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**Reconstituting feminised practices as masculine:
discourse dynamics in the field of men's health**

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Introduction

Contemporary western societies enmeshed in consumerist, "healthist" and neo-liberal ideologies increasingly require citizens to care for themselves. Self-care, however, has never figured highly on the heterosexual male agenda, where concern for body management and beautification is eschewed, except if such concerns can be situated within legitimately masculine practices such as sport training. Nonetheless, men's bodies have been sexualised and put on display across a range of visual media, and statistics suggest that men are serious consumers of lifestyle and beauty products (e.g. moisturiser, hair gels, self-tanning lotion). It could thus be said that men are beginning to accept contemporary image-conscious versions of masculinity on offer, thereby reworking or even dispensing with hegemonic masculinities. At the very least, current lifestyle and consumption patterns create possibilities for multi-faceted and sophisticated forms of masculinity. For example, men's health promotion messages could encourage men to acknowledge and confront areas of vulnerability, anxiety and difficulty concerning physical and psychological wounds. However, drawing on research largely in the area of men's health, I wish to argue that mass market media presentations which invoke men as consuming subjects (and as objectivised body parts) actually work to reinforce hegemonic masculinities. In addition, when men themselves talk about health and lifestyle practices, even when those practices ostensibly undermine hegemonic masculinities, there is recourse to

other masculinised concepts, such as self-control, self-reliance and sporting competitiveness (cf. Sloan, Gough & Conner, 2010). In short, hegemonic masculinities are not deconstructed in men's health contexts but reproduced, reworked and repackaged for a health-conscious, consumer-driven and self-reflexive culture.

The "crisis" in men's health

Over the past fifteen years in many Western countries the notion of a crisis in men's health has taken hold, and statistics depicting sometimes stark sex differences in mortality and morbidity abound, for example:

Average life expectancy for men in the UK is approximately four years less than it is for women (Office for National Statistics, 2006)

Men's deaths exceed women's across a number of serious diseases; for example, men are twice as likely as women to develop and die from the ten most common cancers affecting both sexes (Men's Health Forum, 2004)

Men in the UK are less likely than women to consume the recommended five daily portions of fruit and vegetables, and are more likely to have a higher than recommended salt intake (Office for National Statistics, 2006)

Men in the UK are more likely than women to drink above recommended amounts, to binge drink, and to take illicit drugs (Office for National Statistics, 2006)

This "crisis" in men's health, rendered factual with an array of such statistics, can be situated within the wider crisis in masculinity whereby all manner of problems, from antisocial and criminal behaviour to academic underachievement, are attributed to masculinities. Moreover, there are arguments that "femininity" has become the mark of rationality and success within a culture of "emotional intelligence" whereas "masculinity" has become problematised, even pathologised, as a constraint on healthy self-development.¹ I think these contentions mask the continued power and influence of hegemonic masculinities for men (and indeed women). The crisis in men's health can also be understood as a manifestation of moral panic surrounding public health and individual lifestyles, such as the obesity "epidemic" and the "scourge" of binge drinking often invoked in media articles². The extent to which citizens adhere to state-sponsored health advice is perhaps limited, however, as

competing constructs of pleasure, self-determination and identity issues (concerning masculinity) are cited in defence of potentially “unhealthy practices” (cf. Monaghan, 2005; Gough & Conner, 2006). In what follows then, I will use data collected from various men’s health studies to critically examine media-generated men’s health discourse as well as the health talk of male research participants.

Media discourse on men’s health

While media coverage of health issues has typically been the preserve of female-targeted magazines, in the last fifteen years there has been a surge in health-related features across a range of popular media outlets, from newspapers and dedicated television programmes to websites and online discussion forums, making such material relevant for analysis. Other scholars have noted the important role of mass media in defining and reinforcing specific meanings around health (cf. Seale, 2002).

The surge in media coverage of health topics has included explicit men’s health items, originally mainly directed at women, for example in women-only and health sections of national newspapers (cf. Lyons & Willott, 1999), but now increasingly directed at men themselves, such as the men’s health supplement of *The Observer*, a leading UK Sunday newspaper, which features various testimonies from men and which assumed a male reader (cf. Gough, 2006). It is also important to acknowledge the emergence of dedicated men’s health websites (cf. <http://www.menshealthforum.org.uk/>) and magazines (e.g. *Men’s Health*)³. Typically, media articles, supplements and manuals which focus on men’s health begin by connecting the particular health concern (cf. male mortality, alcohol consumption, obesity...) with “masculinity” (cf. “the male brain”; “male views and attitudes”; “male culture”). There seems to be something of a media consensus as to “knowing what men are like” i.e. naïve and irresponsible when it comes to self-care (a view endorsed by health professionals; cf. Seymour-Smith, Wetherell & Phoenix, 2002). Moreover, the nature of masculinity is implicitly fixed, as indexed by the repeated use of the biological term male, implying that the nature of men cannot be changed. Given this apparent stability of maleness, then men can be absolved from

reflecting on and changing problematic behaviours (e.g. heavy drinking) and, instead, responsibility for change will lie elsewhere, with “society” charged with developing “male-friendly” health initiatives. Consider a quotation from the lead article from *The Observer* men’s health supplement (cited above):

Perhaps we spend too long chastising men over their attitude towards health rather than wagging the finger at the delivery of services, education, workplace practices and society’s expectations (cf. Gough, 2006).

Indeed, not only are men freed from changing their health-defeating ways, but their “masculinity” is upheld across a range of health promotion materials. For example, in the area of diet and health, the “male” diet is typically portrayed as restricted, unhealthy and resistant to change:

Fellas urged to take action on killer flab.

Cancer rates among Irish men could be slashed with simple changes in diet.

Over 60% of Irish blokes say they couldn’t care less about their weight

Irish Cancer Society boss John McCormack said: “We’re not asking men to go on extreme diets or become athletes overnight. It can be as simple as making small changes in what you eat and putting a bit more energy into everyday activities.”

(*The Sun*, “Cancer risk of bulging bellies,” 08/11/05)

This extract from a newspaper article is part of a selection of UK newspaper articles on men and food analysed by Gough (2007). Although the “problem” of men’s diets is highlighted in this extract (and many others), the solution offered does not require men to change their habits – any accommodation is minimised (“simple”; “small”; “a bit”; “everyday”), as if anything more would undermine masculine identities and discourage men from reforming their lifestyles.

And when men are presented as being interested in food, diet and health, their activities are invariably framed and glossed within a masculinised discourse, even in practices as innocuous as bread-making:

But what’s really remarkable is that in each case it’s the man of the house who’s up to his elbows in flour. Suddenly men who’ve never shown the slightest interest in matters culinary are talking Italian flour and sourdough starters.

“I’ve become a baking widow,” laments one friend, as another batch of breadsticks are proudly produced from the oven. “Why can’t he take up golf like any normal husband?”

Chef Richard Bertinet puts the appeal down to the hunter gatherer thing. “It’s like natural foraging. You transform a few elements into something that will provide for your family. Seeing your child eat your own bread is very satisfying.”

I think it's also that most men are natural show-offs in the kitchen. We may not like the day-to-day stuff, but we love to cook to impress (*The Times*, “Loafing about - Foodie at large,” 15/10/05)

In this extract bread-making is initially construed as an activity which is alien to men (“really remarkable”), corroborated by the reported quotation from a “baking widow” who highlights the conventional male preference for sporting rather than food-related practices (“Why can’t he take up golf like any normal husband?”). The intervention of the chef in this extract is significant as he reframes bread-making as a quintessentially masculine endeavour arising from early human society (“the hunter gatherer thing”) implying that the activity in question is somehow natural to men. Further, male cooking is constructed as special while (implicitly) it falls to women to prepare less interesting meals on a daily basis. The point here is that men only take an interest in food on a superficial or occasional basis, with the main business of cooking, nutrition and health left to women. Another newspaper article on men considering a contemporary diet plan laments the demise of the “hearty male diet” (“bacon and two pieces of bread”) in the face of greater nutrition consciousness and weight watching (cf. Gough, 2007). The risk of being regarded as a “girl” or a “poof” is apparently more important than that of developing lifestyle-related health problems. This rejection and/or re-masculinisation of feminised health practices can be witnessed in dedicated men’s health promotion texts, for example the “man manual” series in the UK produced by the Men’s Health Forum in association with a car industry publisher. These manuals are marketed in the format of a car manual and each covers a dedicated health topic, including cancer, sexual health and obesity. In this publication (Banks, 2005), the oversized male body is treated like a car-like machine:

Do you spend as much time looking after yourself, thinking about what fuel you need to perform well and how best to recharge your batteries as you do your vehicle?

Do you service and MoT your body and mind and consider what will keep you mentally and physically in peak condition? (Section 2.5)

The male mind is highlighted (i.e. men are encouraged to use their powers of rationality and mind control to progress towards desirable goals):

If you want to lose weight, it is important that you have realistic expectations. (2.1)

Men know Diets with a capital D don't work. (2.3)

The most important thing about motivation is goal setting (2.6)

Make your decisions based on logical discussion with yourself rather than allowing them to be a fait accompli (2.5)

and lifestyle changes are re-framed in masculine terms:

Don't be too quick to dismiss the idea of joining an exercise class. Although it may seem like a very hostile environment for the average bloke, there are some classes out there which you may find surprisingly enjoyable... There are many classes that now cater for men, and overweight men in particular (3.20-1)

What is absent, peculiarly, are representations of the soft, flabby, overbearing bodies—and any discussion of the psychological difficulties posed by this stigmatised embodiment in the context of the current moral panic over obesity in the UK and beyond (and in light of the “tyranny of the six pack” advertised by mediated images of sculpted male bodies—magazines, posters, TV...). In this way conventional notions of masculinity as tough, rational and autonomous are preserved.

Healthy men and the construction of masculinities

Such mediated discourse suggests that healthy men are difficult if not impossible to find. However, they do exist. In a recent interview study with 10 men classified (and self-identifying) as “healthy” along four lifestyle dimensions (diet, exercise, alcohol consumption and smoking), we were interested to see how masculinity was constructed in this context (Sloan, Gough & Conner, 2010).

Curiously, these interviewees distanced themselves from actively thinking about or pursuing a healthy lifestyle, as one said: “It’s not something which I spend a lot of time thinking about.” And when the men were asked about health-related practices, they tended to deploy masculinised repertoires, such as sport:

Paul: when I started to take the basketball seriously. That’s when I started to look at my health and kind of how my body reacts and stuff. And trying to learn and understand more about food and what it does to my body.

Int.: Did you not think about it before then?

Paul: No I never gave it a thought; I just lived and ate whatever.

Int.: There is nothing that you can think of that made you change it?

Paul: Well yeah I kind a used to smoke, not much, but playing basketball made me not want to smoke. Cos I knew that it was abusing my body. I need my lungs to be at the full capacity rather than clogged and stuff. So I stopped smoking.

Here, Paul accounts for his transition to a healthier lifestyle in terms of enhancing his sporting performance—health is subordinated to a more valued sporting context, where the talk is functional and technical, treating his body as an instrument, to be worked upon and refined. Other participants invoked notions of self-reliance and self-control:

Int.: Okay, what about alcohol consumption and smoking just generally?

John: I rarely drink, I will occasionally, but certainly not to excess. Typically I will drink nothing during the week. It’s not as though I have a drink every night, not even a glass of wine. It does not really bother me. In fact I find after a couple of glasses or a couple of pints of something like that, I am starting to feel the effects and I don’t like being out of control. I am quite a control freak, that’s part of my personality, so I like to be in control of things and know what is going on. So I will have a drink now and again in social situations to relax or unwind, or keep company with someone. But I don’t carry on, and smoking, no I don’t take part in smoking because it’s damaging to health.

Drinking (a lot of) alcohol is traditionally associated with “masculinity” (cf. Gough & Edwards, 1998; DeVisser & Smith, 2007) so that consuming little or abstaining is something that may need to be accounted for by men. In this case, John positions himself as special and self-disciplined—he likes being in control and, despite the

pathological ramifications of his phrase “control freak,” he presents himself as rational and balanced in consuming occasionally for social reasons. So, a potential threat to his masculine identity (a distaste for drinking alcohol) is averted by positioning himself as masculine on other counts, i.e. rationality, control, autonomy (see Wetherell & Edley, 1999).

To help us understand these findings, we must theorise masculinity as a broad set of semi-autonomous but related elements, each of which may be drawn upon flexibly to articulate, protect or establish a particular masculine identity. So, when masculinity is potentially undermined by engaging with feminised practices (eating salads, doing aerobics, drinking white wine...) these practices are re-construed in masculine terms, and/or other masculinised attributes are asserted. For example, in a study examining the accounts of men contributing to an online discussion forum on weight loss, a forum linked to *Men's Health* magazine, food preparation was inextricably linked to masculinised metaphors and habits (cf Bennett & Gough, in preparation). For example, the forum discussions positioned men firmly in the kitchen, a historically feminised sphere of course, but now given a masculinised spin in terms of gaining knowledge of—and control over—food content, preparation and consumption, framed within a typical male social drinking scenario:

In my opinion my kebab tastes better than the ones you get in the kebab house after a night out! Worked for me and two of me mates Friday night (Whu)

In the context of UK male drinking culture, a night out with friends (“mates”) is typically rounded off with some fast food such as a meat-filled kebab; in this example then, the healthy and the masculine are neatly combined. The kitchen is also re-constituted as a factory for the manufacture of masculine bodies:

I think the saying “a sixpack is made in the kitchen and not in the gym” is 100% true. (Matt)

Be a beast in the gym and a beast in the kitchen, that's where good bodies are made. (Danroye)

Here muscularity is firstly connected to the kitchen which is then likened to the gym as a legitimate space for masculine endeavour (“be a beast”) and the production of fit male bodies. Such discourse echoes that of the August 2009 UK edition of *Men's*

Health magazine which includes articles such as “Muscle up your kitchen.” This construction of cooking in a masculine way for weight-training purposes has been found in the wider media as a way to further reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Gough, 2007).

Metrosexuality and masculinity

Another feminised arena which men have (albeit tentatively) entered is beauty, typically framed as “male grooming.”

A well-dressed, well-groomed and “stylish” man still tends to arouse anxieties concerning sexuality and masculinity or evoke the terrifying twosome of the homosexual and the effeminate. Stereotypically, “real” men don’t care what they look like and just “throw things on” whilst women go shopping and agonize over matters of self-presentation. (Edwards, 2003:142)

A metrosexual has been defined as

a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis—because that’s where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are (Simpson, 2002:2)

Metrosexuality is often treated with humour as in the mass media and is dismissed as inauthentic and superficial. However, we have explored how self-identified metrosexual men construct their identities in an online context (Hall & Gough, in press). Specifically, this research focused on a discussion by MacRumors forum members to the thread “Metrosexuals?”, the main thrust of which was the product of a day and a half’s exchange in November 2005⁴. The MacRumors website is associated with Apple technology products (e.g. Mac computers, iPhones etc.) and hosts forums on various topics. What we have found is that subscription to feminised beautification practices is invariably accompanied by more conventionally masculinised capital. For example, metrosexuality may be construed as a means towards heterosexual success and as a sign of self-respect:

Contributor 1 11-26-2005, 01:58 am

How about any closet metros?

Contributor 2 11-26-2005, 02:02 am

I used to be in the closet about it. It was so annoying. Whenever I'd do something dainty I'd get weird looks from my parents.

Eventually they stopped caring and I was tweezing my eyebrows without a care in the world!

I like the attention I get from being the way I am. Like, I have this attitude that is like, "Hey, ladies. I look good and I don't even know it... or do I?" So the girls think, "Hmm, that guy looks good, but he doesn't look too full of himself. Let me go talk to him." It's good.

The term "closet" suggests that metrosexuality may be a taboo area for men since it is traditionally associated with the suppression of homosexuality. Reference to the closet is reiterated by the second contributor in relation to his previously hidden metrosexual practices, now very much on show ("without a care in the world"). This carefree attitude could well be regarded as brave or even heroic, but masculine status is affirmed when the "ladies" are cited. In other words, feminised practices such as eyebrow tweezing can be admitted – but only if there is a masculine payoff, in this case positive attention from women.

Self-ascribing metrosexuals also contrast themselves with other men, e.g. gay men, as they seek to establish and legitimise their own practices:

Robert, just like you think now, once I thought that metrosexual was a gay guy that dresses like a man, or something too delicate to be a man. Later I found out, I was a metrosexual myself. A man that does care for his looks, the way he smells, the way he behaves, the way he approaches women and a man that goes to the gym trying to keep his looks up. I am 32 and I can say I have been successful with women my entire life never needing to pay for one to please me, like some real men as they think they are with their rugged manly grossness need to do, because a sane sexy woman cannot take his beer and tobacco smell unless they pay her to do it. I am married now, I am the father of a beautiful girl and the husband of a stunning woman I love, and you know what guys, I am still a metro (Rafael)

Rafael's response asserts metrosexuality as more assured, effective and, in fact, masculine than conventional masculinity – in contrast to dominant discourses which construct metrosexuality as feminised. This stance is first advanced through recourse to knowledge and enlightenment (1-3) then self-respect (3-4) and heterosexual success (6). He makes conventional men morally accountable for their lack of self-respect, which he claims affects their heterosexual masculine status (6-9). What Rafael's response does then, is to allow us to see how the emergence of a new identity category can be used to hold more conventional identities morally accountable for not succumbing to social change, whilst at the same time drawing on aspects of conventional masculinity to bolster the vaunted contemporary configuration of masculinity.

Conclusion

Men increasingly find themselves taking on roles and responsibilities which their own fathers never or rarely had to deal with. This new context brings opportunities and challenges – a chance to re-imagine what it means to be a man, letting go of anachronistic, outmoded aspects of masculinity (e.g. “macho,” homophobic and work-obsessed) while developing hitherto neglected and traditionally feminised qualities such as caring (for self and others), emotional expression/communication (including displays of vulnerability), and attention to body image. Since conventional ideals co-exist with contemporary expectations, negotiating masculinities may be viewed as a balancing act (being caring vs. being “soft”; being emotional vs. being “wet”; looking good vs. vanity). How individual men situated in different domains construct masculinities and manage health concerns is a live research area which has produced some telling insights but with more potential for new knowledge.

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NOTES

1 See Harrison's [1978] classic thesis that "masculinity is bad for men's health"; also, Courtenay, 2000).

2 See <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-301419/Fat-Britain-Tackling-obesity-epidemic.html>>

<<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1096985/Judge-slams-binge-drinking-scourge-society-jailing-drunk-killer.html>>

3 *Men's Health* is the best selling magazine with editions in several national markets – although the extent to which health issues are covered here is debatable, since researchers have noted a narrow focus on muscularity, sexual performance and physical fitness – see Stibbe, 2004).

4 <<http://forums.macrumors.com/showthread.php?t=163687>>

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