

Roles, Roots and Rifts: A Rejoinder to Mahalik, Silverstein and Hammond.

Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell

It was a very pleasant surprise to be invited to contribute a paper to the *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, outlining a Discursive Psychological (DP) approach to the study of men. Likewise, we are also grateful for the opportunity to engage in an extended discussion with a few of our contemporaries from ‘across the Pond’. Goodness knows how hard it was for Ron Levant to come up with a short-list of academics who might be, in some way at least, receptive to the arguments we were advancing, but we would like to thank James Mahalik, Louise Silverstein and Wizdom Hammond for their careful and sympathetic considerations of our offering.

In looking across the different commentaries, it seems to us that there is a fairly clear and obvious pattern. All three reviewers begin by aligning themselves with the broader aims of our approach to the study of men and masculinities, before going on to suggest that the main rhetorical target of our critique (the Gender Role Strain Paradigm – henceforth GRSP) is not inconsistent with those aims. That is, all three commentators seek to soften or defuse our critique by challenging key aspects of what we would hold to be crucial differences between GRSP and DP. In this short rejoinder we would like to revisit these issues. More specifically, in highlighting the links between theory and method, we want to spell out, hopefully more clearly than before, how DP offers a radical alternative to work that is situated within the confines of the GRSP.

The best place to start, perhaps, is with the piece by Silverstein. It was interesting to hear her claim that Pleck’s original formulation of the

GRSP (Pleck, 1981) ‘reflects a post-structuralist conception of masculinity’ (p. ?), especially in view of the fact that, earlier in her commentary, she identifies Judith Butler (1990) as one of the pioneering voices. We have no reason to doubt that Pleck’s framework may have gone on to inspire research with a distinctly post-structuralist flavour, however, we would very much contend the point that Pleck’s own work was within that theoretical fold. The fact that his model highlights the tensions and contradictions that might exist between different aspects of the (purported) male sex role does not, in itself, qualify his approach as post-structuralist. We might recall that Sigmund Freud claimed that the human psyche was marked by powerful divisions (e.g. that most men simultaneously both love and hate women), but he isn’t widely regarded as an icon of post-structuralism – and for good reason, because post-structuralism involves a set of theoretical assumptions which stand at some distance from the ones employed by the likes of Freud, Pleck and, we’d suggest, most advocates of the GRSP.

Put most simply, post-structuralism takes issue with the traditional, ‘mirror’ model of language. It suggests that, far from there being an easy correspondence between words and the world, the relationship is *arbitrary* (Saussure, 1974). For post-structuralist theorists such as Barthes (1973), Derrida (1973) and Foucault (1972), language doesn’t consist of so many labels for the various objects and events that already exist ‘out there’ in the world. Rather, in an act of radical inversion, they saw language – or *discourse* – as something that serves to constitute or bring the world into being. As Foucault (1972) famously declared: ‘Discourse constructs the objects of which it speaks’. Accordingly, post-structuralists see language as *performative*, rather than merely descriptive (Butler, 1990). They study the ‘action-orientation’ (Heritage, 1984) of discourse, to see what it is set up or designed to accomplish. It is highly significant, therefore, that both Mahalik (p. ?) and Hammond (p. ?)

should remark that, in our research, we only look at how men *talk* about gender, not at how it is *done*. Such a claim would never be made by a post-structuralist/ discourse theorist; for us, there is no line to be drawn between the realms of words and deeds (see Austin, 1962 and also Wittgenstein, 1953). This shows that, like most GRSP theorists, Mahalik and Hammond belong to a different research tradition; one from which post-structuralism stands as a radical point of departure.

Of course, it is Silverstein, not Mahalik or Hammond, who claims there to be some kind of theoretical harmony between DP and GRSP. So let's look more closely at the details of her argument. It's interesting to note that, in seeking to encourage a more inclusive methodological stance, she claims that 'quantitative research can also achieve post-structural goals such as correcting stereotypes' (p. ?). Our first reaction was to wonder, since when did post-structuralism embrace those kinds of ambitions? For theorists such as Foucault, there is no such thing as simple, 'unvarnished' truth. As far as he was concerned, 'truth' was a discursive *effect*. So when Silverstein says, of Gates *et al's* (2007) study, that they 'deconstructed' the stereotype that most gay men don't wish to become fathers, she is using the term very loosely indeed. All she means to say is that they over-turned the stereotype; but that isn't a conclusion that Foucault would have drawn. For post-structuralist theorists, the name of the game is not about proclaiming truths or uncovering realities. Instead, it is more about trying to show how different institutions and social groups work to manufacture particular 'regimes of truth'.

Similar problems attend Hammond's appeal for a more 'mixed-methods' approach to the study of men and masculinity. Consider the case of psychometric research. Broadly speaking, psychometrics assumes that subjects' responses are *indicative* of what they have in mind. However, as we've tried to explain, discourse theorists would object to this most

basic or starting premise. For them, a completed inventory is never a simple representation of a person's mentality. The problem isn't just that psychometrics tends to offer too static a model of a person's 'mind-set'. If it was then, as Mahalik suggests, researchers could try asking subjects to indicate how they might think or feel in different situations. Rather, the key difference lies in how psychometricians and discursive psychologists understand (or theorize) the nature of those declarations. In psychometrics, they are seen as forms of *self expression* (thus, providing evidence of what that person is really like); in DP, however, they are viewed (in the context of everyday life, at least) as a series of performative acts.

Elsewhere in his commentary, Hammond suggests that a mixed-methods approach might allow researchers to keep simultaneous track of how men operate at both a macro and micro level. In doing so, he seems to imply that quantitative studies might prove useful in revealing how 'men think about masculinities *on average*' (p. ? – emphasis added). But what does that actually mean? In one of our featured studies (Wetherell and Edley, 1999) we noted that some subject positions appeared to be more popular than others. We found that, within our data set, it was more usual for men to distance themselves from the discourses of hegemonic masculinity. Such patterns may be common-place – even typical perhaps – but is that the same as *average*? Would a quantitative approach involve spending hours with a stop-watch, trying to clock the amount of time men spend occupying the positions of heroic, complicit and rebellious masculinities? How would it deal with those occasions when men invoke one form of discourse as a contrast or counter-point? As we showed in our original paper, we are not disinterested in the notion of *Mr Average*. The difference is that, for discursive psychologists, it always exists as a *construct* – either in the hands of the social scientist or those of the ordinary, everyday speaker.

The final point that we would like to make concerns both Hammond's point about 'forests and trees' and Mahalik's appeal for greater methodological pluralism. The fact is that we are no strangers to either of these calls. Ironically, however, in the past, we have been on the other side of the fence; that is, the ones making those appeals, rather than being positioned as their target. In our eyes, DP represents an attempted rapprochement between the broader social theory of writers like Foucault and Butler and the empirical disciplines of conversation or discourse analysis (see Edley & Wetherell, 1997). Holding the two sides together is no easy matter; there are significant tensions that exist between the two camps (see Wetherell, 1998). However, the task of grafting GRSP on to DP (or indeed vice versa) seems to us to be of an even taller order, given the discrepant nature of their theoretical root-stock.

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