Reading Between the Lines

DOI: 10.1177/1097184X02250838

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer

Citation for published version (APA):

Published in:
Men & Masculinities

Citing this paper
Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher’s definitive version.

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester’s Takedown Procedures [http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.
Abstract
This article discusses the relative merits of psychoanalytic and psycho-discursive approaches to the study of masculinities and men’s violence. The case histories of four men are presented and analysed. Two of these men were anti-sexist men seeking to help other men to change, the other two were men who were getting help to stop being violent. Using these case histories, this article seeks to demonstrate that psychic ‘experience’ is not a simple product of social discourses, and therefore ‘masculinity’ cannot be straightforwardly read off from what men say. The article concludes by
arguing that the psychoanalytic notion of a 'defended subject' draws our attention to
the unities amongst men more effectively than psycho-discursive approaches precisely
because it is able to acknowledge biographically mediated differences between men.

**Key Words**

Violence, Embodiment, Hegemony, Psychoanalysis, Psychosocial, Psycho-discursive,
Jefferson, Hollway, Wetherell, Edley.
Introduction

Is it possible make sense of the persistence of male violence, in spite of many men’s felt sense of ‘doing difference’ from each other? The resurgence of interest in the psychological dimensions of masculinities presents a new opportunity for addressing this question; an opportunity that this article exploits. I begin by showing how Carrigan et al’s (1985) critique of sex role theory encouraged the development of socially literate psychoanalytic approaches to the study of masculinities, in preference to more conventional social psychological approaches. I then compare and contrast two emerging paradigms – ‘discursive psychology’ and (what I refer to) as ‘interpretive psychoanalytic case analysis’, before testing these paradigms out against the case histories of four men I interviewed. I argue that interpretive psychoanalytic approach provides a more illuminating perspective on men’s violence against women than its more discursive counterpart.

A New Sociology of Masculinity and Socially Literate Psychoanalyses

In their article “Towards a new sociology of masculinity” Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and John Lee (1985) urged sociologists of gender to focus their attention on the ‘conflict within masculinity’ (p566), as much as the conflicts between and amongst men and women. Against a ‘powerful current in feminism’ Carrigan et al argued that the relationships between men’s social power and men’s violence needed to theorised in ways that did not reduce masculinity (or masculinities) to the ‘unrelieved villainy’ of patriarchal men (Carrigan et al, 1985: 552). Carrigan et al’s critique of the oversocialised actor assumed in sex role theory, together with their debunking of the presumption of a ‘normative standard case’ to be measured and proven by social scientific research, sent a clear message to orthodox psychology: namely, that its
concepts and practices had blinded its practitioners to the relational quality of gender and the structuring of gender relations. Carrigan et al identified psychoanalysis as ‘a more complex and powerful tool’ (p580) for thinking through the ‘psychodynamics of masculinity’, psychodynamics that should ‘not been seen as a separate issue from the social relations that invest and construct masculinity’ (p598).

Bob Connell’s (1983, 1989, 1995, 1998) subsequent attempts to develop this thesis emphasised the strategic structuring of gender relations within a gender order in which some groups of men constantly seek to secure power over other men and women. Connell also reiterated his belief that psychoanalysis held untapped critical and subversive tools for thinking about the connections between social structure and the psyche (Connell, 1983: 13). In particular Connell (1995: ch1; 1998) made much of the Freudian insight that ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are not ‘essences’ but cathexic components of experience that men and women negotiate subjectively and inter-subjectively. This is why human personalities are multi-layered, ‘contradictory’ and ‘complexly’ shaded in character.

Linking these insights with a Gramscian model of social relations, Connell showed how in the institutional and interactional struggles of everyday life, (patterned also by class, race and other social relations) masculinities manifest themselves competitively and strategically. Men and women negotiate between hegemonic masculinity, emphasized femininity and other competing alternatives: alternative masculinities and femininities that are subordinated to, marginalised by, or complicit with the ‘hegemonic pattern’ (Connell, 1995: 79). Within this framework men’s violence is both a strategic means of ‘drawing boundaries and making exclusions’, and a symbol
of the essential injustice of the current social order: a ‘thoroughly legitimate hierarchy would have less need to intimidate’ (Connell, 1995:84). The gender order is reproduced partly because different groups of men and women have material interests that routinely converge, despite power imbalances between them. But, Connell also observed how patterns of gender relations become over-determined as men and women embody - at a corporeal level - the gamut of anxieties and desires that socially-prescribed expectations regarding gender and sexuality foster. Hence, gender differences are both more biographically unique and more stubbornly resistant to deconstruction than sociological analyses typically have it.

The sweat cannot be excluded…Bodily experience is often central to our memories of our own lives, and thus in our understanding of who and what we are (Connell, 1995: 51-3).

Other critical contributors to this field also used psychoanalytic insights to make similar points. Lynne Segal (1990, 1992) emphasized the contradictions many men encounter between the ‘the promise of phallic power’ and the reality of their relationships with other men, women and children. Segal argued (persuasively, to my mind) that for many men intercourse confirms a sense of ‘powerlessness’, ‘emptiness and failure’.

[I]t is precisely through sex that they experience their greatest uncertainties, dependence and deference in relation to women…And certainly for many men it is precisely through experiencing themselves as powerless and submissive that they experience the greatest sexual pleasure. (Segal, 1990: 212)
Importantly, Segal’s insists that men’s eroticising of women does not necessarily create women’s subordination. Rather, women, along with other relatively powerless groups, are eroticised because of their consistently disadvantaged position in power relations. From this perspective, men’s violence is not caused by exposure to pornography. Rather pornography exposes men’s ‘fetishistic need for visual proof of phallic potency, alongside their craving for visual evidence of female desire’.

[Through pornography real women can be avoided, male anxiety soothed, delusions of phallic prowess indulged (Segal, 1998: 58).]

Likewise, Michael Kaufman (1994, 1997) argues that men’s harassment, abuse, and violence towards women are often unconsciously motivated by pain and alienation: pain and alienation incurred because men stifle their ‘unruly emotions’ in order to ‘impose control on others’. Similarly, David Jackson’s (1990) critical autobiography illustrates the connections between psychic defensiveness, male bullying, the intellectualisation of personal problems and poor health; Victor Seidler’s (1997) highlights the social and bodily consequences of men’s tendencies to idealise and denigrate significant others, to repress feelings and desires rather than entertain ambivalence; and Ian Craib’s (1998) extended essay “Masculinity and Male Dominance” makes a powerful case for considering ‘stereotypes’ (whether sexist or otherwise) as the social effects of the suppression of traits attributed to the other sex, the denial of what Freud called polymorphous perversity.
Discursive Psychology and the Critique of the Rational Unitary Subject

Recent developments in the study of gender have seen to opposing responses to this use of psychoanalysis: one dismissive, the other welcoming. The former response – referred to here as ‘discursive psychology’ – is most closely associated with the work of Margaret Wetherell and Nigel Edley - although as a recent edition of *Feminism & Psychology* reveals, a number of researchers have are now adopting this approach. The latter approach is associated with the work of Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson and is referred to here as the ‘psychoanalytic-interpretive approach’.

The aim Wetherell and Edley’s (1999) approach is to explain why – in Connell’s terms - many men pursue the ‘aspirational goals’ of hegemonic masculinity without actually instantiating hegemonic masculinity as a ‘personal style’. In interviews and ethnographic research with 16-18 year old boys Wetherell and Edley explored how social discourses encourage certain groups of young men to take up familiar masculine subject positions, as well as why the young men under study actively deployed social discourses to create differences and distinctions among themselves; using gendered ‘accusations, criticisms and mitigations’ to reconstruct their own masculine identities. Wetherell and Edley found that many boys position themselves in imaginary discursive positions that emphasise their difference from the stereotype of the traditionally tough, retributive man – a stereotype boys readily applied to their school’s ‘rugby lads’. In contradistinction to the ‘rugby lads’, the other six-form boys positioned themselves as ‘ordinary blokes’, ‘heroic selves’, and ‘rebellious, non-conformists’. 
Wetherell and Edley suggest that whilst their ‘heroic’ position is a near instantiation of hegemonic masculinity, those men who invest in the rebellious position adopt the most effective and thus hegemonic strategy of negotiating masculinity. In representing themselves as extraordinarily independent and freethinking, these ‘rebellious’ men asserted their difference from both women and stereotypically macho men. In Connell’s terms, rebellious men remain complicit with the gender order, criticising it whilst implicitly making concessions to it\textsuperscript{ii}.

But as Connell (2001) himself has pointed out it is questionable whether the psychodiscursive approach can encapsulate the ‘multi-dimensional understanding of gender’ he has argued for. Tony Jefferson’s (2002) view on this is that Wetherell and Edley’s discursive psychology ‘fails to produce an authentic inner world’. Paradoxically, Wetherell and Edley’s (1999: 353) claim to analyse the ‘the social within the psychological’ provides food for thought for psychologists, it tends to reproduce the kind of sociological reductionism which blinkers social scientists to biographical uniqueness, reproducing what Henriques et al (1984) refer to as a rational, unitary, and unduly uncomplicated view of the subject.

In work alone (Jefferson, 1994), and with Wendy Hollway (Hollway & Jefferson, 1998), Jefferson has tried to develop a theoretical framework that captures men’s various and contradictory experiences of masculinities, focusing especially on the tensions between inner mental life and social expectations. What is different about Hollway and Jefferson’s approach is that they ground their analysis more specifically in the biographical contingencies of individuals’ lives. Drawing on Kleinian
psychoanalytic concepts, Hollway and Jefferson posit a ‘defended’ and conflicted subject investing, sometimes unconsciously, in empowering social discourses.

Arguably the best exemplars of Jefferson’s approach in action are contained in his analysis of the life Mike Tyson. Here Jefferson (1996, 1998) explains the boxer’s transformation from a muscularly undeveloped, lisping ‘fairy boy’ to ‘Iron Mike’ - the world heavyweight champion, in terms of Tyson’s capacity to muster the mental resolve needed to risk his body in the life-threatening performance of boxing. Jefferson demonstrates how Tyson’s capacity to ‘live’ hardness, hinged upon his willingness to disown the weaknesses he found intolerable in himself by splitting them off and violently projecting them onto others. Similarly, in his analysis of the courtroom accounts of Tyson’s rape of Desiree Washington, Jefferson (1997) implicated a specific combination of psychosocial dynamics and tensions. These included Tyson’s:

- investment in a racialised discourse that attributes ‘bestial’ ‘supersexuality’ to all black men;
- tendency to deal with emotional weaknesses through the physical diminishment of others;
- proclivity to deal with his fear of rejection through sexualised sadistic fantasies, in which women’s resistance could be re-imagined as signifying a positive ‘come on’.

Based on secondary sources, Jefferson’s case analyses are both provocative and speculative. Their value in terms of making sense of the lives of ordinary men needs to be empirically test (Connell, 2002): a task I embark on below.
Research

The research documented below was conducted using the “Free Association Narrative Interview Method” Hollway & Jefferson advance as a way forward in research about the ‘fear of crime’ (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In short, the FANI method works by encouraging interviewees to ‘freely associate’ when providing answers to questions about their life history. Absences, avoidances, contradictions and changes of emotional tone are then explored in subsequent follow-up interview, during which the interviewee is asked further ‘narrative-focussed’ questions. In both interviews ‘Why?’ questions are explicitly avoided by the interviewer so as not to pressurise the interviewee into rationalising their choices and behaviours. Instead, the interviewer reflects back the interviewee’s emotions, and directs the interviewee to describing actual events and relationships.

Using this method I interviewed 8 men who had been violent to female partners and were seeking help to change, and 7 men and 2 women who were doing intervention work (i.e. practitioners) to help violent men find ‘non-violent masculinities’. Four of the men’s accounts are documented below.

Four Cases

Ken

Ken, aged 36, was from a prosperous background, privately educated during his school years. He had a lengthy history of working in the field of men’s health and with groups interested in alleviating social exclusion within and of the Third World. Ken had moved into the areas of anti-sexist men’s politics since the birth of his son; partly because of a heightened awareness of issues around fatherhood, and partly
because his responsibilities as a father inhibited his ability to pursue political work further away from home.

Ken had neither witnessed, experienced nor participated in very much violence of a purely physical kind. He said he had ‘never been close to sexual violence in terms of issues to do with abuse or rape’. However, he was aware that this was an issue of definition, as his accounts (below) illustrate.

I suppose as close as it gets to is earlier days in my relationship with Karen...knowing what the grey area or line is that you cross that the woman or the partner may define as not necessarily violent, but overly, you know, pushing it too much and causing hurt… Issues to do with starting out on a sexual career and urm not so much the violence, as the not knowing what the hell you are meant to do. The inept groping. And wondering whether or not what you are doing is pleasing or displeasing, and therefore perhaps uncomfortable or inappropriate. I remember, obviously making a few mistakes in that area…

When we were having sexual intercourse she obviously wasn’t finding it that comfortable. And instead of me easing off and doing something different, or just not doing anymore, I pushed it and urm carried on until I had my orgasm and then withdrew...I can remember her saying that it hurt. [DG So did she ask you to stop at that point?] Yeah. I’m sure she did. I’m sure I was under the influence of alcohol at the time. I mean I can remember her, probably something like hands on my on shoulders trying to sort of trying to push [me] away, I suppose…

I don’t think it would have ended that pleasantly…I tend to close down. After a bit of time has elapsed I sort of come round to realising what the implications of the event were, and my part in it, and then making up for it so. I’m sure I would have apologised…
It’s one of many experiences I have come across in terms of not wanting to have a traditional man-woman relationship, either from the sexual point of view or in the whole relationship point of view, with regard to issues of power and dominance…Over the years we have tried to work out an equal relationship as far as we can. I mean when the sexual aspect of our relationship was more, as I see it, important we used to talk about this kind of thing quite a lot in terms of checking out what we both liked. That happens less now because the urge to have love, to make love is relatively infrequent in terms of our lives. For me there is just too many demands going on.

There are a number of ways in which we might read this statement. Firstly, we might observe that today (if not then) the event described in Ken’s second paragraph could be legally categorised as ‘rape’. Not only did Karen ask Ken to stop, withdrawing her consent, but she made her withdrawal of consent physically explicit by pushing him away. The sexual intercourse was hurting Karen. Ken was aware of this, but carried on. The act was certainly selfish and harmful, resented by her, and (later) regretted by him. Not atypically (Painter & Farrington, 1999), neither of them identified the experience as ‘rape’. No legal proceedings were pursued. Ken and Karen were still together some 13 years after the event.

However, rather than situating this event within a continuum of abuse (cf. Kelly, 1988), Ken makes sense of his behaviour in terms of his sexual immaturity and its rectification. The non-consensual sex Ken described occurred back in the ‘early days’ when intercourse was more important, at least to him, perhaps because he felt the heavy petting which was the norm in his relationship signified the first step to something more serious or sophisticated’. Ken’s ‘inept groping’ bespeaks of sexual inexperience and the mistakes that one ‘obviously’ makes in such circumstances. His reference to being ‘under the influence’ defines a more enlightened, responsible
present in contrast to a period of youthful thoughtlessness and badly managed intoxication.

Like many of Wetherell and Edley’s subjects, Ken differentiated himself from certain stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity, i.e. the patriarch, ‘bullying aggressor’ and/or ‘sexually selfish lover’. He and Karen worked out an equal relationship’ in which they ‘sought after equality’ in their whole relationship, as well as sex. But this kind of psycho-discursive interpretation misses as much as it notices. For example, note how Ken’s claim that ‘things weren’t going too smoothly’ when they were ‘having sexual intercourse’, suggests a more ‘mechanical’ lapse, whereas the discourse of ‘love-making’ invests sex with a more caring and desiring dimension. For example, note how Ken’s claim that ‘things weren’t going too smoothly’ when they were ‘having sexual intercourse’, suggests a more ‘mechanical’ lapse, whereas the discourse of ‘love-making’ invests sex with a more caring and desiring dimension.

The other stories Ken told me suggested the importance of a more complex cathectic dimension throughout his life. During his youth Ken had at least one ‘homosexual experience’ that he described, contradictorily, as both ‘borderline abusive’ and ‘very natural sexual activity’. Ken explained,

I don’t have a problem in feeling sexually attracted to other men. Or them feeling sexually attracted to me. But I think it’s because I have done a fair amount of work on those kinds of feelings.

This contradiction may not be totally irreconcilable. If Ken no longer has ‘a problem in feeling attracted to other men’ this may be because he had done a lot of work on the ‘kind of feelings’ that render bisexuality a problem for many men. The ‘shaving’ incident described below, suggests that in his youth Ken, like many young men
(Harry, 1992; Mac an Ghail, 1994) associated homosexuality, with bodily under-development and effeminacy, and that he used to fear all three.

This guy epitomised what I didn’t want to be. So I didn’t want to be as immature as I perceived him to be in terms of a developing adolescent boy. Because he looked more effeminate than a lot of other boys. He had this very round face and ears that really stuck out. And wasn’t as physically developed from the muscular point of view and didn’t have as many hairs on his body…He was like the anathema to what the rest of us in this group was trying to be - real boys, really tough and really fit.

We ended up pinning him down on the floor getting a razor out and shaving some of his pubic hairs off. I think I was the person who actually did that. I feel ashamed that I did that, allowed myself to do it. Not completely coerced, but allowed myself to be influenced by the bigger group. I must have been wanting to prove myself to the group. I’m sure I felt that I had achieved something in terms of earning the respect of the majority group. But I would also hope that I had some kind of feelings of discomfort about it.

Ken’s narrative suggests that in order to be violent he had to fist surmount whatever feelings of empathy he had for this boy. His dread of being perceived as like him – ‘effeminate’, ‘immature’ and underdeveloped, and the target of his peers’ homophobic violence, ultimately subsuming the empathy he had for someone with whom he had much in common. Looking back Ken seems aware that the act evoked a fear of the homosexual amongst his peers whilst enabling the collective projection of these same fears (safely for the perpetrators) onto the body of a weaker and statistically outnumbered other. Ken, a late developer, who sometimes got excluded by his peers, had abandoned his morals in order to prove himself to the group. Arguably then, the adult Ken was only able to take up the authoritative psycho-discursive subject position from which he spoke because he had undertaken a long,
biographically nuanced journey, during which he had learnt to successfully fend off certain anxieties, having accrued certain power-conferring resources (education, income, his own family life, political affiliations) that rendered it somewhat safer for him to assert his social, sexual and intellectual difference.

**Scott**

Scott, aged 48, was of more humble origins than Ken. Money was tight during Scott’s childhood. Although his father was a skilled manual worker, the recurring arrival of newly born siblings throughout Scott’s youth made for a large, restless household. Academically more advanced than his brothers, Scott attended grammar school and later university. His training as a social worker and interest in matters ‘intellectual’ during this period laid the foundations for his entrance into gender politics, most significantly after the break-up of two relationships and the loss of custody of his only child.

In response to my question about ‘how sexual violence had impacted’ on his life, together with a follow-up question about ‘feeling sexually harassed threatened or pressured’, Scott explained:

I have never raped or sexually assaulted anybody…I’ve never really felt threatened sexually by somebody else, except in a general way of feeling sort of very, very anxious about sex. But they’re in consensual situations where I am actually choosing. Nobody has forced me to take my clothes off and go to bed with somebody.

As became apparent from Scott’s account, this ‘anxiety’ about ‘sex’ was implicated in the one occasion when he had been ‘physically violent’ to his ex-partner, Stephanie.
Stephanie and I had this like very volatile relationship. Passionately in love with each other… Anyway, the circumstances in terms of my violence, angry feelings towards her was that the relationship was one which became a very sexual relationship, but was one where Stephanie was, I think, ambivalent about being in a relationship at all really. We’d had times when she wasn’t interested in sex. And I’d be very, very turned on by her. There was one particular occasion. She’d been away for the weekend. And before she’d gone away I was really, really aroused. And there was a couple of times she had just not been interested. And the kids were still away. And she was feeling really randy. And (laughs). I said, ‘I’ve arranged to go out anyway. So I’ll see you later’. And we went to bed together that night and she wanted to have sex. And I just felt really, really angry. I was actually penetrating her with my finger. And urr I just wanted her. I felt very, very sexually violent towards her, really. And I just, I just shoved her out of bed. Just pushed her out the bed. Bang. It wasn’t a very high bed. But she was shocked, she was shocked. No doubt about that. And it was a very angry feeling I had about it…

Scott thus provides us with an emotionally literate account of an event in which ‘control’, ‘power’, and ‘heterosexuality’ were inextricably linked. Discursively, he links his strong desire for sex with his proclaimed ‘anger’ because Stephanie twice rejected his advances. But Scott’s somewhat antagonistic retort, ‘I’ve arranged to go out anyway’ reads like a rather defensive attempt to recoup some control over their sexual relationship in the face of her earlier rejection. Moreover, his account contains two clear contradictions. First, Scott and Stephanie’s relationship was ‘very sexual’, but on the other, Scott’s proclaimed anger was about not getting sex. Second, they ‘were passionately in love with each other’, but Stephanie was ‘ambivalent about being in a relationship at all, really’. These contradictions might be because Scott was anxious, either at the time of the event or when recounting to me. Neither possibility is mutually exclusive. Scott’s stammered repetitions ‘She was shocked, she was
shocked. No doubt about that’, along with his grammatically unnecessary clauses ‘really’ at the end of his sentences, suggested to me that he was reassuring himself of the emotional dynamics of this relationship. If Scott was uncertain over what Stephanie’s seemingly erratic sexual desire (from his point of view) signified about her feelings for him then this would probably have made him anxious, both at the time and when recounting the story. The following statement would seem to support this hypothesis.

Somehow it had got to that stage without me sort of being able to talk to her about it. Why it was I was feeling that...One of the very good things about that relationship for me was that we worked through this. I mean the other relationships which I had up to that point which could have become sexual and didn’t. I mean I never got through to working through the impotence stuff. Stephanie was the first person where I acknowledged it was a problem. I got very, very upset about it. And we shared that distress. And, she was committed to the relationship, so we got through it. And eventually we were able to have a good sexual relationship. So I mean that sort of broke the cycle in a sense that I knew after that that if I was with somebody who I loved, and she loved me, and it was what we wanted then eventually it would be okay.

Unsurprisingly, Scott had chosen not to initiate sexual relationships with several women whom he was close to for fear that his impotence would recur. As studies of men’s heterosexuality now substantiate, intercourse remains the definitive act for many heterosexual couples (Gavey et al, 1999): an act in which ‘real men’ are presumed to take charge of the sexual encounter and women do not (Hillier, et al. 1999: 72). Penetrative sex is not only about performance (Bordo, 1998; Grindstaff & McCaughey, 1998), but it typically smuggles in, for men (at least), emotional reassurance that the relationship is ‘normal’, intimate and close, without forcing them
to verbalise their desires, self-doubts and fears of rejection (Hillier et al, 1999). As a consequence, men who fail to live up to the myth of heterosexual potency typically experience intense feelings of humiliation, incompetence, and insufficiency (Webb & Daniluk, 1999). Unable to smuggle in these emotional benefits through intercourse, sexually impotent men must choose whether to deny their emotional dependency or renegotiate intimacy with sexual partners in other ways.

Scott’s psycho-discursive response to this was to construct his sexual impotence as a product of relationships in which mutual love and recognition were lacking: a lack that he imagined to be rectified by Stephanie’s commitment to him. His discovered sexual potency with Stephanie was then attributed to a ‘passionate’ love that ‘broke the cycle’. These attributions fit closely with Wendy Hollway’s (1989) argument that in the West many heterosexual couples have pursued equality by investing in a have/hold discourse that define ‘good sex’ as that which happens in a mutually loving, safe environments.

But the question we must ask is why Scott’s chose - whether consciously or unconsciously - this particular discursive investment? To what extent did it confer power for him? Investment in the have/hold discourse presented Scott with the possibility of sustaining sexually fulfilling relationships with women by rendering his impotence socially contingent (not biologically immutable), without requiring him (as the male sexual drive discourse would have done) to heap blame on women, or deny the reality of his own feelings (as the traditionally patriarchal men of his father’s generation often did). Scott’s investment in this discourse can thus be read as a defence against anxiety. Self-evidently this defence was not immutable. Scott’s
particular investment in this discourse rendered him dependent on Stephanie’s desire. When Stephanie’s ambivalence about ‘being in a relationship at all’ emerged, this probably felt especially threatening and isolating for Scott. Even though Scott was an articulate man, whose social work training and participation in men’s politics would have rendered him better equipped than most to confront his sexual impotence, ‘it had got to that stage’ where he wasn’t ‘able to talk to her about it’. From a psychoanalytic perspective it is not necessary to reduce Scott’s violence, or his account of it, to self-interest. Rather, Scott’s shoving could signify his violent denial of the very unspeakable emotions that Stephanie’s erratic desire (from his perspective) evoked in him; his violence occurred when his discursive investment no longer served to fend off his feelings of vulnerability. If Scott feared that Stephanie no longer wanted him, then instigating sexual intercourse probably seemed like an irrepressibly desirable, but potentially dangerous and humiliating means of pursuing his own sexual desire.

**Matt**

Matt, aged 30, was an ex-retail manager seeking counselling for his violence. Matt had been raised by two Irish Catholics who had adopted him when he was a baby. He described his adoptive father, who was a professional sportsman, as ‘like a mountain…If he spoke the earth would shake’. He depicted his mother as very controlling, ‘smothering’; a woman who had found it very difficult to get over the loss of her daughter who had died of meningitis whilst still an infant. Matt was one of the most challenging interviewees I encountered, wrapping much of his story in what felt to me to be a heavily intellectualised misogyny, that more often then not, detracted from what had actually happened in his life and/or how he felt about it.
Matt’s violence had taken different forms at different points in his life. During his youth, Matt had attacked peers who ‘tried it on with him’ and threatened his father with a knife. Matt had been violent to all three of the women with whom he had sustained intimate relationships - although he was initially reluctant to acknowledge the violence in all but his most recent relationship. Matt had a history of suicide attempts linked to the bullying he experienced at school and the break-up of these relationships. Not uncommonly.ix, what had spurred Matt to seek help for his violence was the fact that his wife had now left him and was refusing him access to his son.

Matt claimed to have a number of current sexual partners, ‘none of them going to be permanent’. He readily described himself as ‘manipulative’, ‘a charmer’ ‘a co-dependent’, and ‘a relationship-addict’.

Everyone needs to be needed, but I will actually use guile. I use cunningness. I’ve used subterfuge. I use intimidation. I use anything to get into a relationship. And once I’m in a relationship I don’t really give a shit about who I’m with. It might as well be a cardboard cut-out.

Matt presented himself as someone with a manically split personality. On the one hand he said he would:

go out of my way to make someone feel happy…If they need something I will go out of the way to get it. I will basically get rid of all my feelings and put their feelings first and foremost…constantly, for months, even years.
On the other, he was someone who would try to ‘find out people’s insecurities and to build them up’.

You sit, you listen. You show that you’re thinking. Show them that you’re attentive. You show that you care. You give them good enough eye contact. You agree with their plight. You show them just enough sympathy, but not too much...I’ll work on their insecurities. If someone feels that they’re not nice, I basically work on comforting them. But not overly much. Because too much comfort just sounds false. I feel so much power. I mean I can twist most of these woman around my little finger.

What Matt referred to as ‘twisting’ women around his finger sometimes amounted to ‘mental cruelty’. He described how he would intimidate his wife by telling people that their relationship was ‘just based on sex’ and by threatening to leave.

I played my power games by saying, ‘Okay. I’m leaving. I’m going. I’m running away’. And yet the minute I turned around and came back I gave her all the power to play the power games. ‘Oh I don’t know if I should have you back’. And then I automatically start panicking. ‘Christ what have you done, Matt? You’ve fucked up. Get on your hands and knees, flowers, chocolates whatever.

Matt claimed that his wife had maliciously alleged to the police that he had thrown her on the floor and knelt on her head whilst pregnant. Matt insisted that their arguments were physical ‘on both sides’, ‘nothing extreme’, more ‘childish, reactionary’. One might argue that Matt was in ‘denial’, not wanting to admit to me the extent of his violence through shame or fear of incriminating himself (Hearn, 1998). Nevertheless, that he was willing to admit that he played some cruel ‘power games’ - power games that seemed highly provocative and likely to incite violence – suggest that his account was not only about self-presentation.
Matt blamed his adopted mother for his sense of dependence on women, pointing to the pattern of ‘suffocation, abandonment, suffocation, abandonment’ that characterised her relationship with him. He believed that his mother had gained ‘total control over him’ by ‘switching off’ for days, not letting him in, ‘refusing to talk’.

My parents treated me in such an over-loving way that it became a catalyst for some of my major insecurities, like why my real mother and father didn’t love me or want me. The strength of my adopted mother’s love gave me the impression that she was the only one who could actually love me in the world, but nobody else in the world could love me. And therefore nobody else in the world wanted to love me. So I mean that built, built, and built.

It is impossible to know how Mark’s parents actually treated him, but his account suggests that the fear of dependency he attributed to upbringing was routinely displaced in the sexual relationships he had with women. Rather than being twisted round his finger by his guile and cunning, Matt feared being twisted round his partner’s. His confidence quickly crumbled when he felt unwanted. He would ‘start panicking …[down on] hands and knees, flowers, chocolates whatever’. Moreover, Matt – like many of the pornography consumers Segal describes - considered this power almost completely in terms of sex.

I have not enjoyed sex in a long time. I have the staying power for up to six hours, but yet I get no pleasure out of it. I can’t ejaculate anymore. That’s why I have such long staying power…And by the end of the time…they’ve love hearts in their eyes because I’ve just basically preyed upon their own insecurities. Shown them that they’re not frigid. Shown them that they can enjoy themselves once more where previous partners would in anger moments told them they couldn’t…
DG: Perhaps you could tell me about the last time when you did enjoy sex?’ No, I don’t think, hand on heart that there is an occasion where I can look back and say, ‘Yes. I enjoyed sex in general’, solely because I have always strived to give pleasure first. Having sex with my wife was my only way of showing love. I didn’t realise that me just smiling at my wife [or] listening to my wife was a way of showing love. So I gave my all in sex, literally. And I would curl up and I would die at the end of it...

Matt, in line with Wetherell and Edley’s thesis asserted his difference from the women’s ‘previous partners’, men whom he said implied that they were ‘frigid’. However, Matt invested a very different discourse to the one’s adopted by Ken and Scott. The heroic discourse Matt reproduced measures men’s virility in terms of their capacity to give sexual pleasure to (as opposed to receive from) women. As Victor Seidler (1997: 187) explains:

‘Often heterosexual men’s sexuality becomes focused upon giving women an orgasm, as if their virility is to be measured by whether a woman has come or not. But men have been slower to recognize a need to share their own sexual needs more openly and to gain more contact with their own bodies…Often we have little contact with our bodies as men, having learnt to treat them as machines at our disposal. This makes it hard to identify what kind of touch brings us nourishment and to appreciate sexuality as a form of communication. Often if we have little contact with our hearts then orgasm…becomes a matter of ejaculation…[I]t is hard to acknowledge where we are emotionally as men; it is far easier to pretend that we are already where we want to be.

Discursively, Matt distanced himself from the stereotypes of the uncaring, selfish, or otherwise authoritarian and/or patriarchal men. He accomplished this by constructing his part in sexual intercourse as giving pleasure through his ‘long staying power’. He convinced himself that women had the ‘power to give’ him sex; that women would
use sex as a ‘weapon’ against him. The psychic and physical costs of this manifested themselves when Matt would curl up and…die’, having treated his body as a machine, as Seidler would have it. Matt’s talk (as much as his behaviour) thus serve a defensive function. By preying on women’s insecurities he positioned himself as someone who is already where he wants to be, strong and secure. If Segal is correct that many men ‘experience the greatest sexual pleasure’ in ‘being powerless and submissive’ then it is unsurprising that Matt, with his many strategies for denying his own emotional dependency, had ‘not enjoyed sex in a long time’. His ‘power games’ were defences against admitting to his partners where he was ‘emotionally’.

**Ahmed**

Ahmed, aged 30, was born in Pakistan but raised in England after his family emigrated during his infancy. Ahmed’s father was a steel worker; his mother managed a large household comprising of herself, her husband, three children and her brother-in-law. Ahmed claimed he was a bright and popular child. But, during his teens he started getting into ‘trouble’, culminating in him serving a prison sentence for the kidnapping and attempted murder of one of his college peers. After his release from prison, and with the financial backing of his family, Ahmed became a successful entrepreneur, owning a chain of shops. Ahmed then went along with his parents’ plans to marry him to a Pakistani woman to whom he was ‘promised’. When Ahmed’s wife immigrated to the UK, a year later, Ahmed grew to resent her attempts to delimit the social life he felt he was entitled to. Ahmed claimed that his wife had tricked him into staying with her by piercing his condoms. However, his evidence for this was somewhat self-incriminating.
She couldn’t speak a lot of English. She still can’t now...Which I think is perhaps slightly ignorant...She was too concerned with her own little argy-bargies with her own friends...I used to work, and then obviously I used to go out as well with some friends at the weekend. She wasn’t really too keen on it, but she never said much...Every time something went wrong I used to blame her for it. I never blamed myself. For some reason I kept all the blame away from me. I used to blame her and I blamed my mum. As soon as all the house was finished off then she, she called it ‘to straighten me out’. Stop me from drinking...smoking. And stop me from going out. The more she tried to stop me the more I wanted to go out. I thought, ‘I work for it. It’s nothing to do with you’...

I don’t know whether I was a good husband to her or not. I never really asked her that. I suppose you could call me ‘a good provider’, but I don’t know if I was a good husband. Because I do used to have affairs [sic]. I used to have affairs all the time really, without really having a conscience about it really. It’s something that I’ve never really admitted to anybody really. This is the first time I’m talking about it.

Ahmed claimed that it was his wife’s attempts to ‘straighten him out’ that provoked his violence.

She was on my case properly. All the time there was arguments. Nag, nag, nag. And I think that is where the violence with me and her started...It was nearly every time she found out that I’d been out. And if I had been unfaithful to her...It started from a slap. A couple of months later it escalated...She was winding and winding me up...I slapped her this one time on the side of the face. And it hit the kitchen units. But it was only a little bit of bruise. It wasn’t really hard. I did it gently. Well I don’t know if it was or not coz she hasn’t stop crying...

I’m sort of a private type of guy. I like to keep things indoors. I don’t really like to wash my dirty laundry in public. And I think she wanted to cause me embarrassment, and cause me grief, you know, in front of my parents. So she attended to wash it in public. Virtually everybody knew...And I’d kept it quiet for a couple of years really. You know. Because nobody knew...I think it took roughly about eight or nine months for it to climax.
When it did ‘climax’, Ahmed had headbutted his wife on the nose, causing her to collapse, her face cut and bleeding. Both his parents, who were present at the time, condemned Ahmed’s violence, although his mother also stated his wife ‘was out of line’ for what she had said. In a subsequent violent incident Ahmed punched his wife in the face and smashed up the house, accusing her of having damaged his silk shirts by washing them incorrectly. Ahmed’s father told a friend of his wife’s to ‘call the police on the bastard’. Ahmed was arrested several days later. Fortunately for Ahmed his wife saved him from a second custodial sentence by telling the magistrate that she wanted her husband to ‘come home and look after his boys’.

Ahmed did not seem to recognise either the unequal basis of his marriage or the abusive quality of his behaviour. The power inequalities in Ahmed’s relationship with his wife probably left her with little option but to stay and endure his abuse. A non-English speaking newcomer to the UK, Ahmed’s wife probably lacked both the social support and material resources needed to leave her husband or stop his violence. Whilst she looked after his children Ahmed worked and socialised, retaining financial and physical control over his own live and hers, investing discursively in his status as a ‘good provider’. In the meantime, Ahmed’s wife endured a continuum of abuse, including his infidelities, his blaming, his unwillingness to take responsibility for his children, slapping, punching and headbutting. Ahmed felt that his wife’s inability to speak English was ‘ignorant’, although there is little evidence of him trying to help her learn. Ahmed felt he was entitled to the social life he had worked for, but he rebuked his wife for being too concerned with her friends. It is perhaps unsurprising that his wife chose not to ‘say very much’, since she knew the consequences of being
seen as a ‘nag’. Conversely, Ahmed, despite never having talked about his affairs already had a stock justification for them:

It’s not an easy thing for me to be faithful to one woman, to be honest with you. I don’t how people do it. It’s not easy at all…I’m just a red-blooded male. Can’t help it (laughs).

In psycho-discursive terms, Ahmed distanced his ‘red-bloodedness’ from ‘sexual violence’.

It’s something that I have never ever indulged in, is sexual violence. I mean a girl, she doesn’t even have to say, ‘no’, really. If I get the cold shoulder, that’s it. I don’t even bother… I’m not really a pushy type of guy.

As Jeff Hearn (1998: ch.8) has observed, in men’s accounts of violence, sex is usually only implicated in terms of righteous jealousy when female partners are alleged to have been unfaithful. In fact, Ahmed’s assertion that he is not really ‘a pushy kind of guy’ militates against the negative connotations that are increasingly associated with being ‘a red-blooded male’, notably, desperation, sexual coerciveness, obsessiveness and/or perversion. Indeed, one might argue that Ahmed’s various attempts to position himself as an ‘ordinary bloke’ – an industrious, providing father, function to restore a hegemony threatened by his resort to extreme violence. These investments helped Ahmed ascertain the respect of his friends and family – many of whom were deeply critical of his violent behaviour - whilst enabling him to side step the question of whether or not he actually wanted to continue with his relationship with his wife.

However, the taking up of these discursive positions should not be confused with how Ahmed felt about his violence. As he explained:
It’s not something that I actually tell everybody about that I’ve done. It’s quite a shameful experience really. I mean it’s taken about two years to get to terms with it.

Indeed, there was evidence to suggest that Ahmed’s attacks on his wife were not simply about the damage to his clothes, his humiliation in front of his family, or even the reinforcement of the sexist double-standards he favoured (although each of these probably contributed to the emotional charge of his violence). Ahmed never actually said what he blamed his mother and wife for. But he did tell me that after his wife had exposed his infidelities his mother informed his girlfriend (of seven years) that he was married with children. In conflict with Ahmed’s investment in the male sexual drive discourse was his confession:

I think I cared for the girl a lot really. It affected me a fair bit, really. I was looking for people to blame. Me and my wife were going to split up anyway. And then I split up with my, this girl instead. She found out I was married. She got the courage together to come round to my mum’s house and knock on the door and talk to my mum. My mum basically told her everything. And it sort of broke the girl’s heart really…I had denied it for years and years. Never admitted. And when she found out she says, ‘That’s it. I’m on my way now’. And we split up…. She started seeing another bloke.

None of this excuses Ahmed’s brutal treatment of his wife. However, what this story does tell us is that Ahmed fantasised that he could sustain a relationship with another woman he was dating before his marriage. My hypothesis is that when Ahmed’s fantasy was shattered he projected his hurt as anger and blame onto his wife and mother; anger and blame no doubt exacerbated by feelings of jealousy when his girlfriend ‘started seeing another bloke’. How much Ahmed actually cared for this
girlfriend was concealed in the misogynistic tales he told about his ‘red-bloodedness’ and his wife’s failings, but exposed by his violent rages and the absences and avoidances in his story. The contradictions in his account, together with the shift of emotional tone signalled in the final quote (above), allude to an ‘inner world’ peeking through the cracks in some conventionally gendered social discourses.

Conclusions

To summarise, all four of the men whose stories are documented above took up discursive positions that represent them as different from violent, dangerous men. Their female partners may have experienced these men’s behaviours as part of a continuum of abuse, but it seems unlikely that any of the men would be able to recognise themselves as contributors to this continuum. Moreover, whilst sexuality, especially heterosexuality, is implicated in all four men’s accounts of violence, none of these men identified their violence as ‘sexual violence’. These observations fit neatly with the psycho-discursive approach, as well as with some profeminist analysis of men’s talk about violence (i.e. Godenzi, 1994, Hearn, 1998).

In some instances violence can reaffirm oppressive gender orders. Ken’s violence towards the boy in his school gained him the support of the majority. Matt’s ‘preying’ on women’s insecurities probably made some women dependent on him, at least temporarily. But this is not to say that men’s violence always has a clear, expressible, instrumental logic. Ken’s sexual aggression towards his wife was partly about sexual naïvety and poor communication, as well as his selfish desire for sexual gratification. The motives behind both Scott’s and Ahmed’s violence sometimes defied rational explanation. Irrespective of their discursive investments, all of these men had at times
saddled their partners with some of their own vulnerabilities. They fluctuated between idealising and denigrating the women they were dependent on; their relationships were either all good or all bad, volatile or passionate, saving or damning. This splitting reveals the flip side of the masculine power often associated with ‘domestic violence’—men’s sense of powerlessness at their emotional and sexual dependence on women (Segal, 1990; Frosh, 1994). My contention is that it is also implicated in the driven, over-determined quality of much male violence.

Masculine embodiment was also implicated in these four men’s accounts, not only because bodies are the physical technologies that perpetrate harm, but also because men’s bodies are sources of insecurity and feelings of inadequacy, symbolic purveyors of competence and incompetence, sites through which intimacy is experienced or thwarted, and instruments through which difficult emotions are communicated, concealed and contained. This helps explain why brutal violence can emerge from apparently trivial disagreements; and why so many men find their partner’s emotionality so intolerable, but are unable to face up to the emotionally charged nature of their own aggression. In short, the psychoanalytic notion of a defended subject enables one to better conceptualise the similarities and differences between the masculinities of those men who ‘threaten to leave’ and those who are unfaithful, those men who saddle partners with their vulnerabilities and those who beat them up, and those who are sexually aggressive and those who are ‘just red-blooded’ (cf. Hearn & Collinson 1994). This perspective also suggests why some men, including both practitioners and clients on anti-violence programmes, learn to ‘talk the talk’ without ‘walking the walk’. If anxieties are embodied, then masculinity cannot be readily socially reconstructed away, even if the necessary material
resources and political will are in place. The possibility of change is at once opened up by giving linguistic symbolisation to the often messy and muddled elements of men’s experience, but also constrained, undermined, and foreclosed by the psychic investments that render the language of gender difference so indomitable (Frosh, 1994).

Paradoxically, interpretive psychoanalysts seem less inclined than their more social-psychological counterparts to reduce the psychic dimensions of experience to the discursive. The psychoanalytic interpretive approach is more versatile than it psycho-discursive counterpart. Nevertheless, the psychoanalytic interpretive approach can come close to adopting a position of cultural superiority from which the emotional truths of other’s experiences are depicted as ‘known’. There is an underpinning assumption in my analysis that the psychic cannot be reduced to the social, and that the researcher/analyst is able to perceive this irreducibility in a form that the subjects of social research cannot necessarily perceive for themselves (cf. Wetherell, 1999). Unchecked, such an epistemological position risks collapsing into the kind of arrogant masculinism that feminism has quite appropriately sought to dislodge.

However, to suggest that the only alternative to this approach is to document psycho-discursive strategies, divorced from the motivations that underpin individuals’ investments in them, is to set up a false dichotomy. It is only with a more complex notion of subjectivity in mind that we can come to write the lives of men - whose relationships to women, violence, and each other are vastly different - in ways that make the points of convergence and divergence between them recognisable enough to engender a politics of change. If it is not to become dogmatic, such an approach will
require theorists of gender to engage more precisely in the detail of individuals’
accounts of themselves, and to be alert to the need to re-open up the field of
interpretation whenever analysts try to foreclose it.

References


Burton, Sheila., Regan, Linda. & Liz Kelly (1998) Supporting Women and
Challenging Men: Lessons from the Domestic violence Intervention Project, Policy
Press: Bristol.

Carrigan, Tim, Connell, Robert, and John Lee (1985) “towards a new sociology of


Connell, Robert W. (1995) Masculinities, Berkley University: University of
California Press.

of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, 3(2): 1-8.


and Hall” Theoretical Criminology, 6(1).


Hillier, Lynne, Lyn Harrison & Kate Bowditch (1999) “‘Never-ending Love’ and ‘Blowing Your Load’: the meanings of Sex to Rural Youth”, *Sexualities* 2 (1) 69-89.


Kaufman, M. (1997) “Short Articles on Men & Masculinity and on Men's Violence: Men must abandon notion they are violent by nature”,


Wetherell, Margaret, & Edley, Nigel. (1999) 'Negotiating hegemonic masculinity: Imaginary positions and psycho-discursive practices'. *Feminism and Psychology*, 9 (3) 335-356.

**Acknowledgements:** The author would like to thank Richard Collier, Tony Jefferson, Michael Kaufman, and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
See also Godenzi (1999) who comes to a similar conclusion from a more cognitivist perspective.

For a more detailed account of my methodology see Gadd, 2000, 2003.

All names have been changed in order to ensure the anonymity of my interviewees. See Hillier et al. (1999) & Holland et al. (1996) on the relationship between youthful masculinity and the imperative of sexual intercourse.

Ken’s despondent ‘that kind of communication about love-making doesn’t really happen now’, along with his slip ‘have love’ as opposed to ‘make love’, hint that some passion may have been lost en-route to this more ‘equal relationship’.

A social norm exploited by Bill Clinton in his endeavours to convince the world that the fellatio performed on him by his employee, Monica Lewinsky, did not constitute ‘a sexual relation’ (Jackson, 1999; Murray, 1999; Shrage, 1999).

See also Frosh, 1997.

See also Burton et al 1998.

Ahmed did not always use condoms. Ahmed proclaimed expertise in the withdrawal method because he had ‘never got anybody pregnant’!

See also Hamner, 1998.