The ‘New’ Politics of Fatherhood: Men’s Movements and Masculinities

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Conclusion
Introduction

Contemporary gender debates have examined the role of men and masculinity in creating equality and/or reinforcing inequality. Popular narratives often situate masculinity as inherently “toxic”, powerful, and damaging to both women and men. In contrast, masculinity is frequently claimed to be fragile, under siege, and in urgent need of reclamation. These polarised, oppositional perspectives replicate the idea of “masculinity in crisis”, of masculinity as at a critical juncture where “old” masculinity must either be dismantled, or, alternatively, defended in the face of a hostile, man-hating culture. The “crisis of masculinity” is often represented as new, the result of unprecedented social change. However, such representations are as old as masculinity itself, suggesting that “crisis”, instability, and fragmentation, is built into the very concept of masculinity. Debates around the role of feminism in modern society also continue. A resurgence of interest in feminist activism, and the increased visibility of online feminist resistance has been accompanied by a seemingly inevitable conservative anti-feminist “backlash”. At the same time, dominant postfeminist discourses position feminism as obsolete, denying persistent gender inequalities, and depoliticising gender.

In this context, there is increased awareness and scrutiny of men’s “political choices”, as Raewyn Connell puts it, both within academia and beyond:

The vast changes in gender relations around the globe produce ferociously complex changes in the conditions of practice with which men as well as women have to grapple. No one is an innocent bystander in this arena of change. We are all engaged in constructing a world of gender relations. How it is made, what strategies different groups pursue, and with what effects, are political questions. Men no more than women are chained to the gender patterns they have inherited. Men too can make political choices for a new world of gender relations. Yet those choices are always made in concrete social circumstances, which limit what can be attempted; and the outcomes are not easily controlled

(Connell, 2005: 86)

Feminists have raised concerns about the apparently ubiquitous “MRA” (Men’s Rights Activist) who seems constantly poised to pour vitriolic scorn on any (social) media intervention deemed “too feminist”. On the other hand, the idea of men as feminist “allies” is being valorised, with high-profile celebrity-led campaigns emphasising the importance of men to feminism, and of feminism to men. Men’s roles as allies are, however, contested. Some worry that male feminists re-inscribe the invisibility of women’s voices or, worse, that in extreme cases, their apparent feminist politics is used as a screen for problematic behaviour towards women. Finally, the purported innocence of the “bystander” subject, of the majority of men who eschew gender politics altogether, has come into the spotlight. “Ordinary” men’s complicity through subtle (and not-so-subtle) everyday sexism is consistently challenged in mainstream public arenas.

This heightened visibility of men’s politics and gender identities is not, however, evidence that men are the “new gender victims” as some conservative commentators would claim. Although there are costs of masculinity for men (and, importantly, for some men more than for others), the benefits outweigh these harms. Gendered structures continue to disadvantage women as a group more than men as a group. One of the key
concerns of this book is to map and critically interrogate contemporary constructions of masculinity and of the changing gender world.

Specifically, this book examines the contemporary politics of gender through an analysis of men’s movements, their politics, and the identities they (re)construct. Investigating men’s explicit mobilisations around masculine identities and “men’s issues” is an important aspect of interrogating men’s political choices, and the varying ways in which a politics of masculinity has been invoked. Whilst my primary focus is on the under-researched UK context, the book draws on and extends broader international research on men’s movements. Examining movements from diverse positions (categorised as broadly “feminist”, “postfeminist” and “backlash” perspectives), I explore the following research questions: how do different men’s movements represent masculinity and gender? What is their perception of current gender relations? How do they construct feminism? What forms of gender politics do they employ? How far are postfeminist ideas (alongside feminist and backlash perspectives) present in their discourses? Do they invoke “crisis of masculinity” narratives? How does “crisis” thinking constrain or enable critical scrutiny of masculinity? What are the likely effects of these representations of gender, gender relations, and gender politics? Crucially, overall, does each movement reinforce or destabilise dominant gender identities and the hierarchical relations they foster? I also tentatively consider the cumulative politics of men’s movements, as well as contemporary constructions of crisis of masculinity in other arenas.

There is a substantial body of research on men’s movements in some contexts. Landmark studies which examine men’s movements from different perspectives include the work of Kenneth Clatterbaugh (1997), Michael Messner (2000) and Judith Newton (2005) in the USA (see Chapter 3). As yet, there is no similar in-depth study mapping diverse men’s movements in the UK. In addition, there is only a small literature examining feminist men’s movements. Prominent examples including a recent in-depth history of US feminist men’s movements by Michael Messner, Max Greenberg and Tal Peretz (2015; see also Messner, 2016), and Fidelma Ashe’s (2007) book on academic male feminist perspectives on masculinity, which touches on UK men’s movements. In contrast, there is a burgeoning literature on men’s and fathers’ rights groups covering a number of national (and international) contexts (see, amongst others: Basu, 2016; Behre, 2015; Bertoia and Drakich, 1993 Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Boyd, 2008; Busch et. al., 2014; Burman, 2016; Crowley, 2008; Dragiewicz, 2011; Flood, 2012; Gavanas, 2004; Ging, 2017; Gotell and Dutton, 2016; Hacker, 2016; Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman, 2016; Hoddap, 2017; Kaye and Tollef, 1998; Menzies, 2007; Messner, 2016; Nicholas and Agius, 2018; Salter, 2016; Seymour, 2018; Träbert, 2017; Wojnicka, 2016). There is, however, still very little written on men’s and father’s rights groups in the UK. Noteable exceptions include research by Richard Collier (2014; 2013; 2010; 2006; Collier and Sheldon, 2006), who has written about UK fathers’ rights groups from a socio-legal perspective. However, this work did not draw on empirical research with fathers’ rights groups and did not address UK men’s movements beyond fathers’ rights. This book draws on and extends my previous work on men’s movements and fathers’ rights groups which examined: constructions of masculinity and fatherhood by fathers’ rights groups (Jordan, 2009; Jordan, 2014; Jordan, 2018); diverse responses to feminism in men’s rights groups (Jordan, 2016); and the political uses of crisis of masculinity narratives by men’s groups and others (Jordan and Chandler, 2018).

The main empirical contribution of the book is in the analysis of interviews with members of well-known fathers’ rights group, (Real) Fathers 4 Justice ((R)F4J). Fathers’
rights groups have been understood as part of an anti-feminist "backlash" (see Chapter 5). The identity of 'father' has always been political as power-laden gendered identities are implicit within constructions of fatherhood. However, what is sometimes referred to as a "new" politics of fatherhood has seen the identity of "father" become more explicitly and publicly a site of contestation over rights, resources and subjectivities. Globally and in the UK, debates surrounding fatherhood including over paternity leave, absent fathers, and fathers' rights, have all commanded attention from the media, politicians, and policymakers. This book extends understandings of the complex nature of these issues, offering a nuanced, empirically grounded, account of fathers' rights perspectives to explore the (gendered) implications of the politics of fatherhood and fathers' rights. It will be of interest to those who study: the contemporary politics of gender and feminism; men and masculinity; identity and cultural aspects of social movements; and, more specifically, to readers who want to know more about men's movements, fathers' rights groups, and fatherhood politics.

The interview analysis reveals multiple, complex narratives around masculinity, fatherhood, and gender politics. Aspects of these narratives express caring masculinity and ideas of "new", nurturing fatherhood which partially destabilise dominant constructions of gender and gendered binaries. Others, however, replicate problematic, conservative notions which seek to reinstate "traditional" forms of masculinity and to demonise women/mothers. Overall, the cumulative effect of the discourses presented is at best limited, "postfeminist", and depoliticising. At worst, they equate to the straightforward, vitriolic "backlash" response characteristic of other fathers' and men's rights groups.

Whilst fathers' rights groups have been particularly prominent and visible, they are not, of course, the whole story of men's engagement with masculinity politics. Fathers' rights groups must be understood within the context of other men's movements. I therefore present two further in-depth, qualitative case studies of one "feminist" and one "postfeminist" group, the anti-violence group, the White Ribbon Campaign UK (WRC), and male suicide prevention charity, the Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) respectively. Materials from their websites and campaigns are analysed to explore their representations of gender and of gender politics. These groups, like (R)F4J, were selected due partly to their relative visibility (online and to some extent in the news media) but also, more importantly, to illustrate the diversity of movements and the broad array of positions taken in relation to feminism and masculinity by UK men's movements. The analysis of each of the cases is broadened through reference to research on comparable men's movements elsewhere where relevant. Whilst there are significant disjunctures between men's organisations, as the case study analysis shows, there are also overlapping themes. Even groups starting from very different political perspectives influence each other, sharing ideas and reference points. There are ways in which each of the groups examined in the book challenge dominant frames of masculinity. However, overall, the analysis substantiates the scepticism of feminist masculinity scholars such as Raewyn Connell and Michael Messner over the limited emancipatory potential of the men's movement model.

The qualitative, in-depth case study approach is appropriate given the dearth of research in the UK on these movements. It is also suitable to facilitating an understanding of the nuances of constructions of gender and gender relations. Methodologically speaking, the approach taken in this book is primarily what Connell (2005: 70) calls a 'semiotic' approach to masculinities where 'masculinity [is defined] through a system of symbolic difference in which masculine and feminine places are contrasted'. I am
concerned with reading narratives of masculinity present in “texts” produced by men’s movements such as websites, images and, in the case of (R)F4J, interviews. I focus primarily on analysing constructions of gender at the discursive level. This reflects a feminist ‘displacement’ approach which entails ‘critique, questioning, destabilizing, creating uncertainty and challenging accepted meanings’ (Squires, 1999: 107) to disrupt ‘the hold of particular gendered discourses’ (Squires, 1999: 111). This branch of feminist analysis takes narratives/texts seriously, drawing attention to their power-laden effects, and seeking to both reveal and disrupt the socially constructed assumptions underpinning dominant ideas of gender.

The analysis in each of the case study chapters is based on thematic exploration of the data (web materials in two cases and in-depth interviews in the final case) using qualitative analysis software (NVivo) to facilitate a process of open-ended and iterative coding. The research questions discussed above shaped the investigation, which explored: how each group represented masculinity and gender; perceptions of current gender relations; constructions of feminism including feminist/postfeminist/backlash framing of the issues; whether “crisis of masculinity” narratives were invoked (and in what form); how “crisis” thinking is enabling and/or constraining where it is employed. Through this analysis, each movement’s discourses about gender were critically scrutinised.

WRC and CALM’s websites and other online materials are examined to explore their aims, constructions of masculinity, and overall gender politics (including themes around “crisis of masculinity”). There are inevitable limitations to selecting groups with a web presence in terms of excluding potentially interesting organisations which exist exclusively or predominantly in non-virtual spaces. Further, focusing only on groups’ online materials may not allow as full a picture of potentially complicated and diverse internal perspectives of members as provided by, for example, the in-depth interviews conducted with members of (R)F4J. There may be differences between the online “official” narrative and participants’ own constructions of meaning. However, there is of course no sharp distinction between online and offline worlds. Social movement scholars, as well as those interested in contestations of gender, are increasingly examining these spaces as they are crucial to understanding modern gender identities and cultures of activism. Studying online activism has been argued to be vital to understanding contemporary men’s movements in recent research as it is, for example, the primary site of action for many men’s rights groups (Menzies, 2007; Hoddap, 2017; Ging, 2017; Träbert, 2017, see Chapter 5).

For WRC, their website and campaign materials were the primary sources examined. All written text and documents available were inspected as the website is fairly self-contained and does not frequently change. Most of the data quoted derive from the main areas of the website. However, to extend the discussion, I refer to other material where relevant, for example, media interviews with group leaders/members. The CALM website has a far wider range of material beyond the general areas. For example, CALM make their regular magazine, ‘CALMzine’, available online, along with content such as videos and frequently added blogposts. As their site is significantly larger than WRC’s and constantly evolving, it was not possible/helpful to examine all of this material in depth. All main areas were examined, and other data were included or excluded according to relevance – for example, all articles in the magazine which referred to masculinity, crisis of masculinity, gender politics, feminism, and associated terms, were read and analysed. The point raised above about analysis of websites not incorporating divergent perspectives from within the group is less applicable to CALM than to WRC, as there are
contributions from a range of voices on CALM’s website and this diversity is represented in the discussion. (For more detail on the data and interviews for the (R)F4J case, please see Chapter 5.)

Having explained the context, research questions, methodology, and methods underpinning the analysis, I now move on to outline the argument and content of the book. In the final section of this Introduction, I explicate the theoretical framework, that is, the underlying understanding of concepts of gender and masculinity.

Argument and structure of the book

Men’s movements differ vastly, incorporating organisations with disparate agendas, from the global gay rights movement to the Promise Keepers (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Jordan, 2014; Jordan, 2009; Messner, 2000; Newton, 2005). In Chapter 1, I unpack the definition of men’s movements employed in the book, as well as addressing literatures on gender and social movements, and on contemporary responses to feminism. I argue that common features of men’s movements are that: they organise around the identity of being “men”; they assume that there are distinctive “men’s issues” and “men’s interests”; and that they all articulate a standpoint on feminism (Jordan, 2014). Men’s movements rely on and (re)produce ideas of masculinity and femininity. As masculinities are multiple, men’s movements draw on various notions of masculinity, rather than a single form. Alongside multiple constructions of gender/masculinities between and within movements, there are different responses to feminism and diverse gender politics. Attitudes towards feminism depend on groups’ perception of what ‘feminism’ is and how it has affected men’s status, as well as assumptions on ideal gender roles.

Chapter 1 provides an in-depth analysis of debates around the relationship between feminism and men’s movements, especially the contested concepts of “backlash” (Faludi, 1991) and “postfeminism” (McRobbie, 2009). I outline my definitions of backlash and postfeminism, mapping out a new typology distinguishing between backlash, postfeminist, and feminist perspectives according to the different empirical claims and value judgments relevant to each perspective. “Backlash” perspectives are explicitly hostile, suggesting that feminism disadvantages men. Gender is constructed as political and a collective, anti-feminist, politics is advocated. Postfeminism is more ambivalent. It assumes that gender equality is desirable, but that it has already been achieved, thereby depoliticising gender. Some feminist ideas are taken for granted, whilst feminism itself is constructed as anachronistic, at best an individual lifestyle choice. Finally, feminism, like backlash, highlights ongoing significant gender inequalities. However, women are argued to be generally disadvantaged compared to men. Gender equality is considered an important goal, gender is represented as political, and a collective feminist politics is advocated. Men’s movements’ deployment of postfeminist narratives are only beginning to be explored and it has been argued that ‘masculinity studies scholars generally have failed to take up the analysis of postfeminism’ (O’Neill 2015: 115). This typology enables a more nuanced understanding of the complex narratives around feminism, and particularly postfeminism, present in specific men’s movements, and is applied to the case studies.

Chapter 2 analyses the construction of masculinity as “in crisis”, as ideas of crisis have both shaped, and been shaped by, men’s movements. “Crisis” discourse becomes most intense when movements challenge dominant social groups (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 1987; Messner, 2000). Some men’s organisations respond
to crisis notions by resisting the “feminisation” of men, aiming to re-establish masculine power (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Kimmel, 1987). Others seek to reformulate masculinity (Connell, 2005). Either way, there is scepticism over whether the masculinity movement model is a useful response to perceived “crisis”. I discuss the recurrence of crisis-of-masculinity narratives throughout history, suggesting that masculinity is inherently unstable, and “crisis” is internal to the logic of masculinity. I also review contemporary men-in-crisis debates, including two issues commonly invoked by men’s movements: men and work, and male suicide. Crisis narratives often enrol a “battle of the sexes” framing; if women gain, men must lose. The analysis troubles suggestions that men are the new gender victims in these areas.

Finally, I distinguish between what I call “conservative” and “progressive” crisis narratives. Conservative narratives aim to reassert traditional masculinity, presenting women’s equality/feminism as the instigator of “crisis”. “Progressive” accounts, in contrast, highlight traditional masculinity’s harmful effects for both women and men, and recommend reimagining masculinity. Conservative and progressive narratives are illustrated through my analysis of recent (non-academic) constructions of crisis by a) British MP, Diane Abbott, and b) “men’s issues” activist, Glen Poole. Overall, I argue that both conservative and progressive crisis narratives reinforce harmful, essentialist, binary notions of gender. The language of crisis is problematic in implying that masculinity is normally stable, ahistorical, fixed, singular and “natural” and starkly contrasts with femininity. Further, crisis-of-masculinity rhetoric obscures how many men, far from being oppressed, directly benefit from the disadvantage of women and less privileged men.

In Chapters 3 and 4, building on the examination of diverse responses to feminism and masculinity in crisis, I consider “feminist” and “postfeminist” men’s movements respectively. The two chapters extend knowledge of the underexplored UK men’s movement through new empirical research. In Chapter 3, WRC are argued to demonstrate some of the radical potential of feminist men’s activism in their explicit feminist analysis of power and masculinity/violence and challenges to complicit masculinity. However, the emphasis on men as bystanders is problematic in potentially allowing men a pass out of examining their own practices. They also partially reinforce problematic ideas of masculinity in efforts to appeal to men and to reframe anti-violence work as “manly”. This fits with research suggesting that anti-violence men’s groups often reproduce, rather than destabilise, dominant masculinity (Messner, 2016). There is a danger of entering into a new patriarchal bargain (Messner et. al., 2015; see also Murphy, 2009). Although “crisis of masculinity” is not overtly discussed in the WRC, there are resonances with “progressive” crisis accounts in terms of the presentation of the promise of mainstreaming a softer form of masculinity for a modern world. The project of altering masculinity is confined by the continued assumption that masculinity as a category is itself unproblematic, reinforcing binary notions of gender.

CALM also present inconsistent constructions of masculinity and reinstate gender binaries through their articulation of a need for “softer” forms of masculinity. Crisis of masculinity narratives are dominant and explicit in CALM’s narrative, mostly framed in a “progressive” form, although at times “conservative” crisis ideas were also articulated. Alongside the postfeminist ideas which were most prominent, sat feminist and backlash narratives. Concerns are raised about the conservative and anti-feminist messages underpinning some of the CALM website. However, the postfeminist framing is also problematic in contributing to the marginalisation of feminism/women’s inequalities.
The analysis in Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrates that although there are dominant themes (feminist/postfeminist), there are diverse responses to feminism within the groups. This suggests the importance of moving beyond simplistic feminist versus anti-feminist framings in analysing the gender politics of men’s movements. It also demonstrates that rather than taking groups’ avowed allegiances at face value, it is necessary to examine how they frame masculinity and gender relations to gain a fuller understanding of specific movements. Taken together, the analysis of WRC and CALM illustrate the frequency of slippage between feminism and postfeminism, and between postfeminism and backlash. While this is not all that surprising given that the lines between these perspectives are inevitably blurred, it demonstrates how it is challenging for men’s movements to avoid reinforcing certain aspects of dominant gender relations, even where a central aim of the group is undermining “traditional” ideas of masculinity. Interestingly, although there was most radical promise in the narratives of the feminist WRC, there are overlapping issues between the two groups in terms of potential reinforcement of problematic notions of crisis of masculinity which tend to shore up the category of masculinity itself, along with binary notions of gender. In addition, in trying to appeal to men through messages about what should be considered “manly”, both groups at times re-presented aspects of the very forms of masculinity which they also sought to destabilise. These findings illustrate, once again, the risks of engaging in masculinity politics in this form. Ultimately, I argue that this may be a limiting paradigm for groups with “progressive” goals in terms of altering gender norms.

Chapters 5 and 6 critically examine “backlash” men’s movements in the UK, with a particular emphasis on fathers’ rights groups and the politics of fatherhood. Broadly, men’s rights groups draw on both anti-feminist and postfeminist narratives, arguing that men are discriminated against in society or in specific arenas. Fathers’ rights groups claim that fathers are disadvantaged by a family law system that favours mothers over fathers in child contact disputes (Smart, 2006). In these chapters, I offer an in-depth analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with members of (Real) Fathers 4 Justice, the most visible and well-known fathers’ rights group in the UK and, arguably, beyond (Collier and Sheldon, 2006). (R)F4J’s aims, constructions of masculinity, fatherhood, and overall gender politics are examined and placed in the context of international research on fathers’ and men’s rights groups.

Multiple masculinities were implicit in the interviewees’ representations of themselves as fathers’ rights activists and of the group’s aims and methods. Three masculinities are identified: “bourgeois-rational”; “new man/new father” (both analysed in Chapter 5); and “hypermasculinity” (Chapter 6). Central to these constructions of masculinity were interviewees’ conceptions of fatherhood. Mapping on to the three masculinities, three notions of the “good father” were expressed in the interviews, which I label the “good enough father”; the “nurturing father”; and the “father as superhero”. Ideas of good fatherhood rested on binary oppositions with both “bad fathers” and “bad mothers”, which are also discussed. The findings suggest that the “softer” bourgeois-rational and new man/new father masculinities serve as legitimising strategies which exist in an uneasy tension with the aggressive hypermasculinity frame. Further, all three masculinity frames are argued to be problematic in different ways, as each reinforces existing power-laden gendered binaries. All three of the conceptions of fatherhood are argued to be limited in their potential to revision dominant gendered identities. Some of the implications of these insights for wider academic understandings of masculinity and of fatherhood are considered.
In terms of crisis of masculinity narratives, there were resonances with both progressive and conservative crisis perspectives. Progressive notions of crisis were associated with the new man/new father masculinity in terms of holding out a promise of kinder masculinity (without a deeper unsettling of gender binaries). The most explicit crisis themes, however, were articulated through hypermasculinity, where conservative notions of men's victimhood at the hands of feminism were prominent.

Although (R)F4J are categorised as a “backlash” group, postfeminist ideas are also dominant in the group narrative. Both are explored in depth. Whilst I suggest that some aspects of the group’s narratives are not incompatible with feminist understandings of gender/fatherhood, the framing of the issues in terms of fathers’ rights restricted any sympathy with feminist understandings of debates around post-separation child contact disputes. Overall, the analysis further demonstrates that men’s movements frequently shift their discursive strategies and may express ambivalence about feminism, even where straightforward hostility may be expected. Overall, Chapters 5 and 6 provide an in-depth examination of (R)F4J based on empirical data, extending understandings of men’s and fathers’ rights groups, as well as building on insights into the gendered identities at play within men's movements.

Finally, the conclusion considers implications of the findings for understanding the cumulative politics of backlash, postfeminist, and feminist men's movements. The analysis suggests the partial contestation of dominant gender discourses in contemporary narratives of masculinity articulated within and beyond men's movements. Overall, however, men's groups, and crisis rhetoric more broadly, tend to buy into restrictive binary notions of gender. Even more promising engagements with masculinity and feminism replicate aspects of hegemonic masculinity, thereby shoring up gender inequalities. The cumulative impact of invoking notions of crisis of masculinity and of employing the masculinity politics model is to reify gender. Gender is more “done” than “undone” by men's movements. The implications for understanding contemporary masculinity politics are also discussed, including questions around hegemonic and changing masculinities.

**Gender, masculinity/ies and power**

Below, I outline the conception of masculinity underpinning my examination of men's movements. The use of a masculinities perspective derives from two central insights. First, that the constructions of (intersectional) gendered identities are vital in understanding men's movements. Second, the emphasis on masculinities subverts the assumption that gender is a ‘synonym for women’ (Carver, 1996) and leads to a nuanced conception of gender incorporating the relational nature of masculinities and femininities. Men have become subject to the critical gaze through feminist scholarship (Whitehead, 2002), and men as gendered beings have been studied most consistently in the vast literature on masculinity/ies. There are many frameworks for understanding masculinity, which I do not propose to review here (see, for example, Ashe, 2007 for a detailed overview of some key approaches). Instead, I outline the understanding of masculinity employed in this book, drawing on feminist perspectives emphasising the socially constructed nature of gender, as well as ideas more specific to the feminist-inspired critical masculinities literature (for example, hegemonic and multiple masculinities).
There is some broad consensus in the masculinities literature on what masculinity is not. First, and most fundamentally, masculinity is not attached to men’s bodies in any straightforward sense (Beasley, 2005; Buchbinder, 2013; Connell 2005; Halberstam 1998; Hooper, 2001; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007; Reeser, 2010; Whitehead, 2002). The critical masculinities literature dismisses crudely biological, or otherwise essentialising, accounts of gender. Scientific definitions of “male” and “female” reflect already existing social ideas of masculinity and femininity rather than “the truth” about men and women. Even within medical and biological sciences, there is significant debate over exactly which ‘biological “facts” determine sex’, as ‘chromosomes, hormones, gonads (ovaries/testes), internal reproductive structures and genitalia have variously been seen as the basis for defining a person’s sex’ (Richardson, 2008: 7). Further, despite the considerable energy and resources poured into attempts to locate “hardwired” gender/sex differences in the brain, research findings often suggest at the most only very small differences between men and women, and that there is as much variation within the categories of “men” and “women” as there is between them (Connell, 2011: 47).

Understandings of what it is to be a man (or woman), as well as ideals of manliness and masculinity differ across time, across societies, and even vary within different contexts/arenas win any given historical period or culture. These variations in themselves suggest that masculinities cannot be reduced to biology, or, at least, not to a simplistic understanding of biology which would neatly separate men and women into two entirely discrete categories. Indeed, concepts of gender, masculinity and femininity do not even exist in all cultures (Richardson, 2008). Masculinities (and femininities) ‘prove remarkably elusive and difficult to define’ (Connell, 2005: 3) because the gendering of identities is a social process which is always contingent, partial, and in flux.

Second, and relatedly, masculinity is not simply an expression of the psychology of individual men, nor is it reducible to a list of essentially “masculine” character traits. The “male psyche” is not a pre-social foundation for masculinity. Further, masculinity is not just a matter of individual psychology or personality, instead, it is inherently social and collective (Connell, 2013). Whilst gender operates at the micro level in our everyday lives and interpersonal relations with others, it is also profoundly constitutive of, and constituted by, social, political and economic structures at the macro level. Gender is not simply a negotiation of personal, asocial, gender identities at an individual level. These broader social structures mean that men/women and those who identify with non-binary gender identities do not straightforwardly “choose” their gender, nor how gender impacts on their lives.

Third, given this lack of a fixed reference point, masculinity scholars agree that masculinity is not a stable object “out there” in the world which exists independently of our socially constructed understandings of gender (Connell, 2005). There is, then, widespread agreement amongst critical masculinities (and other feminist) scholars that there is no such thing as true masculinity. If masculinity (and gender) were fixed or “natural”, there would be no need for the pervasive, constant and energetic attempts frequently made to assert its inevitability. The social/structural aspects of gender suggest limitations on how far we can straightforwardly choose to accept or resist dominant gender identities and relations of power. However, acknowledging the socially constrained nature of gender does not mean accepting cultural determinism in place of biological or psychological determinism. We are not all passive “gender dupes” lacking any agency. Instead, paradoxically, recognising the social construction of gender is the condition for resistance (Hekman, 2014). Acknowledging that gender is social/cultural, rather than “natural”, enables us to begin to reimagine gender.
Fourth, the effects of masculinity are not neutral and do not affect men and women (and, again, those who identify with neither category) in the same ways. Although there are differential power relations between men as a group, and between women as a group, ‘men in general are advantaged by the subordination of women’ (Carrigan et. al., 2004: 152). In “western” languages and systems of thought, masculinity has been defined in binary opposition to femininity (Coole, 1993; Lloyd, 1984; Prokhovnik 2002, Squires, 1999). Binary ideas of gender/sex assume that there are two categories of gender/sex; that these categories are opposites, that ‘one side of the pairing is defined by its not being the other’, and that they ‘are not only mutually exclusive; they are also mutually exhaustive [...] together they comprise all the possible options’ (Squires, 1999: 127).

Binary gender oppositions are problematic for several reasons. First, they mask the social nature of gender and of sex. Physiological complexities including “intersex” categories can be argued to undermine the plausibility of simple dichotomous constructions of biological sex/gender (Fausto-Sterling, 1993; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Unnecessary and sometimes harmful practices such as gender reassignment surgery conducted on babies, demonstrate the inherently social nature of the process whereby ‘the medical practice pulls bodies into line with a social ideology of dichotomous gender’ (Connell, 2011: 48-9; see also Richardson, 2008: 8).

Further, the dichotomous rendering of man/woman, masculine/feminine and related gendered categories is not merely an analytical distinction, it is a power-laden, hierarchical construction of (gender) difference situating the “masculine” as superior and the “feminine” as inferior (Prokhovnik 2002). Binary notions of sex/gender are intimately linked with binary notions of sexuality and with the casting of non-heterosexual identities as intrinsically problematic, “unnatural” and ‘unintelligible’ (Butler, 2006). These oppositions are ‘not simply innocent contrasts’ (Prokhovnik 2002: 1), they both reflect and perpetuate unequal gendered power relations and heterosexist structures. Dichotomous thinking ‘is a way of trying to fix the gender order in a way that keeps masculinity both naturalized and privileged’ (Hooper, 2001: 44). Dichotomies often obscure ‘more complex social realities’ and reinforce gendered stereotypes, helping to ‘produce real gender differences and inequalities’ as they are ‘embedded in institutional practices’ (Hooper, 2001: 45). Despite, or perhaps because of, the privileging of masculinity, it is often invisible as it is constructed as the apparently de-gendered “norm”. The task of masculinities scholarship, then, has been to render the masculine visible, and, by deconstructing masculinity, to demonstrate the power relations it shores up.

Finally, despite the presentation of “masculine” and “feminine” as homogenous categories in binary constructions, masculinity is not singular. There are in fact multiple masculinities, rather than masculinity and, correlative, multiple femininities, rather than femininity (see, for example, Buchbinder, 2013; Connell, 2005; Hooper, 2001; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007; Pease, 2000; Whitehead, 2002). Masculinities are both contextual and related to intersectional identities such as class, age, sexuality, race and disability (Buchbinder, 2013; Connell, 2005; Hooper, 2001; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007; Whitehead, 2002). This insight derives from the concept of ‘intersectionality’, that gender is inseparable from other social identities (Crenshaw, 1991) and operates as part of ‘a matrix of other forms of oppression’ (Gill, 2007: 25). The idea of intersectionality entails a more nuanced appreciation of gender and highlights the flaws in binary thinking.

To sum up the argument so far, masculinities are culturally, socially and politically, not biologically, or psychologically, determined. Binary notions of gender reproduce the assumed “naturalness” of the gender order and bolster the privileging of masculinity (and
men by association). Despite these points of consensus, there is an inevitable lack of agreement on how to define what masculinity is in more positive terms. A central debate is “how far” gender is social all the way down. To put this another way, how far can we consider “sex” to be ‘a matter of biology’ and “gender”, in contrast, to be ‘culturally defined’ (Squires, 1999: 54) as early feminist theorists suggested? Despite recognition that these debates are premised on a false nature/nurture dichotomy as discussed above, this issue remains at the heart of the contestation of gender as a concept.

Like many other gender scholars, I understand sex, as well as gender, to be socially constructed, and the boundaries between biology and culture to be blurry and ill-defined (Butler, 2006; Fausto-Sterling, 1993; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). As noted above, gender is ascribed to bodies that are ‘sexed’ in complicated ways through social processes. Rather than gender deriving from biological sex, “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed perhaps it was always already gender’ (Butler, 2006: 9). The very notion of a binary sex system depends ‘on the prior existence of a gender system that [is used to] make sense of genital difference’ (Buchbinder, 2013: 51). Gender brings binary sex into existence, rather than the other way around. This is not to suggest that the corporeal is unimportant. Gender acts on the body and is inscribed on it through gendered social and political structures. As Connell (2013: 12) suggests, ‘men’s [and women’s] bodies are addressed, defined and disciplined […] and given outlets and pleasures, by the gender order of society’. However, the body is not the pre-social arbiter of gender at one remove.

Another key issue in the critical masculinities literature is how to understand the relationship between masculinity and power given insights discussed above about intersectionality. Understanding masculinity as multiple could risk obscuring questions of power if gender identities were perceived as simply fragmented, diverse, and all equally validated in society. As Hooper (2001: 53) puts it, ‘an examination of the differences between men threatens to dissolve, or at least obscure, our view of the oppressor as a group’. She argues that men ‘have generally been more successful in claiming power (through its association with masculinity) than have women’ and ‘men as a whole have always had an edge over women, even though particular groups of men may have been less privileged than particular groups of women’ (Hooper, 2001: 63). It is crucial, then, to acknowledge that masculinity is privileged above femininity. At the same time, ‘all masculinities are not created equal’ (Kimmel, 2004: 184). Hierarchies of power between different masculinities (as well as between masculinities and femininities) have been understood in a variety of ways by masculinities scholars. The most influential, although far from uncontroversial, of these frameworks is Raewyn Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity. Connell (2005: 77) argues that ‘at any one time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted’. Hegemonic masculinity is further defined as a ‘configuration of gender practice… which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women’ (Connell, 2005: 77) and is ‘always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women’ (Connell, 1987: 183). Hegemonic masculinity is manufactured through contrasts with less powerful masculinities, and with femininities.

Loosely following Antonio Gramsci’s\(^1\) conception of class relations, Connell (2005: 77) uses the idea of cultural hegemony to signal that hegemonic masculinity becomes

\(^1\) Charlotte Hooper (2001), amongst others, has pointed out the lack of sustained engagement with Gramsci’s ideas in Connell’s account of hegemonic masculinity.
powerful through a continual process of becoming the assumed norm, the common-sense, or taken-for-granted, cultural ideal. Connell (2005: 77) argues that ‘it is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony (though violence often underpins or supports authority)’. For the most part, hegemonic ideals are not enforced through an overtly authoritarian gender system. Rather, they are consented to (and sometimes challenged) through everyday practices at the micro level, as well as through structures at the meso and macro levels.

The idea of hegemony is taken by Connell to allow room for resistance to the current gender order and to account for the possibility of change. Hegemonic masculinity ‘embodies a “currently accepted” strategy’, when ‘conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded’ (Connell, 2005: 77). Hegemony ‘is a historically mobile relation’, so that ‘new groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony’; in addition, ‘the dominance of any group of men may be challenged by women’ (Connell, 2005: 77). Hegemonic masculinity is in constant need of shoring up and may change over time to adapt to new contexts.

In Connell’s schema, the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity partly occurs through its relationship to other masculinities (as well as in opposition to femininity/ies), namely, subordinate, complicit, and marginalised masculinities. As idealised notions of masculinity embody the characteristics associated with a particular “type” of man (white, heterosexual, non-working class, non-disabled), some men (and in some cases women) are more able to access these culturally privileged masculinities than others. The hierarchical relationship between masculinities therefore maps on to hierarchies between groups of men (Connell, 2005: 78). However, it is important to note that these associations are far from absolute and to assume a direct correlation between a group and the masculinity ascribed to them would be essentialist. In addition, hegemonic masculinity does not refer to ‘fixed character types’ but to ‘configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships’ (Connell, 2005: 81). Connell (2005: 71) argues that masculinity is ‘simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices’, rather than a simply a property of (hegemonic) men. Hegemonic masculinity operates through various arenas rather than from one locus of power, however ‘hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power’ (Connell, 2005: 77). Connell suggests that taken together ‘the top levels of business, the military and government provide a fairly convincing corporate display of masculinity, still very little shaken by feminist women or dissenting men’ (Connell, 2005: 77).

Subordinated masculinity, for Connell (2005: 78), refers to the ‘dominance of heterosexual men and the subordination of homosexual men’, through ‘a cultural stigmatization of homosexuality or gay identity’ and, importantly, ‘an array of quite material practices’ such as legal violence, street violence and economic discrimination. Gay masculinities are positioned ‘at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men’ and ‘gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell, 2005: 78). The symbolically expelled includes all things associated with being feminine so that “gayness” and femininity are conflated. Although gay masculinity is the most visible subordinated masculinity, then, Connell (2005: 79) suggests that some heterosexual men perceived as effeminate in a variety of
ways may also be ‘expelled from the circle of legitimacy’. In this view of subordinated masculinity, gender is closely intertwined with sexuality – it is the association of femininity with gay masculinity which renders it subordinate. This category is in some ways more about the subordination of femininity and women than it is of gay men per se.

Complicit masculinities are more widespread than hegemonic masculinity. Connell (2005: 79) argues that only a small group of men enact hegemonic masculinity, but ‘the majority of men gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women’. Although she is clear that this is not just about the numbers, nonetheless, ‘if a large number of men have some connection with the hegemonic project but do not embody hegemonic masculinity, we need a way of theorizing their specific situation’ (Connell, 2005: 79). Complicit masculinities are not just ‘slacker versions of hegemonic masculinity’, they are ‘something more definite and carefully crafted than that’ (Connell, 2005: 79). Many men who benefit from hegemonic masculinity ‘respect their wives and mothers, are never violent towards women, do their accustomed share of the housework, bring home the family wage, and can easily convince themselves that feminists must be bra-burning extremists’ (Connell, 2005: 79-80). For Connell, ‘marriage, fatherhood and community life often involve extensive compromises with women rather than naked domination or an uncontested display of authority’ (Connell, 2005: 79).

Whilst hegemonic, subordinated and complicit masculinities are said to be ‘relations internal to the gender order’ the final category, marginalised masculinities, are the result of ‘the interplay of gender with other structures such as class and race’ (Connell, 2005: 80). Connell argues that ‘marginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group’ (Connell, 2005: 81). So, for example, in the US, elite black athletes can be ‘exemplars for hegemonic masculinity’ but ‘the fame and wealth of individual stars has no trickle-down effect; it does not yield social authority to black men generally’ (Connell, 2005: 80-81). Like subordinate masculinity, marginalised masculinity is defined from the perspective of hegemonic masculinity, a constructed contrast deployed to reinforce hierarchy and dominance.

As noted above, whilst the idea of hegemonic masculinity continues to be hugely influential in masculinities scholarship, it has attracted considerable criticism and is a ‘contested concept’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 830). Critiques have come from a variety of different perspectives (see, amongst others, Ashe, 2007; Conway, 2012; Demetriou, 2001; Beasley, 2008; Beasley, 2012; Hearn, 2004; Hooper, 2001; Jefferson, 1994; Maclnnes, 1998; Petersen, 1998, Wetherell and Edley, 1999; Whitehead, 2002). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have reviewed and responded to some of the earlier critiques from the 1990s onwards. I do not propose to examine the many ongoing debates about hegemonic masculinity here.

One important criticism, however, is that there is sometimes slippage between hegemonic masculinity (as about practices, structures, and culture, and which may be performed by women) and hegemonic men (a group of elite men who “possess” power) (Beasley, 2008; cf Hearn, 2004). Men are linked to masculinity by ‘cultural association’, rather than ‘by virtue of their anatomy’ (Hooper, 2001: 41). Some slippage between analysis of men and of masculinity is perhaps difficult to avoid given that performances of gender at the micro level interact with gender at the macro level. Although references to hegemonic (as well as complicit and subordinated) masculinities may sometimes refer to men or men’s practices, “men” are understood here as a symbolically gendered category, rather than as sharply distinct from masculinity. This does not imply
essentialist links between what men do/say and masculinity. Instead, notions of masculinity are always already embedded in our understandings of men.

Further, Connell’s framework is at times ‘overly deterministic’ (Conway, 2012: 7), too rigidly presented, with insufficient attention to shifting, fluid identities and inadequate emphasis on the potential for resistance (Demetriou, 2001; Hooper, 2001; Peterson, 1998; Whitehead, 2002). Whilst Connell does at times over-emphasise stability in ‘the gender order’ and does not always foreground the possibility of resistance and change (Duncanson, 2015), this is not an inevitable aspect of concepts of hegemonic masculinity. Connell’s original formulation perceived hegemony as constantly open to contestation and change, and as able to incorporate aspects of other masculinity over time in response to challenges (see Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Indeed, this was precisely the point of theorising hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is thus constantly evolving to maintain social authority.

I follow Hooper in conceiving hegemonic masculinity as fluid, dynamic and as ‘transformed, through constant challenges and struggles, to resemble whatever traits happen to be most strategically useful for the getting and keeping of power’ (Hooper, 2001: 61). It is not, then ‘a fixed set of dominant traits’, but ‘a constantly negotiated construct that draws on a pool of available characteristics, which, although they may be mutually contradictory can be put together in different combinations depending on circumstances’ in a ‘mix-and-match’ manner (Hooper, 2001: 62). The content of available characteristics shifts gradually and ‘characteristics of subordinate masculinities can be plundered to reinvigorate hegemonic masculinity, while previously hegemonic characteristics can be dropped or devalued’ (Hooper, 2001: 62). Hegemonic masculinity is therefore malleable, but in combining newer elements of masculinity with older manifestations, it is always, paradoxically, presented as ‘a powerful, timeless, and stable phenomenon’ (Hooper, 2001: 62). As hegemonic masculinity changes, the newest version nonetheless comes to be commonly accepted as inevitable, natural, and as “commonsense”, whilst also remaining subject to challenge. Hegemonic masculinity is remarkably resilient, but it is nonetheless possible to imagine a world without relations of gender domination.

Despite limitations, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has important benefits as it helps to keep the power in the analysis of masculinity (Ashe, 2007), something which is sometimes lost in alternative perspectives (de Boise, 2015). Hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, then, are understood here as ‘heuristic devices’ which ‘indicate plurality while also highlighting power relations both those between men and women and those between different groups of men’ (Hooper, 2001: 75), even if not all aspects of Connell’s schema are helpful. Although I do not import Connell’s framework wholesale, then, I use the language of hegemonic masculinity where appropriate in the book to signal these power relations. For example, in Chapter 5, I analyse (R)F4J’s articulation of “new” and “caring” masculinity and highlight how the partial softening of masculinity may reinforce, rather than undermine, hegemonic masculinity. I also draw on the idea of complicit masculinity, which I argue is acknowledged and partly challenged by the WRC (see Chapter 3), and which helps us to understand how it is possible for some to benefit from hegemonic masculinity ‘without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832).

Masculinity has been argued to be constituted by, and constitutive of, social, political, and economic institutions, as well as bodies. As Christine Sylvester (1994: 4) has put it, ‘men and women are the stories that are told about men and women’. It is important to reveal how such stories are “fictions” rather than “facts” and could therefore
be told differently. Indeed, in revealing these processes, any clear-cut distinction between gender “fictions” and gender “facts” is called into question. To suggest that gender is inherently fictional, however, is not to suggest that it is imaginary in the sense that it does not have “real” effects – quite the contrary. Social gender scripts shape the world in fundamental ways and analysing how they reinforce (or subvert) hierarchical gender relations is a crucial political project, creating spaces for imagining gender differently (Butler, 2006).

As men’s movements are intrinsically concerned with the “telling of stories” about gender, examining these movements from a masculinities perspective facilitates an understanding of one aspect of the perpetuation, negotiation and contestation of gender. Men’s movements, by drawing on some discourses on gender rather than on others, can either contribute to destabilising dominant gender norms, or can, overall, shore them up. The connection between men’s movements and masculinity is analogous to the relationship between individual men and masculinity – both are fundamentally socially constructed, rather than reducible to anatomy. Using masculinities lenses to view men’s movements allows for a more complex understanding of masculinity in its different forms.

Although it is only a minority of men (and a few women) who participate in men’s movements, such movements both reflect and attempt to reconstruct broader discourses of gender, masculinity, and gender politics. They play a part in both potentially revisioning, but also perpetuating, dominant gender identities and inequalities. Understanding men’s movements is therefore important to gaining a wider knowledge of social processes, change, and continuity in relation to gender. A key aspect of understanding constructions of masculinity/men’s movements is how they are situated in relation to feminism. I now turn to delineating my typology of different perspectives on gender politics.

References


Chapter One

Gender, Social Movements and the Politics of Backlash

Introduction

Men’s movements differ vastly, incorporating organisations with disparate agendas, from the global gay rights movement to the Promise Keepers (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Jordan, 2014; Jordan, 2009; Messner, 2000; Newton, 2005). I argue that common features of these movements are that they organise around the identity of being “men” and that they assume that there are distinctive “men’s issues” and “men’s interests” (Jordan, 2014). Further, partly because the discourse of gender as a legitimate and salient nexus for coordination in civil society was created by feminist movements, another feature that men’s movements have in common is that all articulate a standpoint on feminism. Attitudes towards feminism depend on the perception of what “feminism” is and how it has affected men, as well as assumptions on ideal gender roles. This chapter unpacks and extends this definition of men’s movements.

I start by examining the relationship between gender and social movements. Feminist scholarship on social movements suggests that attention needs to be paid to the cultural politics of social movements, including internal negotiations of gender within movements and the construction of intersectional gender identities for public consumption. In addition to the broader discussion of gender and social movements, I analyse debates around the relationship between feminism and men’s movements. I explore the concepts of “backlash” and “postfeminism”, paying particular attention to the claim that men’s movements represent a backlash against feminism and women’s movements (Faludi, 1992). Such claims fail to appreciate the full complexity of the men’s movement and, in turn, the different politics of gender constructed within men’s movements. Conceptualising backlash and postfeminism is important to understanding the gender politics of men’s movements and yet these concepts are too frequently inadequately defined.

Drawing on the work of relevant (feminist) scholars, I argue for a particular understanding of both backlash and postfeminism and map out a typology intended to help situate different men’s movements. Backlash is defined here as explicitly hostile to feminism, either because a) gender equality is not a desirable goal so feminism is fundamentally pernicious in its aims or b) although gender equality is a worthy aim, feminism undermines equality by privileging women over men. Gender is therefore constructed as political and as requiring a collective, anti-feminist, politics. Postfeminism, on the other hand, is a fundamentally ambivalent perspective which assumes that gender equality is a valid goal but that, in all or most respects, it has already been achieved. Basic feminist ideas are therefore taken for granted whilst feminism itself becomes embarrassingly anachronistic, simply a product of a firmly bygone social and political era. Gender is depoliticised and feminism becomes a matter of individual taste or a lifestyle choice. Finally, the equally complex concept of feminism with which the first two are (often implicitly) contrasted needs to be defined. In this context, feminism, like backlash, assumes that significant gender inequalities exist in contemporary society. However, in this case, women are argued to be generally disadvantaged compared to men. Gender equality is seen as a socially and morally desirable goal, and feminism as the best hope for achieving this goal. Here, gender is rendered political and challenging gendered
inequalities necessitates a collective feminist politics. The typology informs the analysis in the following chapters.

Gender and social movements

Social movements are ‘involved in struggles over the definition of meanings and the construction of new identities and lifestyles’ (Nash, 2000: 101). A social movement is understood here to be ‘a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity’ (Diani, 1992: 13). This inclusive definition recognises the diversity of forms that social movements can take and avoids making overly restrictive claims about the nature of movements as opposed to other forms of organised politics which, in practice, are often difficult to distinguish neatly from movements. In the chapters to follow, the terms movement and social movement are used interchangeably with groups, organisations and so on to indicate a broad understanding of social movements in general, and of men’s movements in particular.

Movements take different forms – from loose, devolved networks with no official leadership to more centralised groups with formal leadership structures characterised by hierarchical and bureaucratic formations. They also differ in whether they tend overall to favour a state-oriented or cultural politics, although this distinction can be misleading (Jordan, 2014). Movements also use a variety of strategies including: traditional methods directed at formal political institutions (lobbying MPs/governments, petitions); direct action methods (sit-ins, strikes); awareness-raising (social media campaigns, flash mobs); prefigurative activities (participatory democratic processes within movements, peace camps); individual consciousness-raising; self-help strategies, and community initiatives.

There are many approaches to studying social movements, underpinned by distinct theoretical perspectives, each of which ‘raises different types of questions and points to different ways of describing and analysing movements’ (Staggenborg, 2012: 13). As there are many excellent summaries of the various strands of social movement theory, I do not describe them here. Instead, I discuss how feminist scholars have conceptualised social movements, as ‘social movements have the potential to reproduce as well as transform gender inequalities, structures, and belief systems’ (Kuumba, 2001: 2).

Gender has been, and remains, a prominent identity and centre for social movement activism. Although not all movements taking gender as their starting point are feminist, feminist movements have played a large part in shaping gender movements. Partly as a result of this, and partly due to the early efforts of feminist scholars to render women’s movements and the work of women in movements more visible (Buechler, 1993; Charles, 2008; Ferree and McClurg Mueller, 2007; Freeman, 2009; Kuumba, 2001; Rowbotham, 1993; Ryan, 2008; Threlfall, 1996; Staggenborg, 1998; Taylor, 1999; Taylor and Whittier, 1998), the current literature on gender and social movements predominantly focuses on the study of women’s (feminist) movements.

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2 For useful overviews see, amongst others: (Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Nash, 2000; Opp, 2009; Staggenborg, 2012).
Feminist research on women’s movements yielded important insights which supported feminist critiques of “mainstream” social movement theories. Such theories either did not engage with theories of gender in any sustained way, or neglected entirely the gendered aspects of movements (Buechler, 1993; Ferree and Mueller, 2007; Kuumba, 2001; Staggenborg, 2012; Taylor 1999; Taylor and Whittier 1998). Feminist scholars have argued that traditional social movement theories were based on symbolically gendered assumptions about what “counts” as a social movement and what constitutes “activism”. As less visible forms of activism were often overlooked, women’s movements, which often relied on less traditional activism and on informal networks in local communities, were not seen as a proper object of study (Buechler, 1993; Staggenborg, 2012). Women’s movements were often written out of social movement scholarship which treated ‘male-led movements as if they represented the normative case’ (Ferree and Mueller, 2007: 577). Initial feminist research in this area therefore focused on writing women back in by researching women-as-activists and women’s movements. This early, often empirically-led, research has been used in conjunction with feminist theories of gender to generate conceptual insights about the nature of social movements as ‘women’s movements theoretically raise issues for all movements’ (Ferree and Mueller, 2007: 588).

Feminist social movement scholars argued that social movement theory was founded on symbolically masculine models. It assumed a series of false dichotomies: reason vs. emotion; instrumental vs. expressive politics; strategic vs. identity- or culture-oriented activism, and structural vs. cultural change. These dualisms map on to symbolically gendered binary oppositions between “masculine” (instrumental rationality, strategic, structural change) and “feminine” (emotion, identity-oriented, cultural change) (Hercus, 1999; Taylor and Whittier, 1998). The emphasis on the “rational actor” privileges the terms commonly associated with masculinity rather than femininity. Alternative understandings of social movements attend to the role of emotion, identity and culture, providing both a more holistic understanding of movements, and the tools with which to understand their gendered nature (Buechler, 1993; Ferree, 1992; Kuumba, 2001).

Feminist scholars also highlighted the operation of gendered political opportunity structures related to gender, race, class and so on, which can constrain or enable women’s (and other) movements (Kuumba, 2001; Noonan, 1995). Gendered opportunity structures may arise from formal political institutions, economic structures, or from more informal cultural/social structures (Taylor and Whittier, 1998). So, women’s movements may be directly constrained by legal barriers to women’s activism or more indirectly limited ‘by a political culture that makes gender-specific claims problematic’ (Ferree and Mueller, 2007: 577). Overall, women are more likely to be marginalised in formal political contexts (Ferree and Mueller, 2007: 589).

Responses by the wider public to movements are also filtered through gender, with the ‘legitimacy of activists’ claims’ being ‘judged externally on the basis of gendered assumptions and perceptions’ (Kuumba, 2001: 20). These processes do not just apply when movements are explicitly gendered or deliberately using gendered framings as a protest strategy (see, for example, Einwohner et. al., 2000 on stereotyping of women animal rights activists). At a general level, emotion is often constructed as feminine. However, the gendering of emotion is complex as certain emotions, such as anger, are sometimes seen as more “deviant” for women than for men and this influences the differential reception of women’s and men’s activism (Goodwin and Jasper, 2009; Hercus, 1999; Taylor 1999). Men’s rights activists, for example, are frequently successful in
deploying anger in ways which would be judged unacceptable (irrational and hysterical) for women activists (see Chapters 5 and 6).

In short, movements do not operate in gender neutral contexts. They cannot simply control gendered perceptions as ‘culturally available ideas about gender’ shape how ‘opponents and other third parties evaluate them in terms of gender’ and ‘these evaluations may either hamper or facilitate protest efforts’ (Einwohner et. al., 2000: 688; see also Beckwith, 1996). Movements contesting dominant gender (and other) norms may be less successful than those drawing on more mainstream ideas. The cultural arena is not a blank space in which movements can simply select the ideas which appeal to them most, and ‘violating gender norms and expectations carries dangers for both individuals and social movements’ (Einwohner et. al., 2000: 692). Cultural opportunities are thus tied in with articulations of gender and other prominent identities.

It is now commonplace amongst social movement scholars to recognise the importance of identity, cultural/symbolic struggle, and emotions, at least in terms of movement formation/maintenance and movement outcomes (Benford and Snow, 2000; Buechler, 1995; Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Jasper, 1997; Goodwin and Jasper, 2009; Melucci, 1989; Nash, 2000; Noonan, 1995; Opp, 2009; Snow and Benford, 1992; Staggenborg, 2012). As Nash (2000: 106) puts it: ‘what is at stake in much collective action is cultural politics: the contestation and transformation of the meanings actors attribute to events, experiences, and perceptions, and the attempt to construct and reconstruct one’s view of oneself and others’. Further, feminist scholars have highlighted how ‘these identities and symbols are fused with gendered assumptions and constructs that have to be taken into account’ (Kuumba, 2001: 50). It is the cultural politics of social movements that I am most concerned with in this book, especially how movements both construct and challenge gender identities.

Examining gendered identity **within** social movements is also essential to understanding ‘the constitution and role of individual political consciousness and its relation to collective agency and movement politics’ (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2007: 297). Such micro performances of gender are not separable from wider (gender) politics. Evidence of the internal contestation of gender within movements is important to evaluating and understanding them in relation to gender equality. For example, some feminist scholars have noted problematic gendered divisions of labour within movements (Taylor 1999).

So far, I have discussed broader insights about the relationship between gender and social movements, which could in principle apply to all movements. I now move on to consider how we should define those which specifically organise around gender. Karen Beckwith (2000: 435) suggests that there is sometimes ‘an eagerness to recuperate (almost any) women’s activism as feminist’. This ignores the existence of non-feminist or anti-feminist women’s movements. Further, the simplistic equation of women’s and feminist movements suggests a problematic gender essentialism whereby women activists must be inherently feminist. The implicit corollary is that men’s movements are inherently anti-feminist or, at best, non-feminist. However, the relationship between men’s movements and feminism is more complex (see below).

Beckwith (2000) makes a useful distinction between ‘women’s movements,’ ‘feminist movements’ and ‘women in social movements’, categories which are sometimes conflated. Women in social movements do not necessarily act as women or around women’s interests. Women’s movements, in contrast, are ‘characterized by the primacy of women’s gendered experiences, women’s issues, and women’s leadership and decision-making’ (Beckwith, 1996: 1038). There is a collective “women’s” identity but
issues or interests defined as “women-specific” are not considered in connection with feminist aims and such groups may be overtly anti-feminist. Feminist movements, on the other hand: ‘are distinguished by their challenge of patriarchy’ and ‘share a gendered power analysis of women’s subordination’, contesting ‘political, social, and other power arrangements of domination and subordination on the basis of gender’ (Beckwith, 2000: 437). It is these themes which I take to be definitive of feminist movements, whether they are feminist men’s movements or feminist women’s movements.

To expand Beckwith’s categories to men’s movements, then, it is more persuasive to distinguish between men in social movements, men’s movements, and feminist men’s movements. Men in social movements, even movements which are dominated by men as leaders and participants, do not construct themselves as acting as men to promote specifically male interests. Men’s movements, in contrast, organise based on collective gender identity, gendered experiences, and around issues perceived as gender-specific (Jordan, 2014). The collective gender identity here is the socially constructed category of “men”, and the issues/experiences are seen as those particular to men. Men’s movements inhabit a range of positions in relation to feminism and to male/masculine identities, as discussed in more depth below, but are not explicitly feminist in orientation. Finally, feminist men’s movements share with feminist women’s movements the fundamental claim that men as a group are advantaged relative to women as a group, and seek to challenge unequal gendered relations through their activities.

I use the umbrella term “gender movements” to refer to movements which organise around a gender identity, and to signal that such movements could be organised around non-binary notions of gender. Although I follow common usage in using the terms women’s and men’s movements, I take the categories of “women” and “men” to be always already socially constructed and embedded in ideas of femininity and masculinity, rather than as an anatomical description of the male/female bodies that make up these movements (see the Introduction). As Ferree and Mueller (2007: 580) acknowledge in relation to women’s movements: ‘defining who “women” are said to be is a political process’ and ‘the inclusions and exclusions created in these definitional struggles are important for understanding the course of specific movements over time’. Gender identities are not static and uncontested within gender movements, which is unsurprising given that these movements are about challenging or reconstructing gender in various ways. To a greater or lesser extent, gender movements both rely on, and at the same time attempt to transcend, gender categories such as masculine/feminine, men/women.

Intersections of gender with race, class, sexuality and so on are central to analyses of “gender movements”. The category of “women” is now widely understood by those who study women’s movements as ‘of necessity complex, heterogeneous, and informed by differences of race, class, ethnicity, nationality, generation, and religion’ (Beckwith, 2000: 431). Mirroring the recognition of differences between women, “men” as a category ‘has not only been relinquished as the benchmark ‘Other’ but has been replaced by more complex and subtle considerations of masculinity and masculine performance’ (Beckwith, 2000: 432). Research on gender movements has moved away from essentialist, dichotomous understandings of “women” and “men”, acknowledging ‘a continuum of gendered identities, performances, and behaviors’ (Beckwith, 2000: 432).

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3 Men’s movements sympathetic to feminism are more commonly referred to as “profeminist”. I primarily refer to “feminist” men’s movements in this book.
To summarise, acknowledging the broader gendered dynamics of social movements in terms of their internal workings, the wider cultural constructions of gender by movements, and the gender-differentiated outcomes of movements, is important. Nonetheless, viewing these gendered processes and identities as operating in terms of a straightforward masculine/feminine binary opposition oversimplifies the complexity of the various gendered aspects of social movements. As my focus is on the creation and maintenance of a plurality of gender identities in men’s movements, I use a multiple masculinities approach to enable a more nuanced understanding of the complex gender performances at play (see Introduction). Further, the construction of gendered identities within movements is both contingent and not necessarily mapped onto sexed bodies. The study of men’s movements entails the awareness of gender dynamics as integral to explaining and evaluating social movements informed by feminist scholars of women’s movements. However, there are a different set of concerns involved in studying men’s movements from a feminist perspective which inform the analysis throughout this book. Key debates around men’s movements centre on their privileged social, political and economic positioning and their relationship to feminism. I begin to address these themes below.

Backlash?

Men’s movements are often understood as representing a backlash against feminism and women’s movements (Faludi, 1991). Given the diversity amongst men’s movements, situating all such movements as part of a backlash would be problematic. In this part of the chapter, I map out a typology to help situate men’s movements and to illuminate the nuances of varying perspectives on feminism present in different movements. This typology is developed out of my analysis of existing conceptualisations of “backlash” and the related idea of “postfeminism”. These concepts have been used to analyse contemporary perspectives on gender relations, and cultural responses to feminism. Whilst they provide useful ideas for understanding gender politics, in this case in relation to men’s movements’ perspectives on feminism, they are frequently inadequately defined (Hall and Rodriguez, 2003). Backlash and postfeminism are contested concepts, with disagreement over their meaning. There is frequent confusion over these terms in the literature, as well as slippage between them, and they are too often used interchangeably (Braithwaite, 2004: 18). I therefore unpack these complex concepts below, taking the concepts of backlash and postfeminism in turn and arguing for a particular understanding of each.

Academic accounts of the state of contemporary feminism have been characterised by Jonathan Dean (2010: 9-10) as either ‘melancholic’ or ‘celebratory’. Inspired by Dean (2010), I suggest that a useful way of distinguishing between academic concepts of backlash and postfeminism is to categorise them as representing different points along a spectrum of pessimism to optimism. Whilst none of the conceptions of either backlash or postfeminism completely inhabit either of the polarities of absolute gloominess or unqualified cheerfulness, this is a useful starting point for mapping the contours of the debate.

Those who I refer to as “backlash theorists” are situated at the pessimistic end of the scale as they often see anti-feminist trends as entrenched, persistent and omnipresent (Braithwaite, 2004; Genz, 2009). Feminists have understood backlash as hostile
responses from powerful groups to changing gender relations and to the real or perceived impact of feminist and/or women's movements. Whilst there is certainly evidence of this response from, for example, men's rights groups (see Chapters 5 and 6), the sometimes morose representations of backlash in the academic literature, portray its effects as so damaging that feminism is taken to be either dying or already dead. Such accounts tend to exaggerate the extent and influence of backlash and to present an overly simplistic view of the complex landscape of contemporary (anti)feminist narratives and activism. Susan Faludi's (1991) book is a key example of this perspective and is analysed in detail below.

Postfeminist academic accounts, on the other hand, tend to a more optimistic outlook. They contest the narrow conceptions of feminism and of femininity inherent to backlash accounts. Broadly speaking, postfeminist theorists argue that the narratives which Faludi and others have seen as indicative of backlash are not necessarily anti-feminist. Instead, they may constitute a “new” feminism, one which embraces elements of “traditional” femininities (erroneously) thought to be inherently oppressive by second-wave feminists. For these theorists, Faludi and the like situate women as lacking agency. I take Stephanie Genz and Ann Braithwaite's respective discussions of postfeminism to be representative of this approach. I also draw on Angela McRobbie's and, to a lesser extent, Rosalind Gill's work on postfeminism, although, as outlined below, they are both far more sceptical about the implications of postfeminist narratives than either Genz or Braithwaite.

I will begin with the concept of backlash. A useful definition of how backlash is commonly used is offered by Jane Mansbridge and Shauna Shames (2008: 623-4): backlash 'denotes politically conservative reactions to progressive (or liberal) social or political change'. They argue, however, that backlash need not necessarily be conservative. Instead, it entails resistance from 'those in power to attempts to change the status quo' (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008: 625). Backlash, on this account, is 'a reaction by a group declining in a felt sense of power' resulting from a (perceived) threat posed by another group (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008: 625). The sense of entitlement acquired by dominant groups leads to genuine outrage and pain when it appears that their “natural right” to power/privilege is questioned (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008: 627).

The classic commentary on backlash by US journalist, Susan Faludi (1991, 1992), documented some of these characteristics of backlash to feminism. Despite limitations, Faludi’s account is worth interrogating. It remains one of the most in-depth and frequently-referenced accounts of backlash, although it is more often cited than analysed. In her book, Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women, Faludi (1992: 12) described the 1980s as defined by antagonism towards feminism: ‘the last decade has seen a powerful counterassault on women’s rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women’. This counterassault, Faludi argued, began in the USA in the late 1970s, driven

4 Faludi has since published additional books which indirectly amend or complicate her narrative in Backlash. For example, in Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern American Man (Faludi 1999), she suggests that men are as much victims of entrenched gender norms as women. In The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America (Faludi 2007), she argues that the response to 9/11 precipitated a return to restrictive gender ideals and a new attack on both feminism and women's rights. However, I do not discuss these accounts as it is the specific, detailed articulation of backlash that Faludi gives in her earlier book that is most useful for my purposes here.
by the evangelical right. By the early 1980s, she asserts that the ‘fundamentalist ideology’ of backlash became influential in government and that by the middle of the decade it passed into popular culture and dominated the media (Faludi, 1992: 13).

The logic of backlash suggested, erroneously, that feminism had in fact won uncontested favour in “the west” and simultaneously positioned feminism as women’s enemy. Backlash narratives represented feminism as damaging to society, and bad for the very women that it was supposed to liberate (Faludi, 1992). Feminism was portrayed as anachronistic, power-hungry, and fundamentally misguided in claiming women were still oppressed and in the solutions it offered to emancipate women. Feminism was thus delegitimised through a chain of connected claims: a) that women were already equal, b) that winning equality had harmed women (and men), and c) that as a result of a) and b), women themselves no longer supported feminism. Faludi criticised all of these premises, but perceived backlash as having very successfully dominated public discussions of gender relations.

Although this account of ubiquitous backlash would seem to situate Faludi at the more despondent end of the scale, she is less gloomy than is sometimes suggested. She did not argue that feminism was entirely defunct. Noting that there has always been resistance to women’s attempts to assert their rights, she characterises ‘fear and loathing of feminism’ as ‘a sort of perpetual viral condition in our culture’ which ‘is not always in an acute stage; its symptoms subside and resurface periodically’ (Faludi, 1992: 13). The points at which the virus becomes “acute” are, then, the periods that she refers to as backlashes. Backlashes do not spring mysteriously from the void, they occur at times when there is a perceived threat of women making substantial gains and draw on existing undercurrents of antipathy towards feminism and women. In this sense, ‘outbreaks’ of backlash are actually a symptom of the (perceived) successes of feminism: ‘the anti-feminist backlash has been set off not by women’s achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility that they might win it’ (Faludi, 1992: 14). Backlash is therefore a sign of feminism’s transformational potential. Backlash, by definition parasitic on feminism, only becomes necessary when feminism is a strong, rather than a declining, movement:

when feminism is at a low ebb, women assume the reactive role – privately and most often covertly struggling to assert themselves against the dominant cultural tide. But when feminism itself becomes the tide, the opposition doesn’t simply go along with the reversal: it digs in its heels, brandishes its fists, builds walls and dams. And its resistance creates countercurrents and treacherous undertows

(Faludi, 1992: 15)

This mirrors the metaphor of “waves” of feminism, with backlashes ebbing and flowing relationally to the ebb and flow of feminism. Faludi’s account challenges the assumption that backlash indicates that feminism must be on the wane. This point is addressed in more depth in the discussion of postfeminism below.

Various empirical critiques have been levelled at Faludi. The extent to which a backlash discourse was in fact dominant in the US media in the 1980s and 90s has been challenged by (feminist) researchers (Hall and Rodrigues, 2003). Further, Faludi published an updated version of the Backlash book in 1992 (originally published in 1991) to apply her argument to the UK context. It has been suggested that important differences between the UK and the US are obscured in this account (Walby, 1993). There is also a
problematic tendency in her book(s) to conflate the USA (and the UK) with the whole of “the west”.

Most pertinent to the present discussion, however, are the conceptual issues with Faludi’s account, which fall into three broad categories. First, is Faludi’s reductionist view of feminism. Second, is the related difficulty of her inadequate acknowledgment of women’s agency. Finally, there is the wider problem of essentialism in backlash accounts which assume that men are always the agents of backlash, and women of feminism. The first two lines of critique around Faludi’s simplistic idea of feminism and women’s subjectivity, are central to what I call ‘postfeminist’ academic analyses. The third partly emerges out of similar concerns, but also derives from her simplistic equation of men’s movements with anti-feminism. Below, I address each of these criticisms and outline alternative postfeminist accounts of feminism, women’s agency, and essentialism.

First, then, Faludi assumes that “feminism” itself is uncontested (Dean, 2010; Genz, 2009). This is problematic because to understand what constitutes a backlash, it is first necessary to understand to what the backlash is supposed to be a reaction. Taking issue with Faludi’s notion of backlash, Ann Braithwaite (2004: 18) argues that backlash (and postfeminism for that matter) has ‘come to be widely used in many feminist analyses to critique – and then usually dismiss – representations of both women and feminists throughout media and popular culture’. For Braithwaite, contentious questions about the nature of feminism are effectively marginalised by such uncritical uses of the concept of backlash.

Braithwaite (2004: 19) claims changes in both feminist theory and popular cultural representations of feminism are often ignored, leading to an inability to appreciate ‘how these examples of a supposed backlash against feminism might alternately be seen as illustrations of how much something about feminism has instead saturated pop culture, becoming part of the accepted, “naturalized”, social formation’. This critique suggests that there may be something more complex than a straightforward rejection of feminism in some of what Faludi claims as instances of backlash.

Stephanie Genz (2009: 72) similarly argues that analyses of backlash neglect the extent to which feminism has been mainstreamed in society, the media, and popular culture. She suggests that Faludi (amongst others) inscribes a false binary between 1970s feminism and 1980s backlash, resting on a further opposition between “authentic” and “inauthentic” feminism. This framing assumes one very specific version of feminism and obscures the possibility of alternative visions (Braithwaite 2004: 26). Such accounts paint a one-dimensional portrait of both “new” and “old” feminism, in the latter case implying ‘a homogeneity that was never there’ (Braithwaite, 2004: 19). Faludi’s perspective sets up only two available responses to feminism – for-or-against, feminist-or-backlash. “Postfeminist” narratives which are not simply either/or are automatically dismissed as anti-feminist because they do not embrace all aspects of the feminism which Faludi prefers.

Second, those who label themselves feminist but do not subscribe to this version of feminism, are portrayed as automatically complicit in backlash. To explain the tension between women’s self-identification as feminists and what she sees as their participation in backlash, Faludi claims that women’s consent is engineered through self-policing. Contrary to the characterisation of backlash as explicitly hostile to feminism in most of her discussion, then, Faludi (1992: 16) also suggests that backlash is a complex, often subtle process. It is not a ‘conspiracy’ with a centre, nor is it even an ‘organized movement’, but this ‘only makes it harder to see’ and therefore more dangerous as it:
succeeds to the degree that it appears not to be political, that it appears not to be a struggle at all. It is most powerful when it goes private, when it lodges inside a woman’s mind and turns her vision inward, until she imagines the pressure is all in her head, until she begins to enforce the backlash too – on herself

(Faludi, 1992:16)

Backlash is claimed to operate through a divide and conquer strategy whereby women are pitted against other women along, for example, class or racial lines. Women who conform are rewarded and those who do not are punished. To this extent, Faludi recognises the role of women in promoting and complying with backlash.

However, the framing of “anti-feminist” women’s voices as the result of a kind of backlash brainwashing is problematic. Whilst it is not the case that any and all definitions of feminism are equally valid (Braithwaite, 2004), there is no one “true” version of feminism. Instead, there is a plausible spectrum of feminisms and the nature of feminism is always to some extent an open question, subject to contestation (Squires and Kemp, 1997). As a result, it is not so easy to dismiss dissenting women who might ‘even consider themselves feminists’ (Faludi, 1992: 16) as deluded, unconscious instruments of backlash.

The false dichotomy that Faludi inscribes between feminism and anti-feminism, maps on to a further binary opposition in Faludi’s work between feminism and femininity. Braithwaite (2004: 18) argues that by uncritically absorbing the view of second wave feminism as static, monolithic and inherently antagonistic to particular constructions of femininity, Faludi positions all representations of “traditional” femininities as automatically anti-feminist and, correlatively, anti-women. Genz (2009: 70) follows Braithwaite in arguing that the notion of backlash ‘keeps intact the historically entrenched division between feminism and femininity’. If (traditional) femininity is automatically classified as anti-feminist, then, by definition, all women taking on aspects of such constructions of femininity must be gender dupes, taking on identities which are detrimental to their interests.

Further, Faludi portrays the media as monolithically oppressive and omnipotent in promoting a backlash agenda (see also Genz, 2009: 72). Her commentary does not leave much room for defiant voices, nor does it evoke the strength of feminism that the passages cited above depict. Taken together, the unduly narrow view of feminism, the dismissal of (traditional) femininity as inherently anti-feminist, and the reductionist representation of the media as the instrument of backlash, mean that there is limited attention in Faludi’s work to evidence of women’s (or men’s) exercise of agency in resisting backlash.

Finally, and relatedly, backlash accounts are “essentialist” in both senses of essentialism used in the feminist literature: first, the elision of differences among women (and men) (Riley, 1988) and, second, problematic conceptions of gender whereby ‘men and women [...] are identified as such on the basis of transhistorical, eternal immutable essences’ (Fuss, 1989: xi). Not only do backlash accounts tend to assume that men and women are monolithic, largely homogeneous, groups, they also imply that backlash is always perpetrated by men against women, albeit with women’s unwitting consent. Although Faludi does, at moments, recognise women’s role in consenting to and internalising backlash, thereby upsetting a straightforward women-are-feminist/men-
are-antifeminist binary, this simplistic assumption is nonetheless dominant in her work.\(^5\)

**Postfeminism**

In contrast to Faludi’s backlash account, those I have labelled “postfeminist” theorists, emphasise the diverse available positions articulated in response to feminism, emphasising the complexity of postfeminist ideas. Although the term postfeminism has sometimes been used as a synonym for backlash or anti-feminism, there is an established literature which challenges unexamined assumptions about postfeminism. There is significant contention over identifying “postfeminism”. However, scholars analysing postfeminism tend to have broader conceptions of a) feminism/s and b) femininity/ies, as well as more nuanced ideas of the nature of changes in both. Angela McRobbie (2004: 255) argues that postfeminism (or post-feminism as she prefers) ‘positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force’. She distinguishes postfeminism from Faludi’s perception of backlash as ‘a concerted, conservative response to the achievements of feminism’ (McRobbie, 2007: 255). Postfeminism is not, then, explicitly hostile to feminism in the same way as backlash. Rather, some feminist ideas are taken very much for granted, indicating a deep ambivalence towards feminism, not a straightforward rejection of it.

This ambivalence has manifested itself in debates over the “post” in postfeminism. Genz (2009: 18) notes the considerable ‘semantic confusion’ over the prefix (see also Braithwaite, 2004; Braithwaite, 2002; Dean, 2010; Gill, 2007). These different interpretations of post are at the heart of debates over the significance of postfeminism. First, “post” can mean *after*, indicating that feminism has ended. This partly explains the slippage between postfeminism and backlash in some feminist discussion as this meaning suggests the loss of feminism. Second, in contrast, “post” can suggest *continuity with*, rather than rupture from, feminism. It is this meaning which is invoked by those who suggest postfeminism is a new strand or wave of feminism, adapted to a changed social world. From this perspective, gloom about postfeminism is unwarranted, arising from anachronistic understandings of gender and power (see Dean, 2010). Finally, Genz states that “post” ‘can occupy a precarious middle ground, signalling a contradictory dependence on and independence from the term that follows it’ (Genz, 2009: 19). Genz situates her own conception of postfeminism in this middle ground. McRobbie’s definition of postfeminism above also captures this tension between the two apparently oppositional meanings of “post”.

I follow Genz and McRobbie to the extent that I conceive of postfeminism in terms of *both*-continuity/*and*-disjuncture, rather than as *either*-pro/or-anti-feminist.

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\(^5\) Some feminists have also criticised the construct of backlash as being based on white, middle-class women’s experiences of (anti)feminism. For example, Parminder Bhachu (1997, 189) suggests that ‘the multiplicity of women’s agencies and “feminisms” was never adequately represented in “the” feminist movement’ so that ‘the present moment of backlash does not relate to the cultural position of many groups of women’. So, not only is the simplistic male/female binary implicit in Faludi’s approach flawed, but the implicit assumption that these women and men are all from relatively privileged racial and economic categories is equally problematic.
Postfeminism necessarily indicates a troubled relationship with feminism. Feminism is acknowledged but always also held at a distance. This "acknowledgement", however, can be largely hostile or mostly benign, or can be more ambivalent.

Debates over postfeminism, then, also centre around scholars' perceptions of how feminism is recognised and the extent of the simultaneous distancing from "past" feminism. Postfeminism could be understood as simply the adjustment of feminism to contemporary social realities, or it could be interpreted as a much more substantive reconsideration of some of the fundamental tenets of feminism(s). Differing interpretations of how far popular postfeminist ideas are hostile/accepting of feminism have shaped the divergent responses of feminist theorists to postfeminism.

This complexity is exacerbated by the fundamental open-endedness of the "feminism" in postfeminism, as mentioned above. Genz (2009: 19) argues that 'feminism at best can be said to have working definitions that are always relative to particular contexts, specific issues and personal practices'. Responses to feminism must therefore be similarly multifaceted. Genz (2009: 19) suggests that recognising multiple contested meanings of feminism, along with ambiguity around understandings of "post", means that any attempt to 'fix' a single meaning of postfeminism is 'futile and misguided'. She therefore suggests a fluid conception of postfeminism as 'a network of possible relations that allows for a variety of permutations and readings' (Genz 2009: 19). For Genz, it is more productive to insist on the inherent heterogeneity of postfeminism, than to (arbitrarily) choose one of the available meanings.

This understanding of postfeminism as new-and-old, feminist-and-anti-feminist, does not, however, sidestep the problem of critically interrogating the politics of narratives around feminism and gender. This is evident in Genz's (2009: 23) account as she warns that although 'postfeminism's interrogative stance could thus be construed as a healthy rewriting of feminism, a sign that the women's movement is continuously in process/progress', she is also cautious about interpreting postfeminism as merely 'a new stage in the evolution of feminisms'. Whilst recognising the ambiguity of postfeminism, then, she maintains a healthy scepticism about its 'appropriation of its feminist origins [which] is more complicated and insidious than a modernization or rejuvenation' (Genz, 2009: 23). This caution reveals some of the tensions in Genz's position. To evaluate what constitutes 'appropriation' of feminism, it is necessary to make at least some basic claims about what is (or is not) being co-opted. Whilst it is important, then, to recognise the fluidity of feminism and, correlatively, of postfeminism, it is not possible in doing so to avoid drawing any boundaries at all around "feminism".

For example, Genz demonstrates an awareness that how individuals and groups construct feminism is in itself an important issue in determining the politics of postfeminism. She notes that responses to feminism vary from 'complacency to hostility, admiration to repudiation' (Genz, 2009: 23). In some cases, she suggests that postfeminism wilfully misinterprets "old" feminism 'as a monolithic movement that is archaic, binaristic and unproductive for the experiences of contemporary women'. Although Genz would resist making a clear distinction between postfeminism and backlash, the explicit rejection of feminism described here does not seem to resemble her understanding of postfeminism as ambivalence, as both continuous-with/and-a-departure-from, feminism.

Angela McRobbie (2009) shares some ground with Genz in her analysis of postfeminism in her book, The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, culture and social change. However, she is also critical of Genz and of others who write in a similar vein. Distinguishing her account from earlier work on backlash by Faludi and others,
McRobbie’s concern is to ‘differentiate between this longstanding hostile activity [the backlash of the 70s and 80s] and the practices of disarticulation in evidence today’ (McRobbie, 2009: 30; see also McRobbie, 2004). She argues that by the 1990s feminism (in the UK) ‘had achieved the status of common sense, while it was also reviled, almost hated’ and that postfeminism represents a “complexification of backlash”, through this “double entanglement” (McRobbie, 2009: 6).

Postfeminism is conceptualised as ‘a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment which is different from simply being a question of backlash against the seeming gains made by feminist activities and campaigns in an earlier period’ [emphasis added] (McRobbie, 2009: 1). Although postfeminism means that ‘elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life’, the elements that have become accepted have also been co-opted as part of a ‘much more individualistic discourse’ employing impoverished understandings of the feminist vocabulary of ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ (McRobbie, 2009: 1).

McRobbie (2009, 28-9) situates this discourse as embedded in broader neoliberal politics and the dominance of the neoliberal subject. As other feminist scholars have argued, the ascendancy of neoliberalism has been central to the maintenance of the gender order as the ‘neo-liberal individual ostensibly has no gender, and, as a result, social justice initiatives for women can be jettisoned’, in effect, this means that ‘men’s still more dominant positions are empowered to some degree, while women’s interests are rendered increasingly invisible’ (Chunn et. al. 2007, 4; for additional discussions of neoliberalism and postfeminism see also Connell, 2011; Gill, 2007; Tasker and Negra, 2007). This ‘substitute for feminism’ or ‘faux-feminism’ is then used not only as a persuasive tool to close down potential concerns over gendered inequalities (we already have equality), and to ‘ensure that a new women’s movement will not emerge’ (McRobbie, 2009: 1). Feminist ideas, then, have ironically become an integral part of the ‘undoing of feminism’ (McRobbie, 2009: 13).

Rosalind Gill (2007: 1) similarly suggests that ‘feminist ideas have become a kind of common sense, yet feminism has never been more bitterly repudiated’. Like McRobbie, she argues that the acceptance of a (neo)liberal form of feminism which focuses on equal opportunities, in conjunction with recurrent assumptions that such liberal equality already exists, leads to the positioning of feminism (especially radical feminism) as unreasonable, outmoded, and beyond the pale. Further, she criticises what she calls a move from sexual objectification to a compulsory ‘sexual subjectification’ of (young) women, whereby they participate in a particular version of their own sexual empowerment and agency which buys into traditional ideals of femininity (Gill, 2007: 2003). For Gill (2007: 95), the media repackage and co-opt feminist ideas such as ‘independence and control over one’s own body’ which are then ‘emptied of their political significance and sold back to us as choices about what to consume’. Empowerment and freedom are to be achieved through individual consumer choices, ‘rather than collective struggle for social and political change’, and ‘feminism, signified in this manner, becomes just another style decision’ (Gill, 2007: 95; see also Tasker and Negra, 2007).

For McRobbie, as for Gill, the active consent of young women is crucial to the success of such a project. According to McRobbie, their agreement is sought through a variety of strategies. In a ‘new form of sexual contract’, young women are offered an exchange – ‘a notional form of equality, concretised in education and employment, and through participation in consumer culture and civil society, in place of what a reinvented feminist politics might have to offer’ (McRobbie, 2009: 2). This contract is made to seem viable and appealing to young women through the media’s selective emphasis on
women’s successes in various professional spheres (McRobbie, 2009: 14). In exchange for access to individual professional success and to an array of consumer pleasures, the young woman who is the subject of the contract is, however, ‘despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern sophisticated girl’ (McRobbie, 2009: 18).

McRobbie examines a range of popular cultural artefacts which she suggests reflect and reproduce these cultural trends, including the film *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (2001) and the “Wonderbra” adverts of the 1990s. For her, they portray relief that the old restrictive feminism has passed, that irony can be embraced, and once-rejected “traditional” femininities retrieved. Having originally seen the relationship between young women and (radical) feminism as one that involved ‘a lively dialogue about how feminism might develop’ for a new generation, McRobbie (2009: 15) re-evaluates postfeminism as having evolved into ‘something closer to repudiation than ambivalence’, as a ‘vehemently denunciatory stance’. This is puzzling. If feminism is no longer relevant except as marking a historical stage in progress towards the purportedly achieved goal of equality for women, there would seem to be no need for such an antagonistic stance. Instead, on McRobbie’s account, feminism seems to be curiously threatening to (young) women. Such eagerness to distance themselves from the identity of “feminist” is surprising if it is really the case that feminism is considered a mere anachronism.

The implications of McRobbie’s analysis are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, this “undoing” of feminism is seen as resulting from its disruptive, threatening potential, suggesting that feminism still challenges the status quo. McRobbie (2009: 150) is clear that she does not advocate a linear understanding of the history of feminism as stalled or ‘extinguished’ by postfeminism. On the other hand, she comments that ‘it requires both imagination and hopefulness to argue that the active, sustained and repetitive repudiation or repression of feminism also marks its (still fearful) presence, or even longevity (as afterlife)’ (McRobbie, 2009: 15). This apparent tension arises from the distinction that McRobbie makes between “real” feminism and “faux” feminism. In suggesting that feminism is not dead, McRobbie clearly has “real” feminism in mind. “Real” feminism still exists alongside “faux” or “post” feminism, but the latter is quite distinct from the former.

Overall, then, McRobbie’s perspective is closer to the more pessimistic backlash theorists than to more optimistic postfeminist theorists. In such passages, there is little of the so-called “double entanglement” of postfeminist narratives. Postfeminism is a ‘complexification of backlash’, then, only in that it represents backlash in a slightly different guise, in a new manifestation. It is, ultimately, a specific strand of a wider backlash, rather than a reinvention of feminism.

Unsurprisingly, McRobbie is therefore not critical of feminist academics who have welcomed postfeminism as a new form of feminism. For example, she critiques the views of Baumgardner and Richards (2004), who want to revalorise what they call ‘girlieness’. They use the term as shorthand for femininity linked to make-up, “sexy” underwear, and to the celebration of the individual consumer pleasures that capitalism has provided for (young) women. According to their analysis, the need for women to fight the perception of them as “girls” has long since passed and it is only feminism that is now preventing

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6 Christina Scharff’s (2012) qualitative study of young women in the UK and Germany found that of 40 women interviewed, 38 did not identify as a ‘feminist’. Scharff (2012: 5) argues that rejections of feminism ‘constitute performances of gender and sexuality’. This insight, along with the common-sense status of neoliberal ideas which are antithetical to collective politics, is perhaps a part of the explanation of this phenomenon.
women from representing themselves as they would like. McRobbie argues that their version of postfeminism falsely represents “old” feminism as overly restrictive and monolithically repressive of certain femininities. In this respect, Baumgardner and Richards present ‘an anti-feminist argument, casting elders as implicitly unattractive and embittered’ (McRobbie, 2009: 157). Like Genz, McRobbie points out that such caricatured representations of “old” feminism are crude, divisive, and unproductive. Further, significantly, such accounts say ‘little about what social or political forces this third wave of younger feminists is actually organising itself against apart from an older generation of feminists’ (McRobbie, 2009: 157).

Although Genz’s take on postfeminism is far less hostile to “old” feminism than Baumgardner and Richards’ perspective, McRobbie also takes issue with her ideas. She argues that Genz is overly celebratory of postfeminism and simplistically equates it with a new, “third wave” feminist politics. There is certainly evidence to support this criticism as Genz draws on yet another meaning of the “post” in postfeminism to suggest that postfeminism can also refer to postructuralist or postmodern feminism within the academy (2006: 2009). In making this claim, Genz associates poststructuralist feminism with a focus on (women’s) agency and choice in relation to their gender performances and with the work of third wave feminist queer theorist, Judith Butler.

However, as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007: 213) suggests, ‘the political focus of postfeminism is vastly different from that of third-wave feminism for the former eschews gender politics as rather old-fashioned and dreary and the latter refuges gender politics’ for the contemporary world. Whilst Butler’s (2011; 2006) conception of gender as performativity does allow scope for resistance and complex power dynamics which would suggest that either/or conceptions of postfeminism are always flawed, Genz’s reading of Butler is problematic in that it ignores the aspects of her thought which problematize hypervoluntarist accounts of gender performance and emphasise a ‘leftist radicalism’ (McRobbie, 2009: 158). This flawed interpretation of Butler, combined with reservations about the individualism of Genz’s (2006) “Third Way/ve” feminism based on the ideas of Anthony Giddens, leads McRobbie to reject her conceptualisation of (post)feminism as ultimately impoverished.

Genz does express some ‘hesitation’ about how such a ‘micropolitics’ of postfeminism as viewed through the lens of Third Way politics might (or might not) be connected with ‘action at a macro-political level’ (2006: 346). In addition, she recognises that ‘sexual micro-politics’ ‘undoubtedly commodify and objectify female bodies by using irony as a get-out clause to make women buy into the old patriarchal stereotypes that tie them to their feminine/sexual appearance’ (Genz, 2006: 346). However, despite these problems, she argues that drawing on these ‘uses of standardised sexual imagery also have the potential to “uproot” the feminine as commodity and make it available for alternative significations’ (Genz, 2006: 346). Further, Genz points out that it is not possible to clearly distinguish between the individual and the collective, the micro- and the macro-political, as these boundaries are blurred.

Although Genz makes some valid points here, these occasional caveats aside, she ignores the individualising aspects of postfeminism which operate to marginalise concerns over gendered social, political and economic structures. In her eagerness to embrace the ambivalence of postfeminism, Genz sometimes seems reluctant to evaluate examples of postfeminist narratives in terms of their implications for gender politics. In one article, for example, she highlights the wearing of t-shirts with slogans such as “porn star” by women who purchase these items from high street shops (Genz, 2006). Noting that ‘active consumption’ also contains the seeds of a sexual micro-politics, Genz goes on
in the same breath to mention the t-shirts created and marketed by ‘controversial American designer/writer/women’s rights activist’ Periel Aschenbrand (Genz, 2006: 345). These t-shirts are intended by Aschenbrand to make feminism appealing to younger women and feature(d) slogans that were anti-George Bush, anti-date rape, anti-domestic violence, and protesting threats to abortion rights in the USA.

It is not imposing a false dichotomy between the macro- and micro-political to claim that the latter t-shirts, whilst they may not be unanimously accepted by all feminists, are an instance of an attempt at collective politics, albeit through individual consumer choices. Their slogans could persuasively be argued to be in themselves a form of cultural politics aimed at disrupting conventional ideas of gender which undermine gender equality. The ‘porn star’ t-shirts, on the other hand, do not in and of themselves represent any such collective or even individual political action, nor do they disturb common-sense ideas. Although they could be used in this way (say, by a group of feminist activists wearing them to challenge misconceptions about women who work in the sex industry), there is nothing to suggest that they will be and, indeed, it seems more likely that they will perpetuate existing problematic constructions of gender.

By the same token, the Aschenbrand t-shirts could be worn as simply a trendy fashion statement and the feminist content of the slogans on them ignored. However, their direct attempt to challenge on gendered issues makes them far more likely to be read as political statements. This is not just, as Genz seems to assume, a question of judging the motivations of the wearer (which may be complex) and situating women as either lacking or possessing agency, but of reading the broader cultural context and the ways in which (post)feminist ideas are received and constructed. It is perfectly possible to note that representations of femininity are ambiguous and may have some potential for resignifying gender, but at the same time to recognise that ultimately this potential is limited, and more constrained in some cases than in others. To this extent, although I would eschew McRobbie’s implicit reliance on an “authentic” versus an “inauthentic” feminism, her critique of Genz is valid. An enlarged understanding of feminism(s) does not mean accepting that ‘anything goes’ (Braithwaite, 2004: 28). Overly broad conceptions of postfeminism that accept all or most claims to feminism at face value are of no real analytical use.

Recognising that the boundaries between postfeminism and feminism are far from clear-cut, I nonetheless argue that it is worth holding on to the distinction, rather than dissolving it altogether. Doing so maintains analytical focus on the less promising elements of postfeminist narratives. Postfeminism is distinctive in the way it frequently acts as a “thought-stopper”, closing off questions about the nature of feminism and feminist activism before they can even be asked. As McRobbie and Gill both argue, there is a disarticulation in everyday postfeminist accounts which presents certain feminist ideas as inherently unreasonable and/or irrelevant. Feminism and gender are depoliticised through the representation of gender (and sexuality, and race,7 and so on) as a matter of individual style. It is this closing down of critique before it is articulated that feminist scholars have objected to in postfeminism (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2012; Tasker and Negra, 2007). Postfeminism lacks a critique of gendered power relations and any conception of the necessity for social and political change, framing

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7 See Benet-Weiser (2007: 208) for an account of how postfeminism situates not only gender, but also race as ‘just a flava, a street style, an individual characteristic, and a commercial product’ and Kimberley Springer (2007) for a discussion of the intersections between postfeminism and “post-civil-rights” discourses in the USA.
gender issues as best navigated at the individual level. However, as Ann Braithwaite (2004: 28) argues, feminisms must precisely be about structural change, ‘they cannot just be about individual women’s empowerment without exploring how that empowerment is defined and achieved’.

This point is also significant for evaluating the difference between backlash and postfeminism, as backlash narratives do not cast feminism or gender as apolitical. Instead, backlash re-politicises gender as an axis for mobilisation and feminism as a social force. Although there is, of course, fundamental disagreement with feminist characterisations of both gender and feminism, backlash, like feminism, entails active resistance to what is perceived to be the current gender order. Postfeminism, on the other hand, operates to overtly depoliticise gender, to render it simply a lifestyle choice.

Whilst postfeminist accounts may seem more celebratory of feminism and "feminine" subjectivity, then, the prognosis for postfeminist accounts may be more troubling for feminism than that for backlash accounts. If postfeminist narratives can be understood as those which depoliticise gender, it may be that they are more pernicious from a feminist perspective than the superficially more negative backlash discourses. Backlash narratives, in their more explicit hostility to feminism, must at least raise questions about feminism and gender, whilst postfeminism renders feminism invisible, marginalising the potential to critically evaluate the operation of gender in society.

To sum up, the conflation of all aspects of postfeminism and all variants of postfemininity with anti-feminism in backlash accounts is problematic. However, overly upbeat views of postfeminism are also flawed and ultimately sidestep important questions about the nature of agency, power, feminism and gender identities. In their anxiety to advocate enlarged notions of feminism and to emphasise women’s agency, postfeminist theorists do not adequately address some of the implications of the ‘new’ forms of feminism they identify. In this sense, while some of the more dire-sounding aspects of backlash accounts are unduly pessimistic, the more celebratory elements of postfeminist accounts are unduly optimistic. As Dean notes, commentators ‘often seem to find feminist politics everywhere (e.g. new and some third-wave feminisms) or nowhere (e.g. McRobbie’s post-feminism)’ (Dean, 2010: 21).

**Feminism, postfeminism, backlash and men’s movements: a typology**

There can never be a single, uncontested concept of feminism, of postfeminism, or indeed of backlash, and it is important not to reinscribe simplistic, false dichotomies between these concepts. Nonetheless, it is useful to outline some general criteria for recognising each. Drawing on the analysis above, I therefore outline a typology for mapping particular men’s movements in terms of their response(s) to feminism. I advance my typology for the sake of clarity and of intellectual honesty, by which I mean, articulating the broad assumptions about feminism, postfeminism and backlash, which would otherwise inevitably be hidden premises lurking beneath the surface of my analysis in later chapters. In addition, the typology is intended to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of men’s movements by separating out postfeminism and backlash, rather than reducing one to the other.

All such typologies must be partial and to some extent oversimplify matters. However, disentangling the ambivalence of postfeminism from more directly pro- or anti-
feminist positions reveals the multiple available responses to feminism by these movements. Using either backlash or postfeminism as an umbrella term encompassing these various responses can end by indirectly reinscribing a false sense of a single unified view. The broad definitions of feminism, postfeminism, and backlash allow for some internal fluidity within each category. Following Dean (2010), it is important to explore how representations of feminism actually play out in specific contexts, in this case, in specific sections of the men’s movement. Although the typology does not remove problems of definition as judgment is still required on whether groups are feminist, postfeminist or part of a backlash, it opens up room for a discussion of the complexity of feminism and attitudes towards feminism.

Inspired by my analysis of debates around postfeminism and backlash in the feminist academic literature, I argue that it is useful to analytically distinguish between everyday (as opposed to predominantly academic⁸) feminist, postfeminist, and backlash perspectives in terms of the differing empirical and normative claims integral to each. Of course, empirical accounts are value-laden and normative positions rely on “factual” premises, so that the boundaries between the empirical and the normative are inevitably blurred. However, it is instructive to separate them out for analytical purposes. Empirically speaking, feminism, postfeminism, and backlash relate to different assumptions about the nature of gender equality in society and the part that feminism has played/plays in bringing about gender equality. Normatively, they can be separated in terms of the perception of the value of gender equality and of the positive or negative value of feminism in creating a better (or worse) society.

First, it is important to give a working definition of feminism. There is of course no stable, unitary definition of feminism that all feminists would agree on (Kemp and Squires, 1997). However, as argued above, implicit assumptions about what is, and is not, “feminist”, seep through at various points in accounts of backlash and postfeminism, revealing that an unilluminated version of feminism underpins them. Some, (for example, Faludi), assume a fairly narrow view of feminism which leads to the dismissal of any departure as automatically representative of backlash. In contrast, those like Genz, who object to this imposition of an unfeasibly restricted idea of feminism, tend to operate with an extremely broad understanding. This leads to all and any constructions of gender or discussion of equality issues being perceived as automatically (post)feminist. The definition I present is intended to allow for the diversity of feminisms, but at the same time to avoid becoming implausibly open-ended.

To make analytical headway, I define feminism for the purposes of this book as premised on the empirical claims that: a) significant gender inequalities exist in contemporary society – women are generally disadvantaged compared to men, and b) feminist theory and activism are necessary to bring about gender equality⁹. This view is accompanied by three normative assumptions that: a) gender equality is a socially and morally desirable goal, b) feminism is positive, a necessary and benevolent force for social change, and c) gender is political, there is a need for collective feminist politics. There has been widespread recognition amongst feminist scholars that gender is not separable from other social identities (Crenshaw 1991, Hill Collins 1998, Hill Collins

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⁸I see the distinction between everyday/popular and academic narratives of postfeminism and backlash in terms of the arenas in which they are articulated, rather than as a hard-and-fast difference between them in respect to theoretical rigour or similar. Popular and academic versions of postfeminism are mutually constitutive.

⁹Although there is a long-standing "equality vs. difference" debate in feminist theory, the two concepts are not mutually exclusive (Barrett, 1987; Phillips, 1999; Young, 1990).
and needs to be understood in the context of a ‘a matrix of other forms of oppression relating to “race,” ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, disability and health status’ (Gill 2007: 25) along with other markers of inequality. However, gender movements vary considerably on how far they are concerned with intersectionality and cross-cutting inequalities. As the definition of feminism here is designed to apply to such movements, only counting movements that recognise intersectionality as feminist would be too restrictive.

Feminisms have in common the argument that gender is ‘a difference that makes a difference’ (DiStefano, 1990: 78). Gender is seen as a social and political category as opposed to merely biological or natural (see Introduction). Gendered social structures are therefore understood in terms of power relations rather than as a matter of genetic destiny or of individual choice. Whilst the boundaries between the personal and the political are not fixed (Braithwaite 2004), feminisms resist the complete reduction of the latter to the former. Feminist perspectives actively seek to understand (and potentially disrupt) the relationship between the personal and the political. This leads to a third common aspect of feminisms which is the need for collective action to bring about social and political change. Whether this change is to amend the existing system to make it less hostile to women and other marginalised groups, or to stage a gender revolution which would necessitate the radical transformation of society and politics, action to remove gender inequality must nonetheless be central to any plausible definition of feminism.

Postfeminist perspectives should be understood as making the empirical claims that: a) no important gender inequalities remain in current (western) societies and b) feminism is no longer necessary as any minor gendered inequalities will disappear “naturally” over time. These claims underpin a normative position that gender equality is socially and morally desirable, but that feminism is anachronistic and lacks legitimacy as it has already been largely successful. Through this ambivalent construction of feminism, it becomes an individual lifestyle choice rather than a focus for collective politics, and gender is depoliticised.

Backlash characterises the “facts” of gender (in)equality in two ways. Either, a) it is claimed, contrary to postfeminism, that significant gender inequalities do exist in society – but that men are generally disadvantaged compared to women, or, b) the argument is that there is rough gender equality, but that equality has led to a damaged, dysfunctional society because women and men are not “naturally” meant to be equal. The normative position that goes with the first account is that gender equality is a socially and morally desirable goal, but that feminism is negative as it has made men unequal. The second account, instead, is premised on the view that gender equality is not a desirable end and that feminism is therefore bad for both men and women. Feminism is therefore constructed as a negative, damaging force. Here, gender is once again conceived of as political and as the basis for a collective anti-feminist politics.

Overall, postfeminist perspectives are deeply ambivalent about feminism, whereas the logic of backlash is explicitly hostile to feminist projects. These analytical distinctions are not conceived of as mutually exclusive, nor as fully defined/definable in advance. The broad definitions of feminism, postfeminism, and backlash allow for some

10 Although liberal feminism may be founded on (liberal) individualism, gender inequalities from this perspective still have a structural element, they are not simply an “accident” but the outcome of socially constituted institutions which have generally favoured men over women. For example, liberal feminists have challenged the way in which the line between private and public spheres has been drawn and demonstrated how the relegation of women to the private is a structural issue which hampers their equality (see, for example, Okin, 1989; Phillips, 2013).
internal fluidity within each category. For example, I have not specified a particular version of feminism, although I maintain that it is important to be explicit about some general boundaries around the term for the reasons given above. In addition, one of the key starting points of my definition of postfeminism is that it is precisely marked by its ambivalence towards feminism, meaning that recognition of ambiguity and complexity is built into the definition itself. Finally, as the boundary between the categories is not rigid, movements may also employ dual narratives, slipping between backlash and postfeminism, or perhaps from feminism to postfeminism. This is evidenced in the analyses of men’s movements presented in the rest of the book.

Conclusion

Constructions of feminism are themselves interlinked with constructions of gender (and other identities) (Scharff 2012). The attitudes of specific men’s movements towards feminism are therefore not separable from their representations of gender. The distinctions I outlined above between feminist, backlash, and postfeminist narratives enables more nuanced understandings of the complex narratives around feminism present in the men’s movements analysed in Chapters 3-6. The implications of none of the categories are straightforward in terms of their actual effects on gender equality in any given context. Such questions are inherently open ones which must, at least in part, be examined on a case-by-case basis. As discussed, backlash narratives can be an indicator of the strength of feminist activism at any given time and also serve to at least politicise gender. Postfeminist ideas, by contrast, tend to depoliticise gender and to take feminism for granted in a way that casts feminism as dismissible and as an irrelevant relic. Further, feminists cannot control the reception of their interventions, especially in the light of contrasting narratives of gender and post- or anti-feminism. However, understanding the positioning of such groups is important to thinking about how feminists can respond to their constructions of feminism and of gender (in)equality in particular cases. Although the proposed typology does not remove problems of definition as judgment is still required on whether groups are feminist, postfeminist or part of a backlash, it opens up room for a discussion of the complexity of feminism and attitudes towards feminism and rests on a non-static, non-predetermined view of the categories proposed. Finally, the typology moves away from problematic ‘dualistic patterns of (male) power and (female) oppression’ (Genz, 2009: 24) as it could be applied to the gender politics of any given movement/group.

Movements, whether they are specifically ‘gender movements’ or not, are gendered in a variety of ways— in their internal dynamics, in relation to gendered political and cultural opportunity structures, and finally in their reproduction or contestation of gender identities at the symbolic level. All of these factors need to be considered when viewing movements through gender lenses. However, it is the last aspect which is most central to this book. I have defined men’s movements as organised around a collective gender identity based on a construction of the category of “men”, on an assumption of gendered experiences “as men” and issues that are gender-specific to men. As the construction of the identity of “women” is predicated upon and productive of notions of “femininity”, so too the category of “men” relies on and creates ideas of “masculinity”. Further, as gender categories are defined relationally and dichotomously, gender
movements must also be understood in relation to each other. Men's movements exist both empirically and symbolically as a response to women's movements and the gender identities underpinning them. But insights from the literature on multiple masculinities also highlight the complex interrelations between different masculinities and femininities. The plurality of gender constructs points to the potential variations between different men's and women's movements drawing on diverse masculine and feminine identities. If masculinities are shaped through discursive contrasts with femininities and to other masculinities, then men's movements and their correlative masculine identities can be expected to be intelligible only in terms of their contrasts/continuities with both women's movements and, importantly, other men's movements.

Add to this the further layer of complexity that individual men's movements may also rely on divergent constructions of masculinity (and femininity by implication) and it becomes clear that the examination of gender and social movements is inherently messy, revealing the similarly intricate, contested terrain of constructions of gender more broadly. Recognising the variety of gender identities underpinning and produced by social movements (and especially social movements self-identifiably concerned with gender) then, helps to undermine the simplistic, binary oppositions that would seek to associate men's movements exclusively with a homogenous notion of masculinity and women's movements with a similarly reductionist construction of femininity. In the next chapter, I examine the discursive construction of masculinity as “in crisis” by men's movements, as well as in public debates around men/masculinity.

References:

Chapter Two

Masculinities, Crisis and Men’s Movements

Introduction

Understanding the social construction of masculinity as in crisis is important to understanding men’s movements. Masculinities scholars have highlighted that “crisis” discourse tends to become most intense when movements arise to challenge dominant social groups (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 1987; Messner, 2000). For example, both antifeminist and (pro)feminist men’s organizations arose to counter or support feminist women’s movements on issues such as suffrage and education at the turn of the twentieth century in the USA (Kimmel, 1987). Ideas of a perceived crisis of masculinity were prominent in informing these mobilisations and men’s movements have, in turn, contributed to debates about crisis (Kimmel, 1987). Some men’s organisations responded to popular notions of crisis by affirming fears about the “feminisation” of men (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Kimmel, 1987). Such groups, often antifeminist in orientation, were established precisely to reassert masculinity through homosocial spaces where men ‘separated from women, could engage in “masculine” activities, often centred around the development and celebration of physical strength, competition, and violence’ (Messner, 2000: 9). Other men’s organisations, instead, have seen the apparent disorder of gender identities as an opportunity to reformulate masculinity in a softer image. In these cases, the construction of crisis has potentially opened up space for resistance (Connell, 2005). There is considerable scepticism over whether the masculinity movement model is a useful response to “crisis”, whether crisis is conceived in terms of re-establishing masculine power, or in terms of challenging dominant masculinity. Although crisis narratives may reflect genuinely felt insecurities and anxieties about the precariousness of modern life, we should be wary of accepting the implications of the idea of a crisis of masculinity uncritically.

Crisis narratives are often associated with conservative views of society which would aim to “rediscover” the natural (gender) order by reasserting traditional masculinity and femininity in accordance with the logic of backlash (see Chapter 1). However, as I suggest below, crisis-of-masculinity ideas are also sometimes tied in with more “progressive” perspectives. So, crisis is not just a manifestation of, nor reducible to, backlash, but can also be articulated from a feminist or postfeminist perspective. For example, (pro)feminist projects may draw on the idea that masculinity is in crisis to point to its harmful effects for both women and men and to recommend reimagining masculinity in a less toxic way. Traditional masculinity is seen as the source of the problem, rather than romanticised as the solution. Further, the socially constructed nature of the gender order is emphasised rather than rejected. However, progressive understandings of crisis nonetheless tend to assume that masculinity simply needs to be amended in a more modern image, rather than to be more radically deconstructed. Narratives around masculinity-crisis are therefore both promising-for, and threatening-to, social projects that aim to destabilise dominant ideas of gender. The nature of the promise and of the threat is examined in this chapter.

Ultimately, I conclude that crisis narratives are more harmful than beneficial from a feminist perspective. First, because such narratives tend to reinforce essentialist, binary
notions of masculinity and femininity, even in progressive approaches which would advise amendments to traditional masculinity. Second, and relatedly, the rhetoric of crisis of masculinity homogenises men and treats them as a uniform category. In doing so, it obscures the fact that there are inequalities between different groups of men, and that men at the top of the hierarchy, far from being oppressed by the gender order, **directly benefit** from the disadvantage of less privileged men (and women). Understandings of crisis of masculinity frequently employ a “battle of the sexes” framing in which women and men are pitted against each other to win a zero-sum game. If women gain, men must lose. If women are winning, men must be losing. Not only are the claims of women’s successes often exaggerated in such accounts, they also inevitably fail to grasp the complexities of gender relations. Finally, the factual claims made by groups drawing on crisis of masculinity notions are frequently suspect and misleading. In a climate where the dominant understanding of a crisis of masculinity is conservative and based on dubious assumptions, groups that would partially buy into a crisis perspective may be pursuing a risky strategy.

I begin by discussing the construction of crisis of masculinity as new, highlighting the recurrence of ideas of crisis throughout history. These heightened expressions of “crisis” discourse arose across different historical and social contexts and took different forms. However, the repetition of the overall theme of masculinity in turmoil suggests that masculinity must always be unstable, that “crisis” is internal to the logic of masculinity itself. I then analyse the constructions and claims underpinning contemporary crisis of masculinity debates. As noted above, multiple areas of men’s lives have at some point been discoursed about in relation to a crisis of masculinity. I do not address all these areas, but primarily focus on two issues which are especially common in commentary on crisis and frequently engaged with by men’s movements: masculinity and work; and masculinity and suicide. The analysis troubles suggestions that men are the new gender victims in these areas. Finally, I illustrate my argument that there are conservative and progressive accounts of the so-called crisis of masculinity through an analysis of contemporary non-academic constructions of crisis. In this part of the chapter, I examine a speech on masculinity in crisis by a politician, Diane Abbott which I suggest represents a progressive crisis of masculinity perspective, along with two media pieces by a high-profile men’s issues activist, Glen Poole, as representative of a conservative articulation of crisis. Throughout, I explore the politics of thinking in terms of crisis. I illustrate how crisis of masculinity claims simplify and distort debates around gender and power. I end, in the conclusion, by considering the language of crisis and its overall promise or lack thereof for feminist engagements with gender.

**A history of masculinity in crisis**

Crisis suggests ‘a decisive moment, or turning point, and can be understood as the moment when it is to be decided whether something is to go on, to be modified or terminated (medically, **crisis** refers to a striking change of symptoms that may lead to either recovery or death)’ (Griffin, 2012: 18). To apply Penny Griffin’s broad definition of crisis to the case of masculinity, then, crisis is represented as a critical juncture where gender identities are fragmenting due to enormous social change. In this ‘decisive moment’, masculinity must be modified or terminated, must recover or die. Crisis of masculinity narratives are articulated in public and policy debates in relation to a large array of arenas, including, but not limited to: men’s health; men’s (un)employment; men’s
personal relationships; men and crime; boys’ education; and the family, including fatherhood, family law, paternity, and reproductive rights. These conversations take place: in the mainstream media; in popular culture such as television and films; increasingly via online public forums on social media; and in psychology books, especially the popular psychology and self-help genres.

Michael Kimmel has defined periods of masculinity-crisis as times when ‘masculinity was seen as threatened and people worked hard to try and salvage, revitalize, and resurrect it’ (Kimmel, 2012: 7). In his historical account of masculinity in the United States, Kimmel notes that American men ‘have been afraid of not measuring up to some vaguely defined notions of what it means to be a man, afraid of failure’ (Kimmel, 2012: 5). This anxiety revolves around fear of being seen ‘as less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened’ (Kimmel, 2012: 5). Defining masculinity in opposition to femininity, by invoking women or feminised men, leads men to ‘try to control themselves; they project their fears onto others; and when feeling too pressured, they attempt an escape […] in their efforts to ground a secure sense of themselves as men’ (Kimmel, 2012: 6). Further, the constitution of hegemonic masculinity in relation to subordinated or marginalised masculinities means that the “others” that are the targets of such efforts are “other” men as much as women, as masculinity is ‘a homosocial enactment’ (Kimmel, 2012: 5). These processes are a constant feature of the gender order, but they intensify at times of significant change.

Crisis, in these cases, is both “real” and “not-real” in that narratives of crisis ‘reveal to us the importance of understanding men and masculinities as discursive; that is, dominant, subordinated and political ways of talking and thinking about men in multiple cultural settings’ (Whitehead, 2002: 59). In addition, crisis narratives are to some extent a manner of responding to actual ‘crisis points in economic, political, and social life – moments when men’s relationships to their work, to their country, to their families, to their visions, were transformed’ (Kimmel, 2012: 7). The factors that give rise to apparent crisis points are, then, both external and internal to masculinity itself.

Lynne Segal attributed the increased international visibility and scrutiny of men as a gendered group in the 1990s to the resurgence of feminism. The question ‘“what is wrong with men?”’ (Segal, 2007: xvii) was voiced consistently and unavoidably at this time, both in academia and in public discourse. Used to being the agents, rather than the objects, of knowledge, men responded to the question by providing their own answer: ‘men emerged in the 1990s as society’s new victims, portrayed as suffering from falling levels of confidence, losing out as they journeyed through life, in schools, jobs, personal relationships, overall health and well-being’ (Segal, 2007: xvii-xviii). The apparent disadvantaged status of men articulated through notions of crisis was frequently blamed on feminism and commonly reflected conservative and essentialist views of masculinity (and femininity), along with the reassertion of old gender relations. This strand of the articulation of crisis is what I have called the “conservative” approach illustrated by Glen Poole’s views analysed below. At the same time, there was also interest in the potential of “new”, more egalitarian and caring masculinities/ies, including those centred around more nurturing conceptions of fathering. Whilst a frequent media ‘target for ongoing derision’ (Segal, 2007: xvii-xviii) such developments did at least demonstrate potential to question monolithic representations of masculinity and, at best, to challenge unhealthy ideals of what “real men” (and, by corollary, “real women”) should be. It is important to consider the potential promise of these more “progressive” ideas of crisis. However, I argue below that the overall politics surrounding masculinity-in-crisis inherently limit
the possibilities for reimagining gender. To a greater or lesser extent, the idea of crisis naturalises binary constructions of gender.

A distinctive feature of both conservative and progressive crisis narratives, but especially the former, is the misleading presentation of crisis as new (Whitehead, 2002: 57; Kimmel, 2012: 189). Kimmel (2012: 189) highlights a recurring ‘nostalgia’ about masculinity in which a picture is painted of a past which was ‘happier, easier, and more stable’. This construction serves to romanticise a fictional time when men could be men and masculinity went unchallenged. Such a time, of course, has never existed as the ‘bygone days’ that are fondly referenced actually ‘came weighted with their own gendered anxieties’ (Kimmel, 2012: 189). Crisis narratives portray masculinity as ahistorical – as a property of men that transcends social change, rather than as shifting over time. This rendering serves to emphasise the purported unnaturalness of the current social order – the questioning of masculinity is perceived of as an aberration resulting from a flawed modern world. The more “crisis” is represented as unprecedented, the more masculinity is seen as something that should be fixed and universal, a “fact of life”. Such a portrayal helps to legitimise the idea of gender “roles” as standing outside of historical specificity. In contrast, recognising that masculinity has always been (and will always be) in crisis brings the socially constructed nature of masculinity, along with the promise (as opposed to threat) of change into view.

It is well-documented that masculinity has been seen as under threat throughout history in a variety of geographical locations. As dominant conceptions of masculinity vary over time, the content of the version of masculinity that is said to be troubled also varies. There is, nonetheless, a striking similarity across such narratives. Whitehead traces a cyclical historical trajectory of crisis narratives which, although articulated in different periods, are reminiscent of contemporary representations. In the UK in the 1970s, commentators bemoaned ‘identity consequences for those white, British males whose sense of masculinity was primarily invested in a fast diminishing, working-class, breadwinner, factory-floor work culture’ (Whitehead, 2002: 58). Earlier US research published in the 1950s made very similar claims about the state of American men’s masculinity. By those accounts alone ‘Western males can be seen to have been in a “crisis” for over fifty years now’ (Whitehead, 2002: 58).

However, Whitehead goes on to discuss research documenting masculinity panics from still earlier times. These range from representations of US men as emasculated by the Great Depression of the 1930s; to the 1910 formation of the Boy Scouts of America in order to create more masculine boys/men; to concerns raised about whether “soft” US men were fit for military service in World War One (Whitehead, 2002: 57-8). In fact, at least as far back as the 1800s, ‘concerns about men (of all classes) and their decadence, morality, sexuality, carnality and lack of domestic and civilizing traits were never far from social and political discourse’ (Whitehead, 2002: 58). Michael Kimmel (2012) has also traced the history of American masculinity and crisis across more than two centuries; from 1776 right up to the 1990s and beyond to the twenty-first century (the third edition of Manhood in America features an epilogue on the 2008 presidential elections and masculinity after Obama) (see also Kimmel, 1987). Crisis of masculinity rhetoric has even been suggested to have emerged during the turmoil of the French Revolution (Lampron, 2008 cited in Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012: 24). Masculinity in crisis is therefore a recurrent theme that long predates contemporary men’s movements and contemporary men.

There have been some attempts in the literature to map out the broader empirical patterns contributing to crises of masculinity and to theorise its conceptual aspects in
relation to shifting gender relations. In general, there appears to be some correlation between prominent crisis discourses and periods of unusual social, political and economic change. The causes purported to bring about crises are not, then, merely “imaginary”. Representations of crisis are neither fictional nor factual, but both – they present a particular interpretation of a set of social “realities” and they tend to arise when these realities seem to be most in flux. As Kimmel suggests (2012: 4) ‘we tend to search for the timeless and eternal during moments of crisis, those points of transition when the old definitions no longer work and the new definitions are yet to be established’.

In *Masculinities*, Connell (2005: 84-85) identified three broad areas in which she suggested the gender order exhibits “real-world” ‘crisis tendencies’. The first tendency is in the arena of *power relations*, whereby patriarchy is challenged by feminist movements but gendered inequalities persist (Connell, 2005: 85). Masculinities are ‘reconfigured around this crisis tendency both through conflict over strategies of legitimation, and through men’s divergent responses to feminism’ (Connell, 2005: 85). While this conflict ‘leads some men to […] cults of masculinity […] it leads others to support feminist reforms’ (Connell, 2005: 85).

Second, there are disruptions in *production relations* – for example, ‘the vast postwar growth in married women’s employment in rich countries, and the even vaster incorporation of women’s labour into the money economy in poor countries’ (Connell, 2005: 85). This has not translated into economic equality for women as a group. There is therefore ‘a basic contradiction between men’s and women’s equal contribution to production and the gendered appropriation of the products of social labour’ (Connell, 2005: 85), as wealth is still disproportionately accumulated by men. On the other hand, there are inequalities amongst men whereby some men are excluded from the ‘gendered accumulation process’ through unemployment while others are ‘advantaged by their connection with new physical or social technologies’ (Connell, 2005: 85).

Finally, there are disturbances in *relations of cathexis* or relations of desire and attachment. Notions of sexuality ‘have visibly changed with the stabilization of lesbian and gay sexuality as a public alternative within the heterosexual order’, similarly, women’s assertion of sexual agency in terms of ‘pleasure and control of their own bodies’ has ‘affected heterosexual practice as well as homosexual’ (Connell, 2005: 85). In some societies legitimacy has been partially conferred on gay/lesbian sexualities and relationships; there is partial acceptance around women’s sexual freedoms. At the same time, there are ongoing tensions and sexual and relationship rights are subject to constant contestation. In short, sex, too, has changed and this has given rise to anxieties about “threats” to the gendered, heteronormative social order.

Elsewhere, in thinking about the postcolonial gender order, Connell (2000: 43) also emphasises the role of symbolism, for example, in news media, as another factor in reproducing (or sometimes resisting) dominant ideas of gender. Although Connell does not relate this aspect of the gender order specifically to crisis, the discursive representation of crisis is very important. Indeed, ideas of crisis cannot be neatly separated from gendered relations around power, labour and desire as Connell’s original schema might imply. However, Connell presents useful insights about widespread social changes exacerbating always-existing “crisis tendencies” in the gender order. Struggles over power, resources, identity/ies and culture/symbolism are all at stake in conditions of heightened uncertainty and in the shifting landscapes around each.

The articulation of crisis as the result of exceptional change is not, therefore, entirely unfounded (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2012; Segal, 2007; Whitehead, 2002). Men who do not belong to elite groups may feel (legitimately)
disempowered: ‘for particular groups of men, especially the long-term unemployed and low-skilled, discourses of feminism may well be difficult to reconcile with their own lack of power and opportunity’ (Whitehead, 2002: 57). However, crisis narratives tend to ignore the disproportionate effects of these structural insecurities on women and, in addition, to obscure the reality that it is only certain, marginalised, groups of men that are disadvantaged by such changes. In contrast, elite men continue to benefit more than ever from vast global economic, social and political disparities (Connell, 2011). Presenting men as uniquely impacted by change reveals much about the entrenchment of privilege and entitlement and little about actual shifts in relations of power.

Both identity and interests are, then, at stake in crisis narratives – the symbolic politics of crisis is neither separable from, nor reducible to, the material outcomes at stake (who gets what, when, how). Whitehead (2002: 79) suggests that men use the discourse of crisis ‘as a political platform from which to attempt to reverse any material benefits to women arising from equal opportunity legislations and feminist politics more generally’. Worryingly, he also claims that uncritical ideas around crisis have influenced social policy in troubling ways across a variety of arenas in western contexts. Below, I discuss crisis of masculinity discourses as articulated in contemporary contexts.

**Masculinity and “crisis” in contemporary empirical context**

Across the many issues constructed as symptomatic of a crisis of masculinity, the same concerns are repeatedly regurgitated. The examples of high-profile debates about men and crime and about boys’ education can start to give us a broad sense of how crisis of masculinity logic works. Discussions about crime, specifically, men’s perpetration of the vast majority of crimes (especially violent crimes), have been shaped by and, in turn, have shaped, crisis of masculinity rhetoric (Collier, 1998: 67). Such conversations have also articulated links between troubled men, masculinity and criminality across diverse arenas including boys and schooling, urban disorder and riots. In what I am referring to as “conservative” representations of crisis of masculinity, ‘women’s new-found expectations and achievements are a social problem [...] because they serve to put those males who are seen as most likely to offend (working-class white and black youths) in an untenable situation whereby their “natural” masculine inclinations have no ready outlet’ (Whitehead, 2002: 53). As women’s “demands” are attributed to feminism, ‘the relationship between feminism, male criminality and redundant and dysfunctional forms of masculinity is reified’ (Whitehead, 2002: 53).

In conservative crisis narratives, then, men are seen as ‘somehow simultaneously powerful and threatening, yet also rendered powerless by external (often feminist) forces’ (Whitehead, 2002: 55). Men are said to both need to assert control and dominance (over "other" men and over women) as a result of their “true” masculine natures which they have been forced to repress as a result of changing gender roles, and require support to reconnect with their damaged, fragile, masculine selves through ‘fraternal projects and missions’ (Whitehead, 2002: 55). They are, somewhat paradoxically, simultaneously positioned as vulnerable victims of changes to society and as aggressive, or even violent, in their victimhood.

Portrayed as stifled by women, feminism and the loss of clear gender roles, men are seen as driven to find release in criminality (Collier, 1998; Whitehead, 2002; Walklate, 1995). In relation to fathering and fatherhood, lawlessness, societal breakdown and a range of harms to fathers themselves have all been attributed to the victimisation of men,
particularly by fathers’ rights groups. The family is a key site through which crisis of masculinity has been articulated (Collier, 1995). I discuss the construction of masculinity, crisis and the family further in the context of fathers’ rights in Chapters 5 and 6.

In education, too, girls’ academic achievements have been constructed as coming at the expense of boys (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Hopkins, 2009; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2012; McCready, 2012; McDowell, 2000; Mills, 2003; Nayak and Kehily, 2013; Weaver-Hightower, 2003; Whitehead, 2002: 51). This purported gender inequality is seen attributed to the “feminisation” of education via the dominance of women teachers in schools and/or to the impact of feminism on education (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003; McRobbie, 2009). In this arena, as in broader constructions of crisis, boys are seen as the new disadvantaged group (McCready, 2012; Mills, 2003).

Whether girls overall do better educationally than boys overall is contested, and some suggest that apparent statistical differences are exaggerated or interpreted problematically (see, for example, Arnot et. al., 1999; Epstein et. al., 1998; Francis and Skelton, 2005; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose, 2007). In addition, there is a disproportionate willingness to notice when girls/young women achieve higher grades and to construct these instances as equality problems. In the UK in 1999, ‘for the first time ever less than one per cent (0.6%) of girls outperformed boys at A-levels’ (Segal, 2007: xx). Despite the relatively small difference and the lack of an established pattern, the then Member of Parliament, David Blunkett, saw fit to declare that boys were suffering from low self-esteem and educational failure, the cause of which was said to be schools having fostered ‘too much equality’, too much ‘aggressive assertiveness’, in girls (Blunkett quoted in Segal, 2007: xx). Such a response is striking when contrasted with the routine explaining away of ongoing gender inequalities – for example, pay gaps between men and women in the UK are frequently dismissed as simply a result of women’s unconstrained choices, or of market necessities. Unsurprisingly, there is also little recognition in all the discussion of apparent educational disadvantage that ‘this so-called new gender inequality is completely reversed once women and men leave education for paid employment’ (Whitehead, 2002: 52). Girls and women become an object of concern only when they are seen as the cause of negative outcomes for boys and men (Segal, 2007: xx).

Further, the apparent gender inequalities only exist if we buy into the logic of the “battle of the sexes” narrative underpinning the presentation of “facts” about boys’ and girls’ educational trajectories (Ringrose, 2007). Most boys were ‘neither “losing out” nor “failing”’, rather, it was specific groups of boys, namely, those who belong to working-class and some ethnic minority groups that are missing out in education, not boys in general (Segal, 2007: xx). Similarly, supposedly “overachieving” girls are disproportionately white and middle-class; working-class, black and Asian girls fare less well due to prejudice and material factors (McRobbie, 2009: 74).

Public and policy discourse around education is therefore a key example of how crisis narratives obscure differences within the categories of “men/boys” and “women/girls” in important ways. Popular (and academic) ideas about the “boy crisis” tend to essentialise rather than challenge gendered identities and assumptions about boys (and girls) (McCready, 2012; Mills, 2003). Not only does this fail to address real problems for marginalised boys (which are not caused by feminism), it perpetuates the broader logic of crisis as backlash where feminism is presented as creating inequality for men.

**Masculinity, work and “crisis”**
Nostalgic crisis of masculinity narratives often misleadingly represent Britain’s industrial past as if it were a haven for (white, working-class) men. In contrast, today’s work structures are portrayed as problematic for men and as one of the roots of a masculinity crisis. Blame for socio-economic change is frequently projected onto groups of “others”. Women or specific groups of men (often immigrants or minority ethnic groups) become scapegoats in crisis discourses – the “they” who are taking “our” jobs.

There have of course been actual shifts in labour markets and changes to the structures of gendered inequalities associated with capitalism. Prior to World War Two, masculinity and adulthood for young working-class men in the UK was associated with moving from school to work in the manufacturing industries (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007; Nayak, 2006; Nayak and Kehily, 2013; Willis, 1977). Previously established routes into relatively stable jobs, however, began to disappear and young working-class men found ‘themselves viewed as unskilled, unemployable, redundant youth’ (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 54). Although this type of manual or mechanised labour was ‘monotonous’, it was also seen as a legitimate route for working-class men to achieve ‘the material benefits of regular pay, stability, security and a “job for life”’ (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 54). Industrial employment also came with ‘its own type of cultural capital, forged through notions of the patriarchal “breadwinner”, [and] physical “hardness”’ (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 54).

The post-war shift from an industrial to a service economy led to a so-called “feminisation” of labour within which ‘certain white working-class males may be out-of-step with an economy that values flexibility, keyboard proficiency, telephone communication skills and personal presentation’ (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 55; see also McDowell, 2002; Mc Dowell, 2003; McDowell, 2014). Service sector work is “feminised”, requiring traits considered feminine: ‘docility, empathy [...] the ability to cope with dirt or bodily emissions, [...] the production of a courteous “smiling” performance in exchanges with customers’ (McDowell, 2014: 34; see also Wolkowitz, 2006). Women are more likely to be seen as docile workers and (working-class) men as unruly and ill-equipped to deal with the emotional labour involved in such work.

This shift has not been straightforwardly empowering for women as crisis narratives suggest. Angela McRobbie (2009: 58) argued that the neoliberal agenda of “New” Labour from the late 1990s mobilised ‘the working girl’ who has benefitted from feminist-created equal opportunities ‘as the embodiment of the values of the new meritocracy’. This working girl is understood to be predominantly white, middle-class, and highly educated. In the ‘new [postfeminist] sexual contract’, girls are required to be economically (hyper)productive, self-reliant, well-qualified, and active consumers (McRobbie, 2009: 60). Crucially, however, the acceptable working girl must not transgress gender boundaries, always being ‘consummately and re-assuringly feminine’ (McRobbie, 2009: 60). They must remain passive, enjoying their status ‘without going too far’ (McRobbie, 2009: 79).

Women and girls are not only “docile” workers, they are also cheap. Women, and especially poorer women, have always been part of the paid workforce. The constant drive for lower production costs, combined with the relatively low price of women workers (itself a result of the gendered division of labour in the private sphere), however, means that women may now be more employable. Where ‘neoliberal reforms and restructuring open up economies to global competition, there may be greater opportunities for women than men to enter the labor market and gain economic independence’ (True, 2012: 39).
Employment figures in and of themselves, though, do not tell the full story regarding gendered inequalities in work. Women’s increased participation in the workforce is largely accounted for by the overall increase in poorly-paid, casualised, and part-time jobs which have been largely taken up by women (Frade, 2005; McDowell, 2009; McDowell, 2014; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007). In addition, historically, women have not benefitted from capitalism: ‘job requirements, job markets, and gendered reproductive labor expectations concomitantly underscore a patriarchal gendered order, in which men’s paid work is disproportionately overvalued, and women’s work – both paid and unpaid – is devalued’ (Demantas and Myers, 2015: 640). Despite changes, this overall pattern persists. As Connell (2011: 13) notes, on a global scale, ‘men, collectively, receive approximately twice the income that women receive and also receive the benefits of a great deal of unpaid household labour, not to mention emotional, support, from women’. Women are still paid less for equal work and still rarely occupy top managerial positions in corporations (and other institutions) (Connell, 2011; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007; Cory and Stirling, 2016).

While more women are now paid for part of their labour and participate in previously male-dominated work worlds, there has been no proportionate shift in who does the bulk of the caring work (Arrighi and Maume, 2000; England, 2010; Miranda, 2011; Tronto, 2013). For example, the state encourages UK mothers to return to work after maternity leave by allowing the right to request flexible, part-time work so they can juggle their dual role. However, the structural assumption continues to be that women do the majority of the childcare. While men would ‘ideally […] devote more time to the family’, this remains ‘a personal choice’ (McRobbie, 2009: 81). The gendered division of parenting is slightly adjusted but left intact, whilst the imperative to be economically productive is simultaneously strengthened for women in the move to a universal breadwinner model (McRobbie, 2009; see also Crompton, 2002).

The “advantage” of being more desirable workers in this context is thus a severely limited one and the idea that women’s participation in the workforce is a feminist victory needs to be troubled. The expectation of combining motherhood with paid work is premised on women managing both roles – women must be economically active carers, but still predominantly carers. By the same token, men may choose to be caring workers, but remain defined by their status as workers. The understanding that men are primary breadwinners and women primary carers implicitly legitimises paying women lower wages for the same jobs or employing them in less lucrative part-time positions (Acker, 2006; Demantas and Myers, 2015; Pulkingham et. al., 2008; Tronto, 2013; Williams, et. al., 2012). In addition, the “double day” or “second shift” where women undertake “private” caring duties on top of their paid work (Hochschild, 1989) becomes further entrenched (Demantas and Myers, 2015; England, 2010; Ridgeway, 2011; Risman, 2009).

Crisis of masculinity narratives often valorise breadwinner masculinity, sometimes claiming that these roles are now lost to men, and that this is one source of “the crisis”. Although the “dual-earner” or “universal breadwinner” model is now the dominant reality in wealthier countries, breadwinner masculinity remains remarkably persistent as a cultural ideal (Demantas and Myers, 2015; Pulkingham et. al., 2008). Nostalgic conceptions of men’s identities as breadwinners reflect the broader continuation of traditional gender norms which ‘still valorize the male breadwinner and the female caregiver’ and the reality whereby ‘most households remain organized along gender lines’ (Demantas and Myers, 2015: 640; see also England, 2010; Ridgeway, 2011; Risman, 2009). Glorifying breadwinner masculinity is problematic as it relies on a
gendered, heteronormative view of the “traditional” nuclear family as a heterosexual couple with children (Diduck and O’Donovan, 2006). It assumes a gendered division of labour whereby men’s role is to participate in paid work in the public sphere and women undertake the vast majority of domestic duties in the “private” realm (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 54). Breadwinner masculinities thereby legitimise men’s control over money, resources, and, crucially, women (True, 2012: 39).

Further, men’s struggles with perceived loss of masculinity are attributable to (masculinised) global processes of neoliberalism, not to changes in women’s status brought about by feminism as more conservative crisis of masculinity narratives would suggest. In times of economic insecurity, some unemployed men feel there is a “crisis” because they are unable to fulfil their purported masculine duties. Interviewing 40 men who lost jobs during the economic crisis in the US in 2007, Ilana Demantas and Kristen Myers (2015: 640) found that ‘because work is tied to masculine identities, these men suffered psychologically as well as economically’. Loss of work was articulated as a loss of masculine dignity. In response, they reimagined their gender identities and relations within their households. Many unemployed men took on a greater share of household duties. Some emphasised the honour in performing what was reconstructed as their masculine duty to provide ‘care rather than “bread”’ and to do it in a macho way: ‘men could not only do housework, they could do it like men’ (Demantas and Myers, 2015: 659). Rather than transcending traditional gender framings, these men adapted them to their new realities, in some cases continuing to assert men’s roles as heads of households. The compulsion to navigate caring/working identities in relation to masculinity demonstrates the restrictive tenacity of breadwinner masculinity (Hanlon, 2012; see Chapters 5 and 6). Further, Jacqui True (2012: 39) has argued that ‘the loss of male entitlement to privileged employment positions and income they often bring about, can lead them [men] to act out violently against women’. Men’s unemployment in such cases cannot be said to benefit the women (employed or otherwise) who are subject to gendered acts of violence.

Just as class and gender identities are closely tied in with work, there are also strong associations between an assumed “whiteness” and employment. As Nayak and Kehily (2013: 58) comment, unemployment can ‘be read as more than a loss of class status, entailing a symbolic “slipping back” into the domestic feminized location of non-worker and the racialized configuration of being “not-quite-white” on account of a loss of white respectability’. The masculinity constructed as under attack in the realm of work, then, is very much white masculinity. The racialised nature of these narratives is also evidenced in the ‘fear, panic and crisis’ which have ‘come to accumulate around the bodies of Muslim young men’ in contemporary Britain (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 66). Muslim masculinity, projected onto non-white, racialised “others” is portrayed as one of the many “threats” to white masculinity, demonstrating the importance of hierarchies of masculinity in critically interrogating ideas of crisis of masculinity.

In terms of the impact of the construction of white working-class masculinity in crisis on labour opportunities, Linda McDowell (2014: 37) suggests that Islamaphobia post-2001 has negatively impacted on young Muslims, especially men, with ‘a dispiriting 42% of Muslim young people […] not in education, employment or training (NEET) in 2008’. This statistic is perhaps unsurprising given research evidence that racialised discrimination in the form of ‘ethnic penalties’ continues to exist in employment and unemployment: ‘a number of ethnic minority groups, notably Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Carribean and Black African men continue to experience higher unemployment rates, greater concentrations in routine and semi-routine work and lower hourly
earnings than do members of the comparison group of British and other whites’ (Heath and Cheung, 2006: 1; see also Carmichael and Woods, 2000; Li and Heath, 2008). Women from the same ethnic groups were also more likely to be unemployed than the comparison group, although those who were employed on average earned around the same, or more than, white women (Heath and Cheung, 2006: 1).

To summarise, the crisis of masculinity narrative as it is articulated in relation to work is not entirely unfounded. There are both material and social factors impacting on (specific groups of) men in a changed job market. For example, the decline in traditional labour routes means that opportunities for (white) working-class boys/young men to achieve stable employment are further attenuated. The always considerable obstacles to their access to advanced education/professional training and to middle-class occupations remain entrenched. The construction of industrial working-class masculinity may also position working-class men as not willing, or as not fit, to undertake feminised service sector roles.

However, the narrative is also deeply flawed. Research on gender, race, class and employment, illustrates complex inequalities in contemporary local and global labour markets. These nuances are often obscured by simplistic crisis of masculinity frames which treat men and women as homogenous groups. As McDowell (2014: 33) highlights, a ‘complicated pattern is emerging in which gender and class intersect in particular and different ways, at the top and bottom end of the class hierarchy’ and this is further complicated when other factors such as race, nationality and age are considered. Recent public sector cuts in the UK have had a severe effect on women’s employment and job opportunities (Karamessini and Rubery, 2013), as well as on job prospects for younger and older men and the ‘less skilled and uncredentialised’ (McDowell, 2014: 34). In addition, ‘among the young unemployed, working-class men, especially from Black and other minority backgrounds’ are ’over-represented’ (McDowell, 2014: 36).

Crisis of masculinity narratives frame “the problem” as women’s increased participation in the workforce, and men’s supposed victimhood in the job market. However, employment for both men and women is increasingly precarious (Anderson, 2010; Fudge and Owens, 2006; McDowell, 2013; McDowell and Dyson, 2011). Trends of unstable employment, casual labour and “poor work” are not confined to the UK, as ‘the growing number of part-time workers, fixed-term contracts and more “flexible” patterns of employment […] are a feature of much of the globalized West’ and ‘give rise to greater risk, insecurity and individualization’ (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 60). There are no clear gender winners or losers. As Whitehead (2002: 56) suggested nearly two decades ago, ‘the so-called feminization of labour’, perceived as ‘a significant factor in the crisis of masculinity, can be more accurately described as a re-masculinization of organizational culture occurring from the 1960s’, which has brought with it ‘work intensification and job insecurity for both men and women’.

Masculinity, suicide and “crisis”

In health, heart disease, suicide, alcoholism/drug addiction, shorter average life expectancies of men, and male-specific forms of cancer (e.g. prostate) have sometimes been seen as evidence of “crisis” (Canetto and Cleary, 2012; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2012; Scourfield, 2005; Segal, 2007; Whitehead, 2002). The question of how social aspects of the gender order impact on women’s and men’s health is a very complex one (Annandale and Hunt, 2000), especially in determining where there are socially produced
gendered health inequalities. However, it has been argued that ‘gender inequality damages the health of millions of girls and women across the globe’ (Sen et. al., 2007: xii). Whilst gender inequality ‘can also be harmful to men’s health’, this is ‘despite the many tangible benefits it gives men through resources, power, authority and control’ (Sen et. al., 2007: xii, my emphasis).

The benefits of gender inequality, though, as well as the costs, are very unevenly dispersed between different groups of men. Whitehead (2000: 52) highlights that ‘the availability of the male crisis discourse’ has been used to ‘polarize gender differences […] under the rubric of a “men’s health crisis”’. Crisis of masculinity discourses depict health as the ground on which a “battles of the sexes” is fought, and are therefore unlikely to recognise damage to women, or inequalities between men. Male suicide has become a prominent issue for a variety of men’s movements. For example, The Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM), discussed in Chapter 4, is a UK men’s group mobilising around the problem of male suicide. Men’s health groups are often more concerned with anti-feminist activism than with promoting changes in health provision for men (Salter, 2016). They draw on crisis of masculinity narratives, representing health as a zero-sum game where men lose out and women win. Some argue that men are disadvantaged because of feminists’ pursuit of better (disproportionate) resourcing for women’s health problems. This is just one instance of how health has been viewed through the lenses of the crisis of masculinity thesis in misleading and problematic ways.

Constructions of male suicide in the public domain often exemplify the polarisation of sex/gender difference noted by Whitehead. In recent years, concerns around “crisis” and male suicide have become more prominent. The apparent disparity between men’s and women’s rates of suicide, along with increases in suicide amongst young men (or, more recently in the UK, amongst middle-aged men) is often portrayed by the media as a symptom of a crisis of masculinity (Canetto and Cleary, 2012; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2012; Scourfield, 2005). Jonathan Scourfield suggests that the frequency of mainstream media discussions of male suicide reflects the interpretation of the “facts” of gendered patterns of suicide ‘as supporting the dominant narrative of gender crisis’ (Scourfield, 2005: 2). Since research on suicide began, it has been seen as a male phenomenon (Jaworski, 2015). Men are at increased risk of death by suicide in most countries in the world (Coleman, 2015; Canetto, 2008; Cantor, 2000; Joiner, 2005; Oliffe at. al., 2012; Stack, 2000; WHO, 2003; WHO, 2011; Wyllie et. al., 2012), although, crucially, not all, especially when other factors such as age are accounted for (Canetto, 2008; Canetto and Cleary, 2012; Canetto and Lester, 1995; Page et. al., 2010; Vijayakumar et. al., 2012).

A recent UK report ‘Men, Suicide and Society’ commissioned by the Samaritans, a charity dedicated to suicide prevention, suggests that in the UK, ‘men are three times more likely than women to end their own lives’ and that ‘rates of suicide among women have steadily decreased over the last 50 years, while suicide rates among men overall are at comparable levels to the 1960s’ (Wyllie et. al., 2012: 4). Young men were once seen as particularly vulnerable to death by suicide, and suicide among young British men increased sharply between 1970 and 1991 (Wyllie et. al., 2012; McDowell, 2000; Scourfield, 2005). More recently, suicide rates amongst younger men have reduced, and it is now ‘men of low socio-economic position in their mid-years’ who are ‘excessively vulnerable to death by suicide’ (Wyllie et. al., 2012: 1; see also Shiner et. al., 2009). High male suicide rates are often taken in public debates to be a direct result of changes in gender identities, along with the apparent displacement of men in education, the workplace and families (Canetto and Cleary, 2012; Scourfield et. al., 2012). Suicide, seen
as the result of these seismic social changes, becomes articulated as the starkest outcome of masculinity in crisis.

It is misleading and problematic to frame the social problem of suicide in terms of gender winners and losers understood through statistics as quantitative approaches cannot adequately capture the gendered social processes involved (Jaworski, 2015; Scourfield, 2005; Canetto, 1997; Canetto, 2008). Far from being objective, suicide statistics already assume gendered interpretations of what it means to suicide. The earliest statistical representations of suicide from the eighteenth-century, which suggested that more men died by suicide than women, were flawed for a variety of well-documented reasons (Kushner, 1985; Kushner, 1993; Kushner, 1995; Jaworski, 2015). Reports drew almost exclusively on mortality rates and did not include attempted suicide which was ‘largely identified as female’ (Jaworski, 2015: 21-2). Whether a death is recorded as a suicide depends on the interpretation of intent (established via motives and methods) and on outcome (whether the person died) (Jaworski, 2015). Intent, however, is often read differently depending on gendered assumptions about men and women. Women’s suicides are less likely to be read as suicide for a variety of reasons, including the assumption that more visibly violent suicide methods more commonly used by men (for example, men are more likely to use guns and women to overdose on drugs) (Coleman, 2015; Jaworski, 2014; Kaplan et. al., 2009), are a signal of serious intent (Jaworski, 2015: 103)\(^\text{11}\). Attempts by women are often seen as cries for help or attention, or as self-harm, rather than as sincere efforts to end their lives. On the other hand, ‘male methods of suicide are viewed as masculine, aggressive, violent and serious, with limited chance of survival’ and, therefore, the assumption is that ‘male suicides represent strength, instrumentality, independence and decisiveness’ (Jaworski, 2015: 24). The complex layers of gendered meaning in interpreting and understanding suicide thus reflect much broader social constructions of gender (Jaworski, 2014: 22).

Other gendered assumptions underpin the focus on completed suicides, rather than on suicide attempts. Although more men than women die by suicide in most of the world, more women than men attempt suicide, deliberately self-harm\(^\text{12}\), or have suicidal thoughts (see, for example, Canetto and Sakinofsky, 1998; Kerkhof, 2000; Schaffer et. al., 2000; Scourfield and Evans, 2014). Women are also more likely to be diagnosed with mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, and to be hospitalised for self-harm (Coleman, 2015; Jaworski, 2014; Nock et. al., 2008; WHO, 2012). Feminist scholars have highlighted that focusing on fatalities relies on a gendered construction of completion as success, as masculine, and on non-completion as failure, as feminine (Canetto, 1997; Canetto, 2008; Canetto and Lester, 1995; Canetto and Sakinofsky, 1998; Jaworski, 2015). Men are ‘viewed as completers and women as attempters’ and ‘surviving suicide [...] is viewed as “unmasculine”: a sign of a “failed” act and of “failed” masculinity’ (Jaworski 2015: 23). Attempted suicide then becomes oxymoronic – if an attempt is non-fatal it is not really suicide (Jaworski, 2015: 21).

\(^{11}\) It is unclear why women are less likely to use “violent” methods, but some feminist researchers suggest that certain types of suicide are likely to be construed as more acceptable for women than for men, and vice versa, as a result of gendered cultural scripts (Canetto and Lester, 1995; Canetto, 1997; Canetto, 2008; Canetto and Sakinofsky, 1998; Jaworski, 2014).

\(^{12}\) Distinctions between attempted suicide and deliberate self-harm are not themselves easily defined and there is no clear way to distinguish between suicidal behaviour and any other label suggesting harm to the self (Chandler et. al., 2011). There is a range of different usage in the literature, much of which is inconsistent and some of which is problematic, either for methodological/epistemological reasons, or because the phrasing has negative connotations which may not correspond to the self-understanding of people who engage in the behaviours referred to (Chandler et. al., 2011).
Further, and significantly for examining the articulation of male suicide through crisis of masculinity narratives, ‘men’s acts of self-destruction are interpreted as resisting loss, rather than reactively giving in to its conditions’ (Jaworski, 2014: 101). Male suicide is seen as ‘a symptom of public social upheaval’ while female suicide is portrayed as ‘a symptom of individual pathology’ (Jaworski, 2014: 26, see also Canetto and Lester, 1998). Men who suicide are represented as reacting to important public injustices in a rational, heroic manner and their plight is therefore taken more seriously. Gendered binaries constructing male suicide as agentic and successful, as evidence of manly courage, and female suicide as passive and “merely” attempted, as proof of womanly hysteria, remain embedded in perceptions of suicide in many societies.

The construction of men’s suicide as evidence of a crisis of masculinity once again simultaneously, and paradoxically, constructs men as both victims and as active agents of their own destiny. Scourfield (2005: 4) argues there is ‘a political polarisation’ in policy debates about men ‘where men are either regarded purely as victims or purely as perpetrators’, and that this binary is central to understanding the social construction of male suicide. In positioning men as victims (whether of feminism or of masculinity itself), crisis narratives similarly employ a victim/perpetrator binary which obscures complex power dynamics. To the extent that using the language of crisis reinforces this binary, it represents gender relations in problematic ways.

The victim/perpetrator binary is drawn particularly starkly in the case of male suicide, and men who suicide are firmly situated in the “victim” category. This framing can obscure cases where male “victims” of suicide are also perpetrators of gendered acts of violence against others, usually women partners. In some instances, men’s suicides are directly related to attempts to control partners (Evans et al., 2014; Fincham et al., 2011; Scourfield and Evans, 2014; Scourfield, 2005; Shiner et al., 2009). A small number of men suicide to punish others, often in the context of abuse of women partners at the point of relationship breakdown (Evans et al., 2014; Fincham et al., 2011; Scourfield, 2005; Scourfield and Evans, 2014; Shiner et al., 2009; Oliffe et al., 2015). Suicide notes in some of these cases suggest that some men acted out of sexual jealousy over ex-partners who had become involved with another man (Shiner et al., 2009; Fincham et al., 2011).

Jealousy is also a common feature of murder-suicides, which are mostly perpetrated by men, and are ‘rare but culturally powerful events’ (Scourfield and Evans, 2014: 1). These acts reflect gendered attitudes linked with controlling behaviour, including the perception that a woman is the (sexual) property of her (male) partner. Conflict over contact with children is also often a factor in these cases (Oliffe et al., 2015) and notably fathers’ rights groups have emphasised suicides by post-separation fathers in their campaigns (Scourfield and Evans, 2014: 3). I discuss this further in Chapter 6. Although instances of murder-suicide and suicide as “punishment” are rare, there is disturbing evidence that some men’s suicides are a continuation of gendered control of women who try to leave abusive relationships. This is not the image portrayed in the media where men who suicide after losing a partner are tragic heroes betrayed by the apparent heartlessness of the women who leave them (especially for another man).

Experiences of sexual and emotional abuse are a key factor in many women’s suicides (Jaworksi, 2015: 28), and there is a known association between being subjected to domestic violence and suicidal behaviour in women (see, for example, Devries et al., 2011; Dufort et al., 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2012). Given the connections between violence against women and broader gendered power relations, there are structural reasons for women’s suicide deriving from violent masculinities and men’s power as a group (Hearn, 1998). Ignoring the presence of gender-based violence in cases of suicide...
is to neglect a significant reality of broader gendered power relations in society and to fail to interrogate problematic aspects of versions of masculinity which may both facilitate a culture of male suicide and, at the same time, foster a culture in which gender-based violence flourishes.

Hegemonic (or, alternatively, “traditional”) masculinity is itself a key facilitator of men’s suicide (Chandler, 2012; Coleman, 2015; Oliffe et. al., 2015; Scourfield, 2005; Scourfield et. al., 2012). Male suicide is not, therefore, the result of men being unable to fulfil their “biologically determined” roles. Scourfield (2005: 6), drawing onConnell’s conception of hegemonic masculinity, identifies character traits or behaviours associated with hegemonic masculinity which increase suicide: an emphasis on the value of competition; emotional illiteracy; loneliness/lack of social networks; increased propensity to bodily damage including substance abuse; control of others; and mental health problems (both caused by, and causing, all of these behaviours) (Scourfield, 2005; see also Scourfield and Evans, 2014; Chandler, 2012). Although men experience mental health issues, the construction of masculinity as silent and stoic may mean that men are less likely to seek help when they are distressed (Cleary, 2012; Scourfield, 2005).

Importantly, it seems to be the imperative to live up to rigid masculine ideals that cannot possibly be achieved by all men that is associated with suicide. In other words, it is the valorisation of masculinity that is the problem, not its devaluation. The factors noted above become important risk indicators when life changes are perceived by men as resulting in a ‘loss of [masculine] honor’ (Scourfield, 2005: 7). Scourfield (2005: 7) suggests that ‘the essentially competitive character of hegemonic masculinity’ means that ‘it is not only important to be successful in culturally approved ways, but also to see oneself as successful in relation to others’. Men measure themselves against hegemonic masculinity and perceive themselves as failures where they fall short. Suicide, therefore, ‘might be one of a number of ways in which men “express” a masculine identity’ (Chandler, 2012: 112), an attempt to restore lost masculinity. For example, in cases of gender-based violence culminating in suicide (or of murder-suicide involving intimate partners), it is the association of masculinity with control of women which is at stake (Scourfield, 2005; Oliffe et. al., 2015). Positive identification with “traditional” masculinity, defined as an ‘emphasis on winning, independence, emotion-avoidance, and the acceptability of anger and violence’ has been found to be associated with higher levels of suicide ideation in both men and women (Coleman, 2015; see also Coleman et. al., 2011). In short, hegemonic masculinity renders suicide more culturally acceptable for men.

For this reason, suicide prevention and intervention strategies aimed at men are often problematic. Such campaigns often use male role models such as (male) sports stars and tend to draw on ideas of masculinity. The US military’s ‘Strength of a Warrior’ campaign is an example where interventions suggest that seeking help is manly, rather than a sign of weakness (Coleman, 2015: 380). There are concerns over whether such campaigns work in the immediate term (Coleman, 2015; Pitman et. al., 2012).

Further, Amy Chandler (2012) has cautioned that invoking masculinity may exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, the wider issue by reinforcing the very ideas of gender that may contribute to men’s suicide. Suicide is sometimes understood as a display of strength and control – therefore campaigns which rely on “fighting” suicidal ideas might be counterproductive. In addition, men are sometimes encouraged to play sports as a healthy outlet for those who may be less likely to talk about their emotions. Chandler notes that the heavily masculinised culture of sport may limit the benefits of participating.
Finally, Chandler highlights ambivalent reporting of prominent sports icons suffering from depression. When one of these icons, Duncan Bell, an English Rugby Union Player, finally spoke out about his struggles with depression, the media framed him ‘as almost “heroic” in having the “strength” to stay silent for such a long time’ whilst simultaneously encouraging men to talk to someone if they are depressed (Chandler, 2012: 122). These mixed messages are clearly problematic.

Even were messages more consistent, the emphasis on altering masculinity at an individual level is inadequate. Structural factors need to be critically examined and altered if suicide is to be decreased. Further, if binary and restrictive notions of gender are themselves the issue, then there will always be tensions around appealing to masculinity to encourage men to seek help. This point illustrates some of the potential issues with “progressive” crisis of masculinity narratives that are premised on amending the content of masculinity, whilst maintaining binary notions of masculinity and femininity.

Comparing “men” as a group with “women” as a group in suicide research is also misleading in that there is little attention paid to power relations between men (see also Canetto and Cleary, 2012; Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2012; Scourfield, 2005). Men who find it hardest to access hegemonic masculinity are most at risk of suicide. For example, belonging to a sexual minority greatly increases the risk of attempted suicide, especially amongst younger gay and bisexual men (Cochran and Mays, 2011; Jaworski, 2014; Paul et. al., 2002; Scourfield, 2005; Silenzio et. al., 2007). This risk has been linked to hegemonic heteronormativity in ‘a context of compulsory heterosexuality for men’ (Scourfield, 2005: 8). In Australia, indigenous suicide rates are around 40-45 percent higher than the Australian national average and have been linked to the effects of colonisation (Jaworski, 2015: 29). Socio-economic status is also a key risk factor for suicide in men (Cleary, 2012), and unemployment is a common trigger for men’s suicides (Chung, 2009).

Chandler (2012: 111) argues that ‘men in middle age who are economically disadvantaged might be more susceptible to “failures” of hegemonic masculinity’, creating ‘a context where suicide is more likely’. This may be partly a result of the emphasis on breadwinner masculinities discussed above as poorer men have less access to work opportunities (Chandler, 2012). In addition, wealth and education ‘open up channels of knowledge about, and access to, health and health care as well as other forms of social and emotional capital’ (Cleary, 2012: 504). Although middle-class men may suffer too, ‘in relation to suicide, they tend to inhabit less risky environments’ than their working-class counterparts (Cleary, 2012: 504; see also Chandler, 2012). In short, ‘some men, rather than all men, are vulnerable to suicide, and this challenges a straightforward link between “men” and these social changes’ (Cleary, 2012: 499; see also Cleary and Brannick, 2007). Overall, intersectional research on gender and suicide demonstrates the complexities of the connections of gender with other power-laden identities.

To summarise, constructing suicide as a symptom of “crisis” is problematic as ‘crisis theory’ is ‘based on limited empirical data, ignores significant variations in suicidal behaviour (e.g. in terms of socioeconomic background), and deals with gender in a simplistic way’ (Canetto and Cleary, 2012: 462). Ideas of femininity and masculinity as fixed, oppositional categories, are rarely challenged in either academic or broader public discussions of male suicide (Canetto and Cleary, 2012; Jordan and Chandler, 2018). Indeed, frequently, these constructions are reinforced as invisibly gendered and unchallenged assumptions about suicide frame debates. The issues are too simplistically presented as asocial and apolitical, a matter of men’s individual psyches (perhaps shaped
by “natural” masculinity), rather than as tied to broader social processes. As Scourfield (2005: 4-5) argues, ‘we need to understand [...] masculinities within the context of a social gender order that has historically been structured to maintain men’s dominance, but that can also have negative consequences for men’s mental health’.

In analysing male suicide, it is important to move away from simplistic crisis of masculinity narratives of men as losers and women as winners in a gender battle where life and death are at stake (Jordan and Chandler, 2018). To invert the argument and claim that women lose out would buy into such a reductionist framing. This has not been my aim in attempting to unsettle the representation of “facts” about male suicide. Nonetheless, it is important to demonstrate that suicide is not a distinctly male problem, especially given higher rates of attempted suicide for women. Men are also more likely to die of heart attacks or by violent causes (usually at the hands of other men), however, this does not mean that they are any the less privileged in terms of political, social and economic status (Connell, 2011: 14). In the case of male suicide, hegemonic masculinity similarly has some disadvantages which accompany the overall benefits. Evidence suggests that economically and socially marginalised men are more likely to suicide and, more generally, powerlessness and lack of capacity to change lives is a causal factor in determining who is at risk of suicide. As always, it is those with least hope of achieving hegemonic masculinity that suffer most from its effects. Hegemonic masculinity is premised not just on exclusion of, and hierarchical relations with, other masculinities, but on the exclusion of the feminine, and, by association, women. Hegemonic masculinity shapes broader social conditions which facilitate women’s suicide as seen above in the discussion of gender-based violence as a trigger for abused women.

**Framing masculinity and “crisis”: conservative and progressive perspectives in contemporary public debates**

In this section, I deconstruct two very different non-academic takes on the crisis of masculinity articulated in the last few years, which exemplify what I have called “conservative” and “progressive” crisis of masculinity narratives. The first text is the transcript of a speech given in 2013 by Labour party Member of Parliament, Diane Abbott. I take Abbott’s speech as an exemplar of a “progressive” narrative about the purported crisis of masculinity in contemporary Britain. The second text consists of a response to a pre-released summary of Abbott’s speech written by “men’s issues” activist, Glen Poole, and published in *The Guardian* in 2013. I also include quotations from a more recent piece in *The Telegraph* by Poole (2015) critiquing the then Labour party Leader Jeremy Corbyn’s public comments on male suicide rates. In contrast with Abbott, Poole’s article is paradigmatic of a conservative, anti-feminist, crisis of masculinity perspective. Both have in common that they agree that there is a masculinity crisis and that men are victims in at least some arenas (for Poole all arenas). Whilst Poole sticks fairly consistently to a backlash narrative about gender relations, Abbott’s speech contains elements of both a feminist, and of a postfeminist, perspective. It is important to note that although I critically analyse the texts, my arguments are not criticisms of the individuals who produced them as such. Instead, they are presented as critiques of the wider social narratives to which they relate. Further, and relatedly, the primary aim is not to interrogate the factual accuracy of the claims made about men. Rather, the texts are a

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13 Interestingly, Poole states that he was Director of Public Relations for Fathers 4 Justice between 2003 and 2006 (TEDx Talks, 2012).
heuristic device used to illustrate the terms in which public discussion of crisis of masculinity is currently taking place. In addition, their strikingly different starting points about women, feminism, and traditional masculinity elucidate distinctions (and commonalities) between conservative and progressive narratives.

Diane Abbott is currently a Labour MP for the constituency of Hackney North and Stoke Newington. She has been an MP since 1987, when she became the first black woman ever to be elected to the British Parliament (http://www.dianeabbott.org.uk/about.aspx) and is perhaps one of the most well-known politicians in the UK as a result of her frequent appearances on current affairs television shows.14 In 2013, at the twentieth birthday celebrations of the cross-party think tank, Demos, she gave a speech entitled ‘Britain’s Crisis of Masculinity’ (Abbott, 2013). The speech focused on what she called a ‘crisis that for too long has been unspoken, abandoned and left derelict’, whereby (young) British men have become ‘victims of the messages about their role in the world’ (Abbott, 2013: 2). British people, Abbott (2013: 11) suggests, ‘place a great premium on manhood, but provide ever fewer paths to achieving it’ in a modern society where ‘our heroes are often absent’ and ‘many of our young men are falling by the wayside’. The causes and the effects of the “crisis” she identifies are varied and her speech raises an interlinked series of issues. She particularly highlights: the impact on boys and men of (un)employment, deindustrialisation and changing labour markets, as well as long working hours for those who are employed; suggested failure of the education system to support boys in a context where girls are succeeding and a lack of male role models in schools; lack of opportunities for involved fatherhood and disintegrating family life; men’s poor health deemed a result of cultural attitudes to men seeking help (including higher rates of male suicide, mental health problems, and increased likelihood of contracting and/or dying from cancer); men’s participation in anti-social behaviour and criminality; pressures on men in a ‘pornified’ society to perform sexually; increasing body image problems among men; and, finally, silence around masculinity and inability to express identity issues in a changed gender world. Some of these are touched on in these excerpts:

Tomorrow, too many British men and boys will wake up isolated and misdirected by a boundless consumer outlook, economic instability and whirlwind social change. Tomorrow, too many British men and boys who need the space and support to talk about manhood, expectations and boundaries from an early age, at schools, with other boys, and with their parents will remain silent

(ABBOTT, 2013: 2)

This year, too many British men will return home so late, that happy family life will be pushed even further out of reach; too many British men will be diagnosed with a cancer that was preventable; and this year, too many British men – shouldering the burden of a growing economic mess they did not create – will commit suicide. I fear British society has given in to a fatalism about outcomes for boys – the “they’re just like that” syndrome

14 Abbott has also been the focus of media attention recently as she has spoken out about the racist and sexist abuse she has endured throughout her career (see Jones et. al., 2019).
15 The language of “committing” suicide used here by Abbott is sometimes seen as stigmatising by those who study suicide or work to prevent it. I therefore use language such as “completing” suicide or, following Jaworski (2014), simply “to suicide”.

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Many of these themes are frequently present in crisis of masculinity narratives. The rapid pace of social change is portrayed as impacting on men and creating disadvantages that are simply not recognised or tackled in an indifferent society. What differentiates the kind of view expressed in Abbott's speech from more conservative perspectives is that she explicitly distances herself from a right-wing narrative about "feral" youth and irresponsible lone mothers:

Let me be clear. I'm not here to talk about 'Broken Britain'. I'm not here to do down single parent families. I am a single mother. I'm not here to place blame on any families, or to try and suggest that one particular family might be in some way better than another

Further, Abbott, perhaps aware of the anti-feminist vitriol that often accompanies discussion of "men's issues", was even quicker to point early in her speech to her credentials as a 'card-carrying feminist' (Abbott, 2013: 2). She is critical of those who would blame women for all society's ills: 'too often, women – particularly those who achieve success - wrongly get the blame' (Abbott, 2013: 2) and is careful to mention that women are still lacking equal opportunities: 'men continue to earn more than women for example, and are more likely to occupy senior positions in the workplace' (Abbott, 2013: 8).

Abbott’s assumptions about the nature of gender/masculinity also merit attention in interpreting the gender politics of her claims. She appears ambivalent about traditional masculinity. In accordance with what I am calling here a progressive crisis of masculinity narrative, she is explicitly dismissive of essentialist views of gender: 'narrow stereotypes, based upon biological differences, have finally been laid to rest' (Abbott, 2013: 7) and also notes some of the damaging aspects of traditional masculinity, referring to: 'the masculine predilection for risk and violence' (Abbott, 2013: 4). Further, she states that she is 'particularly troubled by a culture of hyper-masculinity', which she describes as a culture:

that exaggerates masculinity in the face of a perceived threat to it. We see it in our schools; in the culture of some of our big business financial institutions; in some of our in inner cities; and even on many student campuses. At its worst, it's a celebration of heartlessness; a lack of respect for women's autonomy; and the normalisation of homophobia. I fear it's often crude individualism dressed up as modern manhood

What Abbott refers to as "hyper-masculinity" is portrayed as categorically harmful to men and to society – it is selfish, misogynistic, and homophobic. Later in the speech, she acknowledges that racism is also integral to the attitudes she identifies as she calls for 'British masculinities that are not defined in opposition to 'Others' –whether they be racial, sexual, cultural' (Abbott, 2013: 10). She suggests that this is a 'generation of British men without realistic heroes, who feel like they have been set up to fail' who have 'nothing left to lose', a society 'of atomised, lonely, entrepreneurial boys, who often have lives without meaning' (Abbott, 2013: 3). In denouncing this exaggerated masculinity, Abbott implicitly sees its performance as a response to the decline of healthier, more acceptable
models of masculinity. Because boys cannot attain these acceptable models their masculinity must find outlet, at best in individualistic attitudes, and at worst in violence, misogyny, racism and criminality.

Abbott is not always critical of “old” notions of masculinity and appears almost nostalgic for lost breadwinner masculinity and a world in which it flourished:

Thinking about old expressions of masculinity is like flicking through a dusty, well-worn, black and white photo album from a loft – the men who toiled in the iron, steel and coal industries, in shipbuilding, and pre-mechanised farming. The soldier, the bank manager, the breadwinner, the family man. Yesterday’s heroes, in the fantasies and the realities of British life, were affirmed, in part, by physical strength, silent stoicism, and athletic daring

(Abbott, 2013: 4)

However, the ‘inescapable truth’ is that ‘fewer men than ever are able to connect the fabric of their lives to those archetypes’ as ‘machines and not sweating men assemble cars’ and ‘the decline of heavy industry and manufacturing jobs has left a lot of men in a position where they don’t feel the jobs on offer – particularly service jobs – are ones they feel comfortable with’ (Abbott, 2013: 4). Boys are ‘without heroes, struggling to find a role, and sometimes, a voice, in society - lost in a changing economy where old images of masculinity have faded’ (Abbott, 2013: 6). The ‘gold standard’ of ‘what made a British man used to be earning, providing and belonging’ but this has ‘melted into taking, owning and consuming’ (Abbott, 2013: 5). British men and boys are now ‘a “transit generation”, caught between the “stiff-upper lip” approach of previous generations and today’s cultural tornado of male cosmetics, white collar industry, and modernised workplaces’ (Abbott, 2013: 7).

Whilst Abbott envisages altering masculinity to allow boys and men to adapt to an altered world, then, there is a sense of longing for the industrial past in which men were able to be “real” men. Romanticised notion of men’s roles in a fictional past commonly surface at times where crisis of masculinity narratives become prominent, as discussed further in the next section. More conservative perspectives rely on even more mournful lamentations about times gone by and fail to recognise any negative aspects of old styles of masculinity. Nevertheless, such fantasies of simpler masculinity-times, albeit tempered in more progressive accounts, are often a key feature of even the most promising understandings of the apparent crisis of masculinity.

Unlike more conservative commentators, however, Abbott does not suggest we try and return to the past. The solutions she proposes are varied. Practical suggestions include: providing work and better vocational and technical education opportunities for men; male-specific helplines for men with mental health issues; ‘father friendly parenting classes’; and ‘meaningful access to services and parental leave’, to place more value on ‘the father child-bond’ (Abbott, 2013: 13). However, in all the arenas identified as locations of “crisis”, the need to change social constructions of gender connected to men’s problems is also emphasised. For example, in health, campaigns targeted at men should highlight that ‘needing health treatment isn’t a mark of failure’ (Abbott, 2013: 10). In education, ‘we must challenge male gender identities which do not value learning and reading as a mark of success’ (Abbott, 2013: 10). More generally:

We must work to establish and normalise a multi-faceted notion of what makes a man – in our schools, families and workplace – which allows and encourages
sensitivity, emotions, healthy sexuality, communication, and investing time in children [sic] education

(Abbott, 2013: 10)

Fathers and *male* teachers are situated as key figures in challenging dominant norms of masculinity. Fathers 'need to talk to their sons and our young men about manhood and fatherhood' (Abbott, 2013: 10) and 'we desperately need more men in schools teaching our children, and being role models' (Abbott, 2013: 11). This emphasis on the importance of male role models and especially on fathers is also present in conservative narratives and is problematic in its essentialism (see Chapters 3 and 6 for further discussion of problems with male role models). Despite Abbott's insistence that she is not favouring some forms of family life over others and on her own positionality as a single mother, the implication is that only men can effectively parent/teach boys. Whilst this is perhaps in this case more about seeing men in caring/nurturing roles than about male authority or discipline figures being needed to keep "naturally" violent young men in line, a strong biological association between men and masculinity is implicit in this narrative (Abbott's caveats about biology not straightforwardly determining gender identities notwithstanding). Further, there is no radical conception of fundamentally disrupting gender identities here:

*It's not about turning boys into girls. It's about making boys feel like they can talk about their place in the world*  

(Abbott, 2013: 10, my emphasis)

The integrity of masculinity and the gender binaries that go with it must be maintained. Boys are not girls and it is important not to expect them to be girls. We need to tweak masculinity for the modern world, but that is all.

The main points of difference with conservative crisis of masculinity narratives are in Abbott's suggestion of the need for altering masculinity (rather than reasserting old masculinity), and in differing views of who is to blame for "crisis". In more progressive narratives, it is problematic social and economic processes that are the source of the crisis, in combination with unresolved tensions about gender identities that are attributable to a juncture between old, washed-up gender values and a lack of clear alternatives for a contemporary society. In conservative perspectives, there may be some acknowledgment of the same social and economic processes (e.g. globalisation) but the main cause of crisis is represented as a move from "natural" to "unnatural" gender roles, instigated largely by the misguided acceptance of feminism.

As noted, for Abbott, feminism is not at fault, and neither are women. For her, resolving the "crisis" entails moving ‘away from adversarial gender politics’ (Abbott, 2013: 2). She simultaneously recognises the existence of inequality and the importance of feminist movements: ‘the barren soil of inequality has sprung crucial and life-affirming grassroots politics for women’, but suggests that, in contrast, ‘our men have little movement politics to speak of’ and that ‘many British men have no authentic voice’ (Abbott, 2013: 5). Further, she identifies ‘an unfortunate political landscape that catches many men between the belief that all human beings are essentially equal, and the collapsing pillar of patriarchy that mistakenly says men are naturally superior to women’ (Abbott, 2013: 7, my emphasis). Problematic ideas of gender affect both women and men. For example, she discusses a previous talk she gave on the subject of 'pornification'.
I spoke at the start of the year about the pornification of British culture. I want to make clear today that this issue doesn’t just concern women. And that this pornified society is not something that men do to women. This pornified culture tells girls that the most important quality they need is ‘sexiness’, and not cleverness, sportiness, application or ambition. It tells many girls that they only have value as sex objects. But the messages being sent to our boys are just as limiting and restrictive: be macho, be strong, don’t show your emotions

(Abbott, 2013: 7, my emphasis)

This is problematic because whilst these gendered identities are restrictive and in fact represent two sides of the same coin, there is nonetheless a hierarchy whereby being macho, strong and rational are culturally valued above sexiness. In this sense, these messages are not ‘just as limiting’ for boys as they are for girls.

There is a tension between feminist and postfeminist assumptions throughout these passages – between recognising the realities of women’s unequal position in society and at the same time suggesting that men are just as much victims as women. Patriarchy is real but is collapsing, women’s movements are important, but men need movements too because they have no voice. In fact, men – especially white, heterosexual men of high socio-economic status - disproportionately speak and are listened to (Salter, 2016). A postfeminist logic is replicated in which there is sexism against both men and women in equal measure, but this will naturally disappear when the imminent disintegration of patriarchy is complete.

I have already begun to suggest how a conservative crisis of masculinity narrative might be both similar and different to the kinds of views illustrated in Abbott’s speech. I now turn to Glen Poole’s views on crisis of masculinity.

Poole’s 2013 comment piece, ‘How tackling the “crisis of masculinity” creates a crisis for feminism’ in The Guardian newspaper was written partly in response to press releases about the content of Abbott’s speech prior to her delivering it. He opens with the caustic statement: ‘it seems that masculinity is in crisis again and this time the Labour party is going to save us’ (Poole, 2013). Like Abbott, he believes there is a silence around men’s issues, but is also sceptical that Labour are really planning to do anything about them. As will be discussed further below, the main reason for his scepticism is what he perceives to be Labour’s feminist, women-friendly culture.

When we look at the evidence, it is undeniable that men and boys as a distinct group face significant problems. The gap between men and women applying to, and entering, university is growing. They are much more likely to commit crime than women, be homeless, and, between 2006 and 2010, for every single age group men were significantly more likely than women to take their own lives
When the recent recession hit Britain [...] the number of men in work fell between 2008 and 2012 at nearly 50 times the rate for women, leaving us with 387,000 fewer men in the workplace compared with 8,000 fewer women. Around the same time (2008 to 2010), researchers estimated there were more than 1,000 additional suicides as a result of the recession and that 84pc of those who killed themselves were men

These problems, Poole claims, ’disproportionately impact men and boys. They are men’s issues’ (Poole, 2015, my emphasis). In relation to suicide, he states, ’all the research tells us there are multiple factors that make men of all backgrounds more vulnerable’ and these include ‘exclusion from school, poor education, unemployment, low income, fatherlessness, relationship breakdown, separation from your kids, homelessness, imprisonment, substance abuse, being a victim of violence and abuse, mental health problems and a lack of male-friendly services’ (Poole, 2015). Poole’s narrative of both the effects and causes of the apparent ’emergency’ in relation to male suicide and to the broader issues identified is similar to Abbott’s. He agrees that there is a lack of discussion around men’s issues. However, he takes issue with what he perceives to be her negative attitude towards traditional masculinity:

Looking at a preview’s [sic] of Abbott’s speech, it becomes apparent that Labour’s new message about valuing fathers is underpinned with a familiar, negative narrative about disaffected men who are hyper-masculine, homophobic, misogynistic and obsessed with pornography. Abbott is right to say that there aren’t enough men engaged in conversations about manhood, but is it any wonder when modern masculinity is described in such negative terms?

In the Telegraph piece, he levels similar accusations at Corbyn:

The Labour leader, who is rapidly becoming a beta male icon, said that the problem arises because women are prepared to speak out, but our macho culture stops men from doing the same

Jeremy Corbyn deserves credit for daring to mention male suicide. However, his soundbite theory that ”macho culture” is the problem and “speaking out” is the cure, doesn’t stand scrutiny

The clearly derogatory description of Corbyn as a ‘beta male icon’ is revealing in terms of illustrating Poole’s ideas of masculinity. Real men are “alpha males”, they are strong, dominant leaders who are not afraid to be ‘macho’. Corbyn’s criticism of macho culture therefore marks him out as not a real man for Poole who, in accordance with a conservative crisis of masculinity narrative, objects to any criticism of traditional masculinity. For Poole, ’macho culture’ does not cause suicide, therefore changing this culture would not be the answer to suicide prevention. He makes clear how he conceives of the problem and the solution to male suicide:
There is plenty of evidence to suggest that for some men, being a straightforward, ordinary bloke is a perfectly good defence against suicide. Being able to take on the provider and protector role, with a wife and kids, gives these men the security and responsibility of having a family to look out for.

Having a home, money, social bonds and a purpose in life can be the foundations for a man's mental wellbeing. Such men will develop a range of healthy coping mechanisms at times of stress and distress, such as sport, exercise, hobbies, listening to music and of course, retiring to a real or metaphorical shed.

These men may be part of the “macho culture” that Jeremy Corbyn dislikes, but their “keep calm and carry on” approach to manhood works for them and we should honour and respect that. (Poole, 2015)

In other words, men suicide when they are prevented from being men. Masculinity, equated here with being a provider/protector of a wife and children, is singular, natural and inevitable, not to mention heteronormative. Men should not be expected to act in “unmasculine” ways. Talking about emotions is implicitly situated as one of these unmasculine behaviours. Men deal with their personal issues by doing things, by breadwinning, by pursuing stereotypically masculine hobbies and by escaping to their sheds (“man caves”?), where they can be alone. To suggest that altering masculinity might prevent suicide is to denigrate men, reinforcing what Poole sees as the issues. He selectively quotes a report by UK-based suicide prevention charity, The Samaritans (Wyllie et. al., 2012) on male suicide: “men as a group are often criticised for being resistant to seeking help or talking about their feelings. We need to move from blaming men for not being like women, to recognising their needs” (Poole, 2015). Poole reads this passage as supporting the ideas that men should not be expected to be like women, and that the answer to decreasing male suicide rates is to just let men be men.

The imperative that men not be “like women”, was also present in Abbott’s speech. However, unlike Abbott, Poole opposes any amendment of masculinity, as well as any recognition that it is socially constructed. To the extent that culture is relevant, it is not the culture of traditional masculinity that is at fault, it is the culture which he claims seeks to censor it: ‘it’s not a “macho culture” that prevents men from “speaking out”; it’s a culture that isn’t yet “man enough” to listen and respond to men’s needs’ (Poole, 2015). To be critical of stoicism is represented as denigrating men.

Research on suicide, as discussed above, demonstrates why it may be dangerous to suggest that “traditional” masculinity is not part of the problem. Hegemonic masculinity renders suicide more culturally acceptable for men. For example, the construction of masculinity as strong/silent which Poole replicates may mean that men are less likely to seek help (Scourfield, 2005). In other words, it is the valorisation of masculinity that is the problem, not its devaluation. In reifying the common-sense assumption that male suicide occurs because men are inherently hardwired to certain types of behaviour, conservative crisis of masculinity approaches may contribute to a culture of masculinity which facilitates, rather than discourages, suicide (Jordan and Chandler, 2018).

The question arises, what is it that Poole thinks is stopping men from connecting with their true masculine selves? Again, in common with Abbott’s speech, changing economic circumstances are referenced in the comments about the requirement for
steady employment and a home. There is an idea that the insecure relations of production for many in contemporary Britain are an obstacle to men’s sense of masculine self, given that for Poole this is so closely tied in with being economically productive. However, the main culprit, for him, is feminism, and the cultural victimisation of masculinity and men.

Interestingly, Poole has publicly stated that he is neither pro- nor anti- feminist. In a video talk (TEDx Talks, 2012), he positions himself as neutral, equating both feminism and anti-feminism with bias, and his own position with objectivity. There are elements of a postfeminist perspective in Poole’s rhetoric in the news pieces I have analysed. Gendered inequalities are sometimes positioned as applying evenly to men and women, albeit across different areas – for example, he refers to men’s issues as simply ‘the other half of gender equality’ (Poole, 2013).

However, despite disclaimers and claims to neutrality, Poole paints feminism in very unflattering terms. In writing about Corbyn and Abbott, he is critical of what he sees as the Labour party’s feminist stance, suggesting that ‘the party founded for the working man has been mute on the subject of men’s issues for decades’ (Poole, 2015). He attributes this silence to the left’s purported focus on women: ‘the left has given us a brave new world of women’s ministers, women-only shortlists, an annual women’s conference, a manifesto for women and the #WomanToWoman pink bus’ (Poole, 2015). Labour, according to Poole ‘has become not so much a party of One Nation but a party of One Gender’ and therefore ‘any attempt [sic] to bring men’s issues to the table have been fiercely resisted’ (Poole, 2015).

This critique, however, is not restricted to “the left”. Poole is quick to highlight that the right-wing Conservative party are no better: ‘they may have more male ministers [than women ministers] in the cabinet, but they haven’t got any men’s ministers’, whereas they are also guilty of having a women’s minister and women-specific policies (Poole, 2015). This apparent feminist conspiracy in the two largest political parties leads Poole to conclude that ‘in politics, the battle of the sexes is fought on the basis of which party is doing the most for one gender: women’ (Poole, 2015).

Poole’s views illustrate his hostility to feminism and to what he sees as the dominance of feminist views in society. He is sceptical about Abbott’s focus on the crisis of masculinity and about ‘Labour feminists developing a male-friendly narrative’, as he claims her speech highlights the ‘real issue’ – ‘how do feminists deal with men’s issues?’ (Poole, 2013). For Poole, to deal with “crisis”, Labour ‘will need to face up to the crisis that tackling men’s issues creates for feminism’, Labour must be less feminist and remain ‘true to the values of its own equalities legislation that allows for men’s and women’s issues to be addressed in an equitable and proportionate way’ (Poole, 2013). Feminism is situated as actively impeding progress on “gender equality” and as overtly hostile to men. Poole bemoans the feminist ‘belief that gender equality is a women’s problem often caused by men’ and the assumption that ‘women have problems and men are problems’ (Poole, 2013).

According to Poole, ‘even some of the most pro-feminist men’s groups will tell you privately that feminist thinking can often be a barrier to helping men and boys’ (Poole, 2013). Feminist women’s groups or ‘the women’s sector’ in his words, are reluctant to ‘share the gender equality pie’ (Poole, 2013). Dealing with men’s issues, he argues, ‘means allowing for a greater diversity of viewpoints, which will ultimately challenge the dominance of feminist thinking’ (Poole, 2013). When this happens, Poole thinks it ‘inevitable’ that feminists ‘will resist attempts to target the problems that men and boys
face and try to shift the focus back on to the problems that men and boys cause’ (Poole, 2013). Overall, for Poole,

When it comes to gender politics it’s constantly raining women, leaving men without a lifebelt, caught between the rocks of the traditional, socially conservative desire to protect women and children and the hard place that is the progressive, socially liberal drive to champion women and girls

(Poole, 2015)

In relation to male suicide, for Poole, the obstacles to dealing with crisis are feminism, and what he sees as the denigration of traditional masculinity in society. The implication is that feminism kills men. This kind of logic is perhaps one of the reasons that men’s rights advocates so often choose to invoke male suicide.

In progressive accounts of crisis such as Abbott’s, in contrast, feminism is not the “cause” of male suicide. Rather, feminists can challenge the culture of hypermasculinity which is the real root of the problem. However, solutions that rely on reaffirming a new and improved conception of masculinity, or on employing dominant masculine tropes are not unproblematic. In addition, to the extent that all crisis of masculinity narratives position men only as victims, they obscure the complexity of gendered power relations.

Whilst Poole’s narrative shares some concerns with Abbott’s progressive conception of masculinity-in-crisis, his perspective is a conservative one. His perceptions of feminist bias in politics are very much drawn from the wider backlash narrative about feminism discussed in Chapter 1 – feminism has gone too far and unfairly privileges women; feminism is an obstacle to gender equality; feminism undermines the natural gender order, ignoring the realities of our gendered natures and causing social harm in the process. Despite claims to neutrality, he clearly articulates a hostile position to feminist politics.

**Conclusion**

The analysis shows that crisis-of-masculinity narratives are present in multiple arenas of social life. It also illustrates the existence of progressive, as well as conservative, crisis narratives, and the differences between them. Overall, however, crisis narratives are more frequently associated with conservative perspectives which would seek to reassert men’s power over women, and/or the power of some men over other men. Conservative masculinity-in-crisis perspectives ignore or actively dispute the fact that social and economic changes tend to affect women more than men. The benefits and power conferred on men, especially on elite men, by hegemonic masculinity are not acknowledged in conservative crisis narratives. Moreover, conservative crisis rhetoric presents women’s equality as a social problem rather than a social good and blames feminism for bringing about change. Crisis narratives, then, are most often rooted in a backlash perspective (discussed in depth in Chapter 1) and focused on promoting anti-feminist sentiment. Further, in failing to recognise that it is marginalised men who bear the brunt of the costs of masculinity, conservative approaches obscure the real difficulties faced by such men.

What I have called progressive articulations of a masculinity-crisis perspective tend to frame crisis as having potential, as an opportunity for reshaping masculinity in a more egalitarian way. Progressive constructions of crisis are also more likely to raise legitimate concerns about particular groups of relatively marginalised men, although
they also have a tendency to side-line issues of intersectionality. As discussed above, progressive accounts sometimes draw on feminist ideas (for example, they may recognise that women are disadvantaged in contemporary society), but also sometimes employ a postfeminist framing (constructions of gender are equally restrictive to both men and women). Progressive renderings of masculinity-in-crisis are at times more reflexive about binary constructions of gender. However, they often continue to buy into dominant notions of crisis which assume, and advocate, for the promotion of a vision of an idealised, stable version of masculinity. Although the aim in more progressive approaches is to revision masculinity in a more palatable form, rather than to “turn back the clock” to a mythical past and reassert traditional masculinity, even progressive crisis narratives usually fail to fundamentally question the existence of masculinity as a category.

The idea of a crisis of masculinity is neither merely disingenuous nor inauthentic. Given the power and tenacity of dominant ideas of gender, it is inevitable that certain men (and women) are anxious about their gender roles and are attracted by stories of simpler times. As Segal (2007: xxiv) puts it, ‘since all the linguistic codes, cultural imagery and social relations for representing the ideals of “manliness” [...] symbolize power, rationality, assertiveness, invulnerability, it is hardly surprising that men, individually, should exist in perpetual fear of being unmanned’. As argued above, there are costs associated with masculinity, including this fear of failure to live up to ideas of what a man should be like. Recognising these costs can be an important step in opening up avenues for critical challenges to dominant masculinity, but only where recognition of costs is not reduced to the assumption that men are the gender losers and women the gender winners in the modern world.

Crisis of masculinity narratives can also be read as indicating the extent to which masculinity has become subject to question. In doing so, they directly or indirectly reveal the fragility of the construction of masculinity. The impossibility of living up to normative masculinity means that not always has masculinity ‘always been crisis ridden’ (Segal, 2007: xxiv), it must always be fraught due to its internal contradictions and fissures. However, most popular constructions of crisis of masculinity, as demonstrated above, conceive of masculinity as temporarily, rather than fundamentally, in trouble. The language of crisis is in itself problematic in that it implies that masculinity is normally stable, ahistorical, fixed, singular and “natural” and starkly contrasts with femininity. Of course, neither men nor masculinity are quite so straightforward. Instead, gender and masculinity are always subject to internal contradiction and flux as discussed in the Introduction.

In addition, the category of “men” is not uniform, there are differences between men, and there are multiple symbolic constructions of masculinity. The “masculinity” said to be in crisis in conservative (and not infrequently in progressive) perspectives is often implicitly assumed to be middle-class, white, and heterosexual, constructing men ‘as an homogenous group lacking class, ethnic, sexual or racial differentiations’ (Whitehead, 2002: 55). The lack of recognition of the hierarchical positioning of different groups of men within the gender order is not just an oversight in crisis of masculinity narratives, but is precisely a result of the framing of crisis of masculinity itself. The notion of crisis constructs masculinity as singular, rather than multiple, and in doing so, implies not only that masculinity is a fixed property of men, but also that men are a uniform group.

Conservative and progressive crisis perspectives alike seek to paper over the cracks and stabilise masculinity, whether by reinventing it or by re-establishing “old” masculinity. Although notions of crisis may reveal some of the toxic effects of masculinity for men, then, they ultimately perpetuate the gender order by reaffirming the apparent
naturalness of binary notions of gender. The idea of a crisis of masculinity is a circular one. It relies on the myth of singular and stable masculinity, and, in doing so, perpetuates the conditions of the apparent “crisis” which derive from this very construction of supposedly “essential” gender identity.

Although crisis-of-masculinity narratives raise questions about the nature of masculinity and gender relations and take gender seriously, therefore, it is doubtful that even more progressive versions of crisis are promising. Whilst I have sought above to challenge the interpretation of male suicide and changes in men’s employment as symptomatic of a crisis of masculinity, the most important aim of this chapter has been to critique the whole endeavour of framing gender issues as a matter of crisis. Even where the “facts” presented as evidence of crisis do not distort the overall picture of power in the gender order (and they usually do), the logic of crisis is deeply flawed and not at all promising for revisioning gender relations.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I examine how far the selected feminist and postfeminist men’s movements, the White Ribbon Campaign and the Campaign Against Living Miserably respectively, employ the language of crisis of masculinity or rely on assumptions drawn from crisis narratives. I also consider whether they take conservative and/or progressive approaches to crisis of masculinity and analyse the politics of crisis as reinforced or potentially contested by individual movements.

References


TEDx Talks (2012) *A New Gender Agenda* [online video] Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAN3EvkgyE8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAN3EvkgyE8) Accessed 13/08/ 2018


Feminist Men’s Movements: The White Ribbon Campaign (UK) and the dilemmas of feminist men

Introduction

So far, I have categorised men’s movements’ responses to feminism as feminist, postfeminist, and/or backlash and argued that it is vital to understand not only the masculinities articulated by individual movements, but also where they sit in relation to a broader politics around the idea of a crisis of masculinity. As there is currently little research on men’s movements in the UK context, over the next four chapters, I focus the analysis on one group in each of the “feminist”, “postfeminist” and “backlash” categories, rather than giving a more superficial overview of movements in each. For each of the groups discussed, however, I consider the presence of all three narratives to the extent that they are articulated by the group. This is because, as noted, movements frequently do not fall neatly into these categories. Whilst feminist (and backlash) groups more neatly occupy the definitions proposed in the typology, their narratives are still frequently ambivalent.

As noted in the Introduction, the three groups have been selected due partly to their relative visibility (online and to some extent in the news media) but also, more importantly, to illustrate the diversity of movements and the broad array of positions taken in relation to feminism and masculinity by UK men’s movements. The analysis of each of the cases is broadened through reference to research on comparable men’s movements elsewhere where relevant. There are frequently parallels and shared ideas, despite the different contexts they are situated within. For example, men’s anti-violence work in national settings outside of the UK is referred to below.

In the first part of this chapter, I identify key themes, debates, and empirical findings across studies of men’s movements. A particularly important issue is the legitimacy or lack thereof of the men’s movement model from a feminist masculinity/ies perspective. There are varying levels of optimism/scepticism around the potential of men’s movements to bring about gender equality, and feminist men’s movements are a particularly contested case. I therefore move on to critically examine “feminist” men’s movements. I make some general points about feminist men’s movements and give some empirical context, including examples of UK feminist men’s groups.

The case study for this chapter is the UK branch of the White Ribbon Campaign (WRC). I explore their aims, constructions of masculinity, and overall gender politics (including themes around crisis of masculinity) through analysis of the group’s website and other online material. Although WRC are categorised by their overall politics as “feminist”, this is not an absolute distinction and “postfeminist” themes also arose (“backlash” narratives were absent). The group does not tend to frame their campaign in terms of a response to a “crisis of masculinity”, however, there are some resonances in their materials with “progressive” crisis accounts (see Chapter 2). Whilst the main impetus of WRC is to amend and modernise masculinity, there are some inconsistencies in the group’s messages which sometimes invoke problematic notions of “manliness”. I argue that there are some radical aspects to WRC’s campaigns, but that there are also grounds for concern.
Men's movements overview: key themes, debates, and empirical insights

To provide context and a sense of the wider field, I start by identifying central themes, debates and empirical findings across men’s movement research. The discussion draws mostly on three landmark studies of men’s movements in the USA: Kenneth Clatterbaugh’s (1997) *Contemporary Perspectives on Masculinity: Men, women and politics in modern society*; Michael Messner’s (2000) *Politics of Masculinities: Men in movements*, and Judith Newton’s (2005) *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men’s Movement*. As they are amongst the most comprehensive and influential texts. Clatterbaugh and Messner’s respective studies were based on men’s movements up until the late 1990s; while Newton’s study looks at men’s networks from the 1950s to 2000. Each provide case studies of different men’s movements from across various categories. Whilst these texts examine a different research context in terms of their US focus, the existing research provides key insights informing the analysis in this book.

It has long been established that there is no such thing as “The Men’s Movement” and that it is problematic to homogenise a diverse set of men’s movements under this single category. Clatterbaugh (1997: 1), for example, provides a comprehensive overview of eight separate strands of the men’s movement disaggregated according to their differing socio-political perspectives: conservative, profeminist, men’s rights, mythopoetic, socialist, gay, African-American and evangelical perspectives. Whilst it is important to recognise their diversity, the plethora of labels is not always helpful in understanding men’s movements. I have therefore categorised movements by their overall gender politics (feminist/postfeminist/backlash) as the specific focus of groups is less important than how they construct gender and relate to feminism.

As well as being varied, men’s movements, like all social movements, are dynamic. Their identities are shifting rather than static, they change their aims and values, and groups appear and disappear continually (Clatterbaugh, 1997: 1, Messner, 2000: 90). It is therefore only ever possible to offer a snapshot of movements at a particular point in time. Empirical studies indicate that men’s movements arise in response to a changing gender world and (perceived) crises of masculinity (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Messner, 2000, Newton, 2005). Messner (2000) argues that US men’s movements began as a response to radical social change in the 1960s in the workplace and the family, along with a resurgence of feminist movements. Newton (2005) also points out the influence of post-sixties economic, social, and cultural developments in the US and globally ‘which had gradually eroded many of the grounds on which dominant masculine ideals had once been based’. As a result, ‘the latter half of the twentieth century, like the latter half of the century before, was characterized not only by conversations about masculinity but by a series of organized efforts to revise, reinvent, and/or revive masculine ideals’ (Newton, 2005: 8). By the end of the 1980s, ‘the category “white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male” was still a privileged category but a much less secure or celebrated one than before’ (Newton, 2005: 8). Men’s movements are one manifestation, then, of a purported “crisis of masculinity” (Kimmel, 1987).

The US research therefore examines how each movement perceives gender relations and masculinity in general, as well as views on feminism (Clatterbaugh, 1997: 2). Studying men’s movements is one way of ‘understanding men’s organized responses to changes, challenges and crises in the social organization of gender’ (Messner, 2000: 2-3). Messner (2000: 12) investigates movements’ perspectives on the following: men’s institutionalised privileges; the costs of masculinity; and differences and inequalities among men, exploring how far each movement he discusses emphasises, diminishes, or ignores the three themes of ‘privileges, costs, [and] differences’. It is movements'
treatment of these themes that reveal the ‘political possibilities, limits and/or dangers’ of each group (Messner, 2000: 12).

Conceptually, men’s movement scholars recognise the social construction of masculinity (see, for example, Ashe, 2007; Clatterbaugh, 1997; Connell, 2005a; Kimmel, 1987; Messner, 2000; Newton, 2005) and the existence of multiple masculinities: ‘there is not one masculine ideal but many’ (Newton 2005: 21) in relation to men’s movements. They also acknowledge hierarchies between masculinities. While some masculinities ‘are favored and rewarded, others are ignored, and still others punished [...] masculinities that are favoured are dominant or hegemonic masculinities’ (Clatterbaugh 1997: 4). Certain movements have subordinate status, such as gay and ‘African-American’ men’s movements (Clatterbaugh 1997; Messner 2000). Newton (2005: 14) suggests that many men in her study ‘had been particularly vulnerable to the impact of dehumanizing norms’ of masculinity and did not have access to the material and social privileges enjoyed by elite men because of their marginal status in terms of class, race, sexual identity or other personal circumstances/experiences.

Movements themselves often see their version of masculinity as singular. They may perceive masculinity as more or less closely tied to biology, or as more or less a result of social norms. Clatterbaugh (1997: 5) argues that many of the variations between the movements ‘are actually differences over the best explanation of masculinities’. Importantly, the perspectives ‘often rest on hidden assumptions about human nature, social change, and right versus wrong’ which ‘can be buried so deeply that they are seldom made explicit, let alone defended’ (Clatterbaugh, 1997: 7). In addition to examining the content of specific masculinities created by movements, it is therefore also crucial to pay attention to their more implicit assumptions including ideas about the “causes” of masculinity.

Newton (2005) notes that emphasising diversity among men’s movements is useful in mapping the overall terrain. However, during her fieldwork she was particularly ‘struck’ by commonalities between groups with ostensibly very different political outlooks and goals (Newton, 2005: 13). She suggested these marked resemblances might be explained by ‘the shared project of inventing more tender, more openly expressive ideals of masculinity’ having been ‘passed from one group to another’ (Newton, 2005: 13). Members of movements often read the literature of others so that specific ideas are dispersed. In addition, Newton (2005: 13) found overlap in terms of networks as some members of the movements had been active in the same movements in the 1960s. Newton also notes the broader influence of the media and of shifts in cultural attitudes in framing narratives. The idea that ‘dominant ideals of masculinity exert a dehumanizing pressure on many men’ (Newton 2005: 14) is a central recurrent theme and is part of the articulation of a crisis of masculinity which influences men/men’s movements across the political spectrum.

Others have noted the impact of the international media, and of online communities and dialogues which are international in nature. For example, one study suggests that men’s rights groups in the US and in India employ similar narratives in many respects (Palmer and Subramaniam, 2018). Although it is vital to understand these groups in their more specific contexts, then, it is also important to recognise the overlap between not only different movements within a specific national context, but between movements internationally.

A crucial and contentious debate in the literature is over whether men’s movements are inherently problematic or potentially transgressive in their overall gender politics. Clatterbaugh (1997: vii) expressed concern in the late 1990s that men’s
movements had ‘shifted from a powerful profeminist perspective to an antifeminist stance’ and that conservative men’s movements were ascendant in the US. The cumulative effect of men’s movements was ‘to undermine feminism and to shore up patriarchal institutions and thinking’ (Clatterbaugh 1997: vii). Clatterbaugh (1997: 206) suggested that any hope for shifts in gender relations did not reside in men’s movements.

Messner was similarly wary. He argued that, regardless of their political ideology, men’s movements with simplistic perspectives on ‘the nature of power, subordination and oppression’ along with a strong ‘costs of masculinity’ focus, tend to have a clearer sense of collective identity, and to go with this, a clearer sense of purpose/goals (Messner, 2000: 99). The most coherent and stable movements are therefore less likely to form coalitions ‘aimed at progressive social change’ (Messner, 2000: 100) and are more likely instead to represent ‘an antifeminist (and often antigay) backlash’ (Messner, 2000: 99).

Many men’s movements are men-only spaces which commit to ‘rebuilding and revaluing bonds among men’ (Messner, 2000: xiv). The emphasis on fostering relationships between men means that there is little or no interaction with women’s organisations (or with women in general) to support ‘men’s “empowerment”’, so they can ‘reclaim their “natural” roles as leaders’ (Messner, 2000: xiv). Whilst Messner (2000: xiv) sees male bonding as ‘potentially positive’, he worries it is often accompanied by the belief: ‘that for men to overcome their fear of other men, they must separate themselves from women’. As a result, ‘they collectively position women, especially feminists, as convenient scapegoats. In restoring men to their own “rightful place,” they put women back in theirs’ (Messner, 2000: xiv). A ‘deeply internalized distrust of women’ is reflected in many men’s movements (Messner, 2000: xiv). The theme of male bonding and associated concerns arise in all three case studies examined in this book.

Newton suggests that after the decline of “Black Power” in the United States in the mid-1970s, men’s groups increasingly turned away from the political and towards the personal. Although hypothetically in favour of various forms of equality, groups’ ‘activism – and public activism on behalf of women’s equality, in particular – would characterize only a minority of organized efforts to refashion masculine ideals’ (Newton, 2005: 16). Many have adopted a more therapeutic, self-help approach designed to support men come to terms with changing identities which threatened their sense of self (Newton, 2005: 18-19; see also Messner et. al., 2015). Newton notes that some have criticised this turn away from the political, seeing it as an attempt to deflect attention from men’s failure to promote social gender change or, worse, ‘as a means of establishing white, middle-class, heterosexually identified men as victims, thereby excusing them from political responsibility altogether, and [...] recapturing some of white men’s lost social status and centrality’ (Newton, 2005: 19).

For Newton, this critique is overstated. Although she does not dispute the need for structural change, as feminists have long ago demonstrated, the personal/political distinction is not clear-cut: ‘if radically changing men’s ideals and behaviors depends on changing structures, changing structures is dependent upon significantly altering dominant masculine ideals and men’s day-to-day practices’ (Newton, 2005: 17). Masculine values of dominance, aggression, and lack of empathy ‘shore up the economic and other structures’ sustaining ‘economic, racial, gender, and sexual inequalities’ (Newton, 2005: 17). For her, men must work on the personal to affect the political. In this sense, she is more positive than other feminist scholars about the overall potential of men’s movements to engender positive change.

While conservative and anti-feminist men’s movements have been heavily scrutinised, Messner argues that (pro)feminist men’s groups should not be assumed to
be unproblematic (Messner, 2000: 102). This raises questions about the cumulative politics and impact of men’s movements taken as a whole. If feminist movements are about giving marginalised groups voices, then the question of who gets to speak about gender issues is vital. Feminist men are sometimes positioned as “experts” on gender and feminism (Berkowitz, 2004), reinforcing the dominance of men in the public sphere and social ideas around men as authoritative. Unease about feminist men’s movements becomes especially heightened when men’s movements are directly competing with women’s movements for scarce public resources (Connell 2007: xiv). These issues are discussed further in relation to the case of the WRC in the next section.

Given such concerns, for Messner (2000: 102), ‘profeminist activism among men is best accomplished not through a “men’s movement” but in schools, in political parties, in labor unions and professional organizations, in workplaces, in families and through supportive alliances with feminist and other progressive organizations that are working for social justice’. If there is some potential, it lies in men’s movements which start from complex notions of power and gender, including the intersection of gender with other identities, such as race. Such movements exhibit some ‘potential for forging creative coalition building aimed at progressive social change’ (Messner, 2000: 100). For example, coalitions with multi-racial feminists are singled out as a promising avenue for profeminist men’s activism. It is the movements that are least “men-focused”, then, in which Messner sees promise.

In the US, Messner argues that the group with most potential for a ‘progressive politics’ is the profeminist National Organization of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS). Since they were founded in the 1970s, NOMAS have worked closely with women, gay, bisexual, and black men and placed anti-gay and anti-racism campaigns at the centre of their organisation. Founder of NOMAS Michael Kimmel suggests that although the politics of men’s movements are indeed ‘messy and contradictory’, it is nonetheless important that a visible profeminist men’s movement exists to show that men can be anti-sexist (Kimmel, cited in Messner, 2000: 102). Contra considerable scepticism about feminist men’s movements, the symbolic potential of highlighting men’s feminist activism outweighs possible problems of reinforcing men’s power. The existence of feminist men might partially destabilise dominant ideas about a) feminism and b) masculinity, which would help to undermine the gender order.

Whilst this may be partially valid, the fundamental conflict is not resolved. The case study analyses presented in this book demonstrate that feminist (and even anti-feminist men’s groups) can sometimes challenge dominant gender norms. However, unlike feminist women’s movements, men in feminist men’s movements frequently occupy a position of privilege. Although they may have some benefits for men, and especially for marginalised men, feminist goals can also undermine men’s interests:

The structural problem of counter-sexist politics among men needs to be stated plainly, as it is constantly evaded. The familiar forms of radical politics, rely on mobilizing solidarity around a shared interest [...] This cannot be the main form of counter-sexist politics among men, because the project of social justice in gender relations is directed against the interest they share. Broadly speaking, anti-sexist politics must be a source of disunity among men, not a source of solidarity (Connell, 2005a: 236)

This tension, for Connell (2005a: 236) explains the ‘rigorous logic to the trends of the 1980s’ as ‘the more men’s groups and their gurus emphasized solidarity among men
being ‘positive about men,’ ‘seeking the ‘deep masculine,’ etc.), the more willing they became to abandon issues of social justice.

Messner (2000: 102) provides two insightful analogies about the positionality of (feminist) men’s movements – anti-racist white people do not start “white movements”, and heterosexual people who oppose homophobia do not start “heterosexual movements”. It is important that these movements are run primarily by and for black, or LGBT members. Just as to tackle racism and homophobia effectively necessitates white and heterosexual people involving themselves in the struggle, Connell recognises that profeminist men need to participate in the fight against gendered inequalities. Like Messner, however, Connell (2005a: 236) concludes that ‘the “movement” model’ may not be the best one for facilitating progressive ‘masculinity politics’. Instead of joining men’s movements, feminist men should support women’s and other movements, as well as working through other political avenues such as parties and unions (Connell, 2005a: 237; see also Connell, 2000: 208-211).

Broader criticisms of identity politics apply particularly starkly to the case of feminist men’s movements. Where movements both invoke and seek to destabilise power-laden social identities, they risk reifying the identity in question (Butler, 2006). My analysis of the case studies suggests that men’s movements (even feminist movements) tend to rely on binary logics of gender in articulating notions of manhood. In doing so, they fail to radically alter dominant gender structures. In addition, in attempting to reconstruct softer masculinities, men’s movements may inadvertently replicate elements of masculinity which bolster gendered inequalities. These issues are fleshed out in a more concrete way in the analysis of the WRC below, as well as in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 in relation to the Campaign Against Living Miserably and (Real) Fathers 4 Justice.

**Feminist Men’s Movements**

To recap, feminist movements can be identified through their acceptance of the premise that there are significant gender inequalities in society and that women are more disadvantaged overall than men by gendered social structures. Gender equality is seen by these movements as a valid normative goal and gender is conceived of as political, as a site for collective action. Feminist activism and ideas are embraced as central to bringing about gender equality and desirable social change (see Chapter 1). Feminist men’s movements have organised around the rejection of traditional styles of masculinity in support of feminist women’s movements. They exist in many countries (Connell, 2005b) and many feminist men’s groups focus on involving men in anti-violence work (see Messner et. al., 2015). Examples of well-known feminist men’s movements include NOMAS in the US (mentioned above); the Achilles Heel Collective in the UK, and Men Against Sexual Assault in Australia (Ashe, 2007: 18).

There are relatively few feminist men’s organisations globally and those that do exist tend to be ‘small and not very stable’ (Connell 2005a: 222). The membership of even some well-known feminist men’s organisations has been similarly small (see Ashe, 2007: 20-21). It is therefore unsurprising that there appears to be a general lack of feminist men’s mobilisations in the UK. Historically, the Achilles Heel Collective were amongst the most prominent feminist men’s groups globally (Ashe 2007: 18). The Collective was organised loosely, without a centralised structure, and centred around Achilles Heel, a bi-annual magazine for men first published in 1978 (Ashe, 2007: 18) and last published in
2000 (Rowan, 2004: 68; see Seidler, 1991 for a collection of magazine contributions). *Achilles Heel* was described as ‘a forum for discussion of men and masculinity, and a reflection of the diverse and developing ways in which men were experiencing themselves’, aiming ‘to challenge traditional forms of masculinity and male power and support the creation of alternative social structures and personal ways of being’ (Grassroots Feminism). The magazine was linked to men’s consciousness-raising groups designed to allow men to reinvent themselves by reflecting on their relationship with dominant ideals of masculinity. Part of this reflection focused on thinking about how these ideals were damaging to men. However, there was also a clear commitment to recognising that they damaged women more than men overall, and to changing their behaviour in personal interactions with women. This focus on personal (and political) efforts by men to become less sexist mirrors the 1970s radical feminist men’s movements in the US (Messner et al 2015: 34; see also Messner 2000: 49-62).

An example of a more recent UK-based feminist men’s movement is the ‘London Profeminist Men’s Group’, also a consciousness-raising and activist group. Their aims were: ‘to support each other in our personal struggles as men, including our efforts to rid ourselves of sexist behaviour; to discuss issues around gender politics generally; and to plan and co-ordinate pro-feminist action’ (LPMG). Activism included campaigning for ‘equal parental leave and better working conditions for men and women with dependents’ (LPMG). The group seems to currently be defunct as the last post on their website was dated 2011. There is also a UK-based ‘Men for Feminism’ Facebook page (started in 2011), the purpose of which is: ‘to enable men to become better-informed and therefore more effective in their support for the women’s movement (Feminism)’ (Men For Feminism). The emphasis here is on support for feminist women’s movements, on men as feminist allies, rather than on forming a “men’s movement”.

Selecting a case study to exemplify feminist men’s movements in the UK was straightforward given the relative dearth of such groups. Although WRC does not originate in the UK, it is the most visible avowedly (pro)feminist men’s group. WRC is a global men’s movement which began in Canada in 1991 as a response to the murder of fourteen women in Montreal in 1989 (Kaufman, 2001). In 2001, the movement claimed to exist in ‘at least 25 countries’ encompassing Europe, Africa, Latin America, North America, Australia and Asia (Kaufman, 2001: 13) and it has been suggested that this has now increased to a presence in ‘more than thirty-five countries’ (Kimmel, 2013: 197). Existing academic research on the WRC has focused on the WRC in Canada and the USA, as well as, to a lesser extent, WRC Australia.

**The White Ribbon Campaign in the UK**

The English branch of WRC was started by current director Chris Green in 2007 (WRCa). The group describes itself as ‘the largest global effort of men working to end

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16 It is possible that such groups exist but tend to be less visible online and in the media than their much more vocal anti-feminist counterparts. One of the limitations of web-based research is that it will of course fail to include small, local and potentially inward-looking groups.

17 There is also a WRC group in Scotland, which was founded in 2006 (WRCd). The websites of the two UK branches are almost identical in terms of their main content. However, the Scottish site features less material and the group appears to be less prominent in the national media.
male violence against women’ and as aiming ‘to educate and raise awareness of violence against women, and to engage men in these issues’ (WRCb). The engagement of men is premised on the idea that violence against women is not just a women’s issue, but a problem which all men should take responsibility for tackling. The original founders of the group highlighted that by remaining silent about men’s violence towards women, men who are not themselves perpetrators of violence, collude with violent men, thereby allowing violence to continue (Kaufman, 2001). Men’s commitment to changing themselves and others is therefore considered vital to tackling violence. Gender-based violence is also conceived of as a men’s issue in that harms both women and men (Kaufman, 2001).

Another key initial aim of the movement was to allow men to redefine traditional ways of working together via their activism in WRC, promoting unity rather than the competition characterising most male-dominated organisations (Kaufman, 2001: 47).

WRC’s focus is on primary prevention, as aiming ‘to lessen the likelihood of boys and men using violence in the first place’ (Flood, 2005-06: 27) using educational and awareness-raising strategies. Its flagship campaign is the ‘White Ribbon personal pledge’ which requires men to ‘take a stand against violence’ and to promise ‘never to commit, condone or remain silent about men’s violence against women’ (WRCb). Starting on the International Day for the Eradication of Violence Against Women (25th November) each year, WRC asks men who have taken the pledge to wear a white ribbon for a week, demonstrating their opposition to men’s violence against women, and developing local responses to both support abused women and challenge men’s violence (Kimmel, 2001: 34). They also focus on providing positive male role models known as ‘White Ribbon Ambassadors’. (I discuss the use of ambassadors further below).

Other WRC activities include: providing training/outreach to local authorities, groups, and clubs; accrediting councils, towns, and organisations with ‘White Ribbon status’ (certification that the holder has implemented WRC policies); and founding a ‘White Ribbon All Party Parliamentary Group’ to engage politicians/policymakers with issues related to violence against women (WRCa). Campaigns at the time of writing include: a ‘Trade Union’ campaign ‘to end sexual harassment and bullying [of women] at work’; the ‘White Ribbon in Sport’ campaign, which ‘encourages men and boys to engage with our mission and provide positive male role models, challenging the traditional narrative of masculinity’; and a ‘Safer Venues’ initiative focusing on improving safety for women at music festivals (WRCa).

WRC is defined as a men’s movement as it is framed as an organisation for men about a men’s issue. It is organised around masculinity, both in seeking to challenge violent masculinity, and in reconstructing specific masculine identities which are seen as more conducive to a gender-equal society. I examine the constructions of masculinity and gender implicit in their campaign, drawing on campaign materials and other texts from the UK website. (See the Introduction for an explanation of the methodological approach, methods, and data.) Broadly speaking, there is an assumption that masculinity should be softened but that aspects can also be harnessed to render feminist activism more appealing to men. This leads to some troubling inconsistencies which are drawn out in the discussion. In the second part of this section, I explore the nature of WRC UK’s gender politics. I argue that alongside the dominant overtly feminist orientation, aspects of

have therefore focused on the English branch, whilst recognising that there may be differences between them in practice.
postfeminist narratives are present. Analysing postfeminist ideas in men's movements enables us to move beyond a simplistic feminist/anti-feminist binary and to understand the more nuanced and multiple perspectives presented by most groups.

Constructions of masculinity in the White Ribbon Campaign

WRC understands gender-based violence to be a public, as opposed to merely a private, issue, which it is the responsibility of all to address. Gender-based violence *is not and never has been a “women’s issue”*, WRC therefore work with men ‘so they understand the scale of the problem, and become part of the solution, alongside women’ (WRCb, original emphasis). Men have ‘a crucial role to play in creating a culture where male violence, abuse and harassment against women and girls are simply seen as unacceptable’ (WRCb). This involves taking responsibility for their own behaviour, but also working as “active bystanders” to confront problematic behaviour/attitudes, especially when perpetrated by other men.

Gender-based violence is conceived of as the result of socially constructed gender roles and gendered social structures, rather than as a “natural” fact: ‘the type of society we live in is one that gives rise to such gender-based violence [...] men are made to feel like they need to be “hypermasculine” and that women are second class citizens’ (WRCa). Here, WRC mirror feminist understandings of gender-based violence, perceiving dominant masculinity as fostering violence (and, more broadly, gendered inequalities) and as therefore at the root of the problem. This contrasts with explanations of gender-based violence which would construct violence as gender-neutral and/or as perpetrated by individual pathological men, rather than as a normalised and common occurrence facilitated by mainstream culture (Walklate, 2004).

Former director David Bartlett comments that ‘boys around the world grow up being taught it’s [violence] acceptable ... They also feel in some ways that it’s part of what it is to be a man’ (Bartlett, quoted in Jones 2016). Violent masculinity is therefore learned behaviour, rather than inherent, and can be altered: ‘the good news is that there is nothing inevitable about any of this. We don’t have to fulfil those old stereotypes’ (Bartlett, 2017b).

There is little discussion of the content of ‘those old stereotypes’ and of violent forms of masculinity on the website. Instead, there are general statements about the prevalence of men’s violence against women, about “toxic masculinity”, “hypermasculinity” and about men’s ‘sense of dominance and superiority over women’ as well as male ‘entitlement’, which ‘tends to legitimise male violence’ (Bartlett, 2017a).

Negative portrayals of masculinity are an “absent presence” on the site. The spectre of violent masculinity is largely constructed through an implicit contrast with the more positive versions of masculinity which members of WRC are meant to embody or champion.

As discussed further in the next section, WRC is keen to emphasise that ‘fundamentally, White Ribbon believes in men – in their ability and willingness to be part of the solution’ (Bartlett, 2017a), and that ‘most men are opposed to violence against women and girls’ (WRCb). The group promote a vision of a positive, gentler, and more egalitarian masculinity where ‘caring men are tired of the sexism that hurts the women around them’ (WRCb) and are increasingly willing to stand up for women:

There are already many more men who want to play their part – and more and more are doing just that. They are calling out abusive and sexist behaviour where
they witness it – in the workplace, in the street, and online. They are listening to and supporting women, and encouraging other men and boys to step up. They are treating women in their personal lives respectfully, and sharing the double shift of childcare and housework

(Bartlett, 2017a)

Men are represented here in terms of a caring masculinity where men are more nurturing, sensitive, and more involved in traditionally feminised tasks such as childcare in contrast with ‘emotionally distant, or violent, “traditional” masculinity’ (Hooper, 2001: 72). They are also articulated as active champions of feminist action. This image is tied up with a notion of changing, softening ‘new’ masculinity which is purportedly becoming more dominant in modern society: ‘what it means to be a man is already changing, and the future of masculine identity is up for grabs’ (Bartlett 2017a).

There is some evidence that ideas of new-involved fatherhood have become more prominent in at least some countries (Björk 2013; Dermott 2008; Eerola 2014; Farstad and Stefansen 2015; Hearn et. al. 2012). However, there is also a large body of research which suggests that narratives of caring masculinity are frequently expressed in ways that are far from ideal in feminist terms and may incorporate, rather than reject, domination (Bach, 2017; Bach and Aarseth, 2016; Björk, 2013; Bjørnholt, 2014; Farstad and Stefansen, 2015; Jordan, 2018; Klinth, 2008; Lucey et. al., 2016; Miller, 2011). In addition, increases in positive attitudes towards caring masculinity do not necessarily indicate significant changes in men’s practices in increasing their share of care labour (Björk, 2013; Eerola, 2014; Klinth, 2008). This can be partly due to structural barriers (Miller, 2011; Tarrant, 2018) but is also potentially due to some men’s resistance to change, a possibility frequently obscured by the rhetoric of caring masculinity (Klinth, 2008). There are of course men who consider themselves (pro)feminist and men who take on a more equal share of domestic labour, however, there is considerable scepticism that this is a widespread shift as Bartlett might be read to imply. (See Chapter 5 for a discussion of caring masculinity in the context of fathers’ rights groups.) Overemphasising positive/softening notions of masculinity can have the effect of implying that gender equality has been achieved, thereby feeding into postfeminist narratives.

Such dilemmas about appealing to men through positive constructions of possible masculinities are reflected in WRC campaign materials, in which “traditional” masculinity is both unsettled and to some extent reaffirmed. The anti-violence message is advanced through slogans such as ‘Love, Respect, Equality’, ‘Another World is Possible’, and ‘Ask. Listen. Respect’ (WRCa). Men are encouraged to signpost their opposition to dominant masculinity norms by wearing T-shirts with slogans on the front such as ‘These hands are not for hurting’, usually with the White Ribbon pledge on the back (WRCa). One T-shirt reads ‘Having a dick doesn’t mean acting like one’, employing “laddish banter” and humour to get the message across. Campaigns aimed at persuading men to take the White Ribbon pledge such as ‘Man Enough to Say No’ (WRCb), emphasise that anti-violence work is “manly” and at the same time implicitly advocate the gentler forms of masculinity discussed above.

A striking series of WRC posters feature close-up photos of one half of a man’s face. Each of the men (each poster bears a different face) appears vaguely threatening/aggressive as they stare directly out of the poster into the eyes of the viewer. Text accompanying the images follows a pattern: statements associated with rape myths and/or reflecting predatory attitudes towards women are presented in bold, large font,
completed with a “twist” in smaller font subverting the expected script: ‘IT WAS LATE SO I OFFERED HER A LIFT THINKING THERE MAYBE [sic] A CHANCE... of her being at risk’; ‘I COULD TELL SHE WAS ASKING FOR IT’... to stop. So I stepped in and told my mate that was no way to treat a woman. And he backed off’; ‘SHE WAS ON HER OWN, SO I MADE MY MOVE... and told the guys hassling her to back off. They were really out of order’; ‘A DRUNK GIRL IS REALLY EASY TO PULL... so I made sure her friends got her out of there’ (WRCa).

There are, again, conflicting messages here. A direct challenge is made to problematic attitudes towards women and the posters illustrate powerfully what is “wrong” with those attitudes, reframing the cultural narrative. In addition, men are situated as responsible for their behaviour and that of other men (including their friends). Unlike many campaigns which are aimed at preventing violence against women, they are aimed at men, rather than at women. Well-intentioned “advice” offered to women is frequently problematic as it tends to blame the victim.

Less positively, the posters could be interpreted as promoting the notion that women need protection from men, that men should perform the “white knight” role associated with chivalrous forms of masculinity (Elshtain, 1987; Elshtain, 1992; Young, 2003). Appealing to men as protectors of women is a common strategy in men’s anti-violence campaigns which draw on characteristics perceived as conventionally masculine, such as strength and bravery. These symbolic traits are redirected into protection through suggestions that “real men” are not violent (Flood, 2015; Masters, 2010; Murphy, 2009; Salter, 2016). Kate Seymour (2017: 10) also identifies a slightly different form of protector masculinity in WRC Australia campaign posters, where “good” masculinity is associated with the “family man” who protects “his” women and children. Whilst these are attempts to harness it for positive ends, protector masculinity is problematic in its construction of femininity as subordinate, passive, and lacking in agency (Elshtain, 1987; Elshtain, 1992; Young, 2003). It is also heteronormative (Seymour, 2017). Further, ideas of men as strong protectors are intimately connected with violent masculinity through cultural understandings of masculinity as related to ‘dominance, toughness, or male honor’ (Flood, 2002-03: 25).

The use of a ‘commercial advertising aesthetic’ in anti-violence campaigns has also been criticised by gender scholars (Murphy, 2009). The men represented in the WRC posters all appear to be white, are mostly blue-eyed, exclusively young, and unfailingly conventionally attractive. One poster available for purchase shows a white-haired (white) older man doing a “thumbs up” sign under the message: ‘Silence is not an option. Silence excuses violence against women’ (WRCa). This is perhaps an attempt to appeal to different categories of men. Overall, however, it seems that the “target audience” for the WRC is younger men and that images of good-looking men are used as a marketing strategy to encourage identification with the protagonists, similarly to conventional advertising. Anti-violence work becomes a consumable product like buying the right car, which will make men more attractive, implicitly to heterosexual women.

Further, the men chosen to feature in the posters perhaps reflect the general claim that (“Western”) ‘profeminist groups and organisations have been dominated by white, middle class, heterosexual men’ (Ashe, 2007: 20) and that they pay little attention to intersectionality amongst men (Flood, 2015). bell hooks (1992: 116) commented that in her contact with US men’s movements, ‘privileged white male thought, experience, and culture was often presented as a norm standpoint’. Writing more recently, and in a UK context, Ashe (2007: 20) similarly suggests that feminist men ‘may be reproducing a white, middle class, heterosexual standpoint and political practice’. Whilst the WRC UK
posters alone are not enough to support such a claim with respect to this specific group, in combination with the absence of an intersectional approach on their website, they are illustrative of what seems to be a more general lack of engagement with class, race, sexuality and other aspects of identity which have an impact on how men are positioned in relation to violent masculinity (Flood, 2015).

Women do not appear in the posters except, in the case of one, as an abstract symbol – the sign used to denote “women” on toilet doors, accompanied by the text: ‘Groped? Nope’. Women are not often visible in WRC campaigns. This could be problematic in terms of the erasure of women as agents. However, concerns have been raised about how women are represented when they are present in anti-violence messages. For example, “Men Can Stop Rape’s publicly lauded ‘My Strength is Not for Hurting’ anti-sexual violence campaign employs a similar narrative device to the WRC posters (potentially inspired by the earlier ‘My Strength’ campaign) in “shifting the script” of sexual violence. Michael Flood (2002-2003: 28) has argued that the campaign (along with similar initiatives) ‘represent[s] a difficult balancing act between complicity and challenge’. He argues that, overall, ‘they collude enough with masculine cultural codes that they engage a male audience, yet hopefully they subvert the association of masculinity and violence enough to make a difference to men’s attitudes and behaviours’ (Flood, 2002-2003: 28).

Others, however, have questioned whether this “difficult balance” was indeed successfully achieved. Murphy highlights how the ‘My Strength’ posters feature objectified women who appear ‘as dependent objects, marginal accessories to a conversation between male subjects’ (Murphy, 2009: 119). Unlike the men who look directly out of the pictures, women gaze adoringly at their male counterparts, often draped across their muscular bodies. These silent and sexually appealing women are situated as the “reward” for not raping (Murphy, 2009). There are also dangers in attempting to motivate men through their female partners in anti-violence work in terms of reproducing heteronormativity (Flood, 2015: 165). In addition, myths around sexual violence are in some ways replicated by the posters. Murphy (2009: 127), unlike Flood, therefore concludes that the ‘My Strength’ posters ‘exact too high a price for too little demonstrated effect’ as they reinforce dominant notions of masculinity (and of sexual violence) which are themselves ‘hopelessly imbricated in rape culture’. Whilst the WRC posters do not repeat these problematic visualisations of dominant gender norms, the dangers of appealing to men through notions of desirable masculinity are illustrated in the ‘My Strength’ campaign.18 These issues are discussed further below in relation to WRC’s positioning of men as bystanders.

A prominent annual event organised by WRC and collaborators is the “Heels Walk”. Heels Walks take place in a variety of locations throughout the UK. WRC state that the campaign is inspired by ‘Walk a Mile in her Shoes’, an idea originating in California in the early 1980s, which is now a global phenomenon (WRCb). Men are required to walk in “women’s” shoes to encourage empathy with women and raise awareness of, and funds for preventing, gender-based violence.

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18 It is worth noting that according to the activists involved in the “My Strength” campaign, the posters ‘were never intended to be a stand-alone effort to end sexual violence’ (Messner et. al., 2015: 126) but were supposed to be an extension of on-the-ground efforts working with men. This does not, however, deflect the criticisms of the gendered messages within the posters, especially as they are likely to be seen outside of this context.
The “women’s” shoes in question are “high heels”, which are understood to be both particularly feminine and especially difficult to walk in, at least for men. The distinctive image used on many of the WRC campaign banners/posters features the text: ‘These Heels are made for walking. Men working to end male violence against women’, accompanied by a picture of the back of a muscular, hair-covered calf, ending with a red “stiletto” heel taking the form of the White Ribbon symbol (see Flynn, 2015). A video of one walk shows a group of men hobbling along the street in a variety of high-heeled shoes, but otherwise wearing conventionally “masculine” attire. The camera focuses on the shoes, highlighting the discrepancy between the feminised heels and the “masculine” clothes/bodies just above them. A caption on a blank screen reads: ‘You didn’t think it was easy did you…?’ and in the next scene a man is shown falling off his towering heels, laughing along with the other men (Flynn, 2015).

A WRC spokesperson states in a local newspaper that WRC UK: ‘is on the hunt for real men… men who aren’t afraid to slip on a pair of heels and strut their stuff [...] men who aren’t afraid of speaking out against male violence against women’ (Hebden Bridge Times, 2011). We are told that ‘it really will take a tough man to have the courage to do this’ and that these ‘brave men’ will be ‘wearing pride on their faces and plasters on their feet!’ (Hebden Bridge Times, 2011). In a final exhortation, the spokesperson exclaims: “see you there and don’t forget to shave your legs!” (Hebden Bridge Times, 2011).

In determining whether the performance of “drag” is subversive, the context and content of the performances are crucial (Bridges, 2010). Tristan Bridges, observing the “Walk a Mile in Her Shoes” events in the United States found that in ‘overt and covert ways’ they ‘may strengthen gender [and sexuality] stereotypes and inequality at least as much as they attempt to undermine them’ (Bridges, 2010: 6; see also Masters, 2010). WRC Heels Walks could be seen as transgressive of gender norms as men perform a (limited) femininity in the context of promoting an explicitly feminist message. However, the humour surrounding the walks is clearly in the deliberate feminisation/emasculcation of the men. There is a hint that “feminine” things are inherently ridiculous, which is itself problematic, and that they are even more ludicrous when worn by men. Despite all the rhetoric about men challenging gender norms through their performance, this is not a radical act. The walks, in emphasising how funny/abnormal it is for men to act in conventionally feminine ways, end up by affirming the “normal” masculinity of the men from which this is clearly situated as a temporary aberration. This is underlined by the references to the need for plasters and by the apparent discomfort or lack of heel-wearing competence of the men.

There are resonances here with Bridges’ (2010: 17) research which argues that there was a clear disciplinary mechanism in place where men wearing high heels was deemed acceptable given the march context but being comfortable in heels was positioned as too transgressive. Men who found it “too easy” to walk in their borrowed stilettos were subject to sexist, homophobic, and transphobic mockery. As one woman march participant highlighted, it is important to problematise why the organisers chose to specify that “women’s shoes” must be high-heels (Bridges, 2010: 15). Heels are a highly sexualised and very traditionally feminine symbol which are not worn by all women. Traditional notions of femininity are similarly reaffirmed in the Heels Walks. This reproduction of gender roles is exacerbated through the construction of the men as heroic, courageous and as more masculine than other men for making themselves look “silly” in the name of a good cause. Traditional ideas of masculinity are thus also reconstructed.
One of the most interesting aspects of the WRC’s representation of masculinity is evident throughout the campaigns/campaign materials, that is, the focus on what Connell (2005a) would call ‘complicit masculinity’. WRC UK is said to have been founded because in the context of the large-scale problem of violence against women men’s silence ‘was so striking [...] it was as though all these men were committing violence, and all these other men were pretending it wasn’t going on, or it was no concern of theirs’ (Bartlett quoted in Jones, 2016). The preamble to the WRC pledge similarly states that ‘most men are not violent towards women, but many of us ignore the problem, or see it as something which doesn’t have anything to do with us’ (whiteribboncampaign.co.uk). WRC therefore subscribe to a ‘bystander intervention’ model which encourages men to avoid complicity in gender-based violence by actively challenging attitudes/norms which feed violence-tolerant cultures. The bystander approach ‘challenges men to step up to prevent other men’s acts of violence’ (Messner, 2016: 62; see, amongst others, Messner et. al., 2015; Katz et. al., 2011). The messages are therefore aimed at men understood as non-perpetrators, but as nonetheless implicated in the problem of violence.

This mirrors understandings of complicit masculinity whereby men who may not directly engage in the most problematic manifestations of masculinity, including violence against women, nonetheless collude with violence by (deliberately) failing to challenge gendered inequalities and thereby ensuring that they continue to benefit from ‘the patriarchal dividend’ (Connell, 2005a: 79, see the Introduction for a summary of complicit masculinity). To the extent that complicit masculinity is the target of the WRC, this is a radical challenge which positions all men as actively responsible for gender-based violence, as opposed to just those who are themselves abusive. However, as discussed further in the next section, this critique is often diluted to appeal to potential male supporters of the WRC.

**Gender politics and the White Ribbon Campaign**

Men’s groups rarely have a straightforward relationship with feminism or with women’s feminist groups. WRC UK avoid articulating an explicit crisis of masculinity narrative. In this, they follow other profeminist men in moving away from ‘anti-feminist discourses about the victimisation of men’ and trying to create ‘alternative narratives focused on rethinking men’s identities and men’s roles’ (Ashe, 2007: 157). There are, however, elements of a postfeminist narrative present in the group’s materials, and men are nonetheless sometimes situated as gender victims. In addition, there are resonances with a “progressive” crisis narrative in attempts to soften masculinity without radically challenging the category of masculinity itself or binary gender.

Feminist men’s movements often aim to work with women’s feminist groups as “allies” in various causes. However, there are tensions in working on feminist issues as men and some of these contradictions are illustrated in the case of WRC, as has already begun to be apparent in the analysis above. WRC state that ‘we [men] need to join women and women’s organisations in taking action to end the problem’ (WRCb) of gender-based violence. In their annual reports and on their website, the English branch of WRC document their activities with, and support of, feminist women’s movements. They have worked with women’s organisations such as Tender, Million Women Rise, Reclaim the Night, Feminista, UNIFEM and Women’s Aid (WRCb). They have participated in some high-profile activism alongside women’s groups in the UK, including the ‘Lose the Lads Mags’ campaign in 2013 run by ‘UK Feminista’ and ‘Object’ which campaigned to stop
supermarkets selling ‘lads mags’ (WRCb). They also take part in activities such as the ‘solidarity vigil’ of men supporting the 2013 Reclaim the Night march and are part of the End Violence Against Women coalition lobbying the UK government to take action. In 2014-15, WRC worked on a feminist action research project with Scottish Women’s Aid, Tender and a group of feminist scholars which aimed to challenge gender-based violence in university settings (see Jordan et. al., 2018). In addition, many WRC fundraising events ‘raise money both for WRC and for local womens [sic] organisations’ (WRCb).

However, there are some suggestions that those who run WRC UK are aware of some of the potential issues with (pro)feminist men’s groups. For example, slides for a presentation given by David Bartlett on ‘Key Challenges in Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality’ at a Government Equalities Office seminar on Men and Gender Equality suggest that the group recognise that the women’s sector may be wary of groups like WRC. Identified areas of concern for women’s groups include: the potential diversion of resources; diluting the feminist orientation of anti-violence work; whether men can understand women’s perspectives; whether it is patronising to assume that women’s groups need support from men’s groups, and whether men are likely to ‘take over’ (Bartlett 2017b). In contrast, ‘opportunities’ identified include: the potential to build understanding between men’s and women’s groups; a capacity to reach out to men, and situating violence against women as ‘everyone’s business’, rather than as only a concern for women.

The potential problem of men “taking over” from women’s movements and being received more positively by the public than anti-violence work by women’s groups is raised elsewhere on the website: ‘WRC got huge media attention when setting up – in fact, way out of proportion to what we were actually doing compared to women’s groups’ (WRCb). In 2007, Director Chris Green was named ‘Ultimate Man of the Year’ by women’s fashion/lifestyle magazine, Cosmopolitan for his anti-violence work with the WRC (Hough, 2007). However, WRC continue to work with the media as ‘to contribute to the end of violence against women, we must reach men’. They also suggest that they encourage the press to report on women’s programmes and that in their own education programmes they ‘talk about the work of women on these issues’, ‘acknowledge the expertise and central role of women in challenging violence against women’, and ‘encourage our local groups to have an ongoing dialogue with women’s groups in their community’ (WRCb). Bartlett has been quoted as saying that men’s groups must not act ‘as though women haven’t been talking about it for decades, or as though men have something new to say’ (Jones, 2016). In addition, women are asked to participate as ‘Champions’, as the campaign ‘is not about men “riding in to save the day”. Men must ASK, LISTEN, then ACT’ and ‘must work with women to ensure we are helping in the right way’ (WRCa). The commitment to be accountable to women was claimed by Kaufman to be central to the earliest days of the WRC and is also made by some other feminist men activists (see Messner et. al., 2015: 160-164). At least on paper, then, WRC UK are keen to defer to women and not to reinforce gendered inequalities by speaking for them or taking credit for women’s ideas and actions.

On the other hand, as noted above, a central component of the WRC is the use of ‘White Ribbon Ambassadors’. Whilst WRC ‘Champions’ must be women, ‘Ambassadors’ are exclusively men. Ambassadors are supposed to act specifically as male role models, providing leadership for other men, to spread the message and inspire men to change their attitudes and those of others. WRC UK report having a network of over 500 ambassadors. They are given training and guidance on how to ‘take the message out there; […] promote awareness of our principles, […] recruit other men, […] fund-raise,
and generally help us change the world for the better’ (WRCa). The use of male role models, whilst motivated by the impetus to demonstrate that men are participating in solving the problem of gender-based violence, is potentially essentialist. It assumes that men can only be inspired by, or learn from, other men, an assumption which has been questioned in other contexts including educational settings (Martino, 2008; Tarrant et. al., 2015). This problem is exacerbated by the fact that ‘male bonding’ plays a central part in the reinforcing of masculine identities, often premised on the exclusion of others, especially women and non-heterosexual men (Hanlon 2012; hooks 1992; Stoltenberg 2004). Male bonding and sexual violence have also been argued to be mutually constitutive (see Flood, 2002-2003: 29-30).

The effectiveness of the strategy of employing men to engage other men in anti-violence initiatives has sometimes been justified on the pragmatic grounds that male educators are more likely to be perceived as credible by men (Flood, 2005-06; Kaufman, 2001). Whilst it is recognised that this perception ‘unfortunately reflects the cultural silencing of women’s voices’, it is suggested that this is a reasonable compromise as ‘it can be harnessed for anti-patriarchal ends’ (Flood, 2005: 30). Such pragmatism in approaches to gender equality work with men is often troubling in its implications. I do not want to suggest that the WRC in the UK see employing men as educators and ambassadors as important for these problematic reasons. Neither, of course, is it true that interactions between men must always involve hypermasculine male bonding processes. There may nonetheless be indirect effects of these approaches in terms of reinforcing gender essentialism and reasserting men’s status as authority figures in general terms, as well as implicitly positioning them as “the experts” on violence against women. Even the very clearly stated good intentions and practices stated by the WRC are not necessarily sufficient to avoid these side effects.

Prominent WRC ambassadors often include men from traditionally “masculine” arenas such as sport. This is a strategy frequently used in campaigns aimed at men, with the implication (or sometimes explicit message) being that men who are culturally revered for being strong and “masculine” are not violent (Flood, 2002-2003). As WRC work with sports teams as a key site through which to engage men, and sport is a key theme in their campaign materials. For example, White Ribbon enamel badges feature footballs, rugby balls, cricket bats and so on (along with other symbols). One poster features the shadows of two (male) rugby players with one tackling the other and the slogan ‘Tackling violence towards women’ emblazoned across the centre. Another campaign focuses on the football World Cup with the message to ‘Show violence the red card’ and prompting people to ‘recognise the signs’ of GBV including sexist language and coercive control (WRCa). There is perhaps a recognition that the hypermasculinised environment within sports teams is itself a part of the problem in WRC’s choice to work with sports teams. However, sport itself ‘contributes to the construction of violent masculinity as a cultural norm’ (Flood, 2002-2003: 28; see also Messner, 1990; Messner, 1992; Messner and Sabo, 1994; McKay et. al., 2000). In appealing to sporting imagery and enrolling men’s sports teams and individual male athletes as White Ribbon ambassadors, there is little in the publicity to suggest this connection between sport and violence. Potentially problematic aspects of using male role models and especially the choice of men who conform to dominant masculinity are also discussed in relation to CALM in the next chapter.

Alongside issues around who gets to speak/be heard on gender issues, questions have been raised about whether men’s anti-violence work diverts resources from women’s causes (Kaufman, 2001). WRC in the UK is not government-funded and receives
money through donations, as well from selling merchandise, charging to deliver training, and so on (WRCb). On their ‘frequently asked questions’ page, WRC provide a direct answer to the question ‘Does this take money away from women’s groups?’:

The WRC tries to make sure we are of real financial benefit to shelters for abused women, rape crisis centres, and women’s advocacy programs. We explicitly encourage men to give generously to these groups.

On White Ribbon Day, local committees raise money for women’s programs.

We also believe that by reaching men and contributing to the reduction of violence against women, we are making a contribution to the overstretched resources of women’s support services (WRCb)

The Australian branch of WRC, in contrast, receives ten percent of its funding through public money (WRCc). This has been hugely controversial at a time when resources for women’s refuges and similar support are more under threat than ever (Stark, 2016). Although it has been suggested that there are few instances where violence prevention work with men diverts funds from women’s organisations (Flood, 2015: 161-162), such cases illustrate that women’s groups concerns about men’s organising taking place at their expense are not entirely ill-founded. Catherine Lumby (quoted in Stark, 2016), women’s rights activist and domestic violence prevention advocate, has claimed that in Australia, at least, private businesses may perceive GBV as ‘not really a sexy kind of issue’, but be more willing to sponsor WRC which is more glamorous because of its use of celebrities and successful corporate branding. It is not clear whether WRCUK apply for grants which women’s groups are also likely to be competing for, a practice considered to be “out of bounds” by some feminist men’s groups (Messner et. al., 2015: 71).

Feminism and feminist ideas are positioned by WRC as essential to understanding and challenging gender-based violence. For example, advice is given on how to talk about feminism with others and links are provided to the ‘Everyday Feminism’ website on introducing partners to feminism and dealing with sexism in relationships (WRCb). Beyond this encouragement to engage with feminism, there is the repetition of feminist ideas such as “victim-blaming” which contribute to the problem of sexual violence: ‘there is a stigma attached to sexual crime, the result of attitudes that lay the blame on the woman for the rape, not the perpetrator’ (WRCb). In addition, as noted above, the WRC understand gender-based violence to be a result of problematic ideas of masculinity and as fundamentally social rather than “natural” in nature. They also draw on the feminist concept of the ‘continuum of violence’ whereby routine behaviour such as everyday sexism and misogyny are connected to, and scaffold, acts which are more widely understood as “violence” such as rape and domestic physical abuse (Kelly, 1988):

The problem does not stop with physical violence. There are forms of emotional violence – from sexist joking, to sexual harassment at work, to other domineering forms of behaviour [...] 

Men are conditioned by every aspect of our society from an early age to feel a sense of superiority over women, and to objectify women. Violence against women is the
most extreme conclusion of a belief – nurtured over thousands of years – that women are subservient and exist to satisfy men. Rape, assault and murder exist on a continuum that begins with degrading jokes and comments; cat-calling in the street; images that objectify women; the shouting down of women for daring to have an opinion, often involving insults about their physical appearance on social media

(WRCb)

The group also consistently use the language of ‘violence against women’, highlighting gender inequalities and the disproportionate impact of gender-based violence on women:

Our central focus is on men’s violence against women. Comparing violence committed by women and by men, the British Crime Survey notes that the result of men’s violence is five times as likely to require medical attention. Women are four times as likely as men to fear for their lives, and three and a half times as likely to be murdered by a male spouse than vice versa

(WRCb)

This contrasts with the “gender-neutral” approach taken by some anti-violence organisations which eschew any suggestion of feminist influence (Messner et. al., 2015). On the other hand, the WRC also describe themselves as ‘concerned about all forms of violence’:

We are deeply concerned about violence against children, which is committed by both women and men (although men commit most acts of sexual violence against children.) We are concerned about the many forms of men’s violence against other men, whether it’s in a bar, on a playground, or in a sports arena, and whether it’s because of someone’s skin colour, sexual orientation, culture, or simply because they looked the wrong way. We are also concerned by the comparatively rare acts of violence by women against men

(WRCb)

There is clear anxiety here to not be accused of ignoring violence against men, or violence committed by women because of the risk of being portrayed as excessively negative about men as perpetrators. Discussions of “best practice” in anti-violence work with men have suggested that they are indeed often hostile to rape prevention programmes due to unflattering portrayals of men/masculinity and therefore react defensively, claiming that “men can be victims too” and “women can be perpetrators” (Berkowitz, 2004; Flood, 2002-2003; Flood, 2005-06; Hubert, 2003). Whilst recognising the important fact that acts of violence by women against men are ‘comparatively rare’, the WRC acknowledge the victimisation of men to fend off criticism. This concern is also clear in the answer they provide to the self-posed ‘frequently asked’ questions: ‘does this mean you think that men are bad? Are you male bashers?’:
We don’t think that men are naturally violent and we don’t think that men are bad. The majority of men are not violent [...] We’re not male bashers because we’re men, working with men, who care about what happens in the lives of men.

(WRCb)

WRC are positioned as sympathetic to men because the organisation is run by, and collaborates with, men. There is an implicit contrast here with women’s groups who work on violence. This could be problematic if read as implying that women’s organisations are fundamentally anti-male - there is a risk of collusion with destructive and erroneous anti-feminist perspectives. For the same reason, discussing men’s victimisation can also be a strategy which is ‘fraught’ (Flood, 2005-2006: 32) as it can feed into misleading representations of women as just as violent as men (often perpetuated by men’s rights groups) (Flood, 2002-2003: 30).

The perceived necessity to defend against the charge of male-bashing is a pre-emptive response presumably based on WRC activists’ experiences of negative reactions. For example, Chris Green has claimed that there is a stigma for men who work on women’s rights issues and that they are likely to be seen as “gender traitors” by other men (Kennedy, 2010). Men’s suspicion of male anti-violence activists has been documented in the literature (Berkowitz, 2004: 4). Hostility is also evident in comments on WRC made by Australian men’s rights activists (Elam, 2014; see also hooks, 1992 on derisive media representations of feminist men as “sensitive new age guys” or “snags”). Similar statements are found elsewhere in WRC materials: ‘this isn’t about collective male guilt for the violence of a minority of individual men [...] we are not anti-male – this is all about creating space for more positive, healthy ways of being a man’ (Bartlett, 2017a, original emphasis). This responds to the broader “gendering of feminism” whereby ‘masculinity and feminism are situated as mutually antagonistic’ and men’s interest in feminism is sometimes ‘framed as emasculating’ (Bridges, 2010: 22). In this case, it is likely not just to be constructed as emasculating for the individual feminist man himself, but, worse, as a betrayal of other men.

WRC use the common tactic in anti-violence work of positioning men as partners in the solution and/or as bystanders to other men’s violence (Berkowitz, 2004; Flood, 2005-06). As noted, this strategy can be considered radical in terms of emphasising the responsibility of men to upset broader cultures around gender-based violence, rather than representing it as an individualised, private “women’s problem”. The bystander model has been criticised in some of its manifestations, however, for re-individualisation of violence where prevention efforts are targeted at educating individuals to make ‘healthy choices’, thereby ‘stripping collective politics’ from violence prevention work (Messner, 2016: 64; see also Seymour, 2017 on individualised approaches in WRC Australia). Whilst this is not a necessary effect of all bystander approaches, there are other concerns about the limitations of appealing to men as bystanders.

In the case of WRC, despite their acknowledgment that ‘we do think that many men have learned to express their anger or insecurity through violence’ (WRCb), they more frequently assert that the majority of men are not violent. This was part of the original WRC approach which aimed to avoid the unproductive and alienating ‘generalised guilt/blame’ perceived to be a feature of earlier feminist men’s movements, by highlighting that ‘the majority of men [...] have not used physical or sexual violence against a woman’ (Kaufman, 2001: 12).

Whilst it is perhaps useful to “denaturalise” men’s violence in this way by demonstrating that it is not inevitable, this framing comes into tension with WRC's
adoption of feminist understandings of gender-based violence. First, if the idea of gender-based violence as a continuum is taken seriously, then “violence” consists not only in men’s physical violence or more extreme acts of sexual violence such as rape, but also incorporates everyday sexism, casualised sexual assault, homophobia and misogyny, attitudes related to rape culture, and so on, as acknowledged on the WRC website. Second, these are behaviours/attitudes which are often normalised and dominant, rather than the acts of a minority. Feminist research on gender-based violence suggests that men who perpetrate violence are neither pathological nor deviant but are conforming to ‘the dictates of what it means to be a “normal” male’ (Flood, 2002-03: 25). Emphasising the non-violence of the majority reinforces the common-sense notions that a) perpetrators are rare and b) that it is ‘sledgehammer’ acts of physical and sexual violence (Stanko, 1985) that are “the problem”. Although WRC do sometimes show awareness of the widespread, commonplace nature of men’s violence against women, then, this message is not consistent.

In bystander approaches, a dichotomy is indirectly set up between the “good men” in the room who are not perpetrators, and “bad men”: ‘the violent men, the rapists’ who are ‘imagined to be someone else, somewhere out there’ (Messner, 2016: 63). A study of US anti-rape websites aimed at men suggested that the creation of such binaries can be useful but has severe limitations:

Othering the rapist serves to label sexually coercive behaviour as non-normative and shameful. However, one in every five US women has been raped by the time she is in her mid-20s, and over 80 per cent of these assaults are committed by acquaintances, which suggests it is most likely not some “other” who is the rapist. Rather, sexual coercion may be a fairly common element of some US men’s sexual repertoires. Depicting acquaintance sexual assault as a crime committed by others may lull sites’ male audiences into believing their own practices do not require interrogation (Masters, 2010: 43)

Pascoe and Hollander (2016) have also suggested that such othering narratives about sexual violence neglect the fact that ‘a range of behaviors that fall between categories of rape and not-rape are available to enact male dominance while still allowing men to preserve their identity as non-rapists’. Further, men may ‘mobilise rape’ in order to reassert their power over other men by situating them as ‘failed’ men: ‘a real man [...] would be so sexually desirable as to render force unnecessary. A real man [...] would also be able to control his own sexual and violent urges such that they would not overwhelm him or others’ (Pascoe and Hollander, 2016: 68; see also Pascoe and Bridges, 2015). This reinforces conventional masculinity norms in terms of dominance and power over other men with the identity of ‘the rapist’ often projected onto black or poor men (Pascoe and Hollander, 2016).

Those who participate in WRC are implicitly assumed to number among the “good guys”: ‘men who engage in violence against women are not welcome’ (WRCb). Whilst WRC UK ask men to be self-reflexive about their own practices, ‘[to be] committed to examining and challenging violence in his own life’ (WRCb), the potential for men to be perpetrators rather than (or as well as) bystanders is sometimes minimised (see also Seymour, 2017). The emphasis is on not appearing anti-male and engaging positively with masculinity and the average “decent” man to bring men “on board”. Further, as noted above, one of the most promising aspects of the WRC is its critique of complicit masculinity. In reinforcing the binary between good men (WRC men) as
straightforwardly not perpetrators and bad men (non-WRC men) as perpetrators, the attention is often drawn away from behaviour outside of this binary whereby men may bolster a culture which facilitates gender-based violence and contributes to gendered social structures which benefit them. The critique of complicity and collusion found in some of WRC’s narrative, unlike in some of the campaigns analysed in other research discussed above, suggests that men’s silence is not simply accidental/innocent. However, this critique is watered down elsewhere to appease men who are more likely to join if they do not have to put themselves in the same critical plane as “violent others”. Without ‘critical self-interrogation’, men’s movements may become too ‘self-congratulatory’ (hooks, 1992 : 112). These issues illustrate some of the tensions which have been suggested to be inherent to the (pro)feminist men’s movement model (Connell, 2005a; Messner, 2000).

As well as appealing to men’s sense of themselves as “good guys”, WRC are careful to note that ‘restrictive gender roles harm men as well as women, boys as well as girls’ (WRCb) and that therefore ‘men have much to gain from gender equality and healthier relationships between men and women’ (Bartlett, 2017a). Part of the WRC mission is therefore ‘also about opening up more fluid, open ways of being a man, in which men do not feel they have to prove their manhood by being aggressive, successful alpha males – where they can show their vulnerability, and fulfil their potential free from a rigid definition of masculinity’ (Bartlett, 2017a, original emphasis). The appeal to the harmful consequences of masculinity for men is fraught with issues. Whilst WRC, overall, recognise the disproportionate impact of gender-based violence and therefore at one remove of masculinity for women, this could be read in troubling ways as suggesting that violent masculinity is just as much a problem for men as it is for women, without acknowledgment that the costs of masculinity for men are accompanied by considerable benefits (Connell, 2005b; Flood, 2015; Seymour, 2017). Phrases such as ‘men do not feel they have to prove their manhood by being aggressive, successful males’ are reminiscent of postfeminist men-as-the-new-gender-victims narrative often present in “progressive” crisis of masculinity framing (see Chapter 2).

To sum up, whilst WRC UK draw explicitly on feminist ideas and demonstrate awareness of power differentials between men and women, there are also postfeminist perspectives where they emphasise too strongly the costs of masculinity/gender-based violence for men. The positioning of men as active bystanders is destabilising in the implied critique of complicit masculinity. At the same time, however, the assumption that WRC members are “the good guys” can suggest that most men do not need to examine their own practices.

Conclusion

There is some disagreement about the overall politics of men’s movements from a feminist perspective. Whilst any attempt to discuss the overall influence of men’s movements taken as a whole must inevitably simplify things, the analysis so far suggests that general concerns about the “men’s movement model” are not ill-founded.

Concerns have also been raised about the relationship between feminist men’s movements and feminist women’s movements in terms of reinforcing men’s dominance. Feminist men’s movements have been criticised by feminist scholars: ‘from the first stirrings in the early 1970s, men’s feminist activism has always existed in a state of tension and contradiction with men’s access to male privilege’ (Messner et. al, 2015: 16).
The case of WRC illustrates some of these tensions and suggests some of the difficulties with reconciling feminist-inspired men’s activism with male privilege.

Although the presence of a “crisis of masculinity” narrative is much less obvious in the context of the WRC than in the other movements discussed in this book, there are resonances with what I have called “progressive” crisis accounts in terms of the presentation of the promise of altered visions of masculinity for a modern world. There is a clear perception in the WRC that, to tackle the problem of GBV, masculinity needs to be softened in ways that are deemed to be already occurring. Questions can be asked over whether these forms of masculinity are always transgressive. Further, aspects of “traditional” masculinity are reinforced at times. As Messner (2016: 64) puts it, ‘masculinity becomes the savior of women, rather than something we see as a root cause of violence and inequality, and thus in need of transformation’. Aspects of the campaign which fail to radically challenge dominant gender norms re-naturalise them, along with men’s power (Murphy, 2009).

Beyond these issues, there is also the problem that modernising/tweaking masculinity is premised on the continuance of gendered binaries, which is ultimately a limited project. As Seymour (2017: 8) argues about WRC Australia, focusing on “new and improved” masculinity/ies [...] perpetuates the very binary of difference that underpins the oppositional positioning of man/woman and devaluation of the feminine/feminised’. This assumption of binary gender also leads to an understanding of masculinity as singular rather than multiple, which is in turn connected with a tendency to homogenise men, ignoring hierarchies between them (Seymour, 2017). This tendency is evident in the absence of a consideration of differences among men in the UK WRC.

This also mirrors progressive crisis accounts which recognise the need to alter “traditional” masculinity to ameliorate its worst effects, but are less radical in challenging the category of “masculinity” itself along with its implicit contrast with “femininity”. As Murphy (2009: 127) argues, ‘we need to be more honest with men about what ending rape might actually require: the end of “men”, strong or otherwise’. WRC and similar groups are constrained by an ambivalence towards masculinity which is considered problematic in its current manifestation, but as unquestionable or desirable in some more appealing format.

WRC have been argued to demonstrate some of the radical potential of feminist men’s activism through their explicit feminist analysis of power and masculinity in relation to violence against women. In addition, rendering the damaging effects of complicit masculinity visible and their message that men collude in violence where they do not actively work to tackle it, is one which rejects many dominant ideas about the nature of gender-based violence and highlights gender structures/inequalities. On the other hand, concerns have been raised about bystander models which emphasise that most men do not perpetrate violence. This can encourage perceptions that a small group of “other” men (for example, rapists) are the problem, allowing the majority a pass out of examining their own practices which may be normalised and perpetrated by the many. Further, in efforts to appeal to men and reframe anti-violence work as “manly”, the group sometimes reinforce problematic ideas of masculinity. As Messner (2016: 62) argues about anti-violence groups more generally, ‘in effect, today’s anti-violence pedagogy deploys dominant forms of masculinity, rather than arguing for masculinity’s eradication or radical transformation’. In making this compromise, there is a danger of entering into a new patriarchal bargain (Messner et. al., 2015; see also Murphy, 2009). Finally, although “crisis of masculinity” is not overtly discussed in the WRC, there are resonances with progressive crisis accounts in terms of the presentation of the promise of mainstreaming.
a softer form of masculinity for a modern world. The project of altering masculinity is confined by the continued assumption that masculinity as a category is itself unproblematic, reinforcing binary notions of gender. In the next chapter, I analyse the “postfeminist” men’s movement, the Campaign Against Living Miserably, arguing that there are overlapping themes across the two cases.

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Chapter Four

Postfeminist Men’s Movements: The Campaign Against Living Miserably and male suicide as “crisis”

Introduction

This chapter explores the nature of “postfeminist” men’s movements, examining how postfeminist narratives inform the politics of men’s movements, and the types of men’s movements which might fall into this category. I start with a brief overview of postfeminist men’s movements and the influence of postfeminism on men’s gender activism. The focus is on the case study of the Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM). As in the last chapter, the analysis focuses on the group’s website and other online material to explore their aims, constructions of masculinity and overall gender politics (including themes around crisis of masculinity). As might be expected given the ambivalence towards feminism within postfeminist narratives, it is groups which fall under “postfeminism” who exhibit most ambiguity in their gender politics. Feminist, postfeminist and backlash perspectives, are all present in the CALM materials. Articulations of each are unpacked in this chapter, however, I argue that their dominant orientation is postfeminist and that overall they articulate a progressive crisis of masculinity narrative. The group also constructs masculinity in varying (sometimes inconsistent) ways. I argue that, like the White Ribbon Campaign (see Chapter 3), they primarily express a desire for “softened” ideals of masculinity, but fail to challenge binary notions of gender. In the conclusion, I offer some thoughts about what the presence of overlapping themes between WRC and CALM suggests about the promise and limitations of the men’s movement model. Overall, this chapter extends knowledge of the as-yet underexplored UK men’s movement, contributing to emerging research on postfeminism and masculinity/men’s movements.

Postfeminist men’s movements

Postfeminist perspectives have been argued throughout this book to be present in a range of men’s groups. To recap, postfeminist narratives suggest the following perceptions of gender relations and of feminism. Gender equality is accepted as a legitimate goal, but gender inequalities are understood to be non-existent or minimal in contemporary society. Feminism is seen as no longer required as women are assumed have attained equality for the most part (any remaining minor inequalities will disappear naturally as society inevitably progresses). Gender is therefore not constructed as political and postfeminist perspectives would usually therefore see no need for a collective gender politics (see Chapter 1).

In this sense, postfeminist movements are oxymoronic to the extent that “movement” implies collective politics. However, as with the other case studies presented here, postfeminist ideas sit alongside other narratives articulated within men’s movements so that gender is simultaneously politicised and depoliticised. There remains some sense of collective identity around “men” as a category. Further, as what I am calling postfeminist groups position themselves in relation to social structures in terms of notions of crisis of masculinity, there is some engagement with structural issues which
sits alongside a more individualised perspective. Postfeminist men’s movements demonstrate some of the ambivalence within postfeminism itself, as illustrated in the analysis of CALM below.

In a neoliberal environment, anti-violence men’s groups have increasingly adopted a more individualised approach in which the primary focus becomes changing or supporting individual men (Messner et al., 2015). Newton (2005) also found evidence in the men’s movements she researched of a move away from collective, organised macro politics to a more personal, micropolitics. This departure from emphasising the importance of structural change means that feminism and other perspectives which imply radical social change are less likely to be at the forefront of men’s activism.

This is perhaps most surprising in the anti-violence sector where Messner et al. (2015) suggest that some previously overtly feminist organisations have, in effect, toned down “the politics”. They found that depoliticisation began in the 1980s and 1990s, partly because of the broader ‘professionalization’ of movements which were increasingly service-oriented and run by paid professionals rather than activists/volunteers (Messner et al., 2015). This trajectory was also partly instigated by activists feeling that the politics of earlier radical groups were too divisive and led to the fragmentation of movements. Some, including founder of WRC, Michael Kaufman, therefore decided to move towards single-issue campaigns which could unite people across the political spectrum (Messner et al., 2015: 62-65). Elements of this ideological shift were argued to be reflected to some extent in the contemporary narratives of WRC UK, although I suggested that overall they still employ a feminist framework.

Men’s movements do not define themselves as postfeminist. Classifying groups as postfeminist is therefore more complicated and potentially contentious than applying a label such as “feminist” which may already be accepted by the group itself. However, critical engagement with group’s narratives is vital to understanding their perspectives on gender and on changing gender relations/identities in society. It is therefore necessary to consider postfeminism as a key influence on movements and to examine to what extent postfeminist ideas are reflected in men’s movements. The CALM case study presented below was selected due to the prominence of postfeminism (alongside less dominant backlash and feminist themes), and as a result of the strength of “crisis” themes throughout the group’s campaigns. The group can be understood as part of a broader “men’s health” movement which connects ‘men’s health to other issues of masculinity’ (Broom, 2009: 271). Men’s health movements have been criticised by some feminist scholars for using men’s health as a smokescreen for promoting a backlash agenda. Michael Salter (2016), for example, has argued that men’s rights activists in Australia ‘rearticulate notions of injured masculinity via the vocabulary and practice of health promotions’, employing a discourse of men’s ‘needs’ in order to assert men’s victimhood in a manner likely to be more convincing than framing issues in terms of ‘men’s rights’. Whilst anti-feminist rhetoric is often less explicit in this form of men’s health activism to render it more acceptable to a broader audience, men’s health problems are constructed as resulting from feminism’s attack on men. There are therefore hostile, anti-feminist, and misogynist sentiments underpinning aspects of the men’s health agenda (Salter, 2016; see also Broom, 2009). Whilst there are elements of these themes in CALM’s approach, I argue that there is more happening in their narratives than a straightforward “hidden” anti-feminist discourse. At the time of writing, there is no published research on CALM’s gender politics (with the exception of Jordan and Chandler, 2018). I therefore draw less substantially on the secondary literature on men’s movements in this chapter, however,
comparisons are made with other men's groups (including men's health organisations) where relevant.

The Campaign Against Living Miserably
CALM is a UK charity ‘dedicated to preventing male suicide’ (CALM, 2014a). The charity was founded in 2006 (CALM, 2014b). Their support work is primarily based in various areas of England (for example, Manchester, Merseyside, Berkshire, London). CALM have a dedicated helpline and webchat support service for men ‘who are down or in crisis’ (CALM, 2014b). They also provide support for people coping with bereavement after suicide, lobby for changes to policy and practice around suicide prevention, and seek to challenge ‘a culture that prevents men seeking help when they need it’ (CALM, 2014b).

The symbolic/cultural aspects of CALM’s work are in their awareness-raising campaigns (often via social media) and via their magazine, ’CALMzine’, which is also made available, along with other material, including videos and blogposts, on their website. The broad thrust of their campaign is to challenge problematic ideas around mental health/suicide, increase awareness of the extent of suicide as a social problem (as opposed to perceptions of suicide as a “natural” phenomenon), and especially to highlight that ‘suicide is a gender issue’ (CALM, 2014a). Statistics about male suicide rates feature prominently and are repeated across the website and campaign materials. Examples of the most frequently iterated statistics about male suicide are that it is ‘the single biggest killer of men under the age of 45 in the UK’ and that ‘in 2015, 75% of all suicides were male’ (CALM, 2014b). Suicide, for CALM, is very definitely a “men’s issue”, CALM ‘is about, for and on behalf of men’ (CALM, 2014b) and the interrogation of masculinity is central to the organisation. For these reasons, they can be categorised as a men’s movement.

CALM was founded by Jane Powell and directed by her until 2017. Powell frequently wrote for both the CALM website and media outlets (for example, blogs for the Huffington Post newspaper) on the issue of male suicide. However, the CALM website presents a wealth of material written by many regular contributors, of which Powell is only one. There is, therefore, inevitably, no single ‘voice’ of CALM. Powell’s posts/articles feature prominently in the analysis below, partly because of her official position as CALM’s director, and partly because her pieces reflect the most frequently iterated perspectives of CALM as a group on suicide/gender/feminism. However, I also draw on other areas of the CALM website to make broader points about their campaign. (See the Introduction for an explanation of the methodological approach, methods, and data.) Within both Powell’s writings and across the other texts produced by CALM, there is a great deal of variety. Unlike in the WRC case, the theme of crisis of masculinity is explicit and central to CALM’s narrative. Both conservative and progressive constructions of “crisis” appear (see Chapter 2). In addition, feminist, postfeminist and backlash perspectives also sit alongside each other. However, as noted, I have situated the group as postfeminist overall as I argue that this strand is dominant.

Constructions of masculinity in the Campaign Against Living Miserably

19 Elsewhere on the website, CALM state that they take calls from anyone (CALM 2014a).

20 These figures are taken from Official of National Statistics reports which are cited on CALM’s website.
A complex set of cultural expectations for men are seen by CALM as being at the heart of the problem of male suicide: ‘there is a cultural barrier preventing men from seeking help as they are expected to be in control at all times, and failure to be seen as such equates to weakness and a loss of masculinity’ (CALM, 2014b). The meaning of masculinity and challenges to traditional notions of masculinity are therefore central issues for CALM. They frequently seek to disrupt what they position as old-fashioned notions of masculinity, especially as they relate to mental health. For example, the slogan ‘being silent isn’t being strong’ (CALM, 2012) is a frequently repeated message across CALM’s campaigns. In addition, ideas of masculinity that are perceived as leading to undue pressure on men to conform to unrealistic expectations are frequently highlighted and discussed – for example, notions of breadwinner/provider masculinity are consistently critiqued. A vast array of articles on ‘modern’ masculinity can be found on the website and CALM campaigns often seek to redefine masculinity. For example, their Twitter feed, #ManDictionary encourages the public to “tweet” new definitions of manhood. The #BuildingModernMen campaign run by CALM in conjunction with the Huffington Post in 2016 and fronted by the tennis player Andy Murray similarly aimed to explore masculinity. The campaign was launched with a film (#BoysDoCry) featuring famous men talking about the last time they cried (CALM, 2016). The aim of the film was to use these well-known men’s stories and experiences to ‘present a snapshot of modern life for today’s men: the difficulty in expressing emotion, the challenges of speaking out, as well as kick-starting conversations around male body image, LGBT identity, male friendship and mental health’ (CALM, 2016). As well as highlighting what are perceived to be common problems for men, there is an attempt to reassure men that it is acceptable to express themselves in ways (crying) that may frequently be deemed unmanly/feminine.

In addition, the CALM (2017) Photography Movement campaign aimed ‘to provoke discussion on masculinity and mental health’ by asking amateur and professional photographers to submit ‘images which shine a light on the limitations of traditional masculinity’ and illustrate themes around masculinity and mental health, with the winning ‘portraits of modern man’ being exhibited in London. Some of the images produced explicitly attempt to subvert traditional ideas of masculinity by presenting men as gentler or more “feminine”. Examples include an image of a man’s tattooed torso, with a floral tea cup delicately cradled in his hands (Lynch in Scott, 2017); a picture of two men ballet dancing (Houston in Scott, 2017); and a photograph of an older man with long hair wearing a corset and peering into a mirror (Burgoyne, 2017). Other photographs, on the other hand, present themes of “good mental health” in relation to men which invoke more stereotypical representations of masculinity – for example, a man on his motorbike driving on the open road (Leighton in Scott, 2017); a group of smiling male mineworkers (Philips in Scott, 2017); an image of a cowboy’s shadow (Aspra in Scott, 2017).

Narratives around alternative forms of masculinity understood as “new” or “modern” and associated with younger men, are commonly presented on the CALM website. CALM’s focus is on young men despite evidence that middle-aged men of lower socio-economic status are most at risk of suicide in the UK (Wyllie et. al., 2012). Older men are assumed to be more deeply embedded in traditional masculinity, which is cast as a relic of the past. Younger men are ambiguously positioned as less likely to accept these archaic ideas of masculinity, but as nonetheless constrained and damaged by their persistence. This mapping of “old” and “new” masculinity on to older and younger men respectively is not only interesting in terms of understanding how age and masculinity are constructed in relation to each other, but also because it replicates the idea of “crisis”
as inherently novel (see Chapter 2). Past masculinity was stable and uncomplicated, contemporary masculinity is fragmented and in turmoil.

One article on the website positions “new” (young) masculinity as disruptive of old gender norms as behaviours previously ‘considered to be inherently female’ such as beauty rituals, are said to have ‘now edged their way into everyday life for some males’ (Gen, 2016). The ‘beefcake image and blokeish boilerplate is slowly beginning to be chipped away at by this generation of men’ (Gen, 2016) and heterosexual men can form close emotional bonds with other men: ‘guys communicate with each other constantly [...] they have private jokes, hug, open up to each other but all the while still maintaining a firm grasp on both their sexuality and masculinity.’ In short, ‘it’s ok to be slightly “effeminate” now if you’re a straight male’ (Gen, 2016). The writer goes on to challenge the notion of “effeminacy” but at the same time subtly reinforces the binary construction of homosexuality and heterosexuality, as well as maintaining the integrity of the category of “masculinity”.

As noted in the analysis of WRC, the construction of modern masculinity as more caring and nurturing in contrast with emotionally distant, violent, “traditional” masculinity resonates with a wider cultural framing of new masculinity as more appealing (Hooper, 2001: 72). The notion of new masculinity, frequently reinvented but always portrayed as distinctively contemporary and novel in each incarnation, has been argued to have appeared as far back as the 1970s (MacKinnon, 2003: 13) and has been regarded with scepticism by many (Segal, 2007; Whitehead, 2002). In this context, “new” masculinities are clearly deployed in order to disrupt dominant “old” masculinity on the assumption that modern masculine identities are beneficial to men’s emotional and mental health: ‘guys are popping that bubble of oppression and you know what? We are better off for it’ (Gen, 2016). (See Chapter 5 for a discussion of new masculinities in the (Real) Fathers 4 Justice narrative.)

Elsewhere, cultural archetypes of dominant men in high-profile television shows such as 24 (2001) (Jack Bauer); Breaking Bad (2008) (Walter White) and Mad Men (2007) (Don Draper) are deconstructed to explore constructions of masculinity and consider how far these programmes reinforce or illustrate the dangers of problematic ideas of masculinity (Shelton, 2012; Shelton, 2013; Staplehurst, 2013). The popular television series Mad Men (2007) produced between 2007 and 2015, is set in the advertising world of the 1950s to the 1970s and is depicted by a CALM writer as about ‘men battling it out to secure the biggest deals, the best wife, the highest paid job’ (Staplehurst, 2013). Don Draper, one of the central characters of the show is described as ‘the personification of the alpha male’ who is outwardly ‘successful, rich and married with children’ and able to seduce women with ease but at the same time as ‘a deserter, a drunk, an adulterer and, to be frank, pretty fucked up’ (Staplehurst, 2013). Whilst Staplehurst (2013) seems to have a grudging respect for the glamour of the fictional character of Draper, he suggests that most men will ‘fall short’ of the masculinity he embodies: ‘these depictions of masculinity [...] are so beyond the realms of most men that they run the risk of becoming harmful, if taken too seriously. Should we really be clamouring to emulate a man who is nothing more than a womanizing alcoholic, albeit one with a fantastic array of sharp suits at his disposal?’. There is an implicit acknowledgment that this type of masculinity is damaging to the women in Draper’s life, as well as in terms of creating pressure on men to be similarly ‘successful’.

At the same time, as with other men’s health campaigns, CALM often work with ‘clubs, venues and brands with voices that men respect, feel comfortable with and trust’ to reach men. Some of these outlets are implicated in reinforcing traditional
heteronormative masculinity. For example, 'Nuts' magazine, a weekly magazine that was published in the UK between 2004 and 2014, featuring 'laddish' humour and objectified images of women (Alexander, 2014) and LadBible, a prominent UK digital media brand with a website and social media presence which has been heavily criticised for its sexist attitudes towards women (Bates, 2012) have featured amongst CALM's sponsors (CALM, 2013). Further, whilst the 'CALMzine' publication (handed out in barber shops and similar venues) is described as: 'the antidote to lads mags [...] [and] an accessible space to challenge stereotypes and preconceptions on what it means to be a man', it is also billed as featuring 'revealing interviews, honest writing, art, poetry and piss-taking' (CALM, 2014d). “Piss-taking” is an important theme on the website and there is a further appeal to a kind of direct-talking, no-nonsense, down-to-earth “blokeiness” in the use of language – for example ‘a guy...in the midst of a really shit time in his life’ (celeb rating 200,000 chats this #rednose day).

CALM also frequently work with, or refer to, male exemplars in their campaigns and these are often men famous for succeeding in masculinised arenas, such as competitive sports. For example, former England international cricketer Andrew Flintoff and former professional footballer and sports pundit Rio Ferdinand have featured in campaigns. The aim is apparently to highlight that “real men” can be depressed or feel anxiety and pressure to be silent about struggles, to some extent disturbing the idea that men do not feel emotions, and/or should not share these emotions with others. However, there is a tension between this and the glamourisation of male prowess in these fields – these men may be able to show weakness, but this is precisely because they are strong and conventionally masculine in other respects.

Given research on the links between masculinity, sport, and damage to men, this partial reinforcement of elite sporting masculinity may be problematic in its effects (Messner, 1990; Messner, 1992; Messner and Sabo, 1994; McKay et. al., 2000). As noted in Chapter 2, Amy Chandler (2012) has cautioned that drawing on such symbols of masculinity may in fact exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, the wider issue by reinforcing the very ideas of gender which may contribute to men's suicide. Suicide is sometimes understood as a display of strength and control – therefore campaigns which rely on ideas of “fighting” suicidal ideas might be counterproductive as they emphasise the need for men to be strong. In addition, there are suggestions that men should be encouraged to participate in sport as a healthy outlet for those who may be less likely to talk about their emotions. Chandler (2012) notes that although sport may be beneficial to some, the heavily masculinised culture of sport itself means that participating may not always be helpful.

Further, as discussed in relation to WRC, there are problems with the broader reconstruction of traditional masculinity, especially given the links between sport and violent masculinity. Government health campaigns targeted at men in the UK and beyond have similarly been seen as problematic as they use traditional ideas of masculinity, thus rearticulating 'the hegemonic masculine discourses' which may be detrimental to men's health (Crawshaw and Newlove, 2011: 140; see also Robinson and Robertson, 2010).

Overall, there are contradictory constructions of masculinity and narratives around gender in CALM’s campaigning. As in wider progressive crisis of masculinity narratives, however, the main message is that masculinity needs to be tweaked for a modern era but there is little sense of a more fundamental reimagining of masculinity as a non-binary gender identity. This resonates with some of the themes analysed in relation to WRC (Chapter 3).
Gender politics and the Campaign Against Living Miserably

CALM articulate different perspectives which, at different points, suggest feminist, postfeminist, and backlash narratives of gender relations. As discussed below, former director Jane Powell (2011) identifies as a feminist and there are articles on the CALM website which advocate feminist causes and present male suicide as a feminist issue (Cordiner, 2012; Goddard, 2015; Meadows, 2016). The commitment to “tweaking” masculinity and critiques of traditional masculinity are also influenced by feminist ideas about the social construction of gender and harmful nature of rigid notions of masculinity. On the other hand, some of the writings on the site replicate conservative and backlash perspectives. Glen Poole, whose conservative crisis perspective was outlined in Chapter 2, has written for the CALM website (Poole, 2013a) and has been on the advisory board for CALM projects (Welford and Powell, 2014). In addition, other pieces discussed below articulate a sense of loss/nostalgia for the apparently simple gender relations of the “good old days” or bemoan the purported privileging of women’s issues. These pieces draw on a ‘language of competitive victimisation [...] positioning the sexes in a hierarchy of suffering’ in ways that resonate with narratives of other men’s health movements (Broom, 2009: 270). Overall, however, I argue that there is a progressive conception of crisis of masculinity combined with a dominant postfeminist account of gender relations (see also Jordan and Chandler, 2018).

Although CALM buy into postfeminist perspectives in many respects, there are tensions with the feminist/backlash narratives which are also present. This ambivalence is partly illustrated in the rather mixed responses to CALM, who have been designated anti-feminist by some and, conversely, “too feminist” by others. This is reflected in the online comments posted underneath CALM writings discussed below. Despite personally identifying as a feminist, Powell sometimes seems to suggest that her approach is neither feminist nor anti-feminist, implying that her/CALM’s position is “neutral”. I argue, however, that she employs a postfeminist narrative which is indeed neither simply feminist nor anti-feminist, but is not therefore neutral. Instead, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, postfeminism is embedded in problematic assumptions about feminism/feminists and works to side-line women’s issues by suggesting they have achieved equality.

CALM explicitly and continually draw on ideas of crisis of masculinity and/or men. High rates of male suicide are argued to be a direct result of “crisis” in their report, ‘A Crisis in Modern Masculinity: Understanding the causes of male suicide’ (Welford and Powell, 2014). Many of the central and recurring themes of crisis narratives are present:

The role of men is being transformed by globalised forces from economics to technology to feminism. And men are faring particularly badly in many areas of life. From homelessness to education, alcohol and drug misuse to general life expectancy, they are clearly finding it increasingly difficult to cope as they try to adapt to circumstances that are entirely unprecedented

(CALM, 2014c, my emphasis)

Disruptions to masculinity are framed as uniquely modern, and men are claimed to be the “gender losers” in many spheres. Amongst other factors, feminism is highlighted as a major driver of social change. The report claims to identify men’s and women’s different
experiences of expectations and pressures resulting from gender roles\textsuperscript{21}. Overall, it is argued that ‘men often feel negatively stereotyped by the media’ and ‘feel too much is expected of them’ (Welford and Powell, 2014: 33). These perceptions, in conjunction with ‘the higher suicide rate across all ages for men than women’ are taken to mean that ‘the UK in 2014 isn’t quite a “Man’s World”’; [as] thousands of men and boys each year find themselves unable any longer to live in it’ (Welford and Powell, 2014: 33). Implicitly, the assumption that men are privileged, and women suffer most from inequalities is criticised. Instead, men are positioned as the new gender victims.

There are resonances here with arguments made by men’s health activists in Australia who seek to mobilise ‘a politics of pity […] to legitimize claims of male privilege and ongoing attacks on feminism’ (Salter 2016: 90). However, CALM do not necessarily claim that women have gained at the expense of men as anti-feminist perspectives would suggest (Faludi, 1991; Jordan, 2016). Instead, the argument is that: ‘women have clearly benefitted from the cultural changes of the last few decades. It’s now time for men to find their own language of change, and for society and government to acknowledge, and respond to, suicide as a gender issue’ (Welford and Powell, 2014: 3). This reflects a postfeminist understanding that feminism has largely solved women’s problems (McRobbie, 2009), such that the time has come to address unrecognised, but equally problematic issues facing men.

CALM repeatedly claim that ‘the assumption is that it’s all too easy to understand the gender bias in suicide’ (Powell 2016a) and that, as a result, no-one is interrogating the causes of male suicide:

Is it more about society? Is at least in part biology? Are there environmental factors […]? The problem isn’t just that we don’t know. The problem is that we’re not even asking the question

(Powell, 2016a)

Assumptions about male suicide are also said to be based on 'lazy truisms' that ‘men drink more, visit the doctor less, and take more fatal methods […] poverty, divorce, being a breadwinner’, while these are 'good thoughts', according to Powell (2016a, my emphasis), 'women face the same issues. So why men?’. It is not accurate that there is no research on gender/sex differences in suicide or that questions related to the problem of ‘why men’ are not being asked. Whilst much of this research is problematically based on preconceived, unreconstructed ideas and myths about the 'nature' of men and women (see Canetto & Cleary, 2012; Hill & Needham, 2013; Jaworski, 2014), the claim that men are ignored is misleading.

Elsewhere, Powell (2014) argues that men’s issues more broadly are invisible and devalued because ‘male’ is a ‘dirty word’ and gender equality is conceived as being only about women’s issues. Far from men's concerns being marginalised, however, men’s claims to injustice are disproportionately likely to be heard (Salter, 2016). In addition, the periodic, highly visible panics around crisis of masculinity discussed earlier in the book also severely undermine the idea that men are overlooked as a category.

Powell is more accurate in her suggestion that "gender" is often seen as synonymous with "women" (Carver, 1996). However, where men are not marked as

\textsuperscript{21} There are some methodological issues with the research conducted for this report. I do not engage with these issues here as they are beyond the scope of this chapter.
gendered, they are implicitly taken as the template by which ‘humanity’ is measured, positioning women as inferior and inherently less than human (see Introduction). To the extent that gender is not interrogated in relation to men, then, this is precisely because men are the invisible norm, enabling their overall privilege, rather than disadvantaging them as Powell suggests. With respect to male suicide, critical suicidologists have highlighted how the broader construction of men as generically ‘human’ has fed into the underestimation of suicide by women and ideas of attempted suicide as “less serious” (Jaworski 2014). In this way, male suicide is taken as the norm and becomes more, rather than less, visible.

Powell’s (2011) blogpost ‘Suicide, An Issue for Feminists’ presents similar themes in relation to the purported gains made by women through feminism, and to the idea of a stalled gender revolution. This piece is reminiscent of Diane Abbott’s speech analysed in Chapter 2 in that Powell explicitly identifies as a feminist and frames the male suicide “crisis” as a feminist issue, rather than as an anti-feminist project. The first sections of the blog are a nostalgic account of Powell’s memory of the gender struggles of the past. Throughout, she depicts the ‘bigotry’ facing girls in schools and beyond in terms of restrictive career expectations and demands to behave in a properly feminine way:

As a girl born in 1960 my options were to get married, or be ‘that little bit different and have a career, if I was bright enough. There, in front of me, were listed the world of possibilities reduced down to a sheet of paper. If I worked really hard, and surpassed everyone’s expectations, I could aspire to be a launderette manageress […] I remember being severely dressed down for whistling in the playground, girls didn’t whistle. Being angry that I wasn’t allowed to do carpentry and metalwork at school. Finding the constant portrayal of women on TV as simpering brainless bimbos, forever having their clothes ripped off them, or who’d drop them at the drop of a pin, painful, embarrassing and enraging (Powell, 2011)

Powell is keen to signal her feminist credentials, invoking her status as a veteran of the women’s peace camp at Greenham Common. At the same time, she appears to be subtly critical of the radical, women-centred feminism of the time (the 1980s): ‘I used to sit at Greenham and wonder when the ‘mens [sic] movement’ would kick in. Well I believe it’s started […] and as a feminist I welcome it, it’s long overdue’ (Powell, 2011). Again, men’s issues are positioned here as equivalent with women’s through situating “the” men’s movement as directly analogous to women’s movements. Even at the time when Powell suggests feminism was necessary, it seems that men needed movements too. A feminist account might acknowledge that men are also gendered and that constructions of masculinity are problematic for men (for some men more than others) as well as beneficial to them. Powell’s response, however, belies feminist research which has long established that women, overall, are disadvantaged more than men by gendered power relations (Connell 2005).

The theme that life has improved for women, but not for men, is persistent and is used to highlight men’s victimhood through contrast:

Women now have full permission to be just who they want to be. We can be a stay at home mum or a city banker, with or without a family. And gone are the days when trousers were forbidden for any ‘professional’ job. We can slap on as much make up as we can lay our hands on, or none at all. We can wear jeans and dress
casual, or drift around in silk dresses or ripped tights and mini’s [sic] – and regardless of which we choose, it is clearly understood that our style doesn’t indicate ANY sexual preferences or interests

(Powell 2011, my emphasis)

The claims made here are startling given the persistence of dominant rape myths legitimising sexual violence by constructing women who dress in particular ways as “sluts” who “asked for it” (see chapters in Buchwald et. al. 2005), not to mention continuing gendered inequalities in work-family structures which would suggest that women’s choices about work and parenthood are not quite as free as Powell suggests (Crompton, 2006). Again, the postfeminist theme of feminism achieved, of women’s empowerment and capacity to choose their destinies free from the constraints of gender (Gill, 2008; Gill, 2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009) is present.

In contrast to women’s purported freedom, Powell (2011) represents men’s roles as heavily restricted:

Despite all the changes for women over the past decades, the role of men in society seems parked in the dark ages. Society still says, overwhelmingly, that a real man should get paid more than his wife/girlfriend, and should, indeed, be able to support them and a family. A real man is always in charge. A real man is invincible [...]

A real man can drink his weight in beer. A real man doesn’t reveal anything personal. A real man will hide any personal pain – and be a hero for so doing. A real man doesn’t talk.

[...] Men die younger than women, across the age range, because help-seeking behaviour is, by definition, unmanly. So they don’t go to their GP unless they have just sheared their leg off below the knee.

Elsewhere, apparent improvements in women’s suicide rates (implicitly a result of women’s newfound equality) and persistently high rates for men are referenced as evidence of men’s oppression: ‘the female suicide rate has halved since the early 1980s’ (Powell, 2016a).

At some points in the blog, Powell (2011) moves beyond postfeminism to articulating a backlash position reminiscent of anti-feminist men’s rights activists, implying that women want to “have their cake and eat it”: ‘whichever way, however we behave; we demand the right to be paid equally. And still have doors opened for us, and expect to get custody if the family splits, and get a share of the husband’s wealth even if married for only a year’. In these moments, there is a conservative crisis of masculinity narrative which suggests the “excesses” of feminism are to blame for men’s problems.

Whilst Powell caveats these views by saying that ‘all may not be right for women just now’ and ‘let’s not roll back the changes and head for the kitchen’, in almost the same breath she replicates anti-feminist narratives that a) feminists do not care about men and b) that they are hypocrites if they are not active on men’s issues: ‘I’d like to think that feminists can support and encourage discussion about men in society, and be big enough to recognise discrimination and stereotype where-ever and whenever that occurs. Because if we can do that, and change society, it will I believe save lives’.

In her account of her previous experiences of feminism, Powell (2011) recalls the hostility directed at ‘crazy feminists’ for highlighting sexism in films, beauty pageants and beyond: ‘women’s libbers – bound to have short hair and dungarees – were disowned by good respectable women who liked to be feminine, and treated with contempt’. Clearly
aware of (potential) feminist criticisms of CALM, she draws an analogy between responses to feminism and responses to CALM:

A number of the articles on this website challenge depictions and assumptions about men. And even go so far as to pick at some so-called feminist assumptions. And there is some concern that maybe a few of the articles may be a little too strident, a little too angry. Some comments have even hinted that this is an anti women [sic] site.

This is terribly familiar (Powell, 2011)

Powell defends CALM against these charges, saying, ‘the articles on this site aren’t about hating women’ instead, they are simply ‘about trying to move some societal stereotypes and assumptions’. This dismissal of concerns about CALM’s gender politics is somewhat sweeping given that the content of some of the articles objected to can be read plausibly as either overtly or implicitly hostile both to feminism and to women in ways that resonate with backlash perspectives (see, for example, Bell, 2010a; Bell, 2010b; Balderson, 2012; Cordiner, 2011; Kennett, 2016; Nock, 2012).

One prominent example of a backlash narrative presented on the website is Glen Poole’s piece, ‘Why we need young men to fight for their rights’ (Poole, 2013a). Some of Poole’s other writings were analysed as exemplifying a conservative crisis of masculinity perspective in Chapter 2. Citing a list of selectively presented ‘facts’ about inequalities experienced by young men (in comparison with women), Poole (2013a) asks:

why is no-one particularly concerned about these problems? Why does the Government only have a strategy to end violence against women and girls when the biggest victims of violence are young men?

Why is the National Union Students (NUS) campaigning against “laddism” on campus, but not campaigning to get more lads on campus? Why is the TUC only campaigning about the problems young women face getting work when young men who make up 70% of the long-term unemployed? Why is all this happening?
The short answer is sexism and discrimination against men.

Although this article is not explicitly anti-feminist, it is notable that the campaigns/policies that Poole (2013a) highlights here are informed by feminist understandings of the gendered nature of violence/”lad culture”/the workplace. The suggestion is that these initiatives are simply biased for ignoring men, but Poole neglects to engage with key issues in relation to the “facts” he presents. For example, the claim that ‘the biggest victims of violence are young men’ is heavily contested if forms of violence such as domestic violence and rape are included in the definition of violence (Walklate, 2004: 9). When sustained patterns of violence are considered, especially ‘domestic’ violence, women are overwhelmingly the victims and men the perpetrators (Skinner et. al., 2005). Whilst this does not mean that violence against men is not a problem, side-lining such issues means failing to engage with the role of masculinity in scaffolding patterns of violence towards men and women, and ignoring gendered social relations. Poole (2013a) replicates familiar backlash ideas in making the argument that men are disadvantaged overall and that there is ‘sexism against men and boys on an institutional scale’:

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You will have been told from an early age that sexism is something that only happens to women. Maybe no-one ever said those exact words to you but it’s a message you’ve been brainwashed into believing in many different ways through school, the media and by government. Without realising it, you’ve been fed a drip, drip, drip of messages about men and women that can be summed up in the following phrase: “women HAVE problems and men ARE problems”

Poole (2013a) steers clear of suggesting that feminism is the source of these negative representations of men: ‘I’m not saying that this is some crazy conspiracy where a bunch of sinister people sat down in a darkened room and planned to brainwash you into believing that only women have problems’ and instead says that this situation is ‘just the way our society has evolved over the past century’. Drawing on further statistics and examples which are supposed to show how badly-off men are and continue to be, he claims that:

We are conditioned from an early age to be collectively more tolerant of any harm that happens to men and boys. We may not be aware of if [sic], but we want boys to grow up to be strong and tough and independent because, as a society, we expect men to protect us and provide for us

(Poole, 2013a)

Throughout, Poole (2013a) emphasises the benefits to women of these expectations, arguing that if men do not provide and protect as expected, they ‘will face consequences that most women don’t face’. For example, ‘while women now have the opportunity to take on a provider role if they choose, they are also far more likely to be provided for by a partner or the Government if they decide they don’t want to be the main breadwinner’; or, in language similar to that used by fathers’ rights groups ‘when relationships breakdown, men are more likely to end up losing their home and even their kids, with women getting custody of the children in more than 92% of cases’. Whilst claiming that ‘none of this means that we should stop caring about the issues that women and children face’, Poole simultaneously ignores key gendered dimensions of all of these arenas which are detrimental to women and represents men as the “gender losers” in an apparent “battle of the sexes” (see Chapters 5 and 6 for discussion of the misleading nature of this presentation of statistics on ‘custody’). Such caveats on Poole’s part often appear to be grudging concessions to forestall criticism from people who might be at least partially sympathetic to feminism.

The aim of Poole’s webpost is to encourage young men in particular to be more vocal on the issues he raises, and specifically to suggest that ‘all men (and women)’ should ‘try and find a place’ in ‘a growing men’s movement in the UK’ which ‘takes many shapes and forms’ (Poole, 2013a). Beyond the claim that men’s movements are necessary given the apparent marginalisation of men in society, Poole takes no overt position on which of the diverse strands of “the” men’s movement readers should join. Instead, he links to his book (Poole, 2013b) and to an overview of different men’s movements, including (pro)feminist, anti-feminist, father’s rights groups and Christian men’s groups on his website. In accordance with his claims to a neutral stance (discussed in Chapter 2), he does not advocate any of these groups, but suggests he is presenting information so that men can choose the one which ‘might suit you personally’ (Equality4Men, 2013).
To gain insight into the likely reception and impact of CALM’s varying messages, it is instructive to note the similarly varying interpretations of their gender politics by their audience. Powell (2011) references negative reactions over apparently anti-feminist/anti-women content in some articles on the website. A glance at the comments sections suggests that people who appear to take an explicitly anti-feminist stance find many of the arguments made by CALM writers appealing. They interpret CALM as situating male suicide as evidence of a crisis of masculinity caused by feminism/the purportedly privileged place of women in society. At the same time, these same “below the line” commentators are often dissatisfied with views expressed by CALM where they implicitly or explicitly question the value of traditional masculinity. Far from reading CALM/Powell as anti-women, such a response suggests that these messages are seen by some as anti-men. Some object to Powell’s (2016b) suggestion that ‘women face the same issues’ as men, claiming that women are given far more resources by society to deal with unemployment, poverty and so on, and that men are thus underprivileged as a group. Further, many of the comments on this piece were overtly hostile to feminism. Reading Powell’s view as “too feminist” in tone, many were also similarly hostile to her and saw her claim to be a feminist as automatically disqualifying her from writing about male suicide. This ambivalent reception from apparently anti-feminist commentators suggests the equally ambiguous nature of the framing of the issues by CALM. In addition, it confirms the centrality of perceptions of feminism to understandings of gender issues.

Conclusion

Like WRC in the last chapter, CALM have been argued to present inconsistent constructions of masculinity and to reinstate gender binaries through their articulation of a need for “softer” forms of masculinity. Crisis of masculinity narratives are more dominant and explicit in CALM’s narrative, mostly in a progressive form, although at times conservative crisis ideas were also articulated. Alongside the postfeminist ideas which were most prominent, sat feminist and backlash narratives, and there is evidence of the ambiguity of their gender politics in the different interpretations of commentators. As well as some of the concerns raised about the conservative and anti-feminist messages underpinning some of the writings of Powell and others on the CALM website, the postfeminist framing is also problematic in contributing to the marginalisation of feminism/women’s inequalities.

The presence of multiple narratives in both CALM and the WRC suggests that it is fruitful to move beyond simplistic feminist versus anti-feminist framings in analysing the gender politics of men’s movements. It also demonstrates that rather than taking groups’ avowed allegiances at face value, it is necessary to examine how they frame masculinity and gender relations to gain a fuller understanding of specific movements. Taken together, the analysis of WRC and CALM illustrate the frequency of slippage between feminism and postfeminism, and between postfeminism and backlash. While this is not all that surprising given that the lines between these perspectives are inevitably blurred as previously discussed, it suggests that it is challenging for men’s movements to avoid reinforcing certain aspects dominant gender relations, even where it is a central aim of the group to challenge “traditional” ideas of masculinity. Interestingly, although there was most radical promise in the narratives of the feminist WRC, there are overlapping issues between the two groups in terms of potentially reinforcing problematic notions of crisis of masculinity which tend to shore up both the category of masculinity itself, and
binary notions of gender. In addition, in trying to appeal to men through messages about what should be considered “manly”, both groups re-presented aspects of the very forms of masculinity which they also sought to destabilise. These findings illustrate, once again, the risks of engaging in masculinity politics in this form. Ultimately, it seems that this may be a limiting paradigm for groups with “progressive” goals in terms of altering gender norms. In Chapters 5 and 6, I examine ‘Backlash’ movements, focusing on the fathers’ rights movement and, more specifically, the UK group (Real) Fathers 4 Justice.

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Chapter Five

Backlash Men’s Movements Part 1: (Real) Fathers 4 Justice, bourgeois-rational and new man/new father masculinities

Introduction

This chapter critically examines “backlash” men’s movements in the UK from a feminist masculinity/ies perspective. The main focus is on fathers’ rights groups (FRGs) as a specific strand of the men’s rights movement. Men’s rights groups (MRGs) are explicitly anti-feminist and set themselves up in opposition to feminist women’s and feminist men’s movements. However, they also frequently draw on postfeminist ideas and framing to render their messages more palatable to a broader audience. I give some context on MRGs in the first part of the chapter. As in the previous chapters, I provide an in-depth analysis of a specific group, (Real) Fathers 4 Justice ((R)F4J), to illustrate men’s rights discourses, along with some of the complexities of these perspectives. The case studies of “feminist” and “postfeminist” men’s movements presented in the last two chapters examined the group’s narratives based on their websites and campaign materials. The (R)F4J analysis, however, draws on in-depth interviews with members of the group. There is therefore a different approach in this chapter and in the next as the focus is on the interview narratives of fathers’ rights activists. (R)F4J’s aims, constructions of masculinity, and overall gender politics are explored. The interview analysis is structured around each of the three masculinities which were articulated, with corresponding multiple constructions of fatherhood discussed in each section. I engage with themes around feminism, postfeminism, backlash, and masculinity-in-crisis discussed in previous chapters where relevant throughout.

As noted in the Introduction, fatherhood has always been political as constructions of fatherhood are key signifiers of masculinity, however, its visibility has increased (Collier and Sheldon, 2008; Dermott, 2008). Fathers’ rights groups have played a role in shaping public debates over rights, resources and subjectivities associated with the “new” politics of fatherhood. The research findings presented in this chapter and in Chapter 6 contribute to understanding the complex nature of these issues, offering a nuanced account of fathers’ rights perspectives as articulated by fathers’ rights activists. Through this analysis, the (gendered) implications of the politics of fatherhood as expressed in the context of fathers’ rights groups are explored.

Three forms of masculinity are argued to be dominant in the interviews: bourgeois-rationalist, new man/new father, and hypermasculinity. The first two of these are examined in this chapter, and hypermasculinity is explored in Chapter 6. The bourgeois-rationalist model is characterised as egalitarian, cerebral, and concerned with justice in the form of universal rights. New man/new father masculinity signals the partial incorporation of traditionally “feminine” characteristics of caring, sensitivity, and active parenting. Hypermasculinity, in contrast, emphasises physical bravery and displays of aggression or domination. Central to these constructions of masculinity were interviewees’ conceptions of fatherhood. Mapping on to the three masculinities, three notions of the “good father” were expressed, which I label the “good enough father”; the “nurturing father”; and the “superhero father”. The construction of the good enough father maps on to bourgeois-rational masculinity; ideas of nurturing fathers are
 intertwined closely with new man/new father masculinity, and, finally, the image of the superhero father connects with hypermasculinity. The deployment of dichotomous contrasts between “bad” and “good” fathers is also examined; as well as the interviewees’ concern to underline the need for (good) fathers by highlighting the existence of “bad” mothers (see Chapter 6). The findings suggest that the “softer” bourgeois-rational and new man/new father masculinities serve as legitimising strategies which exist in an uneasy tension with the aggressive hypermasculinity frame. Further, all three masculinity frames are argued to be problematic in different ways, as each reinforces existing power-laden gendered binaries. All three of the conceptions of fatherhood are argued to be similarly limited in their potential for revisioning dominant gendered identities.

Both progressive and conservative crisis of masculinity narratives are identified. Whilst crisis ideas were not invoked from the bourgeois-rational masculinity frame, progressive notions of crisis were associated with the new man/new father masculinity in terms of holding out a promise of kinder masculinity (without a deeper unsettling of gender binaries). The most explicit crisis themes were articulated through hypermasculinity, where conservative notions of men’s victimhood at the hands of feminism were prominent as outlined in the next chapter. Although I have categorised (R)F4J as a “backlash” group, postfeminist ideas are also dominant in the group narrative. Both are explored in depth. Whilst I suggest that some aspects of the group’s narratives are not incompatible with feminist understandings of gender/fatherhood, the framing of the issues in terms of fathers’ rights restricted any sympathy with feminist understandings of debates around post-separation child contact disputes. Overall, the analysis further demonstrates that men’s movements frequently shift their discursive strategies and may express ambivalence about feminism, even where straightforward hostility might be expected.

**Backlash men's movements**

Backlash men’s movements have been defined as explicitly hostile to feminism. Backlash movements take one of two perspectives on feminism. First, that gender equality is not a desirable goal, so feminism is fundamentally pernicious in its aims. Or the second, more common, strategy, is to frame gender equality as a worthy aim, but to argue that feminism is anti-equality and seeks to privilege women over men. Gender is therefore seen as political and as requiring a collective, anti-feminist, politics (see Chapter 1). The logic of backlash is tied in with a conservative crisis of masculinity perspective, which has been characterised as embedded in deeply essentialist views of gender, and as aiming to reassert traditional masculinity (and femininity) in response to “crisis”. Backlash movements seek to turn back the clock to a mythical “natural” (gender) order to reclaim men’s power. Men are cast as simultaneously powerless victims and as violent, naturally dominant, aggressors. Men are represented as marginalised by feminism and by other purportedly “anti-male” (implicitly meaning anti-white, heterosexual, male) social forces. Feminism is very negatively portrayed by backlash movements and themes around how it damages men (and also harms women) often arise.

Other groups articulate backlash perspectives as part of a broader conservative politics. Men’s rights’ organisations are distinguished by their central focus on the claim that men, not women, are underprivileged in society, and that this is a result of the “excesses” of feminism (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Flood, 2004; Jordan, 2016; Messner, 2000;
Falling under this heading are groups that campaign for the removal of perceived injustices towards men in the law in areas such as divorce, child custody (“child arrangements” in the UK), affirmative action, domestic violence prosecution, and sexual harassment (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Messner, 2000; Whitehead, 2002). Feminism and feminists are positioned as the main enemy in their battle for men’s equality and problematic myths about feminism are promoted (Hoddap, 2017; Nicholas and Agius, 2018; Sheehy, 2016). MRGs frequently claim to be advancing “gender-neutral” perspectives which challenge the purported bias of feminist arguments about women’s inequality in a variety of arenas. Alongside backlash notions, their narratives often draw on the (neo)liberal language of formal equality and individualised notions of responsibility/agency accompanying postfeminism (Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman, 2016; Hoddap, 2017; Menzies, 2007; Messner, 2016; Mulinari and Neergaard, 2017; Nicholas and Agius, 2018; Sheehy, 2016). For example, many MRGs deny that women are disproportionately the victims of sexual and domestic violence, despite considerable evidence to the contrary (see Hester, 2013). They argue that focusing on violence against women ignores and/or victimises men who are vilified as perpetrators, as batterers and rapists, while women are patronisingly situated as incapable of preventing themselves from being beaten or sexually assaulted (Burman, 2016; Gotell and Dutton, 2016; Mann, 2016; Sheehy, 2016).

Alongside negative views of feminism as a political perspective, pejorative views of feminists are frequently articulated (Menzies, 2007; Nicholas and Agius, 2018). MRGs often target specific feminists and have virulently abused feminist women both in public spaces and through intrusive campaigns designed to intimidate and discredit feminist activists, journalists, and academics (Burman, 2016; Ging, 2017; Gotell and Dutton, 2016; Hoddap, 2017; Sheehy, 2016). At the same time, “good” women who actively participate in MRGs (“feMRAs”, or female men’s rights activists) are a) held up as evidence that men’s rights activism is not anti-women and b) enrolled to ‘legitimize claims that would likely be viewed as being clearly more offensive if put forward by men’ (Gotell and Dutton, 2016: 74). In the most extreme expressions of men’s rights discourses, hostile and misogynistic views of women in general are repeated endlessly – for example, the idea that women are ‘begging to be raped’ (Gotell and Dutton, 2016: 75). MRGs often claim that they are not anti-women and that feminism has been bad for women too. However, even discussions of women designed to be more palatable to a wider audience are often deeply infused with sexist ideas. Whilst the idea that women should take more responsibility for their own safety is not quite the same as claiming they want to be raped, it is still to suggest that they are to blame for not being adequate sexual gatekeepers, that it is their inappropriate displays of sexuality/impropriety which allow men to rape them (Gotell and Dutton, 2016). Ironically, this narrative implicitly constructs men as sexually aggressive predators and naturalises the very idea of men as inherently rapists which men’s rights activists complain is perpetuated by feminists. There is a considerable amount of inconsistency across men’s rights discourses.

As noted in Chapter 3, men’s rights movements are more numerous and more vocal than feminist men’s groups (Mann, 2016). The primary site of action for many contemporary MRGs is the internet (Menzies, 2007; Hoddap, 2017; Ging, 2017; Träbert, 2017). The extent of membership in terms of numbers of activists and in terms of how far movements exist in a variety of national contexts is not known. There are suggestions that specific forums and sites are international in their scope and membership. For example, the prominent organisation, ‘A Voice for Men’, founded by Paul Elam in 2009, have a Facebook page and Twitter account (suspended at the time of writing), as well as
a website hosting a huge amount of content including articles, videos, blogs and a members’ forum (AVFM). While US-based, the site contains links to affiliated groups in twelve other countries (Ging, 2017: 8; see also Hoddap, 2017). MRGs appear to be ‘mostly a Global North phenomenon’ (Nicholas and Agius, 2018: 34), especially evident in Europe, North America and Australia, although there are men’s rights movements elsewhere, for example, in India (Basu, 2016; Palmer and Subramaniam, 2018). Research suggests that there are links between MRGs at the global level, as well as shared ideas, although to some extent culturally specific frames are employed (Basu, 2016; Ging, 2017; Newton, 2005; Nicholas and Agius, 2018; Palmer and Subramaniam, 2018; Wojnicka, 2016). In terms of who belongs to MRGs, again, little is known. As noted above, it is clear that (mostly white) women participate, sometimes numbering amongst the founders/leaders of groups (Crowley, 2009; Edstrom, 2016; De Keseredy et. al., 2014; Nicholas and Agius, 2018). Messner (2016: 14) speculates that ‘anti-feminist backlash rhetoric could possibly appeal to men with less education and less resources’, who feel disempowered but has suggested that in fact ‘most leaders of the men’s rights movement are not poor and working class men; rather, they are men with the educational and financial resources needed to form organizations, create websites or hire attorneys’. Christa Hoddap (2017: 9) similarly claims that men’s rights activists are mostly white, heterosexual, and middle-class men of all ages.

Whilst MRGs may seem to be on the fringes of society, especially in their more overtly backlash rhetoric, it has been argued that men’s and fathers’ rights groups have influenced public discourse and policy/legislation in a variety of national and international contexts (Behre, 2015; Burman, 2016; Dragiewicz, 2008; Dupuis-Déri, 2016; Elizabeth, 2016; Garrett, 2003; Ging, 2017; Hacker, 2016; Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman, 2016; Maddison, 1999; Mann, 2016; Seymour, 2018), including the UK (Featherstone, 2009; Kaganas, 2013). Further, in some contexts, the climate may be more hospitable to crudely anti-feminist rhetoric than in others. For example, in Poland ‘public discourse has been strongly dominated by antifeminist rhetoric’ advanced by MRGs (Wojnicka, 2016: 36). There are also suggestions that MRGs overlap with far-right, racist groups in terms of ideas (for example, anti- “political correctness” discourses) and membership (Nicholas and Agius, 2018; Träbert, 2017) and that men’s rights activists, despite their claims to inclusivity, perpetuate racist and homophobic/heteronormative worldviews (Hoddap, 2017). MRGs are therefore part of a broader conservative coalition. Finally, it is important to recognise the influence of the more moderately expressed aspects of men’s rights narratives on mainstream perceptions of feminism, gender equality, and narratives of men’s victimisation in different arenas (Hoddap, 2017; Sheehy, 2016). The more extreme expressions of misogyny and violence directed at women/feminists may not be broadly acceptable in many contexts, then, but this does not mean that MRGs can be dismissed as merely marginal – their narratives intersect with, and reinforce, implicitly anti-feminist (and, times, postfeminist) discourse.

In the UK, online men’s rights spaces have included antimisandry.com and angrilyharry.com, and MRGs include the charity the “ManKind Initiative”, and political party “Justice For Men and Boys (and the women who love them)”, both of which I will briefly introduce to illustrate the concerns and rhetoric of men’s rights activists (for some brief historical context on the UK men’s rights movement see Ashe, 2007: 56-63). The ManKind Initiative was set up to support male victims of domestic violence, and, more broadly, to promote ‘the interests of men within the context of equality of opportunity for all’ (ManKind Initiative, 2008: 1). The group became a registered charity in 2001, and claimed to defend men’s interests in education, employment, men’s health, “false” rape
allegations, family law, family abuse, equality under the law, relationships between men and women, children, and domestic abuse (Mankind Initiative, 2007). The group participates in awareness-raising activities around domestic violence and has its own helpline for abused men. Historically, overtly anti-feminist arguments were prominent on the Mankind Initiative website, where it was suggested that ‘men are denigrated and masculinity is constantly undermined’ in modern society and that feminism has been responsible for making men unequal: ‘feminism has been corrupted by misandrists, both men and women, who have used feminism as a cover to demean men and at the same time convince generations of women that they have no need for men’ (Mankind Initiative, 2007). At the time of writing, the website no longer contains overtly negative statements about feminism. Instead, the ‘What We Do’ page suggests that Mankind Initiative aims to ‘give a voice to male victims’ and to ‘actively encourage other voluntary and statutory services to acknowledge the incidence of male domestic abuse, to view domestic abuse as gender neutral and to provide adequate levels of support to male victims’ (Mankind Initiative, 2018). Drawing on equalities language, the group argue that domestic abuse should not ‘be defined as a gendered crime – it should be defined as a crime – as it is both legally, and, in terms of equality and human rights’ (Mankind Initiative, 2018). Mankind routinely argue that research by feminist academics and women’s groups marginalises and underrepresents violence against men and that this is reflected in “biased” government policies on domestic violence. The following comments from Chairman Mark Brooks illustrate the group’s views:

We need the principles of fairness, inclusion and equality to apply to men, as well as women escaping from domestic abuse [...] it is current Government policy to record and class a crime of domestic abuse against a man as being a crime against a “women [sic] and girl”. This effectively treats men as second class victims and renders them invisible. This marginalisation of male victims cannot continue

(Mankind Initiative, 2017)

This representation of references to women and girls as merely arbitrary discrimination against men is problematic as gendered patterns of domestic violence are well-established, and women are disproportionately victims (Skinner et. al., 2005). Although the anti-feminist perspective of Mankind Initiative is now less explicit, they work consistently to undermine feminist activism and service provision in this area. They therefore take a very different approach to feminist inspired anti-violence men’s movements (see Chapter 3).

“Justice For Men and Boys (and the women who love them)” (J4MB) is an explicitly anti-feminist political party (J4MB). A recent manifestation of men’s rights organising in the UK, the party was founded in 2013 by leader Mike Buchanan. The party fielded two parliamentary candidates in 2015 in Nottinghamshire constituencies – Buchanan himself, and Ray Barry, who, notably, was one of the founders of Fathers 4 Justice splinter group, Real Fathers For Justice. Buchanan is openly vitriolic about feminism and feminists – for example, prominent feminists including academics, journalists, and politicians have been targeted for a ‘Whiny Feminist of the Month Award’ (Buchanan, 2013). Laura Bates, feminist writer and founder of the “Everyday Sexism Project” has

22 Neither of the candidates were successful, Barry receiving 63 votes in Ashfield and Buchanan 153 votes in Broxtowe.
received this accolade numerous times. Buchanan is a prolific writer and commentator on men’s rights issues, frequently appearing on radio and tv programmes, many of which can be accessed via Buchanan’s youtube channel (Mike Buchanan). Before founding J4MB, he hosted (and wrote most of) a blog called “Fightingfeminism” which focused largely on arguing against quotas for women on the boards of corporations, as well as advancing his more general opposition to ‘militant feminism’ (Trӓbert, 2017: 278-279). The party has been involved in hosting and organising the “International Conference on Men’s Issues” along with “A Voice for Men”. The fourth conference was held in London in July 2018 and was claimed to involve delegates from 24 countries (see Whyte et. al., 2018).

The J4MB manifesto for the 2015 general election states that ‘J4MB is the only political party in the English-speaking world campaigning for the human rights of men and boys’ (J4MB, 2014: 2) because ‘sexism causes far more harm to men and boys than to women and girls’ (J4MB, 2014: 74). It claims that ‘the British state has become ever more hostile towards men and boys […] the state disadvantages men and boys in many areas’ (J4MB, 2014: 2). This hostility is blamed on ‘radical feminists’ who ‘are in key positions in all major political parties, the government, and public bodies, from where many of the anti-male discriminations […] derive’ (J4MB, 2014: 73). These purportedly all-powerful feminists are said to ‘have systematically and ruthlessly exploited the gynocentric culture of the UK’ and to have an ‘appetite for advantaging women and girls over men and boys’ which ‘is insatiable’ (J4MB, 2014: 73). Feminism is characterised as ‘a movement with the ultimate aim of female supremacy […] driven by misandry’ and ‘built upon baseless conspiracy theories […] as well as fantasies, lies, delusions and myths’ (J4MB, 2014: 73). Feminists are said to ‘have lied relentlessly about issues such as rape and domestic violence, making women excessively fearful of men, and in consequence hateful towards men as a class’ (J4MB, 2014: 73). Demonstrating the centrality of fathers’ rights to broader men’s rights organisations, the party campaigns for ‘the right of all children to enjoy good access to both parents following family breakdowns, and the restoration of fatherhood and strong families’ (J4MB, 2014: 2).

These themes are typical of men’s rights groups and are also frequently present in the perspectives of FRGs, to which I now turn.

**Fathers’ rights groups**

Fathers’ rights groups have been understood as part of the wider men’s rights movement and therefore as constituting part of a backlash to feminist women’s movements (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Jordan, 2009; Messner, 2000). As noted above, fathers’ rights are prominent among the various concerns of MRGs. Men’s rights activists frequently frame what they perceive as discrimination in child contact/custody arrangements as central evidence of men as gender victims, of the dominance of feminism (read as women’s unfair advantage over men). The transnational fathers’ rights movement constitutes ‘a response […] to shifts in gender roles and in the structure and meaning of family and parenting relations’ (Flood, 2005: 1). Broadly, FRGs are characterised by ‘the claim that fathers are deprived of their ‘rights’ and subjected to systematic discrimination as men and fathers, in a system biased towards women and dominated by feminists’ (Flood, 2005: 1; see also Smart, 2006). These claims, however, as discussed in the interview analysis, have been argued across the literature on FRGs to be misleading and problematic in numerous ways.
It is impossible to give an accurate overview of fathers’ rights movements at any one time as specific groups appear and disappear, and international and national movements fluctuate (Crowley, 2009). However, FRGs are increasing in numbers, and are ‘increasingly vocal’ (Collier, 2010: 120; see also Collier, 2013; Crowley, 2013; Crowley, 2009; Hacker, 2013; Rosen at. al., 2009). They are documented in the literature as existing in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK, and the USA (Basu, 2015; Busch et. al., 2014; Collier and Sheldon, 2006; Crowley, 2013; Dragiewicz, 2011; Flood, 2012; Hacker, 2013).

FRGs in specific countries transcend national boundaries. For example, F4J spread to the USA and Canada23 and influenced debates and protest styles beyond the UK (Collier and Sheldon, 2006: 6). There are also often striking similarities in narratives/concerns which transcend local circumstances and issues around parental rights have been in the spotlight internationally since the 1990s (Collier and Sheldon, 2006). Although this international dimension is important, so, too, is the particularity of national contexts (Collier and Sheldon, 2006: 5; Smart, 2006: vii), in this case, the UK. As well as broader cultural environments, these differences are partly due to the disparate national legal and policy landscapes FRGs operate within. There are also differences between individual FRGs within nations.

FRGs such as the Australian “Black Shirts” directly ally themselves with the men’s rights movement (Flood, 2004). FRGs also frequently repeat broader men’s rights claims that society is dominated by feminism and that this leads to men’s inequality (Boyd, 2004a; Boyd, 2004b; Boyd, 2008; Boyd and Young, 2007; Busch et. al., 2014; Crowley, 2008a; Dragiewicz, 2010). Some FRGs object to accusations that they are anti-feminist and/or anti-women and claim to take a gender-neutral approach. The official narratives of UK FRGs, for example, tend to be less explicitly anti-feminist than those like the Black Shirts. They often avoid overtly employing a men’s rights framing or acknowledging links with self-identified MRGs. However, implicitly men’s rights and conservative crisis narratives are invoked in their claims that the state/society is dominated by a feminist agenda which marginalises men. This is evident in the discussion of the (R)F4J manifesto below. Further, there is some evidence that members of FRGs are active in men’s rights groups and vice versa (Jordan, 2014).

The (Real) Fathers 4 Justice: the “new” politics of fatherhood

Fathers 4 Justice (F4J) played a key role in raising the visibility of fatherhood politics and fathers’ rights issues in the UK in the 21st century. Established by self-styled ‘founding father’, Matt O’Connor, in 2002, the campaign group quickly became known for their attention-grabbing direct action methods and acts of civil disobedience (Collier, 2006; Jordan, 2014; Jordan, 2009). For example, in September 2004, F4J activist Jason Hatch scaled Buckingham Palace dressed as “Batman”. Hatch took up residence on a balcony for five hours, producing a banner reading ‘Super Dads of Fathers 4 Justice, Fighting for your Right to see your Kids’ (Collier, 2006). Superhero costumes became part of the F4J “brand” and were frequently central to the many spectacles they staged at their height. In an autobiographical book on the group, O’Connor claimed that F4J became part of ‘the national fabric of popular culture’:

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23 Collier and Sheldon (2006, p. 1, n 1; p. 6, n 3) note that there were F4J websites for Australia, Italy and the Netherlands but it is not clear whether these were sanctioned.
[F4J were] spoofed by comedy acts ranging from Rowan Atkinson on Comic Relief to Catherine Tate’s “Gingers 4 Justice”, as well as TV adverts for Vodafone and various cartoons. There was Fathers 4 Justice Lego and ‘Fathers 4 Justice’ the song, written by a punk band called the Molloys

(O’Connor, 2007: 221)

It was estimated that at its height F4J had 12000 members and was the fastest growing pressure group in the UK (Grant, 2005). Although they do not achieve as many column inches as they enjoyed at their peak, F4J were, and remain, ‘the most visible and high-profile fathers’ rights group in the UK’ (Collier, 2006: 59). They still regularly feature in the news media (see F4Ja) and they have a presence on social media through an active Facebook group (F4Jb) and Twitter profile (F4Jc).

As well as being particularly visible, the group is one of the more extreme in the UK. Families Need Fathers (FNF), for example, have existed for decades, but have not attracted the same level of publicity, partly because they are more moderate in their methods, messages, and to some extent their aims, although there are overlapping concerns between the groups. Despite continuing high-profile debate about fathers’ rights and related issues in the media, there remains little research into the fathers’ rights movement in the UK, especially research based on interviews with fathers’ rights activists.

In common with other FRGs, (R)F4J argue that post-separation fathers are discriminated against in family courts. The Blueprint For Family Law In The 21st Century (O’Connor et. al., 2005) sets out a critique of the UK family law system, outlining a manifesto for change. Charges against the system are that it is financially and emotionally punitive for those engaged in contact disputes, and that in either not awarding fathers (sufficient) contact,24 or in not enforcing contact orders, family courts fail to operate in the ‘best interests of the child’25 (O’Connor et. al., 2005). The Blueprint recommends ‘a new language...for family law – a language which is free from the taint of gender prejudice’ (O’ Connor et. al., 2005: 34). The purported failure of the system to maintain contact between children and fathers is seen as contributing to the ‘problem of fatherlessness’, which is in turn said to be causing the ‘breakdown’ of society.

Britain is in breakdown. Family breakdown. The very fabric of society is disintegrating as the glue that binds families together dissolves in the shifting undercurrents of contemporary social dynamics

(F4jd)

This framing illustrates the way in which the family becomes a key site whereby “crisis” is articulated. In situating fatherlessness as a problem and as leading to the

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24 The evidence suggests that ‘most non-resident parents who apply for contact get it’ (Hunt and Macleod, 2008: 189), as discussed later in the chapter.

dissolution of society, a circular logic is advanced where: ‘a perceived breakdown of traditional masculine authority in relation to the family, and around men’s relationships with women and children, [...] has become both the cause and symptom of [...] crisis’ (Collier, 1995: 177). F4J also claim that negative constructions of men have ‘become acceptable in advertising, the media and society in general’, stating that ‘this “reverse sexism” is not only as unacceptable as discrimination against women, but profoundly damaging to young men and boys who increasingly feel isolated and disconnected from their families and society’ (F4je). The presentation of the “problem” as a distinctly modern phenomenon, is also a recurrent theme in crisis of masculinity narratives, as argued in Chapter 2.

The Blueprint sets out a ‘Bill of Rights’ consisting of ten articles. Noteworthy articles include Article 1: ‘Every child has the right to a meaningful loving relationship (the bond) with both their parents and grandparents’; Article 3: ‘Children of separated parents shall be presumed to be cared for equally by their parents, save for instances where there is a proven risk (to the criminal standard of proof) to the child (presumption of shared care)’; Article 4: ‘Both parents have the right to be treated equally and fairly in the eyes of the law, regardless of gender (equality of parenting role)’; Article 7: ‘The family is the desired, natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by the State’, and Article 10: ‘All working parents have the right of access to flexible working arrangements and affordable childcare. State benefits will be apportioned equally between parents, or relative to the agreed division of parenting time’ (O’Connor et. al., 2005: 33). The Blueprint argues, more specifically, for a transparent family court system26, a legal presumption of shared parenting27, and active enforcement of contact orders including arrest of parents (mothers) who breach them (see Jordan, 2009 for further details).

It is worth noting several assumptions underpinning these articles. First, there is the clear suggestion that men are discriminated against in the emphasis on ‘equality of parenting roles’ and accompanying equality of state benefits. Second, ‘parents’ are understood to be the biological parents of the child/children as exemplified in the reference to the ‘natural’ family in Article 7. (Article 6 also refers to ‘natural’ parents.) Third, both a particular kind of father (or parent) and a particular kind of family are envisaged. The so-called “traditional family”, that is, a married or co-habitating heterosexual couple with a child or children is prominent in (R)F4J campaign discourse. The heteronormative premise that contact issues take place against a heterosexual background and always involve a dispute between a (female) mother and (male) father, pervades fathers’ rights discourses generally (Collier, 2006; Collier and Sheldon, 2008). Fourth, the emphasis on ‘proven risk’ in and evidence ‘to a criminal standard’ of child abuse comes from the inaccurate, yet frequently made, claim that “false” abuse allegations are often made by resident parents (mothers) against non-resident parents (fathers). The highly controversial concept of ‘parental alienation’ is also invoked in the

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26 UK family courts have been open to the media since 2009.
27 There is no clear definition of shared parenting in the UK, nor agreement in academic discussions over terms, so that “shared parenting”, “shared care” and “shared residence” are often used interchangeably (Haux et. al., 2017: 571). I use ‘shared parenting’ as this is the language of (R)F4J. Debate around a presumption of 50/50 residence/contact after separation continues in the UK policy/legal context, but was recently rejected in favour of an ‘ambivalently worded’, emphasis on ‘the involvement of both parents’ where it serves the best interests of the child, with “involvement” remaining undefined (Haux et. al., 2017: 573).
Blueprint (see O’Connor et al., 2005). These themes are common in the literature of other FRGs in the UK and beyond and are unpacked where relevant in the interview analysis.

Overall, (R)F4J aim ‘to end the demonisation and denigration of men and boys in society’ and what they refer to as ‘anti-male discrimination’ against fathers ‘on the basis of their gender’ (F4Je). (R)F4J are therefore a men’s movement as they organise around the identity of being “men” (and, more specifically, “fathers”) in response to what they consider to be distinctive “men’s issues” and “men’s interests”. In addition, they articulate a standpoint on feminism (see Chapter 1). Fatherhood is an important signifier of masculinity (Westwood, 1996: 25), therefore ‘the social politics of fatherhood cannot be divorced from masculinity politics’ (Hobson and Morgan, 2002: 5). The putatively “new”28 politics of fatherhood is, especially through the fathers’ rights movement, intimately connected to the purportedly “new” politics of masculinity.

Researching (Real) Fathers 4 Justice: methods and data

The interviews with members of (R)F4J were one-off, in-depth, and semi-structured, with a small convenience sample of nine group members (eight men and one woman) from one branch in England. I conducted the interviews in July and August of 200629. They were audio-recorded and transcribed. The research went through ethical approval processes and measures were taken to safeguard interviewees, their children, and ex-partners from harm. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and data was anonymised on transcription. Pseudonyms have been used to protect interviewees’ identities. With the permission of the group organisers, I attended a limited number of their public meetings. Some observations based on my fieldnotes are drawn on to supplement the interviews where relevant. The specific branch that the participants were members of is not named for a further level of anonymity.

Mirroring average demographics of FRGs (see Crowley, 2013; Dragiewicz, 2010), all participants self-identified as “White British”, most had a professional occupation/background, and ages ranged from early-30s to mid-60s. It would be essentialist to make simplistic claims about how gender interacts with race, class and other identities based on participants’ self-identified characteristics. However, as discussed below, the masculinity/ies reflected in the interviews were consonant with what have been argued to be broader representations of white, middle-class and heterosexual/heteronormative gender identities (Hooper, 2001; Gavanas, 2004).

The small sample size means that the interviews are not necessarily representative of all members of FRGs. However, wider resonances between these member’s perspectives and broader narratives of masculinity, fatherhood and FRGs are explored through connections with other research in these areas. During the fieldwork, this branch (along with others) split from the original Fathers 4 Justice organisation and was renamed the ‘Real Fathers For Justice’. As this was due to disagreement over methods and personal differences, rather than a change of aims, membership, or leadership, all of which remained constant, I have referred to the group as (Real) Fathers 4 Justice throughout the book. I do not distinguish between the splinter group and F4J unless this is relevant.

28 Although there have been shifts in discourses around masculinity and fatherhood, it is too simplistic to suggest that these can be located as stable, fixed, chronologically-specific discourses, as the use of the language of “new” (and “old”) implies.

29 The interviews were conducted as part of my doctoral research which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK.
The analysis is based on a thematic exploration of themes around masculinity/gender, fatherhood and fathers’ rights using qualitative analysis software (NVivo). (See the Introduction.) The dissociation of masculinity from male bodies means that masculinity cannot straightforwardly be read off male bodies and indicates that there is no absolute link between individual men and particular forms of masculinity (see Introduction). Therefore, rather than seeing individual interviewees as expressing one form of masculinity, I analyse patterns in masculinities expressed across the interviews at the level of symbolic difference. Although I ascribe quotations to individuals, then, the focus was on understanding patterns across the group narrative and the masculinities do not derive from, nor simplistically map onto, individuals. Further, the interviewees articulated different masculinities in different contexts. The selected excerpts, unless otherwise stated, are illustrative of views expressed in all or most of the interviews. The idea that interviewees “express” or “construct” masculinity does not imply that they do so explicitly and consciously; rather, that they draw on such implicit constructions is based on an interpretation of their perspectives. Where I refer to “models” of masculinity, these are seen as ideal types (Hooper, 2001), as masculinity frames, rather than complete, coherent or universal representations, as ‘masculinity, like femininity, is always liable to internal contradiction and historical disruption’ (Connell, 2005: 73).

Masculinities are context-bound (Woodward, 2007), but there are recognisable broad models of masculinity. To capture both broader gendered identities and the specific research context, I draw on existing masculinity frames identified in the literature, but adapt these to fit the nuances of the constructions of gender articulated in the interviews. There was no single, unified narrative in terms of which frames were dominant in the interviews. Depending on the context, each of the frames was sometimes valorised, and sometimes pathologised. The relationship between the three frames was similarly fluid and complex: at various times, co-existing, overlapping, contradicting and complementing each other. This both reinforces the importance of talking about multiple masculinities and problematises the idea that there are straightforward relationships between different masculinities. In terms of existing analyses of FRGs, it upsets overly simplistic perceptions of the gendered identity/ies at play within such groups and also extends the insight of the diverse nature of men’s movements overall.

As well as multiple masculinities, there are multiple notions of fatherhood which are partly determined by the social contexts they are constructed within (Lupton and Barclay, 1997). There are also of course variations between individual fathers who are situated differently in terms of, for example, race, class, sexuality, and in their parenting circumstances – for example, whether they live with their child/children (Collier and Sheldon, 2006: 3). The construction of fatherhood in the setting of fathers’ rights groups must be understood as partly dependent on this context. The fathers interviewed are post-separation fathers (see Collier and Sheldon, 2008) who are invested in the ‘subject position of “fathers’ rights activist”’ (Collier, 2006: 65). In the interview analysis, I explore participants’ discussion of what they saw as central to their identities as fathers’ rights activists, fathers, and ex-partners, as well as their understandings of the aims and identity of (R)F4J. I take each of the three masculinities in turn and related notions of fathers (and mothers). I also draw out issues related to their gender politics via an exploration of the extent to which they employ backlash, postfeminist and feminist narratives, as well as ideas of “crisis” where relevant.
Bourgeois-rational masculinity: the ‘campaign for truth, justice and equality’ and the good enough father

In defining bourgeois-rational masculinity, I draw on aspects of Charlotte Hooper’s (2001) characterisation of this frame. Implicitly contrasted with old, traditional, or violent/warrior masculinities, the bourgeois-rationalist frame is represented as a modern, progressive, form of masculinity which is ‘less aggressive, more egalitarian and democratic’ (Hooper, 2001: 98). In this model, ‘superior intellect and personal integrity is valued over physical strength or bravery’ (Hooper, 2001: 98). In addition, ‘respectability as a breadwinner and head of household’ is combined with ‘calculative rationality in public life’ (2001: 65) and ‘reason, and self-control’ are idealised (Hooper, 2001: 65). In the context of FRGs, the emphasis on calculative rationality in public life includes a focus on the law as the locus for action and justice (see Collier, 1995; Collier, 2011). Bourgeois-rational masculinity is, as the label suggests, associated with a middle-class form of masculinity which assumes a white, heterosexual, male identity (Connell, 2005; Hooper, 2001). Bourgeois-rational masculinity is enlightened, reason-oriented, autonomous, and liberal in outlook, as are the men who are implicitly assumed to perform it. This masculinised rational self is associated with the moral/political values of justice, rights, formal equality, and liberal democracy, and with the public spheres of politics, the law, and universal morality, within which these values are enacted.

Outside of academic gender studies, bourgeois-rational masculinity is more commonly understood as not a masculinity, but as the ideal of the “gender-free” liberal self. This form of masculinity, paradoxically, tends to assume that it is not a masculinity at all. It is premised on ideals of formal equality and “rational man” where “man” is assumed to stand for “human”. As discussed below, there was an emphasis on the apparently gender-neutral framing of fathers’ rights issues in this frame, which relies on this idea that bourgeois-rational selves are not gendered, and that gender can be bracketed off from debates related to parenting/families. Because gender is mostly claimed to be irrelevant here, ideas of crisis of masculinity (which entail some engagement with gender) were not prominent where bourgeois-rational masculinity was articulated.

Feminist scholars have long noted that the public sphere of rights and justice is constructed in masculinised ways and premised on notions of self which are defined through symbolically masculine characteristics as outlined above (Elshtain, 1981; Gilligan, 1982; Lloyd, 1984). Bourgeois-rational masculinity relies on a “feminine” symbolic counterpart marked by emotion, relationship, and caring (Held, 2006) which provides its contrasting “other”. This construct of femininity, along with the feminised private sphere of care, affective bonds and dependent relationships which accompanies it, has largely been excluded from “western” moral and political thought (Gilligan, 1982; Lloyd, 1984). Such gendered binary oppositions are not merely analytical, they replicate power-laden hierarchies, whereby the “masculine” is positioned as superior and the “feminine” is rendered inferior (Prokhovnik, 2002; see the Introduction). The construction of values and practices related to caring as “feminine” has had concrete effects in disadvantaging women through their unequal assumption of care-work which is, in turn, devalued in society (Held, 2006; Tronto, 2013; Robinson, 2011; Sevenhuijsen, 1998). Whilst bourgeois-rational masculinity may appear relatively unproblematic as it does not incorporate violence, (overt) sexism, or other negative attributes often associated with masculinity, then, in reaffirming this model, there is a reinforcement of the association of masculinity with justice, rights and the public sphere, which is
accompanied by symbolically reconnecting femininity with (feminised) caring, relationships, and the private sphere (see Jordan, 2018). Traditional gender relations are thus implicitly maintained where bourgeois-rational masculinity is invoked. (In the next section, I analyse the extent to which these symbolic associations between caring and femininity are destabilised through notions of caring masculinity and, more specifically, the new man/new father frame articulated in the interviews.)

The first and most fundamental manifestation of bourgeois-rational masculinity in the interviews was the construction of (R)F4J’s aims as primarily about justice, understood as winning rights and changing family law: ‘it was all about getting the family law changed’; (George) ‘I got involved with Fathers 4 Justice [...] hopefully to try and change the law so they’ll look at fathers in a more just way’ (Simon). As feminist legal scholars have argued, the rational, supposedly non-gendered, abstract voice of the law, is a symbolically masculine voice (Collier, 1995; Smart, 1989). The emphasis on law represents the privileging of universal principles and derives from a “gender-neutral” or “formal equality” perspective. Interviewees justified the need for legal reform by asserting that changes are necessary to fulfil basic “rights”. However, whose rights are at stake was contested and articulated in contradictory ways by participants. Whilst, unsurprisingly, “fathers’ rights” were commonly invoked, interviewees legitimised their demands through simultaneous appeal to additional, assorted sets of rights – men’s, parental, children’s, grandparents’ and family rights, were all advocated. Rights claims manifested differently depending partly on attitudes towards feminism and views on whether the issues are gendered.

The law was seen as the primary site of justice and the pursuit of legal change was presented as respectable, non-violent, and egalitarian, the pursuit of the “Man of Reason”. Portraying the application of current family law as biased, participants saw the remedy in more adequately employing “gender-neutral” principles to create formal equality. When asked if he thought (R)F4J was part of a “men’s movement”, one interviewee answered:

probably, yeah, it is. Trying to have a fairer society, everything should be 50/50 [...] women aren't on the same salaries as men, if you're doing the same job you should get paid the same, and it should be the same with the child [...] individual merit, it should be black and white really, down the middle

(Simon)

Whilst women’s inequality in the workplace was recognised, this acknowledgement is counterposed with the claim that men are discriminated against in terms of access to their children and are thus unequal in this respect. Men’s purported lack of parenting opportunities is not framed entirely in terms of men’s victimhood in society more broadly (there are remaining inequalities for women). There is a postfeminist backdrop here in that gender issues are assumed to impact just as negatively on men and women overall. A “gender equivalence” perspective is presented that men and women are equally disadvantaged, the only significant difference is that discrimination is experienced in different spheres.

The claim that men are regularly unfairly denied contact and that ‘fathers are “underdogs”’ is ‘deliberately propagated by FRGs’ (Meier, 2009: 245). In the US, research suggests that: mothers do not necessarily have an advantage in custody disputes; where sole custody is awarded it is more likely to go to fathers; men are rarely denied contact, and joint custody is the most common outcome of litigation (Meier, 2009: 245). Further,
the ‘powerful’ belief that ‘fathers are too often given short shrift as parents’ combined with the ‘(unfounded) assumption that men who fight for custody are particularly dedicated fathers’ appears to have influenced how family courts react to fathers ‘in ways which decidedly do not position them as underdogs’ (Meier, 2009: 245). In the UK, too, most non-resident parents (usually fathers) who seek contact are awarded it (Hunt and Macleod, 2008). Some have argued that UK family courts have in practice long operated from a strongly pro-contact basis, sometimes to the detriment of children and mothers (Birchall and Choudry, 2018; Kaganas, 2013; Thiara and Harrison, 2016) as discussed later. This central factual claim constantly reiterated by (R)F4J is therefore heavily contested.

Rather than making explicit demands for men’s equality, most interviewees denied that debates over family law/fathers’ rights are gendered. Some members seemed to see raising questions of gender as almost distasteful, preferring to focus on issues that were less explicitly gendered, at least in their perception. Martin, for example, distanced himself and the group from the ideas of another member, John, saying his views (discussed later) ‘weren’t really the views of Fathers 4 Justice’ because ‘he was quite a strong campaigner for men’s rights, which wasn’t really what, you know, what we were all about. We were about changing the law, not you know, not for the good of man, not for the detriment of women’. Luke similarly disavowed the views of this member:

what [John] lectures a lot on is gender [...] it has its roots in, because of my sex, when I went to court and asked for what I did, was it affected by, that I was male or female? And, I don’t think it does, I think actually for my own case, it was more that I was biological dad or non-biological dad. When I say dad, that could have been biological mum or non-biological mum [...] So, actually I don’t think the men’s movement is necessarily about gender first and foremost, I think it’s about parental rights

Claims that family courts unjustly favour mothers and that men are treated as second-class parents were frequently made, a point to which I return. Interestingly, however, the contradictory idea was expressed that it is not (non-resident) fathers per se that are disadvantaged in family law, but the less overtly gendered category of non-resident parents:

I don’t think the sort of gender bit really comes into it. It just seems to be that the system doesn’t really support the non-resident parent, you know, unfortunately in 90 percent of cases that happens to be men, but, you know, if there was more men staying at home looking after the kids, there’d be a lot more women probably joining “Womens 4 Justice”. It’s the law that we’re trying to change, which I think often gets lost in, certainly in the newspaper headlines, “men only” kind of job, they have tried to force it that way, [...] that ain’t the case

(Martin)

The “flaws” in the system are seen as reflecting a “natural” division of parenting labour. Interviewees often suggested that “injustices” in the family court system are driven by lawyers motivated to make money from conflict between clients, as opposed to being the result of gendered ideas about parenthood. Where, as above, members acknowledged that most non-resident parents are fathers and most resident parents are mothers, this
is rendered an unfortunate “accident”, reflecting men’s and women’s individual choices, rather than a gendered pattern in the division of parenting labour.

Postfeminist ideas are also prominent in this narrative. Any possibility of considering the relevance of feminist critiques of family structures is obscured here by the lack of recognition of women’s unequal position in society overall. In this aspect of the group narrative, society is assumed to be broadly gender-equal. The application of laws slightly amended to make them more adequately gender-neutral is therefore the solution to removing any remaining inconsistencies. The logic of this position casts feminism as a relic of the past, a necessary stage in society’s evolution, but one that is no longer necessary.

The claim to gender-neutrality maps on to a bourgeois-rational masculinity premised on abstract, formal equality, which marginalises considerations of concrete relationships of power. This resonates with wider fathers’ rights discourses which often similarly emphasise gender-neutral, formal equality/rights claims (Busch et al., 2014; Collier, 2014; Collier, 2010; Boyd, 2008; Boyd, 2004a; Boyd, 2004b; Crowley, 2008a; Crowley, 2008b; Dragiewicz, 2011; Flood, 2012; Rosen et al., 2009). Far from representing an impartial view, however, this framing obscures importantly gendered aspects of the issue. The formal equality perspective is blind to the fact that women undertake the vast majority of primary caretaking roles (Featherstone, 2009), that women with children are usually financially disadvantaged in post-separation situations (Jenkins, 2009), and, finally, to the reality that the single biggest factor in fathers not gaining access to their children after separation, is their relationship with the child prior to separation (Smart, 2006: ix). Importantly, these facts are precisely not “accidental”, rather, they are the result of broader, unequal gender relations and gendered social structures. Susan Boyd (2008: 71) has noted a similar failure to acknowledge inequalities in caring duties (along with other gendered divisions which disadvantage women) amongst the Canadian FRGs she researched, who ‘did not offer a structural analysis’, and whose ‘strategies did not address the material underpinnings of gendered roles in heterosexual families’ (see also Boyd, 2004b; Collier, 2010).

The “gender-neutral” approach manifested further in the suggestion that (R)F4J wasn’t about fathers’ rights at all – rather, that the group’s aims are also beneficial to women, grandparents, and children. Interviewees were eager to assert support for the cause from these groups to emphasise the universal scope of their objectives. Martin, one of the leaders of the regional branch, commented that: ‘it was never set up to be, a male orientated organisation, it was there to change family law for the good of everyone’. Martin claimed that women made up a disproportionate section of the local group’s membership despite non-resident parents usually being fathers: ‘if you go by the percentages, 90 percent of your members are gonna be male [...] actually, it was probably about 70/ 30’. Ray, another branch leader, also suggested that that the local group had a large number of women members, estimating a higher figure: ‘it was about 60/ 40, 60 percent male, 40 percent female’ and suggested that women were more likely to sign (R)F4J petitions on the street. Martin reiterated several times that ‘plenty of women’ attended the local (R)F4J meetings and recounted that his new partner had been very supportive:

she would come to the meetings to support me because obviously she’d been to the courts with me, she’d wrote the letters with me, she’d seen what the system was like and was as evil about it as I was, even though it wasn’t her children she was fighting for
The presence and support of women was offered as proof of the universal applicability of the group’s objectives. Women (often partners) were claimed to perceive the “injustice” of the system even if they are neither male, nor fathers: ‘female sympathisers were normally a new girlfriend who [...] could see, what was going on’ (George). When asked why he thought that, despite his estimated high proportion of female members, there were very few women at the meetings I had attended, Ray agreed that they were not present in large numbers, saying ‘I think they looked upon it as being a boys’ meeting’. This shows some awareness that the masculinised atmosphere of meetings might not appeal to women (meetings are discussed further below). Such claims regarding women’s participation in campaigns are often used by FRGs, in conjunction with appeals to an apparently inclusive set of rights, as a defence against accusations that they are anti-feminist and/or anti-women (Collier and Sheldon, 2006: 4).

Although it is not clear how many women actually participated in the activities of this branch of (R)F4J, there was some evidence of a gendered division of labour within the group. Ray noted that women undertook specific sorts of roles. This point was echoed by the woman interviewee, Anne, who, whilst mirroring the view that ‘it’s not just an issue for Dads, it’s one for women and children too’, also used the label ‘Purpleheart’ to refer to herself and her involvement in the campaign. ‘Purplehearts’ is the name given to the support group consisting of women and men who are not engaged in child contact proceedings (F4Jd). Anne explained that Purplehearts played a subsidiary role rather than ‘doing the main things’. Despite mentioning her involvement in protests, she said that she was mostly responsible for ‘behind-the-scenes’ administrative work. Although women participated, then, they were cast in different, supporting, parts. The distinction between members (fathers) and non-members implies that the issue is not, after all, centrally one for women and non-fathers. The descriptions of what women did in practice, indicates a concrete sexual division of labour that would suggest that this was not simply a superficial and formal distinction. This impression is confirmed in the hypermasculine construction of activists also expressed in the interviews and resonates with other research on women’s conflictual experiences in FRGs elsewhere (Crowley, 2009).

Along with women, feminism, or at least relatively “safe” tropes of feminism, are enrolled in the (R)F4J campaign in interesting ways. For example, the colour purple, often associated with feminism, is a recurrent theme as it is the international colour for equality (O’Connor, 2007: 61). Founder Matt O’Connor (2007: 50) has also explicitly drawn legitimising analogies with the Suffragettes’ cause, referring to members of F4J as the ‘suffragents’. The phrase ‘the personal is political’ with its well-known feminist heritage, is used on the F4J website (F4Jd). The co-optation of feminism and feminist language is not uncommon amongst FRGs. For example, groups in Aotearoa/New Zealand have been shown to use ‘egalitarian discourse explicitly and implicitly engaged to constitute the sexes as ideally equal – under the law and in their social rights, responsibilities and obligations’, explicitly claiming that what they called ‘masculinism’ was simply about redressing inequalities ‘against men as well as women’ and therefore complementary to feminism rather than antagonistic to it (Busch et. al., 2014: 445; 446).

O’Connor (2007: 208) also cites Mary Wollstonecraft approvingly in his book about the group. Notably, there are no references to post-18th century feminist

30 The term “purplehearts” has military connotations – it is the name of a medal given to soldiers who have died or been wounded in the US army.
philosophers or to feminist movements dating past the early twentieth century in the case of the Suffragettes. These earlier feminists are represented as vindicated and their image is drawn on to sanction the modern-day ‘Suffragents’ – similarly radical, noble, and irrefutably fighting the just fight. The projection of feminism on to the past draws on postfeminist themes and works to position fathers’ rights as the contemporary gender equality issue. Women’s issues have been addressed and men, implicitly, are once again situated as today’s gender victims.

As noted, various constructions of good fathers were present in the interviewees’ narratives. The idea of the father most closely aligned with bourgeois-rational masculinity is that of the “good enough” father. Like masculinity, fatherhood is constructed through social and cultural processes and is both ‘a rather amorphous phenomenon’ and ‘the site of intensely political debate’ (Lupton and Barclay, 1997: 3). The ideas of good fathers employed by (R)F4J and its members are invoked to establish that there is a need for fathers and that men deserve (more) contact with their children. Claiming that most fathers are “good”, and that fathers are important, bolsters the (contested) claim of FRGs that children also almost always lose out where courts and/or mothers impose barriers to relationships with their fathers.

The term “good enough father” draws on Eriksson and Hester’s (2001) arguments that, in the eyes of social services and the courts, ‘virtually any involvement by fathers with their children constitutes good-enough fathering’ (Eriksson and Hester, 2001: 791). Their arguments contradict the misleading assertions of (R)F4J that judges are too willing to deny fathers contact with children as a result of mothers’ allegations of domestic violence. In this case, the phrase “good enough” father is used to indicate that the standards by which interviewees defined good fathers were sometimes rather minimal. Good fatherhood was frequently constructed as simply not being an actively bad father. The criteria for not being a bad father were implicit in the interviewees’ understanding of themselves as having done nothing to deserve contact being withheld. These criteria included regularly making child support payments, not abusing alcohol or drugs, and not being violent or abusive towards the child/ren:

you understand if you get bad fathers who don’t want anything to do with their children, you can understand them being denied access, but when you regularly pay maintenance and you’ve done nothing wrong, they’ve stopped you seeing your child for no reason at all

(Simon)

I went in with a clean conscience, you know, I wasn’t a heroin addict, I wasn’t an alcoholic, I didn’t have money problems, there was no violence, there was no reason at all, not even any reason offered to stop me seeing my kids

(Martin)

Reflecting the aims of (R)F4J, there was a clear premise that men should be assumed to be good fathers unless incontrovertible evidence to the contrary could be provided: ‘the presumption should be, this child is with both parents unless the other parent can give concrete evidence asap why one parent should not be seeing their children, i.e. he has convictions for beating his wife or abusing his children, or something’ (Dominic). This strong innocent-until-proven-guilty attitude, where “innocence” and “proof” are problematically defined, underpins the demand for a legal presumption of contact (see Hester and Radford, 1996).
Some members went further than Dominic and suggested that even where fathers have been found guilty of perpetrating domestic violence towards the mother, this should prevent him neither from being involved, nor from being considered a good father. John argued that domestic abuse is irrelevant: ‘if the husband has been a swine, well it’s still no reason to actually deny him his children’ (John). He related an instance where a member of (R)F4J had been denied contact for this reason:

he was really, really hurt when his ex-wife, I mean how cruel can you get? Said he used domestic violence, you know, ‘he hits me, therefore,’ and the judges say ‘oh, he can’t see his children if he hits you,’ what the fuck’s that got to do with it, if he sees his children in a safe environment?

A similar view was expressed by another member at an (R)F4J meeting. He commented that it shouldn’t make any difference whether the father had a record of previous violent behaviour towards the child’s mother, if there was no violence towards the children themselves. Others overhearing the conversation seemed uncomfortable with his opinion. It was not clear whether this was because they disagreed, or because they were afraid that it would make a bad impression on an outsider.

This was a minority opinion, and most interviewees would have seen (proven) domestic violence as sufficient reason to prevent a father from seeing a child. However, there was a more general impression that the relationship between mother and father should have little or no bearing on contact issues. This perspective has been criticised, as women who have left violent men are left vulnerable through child contact arrangements which may enable perpetrators to retain control over their ex-wives or partners (Dermott, 2008; Eriksson and Hester, 2001; Featherstone, 2009; Humphreys and Thiara, 2003; Thiara and Harrison, 2016; Birchall and Choudry, 2018). In addition, there was a broader troubling dismissal of domestic violence as a problem, and a persistent narrative that in the vast majority of cases abuse is invented by ex-partners to deny access to children, as unpacked further in Chapter 6.

Next, I examine the second masculinity, new man/new father masculinity. Here, caring practices and values were partially (re)constructed as masculine through the notion of the “nurturing father” and expressions of care between members of (R)F4J. To some extent, the ideas associated with nurturing fatherhood could be considered feminist and destabilising of dominant notions of masculinity (such as those articulated in bourgeois-rational masculinity), which gender caring feminine. However, once again, postfeminist narratives were more prominent overall, and the radical potential of new man/new father masculinity is argued to be limited and to map on to progressive crisis of masculinity discourses.

**New man/new father masculinity: ‘in the name of the father’, nurturing fathers and caring masculinities**

New man/new father masculinity, like bourgeois-rational masculinity, is modern, ‘softer’, and less violent than “traditional” masculinity (Hooper, 2001: 72). This frame invokes the image of the ‘new man,’ embodying the ‘caring, angst-ridden, self-deprecating face of new masculinity’ (Woodward, 2007: 9). Here masculinity is reframed as caring and sharing; “feminine” attitudes, behaviours and values are no longer the sole domain of women (Collier, 2006). In contrast to bourgeois-rational masculinity, which emphasises rights
and justice, then, the alternative values of care and connection are central. To some extent, then, new man/new father actually incorporates the construction of femininity which bourgeois-rational masculinity was argued to be premised on a contrast with. Rather than being symbolically associated with femininity, however, this model was gendered “masculine” by interviewees in their insistence that this is how to be a good man/father. Further, there were gender-differentiated assumptions about what it meant to care as a mother and as a father.

The idea of the new man means that ‘some men are more inclined to define interpersonal relations as the most important area of their lives, often citing the family’ (Westwood, 1996: 25). The ‘new father’ is a subset of the new man and closely intertwined with this image: ‘in keeping with conceptions of the new man, the emotional and caring lives of men were centred around the refashioned notion of the father, no longer the distant co-earner, but a co-carer and parent in the work of raising a child’ (Westwood, 1996: 27).

Nurturing fatherhood is often represented as contrasting with a historical ideal of the distant patriarch or breadwinner-father. While there is evidence of the increasing contemporary importance of ideas of the nurturing father, this is not a new form of fatherhood (Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2006; Hobson and Morgan, 2002; Lupton and Barclay, 1997) and the “newness” of both new fathers and new men is contested. Kenneth MacKinnon (2003: 13) suggests the “new man” first appeared in the 1970s and ‘has been recreated in a variety of forms since then’. This purportedly new species is portrayed as having self-consciously revised his masculinity to be ‘anti-sexism’ and to ‘form non-oppressive relationships with women, children and other men’ (MacKinnon, 2003: 13). Ideas of “new”, more egalitarian and caring masculinity/ies have been argued to be one manifestation of responses to crisis of masculinity (Segal, 2007: xvii-xviii). In partially shifting away from traditional masculinity and holding out the promise of altered, kinder, masculinity for a modern world, this frame resonates with what I have called “progressive” ideas of crisis, where the assumption is that masculinity should be amended, rather than more radically deconstructed.

In the case of (R)F4J, new man/new father masculinity does not simply reduce to fatherhood as central to interviewees’ identities. As noted, the participants articulated multiple constructions of fatherhood in the data (see Jordan, 2009). It is a specific version of fatherhood as nurturing, cosy, and involved, which is central to this identity. In addition, new man/new father masculinity incorporates more than fatherhood and childcare, relating, for example, to care between men (e.g. relationships between (R)F4J members). Finally, as with bourgeois-rational masculinity, this frame is based on an implicitly white, middle-class, heterosexual identity (Gavanas, 2004: 6).

The focus on family and “new” fatherhood underpinning new man/new father masculinity was apparent where interviewees emphasised children’s rights as the primary concern of (R)F4J: ‘it isn’t about dads’ rights, it’s about kids that are fighting for their particular choice, talking about children’s rights first’ (Ray); ‘it’s a children’s issue as far as I’m concerned. I think Fathers 4 Justice made a mistake in emphasising the father aspect of it’ (Dominic). At times, the articulation of children’s rights appeared to be a strategic attempt to echo the “rights of the child” international law discourse and to invoke the same idea of the inclusive, universal appeal of the campaign suggested to be at stake in the representation of women participants. The use of rights rhetoric was argued above to be associated with the strategic, legalistic and abstract focus of bourgeois-rational masculinity, rather than with a shift towards concrete expressions of care for children linked to a new man/new father model.
However, there was also a narrative that about listening to children's voices which went beyond this rhetoric. For example, Luke argued for a more child-centred approach to contact disputes, which would make children's voices central in determining where their “best interests” lie. Simon expressed similar views: ‘children should have more influence on it, more of a say on who they want to be with as well, but they don’t even listen to the children’. This maps onto a new man/new father masculinity frame in prioritising a concern with childrens’ welfare and empowering children to maintain connections with fathers on their own terms.

The shift from fathers’ and/or men’s rights to a child-oriented approach is consonant with the model of the nurturing father. Beyond abstract talk of rights, interviewees articulated another objective, namely, fostering individuals’ relationships with children. Although perhaps unsurprising, this emphasis on maintaining particular relationships is noteworthy as fathers’ rights discourses frequently privilege formal, universal rights (Crowley, 2008a), rather than specific parent-child bonds. Here, participants expressed a conception of “good fatherhood” that resonates with what the literature suggests represents a social shift towards ideals (if not necessarily practices) of involved fatherhood (Daly, 1995; Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2006; Flood, 2003, Hobson and Morgan, 2002; Lupton and Barclay, 1997; Marsiglio, 1995; Westwood, 1996). The picture of ‘the nurturant father, highly involved with his children and sharing the parenting with his female partner’ has been argued to exert ‘a powerful influence on popular perceptions’ (Flood, 2005: 1). The construction of nurturing fatherhood emphasises emotional connections between father and child and the desirability of fathers assuming more of the everyday caring responsibilities involved in raising children.

Interviewees sometimes positioned nurturing fatherhood as modern and involving deep emotional father-child bonds equivalent to those expected between mother and child. Emphatic statements of interviewees’ love for their children were common and articulated as integral to fatherhood in general statements about what it means to be a father:

> my love for my children is unquestionable, you know, I’d lay down my life for my kids, and I think, you know, it’s only when you’re in that position, you think they are the only thing in the world I’d actually die for, you know, or give up an organ

*(George)*

The father-child connection was seen here as rooted in intimacy, trust and emotional ties developed through everyday interactions, routine, and a close involvement in the child’s life:

> For me, it’s about involvement [...] it’s knowing his teacher, it’s knowing his friends at school, erm, it’s being involved in parent’s evening, [...] you know, I went on school trips, which I think is great, as a single dad going on a ski trip, all his mates there, and I think that, to me, is really important [...] just a total involvement in your son’s life, which is what I’ve got

*(Tim)*

just gettin’ to see your kids, you know, you pick them up and they’re in their school uniform and helpin’ them with their homework [...] I haven’t been asked to or been able to help my kids with their schoolwork for several years now, you know, that’s
very sad, you know, you think oh you only get them once a month, [...] it’s a pleasure to help your kids, you know, it’s something you don’t do for money you do it out of love  

(George)

I was always quite an involved, active, dad [...] I’d even been known to turn up to some meetings with my son  

(Luke)

There is an emphasis on familiarity and being present in important aspects of children’s worlds, at home, at school, and with their friends. For Luke, taking his son along to work is evidence of his commitment to spending as much time as possible with the child, and there is a suggestion that this means that work took second place.

Members’ identities as fathers’ rights activists were constructed as derived from their identities as nurturing fathers. In addition, interestingly, one interviewee suggested that his ideas of fatherhood had changed as a direct result of contact with other fathers in (R)F4J, saying that his parenting had been ‘modelled on all the other fathers that obviously I’ve met in Fathers 4 Justice’ (Martin). A couple of participants stated that being separated from their children after relationship breakdown had made them better fathers, and that this was partly because their children perceived attempts to gain contact as sacrifices and proof of their love. When asked what his relationship with his children was like at the time of the interview, Martin answered:

Yeah, I mean, it’s fantastic. The up side of it is that because the children are aware of what I went through, [...] of just how much, sacrifice, err, I don’t want a pat on the back for it, cos I’d give up anything for em, but, they know that daddy sold his business to go and work for somebody else so that he could have more time off so that he could see em and work round the court order and all that sort of thing. My relationship with em now is without a shadow of a doubt better than it ever would have been if I’d stayed in the marriage.

It is argued below in relation to the notion of ‘shared parenting’ that despite these narratives of involvement in childrens’ lives, performing equal caring practices was not often perceived as necessary to good fatherhood. However, a couple of interviewees did suggest that shared parenting should be about taking equal responsibility for children, as well as participating equally in mundane caretaking duties. In this conception, such everyday activities are integral to being a good father. John noted that ‘fathering’ is often understood as ‘providing’ and as ‘a biological role’, but suggested he would like to see this notion of fathering changed to be understood as ‘more men being caring for children…’ The caring role was said to be important for men as he argued that involved fathers are ‘less likely to fight, less likely to be a rapist, err, and lots of dysfunctional behaviours which are macho-orientated, because he’s got a vehicle for expressing his care and sensitivity’. He related this to his own experience of single parenthood:

it brought out a side of me, when I had to look after three children, that I didn’t know existed, a really sensitive, caring side, it was there before, I mean, I used to be the one to like cuddle them and put them to bed and things like that, but, when it’s like your sole responsibility to do it, you’re thinking, yeah, I’m the person in
their life, you know, I am God to them, and I've got to really look after them, and it really changes you

Here, fatherhood is constructed as allowing men to ‘to be nurturing and emotionally demonstrative with their children’ (Lupton and Barclay, 1997: 80). John makes the seemingly essentialist assumption that men’s natural inclinations are to violence and sexual predation but simultaneously situates opportunities to care as a way of overcoming men’s “nature”. This conception of involved, nurturing fatherhood, was stressed by John and one other interviewee. Both emphasised the importance of everyday prosaic caring practices such as nappy-changing, bathing, feeding and reading stories. For them, it is not enough simply to care about your children, it is also essential to care for them, looking after their emotional and physical needs consistently as a primary or co-carer. John described his role as primary carer:

[I would] change them, clean them, feed them, put them to bed, read them stories and so on and so forth [...] I had to take on what was probably deemed as the mother’s role, even though it wasn’t in our case because I’d always done that, I’d always changed nappies, and always played with them, and always been kind of the main, interactive, hands-on parent...

Practices of caring were seen as indicating an involved or active fatherhood that resonates with the conception of the ‘new father’, who, ‘unlike the distant patriarch of the past, is involved in everyday parenting’ (Gavanas, 2004: 6). Luke, who was involved in a contact dispute over a stepson, argued that in circumstances such as his own, where fathers were ‘fighting to see a child that wasn’t biologically their own’, ‘it didn’t matter about the biological aspect [...] as far as these kids were concerned you were dad’. For him, it is precisely direct care-giving that entitles someone to call himself a father and, consequently, it is caring practices which should determine the legal right to see child/ren after separation, not the biological “fact” of paternity. On this view, fatherhood is fundamentally social in nature, rather than simply naturally occurring as a result of biology.

Similarly, while John’s comments acknowledge that the role of primary carer is usually linked with motherhood, he is clear here that he believes that it is both possible and desirable to debunk the “traditional” notions of mothers and fathers. Fathers are argued to be just as capable of taking primary responsibility for looking after their children’s everyday emotional and physical needs.

In this equal parenting perspective, the roles of mothers and fathers are (or should be) largely interchangeable, illustrated in the rhetorical question raised by one of the participants: ‘do people believe that dads can be just as good mums and mums be just as good dads?’ (Luke). Another member, when asked what it meant to be a father, responded: ‘the same as being a mum’ (Simon). The equal parenting perspective thus relies on a claim that fathers ‘can be just as nurturing, affectionate, responsive and active with their children as mothers are’ (Doucet, 2006: 68). These interviewees were less anxious to define their parenting as inherently “masculine”, seeing their roles as interchangeable with that of a mother. In this form, caring masculinity challenges gender essentialism as it questions the notion that mothers/women are naturally “best” at caring, a view found in some other FRGs (see Boyd, 2008; Crowley, 2013). This perspective upsets binary masculine/feminine forms of care as the nature of the care is not reduced to the sex/gender of the individual providing it. As discussed in the next
chapter, however, there were also counter narratives asserting the distinctively masculine nature of fatherhood and men’s caring practices.

As previously noted, with one or two exceptions, desires to remain connected with children were most often not articulated as involving everyday caring work. Instead, the notion of “shared parenting”, was emphasised. It has been suggested that there is no clear definition of “shared parenting” in the UK, nor agreement in academic discussions over terms, such that “shared parenting,” “shared care,” and “shared residence” are often used interchangeably (Haux et al., 2017: 572). However, as employed by (R)F4J, the phrase refers to a legal presumption of 50/50 “contact”, giving both parents the default right to equal time with children (see Trinder, 2010; Hunt et al., 2009). This notion is central to the (R)F4J campaign. Indeed, it has been claimed that F4J were influential in the introduction of a ‘presumption of involvement’ by both parents via the Children and Families Act 2014 (Kaganas, 2013). The presumption has been argued to be an unsuccessful attempt by the Coalition Government at the time to appease FRGs – unsuccessful because it falls considerably short of the 50/50 starting point (Kaganas, 2013).

Advocating a legal presumption of contact is problematic in many respects. For example, it does not entail joint responsibility for children, nor an equal division of parenting labour as might be implied by the phrase “shared parenting” (Gavanas, 2004: 11, see also Messner, 2000: 45). In the case of (R)F4J, there was little expression of a desire for equality in caregiving practices. One interviewee suggested that fathers may not always have the financial resources to take responsibility for 50 percent of the childcare: ‘a child’s got to live with somebody […] it’s ok for [Bob Geldof31 to] promote the idea of 50/50, […] but we haven’t all got Bob Geldof's money, yeah, so your ordinary man in the street can’t say well I’ll look after my child 50 percent of the time’ (John). Mothers are seemingly presumed to always have the required financial resources that fathers lack. Despite John’s argument that men can be primary carers discussed above, there is a clear assumption that mothers assume primary responsibility by default in most cases.

Although the legal presumption of contact represents a cornerstone of the (R)F4J campaign, many of the participants expressed similar ambivalence about the idea on other grounds:

I agree with the philosophy of the starting point should be 50/50, my own opinion is I don’t think it works particularly well for the child, the ones I’ve seen, unless the parents are that bloody friendly, when they’ve separated or divorced, if they’re that friendly then it’ll work and they live within close proximity, but normally there’s animosity there […] I just think there’s more areas of conflict, and I think for children they need, they need more stability, err, splitting these weeks, you know, back with daddy on a Wednesday or back with mummy on a Thursday, I just think it’s too, I think it’s too tough for kids

(Tim)

George, like Tim, advocated the idea in principle, but expressed doubt that it would work for his children: ‘I don’t think in my case, it would benefit my children shared parenting, […] some things aren’t practical and aren’t in the interests of the children, but

31 Although not formally a member of F4J, Sir Bob Geldof (former pop star and activist for various political causes, such as ‘Live Aid’ and ‘Make Poverty History’) supported their cause and was a vocal advocate of fathers’ rights (see Geldof, 2003).
I think where shared parenting can work, yes’. In contrast with John, whose emphasis was on perceived problems for fathers, these interviewees (along with others) show an awareness that shared residency or a strict 50/50 split in parenting time may be detrimental to children’s wellbeing depending on the circumstances. Although there is limited evidence about the impact of shared residency on children (Haux et al., 2017), some have suggested that split living arrangements may have a negative impact on children and, in cases where there is a history of domestic violence, may entail risk or stress for one parent, often the mother (Burman, 2016; Eriksson and Hester, 2001; Hester and Harne, 1999; Thiara and Harrison, 2016). A recent UK study drawing on the retrospective perspectives of adults whose parents’ relationships ended when they were children, has suggested that increased contact may not be beneficial for children (Fortin et al., 2012).

Like Tim and George, most of the interviewees suggested that they had no wish to seek shared residency or 50/50 contact, instead, they wanted to see their children, or to spend more time with them than the mother/courts allowed. Whilst this was clearly partly motivated by concern for their children, this is not the radical vision of involved fatherhood that is sometimes implied by FRGs to be at the heart of their vision of parenthood. This resonates with broader fathers’ rights discourses where members ‘seek not sole [or joint] custody but liberal access to children’, and ‘mothers are still expected to assume primary responsibility for everyday childcare’ (Gavanas, 2004: 11; see also Bertoia and Drakich, 1993; Collier, 2006; Jordan, 2009; Messner, 2000). In short, rights to as much “quality time” as fathers happen to desire are demanded without a corresponding commitment to equalising the duties of more prosaic caring activities and responsibilities.

This tension in narratives of new fatherhood has created enduring controversy surrounding ‘the image and reality of the “new father”’, with responses ‘ranging from approval and celebration to scepticism and derision’ (Segal, 1990: 26). This range of responses revolves around the question of whether men are really more egalitarian, caring, and more involved fathers (Connell, 2005: 42). The desire to be a new, caring, father expressed by some interviewees might be considered implicitly “feminist” in that it challenges essentialist views of women/mothers making the best parents (see also Boyd, 2008; Crowley, 2013).

On the other hand, there was no recognition in these constructions that gendered perceptions of women as natural parents serve to disadvantage women rather than only men. Women’s inequality was ignored, rather than being understood as connected with some of the barriers to men taking on more of the caring load around children. The dominant group focus on fathers’ rights discussed in the previous section stifled any potential for sustained feminist analysis of the gendered issues at stake.

Further, increases in positive attitudes towards caring masculinity do not necessarily indicate significant changes in men’s practices in increasing their share of care labour (Björk, 2013; Eerola, 2014; Klinth, 2008) such that changes in the gendered division of caring labour are less extensive than rhetoric around “new” fathers would suggest (Segal, 1990: 33). This can be partly due to structural barriers, especially for less privileged men (Miller, 2011; Tarrant, 2018). However, it may also potentially be due to some men’s resistance to change, a possibility frequently obscured in discussions of caring masculinity (Klinth, 2008).

Significantly, despite the reliance of FRGs on the image of the “new” father, as noted above, the most significant obstacle limiting fathers’ participation in parenting after separation or divorce is their lack of participation prior to separation (Smart, 2006: 148)
FRGs, including (R)F4J, fail to acknowledge gendered inequalities in caring duties and do little to consider how care labour might become more equal before separation (Bertoia and Drakich, 1993; Boyd, 2004b; Boyd, 2008; Collier, 2010; Crowley, 2008a; Flood, 2005; Flood, 2012; Jordan, 2009; Mandell, 2002; Smart, 2006: ix). This implies that fatherhood only becomes a keen concern when fathers’ rights are purportedly denied (Crowley, 2009; Flood, 2012; Maddison, 1999).

Caring masculinity and the more specific new man/new father model present in the interviews, can, in this way, have problematic, postfeminist implications. If stripped of an appreciation of the unequal caring work performed by women and unaccompanied by a commitment to rebalancing this work, representations of caring masculinity can depoliticise childcare and position nurturing fatherhood as merely a desirable, individual lifestyle choice for men. “New”, egalitarian forms of masculinity have been argued in the Norwegian context to have shifted to be perceived as a positive individual mindset, rather than a collective project to bring about gender change (Bjørnholt, 2014). For Bjørnholt (2014: 309), ‘contemporary egalitarian, hegemonic masculinity’ works ‘as part of a social closure’ where gender equality is constructed as achieved, serving ‘to obscure persistent gender inequalities, thus preventing further change’. This is illustrated in Bjørnholt’s (2012: 64) argument elsewhere that (Norwegian) FRGs have influenced aspects of family policy in Norway which seem to imply that men ‘are to be treated more equally as parents’, rather than (or perhaps as well as) being asked to ‘contribute to gender equality in the family’ in accordance with feminist claims that women are made unequal through their disproportionate share of parenting. This different emphasis could have concrete effects in marginalising women’s inequality. The ideas of caring masculinity present in this case often similarly reinforce this social closure in implicitly drawing on postfeminist perspectives that women are no longer unequal and in the suggestion that being deprived of fatherhood is only a disadvantage for men and is not linked to privilege/power in other arenas.

New man/new father masculinity was also expressed in the interviews in terms of men expressing emotion and supporting one another, as (R)F4J was conceived of as providing a network of caring relationships between members. Providing practical and emotional backing is a common function of FRGs (Collier and Sheldon, 2006). Two strands of support-work were prominent in the interviews. The first was helping fathers through the court process and to maintain contact with their child/ren. The ‘McKenzie friend’ (a non-qualified, voluntary adviser to litigants without legal representation in court) was emphasised here as ‘McKenzieing’ was conceived of as providing emotional support, as well as legal guidance. The second strand was the consolation of encountering other fathers going through similar experiences. Feeling less lonely was seen as vital during an emotionally traumatic time.

Nearly all of the (R)F4J members mentioned the support they gained from participating in the group as a positive experience which counteracted the isolating effects of going through child contact disputes: ‘probably the most helpful thing was it was the support network, without doubt, for me anyway, it was just amazing to have that support’ (Tim); ‘it was nice to be around people who were in the same boat as you, I got a lot of support out of it’ (Simon); ‘I read this article [...] saying about, you know, this Dad’s campaign group and it told a couple of stories of people who were denied contact with their kids and it was like, that’s me, that’s what I’m going through, there is somebody else!’ (Martin). Luke also stated that involvement in the group made him feel less isolated and suggested further that being able to help other people through the process had a positive impact on him:
I kept involved because, I, needed the outlet, I felt very isolated, and I felt, even relatively early on in my case, that, not only the need to talk with other people about possible options [...] I’m [also] able to empathise and speak to other people and say, well, you know, I can give advice on that, and [...] that helped people [...] there’s just nothing you can put a price on actually sitting in a room with people (Luke)

Tim also mentioned his own part in supporting other people: ‘F4J gave me what I needed, it really did. And I think also, I mean ultimately, you end up, when you’re in a situation like that, you end up helping other people, which is a way of helping yourself as well’. Martin articulated a similar feeling, saying that:

from a personal point of view that I found it, erm, very gratifying to help a lot of people, you know, sometimes just to listen to people, you know, like, ten o’clock at night the phone rings, half past twelve they’re still going. I was there once, I had nobody to sort of turn to, erm, and it is, for men, I think it’s very hard to find help and support out there [...] so when they come along to Fathers 4 Justice, quite often they’re not really, err, as we would call them, “activists” [...] but they just need, a shoulder to cry on, someone to point them in the right direction and quite often to sort of say that, you know, as someone said to me, you’re not alone

Helping other fathers made Martin feel like he was ‘achieving something’. He also talked about the role of assisting individuals in gaining contact with their child/ren: ‘we put people back in touch with their kids, you know, which, is like what we’re supposed to do [...] there’s one lad [...] he didn’t see his son [...] it was four and a half years before he actually got contact with him again, and now he sees him all the time’. (R)F4J meetings often seemed to be more concerned with direct action tactics and were noisy, boisterous spaces which were not conducive to sharing of caring emotions (see Chapter 6). However, personal stories were told either during breaks or immediately after meetings. In these more informal spaces, there was evidence of the support network referred to by various members in the interviews. One striking example was a father saying an emotional thank you to one member. The father had lost contact with his daughter but had regained it, apparently through the actions of the member who had acted as a ‘McKenzie friend’ in court.

Emotional sustenance was sometimes given as interviewees’ primary reason for participating in (R)F4J and most saw it as an important indirect benefit of membership. Here there was a notion of men as in need of nurturing and also responding to each other’s care needs. However, there were tensions around how far this kind of caring was valued. A couple of interviewees suggested that in fact there wasn’t enough emphasis on this kind of emotional support, and that it wasn’t always prioritised by the group. In addition, many made derogatory statements concerning another FRG, Families Need Fathers, which was perceived as focusing too much on support rather than protest. Further, the bonds between members were premised on the problematic basis of male bonding. The latter two themes are discussed in relation to hypermasculinity and direct action in the next chapter.

Conclusion
Detailed analysis of the narratives of fathers’ rights activists suggest that multiple models of masculinity, of fatherhood, and also diverse representations of gender politics are present. Bourgeois-rational masculinity is associated with a symbolically masculine language of rationality, individual rights, and formal equality which marginalises debates around gendered inequalities. Postfeminist ideas were associated with this depoliticisation of gender. The individualised perspective underpinning bourgeois-rational masculinity means that from within this frame, the sense of a collective politics was not conceived of as one that centred around gender, closing off feminist (and backlash) understandings of the issues. The conception of “good enough” fathering couples this emphasis on simplistic notions of equality with the idea that to be a good father it is sufficient to not be proven to be financially negligent, violent, or abusive (at least not towards children). In addition, bourgeois-rational masculinity reinforces dominant gender norms as it rests on an implicit, traditional, construction of femininity as relegated to the private sphere of emotions and caring. Alongside the “gender-neutral” framing discussed in this section, there was some explicit articulation of a “difference,” or a gender-aware, perspective. This consisted of a “backlash” narrative that men as men are disadvantaged by the family law system and that this is a result of bias against men and fathers. Despite hints that men are the newest gender victims, there was little resort to ideas of “crisis of masculinity” from within this frame due to the dominant insistence on apparent gender-neutrality.

Caring practices and values were partially (re)constructed as masculine in the new man/new father masculinity frame. Caring masculinity was articulated through a new man/new father masculinity through the notion of the “nurturing father”. In addition, interviewees emphasised the practice of care between members of the group and (R)F4J as a support network. However, these expressions of care were limited and complicated by the existence of competing narratives. Whilst new man/new father masculinity was expressed in ways that might be considered feminist at times (in the partial move away from essentialised ideas of parenthood), postfeminist ideas also implicitly shaped the discussion of nurturing fatherhood. Nurturing fatherhood was positioned not as a feminist project for addressing gendered imbalances in childcare, but as an individual lifestyle choice for men which is often limited by society’s assumptions about women making the best parents. In recreating the rhetoric of new fatherhood without recognising the need for men’s caring practices to change, the new man/new father frame, like other constructions of new masculinity can contribute to ‘social closure’ (Bjørnholt, 2014: 309), rendering invisible gendered inequalities and the need for social change. In short, deploying the notion of the “new father” can ‘often mean little more than a symbolic attachment to the idea of being a father rather than a full, equal, and unmitigated engagement in its harder practices’ (Whitehead, 2002: 154, see also Dermott, 2008). Similarly to ideas of masculinity articulated by feminist men’s movement, the White Ribbon Campaign (analysed in Chapter 3), the representation of ‘new and improved’ masculinity (Seymour, 2018: 8) here resonates with a progressive crisis of masculinity discourse and does little to shift gender binaries. Instead, it may work to reinforce them, albeit along slightly different lines. In the next chapter, I turn to examining the hypermasculinity frame, which, in contrast to the two “softer” masculinities discussed above, is associated with a stronger assertion of gender difference, a conservative crisis narrative, and a more overt “backlash” positioning.

References


Mike Buchanan (undated) [YouTube Channel] Retrieved from:
Chapter Six

Backlash Men’s Movements Part 2: (Real) Fathers 4 Justice, hypermasculinity, and fathers as superheroes

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined men’s and father’s rights groups and set out part of my analysis of interviews with members of (Real) Fathers 4 Justice. I suggested that three masculinities were articulated in the interviews, along with corresponding multiple notions of fatherhood and explored the first two frames, bourgeois-rational masculinity (mapping on to “good enough” fatherhood) and new man/new father masculinity (mapping on to the “nurturing father”). Here, I analyse the final frame, hypermasculinity, and the corresponding construction of the “superhero father”. This frame featured most prominently in the interviewees’ comments on the direct action methods that were generally thought most appropriate to achieving (R)F4J’s objectives. In this context, ideas of the father as superhero arose and more overt backlash ideas were present, along with an explicit, conservative crisis of masculinity narrative. The deployment of dichotomous contrasts between “bad” and “good” fathers is also examined; as well as the interviewees’ concern to underline the need for (good) fathers by highlighting the existence of “bad” mothers. As noted in Chapter 5, the most explicit ‘crisis of masculinity’ themes were articulated through hypermasculinity, where conservative notions of men’s victimhood at the hands of feminism were prominent.

Hypermasculinity: ‘fighting for your right to see your kids’, superhero fathers and the dad’s army

The final model, hypermasculinity, was constructed oppositionally to the less aggressive bourgeois-rational and new man/new father frames, acting as a ‘counterimage’ to throw the new man into relief (Hooper, 2001: 74). In contrast with the assumption of men as “gender-free” in bourgeois-rational masculinity, hypermasculinity is overtly premised on a specific performance of manliness. Displays of physical or verbal domination are central to hypermasculinity, along with bodily strength and bravery. This frame thus emphasises risk-taking, especially physical feats involving threats to life and limb. Hypermasculinity draws on ideas of the traditionally masculine hero and is constructed in opposition to a passive, physically weak and timid, symbolically feminine victim in need of male protection. From this frame, the other two masculinities are feminised as they embody what are understood as “feminine” attributes. Hypermasculinity is linked with conservative crisis narratives in the reclamation of aspects of “traditional” masculinity and claims that a lack of male parents has led to a breakdown in modern society. In addition, hypermasculinity was most closely associated with a backlash agenda as this crisis narrative was articulated as a response to the problems with feminism. Hypermasculinity is commonly marginalised through projection onto the working-class and other groups of underprivileged men (Hondagneau-Sotelo and Messner, 1994). Although hypermasculinity was similarly pathologised at times in the interviews, it was,
at other times, valorised. This ambivalence was particularly reflected in the interviewees’ views on direct action methods as explored below.

As discussed, most interviewees maintained that the (R)F4J campaign was gender-neutral and I argued that this related to bourgeois-rational masculinity. Some of the (R)F4J literature, however, explicitly blames feminism for perceived injustices against fathers. For example, one advertisement, featuring a baby boy, ‘Matthew’, covered in derogatory ‘anti-male’ statements (including ‘abusive’, ‘feckless’, ‘deadbeat’, ‘cashpoint’, ‘hated’) claims that ‘organisations like the Labour Party, the Fawcett Society and the NSPCC have become dominated by a militant form of feminism which will condemn Matthew to a lifetime of discrimination’ (F4J). Although it was a minority view, interviewees sometimes similarly constructed the issue of post-separation child contact as very definitely gendered and as indicative of wider discrimination against men.

One interviewee, John, explicitly emphasised gender and articulated a clear backlash perspective. John was also a member of men’s rights group, the ManKind Initiative (see previous chapter) and gave public talks on men’s rights. He saw fathers’ rights as ‘just one manifestation’ of a broader assertion of men’s rights, aimed at redressing what he perceived to be a gendered imbalance in society: ‘we have a pathological interest in women’s issues as interpreted by feminism in modern Britain [...] don’t men have problems, don’t men have issues, don’t men have rights?’. John laid the blame for what he claimed is the habitual denigration of men and men’s rights squarely at the door of feminism and suggested that educating others about this was his motivation for being in the group: ‘the reason why I joined [(R)F4J] is to try and get across to these guys, that what they are suffering is because of feminism’; ‘[I wanted to] educate the guys to let them see that their hurt was only part of a wider discrimination against men in modern Britain’. Men are framed as lacking equal rights and as the real victims of the gender order. The ‘father as victim discourse’ (Collier, 2010: 133) is a familiar theme in FRG narratives more broadly (see also Boyd, 2008; Busch et al., 2014; Collier, 2014; Crowley, 2008a; Crowley, 2008b; Crowley, 2009; Crowley, 2013; Collier, 2010; Flood, 2012; Rosen et al., 2009).

On John’s account, ‘if you actually scratch the surface of any feminist you will see that they really dislike men, and this [discrimination against fathers] is an extension of that dislike’. A conservative crisis of masculinity narrative is invoked via the men’s rights perspective, where “crisis” is seen as a result of feminist challenges to men’s traditional roles. Discrimination against men/fathers was argued to be a direct result of feminism:

according to the tenets of feminism [...] women are discriminated against, women are oppressed, women are victims, women are abused, and who’s doing all this discriminating and oppressing and victimising and abusing, men! So this is why they have a pathological dislike of men and if they can hurt men, again, it does sound paranoid but [...] you will see this as a kind of subtext, dislike of men, and if they can hurt men in any way they will

(John)

Feminism is not only at the root of men’s oppression, feminists are constructed as “out to get” men, and as trying to institutionalise women’s privilege at the expense of men. However, John was also keen to point out that that he is all for ‘women’s liberation’ which he claimed to have been involved in historically and which he distinguishes from feminism:
women's liberation is equality for women, equal opportunities, equal respect for
women, equal treatment for women and equal rights for women, and I still
promote that as I did in the late 1970s and I used to go on marches for women's
liberation [...] during the late 1970s and during the 1980s, women’s liberation was
hijacked by feminism, which is an actual political movement and has its own
agenda and its own ideology, that essentially wants favouritism for women, and
actually policy-inspired favouritism for women, not equality, it’s got nothing to do
with equality, and it doesn’t actually represent women, feminism, it represents
their own ideology.

The conception of feminism/ feminists as demanding ‘favouritism’ for women and
the unfairness of this was reiterated later in the discussion: ‘if we’re talking equality we
can’t have pick and mix equality, we can have fucking equality or nothing’ (John). He also
re-emphasised that he is not being sexist in his advocacy of men’s rights: ‘it’s not anti-
women what I’m doing, it’s just pro-justice’. This is a familiar narrative about the
purported excesses of feminism: hatred of men and vindictive intentions to ‘hurt’ men,
the favouring of women, and feminism as not representing all women. All of these are
tropes regularly enrolled in men’s rights discourses and other FRGs have, similarly,
voiced vitriolic attitudes directed at feminism and feminists (Boyd, 2008; Dragiewicz,
2011; Hacker, 2013; Menzies, 2007) (or, at least, that is, against the “wrong kind of
feminism”, see Boyd, 2004a).

John’s eagerness to highlight that his position is not sexist and that, unlike man-
hating (and sometimes woman-hating) feminists, he does not want to hurt women, is
another familiar move, which positions (modern) feminism as anti-equality. His past
involvement with feminism is used to claim legitimacy and his genuine commitment to
gender equality. There are some parallels in John’s simultaneous claiming of, and
distancing himself from, feminism with Jane Powell’s (former CEO of CALM) invocation
of her involvement in Greenham Common discussed in Chapter 4. To some extent this
also reflects the postfeminist narrative present in Powell’s views. However, whilst Powell
overall positions feminism as anachronistic and men as simply overlooked in struggles
for gender equality, John articulates a backlash perspective which sees purported damage
to men not as an unfortunate by-product of feminism, but as integral to the intentions of
(modern) feminism/feminists. Feminism is framed as the antagonist in a gender war, and
men as the primary casualties of the battle.

Whilst John uses equality rhetoric, he is not invoking a gender-neutral framing of
the issues as gender is overtly politicised – maleness and masculinity are politically
relevant because feminists have denigrated men and fathers. Given this representation
of social realities, the issue of fathers’ rights is gendered and the “natural” order has been
undermined by feminism and changing women’s roles, leading to societal breakdown.
The aim of (R)F4J, on this perspective, is to bring about true gender equality through
removing the oppression of men caused by feminism and reasserting men’s traditional
roles as father figures.

Another (R)F4J member, Ray, also expressed the view that feminism is damaging
to men. He approved of men’s rights activism around domestic violence, saying that: ‘the
women’s movement have grabbed the subject of domestic violence. What they won’t
admit is that the figures which are revealed by the Home Office, erm, 43 percent of victims
of domestic violence are male’. This statistic does not reflect the gendered reality of
domestic violence, but such simplistic “facts” are routinely enrolled by men’s rights
activists in problematic ways (Burman, 2016; Gotell and Dutton, 2016; Mann, 2016; Sheehy, 2016). Further, Ray’s problematic claims about domestic violence are used as evidence that “biased” feminist representations of women’s oppression by men have distorted the “actual facts” of gender relations in society.

Feminists and feminism were represented as disproportionately powerful by both interviewees in a manner which resonated with similar exaggerated declarations of feminism’s omnipotence by men’s rights activists (Allan, 2016; Basu, 2016; Hoddap, 2017; Maddison, 1999; Träbert, 2017). John decried what he perceives as the dominance of academia by feminist literature and research on women; ‘what about men’s problems, issues and rights, who’s addressing that, nothing, you don’t see any books on that at all’. In a starkly gendered representation, three UK universities were singled out as being ‘very feminist’ and as ‘like the three witches’. This casual sexism is a frequent feature of men’s rights narratives (see, for example, Hoddap, 2017). Further, feminists have long pointed out that men have been the assumed subject of academic knowledge and there is a long-established and ever-increasing literature on gender, men, and masculinity, not all of which is feminist-inspired (Brod, 1987). The problematic idea that feminism makes men (and their suffering) invisible is replicated here.

Ray also invoked the notion of feminists as gatekeepers. He recounted being denied permission to give a talk on the aims of (R)F4J at a university’s Student Union. His explanation for their refusal was that the Student Union ‘was very dominated by the feminist lobby’. In a public meeting of the group, a member made a reference to ‘feminazis’ controlling the local press. The ‘feminazi’ in question was a woman who answered the phones for a local radio station – she had been given this label because she had not invited the member to speak on the live show. It was not clear why her actions were interpreted as ideological as it did not seem that she had explicitly presented herself as a feminist. Being a woman and not allowing the member on the air appeared to be sufficient evidence of a feminist conspiracy.

Despite, or, perhaps, because of, his general hostility towards feminism, John defended the stunts carried out by (R)F4J by drawing a comparison with the actions of the Suffragettes:

one of the things that was in the press [...] ‘d’you think men who do that kind of thing are sensible enough to have contact with their children?’, this is one of the feminist things in the media [...] so I always say, ‘well, excuse me, but do you remember the Suffragettes chaining themselves to railings, throwing themselves under race horses, [...] smashing the windows, setting alight to churches, now would you call that sensible behaviour? Wouldn’t you want to kind of say using the same rationale, that these women are so irrational and silly, they don’t deserve the vote, they’re not sensible enough to have the vote’, using the same logic. That shuts everybody up [laughs]

As in the construction of the group as the ‘suffragents’ (see Chapter 5), the justice of the Suffragettes’s cause is considered analogous to the self-evident legitimacy of the (R)F4J campaign. The parallel with the Suffragettes is seen here as an incontrovertible answer to (feminist) detractors. However, John makes it clear which cause he thinks is more worthy:

when I say to people, when I say to my audiences, ‘Fathers 4 Justice are much more important than the Suffragette movement’, ‘Fucking what, why, how’, I say, ‘right’,
‘every woman in the audience who has children under ten, put your hand up’, and I say, ‘lady in the blue cardigan, which would you rather have taken away from you, your children or your right to vote?’, and she’ll say ‘my right to vote’, fucking answer, which is more important, women’s votes, or even men’s votes, or having your children, it’s just no contest

There are, again, elements of postfeminist discourse in these passages. Feminism is endorsed, as long as it is understood as firmly in the past (McRobbie, 2009). However, it is simultaneously repudiated and trivialised in comparison with fathers’ struggles to see their children through the setting up of a spurious (albeit rhetorical) “choice” between voting and contact with children.

**Direct action and the fathers’ rights activist**

Although this attention to gender (and feminism) tended to be downplayed or less overt in other interviews, hypermasculinity was present much more broadly in the data and tended to arise in discussions of (R)F4J’s methods. FRGs commonly use ‘strategies of service provision, lobbying and activism’, as well as offering: ‘self-help meetings, provid[ing] support for men undergoing separation, divorce and family law proceedings, lobby[ing] local and national governments to change policies and laws, and promot[ing] their views through newsletters, websites and media campaigns’ (Flood, 2004: 264-265). (R)F4J use all of these methods to varying extents, and consciously employ a ‘twin-track strategy’ (O’Connor et. al., 2005: 3) of combining the lobbying of political decision-makers with direct action protests.

The professionalised activities of lobbying MPs, letter-writing, and managing public relations via the media, were represented by interviewees as rational, cerebral and logical, thus mapping onto bourgeois-rational masculinity. “Direct action”, on the other hand, was constructed in terms of hypermasculinised accounts of physicality, danger, and risk-taking. Although members often perceived the different strategies and their corresponding masculinities as complementary, they clearly privileged direct action, and, by association, hypermasculinity. The interviewees emphasised the centrality of direct action to the group identity, (R)F4J’s successes in this area, and the importance of direct action to creating public awareness/influencing decision-makers. This was often explicitly contrasted with apparently ineffective bourgeois-rational methods: ‘we kept banging at the doors of the MPs and we kept knocking on the doors of the judges, and it was like, *this isn’t working, we’ve gotta try a different tactic*’ (Luke).

Stories of direct action were frequent, combining humour combined with a large dose of bravado. The dangerous aspects of, for example, climbing a building, were highlighted:

> we pulled a big stunt [...] I’d got this ladder right and [...] we knew we were going up about 35 feet, you know, unloading the van in the morning I saw a sticker on the ladder which sort of said maximum weight should not exceed 15 stone and I’m thinking I’m over 17 stone, uh-oh, [...] I said, I’ve got to go up the ladder first, I said, cos I’m scared of heights, I said, and it’s pitch black so I mean, the ladder’s going everywhere, they’re holding on to it for dear life cos I’m 17 stone in a Batman costume going up a ladder on the [building] in the centre of [locale] under CCTV cameras and the ladder actually went perpendicular to the wall it had that much bow on it and it was just one of those things I had to get up them and scrabble
across the top and if something went wrong you were in…

*(George)*

John described his part in a similar superhero ‘stunt’ which was videoed by another member of the group:

I look really cool with my cape, I was marching up and down there and showing off […] I’m such an exhibitionist but I was really, really good and I was up there for ten hours, and, [laughs] coming down, I couldn’t get down, I couldn’t find the ladder, cos I hate heights you see […] so it was good of me to go up there, […] I was hanging on the edge trying to find the bloody ladder with my feet hanging, and I looked such a prat! [Member] showed it me afterwards and I thought Oh my God, that’s so embarrassing, after me showing off on the ledge, waltzing up and down, trying to get off the bloody thing, I said, ‘you’ve gotta cut that bit, you’ve gotta cut that bit out, you know, edit that out, I’ll buy you a pint!’ [laughs]

The tale of his fear of heights and undignified descent from the building emphasises his bravery in climbing up there in the first place. Stories of direct action often centred around outwitting the authorities and “embarrassing” the police. Luke’s comments are illustrative: ‘I was climbing buildings and dressing up and actually making good my escape without getting arrested’; ‘if you could carry a ladder, or you had a vehicle and you could run quick, then, in a rather disorganised way, we were always confident we could outrun the police, if we couldn’t outrun the police, we’d outsmart the police’. George repeated the idea that (R)F4J ‘definitely scared the living daylights out of any authority’ and that ‘wherever we were, they were scared’, throughout his interview.

The interviewees suggested that performing direct action feats allowed them to reclaim a sense of control when they felt disempowered. Acts of civil disobedience were victories against the system and were therefore valued for their own sake. The judgment of such acts as successful was based not on impact in terms of potentially changing the law, but on how disruptive and visible they were. Many of the members interviewed offered a justification for their participation in direct action and especially for breaking the law: ‘I am a fighter, that’s why I joined Fathers 4 Justice, that’s why I broke the law, because if I believe in something, I will fight’ *(Tim)*;

I’ll break the law to change the law […] I wouldn’t bat an eyelid, if I got arrested tomorrow for climbing on the Houses of Commons, if it changed the law, I’d pay the fine a hundred times over and there’s a lot of people with the same attitude as me… you don’t get anything in this world any more if you ask “please sir can you change the law, thank you very much?” [laughs]

*(Martin)*

Tim and Martin see themselves as stalwarts, fighters, and outlaws, taking action rather than remaining passive in the face of injustice. Feelings of desperation and anger at the family law system were frequently expressed, along with participation in (R)F4J, and direct action in particular, as a way of dealing with a sense of powerlessness: ‘if you’ve tried everything else you’ve got nothing to lose’ *(George)* ‘I just felt I had to do something […] you get a personal satisfaction that something is happening and at least you’re doing something’ *(Dominic)*. Simon suggested that direct action was ‘a way to sort of let your frustrations out’, whilst John saw this as not just cathartic, but as a protest, a
reclamation of agency: ‘just make society listen [...] it was] a kind of a kick against society’.

Tim also expressed the satisfaction of fighting back: ‘I’m a law-abiding citizen, but it’s actually quite nice when you’re sort of sticking two fingers up to [...] the government, the police and everybody else, and I think it was just great pushing the boundaries sometimes’. Tim described his experiences of a specific protest method which the group referred to as ‘decontaminations’, where a false appointment would be made with a family lawyer to gain access to solicitors’ offices. (R)F4J members, dressed in white paper overalls to symbolise a “clean-up” operation, would enter the building en masse, blowing whistles and letting off airhorns. Tim particularly enjoyed one decontamination: ‘these guys, suddenly these all-powerful lawyers, didn’t know what to do [...] it just had a, it was a very powerful feeling doing those, it’s great [...] now you know what it feels like to be powerless, you have now got no power’. In contrast, Tim and the other members temporarily regained their power and control. As discussed further below, this emphasis on freedom and agency is a constituent of hegemonic forms of masculinity. The paradox of men’s claimed victimhood is also apparent – the interviewees represented themselves as simultaneously powerless in the face of women/family law/feminism, and as in charge of their destinies (see Whitehead, 2002: 55).

Interviewees saw direct action as distinctive of (R)F4J’s group identity in contrast to other, less effective, FRGs. As noted in relation New Man/New Father masculinity (Chapter 5), interviewees commented positively on the support offered by (R)F4J for fathers and emphasised the need for the social and caring aspects of belonging to the group. At the same time, however, they criticised Families Need Fathers (FNF), a charity set up in 1974, whose main function is precisely to help individuals through family courts, providing legal advice, and the emotional support recognised to be central to (R)F4J. Martin described FNF in especially unflattering terms: ‘FNF, Suicide Squad!’ He described his experience of attending an FNF meeting as follows:

[I] sat in a room for, err, 2 hours, maybe a bit longer than that, and listened to 15 people pouring their heart out, if I went back there, tomorrow, I’d sit in a room, for 2 hours, and I’d listen to 15 people pouring their heart out, if I went back there in 5 years time, guess what I’d find? Another 15 people, with another 15 stories, saying what a terrible system it is, well we know that [...] all they’re doing is helping the poor buggers that go through the system, well you’ve got to try and attack the system, turn the tap off, it’s like putting a bucket underneath a running tap innit, when the bucket fills up it just overflows, that’s already happened, stick another bucket there, [laughs] it don’t make no difference does it? Still gonna overflow, and that’s what FNF do down there. To me it’s just a total waste of time [...] I think they’d be much better off to scrap FNF, scrap their charitable status, by doing a direct action campaign

Because of their exclusive focus on self-help and lack of direct action campaigning, FNF were constructed as passive and parasitic on the system, in a manner reminiscent of F4J founder Matt O’Connor’s (2007: 47) (gendered) characterisation of “other” FRGs as ‘impotent’ and ‘ineffective’:

A lot of members were also members of Families Need Fathers, which, you know, we said, if you want support, if you want someone to hold your hand, someone to offload your story to, go to Families Need Fathers, if you want to change the law, come to us
George expressed frustration that too much time in (R)F4J meetings was spent offloading anxieties rather than on the “real work” of campaigning:

someone would wanna come to a meeting for the first time, offload their story for three hours, talk about, erm, their problems, but then not get off their arse and do anything about it. So, Fathers 4 Justice was, primarily, an action group. There were support there, we helped each other [...] but the meetings were predominantly about taking action and trying to change the law.

Luke was a member of both groups. Although he felt the work of FNF was important and valuable, along with George and John, he emphasised the idea that FNF were unlikely to be effective: ‘My involvement with them will never make the difference, the difference essentially is in F4J’. The perceived success of F4J in putting fathers’ rights on the political agenda and raising public awareness about the issue in its short lifetime was contrasted by several interviewees with the low profile of the much longer established FNF. Masculinity is reinscribed through descriptions of (R)F4J and themselves as activists, as successful agents of change.

Direct action was constructed in terms of hypermasculinised motifs. Notably, the group self-identified as a ‘Dads’ Army’, fighting for their kids. One protest was called ‘The Rising’ and included militarised symbols such as a tank; interviewees also referred to the ‘storming’ of buildings. The most persistent theme of the (R)F4J campaign is the superhero. Famously, (R)F4J members have donned superhero outfits in protests and superhero imagery is common in their literature with references to themselves as the ‘lads in lycra’ and the ‘men in tights’ (www.fathers-4-justice.org). In the interviews (as well as in the group meetings), the superhero theme was hypermasculinised in bragging about ‘being’ Batman, Robin or Spiderman, endowed with manly strength, bravery, and superpowers. Through such representations, the gendered body is ‘spectacularly visible’ in the (R)F4J campaign (Collier, 2006: 75).

In his book, Matt O’Connor (2007: 80-81) sets out ‘five fundamental rules to donning your supersuit and engaging in freelance voluntary superhero work’. Rules two and three are worth quoting in full:

2. Put a sock on it. It’s generally fucking cold up there. By the time the wind chills hit freezing, your bits will have shrunk to the size of raisins and your knob will have curled up for some self-loving and warmth. It’s long been suspected that superheroes ‘pad out’ their lunchboxes to compensate, and I can confirm that cosmetic sock enhancements were not unknown on F4J demos.

3. Wee freely. Worst of all is the inevitable call of nature, just when the police are climbing up the gantry [...] But when a man’s gotta go, he’s gotta go.

The passage clearly illustrates the masculinised construction of the (R)F4J superhero. To be an (R)F4J superhero, O’Connor (2007: 80, emphasis added) suggests, ‘requires one secret ingredient: balls’, underlining his perception that direct action is ‘man’s work’.

Direct action as man’s work was rendered explicit in some of the interviews. Although women had taken active roles in stunts, as members were keen to highlight in other contexts (in stating the wide appeal of (R)F4J), the participation of women was seen
as the exception that proves the rule and women were not generally expected to climb buildings. Anne, for example, had been openly involved in some protests, including playing a part in a visit to a solicitor who had denounced F4J in the press: ‘I just walked up to him and handed him this massive purple heart balloon’. She also recounted wearing a Father Christmas costume for a demonstration in London. However, whilst she had thought about dressing up as Wonder Woman for a ‘climb’, she decided against it because she was afraid of the impact of gaining a criminal record on her public sector job. Anne was also worried about potential distress for her children. Overall, she suggested that women had less time to be involved in (R)F4J, and especially in direct action, as they have children to look after. In addition, according to Anne, ‘it’s more difficult for women to stand on top of buildings for hours. Men can wee in bottles!’

Not only was direct action seen as a male domain, there was also a perception that it was a *particular kind of man* who was involved in ‘stunts’. Members participating in direct action were known as ‘activists’ or ‘climbers’ and ‘climbing’ was used as a synonym for direct action - ‘hardened activists’ (*Luke*) were glamoured and seen as having proved themselves truly committed to the cause. They were described as ‘people that wanna break the law to try and change the law’ (*Martin*) and ‘activism’ was constructed exclusively in hypermasculinised terms. Again, O’Connor (2007: 78) echoes these ideas, outlining the ‘Fathers 4 Justice commitment scale’:

**Model citizen:** willing to participate in demonstrations but not direct action. Very sensible and eminently intelligent. Probably joined Fathers 4 Justice by mistake.

**Armchair General:** keen on the idea of protest, but not the reality. Will sometimes talk the talk but never walk the walk.

**Reluctantly enthusiastic:** committed when it came to organising protests but not when it came to an encounter with the boys in blue.

**Borderline activist:** ready to get stuck in if push comes to shove. At the very least could be counted upon to be actively involved in any support team.

**Fully certifiable activist with all the paperwork to prove it:** totally fearless to the point of insanity and beyond. One hundred per cent committed

Anne, along with other members of the group who did not focus on direct action, would never be ‘fearless’ enough to be a ‘fully certifiable activist’ based on this classification. Once again, courage, commitment (read in terms of number of buildings someone is willing to climb up) and willingness to confront the authorities, ‘to walk the walk’ rather than just ‘talk the talk’, are the assumed characteristics of a “true” activist.

Interestingly, one interviewee claimed that (R)F4J was composed of working-class men, suggesting this was because middle-class men did not want to engage in the ‘dirty work’ of civil disobedience: ‘the middle class don’t want to get their hands dirty, and they kind of think well, I don’t want to go up on a roof, you know, if I’m a solicitor, or if I’m an accountant or a dentist, I don’t wanna be seen on a roof’ (*John*). It has been claimed that FRGs are composed of mainly middle-class (white, heterosexual) men (Doucet, 2006: 249), however, there is some indication of a division between the socio-economic background of the leadership and the ‘rank and file’ group members (see Bertoia and Drakich, 1993; Collier, 2006).

The idea of a division of labour between middle-class leaders engaging in intellectual activities (such as lobbying MPs) and working-class activists doing the work of direct action was symbolised in constructions of the figures of founder, Matt O’Connor and “ordinary” member, Jason Hatch. Both men were mythologised in the interviews and
both attracted their share of adulation and censure, illustrating a tension between bourgeois-rational masculinity and hypermasculinity. In the interviewees’ imaginations, O’Connor wore the pinstriped business suits and Hatch donned the superhero costumes.

Although O’Connor participated in direct action and civil disobedience, he is more often the public face of F4J in dealings with the media and politicians. His background in public relations and as a professional campaigner for movements such as the Anti-Apartheid movement, CND and Amnesty International (Collier, 2006: 56, n. 13), situate him as middle-class. O’Connor was described in terms that resonate with a bourgeois-rationalist frame: ‘Matt O’Connor, great on telly, […] good at doing that job, standing up and talking politically […] Matt, spoke eloquently, passionately, […] the guy sells it and makes you wanna stand up and be counted’ (Tim); ‘[O’Connor] actually got the, err, issue on the political agenda’ (John). O’Connor was seen as a ‘very clever guy’ (Tim) and as media savvy, but as ultimately weak when it came to sustaining high levels of direct action. O’Connor was admired for his eloquence, strategic abilities, and political vision, but also denigrated for failing to sustain direct action and ultimately losing control of the group.

Jason Hatch, in contrast, was lauded as one of the most active participants in direct action “stunts” and especially for scaling Buckingham Palace dressed as “Batman” in 2004. Hatch was idolised as physically courageous, stalwart and, importantly, constructed as typical of an F4J activist, with members basking in his reflected glow. In the group imagination, Buckingham Palace was legendary, the pinnacle of (R)F4J’s achievements, its “success” measured in terms of its daring nature and high media visibility: ‘Buckingham Palace, […] it’s probably one of the best publicity stunts ever, because, you know, it was a few blokes, a ladder, a van’ (George); ‘Buckingham Palace, […] it was very dangerous, but certainly it got the attention’ (Dominic). Hatch was characterised in heroic, hypermasculinised, terms: ‘you can see [another F4J activist], you know, changing his mind and going back down the ladder when he’s got an armed police officer, […] tellin him, you know, ’stop or I will shoot’ and Hatch who has heard the same stuff is actually erm […] just thought, sod it, I’m gonna keep going’ (George). This admiration for Hatch’s bravery was tempered by perceptions of him as a problematic father. He was disparaged by several interviewees for purportedly being driven by a love of fame rather than the desire to see his children (Jordan, 2009: 427). O’Connor, the face of bourgeois-rational masculinity, was represented as not masculine enough, while Hatch, revered for embodying hypermasculinity, was also sometimes condemned for being too masculine.

Although direct action was understood as integral to the group’s identity, a couple of interviewees criticised some activities, suggesting that the public were bored of the stunts. There was general disapproval of the 2006 incident where (R)F4J activist, Michael Downes, threw eggs at then Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly (Stokes, 2006). This kind of behaviour was said to convey a negative image:

throwing things at people, handcuffing to people, someone was convicted recently of throwing an egg at Ruth Kelly, what does that show us to be? When you’re making personal attacks that just makes us out to be a group of thugs

(Dominic)

Tim criticised the self-congratulatory nature of (R)F4J meetings and problematised the pursuit of direct action as an end in itself:
it’s a bit of a, became a bit of a, well I call it the exclusive club, without a doubt, you know, patting people on the back at meetings, oh you did this, you did that, oh god, you know, shut-up, let’s just get on with it, we shouldn’t be going around applauding people, you know, great that they’ve done it, superb, let’s change the law and then we can sit back and go well done, you know, what you did

As noted, then, there was some ambivalence towards direct action. However, overall, such methods were seen as central to the group’s identity and, in some cases, to the identity of individual members.

Superhero fathers

Superheroes and direct action were also important themes in the third representation of “good fathers”, the “father as superhero”. The construction of superhero fatherhood once again intimately connected the interviewees’ identities as fathers with their identities as members of (R)F4J. Their involvement in campaigning was understood both as proof of the fathers’ love for their children, and as a way of maintaining some kind of connection with them, even (or, perhaps, especially) where this action had not been successful. Some hoped that in the future their efforts would demonstrate to their child the strength of their attachment: ‘at least maybe I can tell my son, hopefully when I see him in the future, as to what his dad did, to make a difference’ (Luke); ‘I’ve got all my files in a box … one day when my kids come to me […] and say “you were a bastard, you did this, you did that” […] I can say “well, there’s the file, you read through, you can see what I’ve done”’ (Dominic).

Dressing up as a child’s favourite superhero was viewed as a form of contact, however indirect, and as a message to the child that the father was taking action to see them:

I know my lad did see me on the telly, […] he was quite proud of it, quite pleased, he used to tell his friends at school that his dad was Spiderman, he saw the good side of it, and I’m glad I did do it cos even though he’s at a young age, he still sort of recognised me, […] and I was sort of still there

(Simon)

The frequently iterated F4J slogan that ‘every father is a superhero to his child’ (fathers-4-justice.org), was often echoed:

to every child her parent is a superhero […] Any […] child at a certain age, their parent is a superhero, you might remove them from their lives but they’re still a superhero. And what do superheroes do, they fight for rights, in this case fight for the rights of children, very simple idea really

(Luke)

Superheroes are protectors of the innocent. The idea of fighting for children suggests a ‘traditional’ construction of fathers as heroes (Dienhart, 1998: 8) and of fatherhood as about care-as-protection, responsibility for standing up for children. George elaborated on the superhero theme in terms of his relationship with his own daughter:
I mean, my daughter [...] she trusts you with her life, because you're her daddy. If something spooks them or worries them, they come straight to you, no-one else, not their room, not cuddly toy, straight to you, because you are their hero.

Another interviewee linked fatherhood with similar notions, suggesting that being a father: 'brings in the traditional chivalry, you know, he has to look after, a man feels he has to look after his wife and children, he's the carer of the family, so to speak' (John). This reflects wider research demonstrating that perceptions of fatherhood embedded in masculinised ideas of fathers as protectors (and/or providers) have not disappeared as some of the more overblown rhetoric about new/nurturing fatherhood implies. They continue to sit alongside more hands-on notions of fathering, even where they may be incompatible with involved fatherhood (Björk, 2013; Eerola, 2014; Hanlon, 2012; Johansson and Klinth, 2008; Miller, 2011). Ambivalent patterns in terms of the gendering of care have been found in broader research on men's carework and especially on involved fatherhood, with 'gender being done and undone, at times simultaneously' (Miller, 2011: 1094). Studies in "Nordic" countries have suggested that men who are more involved fathers express commitment to egalitarianism and to care-work but at the same time reinscribe masculinity through emphasising their autonomy/agency, self-reliance, control, decision-making, and ability to freely choose their work/life patterns according to their preferences, in relation to themselves as involved fathers in ways which tally with hegemonic masculinity and fail to challenge gendered power relations (Bach and Aarseth, 2016; Bach, 2017; Björk, 2013; Bjørnholt, 2014; Farstad and Stefansen, 2015). In this context, interviewees' conception of themselves as warriors fighting to see/protect their children, and the emphasis on reinstating their power through resistance in the form of direct action, similarly resonate with masculinised notions of agency and control.

A strong sense of loss was frequently expressed, mirroring the F4J language of a 'living bereavement' to describe lack of contact with children: 'if someone said how does it feel to have had your children die, that's the same emotion you go through when you're dealing with it you feel you're never gonna see em again, and that's just how you feel...' (Dominic); 'it's what I refer to in my own case as a parentectomy ... it is almost like losing an arm, and I've spoken to a lot of parents who would rather lose an arm' (Luke). These emotive statements could be seen as consonant with a "new man" discourse as it involves the articulation of deeply felt sentiments.

However, these deep feelings were also seen as justifying the violent and sometimes fatal acts that some men commit at the threat of being denied contact with their children (see Allan, 2016; Ging, 2017; Nicholas and Agius, 2018 on the use of affective claims by men's rights activists). John said of the fathers in (R)F4J that 'they cry themselves to sleep these men, because they are not allowed to see their children' and that 'these guys are really, really hurting there, it's a primal hurt'. He gave what he called a 'perfect example' of this hurt based on a news story about an attempted murder-suicide by a British man whose wife had said she was divorcing him (see Booth, 2008): 'that chap in Crete who, err, threw his children off the balcony, he knew in his heart of hearts that if his wife, which she said she was going to leave him and take the children, he knew might never see his fucking children again'. Tim also mentioned this violent incident, saying 'I wouldn't have done what he's done, but my god, I can almost emp... I can understand why...'

32 Working-class fathers may be less able to emphasise agency (Lucey et al., 2016; Tarrant, 2018).
he did it’. John went on to talk about other cases where men had killed themselves and their children as a result of ‘losing’ them:

this happens an awful lot, erm, guys will gas the children in the car, it’s not because they want to take the children away from their mother, or, do anything really bad, their minds are so kind of disarranged, they are insane for the want of, they are losing their children, that’s what they are there for to care for and to love their kids and to be cared and love back, you know, and someone’s taking that away and they can’t do a fucking thing about it, they cannot do a thing about it [...] so what can these guys do?

Referring to his own divorce, he said: ‘I mean if I’d had my children taken away from me, I’m sure I would have fucking shotgunned my ex-wife [...] I feel so strongly about family, you know?’ For John, such violent acts seemed to be not only proof of the depth of a father’s love for his children, but also justifiable due to the devastation caused by separation from them. Although Tim distanced himself from the violent act, at the same time, he nonetheless seems to believe that the circumstances are to some extent mitigating factors. The sense of desperation and loss was therefore articulated in terms which do not sit easily with the image of the “new man”. The “superhero father”, when threatened with the loss of the children he loves so deeply, is constructed as having no resort except to rage, violence and the destruction of those he otherwise seeks to protect.

Some research suggests that through the conjunction of images of “new” fatherhood with fathers’ rights activists as ‘willing to “fight” to protect their vulnerable children from harm’ (Elizabeth, 2016: 114), fathers’ rights discourses have influenced public perceptions of fathers who behave violently or perpetrate other illegal acts. For example, in two high-profile examples in New Zealand of fathers perpetrating custody abduction, the media presented them in an extremely sympathetic light, obscuring disturbing aspects of their behaviour, including potential abuse of the mothers of the children they abducted (Elizabeth, 2016).

FRGs have emphasised suicides by post-separation fathers in their campaigns (Scourfield and Evans, 2014: 3), including F4J (see their #SOSManDown campaign). It has been argued that there is a ‘popular association of men’s suicides and conflicts over children’ in the UK and that such conflicts (combined with relationship breakdown) are often perceived as ‘an especially understandable reason for suicides in men’ (Scourfield et. al, 2012: 469). These perceptions may partly arise from ‘the popular assumption that the family courts “favour” women as carers of children’ and, more specifically, from ‘the angry politics of fatherhood, with FRGs citing suicides in separated fathers as evidence of the supposed cruelty of the judicial system’ (Scourfield et. al., 2012: 469). This perception ignores instances where men’s suicides are directly related to their abusive behaviour and attempts to control/punish women partners or ex-partners (Evans et. al., 2014; Fincham et. al., 2011; Shiner et. al., 2009; Scourfield, 2005; Scourfield et. al. 2012; Scourfield and Evans, 2014; Oliffe at. al., 2015).

Conflict over contact with children is a common factor in murder-suicides (Oliffe et. al., 2015), which are usually perpetrated by men (Oliffe at. al., 2015; Scourfield, 2005; Scourfield and Evans, 2014; Kalish and Kimmel, 2010). It has been argued that ‘hegemonic masculinities prescribing power, control, and aggressiveness’ are one among other causes of murder-suicide, which is often ‘an extreme end-product of failed manhood at work, school and/or within family milieus’ (Oliffe et. al., 2015: 474). The extreme
violence of murder-suicides is a response to ‘aggrieved entitlement’, a way for men to restore their lost masculinity in the face of humiliation (Kalish and Kimmel, 2010).

Whether in the case of suicide or murder-suicide, situating men as straightforwardly victims in these scenarios obscures the fact that they may also be perpetrators of abuse and legitimises violent acts in gendered ways. In addition, it replicates a conservative crisis of masculinity narrative by ignoring issues with masculinity that may relate to male suicide and, instead, blaming the apparently heartless women who threaten masculine authority and control by leaving men and denying access to children. (See Chapters 2 and 4 for further discussions of gender politics, crisis and male suicide.)

"Bad" fathers and "vindictive ex-wives"

The ideas of good fathers (the “good enough” father, the “nurturing” father and the “father as superhero”) articulated in the interviews implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) draw on the contrasting figure of the “bad” father. Some characteristics of the bad father were indicated in the articulation of what makes a good enough father (see Chapter 5); for example, failure to make financial contributions, alcohol or drug problems, and violence (towards the child). Interviewees’ perceptions of “deadbeat dads” were also revealed through their ambivalence about Jason Hatch (“Batman”), whose activism was suggested to be motivated more by fame than by fatherhood.

The criticism of Hatch for his prioritisation of the F4J campaign over his relationship with his children highlights tensions between the various constructions of good fatherhood. Some members stated that they had at times, like Hatch, been overly involved with F4J to the potential detriment of their contact case. Involvement in activism was seen as noble in championing universal “justice” for fathers, but as possibly prejudicing your own contact case as courts may look unfavourably on your actions. In this sense, participating in (R)F4J was perceived as potentially conflicting with good fatherhood. Given the centrality of direct action to the conception of the superhero father, this is paradoxical. It seems that climbing up a building is what a good father does, but, in contrast, climbing up too many buildings, too many times, makes you a bad father.

FRGs’ efforts to ‘reimagine’ the good father (Kaye and Tolmie, 1998: 193) often attempt to combat ideas of “feckless fathers” by invoking such contrasts with the figure of the “bad mother” (Mandell, 2002; Gavanas, 2004). In this case, too, interviewees defended ideas of good fatherhood by projecting negative views of ex-partners as “bad mothers” and “vindictive ex-wives”, reproducing (R)F4J’s slogan, ‘Dads aren’t Demons [and] Mums aren’t Madonnas’ (Jordan, 2009).

In the last chapter, it was suggested that there was a support network between men within the group. However, care between men in (R)F4J takes place in a hypermasculinised male bonding environment where ‘men reinforce their identities as men and remind themselves that they are not women’ (Stoltenberg, 2004: 42). Male bonding practices have been noted to be a traditional outlet for men’s nurturing, with the bonding premised on ‘denigrating “Others”’ (Hanlon, 2012: 151), especially women and gay men. As noted in Chapter 3, the creation of homosocial spaces has been a key aim of (antifeminist) men’s movements who wanted to create a space for reasserting a form of masculinity premised on strength, competition and violence in response to a perceived crisis of masculinity (Messner, 2000: 9). The frequently sexist views about women

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33 The phrase is a slogan from one the F4J campaign posters.
expressed in interviews and meetings suggest that caring relationships between members were not always quite as egalitarian and progressive as the rhetoric of the new man would imply.

FRGs often construct ex-wives and partners as ‘lying and vindictive mothers’ (Flood, 2004: 274, see also Coltrane and Hickman, 1992). Interviewees similarly expressed negative views of women as routinely blocking fathers’ access to children for unjust, purely personal, vengeful reasons – to exercise power over ex-husbands and partners. Family courts were also seen as part of the problem as they were alleged to be biased against fathers (Flood, 2005; Collier, 2006). One interviewee saw family courts and women as in league against fathers: ‘they have, kind of, the establishment’s backing, these vindictive wives, to do what they do, at the expense of men’ (John). These views of “spiteful mothers” who deny contact with children and fail to observe court orders underpin demands by fathers’ rights groups that family courts should take punitive action against mothers who do not comply (Flood, 2005). A UK study found that resident parents (usually mothers) are, in reality, ‘much more likely to facilitate than to undermine contact’ (Fortin et. al., 2012: 6) in post-separation circumstances, suggesting that these claims are, at best, exaggerated.

In public meetings of (R)F4J, it seemed acceptable and normalised to express pejorative views about ex-wives/partners, and about women in general. At one meeting, the group had recently led a direct action ‘stunt’. There was a general round of congratulations and applause for members who had been arrested for their involvement with the incident, developing into a generalised boasting regarding past glories. People were asked to ‘put their hand up if they had ever been arrested’. Amongst the many hands that shot up was one belonging to a prospective new member’s (female) partner, who announced that she was arrested for punching her partner’s ex-wife (that is, the resident parent who was purportedly denying him access to his children). She was cheered and applauded enthusiastically for her violence.

A common claim made by (R)F4J and other FRGs is that “vindictive” mothers routinely make false allegations of domestic violence or abuse (Burman, 2016; Hacker, 2016; Hoddap, 2017): ‘they’ll invent reasons like, it’s domestic violence or he interferes with the child, things like that’ (John, my emphasis). The view that such allegations are always, or almost always, invented by ex-wives was present across the interviews. Dominic, for example, in talking of sharing his experiences with other fathers, illustrated the strength of this “benefit of the doubt” perspective in favour of fathers accused of violent acts:

I remember telling my little bit and telling them I’d been arrested and charged under the sexual harassment act [...] all these guys were like “Oh yeah I’ve been done for that”, “Oh yeah, I’m awaiting trial next month” [...] “Oh yeah, that’s a standard one”. I said, but we went to court and my ex-wife said I’d sexually abused the children “Oh yeah, that’s old hat, we all get that one, anyone here who hasn’t had those accusations” and “ahhh but my wife said I raped her”, [...] you realise, you think you’re alone but everyone’s got the same story, the same story to tell

The implication that allegations of child abuse and gender-based violence are usually false is extremely problematic. Despite being convicted of sexual harassment, Dominic saw himself as not guilty. He recounted the behaviour which led to the charges:
I would phone up to speak to the kids and she wouldn’t let me [...] sometimes it’d just become a game, I’d phone up and she’d say “no you’re not talking to them”, she’d hang up, I’d phone right back, yeah we’ll see who’s stupid now, erm, I’d phone her right back, and say “put the kids on I just wanna talk to them”, “no you’re not”, click, and it would go on like that [...] [I was] charged under the sexual harassment act [...] in court denied I’d been swearing at her, went through all the tapes [of the calls] and showed I never had, just me asking to speak to my kids, I think they categorised as it was about 290 times I’d made the simple expression “I just wanna speak to the boys” and err, it didn’t count for anything, I was convicted

The harassment of his ex-partner is downplayed and dismissed. Further, because he had experienced what he perceived as “false allegations” against himself, Dominic was unwilling to consider the possibility that some of the men who called these accusations ‘standard’ and ‘old hat’ might have (also) been guilty of the offences.

Ex-partners’ purportedly spiteful and deceitful behavior towards men was linked to the view that they were bad parents. As Mandell (2002: 106) found in her study based on interviews with post-separation fathers, ex-partners were considered “bad mothers” simply because they did not ‘protect the children’s relationship with their father’. This was exemplified in Dominic’s comment about his ex-partner: ‘she is completely evil in what she has done to those kids’.

There were persistent claims that mothers systematically “poison” children against fathers: ‘the manipulation of the child is a form of domestic violence [...] I don’t know how much psychological or potential damage that’s done to the kids for the rest of their lives, you know’ (George); ‘by tormenting the child and the, the father, erm that is a form of domestic violence’ (Ray); ‘it is an abuse, if we talk about child abuse, to take one parent away from a child, when that child loves that parent, is child abuse, and there is no other way you can describe it, as child abuse, to take that child away’ (John). This was linked to the problematic, pseudo-psychological notion of ‘Parental Alienation Syndrome’ (PAS):

Parent [sic] Alienation Syndrome [...] this actively happens quite a lot, and you get four year-olds writing an adult’s letter put in their handwriting “To Daddy, I don’t want to see you again because you are a nasty person”, and how cruel is that, to get your child to do that? And if a child was mentally abused under any other circumstances it would be taken into care, but because, erm, a divorced mother can actually abuse the child in that sense, it’s ok! It’s accepted!

(John)

The (purported) allegations of abuse are effectively reversed – it is mothers who abuse their children, not fathers. PAS was developed by Richard Gardner, a clinical psychiatrist, in the 1980s, to describe mothers’ alleged malicious use of false child abuse claims in custody cases, to punish them and gain custody. Such mothers were claimed to systematically poison or brainwash children to believe these lies and to be hostile to fathers (Meier, 2013). Gardner’s ideas have been widely discredited as inadequately evidenced (see, for example, Meier, 2009; Smith, 2016).
Despite this lack of evidence, PAS is routinely peddled by fathers’ and men’s rights activists and, worryingly, appears to be influential in family courts, at least in the US and the UK. Contra FRGs and Dominic and John here: allegations of abuse by mothers are not as frequent as claimed; abuse allegations are usually not taken seriously enough where they are made; and there is evidence that courts frequently award custody/contact to abusive fathers (Birchall and Choudry, 2018; Hunt and Macleod, 2008; Meier, 2013). PAS denies and minimizes the possibility of abuse, assuming that children who report abuse must be brainwashed, and mothers must be vindictive (Meier, 2009: 236). These unevi
denced assumptions have been argued to prevent the proper investigation of abuse claims and, worse, are often ‘turned against the mother who alleges them’ (Meier, 2009: 236) as mothers accused of committing PAS are treated punitively. In contrast, behaviours associated with PAS are often employed by male abusers, but courts have been suggested to be ‘largely indifferent to what batterers do to denigrate mothers’ (Meier, 2009: 234). In UK family courts, it has similarly been argued that there is ‘gender discrimination [against women] [...] and evidence of a culture of disbelief’ (Birchall and Choudry, 2018: 5), and that ‘allegations of child abuse [...] have been outweighed by a pro-contact approach’ (Birchall and Choudry, 2018: 6; see also Thiara and Harrison, 2016). These issues, combined with frequent accusations of parental alienation deployed against women who report abuse, have resulted in ‘potentially unsafe decisions on child contact being made, and survivors of domestic abuse being placed in dangerous and frightening situations’ (Birchall and Choudry, 2018: 5).

Remasculinising fatherhood

Alongside the ‘equal parenting perspective’ which I suggested accompanied the (postfeminist) construction of fathers’ rights as gender-neutral in Chapter 5, an alternative view emerged of fathers as providing a different, masculinised, style of parenting. Anne, for example, suggested that ‘men and women bring different things to children’. When prompted to expand on this point, she said that it was ‘hard to put your finger on’, but that there was more ‘rough and tumble’ with men and that ‘they have more time for fun things’, whereas women are too busy looking after the cooking and cleaning. The central idea was that fathers provide something that mothers do not, and that this is the basis for demanding that they be involved in their children’s lives.

One interviewee emphasised the unique contribution of fathers in extreme terms. Although John argued that fathers can do everything mothers can do ‘except breastfeed’, he also claimed that they bring something to parenting that mothers cannot as children: ‘need a male role-model, they need to see how men operate and not all men are bad and men can be loving without being sexual, and a firmer discipline’. John expanded on these points, saying that (single) mothers are simply not able to provide discipline in the way that a father can:

34 The Mankind Initiative have campaigned to have PAS included in the definition of domestic abuse (Mankind Initiative, 2018: 10-11). They assume this will enhance the “gender-neutral” approach to domestic violence because they understand PAS to be something which women/mothers perpetrate against men/fathers. PAS is falsely advanced as a) an evidenced phenomenon and b) as under-recognised by family courts.

35 Reformulations of PAS as “Parental Alienation” have dropped some of Gardner’s more extreme/worrying claims. However, ‘PA remains too closely tied to PAS’, is ‘used crudely in courts to defeat abuse allegations’ and has been argued that it still ‘minimizes abuse and its effects on mothers and children’ (Meier, 2009: 232).
a five foot six mother who’s harassed, with younger children, is not going to be a
disciplining force on a 16, 17 year old youth who’s trying to find his manhood […]
Now if he’s got a father, and a father who cares, living in, not a series of uncles, but
a father who cares, looking after him and the rest of the family, he’s more likely to
take notice, erm, because his father can kind of show him how to behave, and tell
him off appropriately

In order to back up his position, he mentioned ‘a piece of American Research’ that
was claimed to show that:

when children are raised by a single father, they benefit in ways that they wouldn’t
do with a single parent mother […] single parent fathers of both sexes of children
do, are better, at raising children, more balanced children […] because they can
discipline their children more than a single parent mother can

Lone mothers are represented as unable to adequately discipline their children due to
their apparent lack of physical strength. Although children of both sexes are mentioned,
the first comment implies that discipline is especially important for boys. Notably, the
two-parent (implicitly heterosexual) family is positioned as the ideal, however, one-
parent families are not the problem per se, rather it is specifically single mothers who are
undesirable. A lack of suitable father figures and ‘male authorities’ is seen by John as the
root of most of society’s ills:

there’s been so much research showing that a child coming from a single parent
mother background home, is going to be more dysfunctional […] in every
dimension that you mention, drugs, absconding from school, early pregnancy,
crime, right across the board, rape, more likely to come from a single parent
mother home than a traditional two-parent home

Other interviewees expressed similar views about the need for male role models.
Tim, for example, also saw the single parent family as causing social problems,
commenting that ‘it’s too acceptable in this country to have single parents’.

These perspectives fit with broader (R)F4J discourse positing the decline of the
traditional two-parent family, but especially the absence of men/fathers as the major
cause of the deterioration of contemporary society36. Conservative crisis of masculinity
themes are particularly prominent in these narratives. In relation to fathering and
fatherhood, lawlessness, criminality, societal breakdown, and a range of harms to fathers
themselves, are attributed to the victimisation of men. For example, politicians and the
media framed the 2011 London riots and the unruly/violent behaviour of the young men
who made up the vast majority of the rioters as a direct result of the purported absence
of fathers in their lives (Ashe, 2014). The assumption is that ‘fathers bring discipline; lone
mothers undermine discipline’ (Ashe, 2014: 664). Such claims are of course
problematically essentialist and serve to depoliticise the social, economic and political
features – the structural violence – of the riots (Ashe, 2014). In addition, the absence of
fathers is blamed on lone mothers who are perceived to ‘undermine fatherhood through

36 For a discussion of the complicated issues of the impact of father absence (and father
presence) on children see Flood, 2003.
rejecting marriage or fragmenting fatherhood’ (Ashe, 2014: 664). Such selective responsibilisation reveals a conservative politics which demonises lone mothers and women.

Similarly, on John’s account, women are to blame for father absence as they refuse to let fathers play a part in their children’s lives. This narrative is also implicit in the remark about a ‘series of uncles’ in the passage above, situating single mothers as “sluts” who are more interested in their sex lives than in the wellbeing of their children. John suggested that it would be desirable to have a society with more women ‘actually going out to work’, and more men ‘staying at home and looking after the children’, espousing an apparently non-essentialist viewpoint. However, crucially, this argument was based on a different form of essentialism – the idea that there is something about being male that makes fathers inherently superior parents to mothers.

The claim that men are “better parents” rests on the “fact” of the “maleness” of the carer and from the purported biological advantage of men’s greater physical strength. Asserting the need for fathers through emphasis on ‘the unique qualities of male parenthood’ is a strategy employed by many FRGs, often underpinned by essentialist and heterosexist notions of complementarity which reinscribe patriarchal authority (Klinth, 2008: 26; see also Boyd, 2004a; Boyd, 2004b; Collier, 2010; Dragiewicz, 2011; Flood, 2010; Gavanas, 2004; Rosen et. al., 2009). Such perspectives are also found in the US fatherhood responsibility movement which promotes ‘the indispensability of fatherhood as a particularly “male” institution’ as a result of ‘the specific and irreplaceable contribution of (biological) men to parenting’ (Gavanas, 2004: 5). The idea that male “role models” are important for (male) children’s wellbeing is also frequently stressed by other FRGs, despite research showing such claims are ill-founded (Bjørnholt, 2012; Martino, 2008; Tarrant et. al., 2015).

As well as invoking essentialism and problematic notions of crisis of masculinity, this narrative, along with the idea of fathers as superheroes, associates men’s caring for children with traditional ideas of masculinity. Here, men are good fathers when they are authoritative disciplinarians and/or can protect their children. This contrasts with the version of caring masculinity linked with new man/new father masculinity in the previous chapter, where, as discussed, there was less of an anxiety to assert the specifically masculine nature of men’s parenting. Research involving men as fathers, including men who are primary carers, suggests that because (child)care is dominantly understood to be feminine it is impossible ‘to have a caring identity that is not associated with femininity and therefore, feminized’ (Hanlon, 2012: 108). Whilst sometimes challenging this perception, fathers sometimes also replicate it by suggesting that caring ‘come[s] naturally to women’, whereas men’s caring abilities are “naturally” limited’ (Hanlon, 2012: 182). Another common response by fathers, however is to re-gender (child)care, emphasising ‘masculine’ parenting practices of fathers, for example, around play, physical activity, and encouraging children to take risks (Doucet, 2006).

Alongside this more general impulse to re-gender childcare as masculine, some have pointed to the existence of “traditional” caring roles for men which are premised on a contrast with what are assumed to be more feminine forms of care. Examples highlighted by some fathers include breadwinning or providing economic security for children, protection of children, and the disciplining and educating of children (Hanlon, 2012). These aspects of childcare are frequently coded both caring and masculine, often excluding forms of care more traditionally seen as “women’s work”: ‘men are caring husbands and fathers if they are reliable breadwinners, but they do not have to change their children’s nappies or sing them lullabies’ (Bubeck, 1995: 162).
Elsewhere, I have integrated feminist ethics of care theory with the masculinities scholarship on caring masculinity to analyse the extent to which “caring masculinity” as expressed by FRGs shifts existing gendered identities and relationships (Jordan, 2018). Feminist ethics of care theorist, Joan Tronto (2013), has argued that such masculinised forms of care can leave actually serve to leave men relatively ‘care-free’. In taking on masculinised care, they are given two ‘passes’ out of feminised household care: ‘protection’ and ‘production’. The production pass links masculinity to breadwinning and (men’s) public economic activity as suggested above. The protection pass, in addition, reflects traditional citizenship, where men are “protectors” of the state, women, and children (Tronto, 2013: 72). Production/provision and protection are thus ways of caring ‘at one remove, rather than in the direct and intimate ways usually associated with care’ (Tronto, 2013: 70). Care-as-providing-for, production, and protection, ultimately reinforce the distance between men and care-work. Masculinised forms of care can sometimes reinforce, rather than undermine, the gendered division of care-labour.

In reproducing ideas of certain forms of (child)care and fatherhood as “masculine”, fathers’ rights narratives imply that these are the only acceptable ways for men to practice care. In addition, “traditional” forms of care are relegated to the realm of femininity. Constructing fathers as protectors and as disciplinarians, contrasted with soft/weak mothers, the interviewees root ideas of fatherhood and caring masculinity in old gender dualisms. This is exacerbated where these masculinised caring identities were overtly mapped onto men’s “essential” nature, and feminine care reaffirmed as women’s biological destiny. In this way, ‘spaces for multiple, alternative, gender/caring identities are effectively closed down at the very moment that they appear to be opened up’ (Jordan, 2018: 14).

Conclusion

Taken together, this chapter and Chapter 5 provide an in-depth examination of (R)F4J based on empirical data, extending understandings of men’s and fathers’ rights groups, as well as building on insights into the gendered identities at play within men’s movements. In contrast to the bourgeois-rational and new man/new father masculinities, a stronger assertion of gender difference and a conservative crisis narrative was articulated through hypermasculinity. Hypermasculinity was expressed through an emphasis on strength, courage, risk-taking, male bonding, and the protection (and/or exclusion) of feminised others. Hypermasculinity most consistently mapped on to a backlash perspective in terms of derogatory views of feminism, the claim that men are generally disadvantaged as opposed to women, and in the (minority) perception of (R)F4J as organising around a collective, anti-feminist politics of gender. There was also some sense that women’s equality in and of itself (alongside active discrimination by feminists) has led to a crisis of masculinity and men’s roles, which has also been damaging for women. Whilst some ambivalence was expressed about practices/traits associated with hypermasculinity (as evident in the discussions of bad fathers, Jason Hatch, and the egg-throwing incident), overall, it was emphasised as central to the identity of the group (contra other FRGs) and to individuals’ sense of themselves as fathers’ rights activists. Where the identity of activist was, in turn, made central to good fatherhood, the hypermasculine was privileged. The construction of the “superhero father” resonates with traditional models of fathers as protectors of children and was sometimes, paradoxically, used to justify violent behaviour towards women and children. There was
some evidence of attempts to masculinise care in a conservative way which reinforces both gender essentialism and dominant traditional gender identities. Gendered binaries were maintained through biologically essentialist ideas of the unique value of men's parenting.

This was accompanied by misogynistic statements about ex-partners as vindictive, lying, and abusive to their children. Conservative crisis themes were evident here as women were positioned as powerful gatekeepers, and men as victims unable to access their children and penalised by negative stereotypes of men/fathers. The assertion that ‘Dads aren’t Demons’ thus relied heavily on the argument that ‘Mums aren’t Madonnas’. Despite evidence of informal support networks and caring relationships between members discussed in relation to new man/new father masculinity (see Chapter 5), then, there was at least an ambivalent attitude towards these benefits of membership. This ambivalence towards, and partial rejection of, caring masculinity (at least where it is not accompanied by “real” manly pursuits such as protest) demonstrates that men expressing emotion to each other is not necessarily evidence of a shift in gendered ideas of caring. In the masculinised space of (R)F4J, bonding was premised on exclusion of women (ex-wives, partners, ‘feminazis’) and of the feminine. Caring-as-male-bonding represents another form of care that is both masculinised and reliant on problematic gender binaries.

The existence of multiple constructions of masculinity and of fatherhood within (R)F4J demonstrates the complex nature of gendered identity/ies within men’s movements, as well as within specific FRGs. Overall, it has been argued that although a more nuanced and diverse set of gendered identities than might have been expected were present in the interviews, the masculinity frames are each problematic as they reinforce existing gendered binaries. In the Conclusion, I draw out more implications of the analysis and reflect on the themes of the book, as well as suggesting directions for further research.

References


Conclusion

This book has been concerned with analysing the contemporary politics of masculinity and men’s movements. Informed by critical theories of gender, it has interrogated the multiple masculine identities and perspectives on gender and gendered inequalities constructed by diverse men’s movements. The research findings suggest evidence of the partial contestation of dominant gender discourses within contemporary narratives of masculinity articulated within and beyond men’s movements. Overall, however, I have argued that men’s groups, and crisis rhetoric more broadly, ultimately buy into restrictive binary notions of gender. Further, even the most promising engagements with masculinity and feminism tend to replicate aspects of hegemonic masculinity, thereby shoring up unequal gender relations. The cumulative impact of invoking notions of crisis of masculinity and of employing the masculinity politics model is to reify gender. In short, gender is more “done” than “undone” by men’s movements.

The analysis offered has extended knowledge of men’s movements and the production of masculinities in the under-researched UK context. The case study analyses of the “feminist” group, the White Ribbon Campaign (WRC) and the “postfeminist” Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) presented in Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate the different representations of masculinity, gender relations, and feminism across different men’s groups, as well as some interesting continuities/overlapping themes. The exploration of WRC illustrates that the group challenges the gender status quo to the extent that they draw on explicitly feminist notions of masculinity, gender-based violence, and gendered power structures. They attempt to destabilise violent masculinity and, importantly, also seek to acknowledge and critique complicit masculinity (see Introduction). At the same time, however, they implicitly draw on progressive crisis of masculinity rhetoric (see Chapter 2), presenting masculinity as in need of alteration to adapt to contemporary society. Masculinity as a category is left untroubled, leaving binary notions of gender similarly intact. Further, aspects of hegemonic masculinity are incorporated into the gentler masculinity they advocate. In attempting to appeal to men as allies in fighting violence against women, traditional notions of “protector” masculinity are invoked, a problematic strategy which positions women as in need of protection and reinforces notions of manliness as strength (see also Messner et. al., 2015; Murphy, 2009). Finally, I argued that the group sometimes represented the issues in accordance with postfeminist ideas which depoliticise gender and render the issue of violence an individualised, rather than a structural, matter.

As discussed in Chapter 3, masculinities scholars disagree over whether men’s movements are a helpful paradigm for men’s engagement with feminism (see, for example, Clatterbaugh, 1997; Connell, 2005; Messner, 2000; Newton, 2005). These findings suggest that “feminist” men’s movements suffer from the limitations of identity politics when practised by a dominant group, on the basis of a dominant identity. Debates around the potential problems of “strategic essentialism” for (feminist) women’s movements raise concerns that, in seeking to reclaim and revalorise a marginalised identity, women’s movements may end up reinforcing the essentialist ideas of gender they purport to challenge (Butler, 2006). This is a difficult tightrope to walk. However, given the marginalisation of femininity and of women in society, this essentialist tendency may be mitigated by the fundamentally radical project of challenging the dominance of masculinity and men. There is some potential in women’s movements deploying a strategy of ‘strategic essentialism’ to give voice to the silenced, creating
opportunities to resist and subvert the external imposition of gender structures (Fuss, 1989; Riley, 1988; Spivak, 1987). For (feminist) men’s movements, the dilemma of identity politics is heightened – they rely on an identity which is already valorised and speak from a position which is already privileged/socially authorised. Strategic essentialism in this case means appealing to some aspects of hegemonic masculinity, whilst simultaneously seeking to undermine its power. The examination of the WRC in the UK develops our understanding of these tensions.

The question of whether the cumulative politics of men’s movements give grounds for feminist optimism or pessimism is a complex one with no clear answer. I agree with Kimmel (quoted in Messner, 2000: 102) that men’s visible feminist activism is symbolically and practically important from a feminist perspective, and I have argued that the WRC do upset some connections between violence and masculinity. However, at least in their current form, the promise of feminist men’s movements is attenuated partly by the social context they operate within, but also, the analysis suggests, by their very nature as men’s movements organising around masculinity. Further examination of feminist men’s movements is needed to establish whether it is possible for some groups to manage these tensions successfully, especially in a postfeminist climate (for a recent, in-depth interview study of US feminist men’s movements see Messner et. al., 2015).

In my account of CALM (Chapter 4), I show that in representing the problem of male suicide, the group draw on different framings from conservative, backlash accounts to feminist-inflected ideas. However, their dominant narrative is informed by a progressive crisis of masculinity perspective which seeks to recommend softer notions of masculinity for a changed world, a postfeminist sensibility positioning women’s equality as achieved, and high rates of male suicide as evidence that gendered inequalities impacting on men are yet to be addressed. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates that CALM, too, reinstate gender binaries and contribute to the marginalisation of feminism/women’s inequalities, as well as failing to adequately address the gendered aspects of male suicide.

Despite good intentions and a predominantly progressive outlook, their overt use of crisis narratives may have unfortunate consequences both in terms of gender politics and in terms of producing simplistic, problematic understandings of the relationship between gender and (male) suicide (see Jordan and Chandler, 2018). The analysis of the construction of crisis by CALM and other movements, along with the examination of contemporary public men-in-crisis debates in Chapter 2, illustrates the constraining nature of framing debates around masculinity in terms of “crisis thinking”. Viewing issues of masculinity through crisis lenses tends to lead to simplistic understandings of gender relations, as simply about “men versus women”. Representing gender relations as a gender war where there can only be winners/losers and men are (now) the losers hides from view the real, ongoing, inequalities which impact on women. Moreover, in treating men as homogenous, issues of intersectionality – the different positioning of marginalised groups of men in gender hierarchies – are also obscured. If less conservative men’s movements wish to bring about genuine gender change, they will need to move beyond “the battle of the sexes” and acknowledge the overall privileging of men as a category in society, the benefits of masculinity to men, as well as its considerable costs. Just as women’s movements have had to confront intersecting inequalities, they will also need to grapple with the complexity of acknowledging that some men are “more equal” than others. Further, and relatedly, postfeminist understandings of gender depoliticise and individualise issues around gender and therefore limit opportunities for change. While groups such as CALM acknowledge that dominant ideas of masculinity may be a
problem for men, understanding and challenging gendered power structures is fundamental to destabilising these forms of masculinity.

As noted, each of the men's movements explored here partially disrupt dominant masculinity. However, a recurring theme across all three in-depth case studies analysed in this book is that they are constrained by their reliance on the category of masculinity. It is only by exploring the diversity of men's movements that it is possible to see the continuities and disjunctures between movements, even where they appear to embody very different starting points in terms of their (gender) politics. The final group examined in this book, (Real) Fathers 4 Justice ((R)F4J) is part of a fathers’ rights movement which has been understood as part of an anti-feminist backlash (Dragiewicz, 2008; Faludi, 1991). Fathers’ rights groups are said to perpetuate and respond to a perceived “crisis of masculinity”, invoking a problematic politics of fatherhood aimed at (re)asserting control over women and children. My interview-based research on (R)F4J, overall, supports these claims, but also suggests that fathers’ rights discourses are slightly more complex. The findings reveal that a more nuanced and diverse set of gendered identities than might have been expected were present in the interviews, but that the masculinity frames are nonetheless each problematic as they reinforce existing gendered binaries (see Chapters 5 and 6). In addition, similarly to CALM and WRC UK, the group’s positioning in relation to feminism was not quite a simple “backlash”, as postfeminist narratives were also prominent. Finally, there was some deployment of both an implicit progressive crisis of masculinity narrative, and a more conservative crisis perspective. Below, I summarise the key findings of the interview analysis and draw out some implications of the research for understanding masculinity, postfeminism/backlash, and the politics of fatherhood.

A backlash perspective was articulated by members of (R)F4J through derogatory views of feminism, the claim that men are generally disadvantaged as opposed to women, and in the (minority) perception of the group as organising around a collective, anti-feminist politics of gender. Active discrimination by feminists was blamed for the devaluation of men’s roles as fathers. Women’s equality was seen as more than achieved and as in itself leading to a crisis of masculinity which has damaged men and, as a consequence, children. Conservative crisis narratives were expressed through claims that a lack of male parents has led to a breakdown in modern society and in attempts to reclaim “traditional” masculinity. There was some evidence of attempts to remasculinise fatherhood in accordance with conservative, essentialist perspectives of gender which understand fatherhood as more important than motherhood and as exclusively the role of men. Conservative crisis themes were also apparent in the representation of women as powerful gatekeepers who prevent men (seen as victims) from being fathers. Finally, in the masculinised space of (R)F4J, bonding was premised on exclusion of women (ex-wives, partners, ‘feminazis’) and of the feminine. This resonates with a conservative masculinity-in-crisis response which sees homosocial spaces as necessary to enable men to be men (Hanlon, 2012; hooks, 1992; Messner, 2000; Stoltenberg, 2004).

Alongside the clear presence of backlash narratives in the group’s narrative, postfeminist ideas were evident. Postfeminism was invoked through a purportedly gender-blind, individualised emphasis on formal equality. The default was to downplay/ignore women’s inequality and to sideline consideration of gendered power structures. Framing the issues in terms of fathers’ rights restricted any sympathy with feminist understandings of debates around post-separation child contact disputes. Consonant with postfeminist discourses, however, historical feminism was sometimes invoked, with legitimising parallels drawn between (R)F4J and the suffragettes. Associated with these postfeminist framings, a progressive crisis of masculinity
A perspective arose which, in contrast to the conservative aspect of the group narrative discussed above, implicitly suggested a shift away from traditional masculinity towards a softer, “new” form of masculinity in response to a changing gender world. As noted, progressive crisis narratives reinforce harmful, essentialist, binary notions of gender. I reflect further on postfeminism and the implications of constructions of feminism by men’s movements towards the end of this chapter.

The interviewees (re)constructed multiple masculinities: bourgeois-rational masculinity, new man/new father masculinity and hypermasculinity. The two “softer” masculinities exist in uneasy tension both with each other and the third frame and yet each was important in the interviews. The desire to be seen as rational, caring men who “just want to see their kids” does not sit comfortably with the hypermasculine figure of the risk-taking, limelight-seeker who equates fatherhood with “heroic” expressive acts. Hypermasculinity and the “direct action” methods associated with it, was perceived as integral to the groups’ identity. Interviewees, in constructing fathers’ rights activists as warriors actively fighting for their cause, reclaimed their sense of themselves as (masculine) agents rather than as passive (feminine) victims. At the same time, a contradictory narrative of their suffering and victimhood was invoked which resonates with other men’s rights groups (see, for example, Hoddap, 2017; Salter, 2016; Träbert, 2017; Nicholas and Agius, 2018).

The politics of fatherhood is central to investigating questions around contemporary meanings of masculinity and gendered inequalities. The interviews show some of the ways in which fatherhood and masculinity are constructed and interconnected in the context of fathers’ rights groups. The analysis illustrates that there are several, sometimes competing, discourses of good fatherhood articulated within and by fathers’ rights groups. The “good enough father” was articulated as requiring rather minimal standards of good parenting and little actual involvement in the work of childcare. The “nurturing father”, in contrast, was constructed in terms of hands on parenting and caring practices, although this was somewhat limited. Finally, the “father as superhero” was based on the active (Real) Fathers 4 Justice member who is a good father because he climbs up buildings to see his children. The “nurturing father” co-exists in an uneasy tension with the “good enough father” and the hypermasculinised “father as superhero”, both of which suggest very different and fairly traditional ideas of what it means to be a good father. Interviewees also constructed oppositions to both “deadbeat dads” and “bad mothers”, revealing some of the assumptions underlying their gendered conceptions of fatherhood and motherhood. The anxiety to underpin the idea of the good father with the notion of the bad mother portrays negative, sexist, and sometimes misogynistic, images of women as noted elsewhere in the literature on fathers’ rights groups (see, for example, Dragiewicz, 2011; Crowley, 2009).

The analysis casts doubt on the seriousness of the commitment of fathers’ rights groups to the ideal of the ‘nurturing father’ and to more egalitarian forms of masculinity. While intimate childcare was seen by a minority as inherent to being a nurturing, “new” father, partially upsetting binary notions of gender, others were keen to construct caring fathers as still masculine. This contributes to essentialist gender logics. In addition, if only some styles of care are “masculine” and these are the only acceptable ways for men to practice care, “traditional” forms of care are left in the feminine realm. Drawing on the rhetorical appeal of the new man, strategically employing a care perspective provides a ‘pass’ out of direct care and a privileged irresponsibility for (feminised) care (Tronto, 2013). In other words, fathers’ rights groups may invoke the caring, sharing image of new masculinity, without this translating into any kind of shift in the gendered division of
(feminised) caring labour. Despite some evidence of “taking turns in aspects of caring,” it mostly “remains the mother who is left holding the baby” (Miller, 2011: 1107). If this partial rearticulation of fatherhood is superficial, rather than representing a potential transformation in practices of fatherhood and the practices of masculinity that correspond to them, then feminists are right to be concerned about the prevalence of an unrealised ideal of “new” fatherhood.

This concern may be compounded by the resilience of some aspects of hegemonic masculinity which often remain central to caring masculinity in the emphasis on masculinised forms of care and on agency, action and control. These themes were expressed by (R)F4J members in discussions of effective action to change the law; regaining power through acts of resistance associated with direct action protests, and in conceptions of themselves as protectors/superhero fathers fighting for their kids. Caring masculinity is sometimes expressed in ways which may incorporate, rather than reject, domination. This is particularly pertinent in the context of fathers’ rights groups where caring masculinities sit alongside less palatable forms of masculinity. As articulated in the interviews caring masculinity is, overall, unlikely to hold out the promise of a more gender-equal society in relation to care, or to contribute to the dismantling of gendered power structures (for further discussion of the complex gendering of care by fathers’ rights groups, see Jordan, 2018).

This analysis, along with the discussion of apparently kinder masculinities in the WRC and CALM cases, raises questions about changing masculinities and, in particular, about which forms of masculinity are currently hegemonic. Some have argued that hegemonic masculinity is extremely resilient and that it is precisely through the adaption and incorporation of formerly non-hegemonic characteristics, that hegemony is maintained (Hooper, 2001). Gender power is (re)produced in subtle ways through seemingly softened, ‘hybrid’ masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001; Ging, 2017; Randles, 2018). As Srimati Basu (2016: 45) notes about men’s rights groups, the discourses of men’s movements ‘are a crucial site for tracking contestations of gender and the formation of subjectivities’. In mapping the masculinities expressed by the different men’s movements, the book has furthered the project of examining the politics of masculinity in contemporary contexts.

Taken together, the analyses of (R)F4J, WRC UK, and CALM, demonstrate that men’s movements frequently slide between feminist and postfeminist, and postfeminist and backlash narratives rather than articulating a single, unitary view on feminism. As discussed in Chapter 1, this is partly because these perspectives are necessarily linked rather than neatly distinct from each other. Nonetheless, there is evidence of some ambiguity about feminism and its role within movements that I have categorised as predominantly feminist, postfeminist, or backlash in outlook. This insight suggests the importance of moving beyond simplistic feminist versus anti-feminist framings to gain a fuller understanding of the gender politics of men’s movements. The typology developed in Chapter 1 may be helpful in encouraging future research on men’s (and women’s) movements to explore these nuances further.

Postfeminism is an important discursive backdrop against which men’s movements frame debates around gender and masculinity (Messner, 2016). The analysis of the different responses to feminism by (R)F4J, for example, shows why it is important to distinguish between postfeminist and backlash narratives rather than dismissing postfeminism as merely disguised anti-feminism. Although it could be suggested that postfeminist ideas are articulated in a superficial attempt to be perceived in a more sympathetic light – and perhaps this is partly the case – these discourses still need to be
taken seriously by those who would wish to challenge men’s and fathers’ rights groups. Postfeminism might open up space for resistance to the extent that gender equality is perceived as a desirable goal and collaboration with feminists does not inherently mean collaborating with “the enemy” as aspects of feminism are embraced. However, as I have argued elsewhere, ‘given the potential for postfeminism to shut down debate around gendered social structures, feminists should be cautious about assuming that postfeminist perspectives are more promising than backlash narratives’ (Jordan, 2016: 44). Whilst backlash narratives are embedded in entrenched hostility to feminists and advance distorting arguments about gender relations, they nonetheless politicise gender, drawing attention to issues of power (see Chapter 1). This suggests that critiquing men’s and fathers’ rights groups necessitates more of what feminists have already done in drawing attention to gendered relations at the societal level rather than reducing gender to individual identity/choices. These are not easy arguments to make in neoliberal contexts in which precisely this individualised conception of selves and empowerment dominates (see Chapter 1).

For men’s movements sympathetic to feminism, this also highlights the dangers of framing their efforts at gender change in postfeminist ways. It has been suggested that groups avoiding overtly feminist or anti-feminist standpoints may be more likely to successfully have their views heard and/or receive funding (Dupuis-Déri, 2016; Messner, 2016). However, moving to a depoliticised model of gender is likely to reinforce discourses of gender-blind, formal, rather than substantive, notions of equality which will benefit men more than women given existing inequalities (Chunn et. al., 2007). In addition, if men’s rights movements are indeed increasingly making postfeminist arguments in attempts to roll back feminist gains (Messner, 2016), then playing the same game risks empowering groups with a more fundamentally conservative agenda.

The book has underlined the validity of Rachel O’Neill’s (2015: 115) call to masculinities scholars to engage with postfeminism, which, as yet, has not been adequately taken up. By engaging in-depth with postfeminist narratives as expressed by men’s movements with diverse politics, this book has added a dimension to our understandings of how men’s movements may navigate the context of changing gender discourses. I have demonstrated how diverse men’s movements both invoke and challenge postfeminist ideas. Through the sustained attention to postfeminism in the empirical analyses, broader feminist scholarship in this area has been furthered in terms of our understandings of how postfeminist ideas are narrated (and potentially resisted) in different arenas.

The relationship between gender identities and the gender politics of specific movements is at present also underexplored. Christina Scharff (2012) argues that responses to feminism are intricately entwined with representations of gender and sexuality. Scharff’s claim is made in relation to a case study of young women in the UK and Germany and their self-identification (or otherwise) as feminists. However, this point raises intriguing possibilities for understanding the gendering of social movements and how narratives around feminism intersect with performances of gender (and other) identities in this context. Overall, postfeminist discourses in the movements examined here were more associated with “softer” ideas of masculinity, which, it has been suggested, often embody aspects of hegemonic masculinity in new and more subtle ways. It is hoped that future research will develop these insights further, both in the context of men’s movements, and in the relationship between changing masculinities and postfeminism more generally. Beyond movements, for example, there is scope to investigate whether it makes sense to talk of “postfeminist masculinities” as some have
suggested (Äström, 2018; Clark, 2014; Gill, 2014; Rumens, 2017) and, if so, how far postfeminist masculinities are currently dominant and the “work” they do in relation to gender.

To end, I want to highlight that the arguments I have advanced here are neither “anti-male”, nor “male positive” – this would miss the point entirely. As Fidelma Ashe (2007: 159) has argued, such simplistic standpoints make ‘little sense’ as ‘men’s identities do not exist prior to or beyond the social practices and historical forms of subjectivity that generate them’. Instead, we need to ‘evaluate men’s agency within networks of power’ (Ashe, 2007: 159) which both enable and constrain their subjectivities. Accordingly, this book has furthered understandings of the extent to which men’s movements reproduce or challenge dominant gender identities and inequalities, and in doing so, has explored the likely effects of their narratives on existing gendered structures of power.

References


