Interrogating Masculinities: Regimes of Practice

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

Signed

[Signature]
Abstract

This thesis draws on post-Foucauldian theories of governmental power and technologies of the self to critically examine the deployment of post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, sociological and cultural studies' paradigms for theorising and researching masculinities. It is argued that a particular dialectical mode of rationality and a project of cultural completion inform these approaches which are based on a requirement to reconcile oppositional categories such as freedom and determination, subject-determining state and self-determining subject, social structure and social actor. The limits are outlined of theorising subjectivity in terms of the restoration of consciousness to the individual and as the means by which 'culture' is mediated via repressive and/or ideological mechanisms.

An alternative theorisation of subjectivity, conceiving of masculinities as enacted within regimes of historically contingent normalising practices, is applied to an investigation of how specific groups of boys learn to relate as gendered subjects in a particular school. Surveys, observational methods and semi-structured interviews are used to trace the specific effects of practices implicated in the formation of masculinities for the boys. Attention is also drawn to the relationship of specific models of masculinity to the boys' literacy practices.

On the basis of this research, important implications for practice at policy and pedagogical levels are identified.
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Preface

This thesis elaborates a post-Foucauldian approach to theorising and researching masculinities. It draws predominantly on the work of Foucault (1978; 1982b; 1984c; 1984d; 1984e; 1984g; 1987; 1988a; 1988b; 1991a; 1991b) and Hunter (1984a; 1987; 1988a; 1991a; 1993b; 1994) to formulate an alternative perspective on the constitution of subjectivity which deviates from current cultural studies models for understanding the social and literacy practices of boys in schools. It contributes to 'new' knowledge about the formation of masculinities by undertaking a critique of theoretical perspectives which resort to using the explanatory tropes of ideology and repression to account for the constitution of gendered subjectivities (see Weedon, 1987; Davies, 1993; 1994; Henriques et al, 1984). In other words, rather than treating the formation of 'masculinity' as emerging in the consciousness of individual subjects, it highlights the role that particular technologies of normalisation and pedagogical regimes have to play in understanding the ways in which boys enact stylised forms of masculinity in school. Furthermore, such knowledge is applied, in an innovative way, to developing an alternative account of a group of boys' social relationships and engagement in literacy practices. Moreover, it recasts the role of researcher within the context of a 'sympathetic relation' with interviewees as a basis for articulating an innovative critical practice for addressing masculinities in schools. In this sense, it makes a significant contribution to research on the effects and production of masculinities in schools, both in terms of providing an alternative explanation and in relation to developing pedagogical practices for adjusting norms around the formation of homophobic and heteronormative currencies of masculinity.

A post-Foucauldian interpretive analytics is elaborated in chapters one, two three and four as a basis for establishing both the theoretical and methodological grounds on which the research into the formation of adolescent masculinities is conducted. The concept of
'masculinity' and relations between it and other social practices are placed under a particular type of investigation (Hearn, 1996) which involve re-thinking the links between culture, subjectivity and politics (Greenfield, 1995; Hunter, 1993b; Hindess, 1989). It is in this sense that particular modes of subjectification, conceived of as historically contingent practices of the self, are framed in terms of their deployment within specific regulatory technologies of normalisation (Foucault, 1988a). In these terms, 'masculinity' is theorised as a set of iterative and variable practices and techniques of the self that are tied to various departments of social existence in which boys are subjected to specific forms of training (see Mauss, 1973; 1985). However, it is argued that such trainings have no single point of reference in the putative consciousness of the hermeneutic subject (see Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982). Moreover, the particular focus on language, as the privileged site for realising the possibility of subjectivity within dominant cultural studies paradigms (Weedon, 1987), is refuted in this thesis with regards to elaborating what may be termed a post-discursive theorisation and politics of masculinities.

In chapter five it is demonstrated that a particular form of dialectical cultural critique is endemic in the field of 'masculinity studies' (Brod, 1987c). The limits of a particular mode of rationality, which is framed by a fundamental dialectics that is organised around the oppositional concepts of determination and freedom, are identified through the literature review that is conducted. This critique is further extended in chapter six which focuses on a review of the research that has been conducted into the interplay and formation of masculinities in educational contexts.

In subsequent chapters semi-structured interviews, observational methods and surveys are employed to investigate the bases on which specific behaviours, practices and ways of thinking are judged to count as an instance of 'masculinity' (Coleman, 1990). Groups of adolescent boys in a middle-class, catholic, co-educational high school in metropolitan
Perth, Western Australia agreed to participate in the study. The data, collated over a period of three years, are deployed to describe the *modes of subjectification* that are tied to normalising regimes of practice in which these adolescent boys are incited to enact particular currencies of masculinity. The criteria that the researcher employs in attributing 'masculinity' are also placed under a particular kind of investigation (Coleman, 1990).

The reading preferences and literacy practices of particular groups of adolescent boys at the above-mentioned catholic school are also placed under a particular kind of Foucauldian investigation in chapters twelve and thirteen. A survey is used to document the intersection of specific gender regimes with boys' engagement in specific literacy practices. Two texts are also deployed within a regime of reading to determine their effectivity in terms of addressing the politics of masculinity in the literacy classroom.

The final chapter reviews the central arguments elaborated in the thesis and outlines some of implications of the research, both for educational practices and social relations in schools, and for formulating policy.