



## **‘Every Father is a Superhero to His Children’: The Gendered Politics of the (Real) Fathers 4 Justice Campaign**

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Fathers’ rights groups have been characterised by some feminist academics as part of an anti-feminist ‘backlash’, responding to a perceived crisis of masculinity through a problematic politics of fatherhood aimed at (re)asserting control over women and children. This article analyses the construction of gender and masculinity/ies within fathers’ rights groups, specifically, the UK-based pressure group, (Real) Fathers 4 Justice. The article explores the construction of power-laden gender identity/ies within (Real) Fathers 4 Justice and, in doing so, contributes to understanding the logic and implications of fathers’ rights perspectives. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews conducted with members of the group. The qualitative case study is used to explore critically the (gender) politics of fathers’ rights. It is argued that the interviewees (re)construct multiple masculinities: bourgeois-rational masculinity, new man/new father masculinity and hypermasculinity. These masculinity frames intersect with broader constructions of gender and need to be understood in evaluating the perspectives of fathers’ rights groups which are complex in terms of their implications for gender politics broadly conceived. Overall, it is argued that each of the masculinity frames can be problematic, as they reinforce existing gendered binaries.

**Keywords:** pressure groups; fathers’ rights; masculinities; gender politics; social movements

This article critically interrogates the politics of fathers’ rights from a feminist perspective, analysing the gendered (and heteronormative) logic underpinning fathers’ rights perspectives. The identity of ‘father’ has always been political as power-laden gendered identities are implicit within constructions of fatherhood. However, what is sometimes referred to as a ‘new’ politics of fatherhood has seen the identity of ‘father’ become a public site of contestation over rights, resources and subjectivities. Globally and in the UK, debates surrounding fatherhood, including paternity leave, absent fathers and fathers’ rights, have all commanded attention from the media, politicians and policy makers (Collier and Sheldon, 2008; Dermott, 2008). The article contributes to an understanding of fatherhood issues, offering a nuanced account of fathers’ rights perspectives by analysing interviews conducted with members of the UK fathers’ rights group, (Real) Fathers 4 Justice ((R)F4J hereafter). Through this analysis, I explore the (gendered) implications of the politics of fatherhood in the context of fathers’ rights. Further, the case study provides an insight into the gendered identities at play within pressure groups and social movements. These gendered identities are central to understanding the politics of such groups and, in this case, the politics of fathers’ rights. I argue that the interviewees (re)construct multiple masculinities: bourgeois-rational masculinity, new man/new father masculinity and hypermasculinity. The findings suggest that the ‘softer’ bourgeois-rational and new man/new father masculinities serve as legitimising strategies which exist in an uneasy tension with the aggressive hypermasculine frame. Further, all three masculinity frames<sup>1</sup> are argued to be problematic,



as each reinforces existing power-laden gendered binaries. The analysis both presents new empirical research which extends existing critical understandings of fathers' rights groups and enriches broader gender and masculinities scholarship by providing an insight into the complex, multiple gendered identities that are constituted within and by such groups.

Arguments for fathers' rights obscure potential clashes of the rights of different interested parties including fathers, mothers and children, as well as broader gender inequalities in society. Matt O'Connor (2007, p. 221), founder of Fathers 4 Justice (F4J hereafter), claimed that F4J made fathers' rights so conspicuous that their distinctive campaign has passed into UK popular culture.<sup>2</sup> Despite the visibility of fathers' rights and related issues in the media, there is as yet little research into the fathers' rights movement in the UK.<sup>3</sup> Further, although F4J has been categorised as a pressure/interest group (Grant, 2005), it is important to go beyond 'interests' and examine the role of identity in such groups. The analysis is undertaken through a masculinities lens since focusing on gendered identity within pressure groups/social movements is essential to understanding 'the constitution and role of individual political consciousness and its relation to collective agency and movement politics' (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2007, p. 297).

Although by no means the only and certainly not the oldest<sup>4</sup> UK fathers' rights group, F4J has been the most visible and the most contentious as a result of its imaginative direct action methods. In common with other fathers' rights groups (FRGs hereafter), F4J argues that fathers are discriminated against in the family courts. The *Blueprint for Family Law in the 21st Century* (O'Connor *et al.*, 2005) sets out a critique of the UK family law system, outlining a manifesto for change. The charges against the system are that it is financially punitive for those engaged in contact disputes and that, in either not awarding fathers contact<sup>5</sup> or in failing to enforce contact orders, the courts fail to operate in the 'best interests of the child'<sup>6</sup> (O'Connor *et al.*, 2005). The purported failure of the system to maintain contact between children and fathers is seen as contributing to the 'breakdown' of society. The *Blueprint* argues for a legal presumption of shared parenting,<sup>7</sup> a transparent family court system<sup>8</sup> and the enforcement of contact orders (see Jordan, 2009).

The data analysis is based on nine, one-off, in-depth interviews conducted in 2006 with eight male members and one female member of a branch of Real Fathers For Justice, a splinter group of the original F4J organisation.<sup>9</sup> The aims of F4J and the splinter group are interchangeable and membership of the local branch remained constant in its new manifestation. I therefore refer throughout to the two groups as (R)F4J.<sup>10</sup> The small sample means that the data cannot be claimed to represent the perspectives of all FRG members; however, the analysis resonates with the official group discourse and with qualitative research on groups elsewhere, as well as with broader discourses around gendered identities.

The first section addresses three key contextual and definitional issues regarding FRGs: first, categorising them in terms of the distinction between pressure groups and social movements; second, their relationship with men's movements; and third, the character of the fathers' rights movement. The second section outlines the conception of masculinities employed in the analysis. It is argued that multiple masculinities are implicit in the interviewees' representations of themselves as fathers' rights activists and of the group's aims and methods. Three masculinities are identified and explored in turn: bourgeois-rational, new man/new father frame and hypermasculinity.

**(Real) Fathers 4 Justice**

(R)F4J is categorised here as a pressure group arising from a social movement. (R)F4J exhibits characteristics typical of pressure groups in three respects. First, the group works within the political system, aiming to achieve narrow objectives relating to a single issue, rather than to disrupt conventional politics fundamentally (Nash, 2000). Second, the group is primarily state oriented (Grant, 2000, p. 7). Finally, the group is an ‘interest’<sup>11</sup> group in that there is a direct concern in promoting the cause of post-separation fathers.

However, to define (R)F4J only as a pressure group would not fully capture the organisation’s nature. This is partly because the distinction between pressure group and social movement can be overdrawn. FRGs participate in activities such as providing support for their members which are not aimed at changing policy (Collier and Sheldon, 2006, p. 4). Further, their discursive practices have wider, albeit frequently unintentional, implications in terms of contesting the politics of identity/ies and for imagining socio-political landscapes. In (R)F4J narratives it is possible to find, for example, (re)constructions of fatherhood, motherhood and the family, all of which relate to broader power-laden discourses around identities. (R)F4J, then, analogously to new social movements, is ‘involved in struggles over the definition of meanings and the construction of new identities and lifestyles’ (Nash, 2000, p. 101).

FRGs belong to the ‘Men’s Rights’ strand of the broader ‘Men’s Movement’ (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Jordan, 2009; Messner, 2000). The umbrella term ‘Men’s Movement’ incorporates organisations with disparate agendas, from the gay rights movement to the evangelical men’s movement. Common features of men’s movements are that they organise around the identity of being ‘men’; the assumption that there are distinctive ‘men’s issues/interests’; and finally, that all take a position, whether hostile or benign, on feminism and its impact. The men’s rights strand is defined by a starting point of antipathy towards feminist movements, claiming that men, not women, are underprivileged in society and that this is a *result* of the ‘excesses’ of feminism (Messner, 2000; Whitehead, 2002).

FRGs, as a subset of men’s rights groups, claim that fathers are disadvantaged by a family law system that favours mothers over fathers in child contact disputes (Smart, 2006). Many FRGs object to accusations that they are anti-feminist and/or anti-women and claim to take a gender-neutral approach. However, FRGs draw on men’s rights narratives in claiming that the state and society are dominated by a feminist agenda that marginalises men. Fathers’ rights are a central concern for many men’s rights groups. For example, the UK-based group ManKind Initiative is a charity that supports male victims of domestic violence, but also ‘monitors and promotes the interests of men within the context of equality of opportunity for all’ (ManKind Initiative, 2008, p. 1). It claims to defend men’s interests in education, employment, men’s health, ‘false’ rape allegations and family law. The discussion of child contact issues is more explicitly anti-feminist and directly premised on the notion of a crisis of masculinity than in official narratives of UK FRGs; however, there are clear resonances with the more moderate rhetoric of the latter. In addition, FRGs such as the Australian ‘Black Shirts’ directly ally themselves with the men’s rights movement (Flood, 2004).

As well as being situated within the broader men’s movement, (R)F4J is part of a transnational fathers’ rights movement. Similar FRGs exist in Australia, Canada, France,

Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the US (Collier and Sheldon, 2006, p. 5). Further, some FRGs are transnational and ideas and strategies also transcend national boundaries. For example, F4J spread to the US and Canada<sup>12</sup> and influenced debates and protest styles beyond the UK (Collier and Sheldon, 2006, p. 6). In spite of this international dimension, it is important to stress the particularity of specific national contexts (Collier and Sheldon, 2006, p. 5; Smart, 2006, p. vii), in this case the UK. The relationship between men's movements, the fathers' rights movement and individual FRGs is complex and fluid (Collier and Sheldon, 2006, p. 4) but, due to the overlap between them, it is crucial to understand (R)F4J in the light of this context.

### **Multiple Masculinities: Theoretical Framework and Research Design**

As the category of 'men' always already implicates notions of masculinity, a masculinities framework is vital for exploring the politics of men's movements and FRGs. Fatherhood is an important signifier of masculinity (Westwood, 1996, p. 25). The putatively 'new'<sup>13</sup> politics of fatherhood is, especially through the FRM, intimately connected to the purportedly 'new' politics of masculinity, said to constitute a response to the changing social world (Faludi, 1991). Understanding masculinities, then, is crucial for exploring the implications of the case study. Masculinity is 'simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices' (Connell, 1995, p. 71). Masculinity scholars refer to masculinities as discourses of masculinity are plural (Collier, 2011; Connell, 1995; Hooper, 2001; Messner, 2000; Whitehead, 2002; Woodward, 2007). This plurality partly relates to intersectionality – that is, to the intersections of gender with other important identities such as class, race, age, and so on (Crenshaw, 1991). Masculinity is necessarily amorphous in nature, but specific constructions of masculinity have in common that they are always defined relationally both to other masculinity models and in opposition to femininity/ies (Collier, 2011; Connell, 1995).

The approach taken here to the interview analysis reflects the theoretical insight that 'men gain access to power and privilege not by virtue of their anatomy but through their cultural association with masculinity' (Hooper, 2001, p. 41). The dissociation of masculinity from male bodies means that we cannot read masculinity straightforwardly off male bodies and indicates that there is no absolute link between individual men and particular forms of masculinity. Therefore, rather than seeing individual interviewees as expressing one form of masculinity, I analyse patterns in masculinities expressed *across* the interviews at the level of symbolic difference. The masculinities do not derive from, nor simplistically map on to, individual men, and the interviewees articulated different masculinities in different contexts. The idea that interviewees 'express' or 'construct' particular forms of masculinity does not imply that they do so explicitly and consciously; rather, that they draw on such implicit constructions is based on an *interpretation* of their perspectives. Where I refer to 'models' of masculinity, these are seen as ideal types (Hooper, 2001), as masculinity *frames*, rather than complete, coherent or universal representations, as 'masculinity, like femininity, is always liable to internal contradiction and historical disruption' (Connell, 1995, p. 73).

Masculinities are context-bound (Woodward, 2004), but there are recognisable broad models of masculinity. In order to capture both broader gendered identities and the specific research context, I draw on existing masculinity frames identified in the literature (primarily

the work of Charlotte Hooper), but adapt these to fit the nuances of the constructions of gender articulated in the interviews. Three forms of masculinity are argued to be dominant in the interviews; the 'bourgeois-rationalist', the 'new man/new father' and the 'hypermasculine'. The 'bourgeois-rationalist' model (BRM hereafter) is characterised as egalitarian, cerebral and concerned with justice in the form of universal rights. New man/new father masculinity (NFM hereafter) signals the incorporation of traditionally 'feminine' characteristics of caring, sensitivity and active parenting. The hypermasculine (HM hereafter), in contrast, emphasises physical bravery and displays of aggression or domination.

There was no single, unified narrative in terms of which frames were dominant. Depending on the context, each of the frames was sometimes valorised and sometimes pathologised. The relationship between the three frames was similarly fluid and complex: at various times coexisting, overlapping, contradicting and complementing each other. This both reinforces the importance of talking about multiple masculinities and problematises the idea that there are straightforward relationships between different masculinities. In terms of existing analyses of FRGs, it upsets overly simplistic perceptions of the gendered identity/ies at play within such groups and also extends the insight of the diverse nature of men's movements overall. The interviewees themselves rarely appeared to recognise that there were disjunctures between the alternative gender narratives they employed. Below I illustrate each frame in the context of the participants' discussion of what they saw as central to their identities as fathers' rights activists, fathers and ex-partners and also to the aims and identity of (R)F4J.

### **Bourgeois-Rational Masculinity: The 'Campaign for Truth, Justice and Equality'**

The first of the three masculinities, the bourgeois-rationalist frame, is a modern form of masculinity that is 'egalitarian and democratic', in which intellect and calculative rationality are emphasised (Hooper, 2001, p. 98). From within this frame, 'superior intellect and personal integrity is valued over physical strength or bravery' (Hooper, 2001, p. 98). In this context, the emphasis on calculative rationality in public life involves a focus on the law as the locus for action and justice (see Collier, 1995; 2011). This is underpinned by the assumption of the primacy of universal rights and of justice as a moral/political value. Finally, BRM is, as the label suggests, associated with a middle-class form of masculinity which assumes a white, heterosexual identity (Connell, 1995; Hooper, 2001).<sup>14</sup> As with all the masculinities, this model must be understood in relation to a dichotomous 'femininity' which, by providing its contrasting 'other' fundamentally defines and underpins BRM. The 'masculine' characteristics above have been argued to rely on an inferior 'feminine' symbolic counterpart marked by emotion, relationship and caring (Held, 2006).

In accordance with the bourgeois-rationalist frame, the construction of (R)F4J's aims in the interviews centred on winning rights and changing family law: 'it was *all about getting the family law changed*';<sup>15</sup> 'I got involved with Fathers 4 Justice ... hopefully to try and change the law so they'll look at fathers in a more just way'. The need for legal reform was justified by the assertion that changes are necessary to fulfil basic 'rights'. However, *whose* rights are at stake was contested and articulated in contradictory ways. Rights claims manifested differently depending on attitudes towards feminism and whether the issue was seen as

gendered. Interviewees legitimised their demands through simultaneous appeal to various sets of rights – as well as men’s and fathers’ rights, parental, children’s, grandparents’ and family rights were all advocated.

The primacy of law in the group rhetoric relates to BRM – as feminist legal scholars have argued, the rational, supposedly gender-neutral, abstract voice of the law is a symbolically masculine voice (Collier, 1995, pp. 34–43; Smart, 1989). The legalistic focus represents the privileging of universal principles and derives from a ‘gender-neutral’ or ‘equality’ perspective. Law was seen as the site of ‘justice’ and the pursuit of legal change presented as respectable, non-violent and egalitarian. Although the current law was portrayed as ‘biased’, the implication was that applying ‘gender-neutral’ principles can remove this bias, creating formal equality.

These general points about the connections between law, justice and BRM require further exploration in terms of the construction of those ‘rights’ which were understood as the basis for legal reform and the content of particular measures interviewees advocated. As noted, the central question was *whose* rights were being championed.

More frequently than making explicit demands for men’s equality, the interviewees denied that the issue is gendered: ‘we were about changing the law, not you know, not for the good of man, not for the detriment of women’. The recurring claim that family courts unjustly favour mothers was accompanied by the contradictory idea that it is *non-resident parents* that are disadvantaged in family law, not fathers or non-resident fathers per se:

I don’t think the sort of gender bit really comes into it. It just seems to be that the system doesn’t really support the non-resident parent, you know, unfortunately in 90 percent of cases that happens to be men, but ... if there was more men staying at home looking after the kids, there’d be a lot more women probably joining ‘Womens 4 Justice’, you know. It’s the *law* that we’re trying to change, which I think often gets lost in, certainly in the newspaper headlines, ‘men only’ kind of job, they have tried to force it that way, ... that ain’t the case.

The ‘flaws’ in the system are seen as reflecting an *accidental* or *natural* division of parenting labour. However, the claim to gender neutrality, far from representing an impartial view, obscures importantly gendered aspects of the issue. This equality perspective is blind to the fact that women undertake the vast majority of primary caretaking roles (Featherstone, 2009), that women with children are disadvantaged in post-separation situations (Jenkins, 2009) and, finally, to the reality that the single biggest factor in fathers not gaining access to their children after separation is their relationship with the child prior to separation (Smart, 2006, p. ix). Importantly, all of these facts are precisely not ‘accidental’; rather, they are the result of broader, unequal gender relations in society and a gendered division of parenting labour.

The ‘gender-neutral’ approach manifested in the suggestion that (R)F4J was not about ‘fathers’ rights’ at all – rather, the group’s aims are beneficial to women, grandparents and children. There was an eagerness to assert support from these groups in order to emphasise the universal scope of their objectives: ‘it was never set up to be, a male orientated organisation, it was there to change family law for the good of *everyone*, you know?’ Women were claimed to perceive the ‘injustice’ of the system even if they were neither male nor fathers: ‘female sympathisers were normally a new girlfriend who either had children

before, or had children with a member, or didn't have children but could see, *what was going on*'. The claim to a broad membership base and particularly of women's participation supports previous research suggesting that FRGs claim inclusive appeal (Collier and Sheldon, 2006, p. 4).

Although it is not clear how many women participated, the analysis suggested that there might be a gendered division of labour within the group. One interviewee, when asked why few women attended meetings, said: 'I think they looked upon it as being a boys' meeting', suggesting that the masculinised atmosphere might not appeal. He also stated that women undertook specific roles. This was raised by the woman interviewee who, while echoing the view that 'it's not just an issue for Dads, it's one for women and children too', referred to herself as a 'Purpleheart', the support group consisting of women and men who are not themselves fathers engaged in child contact proceedings. She explained that the Purplehearts played a supporting role rather than 'doing the main things'. In spite of mentioning her involvement in protests, she said that she was mostly responsible for 'behind-the-scenes' administrative work.<sup>16</sup>

There was some explicit articulation of a 'difference', or a gender-aware, perspective. This consisted of arguing that men *as men* are disadvantaged by the family law system and that this is a result of bias against men and fathers. This assertion of gender difference took the form of men's rights discourses and, to the extent that men's rights groups are seen as expressing a militant form of masculinity (Messner, 2000), can be partially associated with the hypermasculine frame (see below). However, the affirmation of gender difference was also associated with NFM to the extent that the 'difference' was seen to arise from men's unique roles as nurturing fathers (Jordan, 2009). The new man/new father frame is explored below.

### **New Man/New Father Masculinity: 'In the Name of the Father'**

New man/new father masculinity, like BRM, is modern, 'softer' and less violent than 'hypermasculine' models (Hooper, 2001, p. 72). This frame invokes the image of the 'new man', embodying the 'caring, angst-ridden, self-deprecating face of new masculinity' (Woodward, 2004, p. 9). Here masculinity is reframed as caring and sharing; 'feminine' attitudes, behaviours and values are seen as no longer the sole domain of women (Collier, 2006). In contrast to BRM, which emphasises rights and justice, then, the alternative values of care and connection are central. This may sound remarkably similar to the very construction of femininity that was argued to be implied by BRM. However, the model was gendered 'masculine' by interviewees in their insistence that this is how to be a good *man/father*. Further, as I discuss elsewhere, there were implicit gender-differentiated assumptions about what it meant to care as a mother and as a father (Jordan, 2009). The idea of the new man means that 'some men are more inclined to define interpersonal relations as the most important area of their lives, often citing the family' (Westwood, 1996, p. 25). The 'new father' is a sub-set of a new man frame, and the two are closely intertwined:

In keeping with conceptions of the new man, the emotional and caring lives of men were centred around the refashioned notion of the father, no longer the distant co-earner, but a co-carer and parent in the work of raising a child (Westwood, 1996, p. 27).

Although this model is tied up with fatherhood, NFM does not simply reduce to fatherhood as central to interviewees' identities. There are multiple constructions of fatherhood and not all relate to NFM (Jordan, 2009). Finally, as with BRM, this frame is based on a white, middle-class, heterosexual identity (Gavanas, 2004, p. 6).

The focus on family and 'new' fatherhood underpinning NFM was apparent where interviewees emphasised children's rights as the primary concern of (R)F4J. This perspective shifts from fathers', men's and parents' rights to a child-oriented approach consonant with the model of the nurturing father. It was articulated by two interviewees: 'it isn't about dads' rights, it's about kids that are fighting for their particular choice, talking about children's rights first'; 'it's a *children's* issue as far as I'm concerned. I think Fathers 4 Justice made a mistake in emphasising the father aspect of it'.

The articulation of children's rights appeared to be a strategic attempt to echo the 'rights of the child' international law discourse. However, there was also some indication of support for a child-centred approach to contact disputes. Including children's voices in the process was seen here as integral to determining where the child's best interests lie: 'children should have more influence on it, more of a say on who they want to be with as well, but they don't even listen to the children'. In this sense, the demand for children's rights was about listening to children's voices. This maps on to an NFM frame in prioritising a concern with the welfare of children and allowing the child to maintain connection with both parents.

However, the use of rights rhetoric implies a universalised form of care, one that also relates to BRM as it is concerned with the general rather than the particular, that is, with children's caring relationships in the abstract, rather than with concrete ties. The link with the strategic, legalistic manifestation of children's rights narratives discussed above also suggests a bourgeois-rational frame as opposed to a new man/new father model. The children's rights discourse as expressed in the interviews and group narrative thus drew on *both* BRM and NFM frames.

So far, the discussion has covered the aims of legal reform and winning rights. Another objective was frequently articulated, namely, fostering individuals' relationships with children. As I have discussed elsewhere, the interviewees expressed a conception of the 'good father' as involvement in everyday caring for children (Jordan, 2009). This specific construction of fatherhood signals an ideal of the 'nurturing father', which emphasises emotional connections between father and child and where it is 'desirable for fathers to assume more of the everyday caring activities and responsibilities involved in raising children' (Jordan, 2009, p. 425). The aim of caring for children, of being a good father, unsurprisingly maps on to NFM.

However, this is complicated by the fact that maintaining connection with children was articulated in the context of 'shared parenting', the phrase used to refer to a legal presumption of 50/50 contact, giving both parents the default right to equal contact (see Hunt *et al.*, 2009; Jordan, 2009; Trinder, 2010). This notion is central to the (R)F4J campaign and has been argued to be about gaining the maximum contact desired, rather than equalising the division of caring responsibilities – as a demand to access rights which assumes that mothers will continue to be primary carers (Bertoia and Drakich, 1993; Collier, 2006; Gavanas, 2004, p. 11; Jordan, 2009; Messner, 2000, p. 45).



The call for shared parenting relates to NFM to the extent that it suggests that men want to care for their children, even if ‘caring’ is limited in terms of everyday childcare. However, it also overlaps with BRM to the extent that this frame entails a focus on universal rights. This reinforces the point that there are continuities between the two masculinities as:

Aspects of the new fatherhood – what it involves, what it calls into being – appear to correlate with this tendency for men to relate to, and appeal in their engagement with law in terms of, a rights-based framework. It is, after all, what a ‘good father’ would do (Collier, 2006, p. 67).

There is a complex relationship between helping individuals maintain relationships with children and the broader objective of changing the law. While legal reform to enable better contact opportunities for fathers can be seen as encompassing the former purpose, the universalised, abstract emphasis on law rather than particular cases in the interviews means that the two aims are not synonymous. To the (limited) extent that sustaining relationships is implied by a focus on, for example, children’s rights or shared parenting, the universalising impulse comes into tension with particular father–child connections.

This tension is illustrated in one interviewee’s suggestion that (R)F4J protests sometimes disrupt individual court proceedings, meaning that a parent applying for contact might have to wait several months before the hearing was rescheduled: ‘any delays that I caused, you know, I could easily have been in court that day with somebody else who was desperate to see their son’. Further, participation in the campaign was perceived to be potentially detrimental to individuals’ cases as judges were said to look unfavourably on active membership of (R)F4J. Again, this maps *both* on to NFM in terms of the focus on caring for children *and* on to BRM in terms of the emphasis on the universal rather than the particular.

It has been argued that both NFM and BRM were articulated in discussions of (R)F4J’s aims. The hypermasculinity frame featured most prominently in the interviewees’ comments on the direct action methods that were generally thought most appropriate to achieving (R)F4J’s objectives. The HM frame is analysed below.

### **Hypermasculinity: ‘Fighting for Your Right to See Your Kids’**

The final model, hypermasculinity, is constructed oppositionally to the less aggressive BRM and NFM frames, acting as a ‘counterimage’ to throw the new man into relief (Hooper, 2001, p. 74). Displays of physical or verbal domination are key, along with bodily strength and bravery. This frame thus emphasises risk-taking, especially physical feats involving threats to life and limb. HM most closely draws on ideas of the traditionally masculine hero and is constructed in opposition to a passive, physically weak and timid feminine victim in need of male protection. From this frame the other two masculinities are feminised as they embody what should properly be considered ‘feminine’ attributes. The hypermasculine is commonly marginalised through projection on to the working class and other groups of underprivileged men (Hondagneau-Sotelo and Messner, 1994). Although HM was pathologised at times in the interviews, it was, at other times, also valorised. This ambivalence was reflected in the interviewees’ views on direct action as explored below.

As argued above, most interviewees stated that the (R)F4J campaign was gender neutral and this related to BRM. However, one interviewee in particular explicitly constructed the issue as gendered, seeing fathers’ rights as part of a broader assertion of men’s rights, aimed

at redressing a gendered imbalance in society: 'we have a pathological interest in women's issues as interpreted by feminism in modern Britain ... don't men have problems, don't men have issues, don't men have rights?' The men's rights perspective fits with HM where masculinity is seen as being in crisis as a result of challenges to men's traditional roles. Discrimination against fathers was seen as a direct result of feminism:

According to the tenets of feminism, ... women are discriminated against, women are oppressed, women are victims, women are abused, and who's doing all this discriminating and oppressing and victimising and abusing, *men!* So this is why they have a pathological dislike of men and if they can hurt men, again, it does sound paranoid but ... when you read through any gender issue ... you will see this as a kind of subtext, *dislike of men*, and if they can hurt men in any way they *will*.

On this view, feminism is 'nothing to do with equality'; feminism 'essentially wants *favouritism* for women'. Advocating men's rights was seen as correcting this favouritism in favour of true equality, but the interviewee was keen to highlight that this position is not sexist: 'it's not anti-women what I'm doing, it's just pro-justice'. Although drawing on equality rhetoric, this is not a gender-neutral construction of the group's aims as gender is seen as the problem – maleness and masculinity are politically relevant because feminists have denigrated men and fathers. Given this representation of social realities, the issue of fathers' rights is gendered and the 'natural' order has been undermined by feminism and changing women's roles, leading to societal breakdown.

The HM frame tended to arise in discussions of (R)F4J's methods, rather than of their aims. FRGs use 'strategies of service provision, lobbying and activism', offering 'self-help meetings, provid[ing] support for men undergoing separation, divorce and family law proceedings, lobby[ing] local and national governments to change policies and laws, and promot[ing] their views through newsletters, websites and media campaigns' (Flood, 2004, pp. 264–5). (R)F4J uses all of these methods to varying extents. The interview data echoed O'Connor's statement that (R)F4J employs a 'twin-track strategy', one strand of which is the lobbying of political decision makers (O'Connor *et al.*, 2005, p. 3). Lobbying MPs, an emphasis on public relations via the media, and letter writing are broadly professionalised activities and were constructed as rational, cerebral and logical, thus mapping on to BRM. The second, hypermasculinised, strand, is 'direct action', in the form of activities such as climbing buildings. Direct action was viewed as essential to create public awareness and influence decision makers and was constructed in terms of physicality, danger and risk-taking.

The two strategies and the corresponding masculinities tended to be seen as complementary rather than antagonistic. However, members privileged the tactics, and with them the two masculinities, differently. Although both tactics were stated to be important, the vast majority of the discussion in interviews was about direct action and (R)F4J's successes in this area. This was often explicitly contrasted with apparently ineffective bourgeois-rational methods: 'we kept banging at the doors of the MPs and we kept knocking on the doors of the judges, and it was like, *this isn't working, we've gotta try a different tactic*'.

Interviewees saw direct action as distinctive of (R)F4J in contrast to other FRGs. Stories of direct action were frequent, involving humour combined with a large dose of bravado. The dangerous aspects of, for example, climbing a building, were highlighted:

We pulled a big stunt ... I'd got this ladder right and ... we knew we were going up about 35 feet, you know, unloading the van in the morning I saw a sticker on the ladder which sort of said maximum weight should not exceed 15 stone and I'm thinking I'm over 17 stone, uh-oh, ... I said, I've got to go up the ladder first, I said, cos I'm scared of heights, I said, and it's pitch black so I mean, the ladder's going everywhere, they're holding on to it for dear life cos I'm 17 stone in a Batman costume going up a ladder on the [building] in the centre of [locale] under CCTV cameras and the ladder actually went perpendicular to the wall it had that much bow on it and it was just one of those things I had to get up them and scabble across the top and if something went wrong you were in ...

There was evidence of feelings of desperation and anger at the family law system: 'if you've tried everything else you've got nothing to lose'; 'I just felt I had to do something'. This was seen as the root of (R)F4J members' 'need' to participate in direct action, as 'a way to sort of let your frustrations out'. Acts of civil disobedience were seen as victories against the system and therefore as worthwhile per se. The judgement of such acts as successful was based not on impact in terms of potentially changing the law, but on how disruptive and visible they were. There was also recognition of the sense of control that performing such feats bestowed on men who felt disempowered: 'you get a personal satisfaction that something is happening and at least you're doing something'; '[it was] a kind of a *kick against society*'. The larger aims of the group sometimes disappeared in these accounts. In this context, then, HM was clearly dominant and valorised by interviewees.

Direct action was constructed in terms of hypermasculinised motifs. Notably, the group self-identified as a 'Dads' Army', *fighting* for their kids. One protest was called 'The Rising' and included militarised symbols such as a tank; interviewees also referred to the 'storming' of buildings. The most persistent theme of the (R)F4J campaign is the superhero. Famously, (R)F4J members have donned superhero outfits in protests and superhero imagery is common in their literature. In the interviews, the superhero theme was hypermasculinised in bragging about 'being' Batman, Robin or Spiderman, endowed with manly strength, bravery and superpowers. Through such representations, the gendered body is 'spectacularly visible' in the (R)F4J campaign (Collier, 2006, p. 75). Direct action was 'man's work' (O'Connor, 2007, p. 80) and this was explicit in some of the interviews. Although women have taken active roles in stunts, as members were keen to highlight in other contexts (in stating the wide appeal of (R)F4J), the participation of women was seen as the exception that proves the rule.

Not only was direct action seen as a male domain, there was also a perception that it was a *particular kind* of man who was involved in 'stunts'. Members participating in direct action were known as 'activists' or 'climbers' and 'climbing' was used as a synonym for direct action – 'hardened activists' were glamorised and seen as having proved themselves truly committed to the cause. They were described as 'people that wanna break the law to try and change the law' and 'activism' was constructed exclusively in these terms.

One interviewee claimed that (R)F4J was composed of working-class men, suggesting this was because middle-class men did not want to engage in the 'dirty work' of civil disobedience. This links direct action with HM as it is constructed as working class. It has been claimed that FRGs are composed of mainly middle-class (white, heterosexual) men (Doucet, 2006, p. 249); however, there is some indication of a division between the

socio-economic background of the leadership and the 'rank and file' group members (see Bertoia and Drakich, 1993; Collier, 2006).

The figures of founder Matt O'Connor and 'ordinary' member Jason Hatch symbolise the idea of a division of labour between middle-class leaders engaging in intellectual activities such as lobbying MPs and working-class activists doing the work of participating in direct action. Both men were mythologised in the interviews. Although O'Connor was involved in civil disobedience, he was more often the public face of F4J in dealings with the media and politicians. His background in public relations and as a professional campaigner for movements such as the Anti-Apartheid movement, CND and Amnesty International (Collier, 2006, p. 56 n. 13), situate him as middle class. O'Connor was constructed in terms that resonate with a bourgeois-rationalist frame: 'Matt O'Connor, *great on telly*, ... *good* at doing that job, standing up and talking politically'; 'Matt, spoke eloquently, passionately, ... the guy sells it and makes you wanna stand up and be counted'; '[he] actually got the, er, issue on the political agenda'. O'Connor was seen as a 'very clever guy' and as media savvy, but ultimately weak when it came to sustaining high levels of direct action.

Jason Hatch, in contrast, was one of the most active participants in direct action 'stunts' such as the scaling of Buckingham Palace dressed as Batman in 2004 (Savill, 2004). In the group imagination, Buckingham Palace was the pinnacle of (R)F4J's achievements, its 'success' measured in terms of its daring nature and high media visibility: 'Buckingham Palace, ... it's probably one of the best publicity stunts *ever*, because, you know, it was a few blokes, a ladder, a van'; 'Buckingham Palace, ... it was very dangerous, but certainly it got the attention'. Hatch was seen as a working-class man and characterised in heroic, hypermasculinised terms in narratives of the Buckingham Palace action:

You can see [another F4J activist], you know, changing his mind and going back down the ladder when he's got an armed police officer, ... tellin him, you know, 'stop or I will shoot' and Hatch who has heard the same stuff is actually erm, ... just thought, 'sod it, I'm gonna keep going'.

O'Connor and Hatch both attracted their share of adulation and censure, the source of which illustrates a tension between BRM and HM. In spite of O'Connor's involvement in various forms of direct action, in the interviewees' imagination it was the F4J leader who wore the pinstriped business suits and Jason Hatch who wore the superhero costumes. O'Connor was admired for his eloquence, strategic abilities and political vision, but also denigrated for failing to sustain direct action and ultimately losing control of the group. Hatch was admired for his bravery and activism, but disparaged for purportedly being driven by a love of fame rather than the desire to see his children (Jordan, 2009, p. 427). So somewhat paradoxically, O'Connor was seen as not hypermasculine enough, while Hatch was sometimes seen as *too* hypermasculine.

Although direct action was seen as integral to the group's identity, there were some criticisms of these activities, arising from the feeling that direct action was no longer effective as the public were bored with the stunts. There was general disapproval of the 2006 incident where (R)F4J activist, Michael Downes, threw eggs at then Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly (Stokes, 2006). This kind of behaviour was said to convey a negative image:

Throwing things at people, handcuffing to people, someone was convicted recently of throwing an egg at Ruth Kelly, what does that show us to be? When you're making personal attacks that just makes us out to be a group of thugs.

One interviewee criticised the self-congratulatory nature of (R)F4J meetings and problematised the pursuit of direct action as an end in itself:

It's a bit of a, became a bit of a, well I call it the exclusive club, without a doubt, you know, patting people on the back at meetings, oh you did this, you did that, *oh god*, you know, shut-up, let's just get on with it, we shouldn't be going around applauding people, you know, great that they've done it, *superb*, let's change the law and then we can sit back and go well done, you know, what you did.

As noted, then, there was some ambivalence towards direct action. However, overall such methods were seen as central to the group's identity and, in some cases, to the identity of individual members.

## Conclusion

To understand the gendered politics of fathers' rights and fatherhood discourses, it is necessary to highlight the complex constructions of gender identity/ies within FRGs. The article contributes to these understandings through an exploratory case study. I argue that members of (R)F4J draw on multiple gendered identities in articulating their cause. Three models of masculinity were represented – bourgeois-rational, new man/new father masculinity and hypermasculinity. The two 'softer' masculinities exist in uneasy tension both with each other and with the third frame and yet each was equally important in the interviews. There was some indication that the softer masculinities were perceived by interviewees to have wider public appeal – as witnessed in the occasional self-conscious disavowal of the personification of the hypermasculine frame, Jason Hatch. The desire to be seen as rational, caring men who 'just want to see their kids' does not sit comfortably with the hypermasculine figure of the risk-taking limelight seeker who privileges 'heroic' expressive acts over practising fatherhood. To avoid being perceived negatively by the public and decision makers, there was an anxiety to suggest that hypermasculine methods are (1) a necessary evil and (2) not representative of the usual behaviour of the individuals who undertake them. At the same time, using the direct action methods associated with hypermasculinity was integral to the group's identity and to the interviewees' understandings of themselves as actively fighting for their cause rather than as passive, and as agents (masculine) rather than as victims (feminine). In this sense, no one of the masculinity frames alone captures the gendered identities expressed within and by the group, demonstrating that it is not possible to characterise (R)F4J as representative of one style of masculinity.

The new man/new father masculinity in particular appears to be what some feminists have asked of men – that is, that they develop purportedly 'feminine' characteristics and values. However, a superficial commitment to this masculinity is insufficient if this is merely a discursive move belied by the actual practices of men (Jordan, 2009). In addition, each of the masculinity frames is problematic to the extent that each reinforces binary oppositions which position the feminine as inferior. The new man/new father frame, while blurring masculine/feminine symbolic boundaries in part, remains premised on a heteronormative

vision where a (male) father is nonetheless essential to raising a child successfully in complementarity with a (female) mother. The bourgeois-rationalist model is premised on a notion of a rational, autonomous individual which is convincingly argued to be problematic by feminist theorists as it excludes the 'feminine' relational self (Held, 2006). The hypermasculine excludes the feminine by valorising displays of masculine strength and in some cases being used to justify violent behaviour. The argument that constructions of masculinity/ies are premised on power-laden binary oppositions with femininity/ies is far from novel. However, the existence of multiple masculinities within (R)F4J serves to illuminate the complex nature of gendered identity/ies within social movements, men's movements and specific FRGs. It also reinforces arguments that masculinities (and femininities) are plural, competing and relational in ways that suggest the fluid, unstable nature of gender.

This account also has implications beyond analysing constructions of gender and understanding the collective politics of FRGs. Some argue that policy makers approach FRGs' discourses uncritically and privilege their perspectives over those of women's groups and mothers (Featherstone, 2009; Smart, 2006). Although there is insufficient evidence that FRGs have directly impacted on policy, research reveals that treating issues around fatherhood and family law as if they are 'gender neutral' works to perpetuate existing gender inequalities (Collier, 1995). Men's and fathers' perspectives should be considered when addressing policy around fatherhood, but this must be situated in terms of the broader context of power relations. This analysis depicts the intricate gender politics around fathers' rights discourses as a grounding for further critical research into FRGs.

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### Notes

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- 1 The use of the language of 'frames' does not imply a frame analytical approach as those who employ frame analysis in researching social movements tend to be engaged in examining the successes and failures of such groups in (re)framing public debates in order to gain public support or in interrogating the (re)framing of policy discourse (see, respectively, Benford and Snow, 2000; Rein and Schon, 1993). I am not concerned with these sorts of investigations here. In addition, frame analysis has been criticised for overemphasising the agency and intentionality of social movements by assuming that it is possible to stand outside frames (Bacchi, 2009).
- 2 There is some evidence to support this claim, including the following joke: 'Did you know there's now a warning on superhero costumes? It says: this costume does not give you superhero powers. Or, indeed, the right to see your children' (Jimmy Carr, on *The Chris Moyles Show*, Radio 1, 7 November 2007).
- 3 Notable exceptions include Collier and Sheldon (2006), as well as Crowley (2008) in the US context.
- 4 Families Need Fathers, a charity offering support to fathers going through the family courts, was founded in 1974 (<http://www.fnf.org.uk>).
- 5 The evidence suggests that 'most non-resident parents who apply for contact get it' (Hunt and Macleod, 2008, p. 189).

- 6 The phrase echoes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989: 'In all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration' (cited in Lowe and Douglas, 2007, p. 454). In UK family law, there is a similar emphasis on the rights of the child: 'the child's welfare shall be the court's paramount consideration' (Children Act 1989, cited in Lowe and Douglas, 2007, p. 450). See Reece (2009) for a discussion of the displacement of parental rights in favour of parental responsibility through the Children Act.
- 7 A presumption of shared parenting was recently considered and finally rejected in the Family Justice Review Final Report (November 2011).
- 8 UK family courts have been open to the media since 2009.
- 9 The research was funded by the ESRC. The fieldwork was subject to ethical approval processes and was undertaken in accordance with the BSA *Statement of Ethical Practice* (BSA, 2002). Informed consent was obtained and data were anonymised on transcription in order to safeguard interviewees, their children and ex-partners from harm as a result of identification. References to geographical locations were deleted, including the location of the branch. Transcripts were analysed using the qualitative software package NVivo 7. As the concern was to explore continuities (and disjunctures) across narratives, rather than to understand individual perspectives, the excerpts quoted are not attributed to individuals but are taken from across the interviews and, unless otherwise stated, are representative of all the interviews. In addition, non-attribution of quotations provides an extra level of anonymity.
- 10 There are significant differences between FRGs; however, a comparative analysis of the UK fathers' rights movement is beyond the scope of this article.
- 11 The conception of 'interest' here refers to the broadest use of the term which encompasses narrow instrumental interests as well as the idea of having a concern in advocating a cause (see Grant, 2000).
- 12 Collier and Sheldon (2006, p. 1 n. 1, p. 6 n. 3) note that there were F4J websites for Australia, Italy and the Netherlands but it is not clear whether these were sanctioned.
- 13 Although there have been shifts in discourses around masculinity and fatherhood, it is too simplistic to suggest that these can be located as stable, fixed, chronologically specific discourses, as the use of the language of 'new' (and 'old') implies.
- 14 Given the small sample it would be problematic to make any generalisations about a potential relationship between the participants' ethnic background, class and their perspectives. The links made between the masculinity frames, race and class relate to constructions of these identities, rather than to identity markers ascribed to individuals.
- 15 Unless otherwise attributed, all quotations come from the interviews.
- 16 For research into women's conflictual experiences in FRGs, see Crowley (2009).

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