.) what?

NICK: They want to be superior to men

NIGEL: How?

NICK: Erm (.) they want advantages because they're a woman
(OU 3: 32-3)

14. NIGEL: What do they [extreme feminists] want?

AARON: They want everything (.) they want to go past the half way line (.) they wanna [go over (.)

PHIL: [Asexual reproduction normally

AARON: Yeah "Right we'll let you live to the age of 30 and collect your semen and then we'll cut you off (.) and then we can just live as women"

(**NIGEL:** Hm m) they just don't see us (.) they see us as perhaps the males have seen (.) the women you know back in the mid 18th century or whatever (C6: 11)

On the face of it, it could be argued that, from a feminist point of view, there are certain grounds for optimism in what we have seen so far. It might be claimed that although these men are identifying with a severely circumscribed definition of feminism, they are nonetheless accepting one of the central tenets of the (liberal) feminist movement; namely, that men and women are born equal and deserving of the same opportunities in life. Yet, as is so often the case with discourse analytical work, there are reasons for questioning so neat a conclusion. For if we examine some other extracts of data, we can find instances where the status of this principle as a cultural commonplace was put under pressure by using, somewhat ironically, the rhetoric of extremism.

For example, Extracts 15 and 16 come from two entirely separate discussions. The first concerned the general issue of men supporting the feminist movement whilst the second was on the subject of developing a non-sexist form of the English language. In both, however, we see the emergence of a very similar kind of theme; namely, the concept of 'total' or 'complete' equality.

15. **ADRIAN:** It's hard to speak for everybody in our school 'cos there's lots of different views but (.) personally I don't think there's much more need for any more change of rights (.) (**NIGEL:** Hm m) as far as I'm concerned you know (.) women have got enough rights as it is at the moment and (.) I mean (.) there may not be complete equality but it's near enough isn't it? (A8: 19)
16. **MARCUS:** I would call it a chairwoman instead of a chairperson (.) (**NIGEL:** Hmm) that's (.) that's a sexist point coming through is the person

(.) you're not allowed to be one or the other with real feminists (.) (NIGEL: Hmm) it's total equality (OU30: 8).

In many of the previous extracts equality is talked about as if it were a very straight forward matter: you either have it or you don't. Yet the concepts of 'total' and 'complete' equality muddy this simple picture, introducing shades of grey to what was otherwise black and white. They raise the possibility of various intermediate states such as partial, near or virtual equality. As a consequence, the moral picture becomes more complicated too. No longer is it a simple case of the great and the good lining up behind the banner of equality. Within these accounts, the principle of equality becomes something that one should take a reasonable or moderate position upon. It implies that whilst a person should be in favour of equality, it is not good to be fanatical about it⁶. It is something that we all should want, but not too seriously.

Histories of Gender Relations

If we return our attention to Extract 14 for a moment, we will find that it ends on a rather interesting note. For here, as elsewhere in the data, we find speakers constructing a *history* of gender relations in which some kind of equation or parallel is struck between contemporary (extreme) feminists and traditional or 'retributive' men (retributive masculinity is associated with the 'macho' values of strength, courage and dominance - see Rutherford, 1988). In this particular extract, Aaron accuses both parties of holding a similarly

demeaning view of the opposite sex - a claim which is also echoed in the following, extended version of Extract Three.

17. **NIGEL:** Give me an imaginary picture of a feminist.

ADRIAN: I seem to think of a feminist woman as like ugly women (.) with like shaved hair (.) stuff like that you know (.) who can't get a chap and so they think "I'll become a feminist" (.) (**NIGEL:** Right) lesbians (.) that sort of thing (.) I don't know (.) well not at the time but stuff like that (.) someone who wants to be independent of themselves and like erm (.) puts men down now like men were putting women down (.) now it's women putting men down (A1: 8)

There are a number of significant things about these accounts that warrant our attention, the first concerning the way in which they acknowledge what is, in effect, a feminist history of gender relations. Of course, the fact that the history being told here is a story of women's oppression at the hands of men would appear to be, initially at least, yet another promising sign from a feminist point of view. Yet, crucially, both Aaron and Adrian present this story as a description of the *past*. In other words, at the very moment patriarchy is recognised, its contemporary relevance is denied.

However, it must be said that at different points within our interviews, speakers did not produce this kind of denial. Indeed, there was quite some variation across accounts in terms of how our participants constructed the current balance of power between the sexes. Some suggested that it was still a "man's world" and that women had some way to go in order to catch up. Others, such as Adrian in Extract 15, implied that although women were still a bit behind, they were fast approaching parity. At other times again, it was proposed that the playing field was now level ("Now they er (.) they can

make them vicars now can't they?" - Harry: OU18: 21). What was consistent across all of these accounts, however, was the assertion that, over the years, the relative status and position of women in society had steadily improved. To this extent, they were all conforming to one particular view or narrative of history.

This 'progressive' view of history is a common frame of reference in which society is seen as moving from a state of relative ignorance, barbarism and injustice towards increased enlightenment and civilisation. It stands alongside alternative interpretative repertoires of historical development that tell very different stories including, for example, one in which the barbarities of modern times are unfavourably compared to the halcyon days of some former, golden era (see Williams, 1975; Billig, 1990; Edley, 1991 and Wetherell and Potter, 1992 for further discussions of these repertoires). In talking about the past, people will inevitably draw upon these repertoires in order to construct their accounts. The question we need to ask, therefore, is why was the 'progressive' repertoire of history consistently employed within these discussions? What particular ideological and rhetorical advantages does it hold?

One of the central features of this discourse of historical progress is that it embodies a sense of almost *evolutionary* change (certainly the supposed movement of society from a state of barbarism to civilisation contains a strongly Darwinian flavour). More specifically, it carries forward a sense both of the inevitability of society's improvement and also of the *pace* of that development. By definition, evolutionary change implies a slow or gradual transformation, a process that cannot be hurried or forced. As an account,

therefore, it has profound consequences for any feminist politics determined to change the course of history. Indeed, if we consider Extract 18, we can see clear evidence of the way in which its rhetorical potential is harnessed and exploited.

18. **NIGEL:** What do you think today's feminists are arguing for now?
ANDY: I suppose they want it to be greater speed and haste probably (.) I think the thing's moving in the right direction anyway (**NIGEL:** Hmm) so I think it's just (.) I mean you can't have women in managers overnight (.) I mean (.) so there is gonna be a sort of coming up in the ranks and men have had lots of years [laughs] to get to that position (OU8: 5)

Notice, for example, the work done by the word 'anyway'. Used in this context it implies that the improvement of women's position in western society has occurred *irrespective* of the efforts of feminists. Within this account, the movement towards equality follows a different, evolutionary logic. It implies, not only that women are 'getting there' (slowly but surely) but also perhaps that, in waiting for the inevitable, they should be tolerant of current inequalities. Similar kinds of themes were evident elsewhere in the data, such as in the next sequence of talk where, once again, we see it argued that the appropriate ('sensible') route for women's advancement is gradual and step-wise.

19. **NIGEL:** Are [extreme feminists] merely just more noisy erm versions of moderate feminists?
SHAUN: I wouldn't er (.) I wouldn't say they're more noisy ones (.) I think that the ones that there the ones that are demanding such as jobs they're looking at (.) instead of looking sensibly and taking it a step at a time (.) progressing (.) they're looking straight away from going at one level (.) er as a woman solicitor straight to a High Court judge or something (.) as an

example (.) they're wanting the top positions now (.) whereas instead of working (.) I mean even a man has to work his way through it (OU9: 45-7)

Constructing Feminism: Personal and Political Implications

In our analysis so far we have looked at some of the ways in which mixed samples of men talked about feminism and feminists. In the first section, we noted that there appeared to be two distinctive, Jekyll and Hyde style, repertoires in current conversational circulation: 'Jekyll' is the ordinary woman who simply wants equality while 'Hyde' is the unfeminine feminist and extreme political activist. Even the most cursory glance at these two repertoires reveals that they are constructed in such a way as to encourage an equivocal stance with regard to feminism: for one is beyond reproach, the other beyond redemption. One of the main rhetorical strengths of this arrangement becomes apparent if we consider the wider issue of men's self-presentation. Elsewhere, we have suggested that men today face a delicate and sometimes dilemmatic task of juggling between two quite contradictory gender identities or masculine positions (Edley and Wetherell, 1997 - see also Rutherford, 1988 and Billig et al., 1988). They have to steer an uneasy course between, what we have called 'the Scylla of the macho man and the Charybdis⁷ of the wimp'. It is here that the dual construction of the feminist comes into its own, for it gives men some important rhetorical flexibility. In short, it means that they can have it both ways; they can be both 'pro' and 'anti', in favour and against, both supportive and, at the same time, critical of feminists.

Our study has also revealed the crucial role that the value of *equality* plays within the surrounding debates. In a sense, it appeared as a rhetorical centre piece, the hub of a wheel around which all of the other arguments articulated. For instance, it stood as both the source and emblem of the moderate feminists' reasonableness, the very basis upon which many of our interviewees alleged their support. And yet, through the analyses that followed, we saw how some speakers managed, in a sense, to dodge the authority of this cultural common-place. We heard it implied, for example, that feminists could become too obsessed with gaining equality and that there was a point at which any reasonable person would accept just a small measure of inequity. We heard it suggested that whilst, in principle, women deserved equal representation in public life, in practice they would have to bide their time as they worked up through the ranks (see also Edley and Wetherell, 1999; Wetherell et al., 1987). We also saw accounts that undermined the very *raison d'être* of feminist politics, by representing the (hi)story of women's struggle for power as subject to the laws of nature, rather than man (sic).

What is more, if we consider the issue carefully, we will see that the concept of equality that is being recycled within these turns has a very specific character. Put simply, equality here seems to connote *sameness*. The notion that men and women are the same underneath or prior to their gender socialisation is, of course, by no means new. Indeed, as Connell (1987) points out, it was a central component of liberal feminist arguments that were dominant throughout the 1960s and 70s. The problems with this assumption are also well known, at least within feminist circles. In particular, it has been found to encourage, not a respect for gender

differences and diversity, but the direct comparison of women's abilities, behaviour and character with a "gold-standard" set by men⁸. We can see this very clearly in our final extract of data (Extract 20) which emerged within the context of a discussion about the legitimacy of moderate feminism. In the previous few turns Nathan and Keith had appeared to be united in their support, indeed, Nathan had just commented upon the ludicrousness of women not receiving equal pay for the same kind of work. Neil, however, refuses to fall into line.

20. **NEIL:** If you want feminism you've got to take the good with the bad like get down the pit and get in the front line (.) if you think you're equal get out and prove it which I don't think they are physically and you can't claim to be equal when you're not because people are different and some women are stronger than some men and you know they can't just generalise about "We're equal to them" I mean I think people shouldn't discriminate on any basis as far as jobs or equal pay or anything like that's concerned

NATHAN: Yeah (.) you shouldn't really be able to find discrimination against women or positive discrimination on their half for anything like that really (.) it should be equal (.) the best person for the best job (.) free market sort of thing (B3:32)

As we can see, Neil's argument is that women deserve to be treated as equal only when they do the same things as men - when they 'get down the pit and get in the front line'. The choice of these examples is, of course, no accident, for mining and warmongering represent two of the more prototypically masculine forms of activity. In other words, they are occupations that are commonly assumed to require the specifically masculine qualities of courage, aggression and physical strength. Within Neil's account they appear as 'the bad' (i.e. the dangerous and dirty work) that men accept along

with 'the good' (i.e. the privileges associated with being a man). According to this logic, therefore, men are constructed as deserving their exalted status. They are seen as, not just different from women, but better. As Betty Friedan (1965) pointed out so long ago, 'difference' here for women means *less*.

However, there is an interesting rhetorical shift in the middle of Neil's argument that sees him developing a different and, in many ways, contradictory rhetorical trajectory. The switch appears to pivot around the phrase 'people are different'. As we have seen, prior to its enunciation, Neil has been arguing that women's claims to equality are illegitimate. His point is that feminists are guilty of ignoring the fact that men and women are not (at least 'physically') the same. 'People are different' he says. Yet, ironically, this phrase is also a central trope or commonplace of a liberal individualism that tends, within Western cultures at least, to erode or undermine such categorical statements. What is more, as if cued by this alternative rhetoric, Neil goes on to paint a more individualistic scenario in which 'some women are stronger than some men'. The very caution against making 'generalisations' also makes an appearance (albeit in the form of an accusation levelled against feminists), as does a denunciation of 'discrimination'. Significantly, however, when these liberal themes are picked up and developed by Nathan, we can see that the force of this rhetoric is turned to an equally reactionary end. Indeed, what seems to be invoked in his discourse is an image of society as a 'free market' or competition in which men's differences as men puts them justifiably ahead of the game.

Conclusion

In this paper we have analysed some of the ways in which men talk about feminism and feminists. We have described in some detail the two main interpretative repertoires through which accounts of the feminist are built and seen something of how these resources are manipulated and exploited in the course of our participants' conversations. One of the main advantages of this discourse analytic approach is that it enables us to appreciate something of the complexity of this ideological field. Talk about feminism and feminists displays an array of different rhetorical positions and arguments nuanced in subtle ways which make it not only impossible to separate out the pro from the anti-feminist, but also difficult to predict the overall direction of social and political change. Nevertheless, it could be said that from a feminist point of view, our overall findings provide little room for optimism. For it would appear that the most readily available ways of talking (and thinking) about feminists encourages men (and possibly women too) to identify with a definition of feminism that is almost entirely emptied of any radical potential. In certain respects our analysis points to the enduring ideological dominance of Thatcherism (see Hall, 1988 and Levitas, 1986), such that gender equality comes to be understood as women taking their place alongside men in an economic, social and political battle of each against all. Indeed, it is precisely within this ideological frame that, say, programmes of affirmative action for women (and other minority groups) get resisted and rejected as 'unfair' or 'discriminatory'. As was so apparent during the 80's, the ideology of the (then) New Right worked against many forms of collective action. What is perhaps not so obvious is the way that,

within the context of a new (and New) Labour government, such activities are still constructed as extreme.

Notes

1. Jekyll and Hyde - characters from a story by R.L. Stevenson about a person in whom two opposing personalities (one good the other evil) alternate.
2. This research has been supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No. R000233129) and research funds from the Open University and the Faculty of Humanities, Nottingham Trent University. We would like to thank Christine Griffin for her perceptive and thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this paper. As ever, we owe a huge debt of thanks to the men whose willingness to give of their time and energy made this whole project possible.
3. In Roman mythology, Janus was the god of entrances or gateways. In his temple he had a statue with two faces looking in opposite directions - one into the future the other into the past.
4. These assumptions also find strong echoes in both Blair and Clinton's advocacy of the so-called middle or 'third' way (see Giddens, 1998).
5. It is not insignificant, of course, that in this respect, the construction of the "extreme" feminist repeats a core component of the traditional gender stereotype of women (see Williams and Bennett, 1975).
6. It is perhaps worth noting that within the interviews the terms 'complete' and 'total' were also used in reference to feminists themselves. In other words, some participants drew a distinction between moderate feminists on the one hand and 'total' and/or 'complete feminists' on the other.
7. Scylla and Charybdis - "two dangers or extremes such that one can be avoided only by approaching the other [monster and whirlpool in Greek mythology]" (Oxford Pocket Dictionary)

8. The setting up of assertiveness classes for women is a good case in point, when predicated upon the assumption that, *compared to men*, women lacked assertiveness.

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Pre-Print