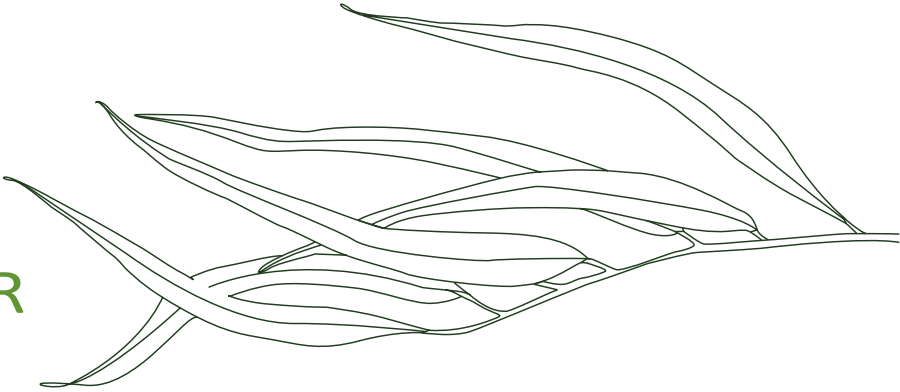




DEAR READER

The following is an article published in *Dulwich Centre Newsletter* in 1992:

“Men’s culture, the men’s movement, and
the constitution of men’s lives”
by Michael White.

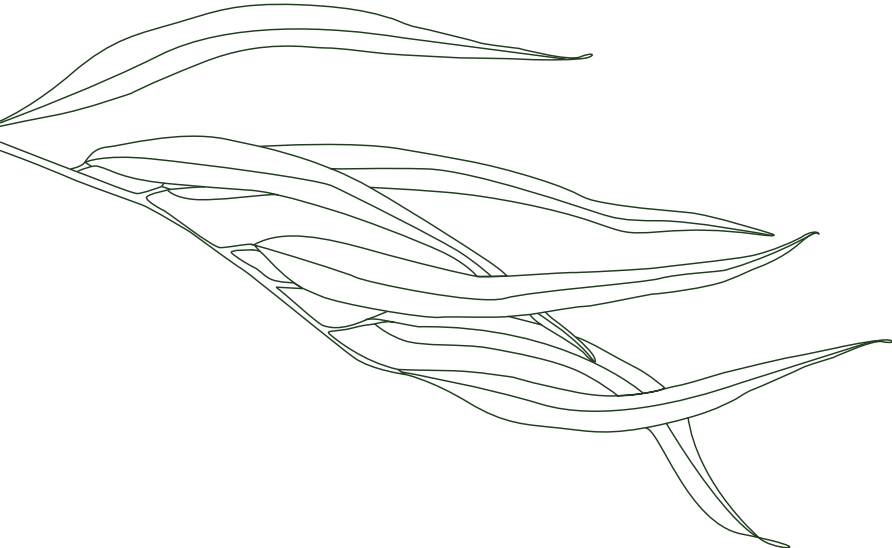
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MEN'S CULTURE, THE MEN'S MOVEMENT, & THE CONSTITUTION OF MEN'S LIVES

In part, this article is the outcome of some reflections on my experience of what is generally referred to as the "men's movement". It is also the outcome of some reflections on the situation that men are finding themselves in as they increasingly observe the very negative effects of the dominant men's culture, and as women's protest of this culture becomes more generally effective and pertinent to men. Also, it is about the predicament in which men are finding themselves as they attempt to respond to these observations and to women's protest.

I propose that this predicament is the result of the terms of reference that inform the attempts of many men to bring about some transformation of the dominant men's culture. These are terms of reference that put men at risk of reproducing problematic aspects of the dominant men's culture, and that make it very difficult for men to bring together the personal and the political. I suggest alternative terms of reference for men's work in the transformation of the dominant men's culture, and include some exercises that are intended to assist men to explore the real effects of these.

by

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Concerned, Alienated, Dismayed, Aware and Dissatisfied Men

I meet many men in different places who are very concerned about what men have done, and are still doing, to women, children and other men. Most of these "concerned" men experience a great deal of distress, shame and outrage on behalf of men in relation to those acts of men who wreak havoc in the lives of others; distress, shame and outrage in relation to the actions of those men who abuse, rape and at times kill women, children, and other men.

I meet many men in different places who are increasingly finding themselves at odds with, or alienated from, many aspects of their own culture - that is, the dominant men's culture. These "alienated men" are at odds with male privilege, with the institutionalised violence of this culture, and with the subjugation of women and men that is the outcome of distinctions that are drawn around gender, class, race and religion.

I meet many men in different places who are dismayed about the social injustice of poverty, about the extreme inequality in the distribution of wealth in our societies, and about the quality and availability of health services for those who are disenfranchised. These "dismayed men" are aware of the extent to which women, many of whom are sole parents, and members of other marginalised groups and races, are entirely over-represented in this group.

I meet many men in different places who are becoming increasingly aware of, and alarmed about, the extent to which the

dominant culture of men has been so wholly toxic to this planet. These "aware" men are those who are refusing to allow material incentives and the rewards of social status to distract their attention from the wholesale destruction of our environment, from the systematic poisoning of our life-support systems, and from the extent to which the planet is now threatened with oblivion.

I meet many men in different places who are experiencing a great deal of dissatisfaction in their personal lives. These "dissatisfied men" are those who are beginning to identify the real effects of the lifestyle into which they have been recruited and in which they participate as members of men's culture. These real effects include the pervasive sense of isolation that is so often an everyday feature of men's experience of men's culture, and the burden that they carry (albeit, one that tyrannises others) in being unable to acknowledge error and to express humility.

I also meet many other men who experience all of the above, and, of course, I meet many men who appear concerned about none of the above. And it almost goes without saying that I meet many, many women, who are also concerned about all of the above, and much, much more - but this essay is about my reflections on the men's movement and on the predicament that men are now facing.

The Men's Movement

A great number of these concerned, alienated, dismayed,

aware and dissatisfied men are associated in some way with like-minded men in groups that make up the "men's movement". However, at this present time, the term "men's movement" is hardly of any descriptive value - homogeneity is not the hallmark of this movement. Diverse orientations and a wide range of activities are encompassed by this description.

Some men are organised into politically oriented groups that are explicitly pro-feminist and anti-sexist. These groups favour various forms of activism that focus specifically on challenging the oppression of women and children by men. Other men are organised into groups that are "personal growth" or "self-help" oriented. These groups put primary emphasis on the idea of "men's liberation" and on the "reclaiming of masculinity". Yet other men, many of whom have experienced marginalisation because of sexual orientation or race, are involved in groups that are organised around issues that are quite specific to their experience of the dominant men's culture.

That there is some conflict of ideas and purposes between these different groups is only to be expected. However, for some groups of men this conflict of ideas and purposes takes on gulf-like proportions that make collaboration impossible. This gulf makes it very difficult for men to develop the sense of affiliation and collaboration that is so necessary to the task of bringing about any of the required transformations of men's culture. The gulf to which I am referring exists primarily between those action-oriented political groups that

are pro-feminist and anti-sexist, and those groups that have a personal growth and self-help orientation.

Those groups of men that are more oriented to the political frequently argue that those groups that are personal growth oriented usually privilege the well-being of men at the expense of social justice. This is an argument which has also been very strongly articulated by groups of women (for example, see *Women Respond to the Men's Movement* [Hagan 1992]). Those groups of men that are more oriented to personal growth and self-help frequently argue that other groups ignore the extent of men's suffering as well as men's need to develop and engage in processes that are healing of the male psyche; that the politically oriented action groups neglect or do not sufficiently address men's experience of men's culture. In the men's movement it is apparent that the bringing together of and the reconciling of the personal and the political is fraught with difficulty.¹

This gulf, and the difficulty that men have had in joining the personal and political, is unfortunate for many reasons, not the least of which is the extent to which it divides men from men and men from women. I believe that a significant part of this difficulty has to do with the taken-for-granted terms of reference for men's personal work; the terms of reference that frame virtually all of the personal growth and self-help oriented activities engaged in by groups of men, and the terms of reference through which the more politically oriented groups so often construe "personal work".

In this paper I will discuss some

of these terms of reference - which I believe to be informed by the foundationalist tradition of thought - and will review the real effects of these terms of reference in the shaping of men's lives and in the shaping of their relationships with others. I will then argue for an alternative perspective on the personal, a perspective that brings the personal and the political together.

FOUNDATIONALIST THOUGHT

The taken-for-granted terms of reference to which I am referring are those that are informed by foundationalist thought. Despite its taken-for-granted status in our world, it is in fact a tradition of thought that is culture and period specific - the foundationalist tradition of thought became dominant in recent history in Western culture. It is a tradition of thought that assumes objectivity, essentialism, and representationalism:

- (a) The assumption of objectivity proposes that a direct knowledge of the world is possible, and that through this we can determine the brute facts of nature; that it is possible for us to obtain an objective account of the world, one that is not mediated by our language, by our interpretations, by our location in the field of social structures and so on.
- (b) The assumption of essentialism proposes that we can know the truth about the very nature of material and psychological

existence; that we can successfully reduce the complexity of the world down to particular elements upon which all else is built; that we can get to the "bottom of things" and discover the essence of human nature; that these discoveries about nature constitute global and trans-cultural truths - uncontested truths that hold for all times and in all places.

- (c) The assumption of representationalism proposes that the descriptions or stories that we have of the world and of life are reflections of the actual world and of life itself; that, to the extent that these descriptions are a mirror of the world and of life, they can provide us with an accurate account of the world and of life.

In the history of foundationalist thought, the physical, biological, social and psychological sciences have all been spectacularly successful in the manufacture of global, unitary and timeless "truths" about nature and about culture. This tradition of thought has enabled the various disciplines of the social and psychological sciences to establish truth statements about life, and it is these truth statements that constitute the professional and expert knowledges.

Despite this success, the truths and knowledges that have been manufactured in the foundationalist tradition have never been received unproblematically and gone uncontested. In recent times, there has been more interest in the history of resistance to foundationalist thought and its methods. And there has been a greater awareness of the real effects of this tradition of

thought, particularly in terms of the extent to which the global and unitary truths disqualify alternative knowledges and subjugate many persons and groups of persons (Foucault 1973, 1979, 1980).

The assumptions of foundationalist thought have now been rigorously critiqued and refuted in many areas and upon various grounds. Alternative systems of thought and methods are usurping its authority. For example, witness those contributions of feminist scholars who are engaging in the archaeology of alternative knowledges of women's ways of being (e.g. Gilligan 1982); those developments in anthropology that relate to the new ethnography (e.g. Geertz 1983, 1988); the emergence of social constructionist and narrative theory in psychology (e.g. Parker & Shotter 1990; Sarbin 1986); and, in family therapy, the call for qualitative research (Atkinson & Heath 1987).

However, despite these developments, foundationalist thought still has currency in many of the academic disciplines and with many groups whose activities are informed by popular culture. And not the least of these are many of those groups in the men's movement that are committed to notions of personal growth and male liberation. These groups tend to be preoccupied with the question of men's nature, and with attempts to determine global and unitary truths about the essence of "masculinity" - so that men might uncover this, reclaim it, perform it, and live a life that is true to it (e.g. Bly 1992; Keen 1992). For it is argued that masculinity is an essence that exists deep in the

psyche and which has been repressed, and which if not reclaimed will surface in wild ways, accompanied by violent and other destructive acts.

In the following discussion, by referring to what I call "the essentialist project", I will review some of the real effects of foundationalist assumptions on the men's movement.

The Essentialist Project and Men's Culture

The essentialist project has played a central role in the long and inglorious history of patriarchy in western culture. Throughout this history, essentialism has been resorted to consistently by men in order to justify the oppression and disenfranchisement of women, of children, and of other races. Essentialist notions have also played a key role in the marginalisation of gay and other minority groups.

In the field of gender, men have persistently and tirelessly worked to establish a case for the superiority of men's essential nature over women's essential nature in all of those domains which are said to determine the "real" worth of a person - from superiority in the moral sense through to superiority in regard to the possession of those highly regarded capacities of logic and rational argument. This case has been central to the maintenance and extension of the inequitable arrangements between the genders - to the justification of the oppression of women, and for the support of male power, privilege and violence.

Over time, this essentialist

project has gone through a series of revivals or renewals. Often these renewals have been in response to those women's rights movements that have challenged or threatened the established social order. For example, take the primary responses of the dominant men's culture to the suffragette movement at the turn of the century - an extraordinary flurry of essentialist activity; activity devoted to distinguishing the truly masculine from the truly feminine, and to the meticulous elaboration of pre-existing notions about the true and natural role in life for each gender. In this way, the established social order that disadvantaged women was preserved and significantly strengthened.

More recently there has been a further renewal of the essentialist project. Albeit, this renewal is one that has been justified on different grounds - one that is judged to be in the service of overthrowing the dominant men's culture - but it is a renewal of the old project nonetheless. This renewal is most clearly evident in the activities of many, but not all, of those groups in the men's movement who privilege self-help and personal growth. Following Bly, Keen, and others, many of these groups, through various means, have the explicit agenda of pursuing, discovering, disseminating and performing the truth of men's nature - of the essential masculinity. Not surprisingly, this essential masculinity so often turns out to be fierce and warrior-like.

In view of this most recent renewal, and in view of the history of the essentialist project, is it all that surprising that many women

and many men are alarmed by those developments in the men's movement that are informed in this way by essentialist notions? Is it all that surprising that there is a very significant concern that these developments may be reproducing, however inadvertently, some of the really problematic aspects of the men's culture?

I believe that an appreciation of the history of the dominant men's culture provides us all with good enough reason to deeply mistrust the essentialist project as a vehicle for the transformation of men's culture. Further, I believe that there is all the more reason for this mistrust upon reviewing *some*² of the real effects of this project as it is expressed through developments in some areas of the present day men's movement. In the following discussion, I will attempt such a review. The points that I make here are not speculative, and they are not "academic" - they are derived from events that I have directly witnessed and personally experienced. Needless to say, this review forms a critique that emerges from a non-essentialist perspective.

Real Effects of the Essentialist Project

- To the extent that the essentialist project identifies certain "truths" about men's nature, it privileges a particular knowledge of so-called "authentic", "real" or "masculine" ways of being that we must learn from other men. Those men who possess this knowledge both assume and are recruited into an expert and leadership position in relation to other men, and the phenomenon of guruism and its associated hierarchical organisation is inevitably the outcome.
- To the extent that the essentialist project privileges certain knowledges and excludes or disqualifies those rival observations and knowledges about men's ways of being from the "outside", as well as critical feedback, it establishes a closed field - an inner sanctum. This is isolating of us, and the risk that we might be reproducing the dominant men's culture becomes extremely high. Isolation from alternative knowledges and from the direct feedback of those who have most keenly experienced subjugation and oppression at the hands of the dominant men's culture (that is women, children, and men of marginalised groups and those of subjugated races and cultures), makes it possible for us to continue to avoid the issue of accountability.
- To the extent that the essentialist project establishes unitary and global truths about men's nature, it specifies and totalises men's ways of being. We are incited to enter into certain operations on our lives, relationships, bodies, souls and so on, operations that establish us as persons of moral worth in the men's community - to enter into a form of dressage in order to achieve a particular presentation of the self that is one that meets the specifications of "authentic masculinity".³ Other knowledges and practices of men's ways of being are marginalised and discriminated against, and thus rendered unavailable for our consideration.
- To the extent that the essentialist project suggests that the achievement of some natural condition requires a recapturing of what has been lost, a return to basics, it is inherently conservative and provocative of a paralysing form of nostalgia for what never was. This is a form of nostalgia that romanticises the history of men's relationships with other men, and particularly the mentoring of younger men by their seniors.⁴ One outcome of this is the determination that there is some "universal need" for sons to have a particular sort of relationship with their fathers.⁵ Since the absence of this relationship is considered to bring about dire consequences, sole parents who are women are perpetually at risk of failing their sons because they provide an "incomplete" context for their lives. This provokes a certain anxiety, insecurity and conformity in these women, who are ever more likely to submit themselves and other family members to highly subjugating experiences in attempts to provide a "good enough" context for their sons' lives - in their attempts to engage a man who will meet this "universal" need.
- To the extent that the essentialist project promotes a dream that men can wind back the clock through time to rediscover the basics, it recruits us into a mythomyopic account of men's nature. This renders it virtually impossible for us to recognise the critical role that these very myths have played in the constitution and the justification of men's culture in the first place - to recognise that these very myths

are essential to the survival of patriarchal culture.⁶

- To the extent that the essentialist project preoccupies men with a search for settled certainties about the truth of their identity, it deprives us of a basis for action in the social domain. "Need" as a criterion for action so often replaces the recognition of injustice and cruelty as a basis for action, and this allows us to avoid confrontation with issues that relate to our commitments in life - to evade recognition of the real effects, upon others, of our way of living. In short, the essentialist project enables us to avoid the moral and ethical implications of, and responsibility for, what we think and what we do. It blinds us to our complicity in the maintenance of the domination and abuse of others, and to our support of economic, political and social structures that preserve and further men's privilege.

- To the extent that the essentialist project references behaviour to a self that is considered to be an underlying, fundamental, precious and somewhat fragile entity, it encourages men to interpret many of their cruel and destructive actions as responses to threats to this self. Such actions are construed as the outcome of fears that this self may be "engulfed", "swallowed", "wounded", "crushed", "pierced", "punctured" and so on. According to this scheme, many of men's cruel and destructive actions towards women and minority groups are considered to be the outcome of certain threats that invoke such fears. In order to circumvent facts that might otherwise shipwreck this

analysis⁷, a special form of mental gymnastics has been necessary. These gymnastics have led to spurious theories about the "power of powerlessness", and have made it possible for us to hold women and minority groups responsible for their own subjugation and oppression. In the culture of psychotherapy, this analysis has also supported and justified the disciplining of women, and particularly of mothers.

- To the extent that the essentialist project provokes a preoccupation with biological, genetic, and psychological explanations for the predicament in which men are finding themselves, it can deny us historical and political analyses of this predicament. For example, the theory of repression that so often accompanies the more psychological explanations of men's actions makes it very difficult for us to face what we have done, as a gender, to others in terms of subjugation and oppression, and to take responsibility for this. Furthermore, such theories distract us from any articulation of the political or class dimension of our own experience of men's culture - including those that relate to inequality of opportunity and to exploitation.

- To the extent that the essentialist project emphasises a theory of repression in its analysis of the disembodied and circumscribed ways that men speak⁸, it diverts our attention from the degree to which this disembodied speech form is one that we have learned to enter and one that shapes our lives - that constitutes who we are, that creates what we experience as "self". In

emphasising a notion of the repressed masculinity, and in sponsoring the cathartic discharge of emotions as a remedy, one considered to be paramount in the healing of men, the essentialist project renders invisible to us the processes of power associated with the more disembodied ways of speaking. The disembodied speech form privileges men's knowledges, while simultaneously masking the very processes of power at work in this privileging. Further, this theory of repression conceals the degree to which this way of speaking is considerably determined by men's situation in the social structures that they inhabit.

- To the extent that the essentialist project blinds men to the degree to which identity is something that is negotiated and distributed in communities of persons and within the institutions of our culture, it perpetuates and reinforces the very isolated forms of individuality that have been so impoverishing of our lives. These "isolated individualities" are the outcome of a denial of community, and this severely limits the opportunities for us to join collaboratively with others in the working out and in the determination of what might be our preferred desires, qualities, purposes, hopes, values, beliefs, commitments in life, and so on - in the working out of more affiliative or connected individualities.

- To the extent that the essentialist project makes it possible for men to deny the degree to which the domains of gender are distinct social worlds, it renders it impossible

for us to engage in dialogue with women in relation to our experience of men's culture and women's experience of men's culture. So often the blurring of this distinction appears to reduce men to what is experienced by women as a highly competitive and enraging position of "we were also oppressed", and "it hurt us too". In that this blurring facilitates the co-optation of women's descriptions of their experiences of men's culture, and of the terms that they have relied upon for a political and social analysis of their position, it disqualifies these terms and descriptions, and is bound to enrage. This blurring of the distinction that pertains to the social domains of gender is in the service of oppression.⁹

- To the extent that the essentialist project provides for a radical distinction between men and women in terms of their essence - one that juxtaposes men's and women's natures - it incites men to separate from and to distance from women. The real effects of this incitement are devastating of our lives. We are split apart from the contribution that our mothers, daughters, partners and other women have made to our lives, and in this process we disqualify these contributions as well as the women concerned. This is impoverishing of the lives of men - we are left to proceed in life bereft of our experience of these women's experience of us. Furthermore, this distinction supports and reinforces misogynist accounts which encourage male separatism.

- To the extent that the essentialist project proposes the

crucial recognition of sharp distinctions in identity based on gender, it inevitably locates identity in anatomy. In so doing, it prescribes for us a preoccupation with genitalia, and contributes very significantly to the phallocentrism of men's culture. The dominant "phallogentric" form of masculinity is one in which penile insertion is tantamount to the achievement of personal acknowledgment and intimate contact with others - other forms of sensual, sexual, and intimate contact are discriminated against as inconsequential, insufficient or insignificant.

- To the extent that the essentialist project obscures the structures of privilege and power that have ensured men's dominance, it makes it possible for us to construe and reduce the history of women's discontent, protest and resistance, and men's reaction to this, as a "battle of" or "war between" the sexes in which we are struggling to hold our own against "competitive women"; in which men's aggression against women is justified by citing women as co-antagonists. The construction of a "battle of" or "war between" the sexes is a ruse that blurs the power differential, conserves the status quo, and burdens women with equal responsibility in the creation of a state of affairs that they have not been free to partake equally in.

This review of the real effects of the essentialist project is by no means exhaustive. However I do believe that this is sufficient to encourage a thorough mistrust of the renewal of the essentialist project - regardless of whether or not men

justify this renewal on the grounds that it will contribute to the overthrow of the dominant men's culture.

In the following discussion I will present an alternative to essentialist notions of self, one that brings together the personal and the political, and one which brings with it very different real effects in the lives of men and in their relationships with others. For the want of a better word, I will refer to this alternative as a "constitutionalist" perspective.

THE CONSTITUTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

Historically, philosophy has been oriented towards what Foucault calls "the formal ontology of truth" through questions like "What is the world? What is man [sic]? What is truth? What is knowledge? How can we know something?" and so on. However, at the end of the eighteenth century a new question emerged in this arena: *This question is very different from what we call the traditional philosophical questions: What is the world? What is man? What is truth? What is knowledge? How can we know something? And so on. The question, I think, which arises at the end of the eighteenth century is: What are we in our actuality? You will find the formulation of this question in a text written by Kant. I don't pretend the previous questions about truth, knowledge, and so on have to be put aside. On the contrary, they constitute a very strong and consistent field of analysis, what I would like to call the formal ontology of truth. But I think*

that a new pole has been constituted for the activity of philosophising, and this pole is characterised by the question "What are we today?" And that is the field of historical reflection on ourselves. (Foucault 1988, p.145)

It is this new pole, posing questions like "What are we in our actuality?" and "What are we today?", that introduces us to what I refer to as the constitutionalist perspective.

Constitutionalism brings with it the proposition that, upon entering into life in the social world, persons become engaged in particular modes of life and thought - or, according to Foucault, particular practices of power and technologies of the self, and knowledges about life that have achieved or been granted a truth status (Foucault 1979, 1980, 1984). According to this perspective, these practices, technologies and knowledges are not radically invented - the individual person does not simply "dream them up". These practices, technologies and knowledges have been negotiated over time within contexts of communities of persons and institutions that comprise culture.

This social formation of communities and institutions composes relations of forces which establish rules that determine which ideas, of all those possible, are acceptable - they determine what is to count as legitimate knowledge. The specification of who is authorised to express these ideas, how they are to be expressed, in which contexts they might be expressed, and to whom they will be expressed, is also a function of these rules. In this way, power relations govern the production of truth.

It is not my intention to articulate these processes here more fully, nor the intimate relationship of knowledge and power, which I have discussed elsewhere (White & Epston 1990; White 1991). However, I will emphasise a central proposition of this constitutionalist perspective: these modes of life and thought are actually shaping or constituting of persons' lives and of their relationships; persons' lives are made up according to these knowledges and practices which are in fact specifying of a life. For all persons living in specific cultures, these dominant modes of life and thought come to reflect the truth about human nature, about authenticity, and about identity.

In proposing that persons' lives are constituted through specific modes of life and of thought, this perspective encourages the refutation of foundationalist assumptions of objectivity, essentialism, and representationalism. It suggests that:

- (a) an objective knowledge of the world is not possible; that knowledges are actually generated in particular discursive fields in specific cultures at specific times, and that it is impossible for persons to avoid complicity in the production of their accounts of the world.
- (b) all essentialist notions about human nature are actually ruses that disguise what is really taking place; that essentialist notions are paradoxical in that they provide descriptions that are actually specifying of life; that these notions obscure the operations of power at work in the constitution of persons' lives.

- (c) the descriptions that we have of life are not representations or reflections of life as lived, but are directly constitutive of life; that these descriptions do not correspond with or mirror the world, and that different accounts of life are not equal or neutral, but have real effects in the shaping of lives and of relationships.

The constitutionalist perspective presents us with an account of identity which is not premised on the idea of a "true", "unitary" and "fixed" nature that is unchanging, bounded, coherent, and trans-cultural. Instead, this perspective suggests that the knowledges and practices of our culture, of our social structures and communities of persons, are significantly determining of the very stuff of identity: of desires, preferences, interests, intentions, motives, values, beliefs, hopes, goals, commitments and so on.

For some, this account of identity has raised significant questions: Doesn't this claim about the determination of identity reduce persons to the level of "dupes" who blindly replicate the lives of those who have gone before, and who, simply, automatically, and mindlessly reproduce culture? Doesn't this propose a rather bleak account of identity, an account of identity as fate; one that is "fixed-up" ahead of our birth into this culture, and one that consigns persons to a passenger status in life? And doesn't this claim propose a denial of agency, and a denial of the subject?

I think not. The achievement of identity requires that persons be active in the negotiation of the

different experiences of the ways of life and of thought that are to be had at the different sites of culture; at the different positions in social structures, and at different places in communities of persons. And this achievement also requires the interpretation of experience and the structuring of self-narrative. Rather than deny agency and the subject, I believe that this perspective emphasises agency and the subject.

Identity and the Negotiation of Subjectivity

If, as I have argued, identity is constituted through a myriad of contexts, then it is multi-sited: work, recreation, marriage, family and so on. At each of these sites, certain modes of life and of thought will be privileged, and each of these will bring forth specific experiences of self - specific "subjectivities". Many of these subjectivities will be overlapping and informed by the same dominant discourses of our culture, but some will not be.

Furthermore, at each of these sites, more than one experience of self will be available. And some of these experiences of self will be contradictory, giving rise to "alternative subjectivities". Although some of these subjectivities will be more pervasive than others, and some just fleeting, none will be total. Thus we can expect that each of these sites of identity will give rise, at different times, to competing subjectivities. For example; as teachers, persons will experience an authoritarian and an egalitarian self; as students, persons will experience a knowledgeable and a naive self; as

nurses, persons will experience a competent and a submissive self; as therapists, persons will experience an involved and a detached self, and so on.

These considerations about the multi-sited nature of the self, and about the contradictory experiences of the self that are encountered at these sites, give rise to the notion that identity is an outcome of the negotiation of various subjectivities. In that many of these subjectivities are competing, on this account identity is necessarily "dilemmatic" (see Billig et al. 1988). Further, in that these considerations provide for a dynamic account of identity, they propose an account of identity that is ever available to contestation, renegotiation, and to change. Thus, as identity is both an achievement and a project for life, the role of agency and of the subject are vital.

Interpretation and Narrative

The extent to which persons are self-interpretive - they are not passive in their response to lived experience, but active in ascribing meaning to this - leads us to a second consideration of the significance of agency and the subject in the constitutionalist account of identity.

It is apparent that the interpretations at which persons arrive in relation to their lived experience are very much informed by a criterion of narrative coherence (E. Bruner 1986; J. Bruner 1990). It is through self-narrative that persons give meaning to their experience and achieve a sense of their lives

unfolding; it is through narrative that persons structure their lived experience into sequences of events in time - through past, present and future - and according to certain plots. These personal narratives are not reflections of lives as they are lived, but narratives that are actually constitutive of life; they are not stories about life, but stories that have real effects in the shaping of lives and of relationships.

As the interpretation of experience according to narrative is an achievement, then so is identity. There are always contingencies thrown up in life for which a person's dominant self-narrative is not tailor-made. These must be managed. As well, there are many gaps in personal narratives. Such gaps are the outcome of the degree to which ambiguity and uncertainty feature in all stories. In the living of, or in the performance of, self-narrative, these gaps must be filled. And there are always dilemmas to be resolved in the performance of self-narrative: dilemmas that arise from the extent to which inconsistencies and contradictions are a feature of all stories.

In the management of these contingencies, in the filling of these gaps, and in the resolution of these contradictions and inconsistencies, narratives not only shape life, but persons also transform narratives of self as they perform these narratives. So, although personal narratives are shaping of persons' lives, there is a certain indeterminacy to them - one which emphasises the role of agency and of the subject in the constitution of one's life.

The Subject

The account of identity that is described here proposes a "subject" that is constituted through certain modes of life and of thought. However, this is not a subject that is reducible to these modes of life and thought. Rather, what is being presupposed is a subject that is capable of negotiating various subjectivities and contradictions, managing contingencies, and filling the gaps that arise in personal narrative. But this is not a subject that can be considered apart from real effects of this activity - for in the process of living one's life, the subject is transformed.

I believe that any attempt to define the existence of a subject or a self apart from certain modes of life and thought, and apart from experience and narrative, is paradoxical. For it is impossible to define such a subject without describing a mode of life and of thought, and, as well, a narrative of self. This description will be specifying of a particular subjectivity. And, in turn, this act of specifying a subjectivity will be constitutive of the subject - it will have real effects in the shaping of one's existence, of who one is.

I believe that the version of the subject that I represent here is close to the version of the subject that is presupposed by Foucault. Others have reached a similar conclusion, for example:

I understand Foucault's project itself as presupposing the existence of a critical subject, one capable of critical historical reflection, refusal and invention. This subject does not control the overall direction of history,

but is able to choose among the discourses and practices available to it and to use them creatively. It is also able to reflect upon the implications of its choices as they are taken up and transformed in a hierarchical network of power relations. Finally, this subject can suspend adherence to certain principles and assumptions, or to specific interpretations of them, in their efforts to invent new ones. Foucault's subject is neither entirely autonomous nor enslaved, neither the originator of the discourses and practices that constitute its experiences nor determined by them. (Sawicki 1991, p.103)

The Personal and the Political

The version of identity or personhood that is proposed by this perspective challenges that version derived from the essentialist project. For the version of identity proposed here is not one that suggests an unfolding of true nature, but one that emphasises the constitution of life as it is lived. This constitution of life cannot be a process that is value-free or neutral, and because of this the formation of identity cannot be divorced from the arena of politics. Thus, this perspective on identity brings together the personal and the political - and it does so on several counts:

(1) In proposing that the constitution of identity, through modes of life and thought, and through narratives of self, occurs within communities of persons and social institutions which have specific commitments to ways of

acting and ways of thinking, I am proposing an activity that is partisan rather than neutral. In this sense the constitution of self is inevitably a political activity.

(2) In proposing that modes of life and thought, and self-narratives, are constitutive of life, I am arguing that these have specific and real effects in the shaping of persons' actions, and specific and real effects on the lives of others. On this score, the constitution of identity is inevitably a political activity in the micro-world of relational politics.

(3) And in proposing that, in the constitution of self, certain ways of acting and thinking are privileged over other ways of acting and thinking, some of which are marginalised or disqualified, then I am also proposing an account of the personal that is world-shaping.

A frequent critique of the post-foundationalist perspective is that it proposes an "anything goes" moral relativism, and that it deprives persons of a ground for critical judgement and a basis for action in the social world. I believe that the above considerations belie this critique, and suggest the opposite to be the case.

As well, in depriving us of truths about the nature of persons and about the nature of the world to which we might refer in order to justify our actions, the constitutionalist perspective confronts us ever more significantly with the ethical and moral implications of, and responsibility for, the real effects of the ways that we live and the ways that we think.

THE CONSTITUTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE AND MEN'S LIVES

Challenging the Essentialist Project

The constitutionalist perspective has the potential to free the present-day men's movement from many of the negative real effects of the essentialist project by:

- mitigating against the fabrication of unitary and global "truths" about men's nature, against the privileging of particular so-called "authentic" or "real" masculine ways of being that we must learn from other men;
- opening space for the introduction of rival observations and knowledges from the outside, thus challenging the perpetuation of an inner sanctum and the isolation that is associated with this;
- making it possible for us to refuse the standard classifications and categorisations that are so totalising of men's lives, and to resist the incitement to police our lives; bodies and souls in the pursuit of "authentic" masculinity;
- enabling us to break free of the paralysing nostalgia for those forms of relationship between men that never were, and, at the same time, to challenge the fabrication of those notions of men's needs that are so disempowering of mothers and capturing of men;
- encouraging us to expose those myths that are referred to in order to justify and glorify patriarchal culture as those myths which have shaped patriarchal culture;
- confronting us with our complicity in the maintenance of structures that preserve men's privilege and the domination and the abuse of others, and with the moral and ethical implications of our ways of life - of what we think, and of what we do;
- discouraging us from engaging in the sort of mental gymnastics that spur theories of the "power of the powerless", and from justifications of our behaviour that are informed by notions of the fragile self and of threats to this self;
- rendering visible to us the processes of power associated with disembodied speech forms, and the extent to which these ways of speaking are informed by our positions in the social structures that we inhabit;
- freeing us from the sort of projects of self that give rise to isolated and impoverished individualities;
- introducing political and historical considerations that enable us to face and take responsibility for what we have done to others, and for the predicament in which we now find ourselves;
- enabling us to counteract the blurring of the distinct social domains of gender, and, in preserving the relevant distinctions, acknowledging women's social analysis of their position rather than co-opting this analysis;
- provoking us to dismantle the juxtaposition of men's and women's natures, thus dissolving the imperative for men to separate from women, and openly acknowledging

and embracing those significant contributions that women have made to our lives;

- inspiring us to challenge the dominance of phallocentrism in our intimate contact with others;
- requiring that we acknowledge the structures of privilege and power that have ensured men's dominance, and, in so doing, making it possible for us to respect and honour, as protest, the struggle that women have initiated against these structures, and to join them in this.

Alternative Ways of Being For Men

The constitutionalist perspective proposes more than just a challenge to the essentialist project and to its negative real effects. And it is provocative of more than a determination to separate our lives from the problematic aspects of the dominant men's culture.

It also provokes a determination to engage in processes that generate and/or resurrect alternative knowledges and practices of men's ways of being, and that lead to the development and the performance of alternative narratives of self that have preferred real effects. What might be the starting point for such a project?

The Renegotiation of Subjectivities

I have argued that identity is multi-sited, and that it is a product of the ongoing negotiation of multiple subjectivities. In

emphasising the dilemmatic nature of identity, I have also argued for a dynamic account of identity - one that is ever available to contestation, renegotiation, and to change.

Although many of the subjectivities that make up a person's experience of the self will be informed by the same dominant discourses, some will not be. In that some of these other subjectivities will be juxtaposed to those that are more informed by the dominant modes of life and of thought of the men's culture, it will be possible to consider some of these other subjectivities as meeting the criterion of "alternative subjectivities".

These alternative subjectivities, these alternative experiences of self, can be considered to be sites of resistance and can provide a point of entry to the articulation and performance of alternative knowledges and practices of men's ways of being - and, of course, to the renegotiation of identity.

Alternative Narratives of Self

I have also argued that a sense of identity is achieved through the structuring of experience into self-narrative, and that this requires (a) the management of contingencies, (b) the filling of gaps that relate to ambiguity and uncertainty that feature in all stories about life, and (c) the resolution of inconsistency and contradiction. However, success at this task will always be of a limited nature; narrative coherence is always partial.

Many of the contingencies that confront persons in their daily lives defy interpretation according to their dominant narratives of self. As well,

some of the ambiguity and uncertainty, and many of the inconsistencies and contradictions that are associated with these dominant narratives cannot be satisfactorily resolved. In order to facilitate the interpretation of these contingencies, and to resolve this ambiguity, this uncertainty, these inconsistencies and these contradictions, persons engage in the performance of various "sub-narratives" of their lives. In this sense, persons' identities are not single-storied, but multi-storied. Many of these sub-narratives will complement the dominant narratives, but there will be those that will not, and some of these can be assumed to be "alternative narratives of self".

However, not even the multi-storied nature of identity will be sufficient to the task of the ascription of meaning to experience. There will still be many aspects of experience that defy interpretation, negotiation and resolution; there will always be a stock of lived experience that will be neglected - lived experience that cannot be managed by, and that appears to exhaust, the available frames of intelligibility.

Just as alternative subjectivities can provide a point of entry to alternative modes of life and thought for men, so can the alternative sub-narratives of our lives and those neglected aspects of lived experience that have defied interpretation. The exercises detailed in the latter part of this paper provide one account of how this might be done.

Before providing details of these exercises, I will make further comment on the extent to which the constitutionalist perspective brings together the personal and the

political, and then discuss some special considerations to our task of generating and or/resurrecting alternative knowledges and practices of men's ways of being.

Resistance and Freedom

In that the constitutionalist perspective is provocative of a determination to engage in the generation and/or resurrection of alternative ways of being and thinking for men, it brings together the personal and the political in yet another sense - through the very act of alternative self-formation, it suggests the possibility of resistance to the dominant knowledges and practices of men's ways of being.

There is an intimate connection between the possibility of resistance and the generation and/or resurrection of alternative ways of being and thinking for men. This is a possibility of resistance that does not arise in a vacuum; it is a possibility of resistance that is not the outcome of sheer negation of particular modes of life and thought, but a resistance that is founded upon and made possible by conceptions of a life for men that might be otherwise.

It is through the articulation of preferred knowledges and practices of men's ways of being, those that are associated with alternative subjectivities and narratives of self, that resistance to the dominant ways in which we have been classified and identified as men can be determined, honoured and further articulated. And it is through a commitment to perform these alternative knowledges and practices of life that the dominant men's culture of the present day will be dismantled.

Inasmuch as this notion of resistance is often associated with the connotation of freedom, this should not be construed as a freedom "to become who we truly are", but:

- (a) the freedom to observe the links between certain modes of life and thought and their real effects in the constitution of lives and relationships;
- (b) the freedom to locate particular modes of life and thought within the structures and processes that have legitimated them, and that have excluded or disqualified other modes of life and of thought;
- (c) the freedom to expose the paradox that is associated with all essentialist notions of masculinity;
- (d) the freedom to refuse to be who we do not have to be;
- (e) the freedom to acknowledge the moral and ethical responsibilities associated with living our lives in the way that we do;
- (f) the freedom derived from experiencing some choice about those modes of life and thought by which we might live;
- (g) the freedom to embrace some of the unique and positive developments in our own lives as we go about the process of renegotiating our identities.

Some Considerations

Despite our very best efforts to challenge the dominant men's culture, and to develop and to enter our lives into alternative modes of life and thought, and thus alternative identities, it is only reasonable for us

to expect that we will be prone to inadvertently reproducing problematic aspects of this very culture. This does not add up to failure. It is not tenable for us to assume that we can achieve a vantage point from the outside of men's culture from which to address men's culture. By accepting that we are prone to reproducing some of the problematic aspects of men's culture, and by expecting that we will carry this proneness into the future, we can be more open to others who might be in a better position to challenge the reproduction of that which we might not be aware of.

On the other hand, if we assume that we are getting it right, and that the risk that we might be reproducing problematic aspects of the dominant men's culture is minimal, then we will be defensive over, distressed about, and closed to feedback. Furthermore we will find it virtually impossible to take responsibility for the real effects of the "alternative" knowledges and practices of men's ways of being that we are championing. And this is entirely problematic, for just as a critique of the established men's culture is dependent on a historical reflection on its real effects, so does a critique of alternative knowledges and practices of men's ways of being depend on a reflection on the real effects of these.

This consideration behoves us to make it our business to take up every opportunity that avails itself to us to render visible those taken-for-granted men's responses that, in ordinary circumstances, we are so familiar with and close to that we cannot perceive. The adoption of this posture signifies a recognition of

the insidious and pervasive nature of many of the attitudes and practices of men's culture, and makes us more responsive to the concerns of others, regardless of the form through which they are expressed. And in our efforts to step into alternative knowledges and practices of men's ways of being, this posture commits us to the solicitation of feedback, of both formal and informal nature, from those who are most subject to the real effects of the dominant men's culture - that is women, children, men of other races, and other marginalised groups. Formal feedback can be achieved through the establishment of systems of accountability, and I would refer readers to the work of the Family Centre of Lower Hutt, Aotearoa/ New Zealand, for further discussion of this (Waldegrave 1991; Tamasese & Waldegrave 1993).

EXERCISES

I will here present a sample of some exercises that I developed in reference to the constitutionalist perspective. The feedback that I have received from those who have engaged in these exercises suggests that many men have found them useful. The first three exercises provide some examples of processes that utilise alternative subjectivities, alternative narratives of self, and neglected aspects of lived experience as gateways to alternative knowledges and practices of men's ways of being with women, children and other men.

The fourth exercise encourages men to further explore alternative knowledges and practices of men's

ways of being that are already firmly established in their lives. The fifth focuses on the *direct* deconstruction of essential notions of masculinity. I emphasise the word *direct* here, as I believe that all of the exercises described contribute significantly to the deconstruction of the modes of life and thought of the dominant men's culture. These exercises also bring the personal together with the political - the renegotiation of identity with attention to the real effects of this, and a commitment to action in the social world.

The exercises, which are structured around specific questions, can be done in small groups, with one person electing to undertake the role of interviewer and another (a man) volunteering to be interviewed. Alternatively, group members can interview each other in a more general way, exchanging experiences as they work through the exercises. It is important that there are at least two women present in each group who are prepared to provide feedback about the exercise. Such feedback will assist the men to determine whether or not they are reproducing problematic aspects of the dominant men's culture or alternative ways of being and thinking that have preferred outcomes.¹⁰ This feedback is best given at the end of the exercise, and the women who undertake to provide this have a choice as to whether or not they engage in dialogue with the other group members about this feedback.

Prior to commencing the exercises, the groups can discuss the questions for the purposes of clarification, and the complexity of some can be reduced by breaking

them into parts. These questions should not be asked in a barrage-like fashion, but will serve as a guide - each question asked in this process should be attuned to the responses of the man being interviewed. Men often find these exercises powerfully evocative of other images of who they might be, and surprisingly emotive.

The exercises are structured around a process of questions which represent a progression, and which contribute to men's articulation of, and men's engagement in, alternative landscapes of their lives. Elsewhere, following J. Bruner (1986), I have referred to these as landscapes of action and landscapes of consciousness (White 1989, 1991). For those readers who wish to refer to other examples of this sort of process, or who would like a framework for designing their own versions of these exercises, I would refer you to *Deconstruction and Therapy* (White 1991).

Exercise A:

Introduction

Your sense of who you are as a man is something that seems to carry across different contexts of your life, whether it be at home, at work, at play etc. This is usually a relatively well defined, familiar, settled and certain sense of who you are and what it means to be a man. You usually experience the transition between these contexts as relatively unproblematic, even smooth perhaps.

However, at times you have found yourself in contexts where this

familiar sense is not available to you, or where it becomes shrouded in doubt. You probably experienced the transition to these other contexts as somewhat problematic, with your familiar ways of being less available to you, your usual sense of who you are as a man almost suspended. You might even have felt "out of sorts" for a period, at times your discomfort being such that you took flight for more familiar contexts. However, on those occasions when you have not taken flight, after struggling with the sense of the unfamiliar and the awkwardness that is associated with this, you will have experienced some different ways of being and thinking, and will have achieved an altered sense of who you are and what it means to be a man.

Questions

Recall one such occasion when you achieved such an altered sense of who you are as a man, when this seemed to bring with it some new and positive possibilities for your way of life, and what appeared to be preferred real effects in your relationships with others. Consider that this recall could provide the opportunity to identify and to explore alternative and preferred ways of being and thinking as a man, and address yourself to the following questions:

Please describe the context and the different sense of self that accompanied this. From which dominant taken-for-granted ways of being as a man, that you were recruited into as a member of men's culture, did you experience a degree of separation at this time?

Was there some initial discomfort associated with being separated from a more familiar sense of who you were, a more familiar sense of self? How did you manage to resist taking flight from this context? Did you nearly turn back? What did you depend upon to see you through this discomfort? Were there other developments taking place in your life leading up to this that helped to prepare you for it?

What stories could be told about you, from earlier times in your life, that would help others to understand the foundations for this resistance? Which persons would have been in the best position to tell these stories? What do these stories say about what you have wanted for your life?

Could you describe and give a name to the alternative ways of being and of thinking that were associated with this different sense of self? In what ways were these shaping of your interactions with others? How did you know that these alternative ways of being a man suited you? Do you understand what it is about you that attracted you to these other ways of being and of thinking?

At this time, did you have the opportunity to receive feedback about yourself from others who were not wholly invested in the dominant men's culture? If so, what did they witness you doing, and what qualities do you think they were experiencing in you at this time? What do you think this told them about what you value highly in your relationships with others?

Do you have any thoughts about the steps that you might take to explore more fully and to extend these

preferred ways of being and of thinking? Let us assume that these other knowledges about what you want for your life, about the ways of life that you are attracted to, and about the values that are important to you, are to become more influential. What further effects would this have on your life and on your interactions with others?

In stepping more fully into these alternative ways of being and thinking, how would this be likely to affect the picture that you have of yourself as a man? And how would this affect your stance on those dominant men's ways of being and thinking that are subjugating of others, and on your commitment to engage with other men in challenging the structures that make possible the domination and abuse of others?

Exercise B:

Introduction

There are many situations in life that throw up contradictory requirements about how men should act, and about how men should think. These engage men in different senses of, or images, of their self. At those points at which these contradictory requirements are in greatest conflict, men usually experience strong encouragement to resolve the associated dilemmas in favour of those ways of acting and thinking that are privileged in the dominant men's culture.

However, this is not always the case. There are many occasions upon which the resolution of these dilemmas is delayed despite the conflict that is experienced by the

men concerned. And there are occasions upon which, at least for a time, that side of the dilemma which is not supported by the dominant men's culture is favoured.

Questions

Consider these to be occasions upon which men stand apart from the dominant men's culture. As such they are worthy of a more thorough examination to determine what they might reveal about alternative ways of being and of thinking for men. Now address the following questions:

Identify and reflect on an occasion when you took the step of delaying the resolution of such a dilemma, or when you took the step of resolving such a dilemma in favour of the side that was more antagonistic to the dominant men's culture. Describe this by providing details about the event, the scene, and the players.

What was it that led up to this step? How did you prepare yourself for it? What other developments were taking place in your life around this time that might be in some way related to this step?

How did you approach this dilemma? In the first place, were you tempted to resolve this in favour of the ways of life and thought of the dominant men's culture? What helped to see you through this? Who else contributed to this? Did you get to a point when you realised that you had achieved something significant? If so, how did you know that this was significant?

What did this achievement tell you about how you wanted your life

to be, and about the beliefs that are most precious to you? Could you describe the different sense of self that was available to you at this time? What does this different sense of self reflect about the ways of being as a man that are preferred by you? Are these ways of being also preferred by others? If so, how do you imagine news of this achievement did (or could) effect the perspective that others have about who you are?

Thinking back, can you recall any other dilemmas, perhaps in other situations of life, around which you might have achieved a similar result, and experienced this different sense of self? What might I have witnessed you doing or thinking at an earlier time that could have given me the hint that, at a later point in life, you might handle such a dilemma in this way? Could you tell me anything else that would help me to grasp the foundations upon which this development depended?

If I had witnessed these earlier events in your life, what might they have said to me about the values that were to become more important to you in your relationships with women, children and other men? How did these earlier events effect your beliefs about what being a man was all about? Whose responses to these events helped most to clarify the importance of these values and beliefs for you?

Is there the space available in your life for the further development of this alternative sense of self? If so, and if you were determined for this sense of self to play a more central role in your life, what further steps are available to you? What effects do you think these steps would be likely to

have on your day-to-day interactions with others? And how do you think they might influence your responses to the day-to-day dilemmas that you are confronted with around sexism, inequality, and the many demands for complicity in men's abusive attitudes and actions in relation to women, children and other men?

If it turned out that you were correct in these predictions, what would this convey, to your loved ones, your friends and acquaintances, about what you are committed to?

Exercise C:

Introduction

When we relate the stories of our lives they usually come out much the same - the recitation is familiar. We depend on these familiar stories to achieve a sense of meaning and coherence in our lives; to organise our experiences of the events of our pasts, and to organise our lives in the present. And these stories also carry us forward - they are a basis for action in that they enable us to determine what will be our next steps in life.

The interpretation of experiences of the events of our lives - the attribution of meaning to these experiences - requires that we find a way of incorporating them into the central and unfolding themes (or plots) of the stories of our lives. And this also requires that we find a way of fitting these experiences into what we know of ourselves in other ways as well: into the regular accounts that we have of our preferences, desires, motives, goals, values and so

on. The storying of our lives in this way usually proceeds relatively unproblematically.

However, from time to time we have experiences of events in life that appear to over-stretch the interpretive resources of these frames that we call stories. These experiences defy a straightforward interpretation; they are not so easily rendered sensible. In response, we find ourselves looking for other interpretive frames, other stories about our lives, that might assist us to ascribe meaning to these experiences.

At these times we can become separated from the dominant stories of our lives, and suddenly find ourselves relating to different accounts of what our lives are about, and to different accounts of our preferences, desires, motives, goals, values etc. Sometimes these alternative accounts significantly contradict the dominant accounts of our lives: those that are informed by the familiar private stories of our lives as well as the dominant stories of our culture into which, as men, we are recruited.

Questions

These alternative accounts can be more fully articulated, and can provide a basis for the exploration of alternative and preferred ways of being and of thinking for men. With this aim in mind, consider the following questions:

Recall an experience of your life that was initially difficult for you to make sense of, and one that didn't fit at all well with the story that you had been recruited into about who you are

as a man. Describe this experience as well as its circumstances.

In your attempts to make sense of this experience, did it have you rethinking who you were as a man? Did it trigger a different image of who you might be? Was this image one that was attractive to you? Was it one that might have significant appeal to others? Was it an image that bore the promise of preferred real effects in your own life and on your relationships with others? If so, in what ways?

At this time, did you become aware of any other experiences in the history of your life that might resonate with this alternative image of who you might be? Describe these experiences. Speculate about how these other experiences might connect to the experience that you described at the outset of this exercise.

Upon undertaking this review, what other threads or themes of your life are becoming apparent to you? How would you name these threads or themes? How do you think other persons who know you well would name these threads or themes?

What is the history of these alternative themes of your life? Of all those persons who knew you well at a younger age, who would be best placed to tell me a story about you that would reflect these themes? What story would they recount? What do you think the events that are related in this story said to others about your personal qualities and about your motives?

As you reflect on your responses to these questions, what do you get in touch with about what might be your preferred ways of going about your

life; about what you intended for your life, about what you believed to be important in regard to your relationships with others, and so on?

Review some of the realisations that are available to you in the undertaking of this exercise. Do these realisations have you reconsidering some of the conclusions that you had previously made about your life? Perhaps you might like to consider some historical events that, at one time, you took to reflect personal failure to achieve manhood, or to express masculinity? In the light of these realisations, how might you reinterpret these events? Might these events now reflect resistance to the requirements of the dominant men's culture?

How would you describe the alternative ways of being and of thinking that accompany this alternative account of who you are? In what ways have these alternative and preferred ways of being and of thinking shaped your life and your relationships with others?

How have these alternative ways of being and thinking had you speaking about yourself and about others differently? How do you think speaking about yourself and others in this way has influenced what you do?

Assume that these alternative ways of being and thinking will become more available to you in the guidance of your life and of your relationships. What further steps would you expect to witness yourself taking in challenging the negative real effects, on others, of the dominant men's culture?

Exercise D:

Introduction

It is one thing for a man to have some thoughts about other versions of who he might be, of other ways of being in relation to women, children, and other men. It is another thing to have the know-how or the practices of life that are required to put these thoughts into being. In view of the extent to which alternative ways of being for men have been disqualified and marginalised by men's culture, orient yourself to the very existence of these thoughts and practices in your own life as one might orient oneself to a mystery.

Questions

Now consider the following questions:

Recall when you first entertained thoughts about ways of being a man that were outside of the dominant and taken-for-granted ideas about men's lives. What experiences provoked these thoughts? And what were these thoughts about?

Could you help me to understand how it was that you were able to entertain these ideas as possibilities for your life at this time? Were there specific persons who played an important role in calling attention to these possibilities for your life?

If there were such persons, how did they contribute? Did these persons provide you with some examples of alternative ways of being as a man in relation to women, children and other

men that you judged to be preferred? And/or did these persons respond to you in a way that acknowledged something about you that was apart from what usually gets acknowledged in boys or other men?

At what point in your life did you step further into this alternative way of being? How did you develop the know-how that was required to achieve this? Did you achieve this largely by imagination and processes of trial and error? If so, who provided the necessary feedback to you in this process?

Or were you fortunate enough to be able to take a leaf out of someone else's book? If so, how did you enter into these practices and make them work in your own life and your own relationships? In so doing, how were these practices transformed? And in what way were they transformative of your relationship with yourself and with others?

Just imagine that those persons who made important contributions to your development of these alternative ways of being were present right at this minute, listening to this interview. How do you think they would respond to this interview? What would you say to them about what they have contributed to your life? And what do you think they would say to you about how you have contributed to their life?

Would the sort of interview that you are presently engaged in encourage you to more fully explore, step further into and more completely embrace alternative and preferred ways of being? If so, what would you predict to be the real effects of this on your life, and on your relationships

with others? What sort of action do you think this could lead you to in relation the various oppressive men's practices that you witness daily in your world? How would this challenge you further to confront the techniques of power that men rely upon to preserve their position of privilege?

Exercise E:

Introduction

There are many notions that have been manufactured by men in their attempts to define what is the essence of masculinity. It is not possible to consider such "essences" without accompanying descriptions of how they manifest themselves in men's lives and in their relationships with others. And these descriptions are not neutral in their effects on men's actions. They constitute specific accounts of men's ways of being that are considered to be "authentic", accounts that men are incited to enter their lives into, and accounts that are actually shaping of men's lives and of their relationships.

Take one notion that represents what you believe or once believed to be a description of what is essential to masculinity; a term that is considered to represent the truth of what it means to be a man, one that provides a keyhole to authenticity.

Questions

Now consider the following questions:

What practices of life and ways of thinking stand behind this word? What ways of living or what lifestyle does this word represent or conjure up?

What sort of operations on your life, on your body, and on your soul does/did this way of thinking and this way of living require you to engage in? How do/did these ways of thinking and living have you relating to yourself? How do/did they shape your life?

What are/were the real effects of this way of thinking and living on your relationships with others? How do/did others experience this way of living and thinking, and how does/did it shape their interactions with you?

If you were to step/had stepped further into the particular way of being that is associated with this notion, what do you imagine this would require/would have required you to do to your life into the future? What other real effects of this way of being do you think you would witness/would have witnessed?

From what other positions or perspectives might you evaluate the effects of this way of being? From these positions or perspectives, which of these effects might be judged to be preferred effects, and which of these effects might be judged not to be preferred?

At what point in history do you think this essential notion emerged? What do you know about the use to which this notion has been put over time? What does it appear that this notion has made possible, and what have been its limitations?

Can you identify and describe the specific processes by which you were recruited into the practices of life and ways of thinking that are associated with this notion?

By what processes has this notion, in providing the grounds for an authentic way of life, been privileged over other notions, which provide different claims about such grounds?

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that, in the history of the dominant men's culture, the essentialist project has been central to the maintenance of gender inequality. I have also argued that the adoption of, and the attempts to adapt, this project by a significant section of the men's movement puts those men involved at risk of reproducing problematic aspects of the dominant men's culture - often, those very aspects that these men were so concerned about in the first place.

I have proposed an alternative frame of reference for men's attempts to transform the dominant men's culture, one that I have referred to as the constitutionalist perspective. I believe that this perspective makes it possible for us to face and to come to terms with our history, and frees us to do something that is very difficult - that is, to take the courage and to find the wherewithal to act against our own culture. It is a perspective that draws together the personal and the political at several levels.

The constitutionalist perspective mitigates against the determination of an alternative global and unitary knowledge of men's ways of being. But it does invite us to (a) engage in processes that contribute to the identification, resurrection and generation of alternative and

preferred "local" knowledges of men's ways of being, and to (b) embrace the unique and positive developments in our lives and our relationships as we do so. In embracing these unique developments, we will not be assuming that they reflect an original nature, but will be aware that we are acknowledging that which we are originating as we renegotiate the dilemmas that are thrown up by our different experiences of self, and as we transform our personal narratives.

Notes:

1. I accept that this is a generalisation, and acknowledge that there exist groups of men who relate themselves to the men's movement, for which these observations are inaccurate.
2. Here, I emphasise the word 'some' for several reasons. First, because there exist alternative versions of what is essential to being a man which may bring about preferred real effects in the lives and in the relationships of those men who step into these versions. Second, because this particular 'some' is an entirely significant some, which brings with it far-reaching negative real effects. Third, because there are many other real effects of the essentialist project that warrant critical appraisal.
3. For example, bodily postures, ways of speaking, attitudes towards women, children and other men, relational tactics of power and control, valued pursuits and so on.
4. Contrary to the commonly held idea that the mentoring of younger men by their seniors is a requirement for the transformation of younger men's lives, I often find in my work with men that the reverse seems to be the case. What so often appears transformative is the development of an account of the contribution that these men made or might have made to their father's life. This account can be developed in response to questions like:
"In what ways do you think that your father's life might have been all the richer for having known you as a child and adolescent?", or
"If your father had been less blind to what there was to appreciate about you as a child and adolescent, and if he had been truly interested in acknowledging and experiencing this in you, what effect do you think this would have had on his quality of life?", or
"If you had yourself for a son, what potential would your interaction with this son have for enriching your life?", and so on.
5. Many men are initially stunned by these questions. These are clearly the more difficult questions, probably because they contradict the usual one-way requirements of men's culture; that is for men to pay homage to their elders. It is so often a deeply moving experience to witness men's struggle with questions of this sort, and to be privy to the conclusions that they begin to arrive at and to the positive effects of these conclusions on their sense of self.
6. In an attempt to review this claim, I have done a little research - I have made it my business to ask men about their relationships with their fathers. Sure enough, many of those men whose fathers ran out on their families wished that their fathers had not done so. However, many other men whose fathers had run out on their families were pleased and relieved that their fathers had done so. I also interviewed men whose fathers had stayed. Many of those men whose fathers hadn't run out on their families were glad that their fathers hadn't. However, there were many men whose fathers hadn't run out on their families who wished that their fathers had done so.
7. I would refer readers to a forthcoming book by Olga Silverstein that is devoted to, among other things, the deconstruction of those myths that provide the foundation for patriarchal culture.

7. For example, although many boys do learn to exhibit contempt for their mothers, it is clearly apparent that, by and large, children fear their fathers much more than they fear their mothers.
8. These language practices introduce ways of speaking that are considered to be rational, neutral and respectable, emphasising notions of the authoritative account and the impersonal expert view - ways of speaking that are designed to elevate the opinions of men over the opinions of others, and ways of speaking that are marginalizing or disqualifying of other ways of speaking. These practices disembodiment the perspective and the opinions of the speaker. The presentation of the knowledges of the speaker is devoid of information that might give the respondent information about the conditions of the production of the expert view. Without this critical information, respondents experience a certain "suspension" - they do not have the information necessary to determine how they might "take" the views that are expressed, and this dramatically reduces the range of possible responses available to them.
9. This isn't to suggest that a very great number of us men haven't had terrible experiences of men's culture - for example, the institutionalised violence of war, the various public rituals of degradation and humiliation, and so on. But it is to suggest that we develop our own language of description and analysis of our experience of men's culture instead of robbing women of theirs.
10. This feedback does not take the form of a judgement about the experiences that are related by the man, nor about his responses to these experiences. Rather, it takes the form of speculation about, and an appraisal of, the real effects that might accompany the alternative ways of being and thinking which are being articulated and performed in the exercise.

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