Masculinity, Rationality, and Family Therapy

Stephen Frosh

Received August 3, 1994; revised February 10, 1995

Contemporary accounts of masculinity have revealed masculine identity to be a fragile achievement. The ‘deconstruction’ of masculinity apparent in Western culture might also be seen in a powerful way in therapy, with the appearance of moments of breakdown in rationality, followed by the gradual articulation of an apparently non-rational position. The particular nature of this position will be as an expression of the ‘semiotic’: a breakthrough of the body into consciousness, an experience of being governed by something outside oneself which is nevertheless representative of the ‘truth’ of one’s emotional state. Two illustrations are given of moments in family therapy where masculine assumptions appear to give way to a more confusional and fluid mode of experience.

KEY WORDS: systemic therapy; family therapy; masculinity; rationality; postmodernism; semiotics.

1. MASCULINITY

In recent years, the influence of feminist thinking on psychology, psychoanalysis, and systems theory has come to be felt in analyses of masculinity as well as of femininity (e.g., Segal, 1990; Seidler, 1989, 1991; Mason and Mason, 1990; Frosh, 1994). These analyses, for all their differences, have converged on a vision of masculinity as something surprisingly fragile. It is as if this entity of which we might once have been so confident, this dominant force in the world, appears to have no substance to hold it together, no definite and permanent reality. Rather than men being sure-footed and imperious in our identity, constructivist perspectives in social, psychoanalytic, and systemic thinking have

1 A different version of this paper is to appear as “Screaming Under the Bridge: Masculinity, Rationality and Psychotherapy” (Ussher, 1997).
2 Department of Psychology, Birkbeck College, University of London, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX, U.K.
3 Child and Family Department, Tavistock Clinic, 120 Belsize Lane, Hampstead, London NW3 5BA, U.K.
revealed us as slippery, furtive creatures, unsure about the grounds for our continuing domination of social structures, unclear about our role in work, parenting, or loving, uncertain about what it means to ‘be a man’.

In large part, the deconstruction of masculinity has gone hand in hand with the growth of a postmodern sensibility that challenges the taken-for-granted superiority of rationality, with which masculinity has historically been closely connected (Seidler, 1994). The ‘discovery’ that rationality operates at the cost of an integrated response to experience is one which has come as difficult news to many men, because it opens us out to all the confusions of feeling and uncertainties of being that are supposed to characterise the ‘feminine’. Nevertheless, this is a genuine contemporary (re-)discovery: however powerful an instrument for making sense of the world rationality may be, there is only so far one can go with it before it starts to fall apart. In particular, the intrusions of what might, tendentiously, be called ‘the unconscious’ into everyday life serve as a constant reminder of the fragility of the rational carapace under which men strive to shelter. This is, transparently, linked to the upheavals of modernity and the confusions of the postmodern sensibility as it faces each of us, as human subjects, with the need to find a series of identities that can map onto the fluctuations of the contemporary cultural environment [see Frosh (1991) for a discussion of the application of psychoanalysis to these cultural experiences].

The deconstruction of masculinity is a particularly apposite arena for the attempt to reclaim the irrational and put it into words. Rationality and control of self and others go together as aspects of masculine mastery, treating experience as controllable and homogeneous, amenable to domination and to the power of the will. Masculinist ideology idealises this logic of rational order, in which all things are subject to the imposition of an organising power, and contrasts it with the apparent chaos and unpredictability of emotionally driven disorder. This logic, in turn, is part of a wider series of contrasts that include science versus nature, instrumentality versus expressiveness, and masculine versus feminine—all contrasts in which the second term presents a threat to the first, and therefore has to be dominated. Consequently, the dawning realisation that science and instrumentality cannot be relied upon, and that those subjugated entities (such as women) which have been dominated and silenced might be finding their voice, puts masculinity into turmoil as well.

As traditional masculine sureties dissolve, what men are often left with is the sense that we have no arguments left. It is as if the premise upon which Western masculine identity has been based, a premise concerned with separateness, self-sufficiency and self (as well as other-)control, is no longer sustainable. Putting things in order, using language instrumentally, repressing emotion, and avoiding intimacy—these characteristics of masculine self-identification now do not look like good bets for survival. This is particularly true of survival in relationships, where demands for obedience are more likely than ever to meet