



Critical Reflections on the Experiences of a Male Early Childhood Worker

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ABSTRACT *This article presents a narrative account of one man's experiences during his decade of employment as an early childhood worker. This account is juxtaposed with reflections from feminist and pro-feminist critical perspectives on the reactions, incidents and events he encountered. Tensions between risks and rewards, perceptions of power and powerlessness, and personal and political contexts are explored. These tensions highlight the pervasiveness of hegemonic conceptions of masculinity, and how they constrain gender reform.*

Introduction

The experiences of women who venture into traditionally male occupations and professions, and their consequent risk of encountering 'hostile male environments and harassment' (Kenway, 1997, p. 5) have been well documented (e.g. Spencer & Podmore, 1987; Abrams, 1993; Chetkovich, 1997; Davies-Netzley, 1998). Relatively little appears to be known, however, about the experiences of men moving into traditionally 'female' work environments, or about the rewards or risks entailed (Williams, 1992). In particular, scant attention has been paid to the men who chose to become professional carers and educators of young children.

Moreover, most of what *has* been written about male early childhood workers lacks an empirical basis, or is informed by limited theoretical analysis. Apart from a few noticeable exceptions (e.g. Skelton, 1991, 1994; Murray, 1996), there has been little attempt to interpret men's experiences in early childhood education from a critical perspective. This article draws on discourses of masculinity to highlight some of the tensions men may experience when their career choice challenges social, cultural, political and institutional norms.

Some feminists argue that focusing on men can deflect attention from the continuing inequalities between men and women (Skelton, 1991; Kenway, 1997). In particular, they

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point out that the ‘competing victim syndrome’ (Cox [1995], cited by Kenway, 1997), characterising aspects of the ‘men’s rights’ and ‘mythopoetic’ men’s movements, does little to overcome structural gender-based inequalities (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Schwalbe, 1996; Connell, 1997; Mills, 1997; Messner, 1998). While sympathetic to these concerns, like Mclean (1997), I argue that gender reform also involves developing ‘sophisticated and empathetic understandings of men’s experiences of masculinity in a variety of different contexts’ (p. 61). As Mclean points out, ‘if we can identify the costs to men implicit in ... gender inequality, then men may start to see that there are good reasons for them to join with women in seeking change’ (p. 62). The purpose of this article is to document one man’s experience of masculinity within the context of early childhood education and to identify some of the costs involved.

Theoretical Perspective

An underlying premise is that the active engagement of males in the nurturing of young children challenges conventional perceptions of masculinity and so has the potential to contribute to gender reform (Williams, 1995; Murray, 1996). Here, masculinity is seen as a ‘social construction about what it means to be male in certain times and certain places’ (Kenway, 1995, p. 61). These constructions change over time and according to context and dominant discourses (Connell, 1995; Kenway, 1995). I adopt the term ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell, 1995) to refer to the socially dominant form of masculinity in a specific time and context, but like Connell and Kenway, recognise the co-existence of competing or alternative masculinities. Following Kenway (1995), I also argue that an individual’s masculine identity is formed by the intersection of his biography with the ‘discourses of masculinity’ (p. 62) of the social settings through which he moves. An understanding of an individual’s biography, therefore, is integral to understanding his masculine identity.

Narrative is well suited to portraying and interpreting human experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995). Typically, we impose a narrative structure to organise our images and experiences. Likewise, we ‘hear and understand in narratives’ (Gudmundsdottir, 1996, p. 291). Thus, narratives contribute some degree of shared meaning, despite widely differing life experiences and circumstances (Gudmundsdottir, 1996). As critics argue, however, narrative can become imbued with unwarranted authenticity (Pringle, 1995; Hargreaves, 1996; Phillips, 1997). In this article, I balance the personal and the political by juxtaposing excerpts from one male early childhood worker’s professional biography with critical reflections on the experiences he encountered and his responses to these experiences.

Context

James (a pseudonym), a 33 year-old Anglo-Australian male, is married with two young daughters, aged 2 and 3 years. He has almost completed a 4-year Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) degree, by part-time study through distance education. His previous qualifications include a 3-year Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood) and a 2-year Certificate of Child Care Studies from a College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). From 1986 to 1997, James was employed as a childcare worker in a heavily industrialised regional city in New South Wales, Australia. This city has a long and continuing history of institutionalised paedophilia. From 1994 to 1997, James was the director of a 40-place long daycare centre, catering for children aged from birth to 5

years. In this capacity, he had overall responsibility for the day-to-day running of the programme and the 10 staff employed within the centre. In 1996–97, James participated in a study of the experiences of males enrolled in early childhood teacher education programmes (Sumsion & Lubimowski, 1998). The present article is drawn from this larger study.

Method

The narrative excerpts referred to are taken from a series of three in-depth interviews held over 19 months from April 1996 to November 1997. The first two interviews were conducted by a male research assistant. The third interview took place after James contacted me to talk about an incident that he found particularly distressing.

The purpose of the first two interviews was to identify and explore formative experiences, pivotal events and critical incidents in James's 10 years as an early childhood professional. In the third and final interview, James focused primarily on the lead up to, and aftermath of, a specific incident, which precipitated his decision to leave the profession. Interviews were between 90 minutes and 2 hours in duration and were held in James's workplace. They were audiotaped and transcribed and transcripts returned to James, who confirmed their authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Concerns have been raised about the potential difficulties associated with women interviewing men. Laws (1990), for example, found it difficult to establish rapport with her male interviewees; while Williams & Heikes (1993) warn of the possibility of a 'social desirability bias' (p. 285) that could lead the interviewee to present what he perceives will be a socially sanctioned account of his experiences. In both studies, however, these researchers found that their concerns were not insurmountable.

In the present study, developing rapport did not appear difficult, perhaps in part because James and I were already acquainted. (We had met several years ago, when he was studying for his Diploma of Teaching, and had maintained intermittent contact since.) Moreover, analysis of the transcripts of his three interviews indicated little discrepancy between his responses to a male and female interviewer. I found, however, that when strong emotions surfaced for James, particularly as he talked about painful events, Stanko's (1994) reservations about women interviewing men resonated with me.

Commenting on her experiences of interviewing men who have been the victims of violence, Stanko (1994) concluded:

The major disadvantage, for me, is that I do not have the personal resources to tap into my own experiences to explore what men say about violence. I am not a man, and do not have the accumulated and gendered knowledge against which to balance what men are saying and sharing about their lives. This work, I suspect, will have to be done by men.

In some ways, her implicit assumption that, for research about sensitive issues to be authentic, researchers need to be of the same gender as interviewees is contentious. Given that the dynamics of social class, race, and political and personal agendas are also influential in the research process (Phoenix, 1994), in effect, it would mean that researchers would only be equipped to work with participants of similar backgrounds and persuasions to their own—a limitation which seems likely to inhibit the emergence of new perspectives and understandings. Her concern is a timely reminder, though, that it is impossible to 'neutralize the social nature of interpretation' (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994, p. 133).

It was important, therefore, to minimise the risk of misinterpretation when constructing James's story. The use of in-depth interviews and narrative representation, and a commitment to sharing with James drafts of manuscripts arising from the project, as well as interview transcripts, were particularly helpful in clarifying issues and checking interpretations. Making explicit the processes of interpretation, and construction of the narrative was also essential. In brief, this involved noting the main themes that emerged as James recalled and reflected on formative experiences and events. Incidents representative of these themes were identified. Those incidents that had the potential to provide both an understanding of the personal context of James's experiences as well as a basis for considering broader sociocultural-political issues were portrayed in the following narrative. James's description of these incidents forms the basis of the narrative.

Throughout these processes of interpretation and construction I was conscious of many issues of trust and power and, as Glucksmann (1994) writes, of the need 'to draw the difficult line between interpreting the data in terms of its relevance to ... [my] research questions as opposed to twisting it in a way that amounts to a misrepresentation of what was said' (p. 163). In the interview context, differentials in power seemed minimal, as James and I met as professionals of equal standing in our respective work communities. As a researcher, though, I had considerably more power than James when interpreting and representing the data. My decision to adopt a critical orientation, with which James had little theoretical familiarity, privileged a feminist and pro-feminist perspective, over a non-critical, experientialist perspective.

Personal, Theoretical and Critical Reflections

In the narrative that follows, the text in italics represents James's voice; the critical reflections following each fragment represent my voice. This device enables the interweaving of the personal, the theoretical and the critical. The narrative begins with James reflecting on his choice of occupation. He commented:

The Decision

I had a good job as a maintenance officer. It paid really good money and at the end of the week it was \$500 in the hand. That was years ago and I don't even earn that now. But there had to be something more to life than getting up in the morning just for the money. I needed to take something home each day 'inside'. I needed to be able to make a difference to someone's life. If I did, maybe I could make the world a better place.

Reactions

My great grandfather was a miner, my grandfather was a miner, my father is a miner and my brother is a miner, so you can imagine my mother's disappointment. My father was fairly supportive, but as far as everyone else was concerned, it was 'James's just another normal red-blooded bloke. So why the hell is he doing this? Maybe there is something not quite right after all'.

For James, becoming an early childhood worker represented an attempt to explore alternatives to the hegemonic masculinity privileged in the working-class environment in which he had always lived. His career choice violated his community's expectations of masculinity which, in relation to work, emphasised providing financially for dependants through manual labour or mechanical or technical competence—in short, by having a 'man's' job. These expectations were held within a broader context of 'compulsory

heterosexuality' (Connell, 1995, p. 103). James's decision to pursue 'women's' work, therefore, raised immediate doubts about his sexuality. Although aware that rejecting traditional male employment options to work with young children involved risks, he anticipated that the rewards would more than compensate. As the following excerpts illustrate, however, the reality proved otherwise.

The wedding ring

I was the first male to enrol at the TAFE [in James's home city]. I was treated like a novelty—asked out continuously and lots of sexual references. There was quite a bit of harassment, really. Playful slapping on the bum and all that sort of stuff. I didn't like it at all. I didn't feel that I should be treated like that just because I was male. I took it all on the chin but I got to the point where I got so sick and tired of it that I started wearing a wedding ring—to provide the illusion that I was married and therefore unattainable, and also to show that I wasn't gay. [James emphasised that he was not homophobic but that the community in which he lived and worked was extremely so.]

Practicum placements

I had some trouble on placements. When I did a family daycare placement I got a phone call after the first day ... 'Oh, James. My husband doesn't like the idea that you're here. You'll have to find somewhere else'. I found that very hard to cope with.

There were some difficulties with pracs at university, too. The same sort of reaction from parents—the raised eyebrows, the shaking of heads. I can cope to a certain degree when somebody is quite prejudiced and they're verbal about it. You know how to react—you know what to say and you know how to come to terms with that, internally. But the passive prejudice is like a subtle sort of sabotage.

Each of these excerpts reflects widely held assumptions about masculinity. Essentially, each defines masculinity in terms of sexuality. The first suggests a perception of males as non-discriminating 'playboys' and sexual adventurers. The second focuses on men as sexual predators and competitors, while the third constructs men as potential abusers of sexual power.

These constructions of masculinity intersect with connotations of nurturing and teaching young children as a quintessentially female role (Steedman, 1988; Acker, 1995; Steinberg, 1996). This confluence leads to assumptions that 'men who want to work with young children must have a tendency towards paedophilia' (Skelton, 1991, p. 285). Murray (1996) puts it more bluntly: 'When men choose to do child care work, they become suspect' (p. 368). The relatively low pay and status, and lack of other socially acceptable rewards for men who choose to work in childcare fuel these inherent suspicions. James's attempts to explore an alternative to the mainstream hegemonic masculinity, therefore, took place in a context that precluded acceptance of males working in a professional capacity to care for young children. This fundamental schism between community perceptions of masculinities and the 'maternal imagery' (Acker, 1995, p. 23) that surrounds early childhood education created many tensions.

The 'wedding ring' incident exemplifies some of these tensions. It also supports Kanter's (1977) claim that 'token' participants in gender-segregated occupations, regardless of sex, are likely to encounter unwelcome attention, stereotyping and marginalisation. Resorting to a wedding ring to deter unwanted sexual advances resonates with the harassment experienced by many women in traditionally male occupational enclaves (Benokraitis, 1997; Kenway, 1997). A later excerpt from James's narrative suggests,

however, that his token status may also have worked to his advantage, unlike the experience of most women in male-dominated professions (Williams, 1995). To James, however, the cumulative effect of these incidents contributed to a sense of vulnerability, which is encapsulated in the following excerpt.

Differences

I enjoyed university. I enjoyed the study and I enjoyed the people. But—and this is really important but it's hard to verbalise—in my heart of hearts I knew that I was different. With a lot of people in Early Childhood, there are common threads and I don't think I shared those same threads. Child sexual assault was coming much more to the fore. So much so, that I kept a file of articles about it. It was an issue for me. It wasn't an issue for any of the girls [fellow students] because it didn't relate to them. But I knew that it was something that could relate to me. Once, there was an opportunity for the male students to get together with a male lecturer and bare our souls. We didn't have a great deal of time to talk but we shared something, and each of us kind of appreciated that. And it seemed to create a kind of bond between us.

In comparison to their female counterparts, males enrolled in early childhood education pre-service programmes are more likely to be mature age students and to have broader life experiences (Sumsion & Lubimowski, 1998). In this extract, though, James alludes to a more fundamental difference. For women, early childhood teaching is a socially sanctioned career choice; for men, it is not. Increasingly, this realisation became the interpretative frame through which James made sense of his professional experiences.

During his pre-service programme, James welcomed the opportunity to establish bonds with his male peers. After graduation, though, he became increasingly apprehensive about associating with male colleagues, because of the possibility of inadvertently associating with paedophiles. In his words, 'I know that I am all right but I can't know for sure about *them*'. His fear militated against his seeking solidarity with other men to work collectively for change, and precluded him from finding a forum in which he could address his anxieties and feelings of isolation. Without collective effort towards reform, there seemed little scope to exert 'social leverage' (Connell, 1995, p. 141) for greater acceptance of men in early childhood education. Nevertheless, despite its oppressive nature, hegemonic masculinity and its patriarchal structures conferred on James certain career advantages, as illustrated in the following.

Career advancement

After I finished my diploma I took a 'second teacher's' job, a new role that the organisation was introducing. Because it was a brand new concept, there were no role models and no support networks. Before, I had just been one of the childcare workers and I found it hard moving into a more managerial type position. It was a step up and there were a lot more expectations. I really needed someone to nurture me and give me confidence. The director was quite nurturing with the other staff, but I think she felt that, with me, she had to be really quite aggressive. I think she had a really hard time coming to terms with the fact that I was male. Maybe that was because of her perception of men, generally.

And I think that I probably got her 'off-side' because of my insecurity. I made quite a few mistakes in that way. So I can't say that it was a really pleasant time. But it was exciting and challenging. It was hard, though, because of the expectations placed on you. Because you're a male, to be considered half as good [as females], you have to try twice as hard. Sometimes I get really sick of trying so hard.

James's rapid promotion exemplifies the 'glass escalator' effect which advances the

careers of many men in traditionally female professions, enabling them to rise quickly to higher paid and higher status positions (Acker, 1990; Williams, 1995; Isaacs & Poole, 1996; Murray, 1996). As organisational cultures tend to favour hegemonic masculine norms, even in female-dominated professions, the traditional gender hierarchy tends to be reproduced (Williams, 1995). These structural advantages favouring men might account for what James perceived as resentment on behalf of the female director. Alternatively, her resentment could reflect the stereotyped gender beliefs and expectations of some female early childhood workers, and their subsequent difficulty in 'accepting the commitment and capacities of their [male] colleagues' (Clyde, 1995, p. 14). James's focus on his personal context, rather than on broader sociocultural and political influences, encouraged a perception that males in early childhood education are disadvantaged by their gender. The following extract explores this perception further.

Celebrating men

I've never been a very pessimistic sort of person and I still had that feeling of wanting to be a champion for men's rights. You hear all the time that 'Women can do anything!' but there's nobody standing up saying 'Hey, men can do anything, too'. Children get shaped and moulded very young in life. One of the reasons that I was in early childhood was to demonstrate to children that you should never be limited by your sex in your career choice. By being here, I was saying to the children 'You can be whatever you want to. Find something that fulfils you totally'.

And I think that men do have a very special quality about them. I suppose that, really, it's just that they are males going into an all female setting. I think they help make it a really well rounded environment. I've seen some children respond to me in a completely different way to how they respond to female staff. I've introduced activities, such as carpentry and handy-person activities, that should have been included but that some female staff never think of including. So yeah, I think that men bring a richness to the environment.

James's comments suggest a lack of awareness of the complexity of gender dynamics and gender reform. His frustration at the constraints and costs of hegemonic masculinity blinds him to its patriarchal dividends (Connell, 1995). Essentially, he overlooks the power, choice and opportunities conferred on men, as a group. His failure to distinguish his personal circumstances from the broader socio-political context, and his tendency to attribute male oppression to feminism could limit his potential contribution to gender reform. Conceivably, it could also attract him to reactionary 'men's rights' movements, discredited by many pro-feminist men (e.g. Connell, 1997; Mills, 1997).

His perceptions of the contribution of male early childhood workers also reveal some inconsistency. On the one hand, he contends that the presence of male role models contributes 'to the breakdown of destructive gender stereotypes' (Williams, 1995, p. 153) that perpetuate current inequities and continue to limit perceived career options. Yet, at the same time, he draws on stereotyped gender roles to argue that men contribute traditional male characteristics, interests and expertise and that these enhance early childhood learning environments. While James seemed to enter early childhood education with the implicit intent of subverting hegemonic masculine norms, he seems to have little understanding of how hegemonic masculinity continued to constrain his thinking.

The following extract is from the third interview with James, and concerns the incident that prompted him to contact me with the request that we meet. The event described in this excerpt was pivotal in James's decision, a few months later, to leave the early childhood field.

The ticking bomb

I love my job but the cost of being male in early childhood is enormous. There are so many aspersions cast on your sexuality and there is so much day-to-day prejudice. I've had people phone anonymously and call me a 'rock spider' [paedophile]. I've had new parents come through the door and say, 'I'd like to meet the director'. I say, 'Hi, my name is James and I'm the director. Can I help you?'—and they've just turned around and walked straight out.

It's like sitting on a time bomb which is ticking away—the accusation will come sooner or later. It's not a case of if it's going to happen; it's a case of when it's going to happen. I honestly believe that.

When you're single, you don't really worry. You think 'If I ever got accused [of child sexual abuse], I'll know that it's not true. Yeah, some mud will stick, but it would only be words'. I thought that if anything happened, I would take it on the chin and fight it to the hilt. I used to think that I was invincible, that I was a bit of a champion for men, that I was providing an example for men. I was invited to open days [at schools and career markets] and I'd encourage boys and young men to consider a career in childcare. It was like 'Go on! You can do it!'

But when you get married, it hurts more people. I've got a wife and two children now and I don't want to drag them through a child sexual assault allegation. I couldn't live with that. I couldn't live with my wife being put through it and I certainly couldn't put my children at risk. I love my children dearly and if anything happened to them, I would want blood. So I can see how people would naturally jump to the wrong conclusions. I couldn't stand somebody thinking that about me. I couldn't take it at all.

A few weeks ago, there was a reference in the newspaper to concerns about a male working in a local early childhood programme. It wasn't a direct accusation, but there were questions raised. Panic set in. My wife and I did a quick count of all the males we knew in the region and came up with seven men. But as far as the parents of many of the children in my centre, I am the ONLY male they know in early childhood. Anyway, it turned out that the report should have read that 'Pre-school aged children had been assaulted by a relative of the family'. But it shows how inaccurate reporting puts a cloud over your head. One night, soon afterwards, the words 'James Straffe is a paedophile' were spray painted on the walls of the centre. I just 'dropped the ball'.

This excerpt provides some insight into the covert and overt discrimination encountered by men who flout the norms of hegemonic masculinity. It also highlights the current globalised moral panic about paedophilia and the inflammatory contribution of the mass media (Glaser, 1998). As Kenway (1995) argues, 'the mass media offer multiple messages about what it means to be male, but some messages are much stronger than others. Given the sweep of their influence ... mass media versions of masculinities exercise an authority of some force' (p. 61). This excerpt indicates that this agency is not necessarily exercised responsibly.

Although the vast majority of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are family members, relatives, caregivers in some capacity, or family acquaintances (Pringle, 1995; Glaser, 1998), this does not justify assumptions that men who choose to be involved with children have a propensity to abuse. Other than being male, no identifiable characteristics distinguish perpetrators of child sexual abuse from the remainder of the population (Pringle, 1995; Glaser, 1998). Indeed, the implicit assumption that men who choose to work professionally with young children do so because of opportunities for abuse sits uncomfortably with findings of male aggression—in general, that men with the most traditional gender attitudes are more likely to violate against women and children

(Howard & Hollander, 1997). As it seems unlikely that men with highly traditional gender attitudes will seek a career in early childhood education, it could be argued that, proportionately, male early childhood workers are less likely to sexually abuse children than the male population, as a whole.

The last excerpt is also interesting for its metaphorical language, which inadvertently illustrates the centrality of aggression to hegemonic masculinity (Howard & Hollander, 1997). Despite James's intent to work towards subverting conventional masculine norms by becoming an early childhood worker, he retains the hegemonic assumption that his role as defender of his wife and children justifies aggression. Simultaneously, he anticipates that as his career choice in many respects violates social norms, the outcome will inevitably involve violence. Although he dreads becoming a victim of this (emotional) violence, he implicitly condones its use.

The aftermath

I really hate the person who did this [the spray painting]. Hate is a strong word but when they did that, they took something away from me that I didn't think anyone could. They broke something inside me that now interferes with the way that I relate to children

Before, it would be nothing for children to come up to me and there would be all this warmth and empathy. But now I just feel like holding them all at arm's length and saying 'Don't come near me. Don't touch me. Just stay away from me'. I've always had a close relationship with them. And on my first day back [after a period of stress-related leave, which James was eventually granted after a considerable struggle], because they hadn't seen me for 6 weeks, they wanted to be all over me. They were jumping and screaming and touching me. And I just couldn't cope with it. I had to lock myself away in the office.

Even with my own kids, before, it would have been nothing for us to jump into the bath together and things like that. And I said to my wife 'I know this sounds silly, but ...' And she said, 'You are these children's father! You're not to talk like that! You're not to feel like that!' But it's really hard, you know. Because when you're in that mode of thinking 8 hours a day and then you've got your own children to go home to, well, it's like you're still wanting to protect yourself. There were never any closed doors in our house, but there are now.

Something feels broken inside. And the most worrying thing is that I don't want to fix it. Because if I hold them at a distance there is less chance that anything like that could ever happen again. I knew this would happen. I knew that it was inevitable.

Two paradoxes are evident in this final excerpt. First, James was attracted to early childhood education because he perceived it offered opportunities for emotional closeness and fulfilment. Yet his attempts to transcend the emotional impoverishment of conventional hegemonic masculinities ultimately resulted in emotional withdrawal. Bathriek & Kaufman (1998) contend that while relinquishing some of the privileges of hegemonic masculinities can make men more emotionally vulnerable, the feeling of not being in control creates possibilities of closer, more rewarding relationships and a greater sense of connectedness with others. For James, however, this was not the case.

Second, men's growing involvement in the care of their own children is widely assumed to hold promise for loosening some of the constraints of hegemonic masculinity (Hood, 1993; Coltrane, 1996; Brandth & Kvande, 1998). These writers argue that a greater emphasis on nurturing capacities, and valuing of the caring role, may lead to the participation of more men in the 'caring professions', a gradual disassociation of masculinity with aggression, and an erosion of patriarchal attitudes and structures. In James's case, though, his commitment to his own children accentuated his perceptions

of the risks his role as a professional carer of young children entailed, and was a catalyst for his departure from the field.

Discussion

James's narrative highlights the need to hear more from men in caring professions if we are to further our understanding of the complexities of gender reform. His story points to the pervasiveness of hegemonic structures which perpetuate the paucity of men in early childhood education and similar professions (Pringle, 1995). It also illustrates the considerable emotional distress and turmoil which can accompany attempts to 'remake' conventional masculinities (Connell, 1995). Yet, at the same time, it demonstrates the need for caution and critical reflection as we listen to 'the voices of men defining the reality of the worlds around them' (Pringle, 1995, p. 9). Otherwise, as James's story shows, in the midst of personal anguish it is easy to lose sight of broader political contexts.

If we accept that greater involvement of men in the nurturing of young children has considerable potential to challenge conventional constructions of masculinity (Hearn, 1987; Connell, 1995; Murray, 1996), then we need to consider how men like James might be retained in early childhood education and assisted to become agents of gender reform. As Connell argues, and as James's narrative indicates, rejecting the constraints of the dominant masculinity requires a great deal of commitment in the face of derision, hostility and suspicion. It also calls for considerable insight into one's actions, as well as into influences perpetuating hegemonic structures. Moreover, Connell asserts, the emotional distress that challenging and attempting to transform these structures can entail makes reform unlikely if left to individuals. Collective action, he contends, is more likely to succeed, especially if it focuses on precipitating change from multiple bases and strategic pressure points. The following discussion focuses on three possibilities: (i) forming professional and parental alliances; (ii) making use of the mass media; and (iii) reconceptualising the organisational and professional culture of early childhood education.

Forming Professional and Parental Alliances

I use the term *professional and parental alliances* to refer to the formation of networks of parents and early childhood professionals to explore perceptions of masculinity, and how these might be reshaped in 'more positive and creative ways' (Pringle, 1995, p. 181). Assuming an atmosphere of trust is established, these networks could provide a supportive space for exploring alternative masculinities and new gender identities. This is likely to involve deconstructing the stereotypes, costs and privileges of conventional masculinities; identifying how these stereotypes and inequities are perpetuated; and how they might be eroded and transformed. Promoting images of masculinity characterised by qualities such as emotional openness, mutual caring and respectful interdependence would be a key priority (Pringle, 1995). Parental advocacy for greater involvement of males in the care and education of young children could become a powerful strategy for challenging community attitudes and legitimising the involvement of males.

Making Use of the Mass Media

To be effective, advocates will have to address community concerns about child sexual abuse. They will need to acknowledge ‘the incidence and severity of male violence’ (MacCormack, 1996, p. 17), but simultaneously emphasise that ‘most men, like most women, commit little aggressive violence’ (Howard & Hollander, 1997, p. 136). In other words, they will recognise community concerns about ‘the interrelationships of masculinity, sexuality and violence’ (Skelton, 1994, p. 87), but challenge the community’s acceptance of its inevitability. To do this effectively, advocacy efforts must harness the power of the media in order to portray images of masculinity centred on interconnectedness and caring, rather than on power and violence. Evidence that media images are reflecting the growing tendency of many men to become more involved in caring for their own children suggests that this is potentially fertile ground for change (Hearn, 1987; Connell, 1995).

Reconceptualising the Organisational and Professional Culture of Early Childhood Education

Reconceptualising the professional and organisational culture of early childhood education—that is, the ‘shared symbols, language, practices (“how we do things around here”) and deeply embedded beliefs and values’ (Newman, 1995, p. 11)—could also assist gender reform. Steinberg (1996) urges early childhood educators to ‘deconstruct the gender context that has insidiously shaped the field’ (p. 35). In particular, she refers to the seemingly unquestioned assumptions amongst many early childhood professionals that the ethic of caring characterising the profession is inevitably linked with female gender roles and perpetuates the ‘maternal model’ of early childhood educator (p. 34). With its emphasis on caring relationships, the early childhood profession may have overlooked the social and political contexts in which these relationships develop (Acker, 1995). Without a critical awareness, it will be difficult for early childhood educators to understand the ways in which gender is socially constructed. Focusing on the experiences of men in childcare could assist in raising awareness of gender issues and provide a useful starting point for deconstructing gender stereotypes (Murray, 1996).

As part of this process of reconceptualisation, gendered practices and policies should also be reconsidered. For example, as Skelton (1994) points out, it is inappropriate to rely on men to construct ‘their own frameworks in which to work “safely” with children’ (p. 87). Explicit and transparent protective measures are a right of all early childhood workers, regardless of gender. Pringle (1995) advises maintaining a constant alertness to the possibility of abuse, avoiding situations and actions that could conceivably be misinterpreted as abusive, and minimising physical contact with children. Such measures, however, seem likely to perpetuate the negative expectations and climate of suspicion that has characterised men’s involvement in early childhood education.

A better alternative may be to emphasise the importance of providing safe and respectful environments for children and adults alike, and to involve parents and early childhood professionals in developing guidelines appropriate to particular contexts. Such guidelines would need to protect young children; support the right of adults, regardless of gender, to work with them; acknowledge community concerns about child sexual abuse; recognise the constraints of early childhood settings; and take account of the potential impact of such guidelines on children, early childhood workers and their colleagues (Skelton, 1994). Resolving these tensions, especially without resorting to

simplistic and inappropriate solutions, will be challenging, but essential if early childhood education is to take a more proactive role in gender reform.

Support mechanisms for those unjustly accused of child sexual abuse would also be needed. These would include recognition of the enormity of the impact of such accusations, and access to counselling services and support groups. An appropriate benchmark might be the types of support supposedly extended to victims of sexual assault. Provisions such as these would need to be informed by an awareness of the pervasiveness of hegemonic perceptions of masculinity and the difficulties involved in challenging these perceptions.

To date, most of the literature concerning early childhood education has shown little understanding of these issues. Take, for example, the implicit assumptions that early childhood professionals are necessarily female. References to what James called the 'ticking bomb' are conspicuously absent, even though they figure prominently in the few existing accounts of other male early childhood professionals. Just as contemporary conceptualisations of women's career stages and professional development needs (e.g. Poole & Langan-Fox, 1997) take account of many women's interrupted participation in the workforce due to family responsibilities, it seems timely to consider the impact of gender influences on men's participation in early childhood education and other traditionally 'female' professions.

Conclusion

This article is not intended as a representative portrayal of the experiences of male early childhood workers. Nevertheless, focusing on one man's experiences and the tensions that led to his eventual departure from the field highlights the pervasiveness, contradictions and complexities of hegemonic masculinity and their constraints on gender reform. The participation of men in childcare appears to offer potential leverage for reform. The challenges faced by James, however, suggest that collective action, rather than relying on the actions of individuals alone, will be needed for this potential to be realised.

Success in increasing the number of men in childcare would, in turn, raise many questions of gender politics. Would the involvement of more men, for example, raise the status of the childcare profession, and elevate nurturing and other roles traditionally seen as feminine, and therefore traditionally undervalued? Or would the glass escalator effect advantage male early childhood workers at the expense of their female colleagues, and perpetuate gender inequalities? Might men attracted to childcare be committed to exploring alternative masculinities, and if so, would this encourage boys to do likewise—and invite female early childhood workers and girls to explore alternative femininities? Or would a greater influx of men simply reinforce hegemonic conceptions of masculinity and femininity? There are many unknowns, many potential gains and risks to the involvement of more males in professional childcare. James's narrative alerts us to some of the possibilities.

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