

Male dominance within organisational structures



Introduction

David Collinson and Jeff Hearn posit that "... a challenge to men's taken-for-granted dominant masculinities could facilitate the emergence of less coercive and less divisive organisational structures, cultures and practices" (Collinson and Hearn, 1996: 73). This paper offers a critical evaluation of this proposition within a structuralist/poststructuralist conceptual framework, centring on discourse as a means by which taken-for granted dominant masculinities may be ameliorated.

The theoretical examination, detailed under Conceptual foundations below, begins with an appraisal of the value of discourse in both the workplace and wider society. Discourse is shown to be powerful and widely accepted, with the potential to challenge dominant masculinities. This potential, however, is not without its difficulties.

The practical considerations of the potential challenge identified are examined under The challenge to dominant masculinities below. Previous challenges to taken-for-granted masculinities are considered and are found to have been limited in their success, inter alia, due to the external points of origin of their discourses.

Finally the Conclusion recapitulates upon the paper's findings. Collinson and Hearn's (1996) proposition is found to be valid but conceptually flawed and optimistic, requiring a more robust challenge than they imply.

Conceptual foundations

Language is the tool of the various discourses that contribute to the formation and communication of social structures, cultures and practices

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(Van Dijk, 1997). The "linguistic turn" – the name given to the encapsulation of the centrality of language in the development of structures, cultures and practices – is a product of structuralist and post-structuralist philosophy (Barrett, 1998), and is most commonly associated with the nineteenth and twentieth century work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault (Potter, 2000). The linguistic turn concept captures the importance of both words and interpretation – "signification" (Barrett, 1998) – which may be described as being either "internal", i. e. that which is acceptable to and readily adopted within the relevant settings (and usually originating therein), or "external", i. e. that which is unacceptable and rejected by the relevant settings, due to having originated from outside and hence being recognised as alien. The processes by which these significations arise are herein respectively described as "internalisation" and "externalisation".

Collinson and Hearn's (1996: 73) suggestion can be read in two ways – as a workplace challenge, or one with a wider, societal base. Examination of the quoted sentence in its entirety – "The possibility of a challenge to men's taken-for-granted dominant masculinities could facilitate the emergence of less coercive and less divisive organisational structures, cultures and practices, a fundamental rethinking of the social organisation of the domestic division of labour and a transformation of 'men at work'" – suggests that their reference point encompasses the domestic division of labour (the private sphere) as well as the workplace (the public sphere). Collinson and Hearn (1996) optimistically suggest that dominant masculinities are "precarious" due to their inherent conflicts and the absence of solidarity

between men. An alternative understanding of this is that dominant masculinities are necessarily in conflict due to masculinity's characteristic division and competitiveness: it is in divisiveness that masculinity achieves its conceptual unity; the contradiction inherent in the converse situation, where divisive, competitive masculinities would be founded on consensus and trust, illustrates this. Collinson and Hearn's (1996) conceptualisation may, therefore, be faulty and over-optimistic, and dominant masculinities may be less precarious and more difficult to challenge than they suggest. The dominance of masculinity is long-standing and deeply rooted; however, there is no deeper root than language, and from the root of language springs perception, assumption and understanding about reality, and importantly, the construction of reality (Potter, 2000). Any purely workplace-based challenge to masculinity would be unlikely to be sufficient, raising the question whether the domestic challenge has prospects of success. At the functional level it appears not: there have been many challenges that attempt to encourage or shame men into tackling domestic chores, yet these have met with overt resistance or subtle resistance, and have achieved little success (Crompton, 1997). It is, therefore, the contention of this paper that to be successful, any challenge must be rooted in language, as this is the only way in which discourse can be modified – the discourse which will ultimately shape the private sphere and the public sphere together, leading to the consensual and unitary structures, cultures and practices that Collinson's and Hearn's (1996) suggestion requires.

The challenge to dominant masculinities

Men's specific experience in the workplace and society has only recently become the subject of academic focus. For masculinity to be challenged, however, issues around it must be considered from this particular perspective (Goodwin, 1999). Challenges to masculinity are not new, even though many take the form of explanations for gender segregation or discrimination and the challenges themselves remain implicit. Indeed, the promotion of feminine characteristics such as that favoured by Hong Kong businesswomen in contrast with their western counterparts (Hills, 2000) presents an oblique challenge, mirrored by Cockburn's (1991) call for equivalence rather than equality. Feminism too, in its typical western form, represents such a challenge, albeit still a secondary one emerging from feminism's aims, many of which are conceived in terms of gender conflict. Previous conceptual challenges typically took the form of critiques of patriarchy - a conceptualisation whereby women are subordinated through tacit co-operation between men and capital (Pateman, 1988), or whereby capital and patriarchy are not supportive but are mutually exploitative in the interests of their survival (Johnson, 1996). Alternative challenges emerge from conceptualisations including preference theory, within which women's biological circumstances govern their choices (Hakim, 1996), and social reproduction, whereby despite women's education levels having equalled and sometimes exceeded those of men, women are conditioned to expect discontinuous employment and lower-level work (Blackburn et al, 2002). Additionally direct, top-down challenges arose from more practical and codified bases, typically in the form of equality legislation and workplace initiatives. Included in these challenges was the modification of language so

that it came to use the explicitly gender neutral and spectacularly clumsy singular pronouns " s/he" and " him/her", and the grammatically difficult plural pronoun " their" in place of the singular, the latter typically favoured by those who wish to be fair but do not wish to be seen to be motivated by a feminist agenda, an example of which is BT's missed-call message " You were called at 5. 32pm today. The caller withheld their number." (Humphrys, 2004: 287-288).

This modification of language has not, so far, been central to the feminist process; it has not driven the process forward, but has merely followed along as a by-product of it and a useful signifier of " correct" attitudes. As detailed in the previous section, language has a long history of reflecting thought and forming thought (Van Dijk, 1997). In language there is a historically accredited and widely accessible means of challenging men's taken-for-granted dominant masculinities, but to be successful, language must be the main focus of the challenge, internalised in the cultures, structures and processes of society and the workplace, and its signification must be internal.

It is easy to explain what the challenge must do, but less easy to imagine what it will look like. The two strands described above - nouns (and by extension, pronouns) and discourse - are good places to start. Each is examined in turn below.

It has been shown that nouns carry meaning and assumptions, and that they establish and perpetuate the dominance of masculinities. It is true that there is a feminist critique of, in the terminology of this approach, " malestream"

nouns – exemplified by the comparatively new noun " womyn", the use of which is intended to neutralise the adjunct-to-" men" associations of the noun " women" (Warren, 1989). Unfortunately, due to faulty signification, this strategy has not achieved the sought-for outcome; " womyn" has, for some, come to mean no more than " woman" expressed in the context of the feminist critique of patriarchy – effectively it has externalised itself from the settings it was designed to reform (Kendall, 2008). Dialect of the Middle Ages provided the non-gendered pronoun " a" and the sixteenth century similarly contributed " ou" (Wright, 1898), but both have fallen out of usage and reintroduction would be difficult without externalisation, although due to its comparative contemporary familiarity " one" may be used with greater prospect of success and with reduced likelihood of externalisation.

Discourse in both the private and public spheres traditionally uses metaphors relating to confrontation, struggles, hunting, warfare and the sports field. In the commercial world, examples can be readily found in management statements, an interesting example of which may be found in IBM's corporate song: "... we've fought our way through, and new fields we're sure to conquer too; forever onward IBM!" (Deal and Kennedy, 1988: 115). The winning of contracts is also frequently conceptualised and verbalised as " winning a battle" in the " commercial jungle" (Collinson and Hearn, 1996: 69-70). The " jungle" image implies a view of the market as a place where " survival of the fittest" and " dog-eat-dog" are recipes for success, with failure to achieve these being " soft", i. e. feminine. The overarching signification implies that masculine equals success and feminine equals failure. This is the basis of dominant masculinity, and it is through

long-standing usage and deep internalisation of these admittedly useful and vivid metaphors that dominant masculinities come to be taken for granted. The Hong Kong businesswomen mentioned above wanted their femininity, not their ability to imitate the behaviour of their male colleagues, to be respected (Hills, 2000). If they wish to achieve this they must begin by revolutionising the discourse of their lives and their workplaces. This means that "fighting" must become "discovering", and "goals" or "victories" must become "answers" or "solutions". The ways in which discourse must change are as numerous as the types of structures, cultures and practices in which they operate. It is not through the appreciation of female characteristics that the discourse and structures, cultures and practices of the workplace will become less coercive and less divisive; it is through discourse that female characteristics will come to be appreciated and structures, cultures and practices of the workplace will become less coercive and less divisive. It is, among other things, from discourse that dominant masculinity came to predominate, and it is, among other things, through discourse that it may be abated. Within the compass of this paper it is discourse that is the root and the cause of the problem, not the symptom and the outcome.

Conclusion

Critically evaluated, it has been shown that the initial statement may be too optimistic. Collinson and Hearn's (1996) view that dominant masculinities are precarious as a result of their inherent division and competitiveness seems at first sight to be reasonable, although this may be illusory. Examination of the converse situation, that of a hypothetical consensual and trusting masculinity, reveals that, conceptually at least, masculinity's divisions and

competitiveness are to be expected and in this it finds a kind of unity, and hence calls into question the validity of Collinson and Hearn's (1996) conceptualisation of the problem. That is not to say that a challenge cannot successfully be made. The common shortcomings of previous challenges are that they all suffer from faulty signification, having originated externally or having become externalised. The suggestion made in the context of this paper is that for the challenge to be successful it must originate in discourse. The power of discourse as a support to dominant masculinities has been shown, and so it is not unreasonable to suppose that a similarly rooted challenge may have comparable power and resultant success. The key to success, however, is that the challenge must begin with discourse and be – and remain – wholly internal. Previous challenges developed their own discourses but these were weak due to their emergence from externalised agendas: they were effectively limited to their academic, political or feminist original locus. To be successful and all-embracing in both the workplace and wider society, the agenda must emerge from discourse, not vice versa, and must encompass all aspects of the public and private spheres.

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