The Critical Role Of Discourse In Constructing Masculinity

Meaning comes from “the matrix of relationships in which we are engaged” (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). The term ‘masculinity’ is, undeniably, laden with meaning. As is true of all language, ‘masculinity’ comes accompanied by assumptions, and these in turn depend upon where and when it is used. This essay deconstructs the assumptions underpinning dominant discourse on multiple masculinities, the male role, and a so-called ‘crisis of masculinity’. It examines ways in which context informs individual, relational, and collective knowledge, drawing upon case studies and real-life examples to support the theory. Finally, it addresses how dominant discourse surrounding masculinity affects different demographics to varying degrees, and particularly the impact of these discourses on collectively developing boys, adult men, and women. It should be noted that these generalisations are made for the purpose of addressing a wider problem, but the act of pigeonholing the entire male population into a single category of ‘men’ is problematic in itself, as it ignores the diverse and unique nature of individuals, cultures, and different groups within society.

Social constructivism is based on the premise that knowledge and meaning, rather than existing as individual objective ‘truths’ or certainties, are constructed through social discourse. Discourse refers to the language and practices used to construct knowledge (Foucault, 197_): it consists of the ways humans use language to express; to argue; to convince; to communicate. Individual meaning, therefore, is constructed through social discourse, which varies depending on context, and often reflects and reinforces dominant values and beliefs (Graham, 2005). Wetherell, Taylor & Yates (2001) understood dominant discourse as the language we use in and around “normative forms of behaviour, the sum total of the practices and characteristics which we conventionally associate with (the subject)”. It refers to a dominant collective ‘knowledge’ of masculinity that evidences itself in everyday language.

Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002) proposed a Hierarchical Ordering of the Tripartite Self, a framework that integrates concepts of ‘self’ by approaching self-definition in individual, relational, and collective contexts (Sedikides, Gaertner & O’Mara, 2011). Dominant discourses of masculinity have serious implications at each level of the framework.

Gender is socially constructed, thus differences in behaviour between men and women are the result of socially constructed beliefs and values. These dominant values are both represented and reinforced by ‘masculine’ behaviours, adding to a continuous cycle. It follows that men’s so-called ‘un-emotionality’ comes not from experiencing emotions, but in their ability to understand and express emotions. While these behaviours are often attributed to the biological wiring of men’s brains (Cleary, 2011), in fact they are the result of social conditioning, and based upon dominant values that have developed across history and culture.

Firstly, positions men as “logical, rational, stable, strong etc.” and women as “emotional, random, unstable”. Secondly, encourages use of dominant discourse such as ‘don’t snitch’ and ‘man up’ that are intended to create a division between ‘real men’, those who conform to these norms, and ‘girls’ or ‘pussies’, men and boys who don’t conform. The dominant group exerts power through physical and psychological strategies, encouraging certain behaviours, and punishing others who do not adopt these behaviours. This phenomenon incites fear,

uncertainty, and a sense of threat, not only in individuals excluded from the dominant group, but also in 'weaker' members of the dominant group, who must then take on behaviours that show their masculinity to make up for having any traits that are considered 'feminine' or 'weak' (in fact, the two are often interchangeable in discourse).

A study by Cleary (2011) interviewed a sample of young males who had recently made a suicide attempt to explore the emotions and meanings behind their suicidal behaviour. Several themes were apparent, notably a lack of control and the influence of dominant male role models. Some participants found it difficult to differentiate between mental and physical illness, with emotional distress translating into physical symptoms.

Dominant discourse of masculinity typically constructs men as un-emotional, stoic and resilient, in contrast with women, who are constructed as emotional, fragile and unpredictable. These constructions are often justified through claims that differences in behaviour and emotion are biological, that men are innately less emotional and more rational. The study by Cleary (2011) references "gendered beliefs about men's un-emotionality and women's emotionality," in spite of evidence showing similar levels of emotionality between men and women (O'Connor, Sheehy, & O'Connor, 2000). The question then becomes this: where do these gendered beliefs originate?

The implications of these constructions of masculinity are serious. Dominant discourses position expression of emotion as 'weak' or 'feminine', thus men are discouraged from expressing emotion. This links closely with mens' reporting of suicidal ideation or thoughts. "Perceived stigma was attached to the expression of emotional pain" (Cleary, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2005). A construction of men as 'stoic' and 'indestructible' renders them less able to express need for help, for fear of showing weakness and being considered 'less than' other men.

That need to identify as a 'man' over a 'woman' is embedded in their minds from a young age: the message repeats in TV shows and films and books and throughout pop culture. Traits that are labelled 'feminine' or 'girly' are portrayed as negative, for example "you're such a girl" is often coupled with a tone of disgust and dismissal, and is associated with lack of courage or "balls". Indeed, that "having courage" has become synonymous with "having balls" reflects not only the pervasive nature of this constructed concept of masculinity, but the purposeful linking of masculine identity with perceived 'masculine' traits, pressuring men and women alike to accept, rather than reject, the dominant construction as valid, and behave accordingly.

Picture a modern game of AFL: masculinity is defined by power, strength, skill, and aggression. Players are cheered as heroes, while at the same time engage in intentional non-game related physical violence against other players, use derogatory language, and show other typically 'masculine' behaviours that reinforce dominant values in viewers across the country. Newspapers regularly publish articles with titles such as "Ruthless Giants Annihilate Lifeless Blues" (AAP, 2019) and aggressive behaviour frequently goes unpunished: "Match review officer Michael Christian… said there was insufficient force for a charge against Geelong star Ablett - who ran off his line to collect Kangaroos opponent Sam Wright in the head with a raised forearm - even though he classified the clash as an intentional strike" (Nine News, 2019). Using this language is problematic because the words are gendered, linking masculinity with violence. When perpetrators of violence are framed as positive role models and even heroes, we are actively encouraging men to be violent, and this can lead to serious consequences.

Feelings of emasculation often emerge from being unable to meet certain ‘ideals’ of masculinity, which can lead to individuals feeling the need to engage in ‘ultra-masculine’ behaviours to subvert these feelings and re-assert their identity as ‘a man’. Jewkes (2002) conducted research on intimate partner violence, finding that having ‘fewer resources’ than their wives is associated with domestic violence (Jewkes, 2002). Here, violent behaviour is used to ‘correct’ a situation in which values of male superiority are threatened.

Expression of emotion through using violence is a self-reinforcing, learned social behaviour, and its consequences can be extreme (Jewkes, 2002; Anderson & Umberson, 2001). In the Christchurch terror attack in March 2019, a twenty-eight-year-old Australian terrorist, Brenton Tarrant, shot and killed 50 people in two mosques (ABC News, 2019). One 2015 study used several murder-suicide cases to explain how normative ideas of masculinity can lead to violence. It found themes linking the violent behaviour to loss of control in their lives, hopeless, and marginalised masculine identities, but also evidence that men commit violence to ‘reassert one’s masculine self’ by acting against their perceived marginalisation (Oliffe, Han, Drummond, Maria, Borttorff, & Creighton, 2015). Perpetrators of such violent crimes are not born ‘monsters’, and neither do they have more ‘natural masculinity’ than other men. They are people whose senses of masculinity and identity have been shaped by dominant discourse, and whose ideas about men’s success are shaped by their family members, peers, and the media (Cleary, 2011). Men and boys have been told all their lives that ‘real’ men don’t cry, that ‘boys will be boys’, that they should strive towards the ideal of being a ‘beast’ and knowing how to throw a punch. Men have to learn from a young age that if they don’t exhibit enough masculine behaviour, they become targets. Fear of becoming a target strongly motivates them to engage in the very behaviours that made them a target in the first place. Respect is gained through violence and aggression. These behaviours are both learned and self-reinforcing.

A study by Motschenbacher (2010) examined the language used in magazines to construct female and male identity. It found that discourse around female body parts was more likely to “play a role in the aestheticization of the body”, while male body parts are seen as “more likely to be of functional value” (Motschenbacher, 2010). This dichotomy is interesting because it highlights how normative values influence language around physical differences, but also how use of this gender-separating language serves to reinforce those very same normative values in others. Clarke, Marks & Lykins (2015) investigated dysfunctional sexual beliefs and attitudes in males that were shaped by normative constructions of masculinity: “depictions of normative behaviour can influence males’ attitudes and self-perceptions”. They found that men were more likely to endorse violence towards women after having watched films showing those behaviours (Clarke, Marks & Lykins, 2015).

Take for example the YouTube video posted by the verified account Improvement Pill, entitled “How to Get A Girl To Like You - 3 GUARANTEED STEPS” (Improvement Pill, 2015). The video is based on the premise that men need to do certain behaviours to ‘get’ girls, as if they can ‘catch’ a woman. It divides the entirety of humanity into two limiting categories: men and women. Men should attract women by projecting value, which is made up of the following factors: wealth, popularity, looks, knowledge, and knowing lots of people. The video explicitly states ways men can manipulate women to make the women like them, making the assumption that women are unable to measure value themselves, or decide what is valuable.

The video tells the viewer that certain body language, such as slower movements and taking up more space, indicate confidence, and this projects value. However rather than generalising this

to all humans, instead it is gendered. It makes reference to confident men, and instructs men to ‘imitate this confidence’ even if they don’t really believe they are confident, because this will make them more successful in ‘getting the girl.’ Well, my question is: does this method apply to other traits? If men have to adopt this particular norm, what other normative behaviours should they adopt to be successful? Should men behave aggressively, because it will give them more success in ‘getting the girl’?

“What about all of those catcallers who catcall women all day? That doesn’t work.” Rather than addressing catcalling as a form of harassment, the video completely misses the point and tells men that it “doesn’t work because they’ve skipped the first step of creating attraction.” In this sidestepping the issue, the article reduces the negative behaviour of catcalling to simply ‘missing a step’, with the implication that this behaviour is okay if the first step is completed. It fails even to label the behaviour as wrong, let alone address the consequences of such behaviour on women who are catcalled. And the consequences are not simply ‘being put out’; this sort of behaviour contributes to a much larger oppressive force. Catcalling is a behaviour that reinforces the belief that women are objects to be commented upon and used.

Another article published in Marie Claire magazine asserts “a girl who’s truly ‘one of the guys’ never has trouble attracting men” (Marie Claire, 2014). Again, there is the assumption that the girl wants to attract men: but there’s also the implication that girls should aim to be like a man, because that’s what men value. It is important to note that the category of ‘masculinity’ itself and its implicit contrast with ‘femininity’ is problematic, not just the form of current dominant models of behaviour (Cleary, 2011).

This article is from a woman’s perspective, and provides advice for other girls on how to become ‘one of the guys’. The advice, predictably, is based on engaging in behaviours that reflect dominant constructions of masculinity: you have to drink lots in order not to be considered “a pussy”; you can’t cry, because expressing emotion shows weakness and is annoying; you can’t “be a mother” by showing caring behaviours, because those behaviours are considered too feminine. The article explicitly states that when girls receive unwanted attention, they should be thankful when ‘the boys’ respond with aggression and violence. This rejection of ‘feminine’ behaviour positions women as ‘less than’, but also shows a highly generalised view of ‘the guys’ and failure to acknowledge diversity (Andersson, 2008). Particularly problematic is construction of men as ‘non-dramatic’ and ‘chill’, but also as aggressive. Emotions such as contentment or anger are valued, but sadness, compassion, and worry are not.

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