

Masculinity, Performance and Discourse

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The extracts below come from a project on men and masculinity conducted jointly with Nigel Edley (Nottingham Trent University, UK). This material comes from an interview study which was part of the project. It consisted of a series of 30 tape-recorded and transcribed interviews conducted in the early 1990s with 61 mostly white British men. These men ranged in age from 20 to 64. They came from a diverse range of occupational and social class backgrounds and had a variety of previous educational qualifications, including leaving school with no qualifications and some university education. The men were interviewed in small groups. A typical discussion group consisted of the interviewer (Nigel Edley) and two volunteers, although some sessions involved three volunteers and others just one. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Extract 1

NIGEL: Okay some people say that (.) you know (.) there's moments in their everyday lives when they feel more masculine than at other times. (.) Is there anything that either of you could think of (.) erm (.) a time in your life where (.) you know (.) there might have been a particular moment or it might be a regular occurring thing you know (.) erm when you have a sense of yourself as masculine?

[...]

MICHAEL: Erm (.) well related to the boxing there's got to be times erm (.) boxing and training that I feel high and confident in my ability (**NIGEL:** Hm m) and I feel generally wha (.) perhaps what you'd term as erm (.) masculine (.) erm (.) times at work as well (.) a stand-up presentation (**NIGEL:** Right) erm

NIGEL: What is it about that then that gives you that sense?

MICHAEL: Erm (.) the challenge (.) I mean (.) was it yesterday? (.) I got up and did a presentation to er (.) 20 or 30 people (.) that was when I went up to [another town] (.) like a sales pitch (.) erm on a technical basis and there was a lot of erm unknown technical ability (**NIGEL:** Hmm) within the (.) within the audience (.) you know the (.) you know on the floor (.) people who had no knowledge of what I was talking about and people that had knowledge that erm (.) in many cases (.) one particular case that equalled mine and I was trying to sell to them that know as much about it as I do (**NIGEL:** Hmm) and you don't know if there's gonna be a question coming up that you can't answer (.) I mean (.) one or two who you feel threatened by (**NIGEL:** Right) purely because he's got (.) I know that that guy over there's got as much knowledge of the subject as me (**NIGEL:** Hm m) if he wanted to try and erm (.) knock me down a peg or two (**NIGEL:** Right) if there's anyone in the room who can do it's that guy (.) so you feel threatened by it (.) you feel a bit vulnerable (.) and erm (.) like on the one hand (.) but on the other hand I'm getting up and dictating the flow and making sure the meeting and the presentation's going how I want (**NIGEL:** Hm m) I'm (.) I've got control to an extent of the meeting (.) (**NIGEL:** Okay) And like there's a bit of a buzz with that along with a risk

(OU16: 13-14)

Extract 2

NIGEL: So (.) I mean (.) are the northern regions (.) well Scotland and the northern regions more macho then?

[...]

SIMON: I know that in my job (.) because we travel around the country a fair bit working and you sort of (.) there is a thing of looking down on southerners as being wimps (**JAMES:** Oh yeah) yeah (.) yeah the thing is SSB (.) soft southern bastards and that's (.) you know (.) when you go down there (.) you know how we were saying that in the army your sort of (.) everybody's in there and in isolation (.) you're self contained whereas sometimes if we're working in London or in Kent or somewhere like that you would go out and you almost feel like (.) you know (.) right we're an invading army like (.) a load of contractors going out for a few bebies and you know (.) showing these southerners how to drink (.) so I think (.) in reality the southerners are no more wimps than we are (.) but there is a bit of a (**PAUL:** North-South rivalry) yeah (.) we like to think that we're more manly possibly than them (OU2: 9-10)

Extract 3

NIGEL: Okay (.) now is there any one of those six images who you would most erm identify with? (.) is there anyone there that you would say (.) you know (.) that's most like me?

JOHN: Out of those I'd probably go for 4 [Image of Tony Parsons]

NIGEL: Number 4 (.) Raj (.) what do you think?

RAJ: Yes number 4 it seems to be (.)

NIGEL: Okay why him?

JOHN: He looks the most normal (laughs)

RAJ: Sorry?

JOHN: He looks the most normal I suppose

RAJ: Yes that's right.

JOHN: In the dress and (.)

RAJ: Yeah half way (.) he's middle of the road.

JOHN: I suppose Mr Average you might say (.) yeah. (**RAJ:** Mm)

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

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

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

JOHN: Yeah probably the same (.) yeah.

NIGEL: Yeah?

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

NIGEL: Hm m (.) okay yeah (.) I wasn't saying that you feel that you're unmasculine

(**JOHN:** Yeah) but that it's not a very (.)

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

(OU17: 4-5)

Extract 4

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

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

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

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

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

JACOB: Yeah (.) I would say so yeah (.) I mean yeah (.) individual people I suppose I don't (.) I wouldn't look at someone and pass (laughs) you know it's not sort of part of my assessment of their character sort of (**NIGEL:** Hmm) deciding how masculine or how masculine or not effeminate or whatever
(OU13: 2-3)

Extract 5

NIGEL: Erm do you feel yourselves to be masculine men?

HARRY: I think so yeah

NIGEL: You you think you feel as though you are?

HARRY: Yeah

NIGEL: Do you?

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

NIGEL: Okay (.) it's interesting that you talk about security (.) how (.) how might you be made insecure then?

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

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

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

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

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

(OU4: 2-3)

Extract 6

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

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

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

GREG: Well, if (.) what I believe (.) I think masculinity is represented to me or has been throughout my life as what I've just said (**NIGEL:** Hmm) what I think it is (.) is (.) it's har (.) it's probably very difficult to define (.) I think masculinity is dependent on the individual (.) if that's not a cop out (.) I think each individual could look at it differently (.) I believe masculinity is being myself erm not (.) I've got this non-conformist streak in me from my punk days but not conforming to those stereotypes of masculinity erm if I want a damn good cry I'll have a cry and if I want to be supportive of my wife I'll be supporting with my wife (.) if I was (.) you know if my wife had a good job for instance and we decided to have children I'd be quite happy to stay at home and look after the children (.) so I don't think masculinity is (.) is erm (.) is necessarily about being the secure figure (.) being the hard man (.) I don't see it as that way (.) I personally see it as er (.) as a softer sort of image (.) I think it's represented as a different thing totally (.) but my personal opinion is it's a much softer sort of approach

(OU12: 1-3)

Transcription Notation

(.) Short untimed pause in the flow of talk

[...] Material omitted by the authors.

[text] Clarificatory information added by the authors.

textWord(s) emphasized by speakers.

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