Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity: Imaginary Positions and Psycho-Discursive Practices

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Abstract

In this paper we provide a critical analysis of the concept of *hegemonic masculinity*. We argue that although this concept embodies important theoretical insights, it is insufficiently developed as it stands to enable us to understand how men position themselves as gendered beings. In particular it offers a vague and imprecise account of the social psychological reproduction of male identities. We outline an alternative critical discursive psychology of masculinity. Drawing on data from interviews with a sample of men from a range of ages and from diverse occupational backgrounds, we delineate three distinctive, yet related, procedures or psycho-discursive practices, through which men construct themselves as masculine. The political implications of these discursive practices, as well as the broader implications of treating the psychological process of *identification* as form of discursive accomplishment, are also discussed.

KEYWORDS: male identity, hegemonic masculinity, identification, gender categories, the imaginary, discourse analysis, discursive practice, discursive psychology.

This paper focuses on the discursive strategies involved in negotiating membership of gender categories. Specifically, we are interested in how men position themselves in relation to conventional notions of the masculine. How do men take on the social identity of 'being a man' as they talk, and what are the implications of the typical discursive paths they follow? We concentrate on responses to interview questions such as "Would you describe yourself as a masculine man?" and "Are there moments in everyday life when you feel more masculine than at other times?", and on men's responses to magazine photographs of possible role models. To help make sense of these moments of self-assessment and identification, we introduce notions of 'imaginary positions' and 'psycho-discursive practices' and initiate a dialogue with the feminist sociology of masculinity developed by Robert Connell and his colleagues (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1987; 1995).

According to Connell, the task of 'being a man' involves taking on and negotiating 'hegemonic masculinity'. Men's identity strategies are constituted through their complicit or resistant stance to prescribed dominant masculine styles. Connell's (1987) analysis of this process of identification is an anti-essentialist one. He argues that masculine characters are not given. Rather, a range of possible styles and personae emerge from the gender regimes found in different cultures and historical periods. Among the possible variety of ways of being masculine, however, some become 'winning styles' and it is these with which men must engage.

Connell's conception of hegemony draws on Gramsci's (1971) depiction of the wars of position and manoeuvre characteristic of social formations. Hegemonic ideologies preserve, legitimate and naturalise the interests of the powerful - marginalising and subordinating the claims of other groups. Hegemony is not automatic, however, but involves contest and constant struggle. Hegemonic masculinity, Connell argues, is centrally connected to the subordination of women. It is a way of being masculine which not only marginalises and subordinates women's activities but also alternative forms of masculinity such as 'camp' or effeminate masculinity. Typically, it also involves the brutal repression of the activities of gay men and their construction as a despised 'Other'.

Connell's formulation of hegemonic masculinity and men's complicity or resistance has a number of advantages. First, this approach allows for diversity. Masculine identities can be studied in the plural rather than in the singular. Second, this is an analysis deeply attentive to the problematic of gender power. Finally, Connell's work notes the relevance of relations between men as well as relations between men and women for the formation of gendered identities. This approach has proved particularly useful for understanding the broad social context of gender relations. It also serves as a useful back-cloth for social psychological analyses (Wetherell and Edley, 1998). We want to argue, however, that the notion of hegemonic masculinity is not sufficient for understanding the nitty gritty of negotiating masculine identities and men's identity strategies. In effect, Connell leaves to one side the question of how the forms he identifies actually prescribe or regulate men's lives. Men might "conform" to hegemonic masculinity, but we are left to wonder what this conformity might look in practice. Moreover, this is not just a case of developing a 'micro' psychological analysis to bolt on to the 'macro' sociological picture. The patterns we find when we look in detail at men's negotiation of masculine identities have some important implications for the more general sociological account.

Connell's account of the processes involved in the social and psychological reproduction of hegemonic masculinity is sketchy. He argues that hegemonic masculinity is not intended as a description of real men. Hegemonic masculinity is not a personality type or an actual male character. Rather, it is an ideal or set of prescriptive social norms, symbolically represented, but a crucial part of the texture of many routine mundane social and disciplinary activities. The exact content of the prescriptive social norms which make up hegemonic masculinity is left unclear. It tends in Connell's writings to be correlated with what might be called macho masculinity and exemplified by fictional characters in films such as *Rambo*, *Rocky* and the *Terminator*. It is also unclear whether there is only one hegemonic strategy at any point in time or whether hegemonic strategies can vary across different parts of a social formation, creating conflicts or tensions for individual men between different hegemonic forms as they move across social practices.

Hegemonic masculinity is presented in Connell's work as an aspirational goal rather than a lived reality for ordinary men. Indeed a key characteristic seems to be its

'impossibility' or 'phantastic' nature (c.f. Frosh, 1994). No living man is ever man enough by this reckoning and this transcendent and unattainable quality gives hegemonic masculinity regulatory force. Connell argues that most men are complicit with hegemonic masculinity, even if they are unable to (or refrain from) strutting like Rambo, since they benefit from the dominant definition both as a source of fantasy gratification and, more practically, through the systematic subordination of women. As social psychologists, however, we wonder about the appropriateness of a definition of dominant masculinity which no man may actually ever embody. What does it say, for example, about the concept of hegemonic masculinity when some of the most institutionally powerful men in the UK, like Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (the current Prime Minister and Chancellor of Great Britain), could also be described as non-hegemonic in terms of personal style (c.f. also Donaldson, 1993)?

There is, therefore, a lack of specification on how hegemonic masculinity might become effective in men's psyches. What happens psychologically? How are the norms conveyed, through what routes, and in what ways are they enacted by men in their daily lives? What are the norms? Are they the same in every social situation? Does everyone know what counts as hegemonic all the time? How is hegemony conveyed interactionally and practically in mundane life? How do men conform to an ideal and turn themselves into complicit or resistant types, without anyone ever managing to exactly embody that ideal?

The ambiguities are compounded by the relative absence of detailed empirical research on masculine styles (although see Edley and Wetherell, 1997; in press; Gough, 1998; Willott and Griffin, 1997). Connell's (1995) own work on life history is mainly concerned with categorising groups of men into types dependent on their shared collective positioning in relation to gendered practices. What is missing is more fine-grain work on what complicity and resistance look like in practice. Investigations are required of how men negotiate regulatory conceptions of masculinity in their everyday interactions as they account for their actions and produce or manage their own (and others') identities.

Our examination in this paper is part of a broader project to develop a critical discursive psychology of masculinity (Edley and Wetherell, 1996; Wetherell, 1998;

Wetherell and Edley, 1998). We chose discourse as a site for investigating men's identities because we are persuaded of the central role discursive practices play in the constitution of subjectivity. That is, what it means to be a person, the formulation of an internal life, an identity and a way of being in the world develop as external public dialogue moves inside to form the 'voices of the mind' (Wertsch, 1991). Subjectivity and identity are best understood as the personal enactment of communal methods of self accounting, vocabularies of motive, culturally recognisable emotional performances and available stories for making sense (Shotter, 1984; Gergen, 1994; Harre and Gillett, 1994). Discursive practices are also a pervasive and constitutive element in all social practices - materially effective and the core of social action.

Our approach to discursive psychology (Billig, 1991; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Harre and Gillett, 1994; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and to the actual analysis of discourse draws upon and treads between two competing theoretical "camps". It has been common-place in recent years to distinguish between a fine-grain form of discursive psychology influenced by conversation analysis and a more global form of analysis derived from post-structuralism (Burr, 1995; Parker, 1992; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). We suggest that such a bifurcation has been a mistake and an adequate discursive psychology needs a more eclectic base.

When people speak their talk reflects, not only the local pragmatics of that particular conversational context, but also much broader or more global patterns in collective sense-making and understanding. It would seem appropriate, therefore, to adopt a similarly two-sided analytical approach, combining insights from the ethnomethodological/conversation tradition (see, for example, Antaki, 1988; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995), with those stemming from post-structuralist and Foucauldian-influenced notions of discourse (see Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Hollway, 1984; Parker and Shotter, 1990). From the former we take the emphasis on the *action orientation* (Heritage, 1984) of people's talk and the notion of social order as constituted intersubjectively as participants display to each other their understanding of what is going on, while from the latter we take the notion of discourse as organised by 'institutionally forms of intelligibility' (Shapiro, 1992) which have a history and which imbricate power relations (see Wetherell, 1998, for the explication and justification of this two-sided discursive psychology).

We suggest that this new synthetic approach to discourse analytical work within psychology best captures the paradoxical relationship that exists between discourse and the speaking subject. It allows us to embrace the fact that people are, at the same time, both the products and the producers of language (Billig, 1991). In this paper, our focus is on the relatively global strategies of self-positioning men adopt across quite large stretches of discourse and in the regularities across a sample rather than within one or two conversations.

Materials and Procedures

The materials for this analysis come from a series of 30 tape-recorded and transcribed interviews conducted between April 1992 and March 1993 with a total of 61 men. The participants for these discussions were men who, at the time, were undertaking various foundation courses with the Open University. As is typical of this student group, the men came from a diverse range of occupational backgrounds with a variety of previous educational qualifications, including men who had left school with no qualifications and men who had other university experience. They ranged in age from 20 to 64. All were volunteers who have been given pseudonyms.

A typical discussion group consisted of the interviewer (Nigel Edley) and two volunteers, although some sessions involved three volunteers and others just one. Lasting, on average, around ninety minutes each, the discussions covered issues selected by the interviewer from a range of different topics, including sexuality and relationships, images of men in popular culture and feminism and social change. In a number of the interviews, various photographs of men taken from *Arena* magazine were presented to the participants and used as a basis for discussion (see Appendix A). In general, the aim of the interviewer was to create an informal atmosphere where, to a large extent, the participants themselves directed the flow of conversation.

For the analysis below, a file of all relevant conversations was created from the transcripts and read and re-read for recurring and collectively shared patterns in self-positioning. All of the extracts presented below come with a "post-script" identifying

the place in the data-base from which the material is taken. For example, "(OU14: 21-23)" represents an extract taken from pages 21 to 23 of the transcript for the fourteenth group of Open University volunteers (see Appendix B for a brief note on transcription notation).

In this paper we will not be concerned with the fine detail of the discursive and rhetorical work evident in the specimen extracts we cite. Our analysis focuses on the broad patterns evident in the data file which are representative of the discourse of the sample as a whole. We conceptualise these broad patterns as 'practical ideologies' (Wetherell et al., 1987) or as familiar interpretative resources and methods of self accounting which are available to these men to be versionned as appropriate when faced with various discursive demands. The interview is, of course, a highly specific discursive situation where the interviewer's own discourse and construction of the issues is influential in setting the local context. Complete analysis needs to be attentive to this and other immediate contextual and interactional features. We contend, however, that the broad methods of self-accounting we identify here have a generality outside the interview context and in this sense are robust phenomena.

Negotiating Positions

Here we compare three contrasting, although not entirely unrelated, procedures participants adopted for describing themselves in relation to the social position of being a man. In commenting on these patterns we develop the notion of 'imaginary positions'.

Heroic Positions

The first pattern conforms most closely to that predicted by writings on hegemonic masculinity and could be seen as a good exemplification of Connell's notion of complicity. Indeed, it could be read as an attempt to actually *instantiate* hegemonic masculinity since, here, men align themselves strongly with conventional ideals.

In Extract 1, Michael, a 26 year old, white, computer software designer and keen amateur boxer is responding to a question about feeling masculine in everyday life.

He develops an anecdote about a recent work presentation as an example of something which might fit the interviewer's terms. In his account he positions himself in a strongly positive way. He describes the "buzz" of being in control, of "dictating the flow", and meeting the challenge in a potentially risky and challenging situation. This production of self appears to be highly *invested* (see Hall, 1996 for a further discussion of the notion of investment).

Extract 1

NIGEL: Okay some people say that (.) you know (.) there's moments in their everyday lives when they feel more masculine than at other times. (.) Is there anything that either of you could think of (.) erm (.) a time in your life where (.) you know (.) there might have been a particular moment or it might be a regular occurring thing you know (.) erm when you have a sense of yourself as masculine?
[...]
MICHAEL: Erm (.) well related to the boxing there's got to be times erm (.) boxing and training that I feel high and confident in my ability (**NIGEL**: Hm m) and I feel generally wha (.) perhaps what you'd term as erm (.) masculine (.) erm (.) times at work as well (.) a stand-up presentation (**NIGEL**: Right) erm
NIGEL: What is it about that then that gives you that sense?
MICHAEL: Erm (.) the challenge (.) I mean (.) was it yesterday? (.) I got up and did a presentation to er (.) 20 or 30 people (.) that was when I went up to [another town] (.) like a sales pitch (.) erm on a technical basis and there was a lot of erm unknown technical ability (**NIGEL**: Hmm) within the (.) within the audience (.) you know the (.) you know on the floor (.) people who had no knowledge of what I was talking about and people that had knowledge that erm (.) in many cases (.) one particular case that equalled mine and I was trying to sell to them that know as much about it as I do (**NIGEL**: Hmm) and you don't know if there's gonna be a question coming up that you can't answer (.) I mean (.) one or two who you feel <u>threatened by</u> (**NIGEL**: Right) purely because he's got (.) I know that that guy over there's got as much

knowledge of the subject as me (**NIGEL**: Hm m) if he wanted to try and erm (.) knock me down a peg or two (**NIGEL**: Right) if there's anyone in the room who can do it's that guy (.) so you feel threatened by it (.) you feel a bit vulnerable (.) and erm (.) like on the one hand (.) but on the other hand I'm getting up and dictating the flow and making sure the meeting and the presentation's going how I want (**NIGEL**: Hm m) I'm (.) I've got <u>control</u> to an extent of the meeting (.) (**NIGEL**: Okay) And like there's a bit of a buzz with that along with a risk (OU16: 13-14)

In Extract 2, Simon, a 30 year old white electrician, is responding to the interviewer's question about regional differences in being macho - is the North of Britain more macho than the South? In developing the argument that Northern men like to feel they are more manly than Southern men he describes his experience of working down South, going into pubs with a gang of contractors and showing those Southerners how to drink. The description of self within this anecdote, like Michael's, aligns self initially at least with a conventional masculine ideal and in those terms produces an exalted or heroic self.

Extract 2

NIGEL: So (.) I mean (.) are the northern regions (.) well Scotland and the northern regions more <u>macho</u> then?
[...]
SIMON: I know that in my job (.) because we travel around the country a fair bit working and you sort of (.) there is a thing of looking down on southerners as being wimps (**JAMES**: Oh yeah) yeah (.) yeah the thing is SSB (.) soft southern bastards and that's (.) you know (.) when you go down there (.) you know how we were saying that in the army your sort of (.) everybody's in there and in isolation (.) you're self contained whereas sometimes if we're working in London or in Kent or somewhere like that you would go out and you almost feel like (.) you know (.) right we're an invading army like (.) a load of contractors going out for a few bevies and you know (.) showing these southerners

how to drink (.) so I think (.) <u>in reality</u> the southerners are no more wimps than we are (.) but there is a bit of a (**PAUL**: North-South rivalry) yeah (.) we like to think that we're more manly possibly than them

(OU2: 9-10)

The final example comes from an interview with Graham, a 24 year old, white accountant, unemployed at the time of the interview, who plays rugby at an amateur level. In this extract, following a long conversation about the role of rugby in Graham's sense of masculinity the interviewer asks him to explain himself - how is it possible to enjoy playing such a violent game? In response Graham produces an account of his life as a prop forward which again constructs and draws on a heroic, invested, mostly unreflexive and conventionally masculine self.

Extract 3

NIGEL: But I imagine some people listening to you who don't play the game particularly (.) well almost exclusively (.) are gonna say erm (.) you know you're talking about (.) you're talking about not only punching people (.) not only head-butting (.) not only erm getting cuts and <u>giving</u> them erm you're (.) you're experiencing that as a matter of (.) of <u>course</u> every weekend (.) right? (.) erm and (.) and yet you sound (.) you know (.) as if you really love it? (**GRAHAM**: Yeah) now for someone who doesn't play the game (.) imagine someone coming over from another country where they don't play rugby (.) they're gonna say 'How on earth can you enjoy that?' (**GRAHAM**: Yeah) I mean that's the most amazing thing that you could subject yourself to that <u>and</u> subject someone else to it.

GRAHAM: But as you said it goes (.) you used the word sort of a trial of (.) I can't think what you said (.) (**NIGEL**: Courage) a challenge (.) a trial of courage (.) and that's what it comes <u>down</u> to (.) it comes down to you're pitting yourself against (.) in the <u>scrum</u> situation which is where I'm saying a lot of the stuff goes on (.) you're pitting yourself against one man erm (.) albeit you've got (.) you know you've got the whole

pack behind you (.) pushing (.) but in sort of (.) in technique and in sort of (.) as I say (.) the kidology of it and whatever (.) you've got basically one against one there and erm (.) in I mean to a certain extent (.) I mean (.) I <u>would</u> say this but the props are a very important part of the ball-winning process and you maybe think you've got a lot of status in that (.) possibly a lot of people who watch the game <u>don't</u> think that (.) they think that the game's won and lost by (**NIGEL**: Outside) yeah (.) the scrum half or whatever (.) but erm (.) I know (.) I can say that I think props are very important and my hooker'll say 'No, you're just there to hold me up (.) I do the work' (**NIGEL**: Sure) or whatever (.) but you do in yourself (.) you <u>have</u> a sort of self importance and you do (.) and you enjoy the challenge and (.) if you're (.) excuse the term (.) <u>dicked</u> about in the front row erm by the opposition (.) you aren't gonna stand for that (OU5: 13-14)

Although these segments of talk were produced by different people and contain a variety of discursive and rhetorical work, what groups them together is that each involves a particular production of self (among other productions of self) as part of a description of an episode (giving a presentation, going to the pub, playing rugby). This production of self is difficult to describe but involves investment (these are valued and emotionally charged self-presentations) where there is a coincidence between self and some heroic masculine persona. This method for self-presentation can be distinguished from other forms of description or autobiographical commentary which involve, for instance, less or no coincidence between self and self-description such as the splitting of self into a character and a voice which comments critically or 'objectively' on oneself (i.e. on what 'I am like'). As noted earlier, the involved or invested self-descriptions in this case conform to key elements in descriptions of hegemonic masculinity (e.g. man as courageous, physically tough and yet able to keep his cool).

One way of describing the pattern of identification occurring in these extracts is through the notion of *imaginary positioning*. Such positioning, which has been outlined in general terms in the work of Barthes and Lacan (c.f. Moriarty, 1991), is relatively common-place in discourse, especially when people take on socially

sanctioned images of ideal selves. For Lacan what is characteristic of the symbolic order, of discourse, is the constant creation of illusory subjects. As the human subject speaks, s/he produces herself or himself as full, complete, describable, as coincident with an image, as a fictional unity. In the symbolic, as we begin to utter, the self becomes a character, endowed with substance and unity as we say "I...", "I...", "I...". This process of taking on a character is seen as illusory by Lacan and Barthes because, in their view, it mistakes the actual nature of subjectivity, its restless, incomplete and distributed nature. It is also a false authorship since what feels like authentic self-production, original self-expression and self description is always ready-made, always social first and personal second. It is a selection from the panoply of selves already available to be donned. An external voice from without is thus mis-presented as a voice from within.

In developing this argument Lacan, and later Barthes, are making a general epistemological claim about the nature of discourse and subjectivity. Our aim in borrowing this notion of imaginary positions is to treat it in a somewhat different way; as an empirical phenomenon where the issue of how self description and identification are accomplished in talk remains an open question. It may prove more useful to reserve the notion of imaginary positions for a specific set of appearances of the "I" in talk rather than all instances of self description. However, we wish to note here that imaginary positioning is one way in which identification with the masculine is achieved and, when it is heroic, as in Extracts 1 to 3, this mode of identification fleshes out what might be meant by complicity with hegemonic masculinity.

Significantly, heroic masculine imaginary positioning was quite a rare event within our data. For the most part, it was not the principal method by which the men interviewed constructed themselves as masculine. This might seem surprising given that men's claims to power and authority appear so firmly bound up with the heroic. However, its rarity becomes more understandable when seen in ethnomethodological terms; participants may try out self-exalting strategies but they also have an interest in doing "being normal" (perhaps especially in a research interview) where normality includes procedures for presenting oneself which manage narcissism, keeping it in check through a mixture of modesty work, self deprecation, and so on.

'Ordinary' Positions

The second pattern around identification with the masculine in the transcripts presents a more ambiguous picture in relation to complicity with hegemonic masculinity. This response separates self from certain conventional or ideal notions of the masculine which, instead of being simply taken on as positive identities, get reconstructed as social stereotypes. In its place, what is emphasised here is the ordinariness of self; the self as normal, moderate or average.

Extract 4 below comes from an interview with Raj, a 37 year old Jordanian man resident in the UK who works as a contract engineer and John, a white British man, also 37 years old, who was employed as a mechanical maintenance engineer. In this sequence, the interviewer has spread out on the table six images of men cut from *Arena* magazine illustrating different styles of masculinity (see Appendix A) and asks if the interviewees can identify with any of them. Both John and Raj present themselves as without pretensions, as normal or ordinary kinds of men.

Extract 4

> **NIGEL**: Okay (.) now is there any one of those six images who you
> would <u>most</u> erm identify with? (.) is there anyone there that you would
> say (.) you know (.) <u>that's</u> most like me?
> **JOHN**: Out of those I'd probably go for 4 [Image of Tony Parsons]
> **NIGEL**: Number 4 (.) Raj (.) what do you think?
> **RAJ**: <u>Yes</u> number 4 it seems to be (.)
> **NIGEL**: Okay why him?
> **JOHN**: He looks the most normal (laughs)
> **RAJ**: Sorry?
> **JOHN**: He looks the most normal I suppose
> **RAJ**: Yes that's right.
> **JOHN**: In the dress and (.)
> **RAJ**: Yeah half way (.) he's middle of the road.
> **JOHN**: I suppose Mr Average you might say (.) yeah. (**RAJ**: Mm)

NIGEL: Okay (.) right so (.) is it true to say then that erm (.) you two both feel (.) or don't have a very strong sense of yourself as being masculine? (.) you know (.) it's not a erm (.) a very prominent part of your identity?

RAJ: I would say yeah (.) that's my understanding (.) yes (.) I'm not a masculine man

NIGEL: Hm m (.) John (.) what do you think?

JOHN: Yeah probably the same (.) yeah.

NIGEL: Yeah?

JOHN: I would (.) I would have said averagely so

NIGEL: Hm m (.) okay yeah (.) I wasn't saying that you feel that you're <u>un</u>masculine (**JOHN**: Yeah) but that it's not a very (.)

JOHN: What I'm saying is (.) it's not (.) if you took your (.) like your archetypal macho man (.) I'm not there (.) I'm just middle of the road (.) just er (.) average again I suppose

(OU17: 4-5)

This framing of self is a disavowal (for this discursive moment and in this context) of the imaginary position of the celebrated and exalted male hero. Of course, there are still imaginary positions in play here, the image of normality, of Mr Average, is just as iconic a figure as the characters put forward in the first three extracts. However, there is no narcissistic merging of self with an exalted masculinity. Indeed, in John's last turn, this very identity or subject position re-appears as a counter-point or Other. Heroic masculinity becomes repackaged as "macho" masculinity, constructed as alien, over the top or extreme.

Another example illustrating what we see as a cognate construction of masculine self can be found in the following exchange (Extract 5) between Martin, a white 35 year old unemployed musician and Phillip, a 26 year old white police officer. Early in the extract Martin introduces the idea of stereotypes to explain what masculinity might be. He describes the stereotype of masculinity as "doing daring things" like shooting and playing rugby. His argument is that, in terms of that particular definition, he is not masculine, but at the same time, he rejects the alternative identity, offered by the interviewer, of being unmasculine. In the final turn in this extract Martin leaves open

the question of how he sees it. Masculinity emerges as a more personal thing, a matter of how people choose to define it and whether they align with conventional conceptions depends on their upbringing.

Extract 5

NIGEL: The first thing I want to get at is this (.) this discussion is about men and masculinity (.) okay? (.) erm <u>men</u> we'd all understand as just being a straight forward biological category (.) erm (.) but masculinity is something different and a bit more complex (.) er have you any ideas initially about what masculinity is? [...]

PHILLIP: Er (.) not as such (.) I presume it's obviously to do with more macho type of images (**NIGEL**: Hmm) rather than you know <u>feminine</u> images

MARTIN: Or <u>stereotypical</u> images

NIGEL: Right (.) so okay (.) so you see it as a stereotype (.) yeah?

MARTIN: Well (.) playing rugby (.) you know (.) shooting (.) doing daring things and what have you

NIGEL: Okay (.) do you see yourselves as masculine men then?

MARTIN: No (.) not by that description no

NIGEL: So (.) what do you think you are (.) do you think you are unmasculine?

MARTIN: No (.) not unmasculine (.) no

NIGEL: So then would you argue that there are different forms of masculinity?

MARTIN: Well (.) perhaps it's a question of terms like (.) there's <u>male</u> (.) erm there is <u>sex</u> isn't there? (**NIGEL**: Hm m) male and female sex (**NIGEL**: Hmm) erm I suppose (.) you could judge masculinity by (.) how closely to accepted stereotypes you adhered erm in your background (.) your up-bringing would have a strong bearing on that

NIGEL: Okay (.) so the closer you are to Rambo (.) or Arnold Schwartzenegger then the more masculine you are? (.) and you sort of (.) as you come away from that stereotype (.) then you sort of <u>shade</u> away

towards the more (.) I don't know (.) the gender neutral (.) is that how
you see it?

PHILLIP: Er (.)

MARTIN: Well that's not how I see it (.) no (.) it depends through
which eyes it's being <u>seen</u> (.) isn't it? (.) I mean if somebody likes Rambo
(.) they would see that as being ultra-masculine wouldn't they?

(OU7: 5-6)

Stereotypes are one among many social psychological concepts which appear both in
lay and academic discourse. Experience with other data sets (Wetherell and Potter,
1992; Wetherell, 1996) suggests that such discourse is likely to emerge in contexts
where people are asked to reflexively consider their place in society. Often, the social
or the cultural realm is formulated as 'just stereotypes', in other words, as artificial,
contrived, unreal, and contrasted with what is ordinary, moderate, individual, non-
conformist, complex, real and normal. This construction typically builds a self out of
the gap or distinction between the individual (personal realm) and the social
(stereotypical realm). The contrast drawn in Extract 5, as with the last one, is
between ordinary, personal and normal masculinity and some version of the macho
man as an archetype, simplification, or extreme caricature.

The next extract indicates another aspect of self positioning which the general
interpretative repertoire of stereotypes allows. Jacob is a white 26 year old soldier,
working in army intelligence. Again the conversation is around the different photos of
men which the interviewer has spread on the table and the contrast is with an
exceptionally or extreme masculine image (glossed as pathetic) and a personal sense
of masculinity. Jacob positions himself in his final turn as an autonomous thinker,
someone who is above making broad social judgements and who tries to respond to
people as individuals rather than as social categories. This identity position, of course,
is one of the most positive imaginary positions produced by a stereotypes repertoire.

Extract 6

NIGEL: What I'd like you to do is just sort of take a look at these and try and evaluate them in terms of whether you think they're masculine (.) very masculine images or not very masculine images

JACOB: Erm (.) this is just purely what I think (**NIGEL**: Mm) (.) it's difficult

NIGEL: Well can you say maybe what you think is the <u>most</u> masculine or <u>least</u> or do you not see any sort of distinction?

JACOB: Well I personally I <u>don't</u> really because I (.) I (.) all this distinctions between the sort of different levels of masculinity doesn't really sort of appeal to me (.) I don't (.) I don't try and personally portray an exceptionally masculine image (**NIGEL**: Hmm) and if I see that sort of aspect in other blokes I sort of think well that's (.) a bit pathetic sometimes (.) I mean because I could (.) I mean looking at these (.) you can sort of see people saying (.) 'Well I think that's quite masculine' and 'He perhaps (.) Malcolm McLaren (laughs) looks a bit effeminate' (.) (**NIGEL**: Hmm) and certainly that one [early David Bowie] looks effeminate but to me (.) I (.)

NIGEL: So I mean (.) are you sort of expressing a reluctance to erm evaluate in that way?

JACOB: Yeah (.) I would say so yeah (.) I mean <u>yeah</u> (.) individual people I suppose I don't (.) I wouldn't look at someone and pass (laughs) you know it's not sort of part of my assessment of their character sort of (**NIGEL**: Hmm) deciding how masculine or how masculine or not effeminate or whatever

(OU13: 2-3)

At first sight it could be argued that the procedures evident in Extracts 4 to 6 for dealing with self-positioning in relation to masculinity are a good example of what could be classed as *resistance* to hegemonic masculinity. There are elements here of a critique of macho styles and a distinct separation of self from what could be specified as hegemonic or dominant. In contrast to this conclusion we would argue that the organisation of the stereotype repertoire with its emphasis on individualism, autonomy and rationality is not necessarily a challenge to gendered power relations, since it can also be seen as buying back into another well-established aspect of a

dominant masculine ideal (see Seidler, 1989; 1994). Our point is not so much that what initially looked like resistance turns out to be another form of complicity. Rather our argument is that a simple dichotomy between resistant and complicit practices is not sufficiently subtle to capture the complex production of gendered selves which occurs in men's talk. This is a point to which we will return later in the discussion.

Rebellious Positions

The third and final pattern evident in the transcripts also looks superficially like resistance to hegemonic masculinity. Again, we wish to take a more qualified perspective here. In this pattern men define themselves in terms of their unconventionality and the imaginary positions involve the flaunting of social expectations.

In Extract 7, Sam a white, 42 year old psychiatric nurse manager and Harry, a white, 53 year old brick-layer, are responding to the interviewer's standard questions. Harry's response is straight-forward or matter-of-fact but Sam makes the distinction, already noted in other extracts, between being masculine and being a "macho man". He describes himself variously in the course of the extract as comfortable with his male identity, as secure in relation to it and as having "all sides" to his personality. In response to the interviewer's probing about the nature of security and insecurity, Sam produces an account of himself as unembarrassed by taking on activities which are constructed as unusual for his gender, such as knitting and cooking. He appears to be invested in such unconventionality.

Extract 7

    NIGEL: Erm do you feel yourselves to be masculine men?
    HARRY: I think so yeah
    NIGEL: You you think you feel as though you <u>are</u>?
    HARRY: Yeah
    NIGEL: Do you?

SAM: I feel <u>secure</u> that I'm masculine but I'm not a macho man (**NIGEL**: Hm m) I'm quite comfortable with where I fit in the spectrum of things yeah

NIGEL: Okay (.) it's interesting that you talk about security (.) how (.) how might you be made <u>ins</u>ecure then?

SAM: I think somebody (.) if you take my background of nursing (.) it's er a female orientated profession (.) but erm I <u>could</u> feel insecure if people felt that that implies something about me but I don't because it doesn't mean anything (.) it's erm (.) I know where I fit into things so I'm not anxious about that

NIGEL: Right but er (.) have you come across a lot of people who erm see that as indicative as something that's less than masculine?

SAM: Yeah (.) plenty of people I think er (.) some of my interests er (.) people are quite surprised if I tell them I can knit for example (**NIGEL:** Hm m) I can't knit very well but I know how to knit (.) and it doesn't embarrass me to say I can knit erm whereas a lot of people I know would (.) would deny it at all costs because they would feel that it implied there was something effeminate about them

NIGEL: Right (.) so why doesn't it embarrass you?

SAM: Well I've no reason to be embarrassed by it (.) I can't knit as well as my wife can but I can cook as well as she can (.) and I can do other things as well as she can which are (.) more likely to be seen as female pursuits but er it (.) it doesn't make me feel insecure (.) but I <u>do</u> know some people deny those sort of things because it might make them feel that way (.) but erm (**NIGEL**: Sure) I'm quite comfortable that I am male and have all sides to my er personality really

(OU4: 2-3)

A similar pattern can be seen in Extracts 8, 9 and 10 below in which Dave, a 39 year old, white, manager of a timber company, responds first to a discussion with other participants about whether it is masculine to wear jewellery and then, in Extracts 9 and 10, to a debate about the effects of sixties pop culture on men's clothes and appearance.

Extract 8

DAVE: The only reason I don't wear jewellery is purely and simply I'm a wimp and I don't want the pain of having my ears pierced (Laughter) I used to wear a ring when I was married and no doubt would wear one again if my partner wanted me to wear one (.) um I do quite often wear sort of coloured string bracelets (**NIGEL**: Uh Uh) and in the summer especially I wear a lot of very loose (.) um flowing bright clothes probably going back to my old hippie background if you like (.) so I've got no taboos there really

(OU1: 3)

Extract 9

DAVE: I remember I ended up becoming a roady for some local pop groups er back in the late sixties (.) early seventies and er (.) I grew my hair long (.) in fact it was that long I could sit on it and once it got past shoulder length it dropped into ringlets and I used to wear all bright clothes and it was absolutely <u>great</u> when I used to walk down the street er with some of my male friends that didn't have their hair quite so long I used to get lots of wolf whistles because I'd got a very slim waist (.) a very effeminate looking back end if you like (.) um (.) if that's not sexist (.) and um (.) I mean I used to really enjoy it (.) the only reason I ended up getting my hair cut really was to keep a job which I wanted as I was getting married

NIGEL: So you were forced in the end to?

DAVE: In the end (.) yes (.) um (.) I mean (.) I still go occasionally barmy and sort of grow it a little bit (.) but nothing like I used to (**NIGEL**: Hhm mm) it gets a bit too much unruly now

(OU1: 23-4)

Extract 10

22

DAVE: I always remember my father and his male friends and such as his mother and his mother's generation always considered the way I dressed back in sort of sixty-nine onwards very very effeminate (.) they considered me to be extremely effeminate

NIGEL: Did that um (.) have negative consequences for your relationship with them?

DAVE: Um (.) to a degree yes [1.0] as soon as I used to sort of turn up at my Gran's and my Aunty's they used to say 'Oh God you know you've come dressed like this again!' (.) and I used to say 'Well its quite simple (.) I'll stop coming' and I stopped going and I did continue not going for twenty years or more (**NIGEL:** Really?) I mean there was no need (.) I got er (.) enough pressure outside there in the world without sort of walking into a row that's not of your (.) I say of my own making (.) I suppose if I had dressed in their idea of conformity it would have been okay (.) but I wasn't prepared to do it (.) I felt very good as I was dressed (OU1: 28-9)

Dave constructs himself as a man without taboos who is proud of his non-conformity. He notes how he felt good being dressed in an unconventional or effeminate manner and indeed, throughout the interview, this stance of being a person who is not afraid to do what feels good or right to him rather than what is conventionally expected of men is presented as a central part of his character.

A final example of this positioning as a 'gender rebel' can be found below in Extract 11. Here Greg, a 30 year old, white, manager for a brewery, begins by making a distinction between what masculinity might mean to him as a result of his socialisation and other possible meanings. He goes on to argue that masculinity is an individual matter, for him it is a case of being himself regardless of what is socially expected. He explicitly links this to a non-conformist attitude derived from his days as a punk rocker and adduces several examples which support his claim for unconventionality such as being prepared to cry, support his wife and as the main caretaker for any future children.

Extract 11

NIGEL: Okay (.) what I'd like to start with is erm a comment really about that these discussions are on men and masculinity (.) erm so I'm making a distinction between on the one hand a biological category (**GREG**: Right) and on the other hand something that's a little more tricky or difficult to define (.) so I'd like to start with your ideas on what you think masculinity is

GREG: Mm (.) difficult (.) I think masculinity is (.) is almost a (.) it's probably (.) to me what it means to me is it's something that is (.) is not presented as natural (.) it's something that's represented to (.) to me as an individual by a number of factors (.) starting from a kid through the family (.) through friends and (.) and er sort of peer groups as it were and through work (.) so you pick up ideas of what masculinity means (**NIGEL**: Hm m) from let's say society in general (.) that's how I would see it (.) erm and if you look at what I would consider to be (.) I don't know what masculinity is (.) I know what it's represented as and if I looked at that I would see the strong erm man (.) very little emotion shown (.) erm really just a strong sort of security figure (.) somebody who's gonna look after the family and the wife erm but predominantly being almost hard to the point of no emotion (**NIGEL**: Right) erm quite a cold description but that (.) that's what it means to me through my sort of socialisation process shall I say

NIGEL: Hmm (.) okay (.) erm an interesting distinction between what you say masculinity is and what it is represented as (.) what are you trying to keep away from saying?

GREG: Well, if (.) what I believe (.) I think masculinity is represented to me or has been throughout my life as what I've just said (**NIGEL**: Hmm) what I think it is (.) is (.) it's har (.) it's probably very difficult to define (.) I think masculinity is dependent on the individual (.) if that's not a cop out (.) I think each individual could look at it differently (.) I believe masculinity is being myself erm not (.) I've got this non-conformist streak in me from my punk days but not conforming to those stereotypes of masculinity erm if I want a damn good cry I'll have a cry and if I want to be supportive of my wife I'll be supporting with my wife (.) if I was (.)

you know if my wife had a good job for instance and we decided to have

children I'd be quite happy to stay at home and look after the children (.)

so I don't think masculinity is (.) is erm (.) is necessarily about being the

secure figure (.) being the hard man (.) I don't see it as that way (.) I

<u>personally</u> see it as er (.) as a softer sort of image (.) I think it's

represented as a different thing totally (.) but my <u>personal </u>opinion is it's a

much softer sort of approach

(OU12: 1-3)

What is striking about these examples of rejecting macho masculinity is that they involve a highly privatised or individualised rebellion. Uniformly, unconventionality is understood as a character trait rather than a political strategy. Furthermore, this character trait is understood in standard humanistic psychological terms as a matter of feeling good about oneself. It is about feeling comfortable, a case of being so well-integrated as a human being that one is not afraid to act in terms of personal preferences. Once again, just like the construction of Mr Average, being a gender non-conformist trades upon the hegemonic values of autonomy and independence. As a consequence, what is being celebrated in this discourse is not so much knitting, cooking and crying *per se,* but the courage, strength and determination of these men *as men* to engage in these potentially demeaning activities.

Discussion

This paper has described three distinct and highly regular procedures for self-positioning found among a diverse sample of men. The first of these procedures suggests a relatively straightforward basis to the reproduction of male power as men act out and take on some of the imaginary characters conventionally associated with hegemonic masculinity. The two remaining procedures suggest a more mixed pattern which could either undercut or bolster male power (or do both) depending on the social circumstances in which they are instantiated. There are some positive as well as negative indications here from a feminist point of view. Some men do appear to be abandoning macho masculinity. Yet their alternative identities give emphasis to characteristics which have in the past also worked in gender oppressive ways such as

authoritativeness, rationality and independence. Thus the rebellious positions could be used as a sanction for new social practices and yet they are also used here to celebrate autonomy from social conventions, where this autonomy can be heard, not just as a legacy of liberal Enlightenment discourse, but as a mode of representation long colonised by men (c.f. Seidler, 1989; 1994).

What are the implications of our analysis for the concept of hegemonic masculinity? Connell argues that gender power is reproduced in oppressive forms because men are complicit with hegemonic masculinity understood as an aspirational and largely unreachable set of social norms and ideals. Most men, Connell suggests, can never personally embody hegemonic masculinity but they support it, are regulated by it, and use it to judge other men's conduct.

What seems worth keeping from this account is the notion of hegemonic forms of intelligibility - the notion that men's conduct is regulated by shared forms of sense making which are consensual although contested, maintain male privilege, which are largely taken for granted, and which are highly invested. What we can't accept, however, is the common assumption that hegemonic masculinity is just one style or there is just one set of ruling ideas (most often understood as macho masculinity). Rather, there is a multiplicity of hegemonic sense-making relevant to the construction of masculinity identities, and in addition these forms of sense-making do not always seem to regulate through their unreachable and aspirational status. Sense-making is complex, contradictory and full of competing claims and dilemmas (Billig et al., 1989). Furthermore, we suggest that we need a much more detailed account of the psychology involved. It is not sufficient to say, for example, that hegemonic masculinity is reproduced because men conform to social norms. We need a more elaborated account of what we mean by 'norms' and of the process of 'take-up' of those norms.

To address these points in turn. As we noted, one of the surprising findings from our research is how infrequently in relative terms our sample engaged in heroic masculinity - that is tried out the highly invested imaginary positions encapsulating the key characteristics usually attributed to hegemonic masculinity (strength, boldness, winning challenges, cool toughness, etc). More commonly men portrayed

themselves as 'ordinary' in relation to a macho stereotype dismissed as extreme, over the top, a caricature, seen as a sign of immaturity, and as a sign of a man who had not developed his own personal style or who was not comfortable with who he was.

Yet we would not want to conclude from this that these 'ordinary' men are beyond gender power simply because they do not seem (in this discursive moment) to aspire to the most common definition of hegemonic masculinity. Instead, paradoxically, one could say that sometimes one of the most effective ways of being hegemonic, or being a 'man', may be to demonstrate one's distance from hegemonic masculinity. Perhaps what is most hegemonic is to be non-hegemonic! - an independent man who knows his own mind and who can 'see through' social expectations. What seems to be happening here is that the realm of hegemonic masculinity can not be sealed off from other hegemonic ways of being a person in Western societies such as demonstrating individuality and autonomy from social forces. These different requirements for how to be a man are in conflict and are a potential source of ideological dilemmas. In everyday talk, recognised social ideals (such as macho man) can act both as a source for invested identity and as an 'Other' to position oneself against. This confusion - men may be most involved in reproducing the hegemonic when they position themselves against the hegemonic masculine ideal - is resolved if we accept that the organised forms of intelligbility which make up the hegemonic in any particular social site and period are multiple, varied and much more complex than current accounts of hegemonic masculinity suggest.

The men we interviewed were engaged in accomplishing a wide variety of identity positions. They were simultaneously constructing themselves as reasonable human beings, as individuals with certain reputations and histories and (usually) as co-operative and willing research subjects. Most discursive situations require this kind of attentiveness to multiple positioning. It would be interesting to examine the occasions when pressures to be a good Enlightenment liberal individual, for instance, enforce, intensify and sometimes contradict gendered self-presentations. On some occasions, claiming hegemonic masculinity can offend against and clash too strongly with other valued modes of self-presentation. A focus simply on this mode of self-presentation is too narrow, therefore, when we try for a complete understanding of what it currently means to be a man.

Connell's account of the discursive/ideological field is thus too neat. We need to consider the multiple and inconsistent discursive resources available for constructing hegemonic gender identities, and, second, we need to allow for the possibility that complicity and resistance can be mixed together. We suggested that it would be difficult to describe the men we interviewed as either complicit or resistant. Indeed, it would be more useful analytically to see complicity and resistance not in either/or terms. It is probably more useful to re-position complicity or resistance as labels to describe the effects of discursive strategies mobilised in contexts as opposed to labels for types of individual men.

Connell in his work leaves vague the question of whether hegemonic masculinity is a relative position in a discursive field or a particular content and set of representations. No doubt this is left vague because it is both. But in our view most emphasis needs to be placed on the exact mobilisation of accounts within a discursive field rather than on sematic content defined a priori. Hegemony is a version of the world which is reality defining. Such versions are plural, inconsistent, achieved through discursive work, constantly needing to brought into being over and over again. That is the chief character of hegemony rather than its definition as an already known and fixed set of ruling ideas. It is a relative position in a struggle for taken for grantedness.

This is not to advocate, however, political quietism, or to suggest that feminist struggles against unequal social relations should be abandoned because practical ideologies turn out to be more chaotic, complex and fragmented than previous theory imagined. Indeed we think there are a number of advantages to focusing on the effects of discursive practices when developing feminist political strategies for the ideological domain. First, such an approach suggests the realistic scope for change and indicates further potential for practical and persuasive political rhetoric. The rebellious and ordinary positions are mixed, we noted. Their effectivity does depend on their mobilisation. We do need to be more cautious, we can't conclude that the battle is won because men in some contexts admit to 'being comfortable with their feminine side', and we can't see all manner of positive omens in men's construction of macho masculinity as a caricature, but it is also possible to imagine how the familiar and seemingly acceptable repertoires of liberal humanism and heroic individual

rebellion might be re-worked in combination with other discourses to produce persuasive new imaginary positions for men. Such an approach fits well with Lynne Segal's (1990) emphasis on a feminist politics based on dealing with shades of gray - recognising the positive as well as the negative elements in the diverse social practices which constitute men and masculinity (see also Connell, 1995).

To turn to our second main theme. We have also tried to elaborate in this paper a model of the social psychological process involved in identification with hegemonic forms of sense-making - a dimension we suggested was left ambiguous in Connell's work. First, we propose that Connell's norms are in fact discursive practices. Second, we suggest that identification is a matter of the *procedures in action* through which men live/talk/do masculinity and as we have tried to demonstrate these procedures are intensely local (situationally realised) and global (dependent on broader conditions of intelligibility). They represent the social within the psychological. Such members' methods (in ethnomethodological terminology) are part of a kit bag of recognisable ways of self-presentation which are available to competent members of society and which always need to be accomplished in context (worked up in this case to deal with the language game of being interviewed). What we mean by character or identity is partly the differential, persistent and idiosyncratic inflection of these procedures over time in the course of a life.

These procedures are a particular class of discursive practice which we call *psycho-discursive*. Psycho-discursive practices occur in talk (hence discursive) and also implicate a psychology. They construct a psychology in the sense that through the momentary and more sustained use of these procedures men acquire a vocabulary of motives and a character with particular emotions, desires, goals and ambitions (see Edwards, 1997 for a more elaborated account of this premise of discursive psychology). Such practices are thus also self-formative or onto-formative in the sense described by Foucault (Rose, 1996). The man, for instance, who describes himself as original, as beyond stereotypes, as having a personal worked out philosophy of masculinity or indeed as just ordinary and average has not escaped the familiar tropes of gender. He is precisely enmeshed by convention; subjectified, ordered and disciplined at the very moment he rehearses the language of personal taste, unconventionality and autonomy, or ordinariness and normality.

The notion, then, of the imaginary positioning of self as one typical psycho-discursive practice provides a concrete route into specifying and then studying the norms which make up hegemonic masculinity. It specifies an empirical site for investigation and can explain the conundrum of men who appear to be both hegemonic and non-hegemonic, complicit and resistant at the same time. In addition this is a reformulation which (through the broader theory of discursive psychology) begins to explain the process of 'take-up' and the reproduction of the social in the psychological. It is a formulation which allows the investigation of varied content across social sites and thus pluralises the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Some of the ambiguities in the notion of hegemonic masculinity noted earlier can thus be resolved. It could be argued that the concept has been particularly influential precisely because of its elasticity and lack of specificity and this may still be so for large-scale sociological, cultural, anthropological and historical investigations of forms of masculinity but not, we think, for social psychological analysis.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A

Six images of men were taken from the Autumn (November) 1991 edition of *Arena* magazine and used as prompts for discussion. Numbered 1 - 6, they featured the following representations:

1 - Cropped head & shoulders shot of a rugged-looking Sean Penn lighting up a Camel cigarette.

2 - 1970s image of David Bowie sporting make-up and nail varnish, cropped just below the chest.

3 - Half length black & white photo of Iain Webb (fashion director, Harpers & Queen) with short, slicked back blonde hair and black snake-skin jacket.

4 - 3/4 length black & white picture of Tony Parsons wearing a suit, shirt and tie.

5 - Half length black & white image of Malcolm McLaren also in a suit and tie. He is seen smoking a cigarette and sports a fairly wild hairdo.

6 - Close-up black & white mug shot of an older David Bowie (probably from late 1980s) showing him with short slicked hair and slight 5 o'clock shadow.

Appendix B

Transcription Notation

(.) Short untimed pause in the flow of talk

[...] Material omitted by the authors.

[text] Clarificatory information added by the authors.

text Word(s) emphasized by speakers.

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