

Scripting Masculinity

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abstract

There is an increasingly familiar genre in gender and organization studies, one that draws upon post-structuralism to stress the fluidity, impermanence and multiplicity of gender identities. This genre seeks to move away from an essentialist and dualist analysis of men and women as biological beings, and instead focuses on the performative nature of gender identities, the ways these are produced, maintained, and can be disrupted. In this paper, we offer a critique of this ‘masculinity genre’ by arguing that its compulsory claims about fluidity and multiplicity are undermined by essentialist assumptions. Thus the masculinity genre seems to be ineluctably drawn back into reproducing enduring clichés that articulate femininity around stereotypical images of intimacy, caring for others, bodily engagement, and masculinity around control, competitiveness and instrumental rationality. Whilst we do not wish to undermine the significance of gender inequality, we suggest that the incoherence that plagues writing on masculinity obfuscates the analysis of gender oppression. The scripted language and soft rhetoric that are deployed have little purchase on ‘hard’ gender effects and the strength of feelings that gendered practices may elicit.

Introduction

There is an increasingly familiar form in gender studies, one that takes its inspiration from post-structuralism and that seeks to ‘reflexively’ engage with the production of masculine and feminine identities. This writing shifts the focus of analysis from men and women towards masculinities and femininities with the intention of rejecting the simplistic dualism and essentialism that have plagued gender analysis; it invites us to explore the production of gender identities in terms of “discursively constituted modes of being” (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998: 8).

This movement from ‘men as the perpetrators of the inequality of opportunities for women’, to ‘masculinities’ frees us from essentialism because there is no relationship of equivalence between men and masculinity (or women and femininity). Instead, gender identities are shifting and fragmented. Therefore by rejecting the reliance on gender as essence in producing an account of fluid gender identities, recent writing on masculinity has sought to emphasise the performative nature of gender and the ways it is produced and maintained through everyday practices. This refutation of essentialism and adoption of post-structuralist accounts of identities is intended to help us understand the

pervasive yet contingent nature of gender, as well as the ways in which it could be disrupted.

In the following we will argue that much of this writing rests on unreflexive templates consisting of certain obligatory points of passage. These accounts are found to rely on an almost compulsory usage of terminology that stresses the ‘fragmented’, ‘multiple’, ‘complex’, ‘insecure’, ‘shifting’ nature of identity. We show that the constructivist language that underpins their theoretical groundwork does not allow the analytical work that is proposed, that these conceptual formulations do not have purchase on phenomena that require explanation and, unhappily, are incapable of conveying the real effects of gendered practice. Many writers on gender appear trapped between the seductions of a dominant theoretical orientation and the desire to say something meaningful about the effects of a particular social problem. As a result any attempt to legitimately criticise social and organizational realities are undermined by these inconsistencies. Statements that gender is multiple, unstable, fragmented, fluid and so on, become divorced from the analysis that follows and, as a consequence, are dissolved of meaning. The result is a form of ‘clichéd constructivism’ (Brubaker and Cooper, 2001) relying on standard signifiers and theoretical gestures towards the fluidity of gendered identity.

We recognise that there already have been some critiques of the concept of masculinity that question its usefulness in understanding power relations between men and women. For example, Whitehead (1999) argues that the notion of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ masks the various meanings and practices attached to masculinity in various cultural and historical contexts. However, he seems to want to hold on to a notion of masculinity as produced discursively and open to multiple, fluid, contingent expressions. As we will discuss below, we take issue with such an articulation. We argue that attempts to reconcile the supposed fluidity and multiplicity of masculinities, with some dominant form of masculinity that may explain men domination have proved to be an analytical dead end.

Others have challenged the usefulness of the very concept of masculinity (rather than hegemonic masculinity) by pointing to its loose, slippery, confused usage (e.g. Clatterbaugh, 1998; Hearn, 1996, 2004; McMahon, 1993). For example, Hearn (2004) asks why it is necessary to hold on to the concept of masculinity when it has come to refer to many different things (e.g. cultural images, everyday practices, institutional structures...), and suggests refocusing critical studies of men on ‘men’s practices’ rather than masculinity. MacInnes (1998, 2004) has also criticised the analytical purchase of ‘masculinity’ by suggesting that it is not clear how it becomes attached to men; and that if we accept that it can be practised by men and women, and that it is multiple and changing, it can easily degenerate into a catch all term for all the characteristics that are socially frowned upon, or that “we don’t like” (MacInnes, 2004: 324).

But for all these criticisms, masculinity seems to have retained its appeal in much of the gender and organization literature. Whilst we concur with some of the criticisms that have been made about the loose and incoherent usage of the term, this looseness has served to mask deeper flaws in the theoretical articulation of ‘masculinity’; and as we argue in the paper, these theoretical inconsistencies have damaging consequences for

understanding and addressing unequal power relations between men and women. The looseness of the concept enables authors within the genre to produce work that, on critical scrutiny, appears not only theoretically incoherent but also politically disabling. And we feel that the persistent usage of the concept of masculinity calls for further critical examination.

Therefore we argue that this masculinity 'genre' has acquired such familiarity that its moves have become not only obligatory but also beyond scrutiny as its theoretical incoherence becomes more and more deeply buried under the weight of endless repetition. The consequence is that gender identities appear increasingly scripted; rather than being indicative of multiplicity, fluidity and ambivalence, they actually seem immutable as the analysis to which they are subjected is inexorably drawn back to crude stereotypes. Hence, masculinity seems trapped in its 'hegemonic' form that aligns it with stereotypical images of control, competitiveness and instrumental rationality. Organizations become the expression of masculinity. Femininity is confined to stereotypical images of intimacy, caring for other, bodily engagement and so on. Displays of male bonding can only be an expression of 'simulated intimacy' subjected to masculine instrumental rationality. Women succeed in organizations by suppressing their femininity and displaying masculine behaviour; when organizations call upon 'feminine' characteristics it is only to subject them to the masculine logic of instrumental rationality.

However in the critique that follows we do not wish to reduce the significance of gender inequalities either as felt experiences or as a central part of contemporary organizational life. We are not proposing to undermine the relevance of gendered processes in understanding organization. And certainly we have no desire to mount a defence of men and masculinities from feminist criticism. So, whilst we intend to be critical of much writing on masculinity, we are not against the broad intent of much of this work. In fact, we will argue that this intent is poorly served by the rhetorical strategies that are predominant. The inconsistencies and contradictions present serve only to obscure any connection with the real effects of gendered practices.

Consequently in the first part of the paper, we unpack the arguments deployed in the masculinity genre and seek to highlight their theoretical incoherence by pointing at the various ways in which essentialism surreptitiously creeps back into the picture. Secondly, we discuss the consequences of this theoretical incoherence. Our argument is that the articulation of masculinity is not only incoherent, but also serves to dilute or efface the gendered practices and power relations it claims to illuminate. The scripted language in which it wraps up gender identities underplays the strengths of feelings gendered practices elicit, and eliminates the grounds on which we might formulate a response.

The Denial of Essentialism

We begin therefore by exposing the theoretical inconsistency at the heart of much present writing on gender. Despite gestures towards post-structuralism and a

compulsory anti-essentialism, essentialism seems to relentlessly creep back. This incoherence, as we will show, is played out in different ways: the fluidity of gender identities gives way to enduring clichés of femininity and masculinity; multiple masculinities are all but effaced by a singular focus on a ‘hegemonic form’; femininity becomes aligned with intimacy and authenticity; and masculinity, through its attachment to control and rationality, becomes the embodiment of organization. Whilst these points could be discussed with reference to different texts in the masculinity genre, we have chosen to illustrate each of our critiques with one or two particular, and in some cases influential, examples in order to provide some consistency to our arguments.

Enduring clichés

The double movement of, on the one hand, asserting the fluidity of gender identity, and, on the other, resorting to conventional gender clichés can be illustrated with Metcalfe and Linstead’s (2003) critique of the (under)theorising of gender in the teamworking literature. The authors claim to undertake a “post-structuralist feminist reading” (*ibid.*: 98) that “stresses plurality rather than unity, and in particular rejects the categorisation of women as a homogenous group, and that femininity and femaleness are unitary conceptions that are associated with the biological sex of women” (*ibid.*: 98).

However, this intended approach can be contrasted with their specific analysis of team theorising. Such theorising is built, it is claimed, “upon masculinist discourses that emphasise managing control and performance, with the ‘soft’ components of teams, the sensitivities and intimacies of team actors being marginalized and subordinated” (*ibid.*: 96). The authors proceed to attach these ‘soft managerial practices’ to the ‘feminine’; but nevertheless attack the teamwork literature for failing to recognise such sensitivities as ‘feminine’. This failure is seen as another mark of team theorising privileging masculinity: “Theoretically effective teamwork rests on the collaborative and supportive work attitudes that we often label as female but team theorising has not explicitly labelled the feminine or female as such nor challenged the way that team theorising is underpinned by masculinist discourses” (*ibid.*: 97).

Despite the alleged fluid, fragmented and shifting nature of gender identities, the authors are not only able to easily pin down particular attributes that are clearly ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’, but also to condemn approaches that do not duly label ‘collaborative and supportive work attitudes’ as feminine. In doing so, they imply that femininity has thus been robbed of one of its essential qualities. Moreover, when these ‘soft’ qualities do get attached to the feminine in organizational attempts at cultural change, such moves only reflect ‘masculinist ideologies’. Thus, the authors present a piece of case study analysis of an organization where human resource strategies attempt to privilege feminine attributes as part of a development process to support change. The research reveals that, “as part of the process of cultural and structural change, women’s feminine capital was consciously exploited to support these restructuring activities. The privileging of the feminine therefore served to endorse stereotypical views about women’s characteristics and skills, in essence their collaborative and supportive work attitudes” (*ibid.*: 107).

But these “gendered processes are, however, underpinned and maintained by masculinist ideologies of organization and management” (*ibid.*: 107). Notwithstanding the incoherence of the analysis which at one point attacks team theorising for failing to acknowledge ‘soft qualities’ as feminine (as if these were inherently so), and later criticises organizational attempts defining these same ‘soft qualities’ as feminine for endorsing stereotypical gender images, the analysis presented in the paper seems actually to undermine the proclaimed fluidity of gender. In fact, gender identities seem to provide pretty solid lines of analysis – everything can be inscribed in their terms. Soft qualities are ‘feminine’, teamwork theorising by privileging control and performance is ‘masculine’, denying the femininity of soft qualities is a display of masculinist discourse, whilst explicitly drawing upon ‘feminine’ qualities in organizations is another example of masculinist instrumental strategy.

Indeed there is another way in which essentialism resurfaces in the authors’ analysis of gender identity. This is evident in the case study analysis of a woman, Nia, a site manager in the company. Nia’s femaleness was seen by the company as offering the skills and attributes to challenge the dominant ‘laddish’ working practices and cultures. However, Nia was regarded by colleagues and subordinates to have a leadership style that was masculine and authoritarian. She preferred to use seemingly ungendered language to describe her work like ‘managing to objectives’ and ‘working to the best of my ability’. For the authors, this involves “downplaying the subjectivities of being female” (*ibid.*: 111); “in conforming to the traditional masculinist interpretations of effective management Nia constructs and re-constructs her identity by *suppressing her feminine emotions and sensibilities*” (*ibid.*: 111, emphasis added). Here women, femininity and a particular form of ‘emotions and sensibilities’ appear to be inherently attached to each other.

In sum, it is difficult to sense how this analysis of organizational circumstances is consistent with a ‘post-structuralist reading’. Firstly, femininity and masculinity are unquestioningly associated with stereotypical gender images; masculinity is defined in terms of control, performance, instrumental intentions, whilst femininity is associated with ‘soft qualities’ such as collaborative and supportive work attitudes. Secondly, the analysis provides no escape from gender dualism for everything can be marked as masculine or feminine. Finally, despite the authors’ initial rejection of the association of femininity with the biological sex of women, women displaying masculine behaviour are somehow seen as being untrue to themselves, as having to suppress their feminine sensibilities. Thus, it seems that the feminine has an authentic core, which should be given voice and freed from instrumental appropriation. On the other hand, masculinity, being defined in terms of instrumentality, seems deprived of the possibility of authenticity.

We shall come back to this problematic alignment between femininity, authenticity and the female sex. But first we want to debunk another of the premises of the masculinity genre: that of ‘multiple gender identities’.

Gender identities: Multiplicity and hegemony

Writing on masculinity tends to start from the premise that masculinity is socially constructed, and that what counts as masculine varies according to cultural and historical contexts (e.g. Connell, 1995; Kerfoot and Knights, 1998; Knights and Kerfoot, 2004; Whitehead and Barrett, 2004). Therefore we would expect to find different forms of masculinities in different social and cultural contexts at different times. Indeed, many writers have offered various categorisations of masculinities (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Mishkind *et al.*, 1986). Yet, after these compulsory gestures towards multiplicity, we are often left with singular forms of femininity and masculinity (Wicks and Mills, 2000). For instance, Kerfoot and Knights (1998) explicitly draw upon, “a selected reading of post-structuralist feminism” (*ibid.*: 8) to stress the fluid and multiple nature of masculinity. Thus,

In making masculinity problematic and exploring masculinity as a social rather than biological concept, we are thus concerned to explore how and in what manner masculinity is constituted at given moments and in certain settings. For part of our concern is to interrogate contemporary designations of masculinity in contrast to those writers and commentators who accept them as given... Nor, despite using the term masculinity in the singular (stylistic license), is any masculine identity identical with another: there are a multiplicity of masculinities and, as some postmodernists might argue, each masculine identity is only as ‘good’ as its next encounter. (*ibid.*: 11-12)

However this multiplicity of masculine identities seems to quickly get reduced to ‘one dominant form’, for whilst “what ‘counts’ as masculine may shift over historical time periods, over the lifetime of individuals and in different spatial, social and cultural contexts” (*ibid.*: 11), it is possible to recognise a “predominant form that is elevated and privileged in everyday life” (*ibid.*: 8). This privileged form is “aggressively competitive, goal driven and instrumental in its pursuit of success” (*ibid.*: 8), it privileges “rational forms of knowledge” informed “by the desire to control the world” (*ibid.*: 13). Femininity also has its predominant mode which unsurprisingly gets aligned with stereotypical images such as ‘the care of others’ and the ‘displays of social and sexual passivity’.

So, for all intents and purposes, and despite the gestures towards multiplicity, fluidity, and impermanence, gender identity emerges as rather fixed, stable and singular. It is hard to see how masculinity can take other forms than its ‘hegemonic expression’ from the analysis presented, or to believe the authors’ claim that “each masculine identity is only as ‘good’ as its next encounter” since only the ‘dominant’ aggressive, instrumental, rational form seems to deserve attention. The ‘hegemonic form of masculinity’ seems to act as a device to enable the authors to speak substantively about gender, whilst preserving the reluctance to speak of gender identities as fixed or tied to sex. Unfortunately, and crucially, the deployment of ‘hegemonic’ masculinity does not allow for clear differentiation from essentialism. Indeed, the behaviours and characteristics it indexes are rather similar to the crude stereotypes the authors warn us against. The vacillation between these two contradictory positions, on the one hand, seeing gender as entirely contingent, and, on the other, representing only a particular ‘dominant’ manifestation requires some reconciliation.

One possible conclusion is that although masculine identities are *potentially* multiple, in practice, they take one hegemonic form that resonates with essentialist accounts of gender. But if these other forms of masculinity are not socially practised (and the authors provide no evidence that they are), and if as the authors suggest masculinities are socially and discursively constituted, we are forced to ask in what sense are these other forms of masculinity ‘masculine’? Where do they acquire their ‘masculinity’ if not in social practices?

Kerfoot and Knights (1998) suggest another way of reconciling potentially multiple forms of masculinity with their ‘hegemonic expression’. They point out that “Despite a diverse range of possibilities and variability through time and context, the difference, it seems to us, between identities grounded in a stereotypical femininity and those grounded in an equivalent masculinity revolves around the issue of control” (*ibid.*: 16). So, it seems, there may be multiple masculinities, but all are defined in terms of their desire to control; multiplicity can only be expressed within the confines of what appears as the fixed, stable, singular essence of ‘masculinity’ centred on control.

Indeed the authors themselves talk about ‘invariability’ in a paragraph worth quoting in full:

Invariably, masculinity as the embodied experience of male gendered identity reflects and reproduces an insecurity about the self that seeks its resolution self-defeatingly by a continuous process of achieving social confirmation through the approbation and approval of others. It is continuous in that each resolution is temporary, and the struggle for a secure sense of self in a masculine identity is compulsive, driven by the competitive conditions in which winning one thing is a mere stimulus to go on and win something larger and more elusive. In contrast to femininity, many men so lack a sense of their own self-esteem as to be forever proving themselves, desperately striving without ever really experiencing fulfilment. (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998: 16)

The use of the word ‘invariably’ is striking. If we take it to mean ‘unchangeable’, ‘always the same’¹, this denotes a rather significant departure from the commitment to a “multiplicity of masculinities” (*ibid.*: 11). Or is it simply the ‘stereotypical’ form of masculinity that ‘invariably’ has the characteristics outlined. But what then is meant by the reference to the “embodied experience of male gendered identity”. Is this intended to suggest that whilst the dominant form of masculinity is embodied, all other forms are disembodied? Or perhaps that *male gendered* embodied experience produces the dominant form of masculinity with the specified invariable characteristics?

But we have yet to consider the contrast indicated with ‘femininity’. Here again, after stressing the “multiplicity and diversity of discourses of femininity” (*ibid.*: 14), the authors tell us that what “is at issue here” is “a predominant mode of femininity” that “finds expression in catering for and nurturing the ‘needs’ of others, be they men, superordinates, or dependent children. Casual conversations readily reveal numerous women come to structure a sense of their own self-esteem and identity through a ritualistic absorption with the minutia of tasks and activities involved in being a wife, girlfriend, mother or daughter” (*ibid.*: 14).

1 The Concise Oxford dictionary.

Later there is a confusing shift to the plural form when we are told that by contrast to masculinity “feminine identities are dominated by attaining an impeccability of physical environment, character and bodily virtue, reflect the indeterminable flux and flow of every day interactions” (*ibid.*: 16). Does the use of the plural here suggest that the multiplicity of femininity is confined to this particular expression? Or is this still referring to the ‘predominant mode’? But even if it is referring to the predominant mode, what remains particularly difficult here is that suddenly the authors draw upon some rather conventional, historically and culturally conservative, clichéd expressions of feminine ‘virtue’ that are usually found in essentialist accounts of the female sex (Merchant, 1983; Longino, 1987). In concluding, the authors’ explain:

Our concern in this paper has been to emphasise precisely a lack of internal coherence, both in terms of the concept of subjectivity per se, and consequently, to recognise the multiplicity of identities, meanings and behaviours that surround any conception of ‘masculinity’ as² ‘femininity’. Masculinity is then characterised by fragmentation at the level of individual subjects at any one time and across their life histories. A project whose purpose is to articulate a singular or constant masculine subjectivity is thereby at once flawed and contradictory. (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998: 21)

But what seems to ‘lack coherence’ here is not femininity and masculinity themselves, but rather the analysis to which they are subjected. The ‘fragmented’ and ‘contradictory’ nature of gender identity does not give rise to ‘multiple identities’, as the authors would have us believe, but rather become the very essence of ‘masculinity’. Femininity emerges as an identity comfortable with fluidity, with the ‘indeterminable flux and flow of everyday interactions’, rather than a fluid identity. These identities are subjected to the caveat that they do not threaten the overall position that gendered identities are ‘multiple’ and ‘variable’ – that being is in ‘perpetual flux and impermanence’. However, the ways these ‘ideals’ are deployed *must* threaten the overall position on gender as ‘multiple’ or ‘in flux’. Repeated assertions of these sentiments lack substance or meaning if they do not connect with the argument as it is developed. If we ignore the disorientating effects of seemingly contradictory statements, what remains *is* an essentialist account.

Intimacy and authenticity

Underpinning much writing on gender identity is a sense that femininity, when it is not ‘suppressed’ or manipulated by masculine instrumental orientation, is more authentic. Masculinity, on the other hand, in its vacuous quest for control, is driven by instrumentality. The very definition of masculinity in terms of instrumentality denies it any possibility of ‘authentic expression’, whilst the very definition of femininity seems to embody authenticity. We saw above that one way in which this (in)authenticity gets aligned with gender identity is by invoking the flux and flow of daily life, which femininity embraces, but which masculinity denies in its self-defeating struggle for control and a secure sense of self.

It is perhaps in relation to intimacy that this granting of authentic status to gender identity is most evident. But we might wonder why we should take intimacy as a

2 We assume that ‘as’ is a typo.

measure of authenticity. Knights and Kerfoot (2004) provide a swift answer: intimacy is “a part of what it is to be human” (*ibid.*: 438). On this count, the inability to display ‘intimacy’ is a failure to be ‘human’. They go on to contrast intimacy to instrumentality and argue that “intimacy reflects and reinforces an engagement in relations, not as means to some external end but as an end in itself” (*ibid.*: 437). Masculinity, being articulated in terms of a ‘self-defeating’ “attachment to an instrumental achievement of identity through the control of self and ‘other’” (Kerfoot and Knight, 1998: 16) is left “disembodied and bereft of emotional content and significance”, “emotionally devoid of intimacy” (*ibid.*: 17).

In another publication, Kerfoot (2004) initially signals some move away from the above essentialist position when she claims that she does not consider “intimacy as a fixed, essential property of individuals and their interactions [...] but as a range of possibilities produced in and facilitated by social encounters” (*ibid.*: 234). However, the somewhat primordial nature of intimacy seems to be later re-asserted: intimacy is said to require ‘authentic response’, intimacy can only be experienced in unscripted, spontaneous encounters that threatens the masculine struggle for control and certainty. Moreover, the connection between intimacy and gender identity seems to be secure enough for Kerfoot (2004) to be able to claim that “in their (frequently unfulfilled) desire for emotional intimacy with the opposite sex, many women sustain an alternative formulation of the possibilities for intimacy as other than concerned with purposive ends” (*ibid.*: 236); on the other end “many men [...] have recourse to conventionally masculine behaviours as a means of evading or avoiding social interaction that is evidently uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable in that, because of the emotional intimacy so desired by many women, such intimacy, by its very nature, requires that the men respond authentically” (*ibid.*: 237).

Intimacy therefore stands in the way of masculine preoccupations with control, success and self-mastery, “Masculinity constitutes a mode of being devoid of intimacy other than in ways that facilitate an expression of self, bound up in purposive rational instrumentality and in a heroic mastery of ‘reality’” (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004: 438). But in denying intimacy, or confining it to “its own private ghetto”, masculine discourses are “repressive both to the self and Other” (*ibid.*: 438). In effect they are suppressing some human essence, or at least impoverishing the range of possibilities for human interactions (Kerfoot, 2004). Not only does masculinity leaves no space for intimacy, but in Kerfoot’s discussion it also appears as a response to, or an escape from, the threat of intimacy. Thus, exposed to the uncertainty of emotional intimacy, many men reach for “stereotypical masculine behaviours” (2004: 237). It is not clear from this account why men more than women feel threatened by the ‘uncertainty’ or spontaneity of intimacy. Moreover, when masculinity finds its expression “in situations of ‘male bonding’ such as sporting events or pub crawls, [...] intimacy is simulated through ribaldry, rivalry and rowdiness” (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998: 11). So, in a circular argument, masculinity is defined in terms of lack of intimacy, and masculine (fake) displays of intimacy can only be simulations, providing further evidence that masculinity is devoid of intimacy. On the other hand, “Many women resist the bureaucratic displacement of intimacy and refuse to allow organizational goals and career aspirations to dominate their lives... elevating personal life and non-work intimacies above the instrumental tasks they are given” (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998:

20). If we assume that the reference to ‘many women’ in the above quote is meant to index a predominant form of femininity, we must conclude that feminine identity is more in touch with her human nature.

To sum up, intimacy is somehow a primordial and essential quality of what it means to be human, and implicitly, by extension, good (although why ‘intimacy’ should be said to form the essence of human nature when, for example, rationality is denied that quality, and essentialism is refuted, is not clear). Masculinity, in its self-defeating desire to control, is reduced to instrumental thinking and incapable of intimacy; therefore any display of intimacy can only be ‘simulated’. So, masculinity is doubly inauthentic: for suppressing or denying an essential characteristic of human nature; and for ‘simulating intimacy’. Femininity, on the other hand, is defined in terms of ‘intimacy’ and is presumably more authentic.

But if masculinity is ‘devoid of intimacy’ or ‘bereft of emotional content and significance’, uncomfortable with intimacy and the flux and flow of daily life, it finds its natural expression in rationality, and by extension organization.

Gendering ‘organization’: Rationality and masculinity

The definition of certain organizational activities, indeed some sense of organization itself, as masculine is central to much writing on gender (e.g. Collinson and Hearn, 1994, 1996; Bruni *et al.*, 2004; Benschop and Dooreward, 1998; Hearn, 1996; Gheradi, 1995; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993, 1998; Kerfoot and Whitehead, 1998, 2000; Hopton, 1999; Knights and Kerfoot, 2004; Knights and McCabe, 2001; Linstead and Metcalfe, 2003; Sinclair, 2000).

This equation between masculinity and organization/management has become so common place that it is often reproduced without the need for further explanation, for cross-referencing provides evidence that this is a well established truth. In fact, the grounds on which such ‘well accepted’ connections are drawn look rather tenuous when examined more closely. There is a commonsensical aspect to these associations drawn from stereotypical masculine behaviour and the empirical reality that men dominate most formal organizations. But theory is neither drawn from stereotype nor necessarily induced from empirical circumstance. How then does organization, and management, acquire its ‘masculinity’?

For Knights and McCabe (2001), it is science that provides the point of connection between masculinity and organization. Science is characterised by (hegemonic) masculine attributes, “science was seen as a cold dry hard aggressive activity that glorified in its own penetrative abilities in the pursuit of a complete mastery over nature” (*ibid.*: 623). This is then equated with the specific *managerial* practice of business process re-engineering (BPR) which is said to be similarly masculine since it is associated with an engineering/science orientation.

The invoking of science to establish the masculinity of organization and management is clearly inscribed within a broader trend that takes rationality as the linking mechanism. For example, Ross-Smith and Kornberger (2004) argue that organization is predicated on rationality, and that from its ‘philosophical beginnings’ rationality has been linked to

masculinity; the concept of rationality that is “elaborated in western society from Descartes to Kant and Weber and enacted in organizational discourse and which informs practices is, at its core, masculine, despite appearing gender neutral. Thus, rationality keeps on gendering organizational discourses and practices” (*ibid.*: 282). Recognising that “the association between rationality and masculinity... tends to be stated rather than argued for” (*ibid.*: 280) in feminist organization theory, they propose to outline how the “two concepts have become genealogically so closely and inseparably intertwined” (*ibid.*: 280). To this end, they develop a history of rationality and its association with masculinity, extending from ancient Greece to Weber.

Drawing upon Lloyd (1984), Ross-Smith and Kornberger (2004) argue that from the beginning of philosophical thought, maleness was symbolically associated with reason and femaleness was associated with what reason left behind. It was the Greek philosophers who initially associated women and femininity with nature. Men were associated with reason and the mind – the opposite of nature and form – thus beginning the association of rationality (the acquisition of reason) with masculinity. Moreover this separation was organized in a hierarchical relation (Ross-Smith and Kornberger, 2004: 283).

These associations were reinforced by Cartesian rationalism and Bacon’s empiricism. Cartesian rationalism is based on clarity, dispassion and detachment and on the dualism associated with the separation of mind and body. Again this distinction assigns dominance to one category; reason in Cartesian philosophy becomes a category that is dominant and assigned to masculine, non-reason is subordinated and assigned to the feminine. Then in the empiricist tradition established by Bacon, “the removal of the pursuit of knowledge from abstract definitions and deductive reasoning and focusing it on the ideas of unbiased analysis of concrete data, inductive reasoning and empirically supported conclusions... in Bacon’s philosophy, nature maintains its femaleness but becomes knowable and controllable” (*ibid.*: 284). The philosophy of Bacon and Descartes was formative in the development of 18th century Enlightenment interpretations of rationality, and attempts to develop objective science, morality and law. These attempts became central to the “human drive towards economic growth and human progress”.

It is here that Ross-Smith and Kornberger connect rationality (and by extension masculinity) with the modern organization. This is particularly due to the influence of Kant on the work of Max Weber (*ibid.*: 285). Their argument centres on the difference between formal or instrumental rationality and substantive rationality; whilst the latter is concerned with means such as formal rules, the former is associated with ends such as human values and ethics. ‘Modernisation’ saw an encroachment of instrumental rationality with ‘important questions’ reduced to problems of instrumental control. Weber felt that substantive rationality inevitably declines as modernisation occurs. Instrumental rationality takes over, bureaucratic rules and the pursuit of wealth and power become ends in themselves.

The authors now reveal the gendered nature of organization; “Rationalizing organization in this instrumental way implicitly leads to a masculinization of organizations, since instrumental rationality and masculinity are inextricably

intertwined” (*ibid.*: 287). Moreover in modern organization, “Value-rational action tends to degenerate into instrumentally rational action that corresponds with the cult of masculinity, Instrumental, calculating rationality brings with it qualities considered masculine: smart and decisive self-determination or free, confident aggressive action” (Bologh cited in Ross-Smith and Kornberger, 2004: 287). Their conclusion is that there is a striking link between the male stereotype and the values underpinning organization; organizations are driven by instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality is masculine. Hence, organizations are masculine.

But the crucial question how masculinity and instrumental rationality came to be ‘inextricably intertwined’ remains. Whilst Ross-Smith and Kornberger (2004) retrace the connections between ‘men’ and ‘rationality’ from Ancient Greece to modern organizations, and provide an account of the various forms this connection has taken in different historical periods, they still do not provide the linkage with ‘masculinity’, unless they commit the essentialist sin of equating men and masculinity. There is no explicit mention of essentialism, or its rejection, in this article but the authors make gestures towards this position when they talk about rationality being “at its core, masculine” (*ibid.*: 282) or of the “inherent association of masculinity and rationality” (*ibid.*: 288). Of course, such essentialist sentiments would be at odds with current received wisdom about the fluidity of gender.

An alternative explanation is to argue that science, rationality and organizations are all practices that have been dominated by men, and from which women have been structurally excluded. This would lead to an analysis of the material and symbolic practices that have served to mark rationality as the preserve of men. Ross-Smith and Kornberger (2004) may point us towards such explanation when they claim that “much activity that can be described as distinctly human (or rational) in the Kantian sense, has been reserved for men” (*ibid.*: 285). However, such explanation does not require the concept of masculinity, but would instead rely on an empirical examination of the practices that have served to exclude women.

Ross-Smith and Kornberger (2004) fail to provide a convincing explanation for the association between instrumental rationality and masculinity, either they have to rely on essentialism, a position that would be rejected by many of the post-structuralist authors that draw on these connections, or on an analysis of the practices through which rationality becomes the preserve of men, in which case it is not clear what the ‘masculine’ label adds to ‘men’. Therefore we are still left wondering how rationality becomes ‘masculine’ and what it means for a concept to be labelled ‘masculine’.

Maybe a better explanation can be found in Knights and Kerfoot (2004). Here again, we find the association between masculinity and organization:

What we would want to describe as discourses of masculinity are what characterise most business, and indeed non-commercial, organizations. While tacit and non-explicit discourses of masculinity nonetheless prevail to structure and sustain behaviour of certain sorts, it is ordinarily behaviour that is technically rational, performance-oriented. Highly instrumental, devoid of intimacy yet pre-occupied with identity, and driven by rarely reflected upon corporate or bureaucratic goals that are presumed inviolable. These masculine discourses thereby have the effect of constituting both managers and employees as subjects that secure their sense of identity, meaning and reality through the rational, efficient and singularly uncritical pursuit of the goals and objectives handed

down from above. Conditioned by this privileged and pervasive form of masculinity, the modern manager is ritually engaged in co-ordinating and controlling others in pursuit of the instrumental goals of production, productivity and profit. (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004: 436)

If we are to believe Knights and Kerfoot (2004), organization and rationality are a direct expression of, and presumably the product of, masculinity. Indeed, we are later told that instrumental rationalities are “a condition and consequence of masculine preoccupations with success that see no limit to control, competition and conquest” (*ibid.*: 437). But the association between masculinity and instrumental rationality also comes from masculine preoccupation with identity. Masculine discourses are not only preoccupied with success and control, but also with securing a sense of identity, to achieve self-mastery. Here we are told that the human condition is characterised by anxiety and insecurity over potential threats to our survival. In contemporary societies, fear over “biological survival” has been displaced by “preoccupations with ‘social survival’ or concern for identity” (*ibid.*: 438). And “while this anxiety about identity can have positive outcomes in terms of creativity and taking life as a challenge, it can also be negative and self-defeating when we become obsessed with controlling the conditions that are seen to secure the self” (*ibid.*: 438-439). Masculinity seems to be the expression of this negative aspect of anxiety about identity: “Masculine discourses not only invoke a preoccupation with this control but also, and as a necessary accompaniment to these instrumental pursuits, self-mastery. This involves a compulsive preoccupation with identity” (*ibid.*: 439).

How and why masculine discourses, and only masculine discourses, transform this anxiety about identity into a compulsive and instrumental pursuit of self-mastery is not clear. Maybe it is because of its already instrumental preoccupations that masculinity reduces the search for identity to an instrumental pursuit. Hence, Kerfoot and Knights argue, “the confirmation of self and identity is social, and yet masculine instrumentality has already chased out the intimacy through which such confirmations from the ‘Other’ might be plausible, let alone sustained. The preoccupation with identity must then become as instrumental, compulsive and self-defeating as the demands for control, conquest and competitive success that it reflects and reproduces” (2004: 439). But beneath these arguments seems to be the assumption that there is a more productive, positive way of addressing the anxiety about identity, and that this would involve recognising the social nature of the self and immersing oneself in intimate relationships. This presumably would be the feminine response to the problem of identity; however, it is an option that is not available to the ‘masculine’ subject who has already undermined intimacy.

By now the circularity, ambiguity and self-referential nature of the arguments have become quite dizzying. In short, it seems that it is the instrumentality of masculinity that transforms the human anxiety and insecurity over identity into an instrumental pursuit. So, masculine instrumentality in its dealing with the problem of identity is a product of its instrumental orientation! And where does this instrumental orientation come from? We can only assume that it is the product of ‘masculine preoccupations with success’. This is where the chain of explanation seems to stop, for here we are back to the circular argument that “[instrumental] rationalities are a condition and a consequence of masculine preoccupations with success” (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004: 437). Does that mean that instrumental rationality provides the conditions for masculine search for

success, but it is also the product of this search? Can instrumental rationality provide the conditions for anything other than the masculine search for success? Can the masculine search for success be expressed in terms other than through instrumental rationality? And where does this masculine search for success come from?

Seemingly the search for an explanation of the association between rationality (and by extension organization) and masculinity is doomed to endless circularity or deferring of essentialist positions. The association goes on unchallenged but unproven; its endless repetition displacing any need for further examination. In some self-referential manner it acts as evidence that no further proof is required for it is presented as something we all surely agree on. Yet, as we have shown it can only be maintained through some essentialist assumptions about the inherent 'maleness' of rationality. If such essentialist assumptions are rejected, as they often are, then it remains unclear how these associations can be sustained.

In the Knights and Kerfoot's (2004) version, essentialism is deferred from 'rationality' itself to concerns for success and self-mastery. However, we are still left to wonder what makes these preoccupations with success and self-mastery 'masculine'. Secondly, even if we ignore the essentialism of this position, it remains unclear why the search for success or the need to secure identity should be expressed through rationality. Historically, the quest for power, control, success, status that are all supposed to characterise masculinity has taken many forms from reliance on traditional patterns of authority, to the force of armies and the use of other forms of violence. Thirdly, is it not clear how rationality becomes reduced to the masculine expression of control and the pursuit of success.

For example, Martin (2001) suggests that women are often more instrumental in work activities, and frustrated by men's reluctance to engage in these issues. She found that men were often not concerned with formal goals but mainly with each other; furthermore the alliances that men built in organizations and their expressions of camaraderie were rarely about work. The women in her research believed that men used organizational resources in pursuit of activities derived from relationships with each other and not in relation to formal organizational goals.

Perhaps Knights and Kerfoot (1998, 2004) would read such happenings as 'simulated intimacy', men's instrumental expression of camaraderie to serve their compulsive pursuit of success, control and secure identities. But this would get us back to the problem of circularity: masculinity essentially being defined by instrumental rationality, all masculine behaviour can only be a manifestation of such instrumental rationality, however it might be disguised. Martin's study also raises the question about the gendered status of rationality. Here it is women who are practising rationality, and being frustrated by men's lack of concern for rationality. What are the implications of this reversal for our labelling of practices as masculine? Martin (2001) argues that her study confirms the conception of gender as fluid because "the women interpreted men as practising masculinities regardless of what they did. For example, when men supported or protected each other, and visited or expressed fondness for each other, women interpreted them as signifying masculinities not femininities, despite the cultural

stereotypes that frame these behaviours – support, protection, visiting, expressing positive affect – as feminine” (*ibid.*: 609).

This argument has some merit, but it does beg the question as to why we would wish to hold on to concepts of masculinity and femininity at all; we are forced to ask whether concepts and their deployment are so flexible that they lose all analytical purchase (Alvesson, 1998). As Brubaker and Cooper argue, “In their insistence that identities are multiple, malleable, fluid and so on, soft identitarians leave us with a term so infinitely elastic as to be incapable of performing serious analytical work” (2000: 11). If masculinity and femininity are floating labels to refer to whatever behaviour men and women respectively engage in, and these vary according to contexts, then they are at best convenient short-hands, descriptive devices, that only have meaning in particular cultural contexts. But as analytical tools to make sense of gender power relations, they are not only theoretically incoherent, as we have suggested in this section, but also, and more importantly, damaging.

This brings us to our next section, where we argue that the contradictions present in writing on masculinity undermines the capacity to engage with (real) gendered effects. Here we assume that writing on masculinity is concerned with the ‘oppression of women by men’, with gender inequality, and argue that the deployment of masculinity does little to address this concern.

The Consequences of Contradiction

Here we argue that the masculinity writing is not only theoretically incoherent, but is also irrelevant for the analysis of gender inequality. We explore this irrelevance in two areas. Firstly, if we follow the soft rhetoric of gender fluidity and multiplicity, of masculinity as a cultural ideal that need not correspond to men, it becomes difficult to see what relevance it may have to understand and challenge men’s dominance over women. Secondly, the cliché and contradictions that underpin this writing cannot adequately convey the feelings provoked by manifestations of masculinity.

The dilution of gender inequality

Let’s start with gender inequality. There is no doubt that historically science, rationality and organizations have been and continue to be the preserve of men, and that woman, through a combination of moral arguments about their proper place or virtue, and material practices related to the division between public / private spheres, have tended to be excluded. We could, of course, choose to package all the moral and material practices through which men have been privileged and women have been excluded under the umbrella of ‘masculinity’.

However the coupling of men (domination) and masculinity is problematic in several ways. Firstly, ‘masculinity’ may become *the* explanation for men’s domination; its deployment puts closure on an analysis of the practices through which men dominate women, thus men dominate women because they are masculine. Secondly, such explanation in terms of ‘masculinity’ could easily degenerate into essentialism, as we

have seen in the previous section. And, thirdly, attempts to move away from the danger of essentialism by proclaiming the multiplicity and fluidity leave us with a notion of masculinity that is so open and insubstantial that it loses its grip on the realities of gender power relations. In all cases the concept of masculinity disables, rather than enables, the analysis of men's domination.

A sense of this ineffectiveness is illustrated by Alvesson's (1998) study of gender relationships and identities in a Swedish advertising agency. Alvesson suggests that the culture of the advertising agency was dominated by what would be labelled as 'feminine' characteristics. Thus, there was an emphasis on 'personal chemistry', interpersonal relationships, feelings, intuition and so on. The men in the organization did not display 'masculine toughness, rationality, impersonality' but also privilege feelings, intuition and the personal over 'masculine characteristics'. Yet the gender division of labour was particularly marked:

The case shows an interesting paradox. There is an extreme sexual division of labour with the men at the top and the women at the bottom, and a strong appreciation of female sexual attraction combined with a, in many ways, 'soft' atmosphere in the organization and a construction of work and organization in 'feminine' ways. (*ibid.*: 988)

Alvesson's (1998) study suggests that, in this case at least, masculinity is of little relevance to explain men domination, unless, like the women in Martin's (2001) study we chose to define masculinity in terms of whatever men do. But bundling everything that characterises groups of men under a "big masculinity umbrella" (Alvesson, 1998: 987) severely undermines the explanatory and analytical power of masculinity. The mobilisation of 'masculinity', together with its loose coupling with men, serves only to obfuscate the analysis of the material, cultural, social practices that lead some men and (some women) to dominate women. Appealing to masculinity to explain any forms of socially problematic behaviour performed by men (and some women) serves only to short-circuit the analysis of the practices that lead to social division and oppression.

The comfort of 'reflexivity'

We have questioned the power of 'masculinity' to explain gender relationships of domination. We now want to argue that work on masculinity is also irrelevant to our own responses to 'masculine' behaviour; its clichés are incapable of coming close to representing the strength of the feelings that 'masculine displays' elicit. These are very uncomfortable. They are conveyed neither by 'hard' essentialist identities that do not fit or the 'soft' rhetoric of fluidity and multiplicity that simply irritates. The increasingly scripted language in which post-structuralism moves towards 'complex and fragmented identities' are both asserted, and undermined produces a sanitising and deadening effect. The lack of explanatory power produces an anaemic response to 'gendered effects'.

So, what is the nature of the response offered by the masculinity genre? Much appears to revolve around the notion of disruption. For instance, Whitehead (2000: 133) claims that 'critical' gender studies should 'encroach directly upon the personal', threaten our ontological security and expose us as complex, vulnerable, inconsistent gendered beings:

Of course, the point about research into masculinity, and gender per se, is that it encroaches directly onto the personal. The individual cannot escape the epistemological and ontological implications of feminist scholarship. By contrast, sociologists have available to them an array of theories and concepts which, critical as they might be, do not impinge on or threaten one's relative and ontological security. These are concepts and theories which can be locked, left undisturbed until we next confront the PC. Thus the unpleasant and personally menacing is effectively shut out. This is not the case with critical gender studies, for it disrupts, it intrudes and the more one engages in it, so more apparent become the contradictions and ideologies informing our being and which, as women and men, we live out daily – despite any ability we might have to critically reflect on them. All critical gender research, undertaken within a feminist agenda, speaks to both the personal and political. Yet it also confronts our very identities as complex gendered beings, forcing us to face our vulnerability, inconsistency, and, I would argue, our contingent existence as discursive subjects. (Whitehead, 2000: 133)

There seem to be two related responses to masculinity suggested here. One is to 'disrupt' dualistic representations of gender, a strategy also proposed by Knights and Kerfoot (2004). Here the idea is to destabilise gender identities by pointing to the contradictions forming our 'being'. For example, they seek to deconstruct the gender binary and its hierarchical content by disrupting masculine hegemony at work; this for them involves "occupying a space in between representation of gender", creating a "critical space where our accounts are not primarily an occasion for producing an orderly and predictable world in which to secure our sense of self" (*ibid.*: 444). However, in reality it is hard to see how the account of masculinity they provide is anything other than predictable and orderly.

But before developing this point, let's look at the second, related response: to 'confront' our gendered identities, our vulnerability and to face the 'unpleasant and the personally menacing'. This seems to take us towards a confessional mode in which men (and women?) are to bring disruptive practices to 'the personal'. So, presumably men must reflect upon their 'masculine' display of competitiveness, sham intimacy, cold instrumentality and so on. Unfortunately, if these behaviours are driven by some 'compulsive' pursuit of control and self-mastery, as Knights and Kerfoot (2004) for example, would lead us to believe, it is not clear what men can do beyond these reflections, or how this constitutes a response. Men may engage in aggressive or competitive behaviour 'reflexively', but what difference does this make from an unreflexive display of these behaviours to those who feel offended, oppressed by them? This only seems to allow for some indulgent and ineffectual confession of the type, 'I am bad but I can't help it'. Whilst this may provide comfort to those who engage in such moves, it is of little consolation to others.

But more fundamentally, research into masculinity (at least that which we have focused upon here) has little impact in disrupting representations of gender or encroaching directly onto the personal. It is hard to feel a sense of threat, menace, vulnerability, ontological insecurity from the work on masculinity. In fact, the 'masculinity' genre tends to achieve just the opposite. Firstly, as we have shown, there is a sense in much contemporary writing on gender, of a rehearsal of expected language and positions. These recitals can be made thoughtlessly. The presence of such clichés is far from disruptive; the familiarity and convenience of language actually has a settling effect; familiarity produces a form of acceptance. How many times have we sat in seminars

where various episodes of masculine displays and feminine passivity are recounted for our reflexive delectation? Then we wander to the pub.

The appropriation of all forms of gendered practices and effects within this inescapable language leaves no room for formulating our own responses. These have been claimed or packaged as being themselves the products of the ineluctable unrolling of gendered practices. Presumably it is masculinity's incapacity for intimacy and over-reliance on instrumental rationality that we should find problematic. But what if it was precisely the display of 'bonding' (and whether this is 'fake' or 'authentic' is irrelevant), the lack of rationality, that disturbs us? And why should we care whether or not men reflexively engage with their masculinity if such reflexive engagement does not stop them displaying the behaviours we found problematic in the first place? With its soft rhetoric of fluidity, multiplicity, reflexivity and so on, masculinity writing makes no space for harder responses that would be more in tune with the violent strength of feeling that men's behaviour may elicit.

Nevertheless, perhaps there are ways of speaking of gender as fluid that allow the possibility of change/transcendence. However, this possibility must follow the identification of the existence of oppression and subjugation. Therefore the progressive use of gender appears to depend on a different conceptual formulation from the one afforded by 'masculinity', one that starts with gender as a source of oppression, domination, disadvantage, rather than 'identity'. We end with some comments about how this formulation might be produced.

On gender: Dualism and dissolution

Whilst we agree with the masculinity genre insistence on 'disruption', we do not see the 'reflexive' or confessional strategies they offer as fitting this purpose, quite the reverse as we have argued above. So, what would form a more appropriate, 'disruptive' response, one that would be more fitting with the hard effects of gendered practices? As we have alluded to above, progressive gender politics depends on the recognition of relationships of domination between men and women, of inequality between men and women. It must start therefore with dualism.

In their editorial introduction to a Special issue of *Gender, Work and Organization* on 'Beyond Boundaries: Towards Fluidity in Theorizing and Practice', Linstead and Brewis (2004) ask whether it is possible to raise the question of gender inequality without reproducing gender binaries; one of the contributions to the issue, to which we have already referred earlier, echoes this concern: "How can we raise an issue about gender equity unless the binary between men and women is already presupposed?" (Knights and Kerfoot, 2004: 431). However, Knights and Kerfoot (2004) seem to ignore this insight and proceed to provide a critique of the gender binary, seeing it as obstructing the development of equality. But attacking gender binaries on the ground that they are constructed, 'inessential', serves to efface the ways in which dualisms are deployed in social reality, in structuring power relations between men and women.

In this, we agree with one of the contributions of the special issue (Borgerson and Rehn, 2004), and would like to speak for dualism, for "dualisms play a critical role in calling attention to subordination and oppression" (*ibid.*: 458). Re-legitimising dualism as an

analytical and political tool would provide a useful contrast to the fashionable diluting, 'ironising' of difference and making them inessential by proclaiming their fluidity. Privileging the 'fluidity of gender identity' may undermine attempts to speak about inequality and promote equality, and underplay the power of dualisms in structuring power relationships. Whilst we accept that gender dualisms are socially constructed rather than 'essential', it remains that when gender matters, at least to understand and challenge patriarchal relations, it is expressed and played out on dualisms; it is not fluid masculinities oppressing fluid femininities but men dominating women. Denying the power of these dualisms because they are constructed involves pulling the grounds for critiques from under our feet. Therefore, perhaps starting with concrete instances in which this dualism is played out offers more promising grounds for challenging patriarchal relations than starting with some stereotypical abstractions about 'masculinity' that often do not speak to / of the concrete instances of oppression they claim to illuminate. So, at least some of the time, gender differences could be productively be brought into sharp relief rather than dissolved into multiple and fluid identities.

But having insisted on the potential political role of gender dualism, we also recognise that it does not always have a hold on our actions and relationships, it does not hold us in place as 'man' or 'woman' all the time; as Riley (1988) suggests, "we do not live our lives soaked up in gender". At this point, we may want to return to the notion of fluidity; however, we would want to move away from a perspective that sees fluidity as movement between (multiple) feminine and masculine identities towards one that dissolves gender as a holder or marker of identity altogether. As Borgerson and Rehn (2004) note, the articulation of fluidity in much of the masculinity literature is still bounded by dualism, by 'masculinity' and 'femininity', be they in multiple forms.

If we take the fluidity of gender identities to its logical conclusion, it would simply dissolve. Thus, the fluidity of gender identities could be expressed not in terms of adopting positions in between masculinity and femininity, but in terms of dissolving into 'not gender'. Fluidity here would refer to gender moving beyond its frame, disappearing, no longer being contained by additional types of femininities or masculinities; it would open up the possibility for the dissolution of gender categories. Therefore if we retain the notion of fluidity, it would be to express the partial hold that gender exercises on identities and social relations, as well as its partial relevance in understanding social relations. We would need to be able to recognise that sometimes it matters, sometimes not. Here we could follow Riley's (1988: 113) call for feminism to develop 'foxiness, versatility', to be willing, at times to use gender dualism as a political tactic, at other times to "shred women [and men] to bits". With this image, Riley (1988) is inviting feminists to loosen the grip that gender categories have on women (and we could add men).

We could then acknowledge that being woman (or man) is only a part-time occupation, that some of the time our lives, relationships, activities, identities are not experienced in terms of gender but of other social categories, other aspects of the moment or context. Stressing the temporality of gender, of being 'man' or 'woman' does not limit 'disruption' to a play between 'masculine' and 'feminine' identities, or a reflexive engagement with our own gender identities. It affords the possibility to sometimes lose

(our) gender, but sometimes use it as a political weapon. We must be prepared to swing over to recognise that if gender is sometimes so 'fluid' as to be irrelevant, as we have indicated above, then too often it sticks, it holds us in places and positions where we do not want to be, erecting hard boundaries that no amount of fluidity, discursive disruption or confession can overcome.

Conclusion

The masculinity genre seems caught between the desire to say something about gender and the theoretical need to empty gender of substance by proclaiming its shifting, multiple, fluid nature. This dilemma leads it into various theoretical contradictions through which essentialism is refuted, but creeps back in terms of the articulation of rather singular and stereotypical images of femininity and masculinity. These contradictions are hidden under various circular arguments that provide no escape from gender.

The only response that can be formulated involves some disruption of gender identity, but disruption remains enmeshed in some inescapable frame of (multiple) femininities and masculinities. We are left with some rather ineffectual responses that involve a combination of reflexivity and confession, but that do not relate to, speak to or about the hard effects of gendered practices. Immersed in its soft rhetoric of fluidity, impermanence, multiplicity and so on, the masculinity genre is ill-equipped to say anything about the 'hard' gender effects that are played on dualistic lines.

Whilst we agree with the anti-essentialist position that the masculinity writing has adopted, we do not see the move into 'fluidity' (at least as articulated in this writing) as particularly productive in addressing gender inequality; in fact privileging fluidity only serves to efface gender power relationships. Thus, we would want to retain dualism as an analytical and political device for understanding and challenging subordination and oppression. However, we see the deployment of dualism as an intermittent, flexible political tactic, one that could be combined with the also intermittent shredding of gender. This flexible analytical treatment of gender, sometimes bringing its hardness to the fore, sometimes dissolving it, would allow for a different understanding of fluidity, one that referred to the capacity to move in and out of gender, rather than between gender identities.

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