

Why performances of accountability and normative heterosexual masculinity do not constitute ‘maturity’: A commentary on Korobov and Bamberg

Adrian Coyle and Chris Walton

Social Psychology European Research Institute (SPERI), University of Surrey,
Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH, UK (e-mail: A.Coyle@surrey.ac.uk).

When we were invited to comment on an empirical discourse analytic article that had been accepted for publication by the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, our initial reaction was one of astonishment. We found it hard to believe that any social constructionist researchers in developmental psychology would be sufficiently courageous (or perhaps foolhardy) to submit their work to a journal that has no track record of publishing social constructionist work. Nor could we believe that the journal had been sufficiently courageous to publish the article and begin what may prove to be a process of broadening its scope in a significant and challenging way. Hence, before we offer any reflections on the content of the article, we must commend both Korobov and Bamberg and the journal.

The article appears at a very appropriate time, when social constructionist work has moved beyond the social psychological realm in which it first appeared in British psychology and has begun to feature regularly in British Psychological Society journals devoted to other domains such as health psychology and psychotherapeutic and counselling psychology. The appearance of Korobov and Bamberg’s article in the journal that lies at the heart of British developmental psychology is a significant and welcome move as it may introduce the radical potential of social constructionist work to a new audience of psychologists (although, of course,

some developmentalists have already used social constructionist approaches in creative ways to shed new light on developmental psychology as a discipline – see Burman, 1994 – and, more specifically, on masculinities in youth, for example – see the work of Frosh *et al.*, 2002, 2003, and the resistance it engendered from Archer, 2004).

For those who are not familiar with social constructionism and its outworking in discursive research, Korobov and Bamberg provide a helpful synopsis in the early part of their article. However, it is important to point out that they tell only part of the story of social constructionist research in British psychology. The social constructionist approach that they focus on in their article is very much a discursive psychology approach with its characteristic micro-level attention to text (Edwards & Potter, 1992). However, there is another strand which is sometimes termed ‘Foucauldian discourse analysis’. This is concerned with the availability of discursive resources within a culture (and the implications for those living within that culture), the role of discourse in wider social processes of legitimation and power and the relationship between discourses and institutional structures and practices (Willig, 2001). There have been calls for a more consistent integration of these approaches (see Coyle, 2000, and Wetherell, 1998, for example) and, given the many potentially rich ideological seams that could be mined in the data extracts in Korobov and Bamberg’s article, it would have been good to see such an approach adopted here. However, it would be unfair to criticise their work on these grounds because such an analysis was not their aim, especially when we believe that there are much more significant grounds on which we can critique the analysis on its own terms.

Before we offer our critique, it is worth pointing out to those who are unfamiliar with qualitative research that one of the principal criteria by which a qualitative analysis is evaluated is its persuasiveness (although different authors use different terms for this criterion such as ‘grounding in examples’ – Elliott *et al.*, 1999 – and ‘transparency’ – Yardley, 2000). In order to

appear persuasive, all interpretations need to be grounded in the data. Clearly what constitutes a credible interpretation of data will vary from one evaluator to another. However, analysts should illustrate their core analytic contentions with data in such a way as to persuade most evaluators. By presenting extracts from their data set, researchers allow readers to assess their interpretations and, if they disagree with these, to offer interpretations of their own. In our commentary, we will illustrate this process by taking issue with one of Korobov and Bamberg's core contentions in their analysis of how a group of adolescent males 'did maturity' in focus group talk. We will offer alternative interpretations that we consider to be more persuasive. Readers can decide for themselves which readings appear more credible. Note that social constructionist work does not assume that a definitive, 'true' analysis is ever attainable: what we offer is our reading of the data in response to Korobov and Bamberg's reading of the data, informed by our 'speaking positions' as male social psychologists who are experienced in discursive research (and undoubtedly by other speaking positions that we routinely adopt too).

The main problem we have with Korobov and Bamberg's analysis is that their interpretations of their focus group excerpts in terms of 'doing maturity' are not adequately grounded in the data and so are seldom persuasive. The invocation of 'maturity' is rarely necessary in making sense of the data. 'Maturity' seems to be a dimension that is sometimes imposed on the interactions by the focus group moderator (the only excerpt in which 'maturity' is invoked by the adolescent speakers is excerpt 1, where they orient to the construct only after it has been invoked by the moderator) and is regularly imposed on the analysis by Korobov and Bamberg. Of course, we acknowledge that, in their introduction, the authors ground the analysis in existing developmental literature on maturity and, based upon this literature, particularly Eckert's (1994) work, they provide definitions of what 'maturity' might look like at a discursive level. It is said to be constituted by the negotiation of movement between or the negotiation of

positions relative to two identifiable discourses, ‘normative asexuality’ and ‘normative heterosexuality’, evidenced by orientations to ‘the features of “heterosexual desire” (so as to appear “cool” or “not gay”), but in ways that fight shy of appearing shallow, sexist, ignorant or desperate’. This definition is qualified through their contention that the simultaneous performance of ‘maturity’ and ‘normative heterosexuality’ is ‘an evasive, inscrutable, and insinuatingly strategic project’. In the terms provided by these narrow and broad definitions, Korobov and Bamberg’s claims to have identified the discursive performance of ‘maturity’ appear warranted. However, the adoption of a critical and radical methodology also requires a critical reappraisal of the topic of interest and of the existing relevant literature. As we will demonstrate, the uncritical imposition of an existing interpretative framework can result in interpretations that do not reflect the concerns of the speakers so much as the concerns of the analysts.

Due to space constraints, we will focus on one data excerpt in detail here but will consider others in more general terms. Just before excerpt 2, the authors state that ‘Although maturity is not explicitly mentioned, the boys defend against the charge that they are habitually “invading” the girls’ privacy, which is hearable as a general index of immaturity’. There is no evidence to suggest that the adolescent males in the discussion orient to the reported action (going ‘into a girls’ bathroom and [] a girls’ locker room’) as invading girls’ privacy except when prompted to do so by the moderator in line 7. The contention that the aforementioned charge is hearable as an index of immaturity applies primarily to the analysts. If the moderator was one of the analysts, then we can say that not only do the analysts identify what can be taken as evidence of maturity but one of them was actively engaged in *producing* that evidence. We contend that, among other things, what is being negotiated in this excerpt is not maturity but the relative moral standing of ‘guys’ and ‘girls’ through a particular focus on sexuality. Young

women are constructed as equivalent sexual beings to young men, even to the point where they might be considered ‘perverted’ (‘perverted’ being one speaker’s reconstruction of the moderator’s charge that the adolescent males might gain sexual pleasure from entering female toilets or locker rooms). The adolescent speakers account for their heterosexual desire by constructing it as normative and by evidencing its normativity through constructing young women as equivalently heterosexually motivated beings (lines 13-18): young women are constructed as being as interested in young men as these young men report being interested in young women. Heterosexuality is constructed and accomplished within a normative model of gender categories and heterosexual desire: it is all rendered as perfectly natural. There is no invocation of a temporal dimension in negotiating subject positions in this excerpt and it is *this* that we would accept as the most convincing evidence in favour of an analysis in terms of ‘maturity’. How can maturity, which must surely be conceived as a process or, at very least, as a dialectic between immaturity and maturity, be said to be done when there is no temporal dimension along which either the accomplishment of the self or the construction of categories might be arranged? Whilst there was potential for ‘maturity’ to be negotiated between the ‘guys’ and the ‘girls’, the comparison of these categories is used by speakers only to develop the account of equivalent heterosexual desire. So does the analysis ever speak about ‘maturity’ in a way that we would see as persuasive? We contend that Hal’s first turn in excerpt 3 contains evidence that his concern is ‘maturity’ as a process. Here ‘maturity’ is being done through positioning the self in terms of an experienced, and therefore relatively mature, heterosexuality. This contention can be supported by pointing to the constructed sense of temporal progression apparent in ‘go through a certain number of girls’, ‘growing up’ and ‘if they’ve [] went through that’.

We take issue with other invocations of ‘maturity’ in the analysis of excerpt 2. The

authors argue that the moderator's turns at lines 4, 7, 12 and 16 are 'soft challenges [] that construct the boys as potentially immature'. There is nothing in these turns or in the content of the speakers' responses to them that supports this contention. They are not oriented to as charges of immaturity so much as charges of unacceptable forms of heterosexual interest in young women in young women's spaces. Likewise, the claim that the scripting of the adolescent males' reported actions as 'potentially reoccurring or habitual [] can be heard as dispositional immaturity' is not supported by the content of the males' turns: even if it is hearable as such, the adolescent males do not orient to this hearing. Although we agree with Korobov and Bamberg's basic reading of excerpt 2 in terms of the performance of normative heterosexuality, we seriously take issue with their linking of the excerpt to 'maturity' in a way that is not grounded in the data or at least not in the adolescent males' concerns and categories (and note that we are not advocating some sort of phenomenological take on discursive work here). In our reading of the excerpt, *accountability* is the participants' concern, not maturity (Shotter, 1984).

We would also question the analyses of 'maturity' in excerpts 4 and 5. In their analysis of excerpt 4, the authors conclude that the use of concessive repair devices allows the speakers simultaneously to occupy two subject positions – as sexually interested and as knowing and in control. This second subject position is argued as constituting the performance of 'maturity' but we do not see this as a necessary or persuasive interpretation. An alternative interpretation would be to argue that the simultaneous positioning as sexually interested, knowing and in control constitutes a particular accomplishment of *masculinity*. An interpretation of this masculinity as itself mature would require the imposition of an interpretative framework within which versions of heterosexual masculinity might be organized in terms of their relative maturity on the strength of their constitutive 'attributes'. In the analysis of excerpt 5, appearing 'calm and confident when asking a girl out' is contrasted with an 'obvious and desperate

infatuation' and is argued to be 'part of the doing of maturity for them'. But is it necessary to conclude that this sort of 'doing cool' is constitutive of the performance of maturity rather than being an end in itself? There is a social and cultural value in 'doing cool' that is not necessarily the same as that which might be associated with 'doing mature'. The overarching interest in 'maturity' in this article results in preferred subject positions and the resistance of dispreferred subject positions being interpreted as maturity purely on the strength of the assumption that maturity is valued and therefore, since these positions are valued, they must constitute maturity.

In the 'Discussion' section, Korobov and Bamberg make the important point that 'The value of a discursive analysis is that it reveals that it is *precisely* the sensitive orientations, and the work done to preempt and deflect possible counters to the hearable trouble in such orientations, that matter most for the boys as they work to position themselves' (emphasis in original). However, it is unfortunate that their analysis lacks sensitivity to the precision of the boys' negotiation of subject positions. Perhaps if Korobov and Bamberg were not so concerned with accounting for their own interest in how adolescent males 'do maturity', they might have been able to develop a richer analysis, one that did justice to the complexity and subtlety of discursive resources and strategies drawn upon by these young men in the negotiation of a great deal more than 'maturity'. If any overarching framework could or should be applied to these data, then it should be a concern with masculinity, within which a concern with maturity would be just one minor part. The excerpts presented in this article demonstrate the participants' concern with, above all else, the performance of normative heterosexual masculinity. What that might be is evident in the preferred positions taken up by the speakers across the excerpts. It is constituted by a 'normal' level of heterosexual desire and interest, by a certain level of experience, by the exercise of rationality and reason, by not being 'desperate', by acknowledging the importance of appearance and character and by an engagement with and

involvement in a process of change and development. Whilst this argument undeniably involves the imposition of another interpretative framework, such an imposition is at least supported by the content of the adolescent male speakers' turns. In their final sentence, the authors claim that a discursive approach to the examination of 'maturity' and young men 'would reveal what counts as maturity from *their* perspective' (emphasis in original). It is strange then that they were not able to see that, in their analysis, 'maturity' is the analysts' concern – part of an interpretative framework derived from existing literature on maturation, sexuality and gender – imposed upon the data and very rarely oriented to unprompted by the young men themselves.

We hope that, in challenging the central contention in Korobov and Bamberg's analysis, we have alerted readers to one of the major analytic pitfalls that might be encountered when doing discursive work (and indeed, when doing any sort of qualitative research) – that data may be squeezed into the researchers' analytic concerns even though they do not readily fit those concerns. Analysts should be eternally mindful of the influence of their speaking positions on their readings of data, endeavour to explore as wide a range of alternative interpretations as possible and ensure that their chosen analysis is adequately evidenced by their data. We also hope that, through the commentaries on Korobov and Bamberg's work, readers will obtain some insight into how the value of any analysis can be worked out in a dynamic way through the advancing of interpretations and their contestation by others, whether that be within research teams, between researchers and reviewers or in the formal exchange of viewpoints seen here.

References

- Archer, J. (2004). The trouble with 'doing boy'. *The Psychologist*, 17, 132-136.
- Burman, E. (1994). *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Coyle, A. (2000). Discourse analysis. In G. M. Breakwell, S. Hammond & C. Fife-Schaw (Eds.),

- Research methods in psychology* (2nd ed.) (pp. 251-268). London: Sage.
- Eckert, P. (1994). Entering the heterosexual marketplace: Identities of subordination as a developmental imperative. *Working papers on learning and identity, no. 2*. Palo Alto, CA: Institute for Research on Learning.
- Edwards, D., & Potter, J. (1992). *Discursive psychology*. London: Sage.
- Elliott, R., Fischer, C. T., & Rennie, D. L. (1999). Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology, 38*, 215-229.
- Frosh, S., Phoenix, A., & Pattman, R. (2002). *Young masculinities: Understanding boys in contemporary society*. London: Palgrave.
- Frosh, S., Phoenix, A., & Pattman, R. (2003). The trouble with boys. *The Psychologist, 16*, 84-87.
- Shotter, J. (1984). *Social accountability and selfhood*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Willig, C. (2001). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research. *Psychology and Health, 15*, 215-228.