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Male femininities? The redefinition of men within neoliberalism

Gregory Wolfman

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Huddersfield

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Abstract

Masculinity today is not the same as it was thirty years ago, with new concepts such as metrosexuality, hipsterism, and spornosexuality emerging as dominant images of man, and frequent lamentations that men today have become soft or effeminate – hence the “male femininities” of the title. While recent scholarship on nerd, metrosexual, hybrid and caring masculinities has examined these phenomena, in this thesis I suggest that they can be linked to the dominance of neoliberalism and neoliberal culture. I argue that an examination of the ways in which neoliberalism is gendered, and particularly how neoliberal subjectivity deploys a certain conception of femininity that conflicts with masculinity, elucidates many of the debates around the changing face of masculinity.

To this end, I use two methods: first, a critical discourse analysis of four US sitcoms – *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *New Girl* – and second, a discursive psychological analysis of interviews and focus groups with 16 men aged 18-30 based in different areas of England in which I showed them selected clips from the sitcoms to ascertain the discursive conflicts and negotiations between neoliberal and masculine subjectivities. I develop a typology of male subject positions in the sitcoms – postfeminist male singleton, douchebag, and the househusband – and examine three different interpretative repertoires from the focus groups and interviews, which I call advanced masculinity, outsider masculinity, and individualism. I find that both the sitcoms and the participants performatively rejected masculinity, often doing so by exhibiting or endorsing what I have called “hollow femininity”, a version of femininity that detaches context and definition from the concept of femininity. These performative rejections, I argue, give way to an enduring fear of being labelled feminine, indicating masculinities might have substantively changed only for the sake of survival.

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Overview of abbreviations

Methodological

DP – discursive psychology

CDA – critical discourse analysis

IR – interpretative repertoire

Sitcoms

HIMYM – How I Met Your Mother

TBBT – The Big Bang Theory

PMS – “postfeminist male singleton”

1

“A more subtle kind of masculine”?

Men, masculinity, and me

At one point in one of my focus groups for this thesis, I found myself smiling as two of the participants, Ringo and George (both pseudonyms), described the difficult time they had as boys at school, and how that experience changed as they moved out of their provincial hometowns into spaces where their versions of masculinity felt more accepted. Though I apologised, I was not smiling at their suffering or pain, but at my familiarity with their stories. I am a physically small heterosexual cis white man who spent my teenage years in the southwest of England at a school where the most popular boys were the ones best at rugby. Having attended primary school in a north London suburb, my known background as a city boy, as well as an interest in fantasy fiction and roleplaying on top of my short stature and lack of sporting ability, meant that I was not one of the more popular boys, and nor was I particularly popular with girls. Though I would not say I was feminine, I was not considered an alpha male. A lot of this felt like it began to change when I started university. Things that seemed to be considered weaknesses at school were suddenly cool, from fantasy fiction through to academic ability. It felt like a different kind of space in terms of masculinity – not feminine, but substantively non-masculine enough to challenge the preconceptions I had of gender.

At university I was drawn to the study of men and masculinities. Having felt that my masculinity was somehow policed at school, there was, and still is, undoubtedly a personal element to my interest.

I began to uncover the ways in which masculinities had been theorised in the plural, with complex networks of power relations between men as well as between men and women (Connell, 2005b; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn & Kimmel, 2006; D. H. J. Morgan, 1992; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Theories of hegemonic masculinity demonstrated how masculinities change and morph over time, subject to surrounding socio-political conditions and structural shifts in heteropatriarchies, capitalisms, and white supremacist structures (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Demetriou, 2001; Donaldson, 1993; Messerschmidt, 2010). Intersections with racialisation (Chua & Fujino, 1999; Collins, 2005; S. Gill, 2014; Ling, Haywood, & Mac an Ghail, 2017; Sinha, 1995) and class (Baker & Levon, 2016; Barber, 2008; D. Nixon, 2009; Roberts, 2018) have examined the ways in which some men's masculinities are subordinated or marginalised, and how dominant conceptions of masculinity are built on racialised and class structures. Theories of hybrid masculinities (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Eisen & Yamashita, 2017), caring masculinities (Elliott, 2016; Goedecke, 2018), as well as apparent queer masculinities of straight men (Heasley, 2005) combined notions of change and of subordinated masculinities (Haywood & Johansson, 2017), while various materialist theories relating men and masculinities to themes as broad as empire (Beynon, 2002), culture (Nayak & Kehily, 2013), and capitalism (Harman, 2013) have put masculinities in broader social conditions. Meanwhile, literature on gay and queer masculinities (D'Emilio, 1983; T. Edwards, 1994) has explored the intersections between feminist activism and feminised men.

Geek or nerd masculinities¹ (Bell, 2009, 2013; Kendall, 2000) and perhaps concepts of subordinated or marginalised masculinities are closest to describing my experience. Yet, I still believe there is an element of my experience missing in the literature. Moving between two different spaces, from school to university, there was an implication that masculinity was not just different, nor that the two spaces valued different men, but that different things were expected of men. When I was a teenager, masculinity was having a girlfriend and being good at rugby; later, it was getting an article published in a student magazine or organising a bar crawl with a university society. At the very least, university was an environment that did not reward overt sexism or homophobia in the way that the culture of my secondary school did. Though masculinities are always in flux, my experience speaks to a process of contemporary change in gender discourses that posits a less obvious or recognisable form of masculinity, at least in certain spaces, areas and moments (Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2007; Segal, 2007; Walby, 1997). Drawing on the differences between these two educational spaces – a comprehensive secondary school in a medium-sized Somerset town and a redbrick university in a gentrifying urban inner city – these contemporary masculinities then become imbricated in wider

¹ See the glossary, appendix 5, for fuller definitions of geek and nerd, as well as other forms of masculinity.

structural questions. Why school and university? Why town and city? Why an apparent move from obviousness to subtlety?

Theoretically, I explore these questions in a neoliberal context, using literature on neoliberal culture (Brown, 2006; Duggan, 2004; McGuigan, 2013), subjectivity (R. Gill & Scharff, 2011; Han, 2017; McGuigan, 2014), and labour (Abstract, 1989; Morini, 2007; D. Nixon, 2009), as well as related literature on postfeminism (Brabon, 2007; Genz & Brabon, 2009; Ortner, 2014), to contextualise contemporary masculinities. There is a body of literature exploring the relationship between neoliberal subjectivity and femininity, ranging from descriptions of the reflexively disciplined neoliberal subject as typically feminine (R. Gill & Scharff, 2011) to discussions on the feminisation of labour including the feminisation of labouring capabilities (Morini, 2007) and the increasing visibility of women in the work place (Coyle, 2005; Power, 2009). What happens when these potentially feminised facets of neoliberal subjectivity come into conflict with the continuing structural dominance of men?

Various studies have looked at this in specific scenarios, from the problems faced by men in service work (D. Nixon, 2009; Pettinger, 2005), to the contradictions of metrosexuality (M. Hall, 2014; T. Miller, 2006), spornosexuality (Hakim, 2016) and hipsterism (Gilson, 2016; Henke, 2013), to the rise in men's cosmetics (M. Atkinson, 2008), to the growth of hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). My contribution in this thesis explores the formation of contemporary masculinities in a neoliberal context through a critical examination of femininity, and the extent to which neoliberalism constructs men as feminine.

1.1 Male femininities?

This thesis has two research questions, each with two parts, with the first two empirical, and the second two theoretically orientated:

1. a. What are the discourses on masculinity, both competing and consistent, that arise from four US hangout sitcoms, and focus groups and interviews with men around England?
- b. How are those discourses resolved and negotiated both in and between each?
2. a. Is it at all accurate or useful to call these discursive formations “male femininities”?
- b. To what extent can we derive any political optimism from this?

My argument, then, is this: male femininities is an accurate description inasmuch as neoliberal masculinities adopt a number of feminised dispositions – namely, a bodily self-discipline, an experience or articulation of otherness, and a fluidity of meaning – that take discourses on femininity and extract them from any political or cultural context. This process updates and recuperates the masculine subject, in order to resolve the incompatibility of the masculine and neoliberal subjects, the latter of which requires stricter modes of bodily self-discipline, incorporates and fetishises forms of otherness, and makes meaning and significations more fluid than in older forms of capitalism.

Though I am primarily interested in the material actions of men, these research questions, as well as the body of the thesis, make heavy use of the concept of masculinities, so it will be useful to say something here on the use I am making of it (though it should be noted that this is covered in detail in section 2.3 in my literature review). It is useful to refer to masculinities to make sense of the ways in which material and discursive understandings of gender are embodied by men. I avoid using the concept of masculinities as a synonym for men's actions, instead taking masculinities as the inscriptions of popular and hegemonic discourses about men onto men's bodies. Here, I avoid veering into biological essentialism, instead sticking to a concept of embodiment, such that gendered discourses construct the body, rather than the other way around. Indeed, such an approach remains culturally and temporally inclusive, accounting for differences in masculinity over time and place, and inclusive of trans experiences, where trans bodies are assigned to one gender at birth that conflicts with the gender they feel they embody. To put it bluntly, I consider it to be impossible to not embody masculinity in some degree if you identify as a man.

This definition of masculinity aims to move beyond the production of definitions of masculinity, and instead focus on material critiques of men's actions. As such, masculinity is also considered throughout this thesis to be inextricably bound up in a relationship of power. This is not to say that masculinity is necessarily at all times and in all locations hegemonic or dominant (especially considering how gender intersects with other structural differences) but that it encompasses the empowered side of a binary in which femininity is generally devalued. Such a theory of masculinity strongly implies that embodying masculinity is an inherently oppressive practice, taking on and reinforcing patriarchal discourses, suggesting that gender is itself an irredeemably oppressive set of structures (indeed, concepts of masculinity and hegemonic masculinity have been critiqued for presenting gender and patriarchy as unchangeable and unchallengeable, such as by Ottemo and Johansson). Though this thesis explores the extent to which temporal changes might materially call into question the inherent oppressiveness of masculinity, with some optimism from Ottemo and Johansson, as well as Gilson (2016), McCormack (2012) and Anderson (2009), my analysis indicates little optimism in the suggestion that “male femininities” indicate a move away from patriarchal oppression.

Critiquing femininity

There are a few areas where femininity has been discussed in relation to men, such as the way in which feminisation is used by some men to demote or devalue others (Bridges, 2014; Connell, 2005b; Cooper, 2006; Pascoe, 2005), in relation to a renewed gaze on the male body (Hakim, 2016; S. Nixon, 1997) and with reference to the concept of hybrid masculinities (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). A search for the phrase “male femininity” mostly brings up research into drag (Jacob & Cerny, 2004; Rosenfeld, 2008), as well as some explorations of the potential for destabilising gender categories in an educational context (Francis, 2010; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2012; Paechter, 2006). Closer to my research, Atkinson (2008) has studied men’s uses of cosmetic surgery and related it to femininity, while Hill (2006) suggests that heterosexual cis men who exhibit “feminine characteristics” in some ways “subvert heteropatriarchal scripts”. None of these studies, however, have examined the possibility of a critical interrogation of the concept of femininity. Schippers, meanwhile, suggests that “there are specific forms of male femininity”, suggesting that researchers look at male femininities as “the characteristics and practices that are culturally ascribed to women, do the cultural work of situating the feminine in a complementary, hierarchical relationship with the masculine, and are embodied by men” (Schippers, 2007: 96).

My thesis aims to fill this seemingly obvious gap, exploring how these new forms of manhood might be analysed using insights from a critical understanding of femininities. So, while “male femininity” is a catchy, rhetorical title for my research, its use is not purely aesthetic. I argue male femininity is a useful description of the intersection between neoliberal and men’s subjectivities, critiquing the ways in which certain modalities of femininity have been co-opted by both. As such, male femininities employ what I call a “hollow femininity”, signposted throughout the thesis by a set of discursive formations drawn from conceptions of femininity that extract it from any structural or power relations. There are, I argue, three key features of this hollow femininity: an inhibited self-discipline, a performance of some sort of otherness, and a fluidity to gender ideology and discourses.

Discipline is not necessarily associated with femininity – for example, Foucault (1991) was interested in discipline more generally, in the societal shift away from subject formation via punishment to subject formation via discipline and self-discipline. Foucault argues that subjects are increasingly made responsible for controlling their own bodies, which are constructed as amenable to dominant or hegemonic ideology, thanks to a societal panoptic model in which subjects are under constant surveillance. Modalities of discipline have been used to describe the formations of both neoliberal and feminine subjectivities. Neoliberalism, here conceived of not just as an economic cluster of ideas, but also a collapse of cultural and economic logics (Brown, 2015; Duggan, 2004; McGuigan, 2013), constructs a new subjectivity in which individuals are assumed to be entirely responsible for their own

actions (R. Gill & Scharff, 2011; Hakim, 2016; McGuigan, 2014; Phipps, 2014). In terms of femininity, Barky (1998) argues that a certain modality of discipline constitutes the formation of femininity. She says that by policing women's bodies in terms of shape and size, constructing women's bodies as ornamented surfaces, and forming a certain set of feminine positions and movements, femininity consists in living in a body constructed by the gaze of another, echoing both Foucault's surveillance model and the concept of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). These two modalities of discipline, neoliberal and feminine, bear some similarities, and produce a set of ideas often at odds with the construction of masculinities.

Neoliberalism also forges a specific relationship with masculinity and otherness. Men, even those who are not dominantly or hegemonically masculine, are most of the time complicit in men's dominance by virtue of their position – Connell (1985) describes this as the patriarchal dividend, such that men gain some benefit from patriarchy even if they do not actively try to uphold it. However, my research found that a lot of the men interviewed attempted to articulate or perform some form of otherness. Gilson (2016) found this in his exploration of hipsters, that white middle-class men in the city employed aesthetics taken from black and working-class cultures, as well as elements of what they perceived to be femininity, to perform hipsterism. Yet, the spaces these hipsters frequent are not “authentic” spaces, but gentrified urban areas, highlighting a paradoxical relationship in which othered cultures are drawn upon for the purpose of forms of masculine renewal, fetishising them without a care for their histories. Zukin (2011) and Rossi (2017) both argue that this relationship with otherness is particularly prominent in the city, which emerged as a key site of the neoliberal renewal of masculinities. Indeed, metrosexuality gets its name from the prefix “metro”, like metropolis or metropolitan, while it (Coad, 2008), along with hipsterism (Gilson, 2016) and spornosexuality (Hakim, 2016) attempts to perform otherness. Salter and Blodgett (2017) argue this is similarly the case for geek and nerd masculinities, too.

A lot of the participants in my research viewed masculinity as reasonably fluidly defined. Either they were unsure about whether masculinity had much meaning generally or found masculinity to have little or no meaning in their lives, despite identifying as male. This might partly be related to the increasing visibility of trans, non-binary, genderfluid and genderqueer identities in public life, particularly among young people, and the ways in which such visibility might be beginning to break down the gender binary (see Hines, 2018; Risman, 2018). However, as with discipline, there are some similarities between the ways in which fluidity has been applied to conceptions of femininity and to conceptions of contemporary capitalism. For example, Kristeva theorises that children undergo a process of socialisation from what she calls the “semiotic realm”, in which meaning is fluid and unfixed, to the “symbolic realm” with fixed meaning and clear signification (Kristeva, 2005; Moi, 1986). She links the semiotic realm to motherhood and to femininity using language that resembles how Bauman discusses the ways in which contemporary capitalism makes linguistic meaning increasingly fluid and

unclear (Bauman, 2000, 2011). Similarly, descriptions of neoliberal subjectivity as reflexive and responsive to situations (R. Gill & Scharff, 2011; McGuigan, 2014) resemble Marxist-feminist descriptions of affective and reproductive labour often associated with a feminised domestic sphere (Delphy, 1984; Hardt, 1999).

Finding male femininity

This thesis examines the competing discursive formations about masculinity that arise in a neoliberal era in two different locations: four US sitcoms, followed by focus groups and interviews with young men around the country. Though it is the topic of chapter 4, I will briefly outline my methodology here. Gender consists in a series of situated meanings that are not static, but continually perpetuated, negotiated, and challenged in multiple locations, from everyday interactions, through to dress and presentation, positioning oneself against others, and in cultural representations. For this reason, as well as the increasing fluidity of neoliberal ideology, I opted to gather data from multiple locations.

I selected sitcoms partly because of the way they frequently make gender relevant by emphasising romantic and sexual relationships. In my question, I use the phrase “hangout sitcom”, which here refers to a specific subgenre of the sitcom that emerged in the early 1990s, simultaneously with the onset of neoliberal hegemony. Typically featuring a group of between four and eight predominantly white twenty-somethings in western cities, moving up their careers, living in apartment flats, and spending most of the time “hanging out” in either flats or coffee shops, I argue that the hangout sitcom explicitly negotiates the ideological conflicts in neoliberalism. I therefore in chapter 4 use a critical discursive analysis to examine the ways in which four hangout sitcoms resolve the conflicts between neoliberalism and masculinity.

My other method of data collection was a series of interviews and focus groups with men aged 18-30 in different parts of England, recruited through a mixture of snowball and opportunity sampling. There was a number of different recruitment criteria (with recruitment materials shown in appendix 2) – men working in retail, men who work freelance, men who work in unusual offices (with things like gaming consoles or beds in the office), men who use cosmetics, and men who identified or have been identified as metrosexual, hipsters, feminine, nerds or geeks. I carried out focus groups with 16 men, some based in a northern town, some based in a town in the southwest, and some based in London. In the focus groups and interviews, I showed them clips from the sitcoms, asking them questions about the characters. I then transcribed all the interviews and focus groups, and analysed those transcripts using discursive psychology.

1.2 Chapter overview

This thesis has nine chapters. After this brief introduction, chapter 2 is a literature review, exploring conceptions of femininities, masculinities, gender, men, women, capitalism, neoliberalism, patriarchy, postfeminism, and various authors exploring new conceptions of masculinity. This both positions my research in relation to these literatures, and produces a framework for the methodology in chapter 3. In chapter 4, I analyse four sitcoms, *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *New Girl*, arguing that they each feature prominently three main male subject positions, defined as character based narrative devices that are mobilised for the purpose of resolving the discursive tensions within the hangout sitcom's stories. I have named these subject positions the postfeminist male singleton, the douchebag, and the househusband, and they featured in all four sitcoms. Chapter 5 then briefly introduces the topic of the next three chapters, which examine the empirical research findings through data drawn from focus group and interview transcripts. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 are each based on one of three interpretative repertoires used by participants to construct their masculine identities. Chapter 6 explores the advanced masculinity interpretative repertoire, looking at how participants constructed their masculinity as either more geographically or temporally advanced than other men. Chapter 7 looks at the outsider masculinity interpretative repertoire, looking at the conflict thrown up when men attempted to say they were both masculine and outside of masculinity. Then chapter 8 analyses responses from participants that positioned them as individuals outside or beyond gender discourses, yet still identified as men.

Finally, chapter 9 rounds off my empirical analysis by returning to my theoretical questions 2a and 2b, using the data from the sitcoms, focus groups and interviews to reflect on the implications and wider discursive patterns at stake in my findings. Structured around four common themes that I pulled out of the data, I look at rejections of masculinity, the relevance of the feminisation of labour, the importance of masculine geographical difference, and then examine in-depth my concept of "hollow femininity". Chapter 10 concludes by summarising my findings and their scope, reflecting on the research process and my contribution to the literature, and drawing out areas of potential further research.

2

Critical literature review: Masculine, feminine, neoliberal subjects

This literature review is structured into four sections, each of which draws out and critically examines the key concepts that form the title of this thesis: the first on femininities, the second on men, the third on patriarchies and neoliberalism, and the fourth on “male femininities”. All these sections will explore the complex relationships between theoretical concepts such as ideology, structure, discourse, agency, and subjectivity. So, to begin this literature review, in this introductory section I will briefly assess various ways in which the relationship between structure, discourse, and subjectivity has been theorised.

2.1 Introduction: Gendered and neoliberal subjectivities

For Althusser (1990), subjectivity is how ideology is sustained through individual action. He argues that subjects are interpellated into their positions, such that given situations force individuals into certain roles in certain contexts. For example, when a police officer hails an individual with, “hey, you!”, this act of hailing create a specific relationship between the officer and the individual that enables and is enabled by the ideology in which the individual is embedded. Through interpellation, ideology becomes intelligible at the point of subjectivity. Althusser is typically criticised for the unidirectional nature of interpellation, even as his insight into the everyday living of ideology is strong. The “Frankfurt School” of critical theorists were concerned more with how structural norms become normalised and reified in culture; for example, Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1997 [1994]) concept of the culture industry aimed to show how popular culture serves the ideological function of ensuring popular passivity by normalising certain political assumptions as “apolitical”. Subjects here risk being positioned as passive

consumers. Conversely, Stuart Hall (1993, 1996) argues that while culture does indeed encode certain ideological and political messages, consumption produces meaning, too. So, someone with a different material background might therefore read a movie or a book and produce a different set of meanings from another. Also influenced by the Frankfurt School, Jameson (1971) perceived ideology as a kind of logical bind, or antinomy, functioning through the individual by making itself common-sense thinking; any imagination beyond the “realism” of ideology is considered logically impossible. Although this more effectively describes a more agentic process of consumption, it still begs the question of how ideological change occurs.

In contrast with this, for Foucault (1991) subjectivation is a more dialogical process, with subject and state co-determining each other’s existence. Foucault is concerned with how power is exerted over bodies, which he calls biopower. In *Discipline and Punish* he charts the history of biopower, using prison architecture as a metaphor to show how 18th century explicit torture and punishment gave way to 19th century discipline. In a prison population that relies on control by discipline, inmates are constantly subject to a gaze from the guards, making the panopticon the ideal architectural design for enforcing control by discipline. By keeping constant watch on the inmates, with the threat of punishment lurking, they are forced to self-discipline to be seen to be behaving “properly”. Foucault argues that a similar process applies to contemporary society – that with constant surveillance, individuals are subjectivated by being forced to self-discipline. Here ideology becomes not simply a set of ideas but what Wendy Brown (2006) calls a “political rationality” that delimits possible actions by reducing politics to the grounds of common sense – a self-disciplined political subject acts as though being watched at all times. Foucault calls this a “governmentality”, a play on words that acknowledges the breaking down of the binary of ideology and internal psychological states. Subjectivation is therefore not just a process of forming subjectivity, but of determining the existence of structures as well.

Foucault’s panopticon has since been developed by Mathiesen (1997), who argues that a synoptic model is an equally important method of control – that there is an important gaze on images and ideas in mass media by individuals that serves as an example of cultural norms to replicate. Mathiesen’s development of Foucault also points towards the increasing importance of globalised structures, that subjectivity is not just produced at the national or local levels, but increasingly on a global scale. Bauman (1998) suggests that, in light of globalisation, the panopticon risks becoming an increasingly obsolete metaphor for societal control, as it relies too heavily on the local. However, he argues that globalisation both exposes and strengthens the panopticon, both revealing the possibilities of differing and oppositional structures, while extending the reach of the panoptical gaze. As space seemingly decreases, ideologies overlap and intersect, both destabilising and cultivating their potentialities. As Steger and James (2011) point out, subjectivation is not merely dialogical between subject and structure, but increasingly a “polylogue” between other national and larger globalist ideologies.

However, the interplay between nation-states and national ideologies is not a level playing field, but is shaped by uneven power relations between nations, particularly US imperialism, which over the 20th century is increasingly culturally visible. Writing in 1992, Kuehnast argued that, with entertainment being the USA's second biggest export (as of 2009 this was still the case (Webb, 2009)), the USA's dominance of culture internationally can be characterised as "visual imperialism" (Kuehnast, 1992). This is particularly relevant in English-speaking countries more recently, considering the market dominance of US television and movies on online platforms, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. The implications of the globalisation of subjectivities, and the ways in which subjectivity interacts with structures and ideologies will be threaded through the remainder of this literature review and thesis, and play a particularly important part in the development of my methodology.

2.2 Femininities

Reviewing femininity as a concept presents some challenges, not least its oft semi-unspoken status in much feminist literature – though, in recent years, an emerging field of "critical femininities" and "femme theory" literature has begun to appear (see Hoskin, 2018). This section is split into two parts – first I look at the relationship between femininity and the body, before I explore how such definitions have been diversified to look at the internal power relations of differing femininities.

2.2.1 Femininity and the (feminine) body

From psychoanalysis through to phenomenology, femininity has frequently been essentialised via an attachment to the female body. For example, Lacan argued that gender is not simply located in biology, but defined by the phallus as a central signifier (Lacan, 1985). While masculinity for Lacan is an attempt to prove ownership of the phallus stemming from fear of castration, femininity, in attempting to cover for the lack of owning one, is an attempt to *become* the phallus, and so is literally a masquerade or performance, adorning the female body for the pleasure of a male gaze (Lacan, 1985). Here, the unclear definition of the phallus as either symbolic or physical makes sexed subjectivity at least contingent on the body, whether symbolically or corporeally (Moi, 2004: 856), making it hard to distinguish between femininity and womanhood. So while Lacan accounts for the construction of sexed subjectivity, "questions of social structure and large-scale dynamics are often very remote" (Connell, 1994: 34). Similarly, Joan Riviere argues femininity should be seen as a masquerade (Riviere, 1929), documenting three female patients who adopt a demure feminine demeanour in order to seem unthreatening to male colleagues. While Riviere analyses the function of a feminine performance here, she, like Lacan, lacks a social critique.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2010 [1949]) moved away from essentialising the feminine body towards an account of embodiment, problematising "woman" from the beginning with her maxim, "one is not born a woman, but becomes one". Womanhood for her is not just biological but involves the coincidence of a female body with the bodily experience of femininity, which is experienced as otherness. To experience femininity is to experience life as the other against which men are defined, which for her is the reality of womanhood. So, *The Second Sex* should not be read as an empirical study on the exact nature of women's subordination but viewed as an exploration of the lived reality of gender difference. This reality is contextually constituted, suggesting that liberation must be achieved on a woman's terms, grounding a feminist politics on a universal feminine experience.

Building on the notion that a politics should take the feminine experience as its foundation, Hélène Cixous argues that it is inherently subversive. Through her concept of "écriture féminine", she argues that the very act of speaking or articulating female experience, in voicing otherness, challenges the ground upon which that otherness is justified: "by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been confiscated from her" (Cixous, 1976: 880). Feminine embodiment lends itself here to the articulation of a political truth, through which ownership of the female body may be reclaimed. Kristeva similarly argues that the feminine contains elements of subversion. She defines two realms of meaning: the semiotic, in which meaning is fluid and interpretively centred, and the symbolic, in which meaning is made more rigid and well-defined. The latter for her is related to masculinity, adulthood, and modernity, while the feminine, child-centred semiotic realm presents the opportunity for subversion, as it "is pre-patriarchal and therefore offers the potential for a psychical experience that is free of the cultural restrictions that patriarchy imposes" (Hauke, 2000: 126). The language of the semiotic must deny the rigidity of the symbolic, which for Kristeva involves poeticising language to "no longer act as instinctual floodgates ... and become instead protesters against its posturing" (Kristeva in Moi, 1986: 112). However, like Cixous, Kristeva's definition of the semiotic relies on a pre-existing gender binary; Butler observes that a subversive language of the feminine essentially relies on the existence of the feminine before language creates it (Butler, 1990: 107-127). Becoming a woman seems only possible from the starting point of a pre-existing female body, making the experience of femininity contingent on that which it subsequently defines.

Iris Marion Young, following Merleau-Ponty, views consciousness as embodied, that "the body as lived is always layered with social and historical meaning and is not some primitive matter prior to or underlying economic and political relations or cultural meanings" (Young, 2005: 7). Young embeds bodily experience in the social world, arguing that femininity is enacted through rather than determined by the body. This enactment is exemplified by certain feminine modalities of moving through space, characterised by inhibitions about full bodily movement and a discomfort in the female body. Her point is not that certain types of movement define femininity, but that the social milieu in which we are embedded commits women in general to a certain modality of movement, that she does *not* think

“phenomenology can discover a ‘pure’ embodied experience prior to ideology and science” (Young, 2005: 8).

Sandra Bartky (1998) develops a social or structural exploration of this phenomenological approach, relating feminine embodiment to Foucauldian biopower and discipline. In section 2.1 on page 16, I looked at Foucault’s concept of biopower, in which the body is required to occupy certain spaces, adopt certain positions in relation to those spaces, and to perform or articulate social gestures or movements (Foucault, 1991). Bartky argues that femininity can be characterised as a bodily discipline that internalises patriarchal power: for example, “dieting disciplines the body’s hungers ... feminine faces, as well as bodies, are trained the expression of deference ... a woman’s skin must be soft, supple, hairless and smooth” (Bartky, 1998: 28, 30, 31). Eventually, a woman’s body on its own is not enough, such that a “woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other” (Bartky, 1998: 34). However, Bartky’s account has some problems: she seems most interested in women’s bodies, assuming the body precedes the internalisation of patriarchal power. Furthermore, although there is a level of construction going on, she lacks an explanation for this particular set of bodily disciplines, indicating a need to examine how patriarchal subjectivation affects women’s bodies, but how it forms them. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for looking at femininity as a discipline of embodiment, and as something that is actively “done” rather than a property.

The feminine body has been characterised by most authors so far as the object of a gaze by a more powerful masculine or male other. Such critiques have often contributed to feminisms that are critical of femininity and of women perceived act in a feminine way. Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1990), for example, derides what she saw in 1990 as a return to popularity of typically feminine beauty regimes. Susan Brownmiller argues similarly: although prefacing her point by asserting she does not “mean to condemn those women who practice the craft in ways that are different from mine” (Brownmiller, 1984: 19), she nevertheless goes on to conclude, “the fear of not being feminine enough, in style or spirit, has been used as a sledgehammer against the collective and individual aspirations of women” (Brownmiller, 1984: 235). Even though these critiques are imperfect, often folding into an essentialism that takes the existence of the body to precede gendered discourses and structures, certain modalities of feminine embodiment do seem geared towards the subjugation of women. A more interesting question is how the body is created as a political construct, in constitution with the subject, discourse, and structure, rather than how structures respond to the pre-existing body.

2.2.2 *Multiple femininities*

Pluralising femininity to femininities allows for analysis of internal power relations between femininities, and for how femininities differ geographically, culturally, and temporally. Pluralisation can also de-essentialise but still maintain the relationship between femininity and the body. Building on

insights ranging from Lacan to Kristeva to Foucault, Judith Butler (1990) developed the concept of gender performativity, suggesting that gender is done or performed rather than a property of existence. Performativity theory conceives of gender as a series of repeated doings that congeal into something recognisable as male or female after the fact (Butler, 1990). Various sociological theories have long asserted that we perform social roles (see, for example, Goffman, 1959), while both of Kessler and McKenna (1978) and West and Zimmerman (1987) extended this analysis to gender several years before Butler. However, Butler arguably some unique contributions to performative theories of gender. While Kessler and McKenna place a theory of doing gender in wider social, political, and cultural discourses that imbricate sexuality, Butler sees the body itself as constructed and gendered from inception. This is not to deny the materiality of the physical body, but to indicate that what we discursively understand as the 'body' is a gendered construct. For Butler, discourses on femininity and masculinity are the starting points of gender, their fluctuating and arbitrary content defining the body, sex, gender and sexuality.

In terms of feminist politics, then, performativity seems to endorse political antinormativity, such that parodic or nonconventional displays of gender constitute some form of resistance. Martin argues that this reveals performativity to be underpinned by similar anti-feminine politics as Brownmiller and Wolf above, as “emphases on antinormative display enjoin us to be different from conventional norms of femininity by defiantly cross-dressing” (Martin, 1994: 119). As such, conceiving of femininity as performative risks fixing the seemingly arbitrary qualitative content of that performative act to an ephemeral definition of femininity. However, this does not need to be a problem, necessarily, for definitional work; it is possible to reconceive this fixing as a way of addressing the illusion of fixity that characterises normative gender performances. Because dominant conceptions of gender and gender performances attach themselves to configurations of practices, a performative conception of femininity might be an effective way of approaching this precise relationship.

What this requires is an approach that perceives of femininities in the plural, because one of the problems of essentialising features of gender is that it cannot look beyond the particularities of different feminine performances as embedded in different contexts. A large amount of the empirical literature explored thus far has been based on methodologies that generalise from white, middle-class, heterosexual women and womanhood, where non-white, working-class or LGBTQI+ femininities are usually devalued in comparison. To draw out such power relations between femininities, Connell (2005b) produces the concept of “emphasised femininity”, which does not so much confer structural power as represent the most “successful” forms of femininity as far as they internalise misogyny and sexist norms. Schippers, however, suggests there is “an ascendancy of hegemonic femininity over other femininities to serve the interests of the gender order and male domination” (Schippers, 2007: 94), pointing out that certain forms of femininity increasingly confer some power. Such power, though, is heavily qualified, as femininity is consistently and effectively defined as othered against masculinity.

Femininity, then, is not simply about gender, but also about race, class, and sexuality. Intersectionality is often considered the main approach for addressing the co-construction of structures, vulnerabilities, and identities. Developed in large part by Crenshaw (1991) for political purposes, intersectionality is often interpreted in different ways, and its use can be contentious. I am most interested in how different structures intersect to produce historically and genealogically specific forms of vulnerability. So, femininity is not enough on its own, as what we understand as femininity is imbued with long histories of heteropatriarchies, capitalisms, and white supremacies. Bell hooks, for example, though not explicitly using an intersectional framework, shows how black women and black femininities are constructed as other (hooks, 1981). Exploring cultural portrayals of femininity, hooks shows how black femininities are portrayed as masculinised and insufficiently demure, thereby marking black women out as unfeminine. Masculinised black femininities in movies, for example, frequently interfere with emphasised white femininities, constructing “stereotypically racist, sexist conflicts between white women and black women” (hooks, 1996: 68-69).

Similarly, the pathologisation of non-heterosexualities can be seen in Monique Wittig’s rhetorical suggestion that “a lesbian is not a woman”, examining how womanhood is constructed as heterosexual, such that to be a lesbian is to disavow womanhood (Wittig, 2013 [1981]). Adrienne Rich (1980), meanwhile, developed the concept of “compulsory heterosexuality”, arguing that the institution of heterosexuality is in need of constant reinforcement. She points to advice pamphlets from the 1950s that reassert the need for women to submit to their husbands and argues that compulsory heterosexuality underpins patriarchy. Gayle Rubin (1975), as well as Rich and Wittig, influenced the development of the concept of “heteronormativity”, to describe the institution of heterosexuality as the normal expression of sexuality. Heterosexuality here becomes the “correct” way of being feminine, such that lesbianism is marked out by masculinised and pathologised stereotypes.

In terms of how femininity is constructed in more structural terms in relation to class, contemporary forms of femininity can be argued to have emerged concurrently with contemporary forms of capitalism. Engels, for example, argued that the institution of the bourgeois nuclear family was a necessary precondition for the development of 19th century capitalism (Engels, 2000 [1884]), as the fast accrual of capital was built on unpaid domestic labour. While Engels was primarily concerned with women rather than with the construction of femininity itself (on top of the fact that women were hardly absent from paid manual labour throughout the 19th century), it is not untrue that certain forms of labour, because of the social roles often played by women, are often marked as feminine. Delphy (1984), for example, points out that capitalism relies on reproductive labour, and that Marxist theory needs to integrate an analysis of the role of unpaid domestic labour to better critique capitalism. Emotional and aesthetic labour might also be considered feminine forms of work. Pettinger (2005), for example, draws on participant observation and interviews to argue that the deferent nature of feminine performance, particularly as performed through the body (echoing the phenomenologically influenced

analyses in the previous section), makes femininity and feminine performativity valuable social capital in service work. Morini (2007) makes a similar argument, positing that changes in capitalism have led to a feminisation of workplaces. Similarly, the concept of affective labour from Marxist-feminist scholarship describes the labour performed in care and kinship (see Delphy, 1984; Ferguson, 1989). Hardt (1999) argues that the emotional investment required of affective labour links it back to feminised notions of domestic labour, such that more contemporary jobs that require forms of affective labour indicate a shift in capitalist relations

Indeed, the idea of care and kinship as a form of feminist labour is prominent in literature on femininity, such that the “ethic of care” is a notion put forward by several feminist theorists to explore how moral development is gendered. Gilligan found that, in making moral decisions, the women she interviewed framed moral deliberation in terms of the relationship between a feeling of selfishness and care for others, which they articulated through the concept of responsibility (Gilligan, 1982). As this dichotomy was worked through, Gilligan found that the conclusion involved the formation of an ethic of care that construes the self and other as interdependent, and involves a responsibility that sees a care for the self as a necessary contingent of an ethic of care for the other. The need for this notion of self-care, articulated as a form of maternal feeling, derives from a sense of powerlessness: “the self ... is constrained by a lack of power that stems from feeling disconnected and thus, in effect, all alone” (Gilligan, 1982: 75). While the ethic of care has been critiqued heavily for essentialism, with accusations that it often lacks a social critique of how such an ethic comes about beyond biological instinct (Hoagland, 1991; Spelman, 1988), such social critique is not beyond the scope of such theories.

2.3 Men

Men, within both academia and the everyday, are often simultaneously presented as unmarked and genderless, as well as explicitly gendered (Carver, 2004). Increasingly scholars have questioned this, critically examining the ways in which men and masculinities are constructed.

2.3.1 Critical studies on men and masculinities

It would be remiss, as Connell (1994) notes, to ignore the ways in which Freud and others began questioning the inherent qualities of gender and sexuality to enable contemporary critique (Freud, 1997 [1900]). For example, Adler combined psychoanalytic insights with a Marxist social critique to argue that children occupy a feminine subject position, defined in “significant traits of obedience, submission, and devoted love toward the father” (Adler, 1964: 47). In response, the child performs a dual role, showing submission to the father and striving for independence. As a result, the external actions of the child steadily become an overcompensated masculinity, that “intensifies all abilities and egotistical

drives, increases envy, avarice, and ambition, and brings out an inner restlessness which makes an external compulsion, lack of satisfaction, disparagement and injury unbearable” (Adler, 1964: 48), prefiguring contemporary profeminist critiques.

Psychoanalysis received renewed attention from feminist theorists in the 1980s, with so-called “object relations” theories from Chodorow (1988), and Eichenbaum and Orbach (2000). These authors argue that, with the mother identified by a young boy as the primary caregiver, masculinity is produced in contrast to the femininity that he identifies in the mother: generally, “the boy’s sense of self thus becomes bound up with his sexual identity, and masculinity is constructed against femininity in a separation generated and sexualised by the mother” (Craib, 1987: 740). As a result, young boys are forced to wrestle with a cultural stereotype of manhood rather than something concrete, which situates a psychoanalytic account more structurally. This allows for the consideration of masculinity as a variable among others, but still risks generalising from one culture, taking masculinity to be congruent with an immutably male-born body, and also focussing on a reified concept of masculinity at the expense of ignoring men’s practices.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Anglophone academics started to call into question men and masculinity, pointing out that naming men as the unmarked gender hides the fact that unmarkedness is a construction. Out of this critique developed, if not a coherent literature, then at least a cluster of researchers, theories, and outputs broadly consisting of critical studies on men and masculinities. For example, Connell asserts that the concept of multiple masculinities is a valuable tool for critiquing men, situated within a set of fluid and historically contingent gender relations (Connell, 2005b: 67-88). Here, masculinities occupy two different roles in relation to gender, as a psychological element of individual personality, as well as the product of gender relations themselves. As such, the masculine subject is created as the endpoint of a set of gender relations to ensure the maintenance of patriarchy. Critiquing men and masculinities, for Connell, looks at neither one of these conceptions alone, but the interplay between men and masculinities as both cause and effect of patriarchy.

There are two main lines of criticism of the concept of masculinities. First, that it is in danger of collapsing essentialism: Morgan (1992) suggests that studying masculinities risks collapsing men and masculinities into the same thing. When empirical studies of masculinities take data from the actions and words of men, it is sometimes unclear whether masculinity constructs or is constructed by gender. Conversely, the second critique suggests that abstracting masculinities from the material actions of men risks the abandonment of a normative profeminist ethics, a critique made by authors such as Hearn (2006), McMahon (1993), O’Neill (2015), and Schwalbe (2014). Studying masculinities has the potential to be a political dead-end, ignoring the material realities of men’s dominance, as it is demonstrably white middle-class men who are, and have historically been, the beneficiaries of

patriarchy. Neither of these two problems are inherent to the study of men and masculinities, but serve as a reminder to tailor a methodology towards critique and towards men.

Hegemonic masculinity has been a similarly critiqued theory that is also an important model for analysing relations between men, and how masculinity is partly sustained by the exclusion and inclusion of certain men. Connell embeds hegemonic masculinity in a patriarchal context, positing it not just to explore relations between men, but also between men and women, describing it as: “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of patriarchy” (Connell, 2005b: 77). Connell herself has acknowledged some of the critiques of the concept (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), while Hearn suggests it is often unclear, asking “are we talking about cultural representations, everyday practices, or institutional structures?” (Hearn, 2006: 44). If hegemonic masculinity refers to an ideal norm, then it necessarily conflicts with the idea that it might refer to a form of contextually dominant masculinity, as ideal norms do not reflect the everyday – and in terms of men, have been shown to be too contradictory to be lived anyway (Donaldson, 1993).

Demetriou suggests hegemonic masculinity refer exclusively to an ideal norm, “a hybrid bloc that incorporates diverse and apparently oppositional elements” (Demetriou, 2001: 349), and a fluid and historically grounded normative subject position against which power is granted and enacted. Though Demetriou’s historicisation clearly defines it, it endangers the political successes of the observations of dominance of certain masculine practices by potentially ignoring men’s material dominance. This is not to say that such a definition of hegemonic masculinity is at odds with a different way of describing the effects of hegemonic masculinity, but it must give those effects a different name. Descriptions of men’s acts need to be analytically separate from the norms that underpin those acts. Though I will not be using hegemonic masculinity as a key part of my theoretical framework, I will be using it often as a lens through which to analyse certain concepts and ideas.

Authors including Herek (1986) and Kimmel (1994) have noted how being gay is constructed in opposition to dominant heterosexual forms of masculinity, that to “be a man” it is necessary (though, importantly, not sufficient) to be homophobic. Although such a view risks erasure of masculine gay men, it accounts for the ways in which gay men’s masculinities are feminised and thereby relegated to marginalised positions. Indeed, queer theorists have previously shown how gay masculinities are constructed as marginalised from the beginning (see, for example, D’Emilio, 1995). Under Connell’s model, gay men’s interactions with masculinity are more complex, such that “they face *structurally-induced conflicts* about masculinity - conflicts between their sexuality and their social presence as men, about the meaning of their choice of sexual object, and in their construction of relationships with women and with heterosexual men” (Connell, 1992: 737). Men’s sexualities are therefore important in at least two instances: in the ways that othered sexualities construct dominant heterosexual masculinities, and as lived experiences that tell us how gender more generally functions.

Various racialised masculinities are also constructed in ways that marginalise or subordinate them. A form of feminisation is common here – Asian masculinities are frequently constructed as weak, effeminate, and asexual in relation to white masculinities, often in cultural representations (Dhingra, 2012), but also frequently articulated as life experience for those of Asian descent in the UK (Kang, 1997; Park, 2013). Conversely, black masculinities tend to be marginalised through being portrayed as having an excess of masculinity (Baker & Levon, 2016), drawn from colonial narratives depicting black men as uncontrollable and savage (Collins, 2005; Ferber, 2007). There is a growing literature on the ways in which whiteness and white people appropriate conceptions of blackness and other non-white racial minorities. Johnson (2003) explores how appropriations of African-American culture not only rely on specific, racialised and post-colonial images of race, but also culturally prescribe those images, fixing and reinforcing post-colonial narratives. Class and capitalism more broadly also play key roles in defining the limits of masculinity. It is certainly true that the idea of working-class masculinity conjures up a certain type of man, but it is also via capitalism that, to some extent, both class and gender are constructed. For the constant accumulation of capital to reach its full potential, capitalism is built on certain institutions, of which the heterosexual nuclear family is arguably an important one. This analysis can be convincingly extended further, that capitalism relies on masculinity and femininity more generally.

Morgan (1992) has written about how men construct their identities in reference to the labour they perform. He explores how men's abilities in industry to do "heavy work", and how this physical attribute "sorts out the men from the boys" (D. H. J. Morgan, 1992: 84) defines in such contexts what makes a man. Morgan also points out, however, that the category of "heavy work" may not be a marker of successful manhood in every context. Within the factory, Morgan observes that many of the men in senior positions still pride themselves on the ability to do heavy work, but mark out their superiority by derogatively labelling the heavier work of those below them "donkey work". Thus we "find the distinction between donkey work/scientific work associated with a distinction between the controlled and the controller" (D. H. J. Morgan, 1992: 84-85). Even within the one environment, there has been a hierarchy constructed, in which the markers of masculinity on a man's body are regarded as differently valued in different overlapping contexts.

Much research, for example, has gone into examining how the shift in recent years away from manual labour has affected and impacted men in post-industrial areas. Pettinger (2005), for example, argues that service work entails forms of labour that are constructed by young men who do such work in specifically gendered, feminised ways. Similarly, Nixon (2009), found that young men developed

various techniques for negotiating their gender in front-line service work that required high degrees of emotional labour, which the participants found anathema to their identities².

Masculinity here is also contextually dependent on geographical difference, as explored in a body of literature interested in the relation between masculinity and place. This relationship can be and has been explored in a number of ways, and Berg and Longhurst (2003) examine the development of such studies from early critiques of the androcentrism of geography through to men and urban geography (Bell, 2009; Srivasta, 2010) and the geography of employment (McDowell, 2003; Nixon, 2009), and to postcolonial geography too. Much contemporary research is interested in the transnational nature of masculinities, not just by looking at different countries, but how men and masculinities more generally are informed by transnational discursive formations. Indeed, my thesis explores this to some extent by examining the interaction of US sitcoms with men in the UK. However, my approach to masculinity and place is primarily interested in how the urban and the rural interact with the formation of masculinities, an area that has been explored to some extent, particularly in relation to how labour is performed and conceived in the city and in rural areas. For example, (2011) Stenbacka explored how Swedish television uses urban/rural differences to construct rural masculinities as backward, while Bye (2009) found that young rural men constructed their masculinity in relation to images of manual labour and physical strength in comparison to the physical smallness of men in the city. Pini and Mayes (2014), meanwhile, examine how rural masculinity can explicitly incorporate “metropolitan” discourses, thereby retaining a discursive separation. However, they also point out that although such differences are constructed, both urban and rural masculinities lean heavily on heterosexist constructions. Attempting to perhaps move beyond this binary, Roberts (2018) argues that together with research into new men, including hipsters (Gilson, 2016; Henke, 2013), metrosexuals (Coad, 2008; M. Hall, 2014), and spornosexuals³ (Hakim, 2016), literature on masculinities tends to ignore the construction of masculinities in what might be seen as provincial former market towns, mostly in the south of England, neither post-industrial, nor with the culture of big cities.

2.3.2 “Post”-ing men

Much of the literature explored so far is concerned with either gendered structures, theoretical gendered subject positions, or specific experiences of lived gender, leaving a gap between masculine normativity and the patriarchal structures that normativity upholds, and the process by which those structures interact with the complexity of individual male psychology to produce something structurally

² Much of this will be examined in more detail in section 2.5 on page 34.

³ Again, for definitions of these terms, see the glossary in appendix 5.

congruent. Saco (1992) has suggested taking leave from semiotics, and theorising masculinity as signs, following de Saussure (2013 [1916]). Signs are constructed through difference, by what they are not as well as what they are, so that a sign only has meaning when situated within a full field of other signs. So, because the content of a sign is arbitrary, moving it into an alternative context might produce a different meaning. As a result, semiotic approaches reject the idea of inherent meaning. In terms of gender, Saco argues that “gender differences are symbolic categories for ascribing subjectivities onto human beings. When we say that someone is ‘masculine’, we are claiming something about that human being as a subject” (Saco, 1992: 25). She points out that in our understanding of gender in the everyday, we use individual competencies to read people’s appearances, and infer features of their biology from this. Therefore, such an approach locates the substantive meanings of gender at least partly in the capacity or subjectivity of the individual: we read and understand masculinity from (re)presentations of gender in culture.

This view bridges the gap between the material world of patriarchy and the successful function of hegemonic masculinity, showing how the latter is weaponised for the continuation of the former. It also allows for the shifting definition of masculinity over time and space, simultaneously locating from where researchers might read and understand gender, accounting for the fact of the arbitrary content of masculinity over that time and space, allowing a critique of men to embed analyses within specific contexts. However, it lacks, in and of itself, a sound account of why gender might be constructed in a particular way.

If multiple masculinities, as signs, form competing manhoods as normative subject positions, of which men are the incomplete material reification, there is a rift between men and masculinity in the everyday. If manhoods are self-contradictory, how do we know what a man is? Performativity describes how gender becomes intelligible through a continually repeated performance of certain acts, such that performance precedes, and indeed forms, a discursive identity, rather than being the result of an already-stable one (Butler, 1990). This sort of account relies on a normative concept of “what it is to be a man”, but also notes the fundamental impossibility of living this norm in the everyday. The images that create and perpetuate an ideal image of manhood are abundant with a range of masculine signs, which often are not even congruent with one another. If one wants to be recognised within a certain context as male, it involves a complex negotiation of signs, norms and bodily performance that is unique to each man.

2.4 Gendered capitalisms and neoliberal patriarchies

As a structural explanation, much work on patriarchy “has sought a clear and critical engagement with Marxism, dialectical and historical materialism, and structuralism” (Hearn, 2009: 179), an

engagement explored in this section looking at the often contradictory structural intersections between patriarchy and neoliberalism (see also Connell, 1998).

2.4.1 Patriarchy/ies

Patriarchy as a concept has been subject to some recent re-examination (see B. Campbell, 2014; James, 2015; Ortner, 2014; Patil, 2013; Pease, 2000). As with the majority of structural analyses, there is a danger of dehistoricising patriarchy so as to present it as inevitable, the root cause of a monolith of women's oppression and the dominance of men (see Rowbotham, Alexander, & Taylor, 2006). Millett (1971) describes patriarchy as "the rule of men", and considers it the primary form of oppression. Similarly, Firestone grounds patriarchy in men's and women's different biologies, which combined with a capitalist system to create a political necessity for "the elimination of the sexual classes" (Firestone, 1979). Despite viewing capitalism as historically contingent, she does not extend the same ontology to patriarchy. Additionally, patriarchy has also been subject to critique by critical race and intersectionality theorists; Mohanty (1988) points out that patriarchy risks assuming a conception of men and women prior to their entering the social world, assuming a universal female experience from the experiences of white women. If the problem with the concept of patriarchy, then, has been a tendency (though certainly not universal) towards biological essentialism, how might this be overcome? Connell (1997 [1994]) uses the concept of the patriarchal dividend to try to iron out some of these internal contradictions – though not all men are hegemonically masculine, all men benefit to differing extents from patriarchy. The patriarchal dividend addresses some of the internal inconsistencies of patriarchy, as well as allowing for intersections within it, as it is evident that the same man in a different context will receive a different dividend.

Hearn argues that a conceptual move from patriarchy to patriarchies allows us to conceive not only of patriarchies, but trans(national)patriarchies, particularly considering globalisation and intersectionality, where confining systemic description to individual nations of societies will not really do anymore. Transpatriarchies allow us "to raise questions of the intersections of gender relations with *inter alia* citizenship, nationality, ethnicity, racialisation, locality and spatiality, identity, and religion" (Hearn, 2009: 183-184). Patriarchy, like capitalism, is not stable; both are historically embedded, dynamic and subject to change, particularly as they respond to each other. As discussed, Engels was interested in the creation of the nuclear family as a notable development in early industrial capitalism (Engels, 2000 [1884]). However, Hartmann points out that "the partnership of patriarchy and capital was not inevitable; men and capitalists often have conflicting interests, particularly over the use of women's labour power" (Hartmann, 1979: 75). However, Walby (1990) also notes that the two systems have been made amenable to each other quite effectively, for example in the separation of reproductive and domestic labour in one sphere from productive labour in the other.

Various studies have historicised this. Gayle Rubin develops a political economy of gender through a critique of Marxism (Rubin, 1975), arguing that within a capitalist system of exchange, kinship networks subjugated women to objects of exchange among capitalist men: “if women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners” (Rubin, 1975: 174). In this model of the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, “the result of a gift of women is more profound than the result of other gift transactions, because the relationship thus established is not just one of reciprocity, but one of kinship” (Rubin, 1975: 173), ensuring one family’s capital has space in which to expand. Similarly, Mary Murray explores how patriarchy evolved to adapt to the transition between feudalism and capitalism, arguing that while, in feudal society, “property became a right to objects or commodities ... in capitalist society property invokes rights of legal individuals to exclude others” (Murray, 1995: 128), extending the logic of capitalist economy into the cultural sphere. As such, where feudal patriarchies effectively excluded women from the polity, capitalist patriarchies created a more explicit exclusion from citizenship, denying women the right to capitalist freedoms. From this perspective, the Rubin view of women-as-property anachronistically projects a capitalist conception of property onto feudal relations.

2.4.2 Neoliberalism(s)

Though there are multiple formulations of contemporary capitalism, such as the descriptors “late” (Jameson, 1984), “cognitive” (Boutang, 2011), “knowing” (Thrift, 2005), and “liquid” (Bauman, 2000), perhaps the most thoroughly researched is neoliberalism. Economically, neoliberalism refers to a set of free-market policies, or stage of 21st century capitalism characterised by deregulated markets, the privatisation of key industries, the attrition of trade union power and the introduction of private finance and business culture into government.. Inspired by philosophers such as Hayek (1996) and Friedman (2002), and on the back of the elections of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US, the 1980s saw this new economic consensus become hegemonic (Yergin & Stanislaw, 1998). However, in this thesis, I am more interested in neoliberal culture than policy or economics, even while these are intrinsically linked. Capitalism, as we have seen, has long regulated culture, figuring the family (Engels, 2000 [1884]) and delineating gender norms (Delphy, 1984; Rubin, 1975). However, neoliberalism arguably marks out a new relationship between capital and culture, in which the logic of capitalism has become the logic of cultural production. There are several material effects here, including the advent of new modes of production, as well as a ubiquitous neoliberal philosophy of individualism, a specific type of popular culture, and the inculcation of a neoliberal subjectivity. First, though, it is worth reflecting on neoliberalism both as a concept and as hegemonic ideology.

There are various models of ideology available, and in section 2.1 on page 17, I discussed a notion of ideology which I employ throughout the thesis. Broadly speaking, I consider ideology to be

less a set of beliefs or ideas, and more a paradigm for the structures of the social world. Ideology – here, neoliberalism – is readable in this sense in the way that it is immanent in institutions, subjectivities, discourses, and sensibilities. It is important here to say that hegemony does not imply inevitability or that everything is always neoliberal, but that at the moment of hegemony, ideology is legible almost everywhere even where it is resisted (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) – need example. Any such conception in which neoliberalism, or any ideology, is all-encompassing would be both politically and analytically useless, as has been pointed out by various authors (Flew, 2014; Venugopal, 2015). This is not to say that resistance is easy, but the very fact that neoliberalism is a relatively new hegemony is evidence of the contingency of any ideology. There are, too, other conceptions of contemporary capitalism worth thinking about, as listed at the beginning of this section. As I expand on in section 10.1.3 on page 203, though, I opt for neoliberalism here partly for its already-existing literature on neoliberal culture, neoliberal gender, and neoliberal subjectivity, and the way these elements have already been related to material conditions.

In a neoliberal era, immaterial labour (affective, aesthetic and emotional labour) and immaterial commodities (such as lifestyles or ideas) are implicated in market relations. Describing this as cognitive capitalism, Boutang points out that it “in no sense eliminates the world of material industrial production ... rather it rearranges it, reorganises it and alters the positioning of its nerve centres” (Boutang, 2011: 48). Meanwhile, Lazzaroto (2006) points out a new importance given to immaterial forms of labour that are not necessarily geared towards a product, but to affective relationships with non-physical products. Bauman argues that resultantly “power has become truly *exterritorial*, no longer bound, not even slowed down, by the resistance of space” (Bauman, 2000: 11). As such, power under neoliberalism is more dispersed and individualised than under other forms of capitalism.

Individualism is a well-contested concept, with a range of different meanings. Lukes (1973) charts some of these uses of individualism, ranging from notions of autonomy in which individuals are conceived as free choosers without constraints, to notions of self-development and self-improvement, concepts of abstract individuals who all have unique sets of wants and desires, through to political and economic individualisms that view society as an aggregate of abstract individuals making rational and profit-maximising choices. Eagleton-Pierce (2016) outlines how neoliberalism fits into a wider genealogy of individualism. First, he argues that neoliberalism conceives of economics as a “science of choice”, like Lukes’ abstract individual, who makes rational choices to maximise material wealth. Second, it views individuals fundamentally as consumers, to the extent that education, healthcare, and even voting, inculcates business vernacular about demographics, targeting and rational trade-offs. Third, it strengthens the individual against the collective, threatening the notion of collective bargaining. And, last, neoliberalism transforms collective emancipatory movements, such as feminism, the labour movement, and the civil rights movements, into struggles of individual emancipation. One can think of postfeminist sensibility here, in which political action consists of individual successes rather than

collective liberations – neoliberalism appeals to “desires for independence and freedom in different social spaces, but translate[s] such desires into the so-called ‘flexible subject’ who explore and nurtures ‘networks’ and ‘projects’ for their own self-worth” (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016: 8).

Eagleton-Pierce here touches upon a conception of subjectivity that differs from the “homo economicus” of classical and neo-classical economics. Again, various theories of neoliberal subjectivity abound. Lemke, drawing on Foucault, says the neoliberal subject is not an employee reliant on a bigger company or organisation for a living, but “the entrepreneurs of themselves” (Lemke, 2001: 199). Han (2017) argues that this means neoliberal subjectivity is defined, rather than by biopolitics and the control of bodies, by psychopolitics or the control of a certain mindset instead, which he argues is a more embedded and effective process of sustaining power. This follows from Foucault’s concepts of discipline and punishment; increasingly, the neoliberal subject performs self-discipline to the extent that survival is made entirely about the individual, entirely reliant on personal responsibility at the expense of any structural critique. Wendy Brown expands on this, describing the neoliberal subject as achieving an “entrepreneurial rationality” (Brown, 2006). Such radical responsibility for the self, McGuigan (2013, 2014) argues, is key to understanding the neoliberal subject, and is present in much popular culture. Partly as a result of the logic of neoliberal capitalism, McGuigan argues the neoliberal subject adopts a “cool” posture, reflecting a neoliberalised individualised philosophy that does not care about cultural norms or outside influences. This “cool-capitalist” subject, as McGuigan labels it, therefore claims a set of political values that performatively reject cultural or subcultural labels by asserting the primacy of self-determination. So, what looks on the surface subversive is, for McGuigan, not just fully continuous with, but necessary to, neoliberal subjectivity.

Harris (2017) argues that such atomisation is partly a result of the transformation of labour, from the stability of the post-war consensus, in which the state was seen as broadly responsible for ensuring employment, to an increasing precarisation of a workforce in freelance work, frontline service work, and zero-hours contracts, producing big materially different circumstances between generations (see also Graeber, 2018). With a required increase in competencies of reflexivity and adaptability, the neoliberal subject performs more affective labour than their predecessor, a process often described as a move away from manual labour to the “feminisation of labour” (Morini, 2007; Power, 2009), thanks to the gendered implications of domestic labour discussed in section 2.2.2. The consumer identity of the neoliberal subject, arguably, therefore, echoes the feminine subject. So, what defines gender relations in the neoliberal era?

2.4.3 Neoliberal patriarchy?

Neoliberalism might represent a break with previous forms of capitalism, then, but that is not to say that it challenges or upsets existing inequalities. Rather, despite constructing a subjectivity that

adopts a more politically progressive posture, neoliberalism has not overseen a structural change in terms of gender, race, or class, but rather a reformulation of these inequalities, in which individual achievement is articulated as collective liberation (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; Ortner, 2014). Through its individualist ontology, it often symbolises progress while leaving oppressive structures intact. Gilroy (2013), for example, argues that the election of Barack Obama as US President is emblematic of a neoliberal era in which US nationalism appears racially pluralised, despite the barely challenged structural material disadvantages for African-Americans. Indeed, I have also already discussed how Harris (2017) points out that neoliberalism, rather than challenging the class system, reorganises its nodal points around generational difference. So, such authorisation obscures rather than resolves inequalities, rendering it largely cosmetic.

Gill (2007) argues that the ideal neoliberal subject is gendered female because of the previous association of such labour acts with womanhood. Gill's argument is situated within a larger set of literature that explores the feminisation of labour, and particularly how this feminisation has affected men. Feminisation, the crux of the literature seems to posit, is the process that occurs when the blurring of productive labour with other forms take place, such that "women are more appreciated precisely because of the qualitative/adaptive characteristics they are assumed to guarantee" (Morini, 2007: 57). Some of the characteristics referenced in the literature include adaptability, reflexivity, flexibility (Coyle, 2005), aesthetic presentation (Pettinger, 2005), and emotional investment (Nickson & Korczynski, 2009).

Gill frames this argument via postfeminism, an analytical concept which contains a number of competing definitions, but largely argues contemporary gender relations are defined by a sensibility that embraces feminist achievements, but rejects feminist politics (R. Gill, 2007), and which is also heavily imbricated in a neoliberal context (R. Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2015). Studies on postfeminism have found, for example, new versions of femininity that exalt an individualist brand of feminism in which emphasised femininity is found in economic success for individual women, rather than (and often at the expense of) structural advancements for women (Adamson, 2016; R. Gill & Scharff, 2011; Lazar, 2009). However, postfeminism is perhaps best seen as a sensibility, rather than a structure or episteme – postfeminist patriarchy might be a way of viewing this, and requires further attention as an idea, but other ideas have been forthcoming. Indeed, Ortner (2014) argues that postfeminism itself represents a strengthening of patriarchal norms, which she exemplifies through a discursive analysis of gender ideology in popular culture. Campbell argues for the existence of neoliberal neopatriarchies, arguing that the shift away from the post-war consensus that saw collectivist movements become co-opted by neoliberal individualism has undermined the structural progress made by such collective movements, an argument that resembles postfeminist arguments about individual empowerment. Campbell specifically argues, though, that such individualisation of feminism signifies a re-strengthening of patriarchy, by concealing structural causes behind individual action. Similarly,

James (2015) argues that contemporary patriarchy can be characterised as “multi-racial white supremacist patriarchy” or MRWaSP, in that dominance of white men is sustained even while patriarchy makes token gestures towards non-white and non-male individuals in order to conceal the remaining structural disadvantages of such groups. Any such theorisation of the contemporary state of patriarchy therefore explores the ways in which a strategic political individualism obfuscates the continued existence of material structures, modifying the appearance of patriarchy merely for its recuperation.

Neoliberalism’s complex and contradictory relationship with gender structures is particularly evident in its figurations of the family. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) explore how the certainties of the nuclear family, formed because of economic necessity through processes of industrialisation, have been challenged by processes of individualisation that remove senses of communal solidarity and permanence. Indeed, the onset of reflexive and individualised neoliberal subjectivity is not conducive to the nuclear family in earlier forms of capitalism. For example, neoliberalism’s reliance on forms of immaterial production (Lazzarato, 2006) and affective labours (Hardt, 1999) as parts of capital accretion contradicts the family’s formation as linked to a separation of domestic labour in the private sphere and productive labour in the public sphere. Yet, at the same time, neoliberal capitalism remains dominated by men at the highest level, and, as argued, continues to subject women to the worst of neoliberalism’s growing inequalities (Keen & Cracknell, 2017). As Haywood and Mac an Ghail (2007: 43) point out, “we are witnessing a fundamental cultural shift from understanding the family in terms of traditional, blood or marriage ties to that in which it has come to signify the subjective meaning of intimate relations”.

2.5 Male femininities

Metrosexuality (Coad, 2008: 72; M. Hall, 2014), hipsterism (Henke, 2013), and spornosexuality (Hakim, 2016) are not new areas of research. In this section, I link this set of literatures with the structural analysis of gender, men, masculinity, femininity and neoliberalism I have examined so far.

2.5.1 Neoliberal postfeminist masculinities

To describe the particularities of the discourses that currently construct manhood and masculinity, Bridges and Pascoe (2014; 2014) (and others (Eisen & Yamashita, 2017)) use the concept of “hybrid masculinities”. Such studies are broadly focussed on the adoption of new behaviours, dispositions and practices that might have seemed oppositional to masculinity. Bridges and Pascoe, for example, explore the inclusion of narratives of care and symbolic distancing from hegemonic masculinity in the construction of young straight white men’s identities in the USA. Bridges and Pascoe

are interested in the same phenomena this thesis examines, but I am equally interested in contextualising “contemporary transformations in masculinity” (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014: 246), as they term it, within neoliberalism and the neoliberal subject.

There is a body of literature that explores the experiences and strategies of men in jobs that require feminised labour. Negotiation of a feminised workplace can be complex for men with a subconscious image of a masculine ideal. Darren Nixon (2009) found that men in the service industry outright rejected femininity as it applied to their labour, while Pettinger looks at how feminisation of labour is giving younger men no choice but to negotiate a more complex set of ideas surrounding masculinity, where “enacting certain forms of femininity is fundamental to the gendering of employment and work in the retail sector” (Pettinger, 2005: 461). Pettinger’s work is careful to avoid the trap of attaching feminisation to an essentialist knowledge of gender, contextualising her argument in sociological studies of service work going back a century (work that is not necessarily affective, emotional or aesthetic), as well as emphasising that our understandings of labour as gendered are constructed themselves, and “are not cultural and symbolic formations separate from economic relations” (Pettinger, 2005: 463). Similarly, Roberts (2018) argues that young working-class men in Kent have embraced the demands of service work with some enthusiasm.

Pettinger differentiates her work from a previous study by Warhurst and Nixon (2009), arguing that they neglect the market context of feminisation, the role of consumption, and the manifestation of aesthetic labour in particular instances. I believe much similar literature lacks critical reflection on the concept of femininity considering the reliance on the concept of feminisation. Morini refers to “a historical modality of female work” (Morini, 2007: 48), while Pettinger refers almost exclusively to femininity in the workplace, rather than the performance of emotional and aesthetic labour domestically. The idea that the practices to which they refer are considered historically feminine is not problematic per se, but the lack of critique around the ways in which femininity is deployed risks such reification. Postfeminism has provided a more thorough critique of femininity, however.

For Marnina Gonick, though femininity is changing, it has always been contextually, complexly and individually negotiated (Gonick, 2004): “traditional femininity is being undone through its inclusion in discourses of individualism, rationality, and adulthood, even as it is being rearticulated through an ever-increasing array of contradictions, the juggling of which has *always* shaped experiences of femininity” (Gonick, 2004: 207, emphasis added). Gonick and others (Lazar, 2009) call this new version “postfemininity”, a change to gender discourse that would also inevitably impact men, especially if formerly masculinised forms of labour are not particular strengths of the postfeminine neoliberal subjects. The perception that men are becoming culturally redundant has resulted in a “backlash” narrative (Bly, 1990; Faludi, 1991) in which some men have embraced biological essentialism and worked to defend patriarchal norms. Much of this might be seen to be embodied by

the growth of “men’s rights activists” and the online “manosphere”, and closely related to the so-called “alt-right” (Valkenburgh, 2018). This narrative is quite simplistic; while discussions of the feminisation of labour and feminised neoliberal subject reflect certain aspects of the state of gender ideology in the UK, men have not structurally sacrificed much of their material dominance.

Postfeminist neoliberal masculinity is not simple, but is, according to Brabon, doubly encoded: “on the one hand, the ‘postfeminist man’ accommodates backlash scripts – drawing upon characteristics of the ‘new lad’. On the other hand, he is more self-aware, displaying anxiety and concern for his identity while re-embracing patriarchal responsibilities” (Genz & Brabon, 2009: 143). Brabon argues that the “backlash” is more complex than just a backlash against women, also defined by “the undermining of the essentialist nature of masculinity [that] has left male identity unmoored and vulnerable” (Brabon, 2007: 57). Popular culture, he argues, therefore shows men with phalluses neither dismembered, nor “membered”, but spectral, in the sense that the attempt to gather the masculine subject into something coherent, following Byers (1996), is never fully realised, such that, “relying on his performance of male gender identity to act a substitute for the ‘real thing’, he becomes the victim of his own masculinity” (Brabon, 2007: 62).

The emergence of the “male singleton” in recent television and cinema is also related to postfeminism. Essentially a mirror to the likes of the postfeminist female singleton character (for example, Bridget Jones (Genz, 2009)), the postfeminist male singleton is “a central male heterosexual character, who is struggling with life/growing up, and looking – albeit ambivalently – for love” (R. Gill, 2014). Genz and Brabon (2009) identify the postfeminist male singleton in the film *Failure to Launch* (Gill identifies more or less the same phenomenon in men’s literature (R. Gill, 2014), while the same trope is also present in what Gill and Hansen-Miller define as the “lad flick” (Hansen-Miller & Gill, 2011)) arguing that the character type actively deconstructs masculinity in popular culture. The “lad flick”, though usually typified by comedy, does the same, and may be viewed as a romantic comedy in which the man plays the lead role of the singleton, constructing “masculine values and ideals as the product of a pathological and anxiety ridden pursuit of collective male approval” (Hansen-Miller & Gill, 2011: 52). The anxiety is often explicit: in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), the eponymous character Andy Stitzer with every day of fading youth faces the prospect of dying a virgin. In analyses of the female singleton, it is often noted that the rush to find a man and settle down can be read as a backlash to a strawman-feminist suggestion that even heterosexual women should not be happy living a life with male partners (McRobbie, 2009). While the male singleton is something of a backlash to this suggestion, he is also an attempt to reconcile patriarchal power.

2.5.2 Men's lifestyles

Empirical research into newer forms of masculinity is not novel. Coad (2008), for example, explores metrosexuality, a term coined by journalist Mark Simpson (1994), by linking male gender roles, sport and fashion, arguing metrosexuality is symptomatic of a permanent softening of gender roles. However, in arguing that metrosexuality subverts the gender binary by challenging the labelling of “handsome” and women as “pretty”, he risks embedding metrosexuality within reified gender discourses, while it is also worth considering that metrosexuality is generally associated with heterosexual men (hence the rhyme). Matthew Hall (2014) also examines metrosexuality, finding the body to be central in how self-identified metrosexual men talk and interact in cyberspace. As he acknowledges, looking at how metrosexual identity is formed, negotiated or disavowed, as he does, does little to gather and explain the structural reasons for the emergence of metrosexuality (M. Hall, 2014: 152). Nevertheless, a relationship arises between masculinity, labour and capitalism, many participants identifying the needs of the labour market as part of the reason for their metrosexuality.

Miller (2006) argues that the US television programme, *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*⁴ can be seen as a “handbook” for metrosexuality, which he argues is partly a response to, as he puts it, “the spread of self-fashioning as a requirement of personal and professional achievement through the U.S. middle-class labour force” (T. Miller, 2006: 114). He argues the metrosexual represents a process in which “the male subject has been brought out into the bright light of narcissism and purchase – a comparatively enlightened culture of consumption” (T. Miller, 2006: 115), where consumption goes some way to define the metrosexual as a neoliberal subject. Similarly, Sender (2006) employs Foucault’s concept of biopower and argues that the self-improvement of straight men resulting from a queer gaze works to position heterosexual masculinities as lacking the capacities for neoliberal subjectivity. Consequently, the show suggests that the queer gaze trained self-discipline and transformed consumption habits of the show’s male subjects attempt to update the masculine subject for a neoliberal era.

In 2014 Mark Simpson declared the metrosexual dead (Simpson, 2014), replaced by the spornosexual, derived literally from the words “sport” and “pornography” and defined by the naked male body. Hakim (2016) argues that spornosexuality makes bodily discipline one of the key features of the masculine neoliberal subject. Arguing spornosexual subjectivity is imbricated in a strengthened male gaze, Hakim carried out six interviews with young men in the UK who post semi-nude pictures of their worked-at bodies on social media. He found similar conclusions to Miller, arguing that “members

⁴ *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy* (2003-2007) has recently been rebooted by Netflix, renamed *Queer Eye* (2018-present), and no longer caters just to straight men. The change in focus retains much of the bodily discipline of the original, but it may be interesting to question what parts of the new *Queer Eye* differ from its predecessor.

of a social group that was historically able to use their minds for the purposes of value-creation is now increasingly having to rely on their bodies” (Hakim, 2016: 9).

Metrosexuals and spornosexuals might belong to the same genealogy as hipster masculinities. Though hipsterism is not exclusively male, there is something specific about the intersection of masculinity and hipsterism that marks a similar trajectory in masculinity as metro- and spornosexuals. Gilson (2016) has explored hipsters in the USA, looking at how hipsterism invokes an attempt to perform certain forms of feminine and non-white authenticity, developing very limited critiques of patriarchy and white supremacy. Gilson also embeds his study within neoliberalism, but he remains optimistic about the opportunities this opens, rather than critiquing the structural issues in which neoliberalism is imbricated with patriarchy and white supremacy. He finds that hipster masculinity is also enmeshed with a concept of authentic urban space and related to gentrification. Zukin (2011) argues that the advent of the hipster, and hipster gentrification of cities, heralds the beginning of the end of authentic urban spaces, driving out the people who made such spaces authentic. Considering neoliberalism’s urban hegemony (Harvey, 2007; İçli & Özçelik, 2012), the development of hipster identity in tandem with urban space indicates strong links to capitalism. In fact, Henke sees hipster authenticity as more of a marketing technique, where authenticity has been reclaimed and repackaged as something artificial as a way of selling men a different type of aesthetic lifestyle (Henke, 2013).

Considering the shift in labour practices in what here might be most aptly called cognitive capitalism (Boutang, 2011), it has become commonplace to hear the argument that “geek” and “nerd”⁵ masculinities occupy a hegemonic position today (again, geeks and nerds are not by any means all men, but there is a specific power relation at play at the intersection between masculinity and nerdiness). Roeder’s (2013) *The Geeks Will Inherit The Earth* makes this basic argument in its title alone, while it is also commonplace to find it in popular culture – Leonard, one of the main characters in “nerd” sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, at one point declares “our society has undergone a paradigm shift, in the information age, Sheldon, you and I are the alpha male”. There is perhaps an element of truth to this, insofar as geekiness or nerdiness is about technological knowledge. Lori Kendall has argued that nerd masculinities occupy an increasingly hegemonic position (Kendall, 1999, 2000, 2011), while Winifred Poster argues that something called techno-masculinity indicates a shift away from the relationship between masculinity and manual labour, to a masculine subject with a capability for technological knowledge (Poster, 2013). David Bell, meanwhile, also links the increased visibility of geek and nerd

⁵ Although geek and nerd have different meanings, they have a close ontological relationship, especially in their intersections with masculinity, and I will therefore use them almost interchangeably here.

masculinities to the city, and the expansion of tech jobs, companies and startups in major cities (Bell, 2009, 2013).

None of these authors (apart from Bell to an extent, and Roeder) hold out much hope of geek and nerd masculinities representing a popular shift away from the negative excesses of masculinity, rather than a shift in its power centres masking the same politics of patriarchal dominance. Indeed, Braithwaite has explored how a re-entrenchment of patriarchal politics among nerd masculinities was a driving force behind the “Gamergate” controversy, a series of arguments online in 2014 in which several female gaming journalists became targets of online harassment by men (Braithwaite, 2016). The literature on geek and nerd masculinities, like that on men’s adaptations to service work and affective labour, literature on metrosexuality, spornosexuality, and hipsters, as well as hybrid and caring masculinities, all contain kernels of debate about the wider gender politics of such forms of masculinity; my research aims to explore the commonalities between these forms of masculinity through their positioning in a neoliberal context.

2.6 Chapter summary

This chapter reviewed existing literature in four sections, elucidating several key concepts in my title and research questions (see page 10). Beginning with a brief discussion about subjectivities and discourses, I examined critical studies on femininity, looking at femininity’s relation to the body, to forms of discipline, as well as the relationship between femininity, capitalism, class, race and sexuality. I looked at of critical studies on men and masculinities, again exploring intersections with race, class, and sexuality, and examining theories of performativity and signification. After that, I explored gendered and capitalist structures, looking specifically at the development of neoliberalism and its relation to patriarchy and gender. Finally, I looked at existing literature on hybrid masculinities, metrosexuality, spornosexuality, hipsters, and neoliberal masculinity, highlighting the gap in the research this thesis aims to fulfil. Next, I explain how I used the existing literature to craft a methodology and method suitable for exploration of my research questions.

3

Methodology: Researching masculinities in a neoliberal framework

3.1 Introduction

This thesis explores the concept of male femininities in two locations. An emergent dual methods approach was used, analysing both cultural data – US sitcoms – and interactional data, involving interviews and focus groups with men aged 18-30 around the UK, in which short clips of the sitcoms were shown. I used critical discourse analysis to analyse the sitcoms, and a fine-grained discursive psychology approach to analyse transcripts of the focus groups and interviews. During my data collection, I was primarily concerned with what I labelled on page 10 research questions 1a and 1b: what are the discourses on masculinity, both competing and consistent, that arise from four US hangout sitcoms, and focus groups and interviews with men around England? And how are those discourses resolved and negotiated both in and between each?

This chapter has three sections. First, I look at the concept of emergent methodology (Dick, 2001; Hese-Biber & Leavy, 2006, 2008), justifying and explaining why it is a relevant framework for my research. The next section tells the “story” of my data collection. Though this story might seem like a diversion, this story of how my methodology and epistemology changed and shifted is key to the justification of my methods as emergent – figure 1 below outlines this process generally, while figure 2 (page 61) outlines it in more detail. I therefore use this story to produce another set of criteria for a methodological analysis explained in the final section.

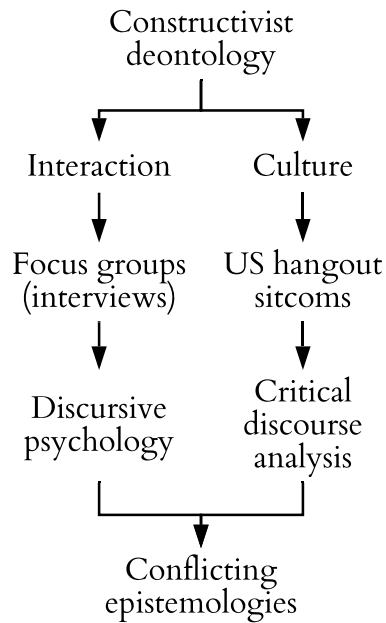


Figure 1 – Basic methods diagram

3.2 Ontology and epistemology

My literature review and background research produced an ontology that grounded my data collection, enabling me to identify the location(s) from which I aimed to get my data. My position is deontological, in that it brackets questions of what exists, instead looking at how the social world is produced and reproduced. Here, I look at the three criteria developed by this ontology, that lead me to the two methods I am using. These criteria are discursive conflict, sociality, and research technologies.

3.2.1 Emergent methods

Emergent methodology refers to the ways in which methods are adapted and changed to suit the data that emerges from collection (Dick, 2001; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, 2008; D. Morgan, Fellows, & Guevara, 2008). This usually begins by establishing an ontology and epistemology, then pinpointing the form(s) of data best suited to the research, and then developing a mode of analysis based on how the findings that emerge from data collection. Such methodological approaches are appropriate for studies in which some of the theoretical connections made are not yet well-characterised, such as my linking of masculinities research on men doing affective labour with metrosexuality and hipsters, as well as hybrid masculinities, under a neoliberal framework.

Emergence is not always an explicit property of certain methodologies, as methodological innovation regularly comes about through some form of emergence. Methodologies change, wane, die

out, and appear anew on a regular basis, often at moments when existing techniques fail to reflect the aspect of social life they analyse (Hese-Biber & Leavy, 2008). Methodological innovation, and the adaptation or rejection of dominant methods, becomes necessary when methodology ceases to bridge the gap between epistemology and methods – between what we assume can be known and what we do in order to know it. And, second, some emergence usually occurs within most research anyway; if a method is not producing the kinds of data necessary for a specific project, it needs to be adapted or changed. The reason for the disjunction may just be an unsuitable choice of method but any one of turbulent socio-political environments, changes to the setting of the research, unexpected findings, or technological issues may force a researcher to rethink their epistemology and adapt their methodology.

Considering the above, there is no reason for emergent methodology to be any less rigorous or systematic than a more “established” method, provided the theoretical framework provides a sufficient ontology from the outset. Ontological convictions are especially important to emergent methodology in allowing analysis to be shaped by data collection – you can know what you are interested in finding out because of what you understand about where to observe it, and determine the best locations to capture those observations without knowing how you might analyse the data. This does not mean retro-fitting the data to a set argument, but “to be fully sensitive to the situation; to be data-driven rather than theory-driven” (Dick, 2001: 1). Emergent methodologies allow for a shifting epistemology. In order to explain how my data collection constructed my methodology, therefore, I need to explain first how my ontology informed my data collection, which I summarise in three criteria: discursive conflict, sociality, and research technologies.

3.2.2 Discursive conflict

This thesis can be said to be deontological insofar as it takes “what exists” to be of secondary concern to that which is discursively constructed (Butler, 1990; Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). It brackets issues of an objective reality, an observable world that can be uncovered using positivist inquiry, taking reality to be multiple and subjective. A methodology derived from what might be considered a “politicised ontology” (Oksala, 2010), in the sense that it takes subjectivity to be formed ideologically, would therefore analyse how discourses construct subjective realities. In a sense, then, my ontology already leans towards a constructivist epistemology (Fairclough, 1992). It is important here to be careful not to reify discourses, which do not exist independent of subjectivity. Discourses are not simply things that we access and act upon, but are positively sustained in the social world by social actors (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Though they are continually reshaped, they are not easily challenged. Discourses are therefore continual sites of conflict, making discursive conflict an important part of my methods. Indeed, the mismatch between men and femininity, as well as between the masculine and neoliberal subjects, are moments of discursive conflict, where hegemonic discursive formations seem

to contradict one another. The notion of “male femininity” was partly inspired by Jack Halberstam’s book *Female Masculinity*, where he argues for a “scavenger methodology” that rejects more conventional methodologies for not being “supple enough to the various locations of information on female masculinity” (Halberstam, 1998: 10). In order to analyse the discursive conflicts between maleness and femininity, and between neoliberalism and masculinity, it seemed apt to look in conflicting locations, and see how the data gatherable from those locations can (or cannot) form an analytic whole. On this basis, I wanted multiple datasets.

I considered one-on-one interviews⁶, on the basis that one of the interview’s strengths the ability to provide an account self-reflexively. However, interviews as a single method were rejected for a few reasons. One, most forms of one-on-one interview limit the potential for discursive conflict or negotiation. Conflict involves interacting with some sort of other, which would point to a structured interview in which I as an interviewer would ask specific questions designed around my theoretical concerns. This would have risked leading the participant to a specific conclusion while additionally challenging the data-driven focus of methodological emergence. Focus groups, on the other hand, allow for the same accountability, and offer the opportunity to see participants, and discourses, in direct conversation with one another. Second, Atkinson and Silverman (1997) argue that the interview relies on a confessional mode of story-telling that assumes the subject can open up a “true” self to the interviewer, often uncritically. And, third, as pointed out by Skeggs et al, access to self-reflexivity and accountability “depends on access to resources and concomitant forms of capital that are classed, raced, and gendered” (Skeggs, Thumim, & Wood, 2008: 7). The focus group setting to some extent addresses the effects of the power relations in an interview by positioning the participants in a group against the interviewer.

The second “prong” of my method developed out of a preoccupation with how and where discourse is read and interpreted. Culture plays an important part in disseminating discourse, as embodied in the concept of the synopticon (Mathiesen, 1997), where he argues self-discipline in not just panoptic, but also takes the form of sophisticated understandings of images we read from popular culture (see also section 2.1, page 15). Additionally, metrosexuality, spornosexuality, and hipsterism are popular cultural phenomena. I therefore developed the idea of using readings of popular culture of some description and in some way combining this with the data from my focus groups. This introduced the notion of offering a further “other” for my participants to react to in the focus groups, thus introducing further possibility for discursive conflict and negotiations.

⁶ There are numerous different types of interview design, and eventually part of my methods included the use of some semi-structured interviews – interview design is discussed in more detail in section 3.3.2 on page 50.

I wanted to choose something that would maximise the possibility of discursive conflict. Narrative structure relies on conflict, as observed by Neale: it “is always a process of transformation of the balance of elements that constitute its pretext: the interruption of an initial equilibrium and the tracing of the dispersal and refiguration of its components” (Neale, 1980: 20). Thus the possibility of presenting the participants with a narrative to reflect upon was a tempting prospect. In very few places is the narrative as obvious as in sitcom episodes, where Attallah describes discursive disruption or conflict as the sitcom genre’s narrative language: “in the situation comedy, disruption and discourse are conflated; it is the discourse itself that is the disruption” (Attallah, 2003: 105). The individual sitcom episode proposes a status quo, which is disrupted and then resolved within a neat 20 minutes: “the sitcom format relies upon regular and short-term disruption to the narrative equilibrium” (Thompson, 2015: 30). On this basis, I decided to select several sitcoms to analyse – in section 3, I will show how my critical viewing of sitcoms drew me to a certain method of analysis.

3.2.3 The social world

The social world as I conceive it is fundamentally multiple, such that reality only exists as constructed by individuals. Key to this is that subjectivity is not an interior category, but produced intersubjectively, or through interaction with both other subjects, and with discourses (Gillespie & Cornish, 2009). Indeed, in section 2.1 on page 15, I argued for an ideological conception of subjectivity in which dominant ideology and subjectivity are co-dependent, such that subjectivity, discourse and ideology all continually sustain and renegotiate one another. For example, performing masculinity is not an innate imperative, but a response to and positioning against other social actors, which in turn draws from and sustains patriarchal structural norms (Butler, 1990). If the social world is conceived as intersubjective, then, subject formation is best examined as interaction with others, suggesting the need for a research method that provides the best stimuli for interaction. Focus groups therefore present an appropriate method for examining the processes of subject formation.

My ontological position therefore views the social world as a series of immanent discourses that in turn shape subjective formation and positioning. I have discussed the importance of not reifying discourses, which in turn means not looking at discourses as a resource, but as a topic of discussion, negotiated, denied, reshaped and directly acknowledged in talk (Speer, 2005). Discourse does not exist independently from subjectivity and interaction, but through them. Context provides rules that govern interaction, but that context is not deterministic (D. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Edwards, 1993). In fact, context is renewed and negotiated in situ – social structure or discourse is therefore an endogenous production that can be studied itself. The everyday social world, from this perspective, consists of discourses made immanent, which is what we observe when we study interaction. In order to fully understand how this works, my aim for this research was to artificially separate what we might

understand as macro (sitcoms) and micro (focus groups) realms, in order to bring them together and see how they might interact, looking for both overlaps and contradictions between the two.

Interaction is not the only place discourses are legible. Culture, and particularly popular culture, are also sites at which discourses are readable. Though calling neoliberalism an ideology of the global north to some extent erases the ways in which neoliberalism relies on the exploitation of the global south, neoliberal culture is arguably dominated by western cultural goods, notably movies and television produced in the USA. Haywood and Mac an Ghail (2007: 199) point out that “rather than simply operate through older forms of economics or militarism, the dynamic of global force now includes cultural industries and new communication technologies”, such that “the United States sets the standard for worldwide export and imitation”. Kuehnast defines this phenomenon as visual imperialism, “the colonisation of the world mind through the use of selective imagery that acts as a representation of a dominant ideology or, as in many instances, a representation of the truth” (Kuehnast, 1992: 184). If there exists a dominant cultural imaginary, for Kuehnast, it comes from the US. In 1992, she observed that entertainment was the US’s second biggest export; as of 2009, this was still the case (Webb, 2009). Debates on globalisation have been raging for years, and it is generally acknowledged that the world now is smaller than it ever was; US visual imperialism indicates that US culture is therefore key to understanding how dominant discourses on masculinity are shaped in the UK.

3.2.4 Research technologies

There is also a more practical reason for me to opt for multiple methods. I have discussed the concept of neoliberalism, also comparing it to other concepts such as late (modern) capitalism (Jameson, 1984) and liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). Key features to all these conceptions of contemporary capitalism are fluidity and ability to adapt, especially through technological advances. Therefore, because of the dynamism and plurality of neoliberalism, I wanted to avoid a single method, both adapting my own research to a neoliberal era, while simultaneously taking full advantage of its technologies. Savage and Burrows (2007) argue that, with the onset of “knowing capitalism”, there is a “methodological crisis” in sociology. Pointing out that the semi-structured interview is often considered something of a standard method for sociologists, they question whether the interview more generally both takes advantage of the increasing diversity of research technologies and can account for the dispersal and diversity of subjectivities – again, though framed theoretically around the concept of knowing capitalism, both of these things are descriptors of neoliberalism, too. Emergent methodologies are often responses to turbulent socio-political contexts, with contemporary capitalism presenting one such challenge to researchers.

Indeed, in few places is this more evident than in media culture. In the literature review I explored Mathiesen’s (1997) concept of the synopticon. Celebrity culture is often responsible for disseminating

new fashion trends, or spreading memetic phrases. With the popularity of YouTube, and the availability of user-created content two decades after Mathiesen first theorised the synopticon, it is arguable that media culture has diversified to the point that the synoptic model of discipline is not all that relevant, and in fact the power now held by big data firms represents a more panoptic model of power (Doyle, 2011). However, there are a few points to make here. First, memetic culture can be interpreted as an extension of the synoptic model. As certain images spread through the internet, being interpreted, read and re-created with new and different significations, such memes frequently originate from television and movies. As such, the images that are watched by subjects might be re-used in different ways, but the images themselves are still reasonably monocultural (Zittrain, 2014). Indeed, social media algorithms are frequently programmed to promote more popular and familiar images, while it has been argued that content-sharing websites such as YouTube are increasingly professionalised areas (Morreale, 2013). And second, though user-created content is heavily consumed, various studios and companies, such as Disney, Fox, Comcast, Google and Netflix, still dominate much of the film and television industry (Anon., 2017), frequently buying out smaller producers as they become more successful.

3.3 Data collection

Considering the above, I set about watching sitcoms and began recruiting participants for my focus groups. Therefore, this next section details the “story” of how I collected my data, justifying, with reference to the previous section, why I made the decisions I did in collection, producing several criteria for my eventual methodology and mode of analysis.

3.3.1 Sitcoms and discourse

Selecting the shows

Selecting and watching the sitcoms produced five criteria for my approach to the data: one, it had to be able to recognise and analyse narrative structure. Second, it had to be able to recognise how subject positioning works on screen. Third, it had to analyse the sitcoms holistically, with each episode or storyline as a “complete” product working towards an end. Fourth, it needed to explore how discursive conflict occurs. And, last, it required a constructivist perspective that recognises that culture constructs reality as much as reflecting it.

I watched and analysed the sitcoms before starting to plan for and organise the empirical element of my research for two reasons: because it was something I could begin immediately without further organisation, but also to identify exactly what it was I wanted to show to my participants. So, I initially

chose seven sitcoms, on the basis that my participants might be familiar with each of them, and because each had one or more characters who fit one bill or another of my at-the-time nebulous concept of male femininity. *Friends* (1994) had Joey, who attributes his success in sleeping with women to his appearance; *Scrubs* (2001) had J.D., a self-proclaimed “sensitive guy” who loves ponies and hugs as much as he loves attractive women; *How I Met Your Mother* (2004) features Barney, a suit-obsessed womaniser; *The Big Bang Theory*’s (2006)⁷ main cast are self-evident nerds who are successful in spite of the fact they lack obvious physical strength; *Community* (2009) has Jeff Winger, variously described as metrosexual and a hipster at various points; *New Girl* (2012) features Schmidt, known for both sexual prowess and his familiarity with fashion brands and trends; and finally, *Silicon Valley* (2014) follows a tech start-up company of more “nerdy” men, exploring masculinity in Silicon Valley technological corporate capitalism.

Emergent methodology must start somewhere, to be adapted to fit an emerging epistemology. Based on Kronz’s study on gender non-conformity in US movies (2016), I began by developing a system of coding, due to the non-conformity posed by the concept of male femininities. For example, when a character was mistaken for a woman, I wrote an A, followed by a contextual note; B when a straight man was mistaken for gay, C when they were shown to be obsessed with their body. My plan was to do this for every episode, develop a quantitative dataset, and produce a typology of “feminine men” in these sitcoms.

This approach quickly became untenable. First, the coding grew too nebulous, encompassing too many quite different phenomena, including other characters’ perceptions of them, individual happenings, character likes and dislikes, and general descriptions. Second, any inclinations I might have had about typology quickly disintegrated as it became apparent that the coding did not significantly demarcate between characters, as male characters who seemed to be feminine in different ways had coding noticeably too similar to differentiate between the characters. And third, it extracted the character types from the “functions” they served towards the narrative end. Here, three methodological criteria for my analytic method began to emerge: the importance and function of narrative, a complex understanding of subject positioning in the shows, and the ability to approach the shows as a “whole” aiming towards a specific end.

The hangout sitcom

At this point, I noticed that certain tropes or narratives that were regularly used in the stories about these characters cut across each of the shows, indicating the need for a more qualitative discursive

⁷ I will refer to *How I Met Your Mother* in shorthand as HIMYM, and *The Big Bang Theory* as TBBT.

analysis. I returned to the literature to develop a more discursive methodology, with a focus on the idea of narrative. Neale (1980) argues that narrative involves the disruption and resolution of an equilibrium, and that it is the modalities used to express the narrative that define genre. So, in order to understand the role of narrative in the sitcom genre, it is necessary to understand the vernacular in which it articulates narrative. Hamamoto (1989) historicises the sitcom by locating its beginning in 1930s USA, which saw enormous changes to US culture thanks to a new post-war ideological consensus. He argues that the first radio sitcoms served a social function, “building a popular, uniquely American political culture”, by “[mediating] the clashes of immigrant culture and [easing] the sense of deprivation inflicted by the Great Depression” (Hamamoto, 1989: 4). It was up to the sitcom to present problems and resolve them, making it a dialogical format. As such, the sitcom constructs realities in which discursive and material conflicts are resolved neatly.

I have already discussed this basic idea as the sitcom’s narrative language – as a reminder, “in the situation comedy, disruption and discourse are conflated; it is the discourse itself that is the disruption. And that is the specificity of the situation comedy, to organise disruption in terms of discourse ... The subject matter is discourse itself” (Attallah, 2003: 105-106). In reflecting and mediating the societal clashes of its time, it actively mobilises discourse as a topic of narrative – the sitcom is a social TV show. What are the discourses and ideology, then, that mark out the subgenre of sitcom I am interested in? Beginning with *Seinfeld* (1989), in the 1990s a new subgenre of sitcom emerged, paying attention to young, aspirational and urban friendship groups: a “twenty-something, heterosexual home-building” (Hartley, 2001: 67) group of white men and women, where the action revolved around common locations like cafés or flats, and the characters, largely, did nothing. *Seinfeld*’s success was built on by *Friends* (Ihnat, 2014), which became one of the most popular sitcoms globally, marking the same period of time when neoliberalism became hegemonic (Brown, 2015; Duggan, 2004).

The individualism and atomisation of subjectivity with which neoliberalism treats citizens (Bauman, 2000) draws on a binary of individualism against collectivism frequently made relevant by the hangout sitcom, where much of the ideological conflict pits work against friends, love, family, sexuality and gender. Family remains key, though not as domestic stability but positioned as a future goal, with marriage and children constructed as natural milestones. As Thompson argues, the hangout sitcom is “most interested in the *processes* of the formation of the couple, rather than the end result, around which there is no enigma” (Thompson, 2015: 22). On top of this, the shows demonstrate a level of disdain for the anyone not included in the group, asserting both a neoliberal individualism and contempt for otherness (Chidester, 2008). The identification of the hangout subgenre made me jettison

Scrubs, *Community*, and *Silicon Valley*, all of which centre different discourses⁸, leaving me with four shows: *Friends*, *HIMYM*, *TBBT*, and *New Girl*⁹.

Narrative

As discursive conflict upholds ideological function, I need to be able to identify the nodal points of narrative: the exposure of equilibrium, its disruption, and its rebalancing. My methodology needed to be able to view this narrative as what Alasuutari calls a specimen, “not treated as a *statement about* or a *reflection of reality*; instead, a specimen is seen as part of the reality being studied” (Alasuutari, 1995: 63). The narrative of the sitcom had to be studied as a part of the immanent discourses of which the social world consists. As such, the disruptions and resolutions put forward by the sitcoms were viewed as constructive, reflective and mediatory of the cultures in which they are embedded.

This also involves understanding the narrative specifically as a whole, avoiding extracting subject positions from the function they serve. Here, subject positions to some extent refer to the “type” of character. These are often identified through quantitative research via coding (for example, Kronz, 2016), but I opted for a critical discursive approach (see Bolt, 2016; Hansen-Miller & Gill, 2011; Neville, 2009; Stratton, 2015; Thompson, 2015; Walters, 2013). Particularly considering Neale’s (1980) definition of genre as the vernacular in which the narrative is articulated, the characters serve a specific purpose in each individual storyline, taking up competing positions that are not always the same in order to serve that narrative. In one episode, one character may antagonise, while another sets out the initial equilibrium; in another storyline in another episode, those roles may swap.

In discursive psychology (discussed in more depth in section 3.3.3 on page 58), subject positioning refers to the process by which people situate themselves against one another in order to say something about themselves (Edley, 2001; D. Edwards & Potter, 1992). There are some differences

⁸ *Community* is set in a community college in the US, and work or family rarely feature. It derives most of its conflict from the way different phenomena undermine the sense of “community” formed by the main characters. *Silicon Valley* evidently has some aspirational themes, as its title suggests, but the focal point of the show the tech start-up that the main characters form, and the frequent setbacks they face. In neither of these shows do the characters ever just “hang out”. *Scrubs* is closer to the hangout sitcom, following the main characters’ careers, whose friendship group remains very insular, and the family is a very clear endpoint for each of them. However, most of the show takes place in the hospital at which the main characters work, rather than a hangout location.

⁹ I did not choose *Seinfeld* as I was aware many of my participants would be unfamiliar with it, being several years older than the other sitcoms, and less popular in the UK.

between the way subject positioning functions in sitcoms as opposed to in talk. In talk, the subject positions taken up by individuals serve to construct those individuals' identities, and are adopted and occupied in response to the situation (Edley, 2001). In an existing text, such as a television programme, they serve a larger narrative purpose. So, while they draw on discourses, much like in interaction, the subject position serves the plot rather than the individual. Essentially, they are a plot device on offer to writers. Fairclough, though writing about written texts, makes this point well: "Whereas in a conversation participants in the interaction are co-present in time and space, with written texts there is temporal and spatial distance between them, and the text acquires a degree of independence both from the writing process and the reading process" (Fairclough, 2001: 239). Though there may be a crucial difference between a solo-authored text and a sitcom episode, which typically involves several hundred "authors" (writers, actors, set designers, sound engineers, editors, etc.), the sitcom retains a degree of independence once complete.

From watching the sitcoms, five criteria for my analytic method emerged. The approach needs to be discursive, able to access the nodal points of a narrative (1), in a holistic manner (2). It required sensitivity to the function of subject positioning (3) in the narrative, and how that narrative deals with discursive conflict (4). Finally, it needed to be able to critique how the sitcoms are situated in realities that they themselves assist in constructing (5).

3.3.2 Focus groups, interviews, and interaction

Selecting the clips

In this section, I outline the five criteria that emerged from my focus group data that lead into my methodology. Some of these criteria overlap with the criteria that emerged from the sitcoms, though some of them also contradict it, presenting a problem that will be dealt with in section 4 of this chapter. The criteria I will draw out in this section, once again by telling the story of how my data was collected, are, like the sitcoms, an ability to acknowledge conflict and contradiction (1), a constructivist approach (2) to the talk, understanding discourse as topic and not resource (3). It also requires that participants be given autonomy (4) to produce their own readings of the sitcoms and to see how those readings differ from my own. Contradicting the sitcoms though, the analysis of focus groups and interviews requires sensitivity to the negotiation of discourse in situ (5), as opposed to as part of a narrative whole.

However, before I began the focus groups, I selected three clips from the sitcoms to use to show to the participants. This presented a problem; as the methodology was yet to fully take shape, and I was not sure how the participants would interact with the sitcoms, I had no methodologically driven criteria for selection of the clips, so I produced some criteria based on how I wanted the two forms of data to relate to one another. Each clip would be from a different show to diversify discussion and would be

edited down to around five minutes. I chose clips from three from very different years, with each one around ten years apart – *Friends*, *HIMYM*, and *New Girl*¹⁰ – to keep the methodology in line with conceptions of ideological hegemony in which the processes of “achieved” hegemony are dynamic and subject to change over time. I wanted the clips to represent clear examples of discursive conflict about masculinity and neoliberalism, with clear narrative disruption and conclusion. I also opted for thematic diversity in the storylines, so they were not all about labour, or all about sexuality or appearance. Finally, I wanted clips that were typical of the characters involved, as I wanted to encourage participants to use prior knowledge to provoke discussion.

In the first clip chosen, from 1994, Joey, an aspiring actor in *Friends*, gets an acting job as Al Pacino’s “butt double” in a movie, standing in for Al Pacino in a shower scene. In the second, from 2005, Marshall in *HIMYM* reluctantly gets a job at a corporate law firm and finds that he must adapt to an exaggerated “jock” form of masculinity. In the third, from 2012, Schmidt in *New Girl*, is visited by his cousin, also called Schmidt, and the two engage in a series of contests of masculinity to decide who gets to become “the one true Schmidt”. I edited these three storylines down to five minute clips.

Recruitment

My recruitment built on existing literature (see also appendix 2 for a full selection of my recruitment materials). Taking neoliberalism to be a central constitutive element of the existence of male femininities, and looking at the ways that neoliberalism works culturally to interpellate subjects to its ends, I selected an age range of 18-30 that would be indicative of a neoliberal era. This was chosen over older generations of men whose subjectivities in formative years would have been co-constructed with different hegemonic ideologies. The literature revealed an uneven neoliberal geography, and a divide between urban and rural (Bell, 2009; Colomb, 2009; Harvey, 2007; İçli & Özçelik, 2012; Zukin, 2011). As such, I wanted to ensure that my study drew upon the potential range of different perspectives across the country, and so opted to carry out focus groups in several different locations, which ended up being a northern town, a southwest town, and London. On top of this, I opted to interview heterosexual and cis men only, on the basis that I was interested in men’s relationships with femininity in a neoliberal context, particularly the ways in which heterosexuality was being challenged, something

¹⁰ I will examine this in more detail in the sitcom chapter on page 88, but as I selected the clips before I carried out the fieldwork, I did not show any clips from *TBBT* to participants, as it was the sitcom I watched last, when recruitment was underway. When I eventually carried out the analysis, *TBBT* became quite prominent. Though this does not completely arraign my emergent methodology, it does point to some considerations for improvement if my methodology were redeveloped, or the study expanded.

with which both groups were likely to have rather different experiences and would have potentially lead the interview or focus group in a rather different direction. Research on non-heterosexual men's relationships with femininity tend towards narratives around policing and femmophobia (B. Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Taywaditep, 2008), while trans men's experiences point towards narratives about bodily policing, belonging, and dysphoria (see Chase & Catalano, 2015; Schilt, 2006; Zimman, 2013)¹¹.

Once I settled on focus groups, I sought and gained ethical approval from SREP, the School Research Ethics Panel at the University of Huddersfield. I sought approval for a series of focus groups and semi-structured interviews with up to seven men each (see appendix 3 for full details). There were several ethical issues to consider here. To keep participants anonymous, I introduced several measures, including offering the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms, such that participants should not have been identifiable in the research, given the possibility of any sensitive topics arising during the research. This meant not only pseudonyms, but reasonable avoidance of identification of place of work or study, profession, specific locations, or any family members. There are reasonable caveats to this – for example, I reasoned that the focus groups and interviews in London could be identified as in London considering the size and population of the city, while the focus group in a southwest town was much smaller and so not identified. On a few occasions also I found that some of these aspects were too pertinent to the analysis to avoid, such as one participant who discussed Brighton as the town he grew up in, which I chose to carefully identify considering Brighton's relationship with LGBTQ+ politics (see Browne and Bakshi, 2016) and its very specific sociopolitical image. In terms of deception, I did not make explicit that I was interested in femininity at the outset (apart from those who were recruited as "feminine men"), as I was interested in whether femininity plays a disruptive role in the formation of neoliberal masculinities. Considering that candidates were recruited based on being asked about contemporary masculinity, though, deception was not considered much of an issue. All recordings and transcriptions, as well as completed consent forms and contact details were kept on the university system throughout the research process, such that only I had access to these details.

The consent forms, information sheets and focus group and interview guides (again, see appendix 3) informed participants that they were taking part in research about contemporary masculinity, that they could withdraw at any time, and that they would be referred to via pseudonyms in the final research. They were informed that the focus groups and interviews would be recorded and transcribed, and that

¹¹ This is not to say that my study would not have benefited from the inclusion of some non-heterosexual or trans men, and indeed such a focus group might have benefited from these perspectives. However, these narratives would have required several other considerations that were beyond the remit of a single thesis – perhaps this is an area of further research worth exploring.

only I would have full access to their information and identity. For the focus groups, I additionally stipulated that the participants themselves had responsibility to avoid divulging any of the discussion that occurred within the focus group.

The rest of my recruitment was purposive via a range of different criteria, as indeed my concept of male femininities is. I did not want to just recruit any and all men, as the disruptions I am exploring may not be pertinent to all men. As such, I advertised with the following criteria: identification as hipster, metrosexual, identification as feminine, working in service, self-employment or freelance jobs, and using men's cosmetics. All participants were told that they were participating in research on contemporary masculinity, partly to enable the participants to begin thinking about their own experiences before the focus groups themselves, encouraging a productive discussion. But, secondly, it would enable my analysis to attribute everything said in the focus group to gender discourses, avoiding any confusion about whether they might have been orienting towards other discourses, unless explicitly stated.

I then recruited through a mixture of opportunity and snowball sampling. I printed off leaflets (again, see appendix 2) and left them in cafés and shops in a northern town, and parts of gentrified London known for hipsters, including Shoreditch, Dalston, and Hackney (see Porter and Shaw, 2009). I also used posters with my email address, which I put up around several universities in London and the north. In the southwest, I had previously worked at a men's clothes shop, where I contacted the three men on the staff there, who agreed to take part. Recruitment proved a challenge – various leads became dead ends, while those who initially expressed interest stopped responding. Though I carried out four focus groups, I eventually carried some interviews, which I hoped would be easier to organise (the epistemological differences here, and further justification, are discussed in the next section). I also managed to get in contact with several office workers in the southwest, recruiting some of them for interviews. I have spoken to 16 men – one focus group of three in a northern university, two small focus groups of two each in London, and one focus group of three in the southwest, as well as two interviews in London and four interviews in the southwest.

My sample consists of sixteen participants, all of whom identified as straight cis men (see appendix 1 for a detailed list). Fourteen are white, while one was black, and one was of Chinese-Malaysian heritage. I did not make a conscious effort to diversify my sample along race or class lines. Though this may be a weakness, it is perhaps worthy of analysis, such that if the subjectivities I am researching are largely available to a certain demographic, then why is *this* demographic is so pertinent to my criteria? Indeed, the overwhelming whiteness of my sample should be relatively unsurprising. It is not only similar to previous studies (see Bridges, 2014), but also is, perhaps, a finding in and of itself. If the adoption of disruptive discourses is a recuperative tool in service of power, then it will be mostly

available to those already structurally empowered – in other words, cis white middle-class straight men. It should probably not be surprising, therefore, that they were dominant in my sample.

Design – focus groups to interviews

The focus groups were semi-structured thematically, as I wanted to be able to steer the discussion while allowing participants autonomy to digress on the topic. The orientation towards masculinity set out during recruitment meant that the topic of discussion was always, to an extent, limited to that which was pertinent. Additionally, many have pointed out the paradox of the interview, which is that it requires a self-reflexivity and autonomy of voice not always on offer in the power relation between researcher and participant (England, 1994; Finlay, 2002; Wood, 2009). Enabling the participants some freedom to steer the topic has some ability to negate this. The themes (selected according to the themes that were salient in my literature review) every focus group covered, were: their own manhood, their work, where they have lived, romantic relationships, shopping, clothes, men's cosmetics, and whether they would consider themselves feminine. Following a “funnel method” where later focus groups were shaped by the topics that were salient in earlier ones (see D. Morgan et al., 2008), I allowed the focus of the groups to change according to what others would find salient. This would allow for direct comparisons on negotiations of similar discourses when I came to my analysis.

I recruited and carried out all the focus groups and interviews myself, which required careful consideration of myself as an interviewer, and therefore of self-reflexivity. Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) argue that for men, an interview on gender is simultaneously an “opportunity” and a “threat” – an opportunity on the one hand to convey a “powerful, in control, autonomous and rational” (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2001: 95) self, and a threat on the other in that the interview is contrived by the interviewer, thus putting the interviewer at least in some sense in control of the situation. They highlight several problems that may develop in the interview as a result of this, such as a struggle for control of the situation, a lack of emotional response, or an exaggeration of rationality, autonomy and control. For my research, there are two additional elements to consider here. First, the focus group setting exacerbated both the threat and opportunity elements, providing more of an audience to present masculinity, while also providing more threats to participants' control of situations. Here, for example, I found that emotionally-driven responses were less forthcoming among focus group participants than interviewees. And, second, in view of my recruitment criteria around supposedly “feminine” men, at a surface level it sometimes looks as though these problems did not materialise very often. Indeed, it was extremely common in my fieldwork for participants to continually claim to reject the power dividend that usually comes with being a man. Yet, as I note on several occasions, the rejection of the premise that masculinity came with certain expectations drove several responses that articulated various forms of autonomy from any outside masculine influence.

My own power relationship with the participants is also worth considering. There are several vectors to consider here, with race and familiarity important (I had met several of the participants before), but the two things that cut across every interview were the relationship of power inherent in the research interview (England, 1994; Kvale, 2002), and the relationship between me as a male interviewer and the participant as a male interviewee. In any interview or focus group, all of these things are inextricable from one another, but they can also be analytically separated for the purpose of considering my position and presence as an interviewer. The interview itself both constructs and is constructed by the research, an artificial situation in which data is produced dialogically, the result of a process that occurs between interviewer and interviewee (Cassell, 2005). As a result, interview data reflects and produces the relationship between the people involved. In terms of gender, it is worth considering how the participants read me as a man, as a researcher, and as a researcher on masculinity. I do not believe I present on first or second impression as obviously masculine. Physically, I am well below average height, my hair was longer than normal for a white man, and my body is not inscribed with manual labour. On top of this, my position as a sociology researcher on masculinity articulates a certain image. While being a researcher indicates a bookishness that marks out a lack of masculinity, a gender researcher is even more intrusive, presenting a challenge to the participant to be accountable for their gender, as well as certain expectations about my political outlook.

Considering all this – the masculinity interview as threat and opportunity, the extra challenges of reflexivity in the focus group, my empowered position as an interviewer and as a gender researcher – as well as being noticeably white, and speaking with a southern accent (a notable factor in interviews in the north of England), my interview strategy was aimed at generating a familiarity with participants. This is not to say that I overworked similarities between myself and them unnaturally into the conversation, but that I encouraged an environment in which they could speak or not speak as they wished, and treated my responses as if I were an interested party rather than a disinterested researcher. Where relevant, I did not hide my own opinions (agreeing with one participant that boys at school can be, in his words, “dicks”), and nor did I pretend that I was not using the interview to get certain data. Instead, I acknowledged these things. Indeed, I discussed at the very beginning of this thesis a moment during one focus group in which I found myself inadvertently smiling at the participants’ stories about their own experiences. Such an approach aimed to mitigate, at least to some extent, the power relationship between myself and the participants, and also aimed to avoid inducing responses participants may have assumed I was looking for. Being up front about myself was a strategy adopted to encourage participants to do the same.

Each focus group was bookended either side with a short word association game, beginning with the words “men”, “masculinity”, and “gender”, and ending with “men” and “femininity”. These were not designed for their responses to be used in the analysis, but to get participants thinking about the topics to come up during the interview, and to reflect on how their thoughts might have changed. The

themes were signposted by questions, though it was stressed that the questions were designed to be open-ended, and participants were encouraged to probe and provoke answers to the questions. For example, following my opening question, “do you find it difficult to live up to expectations of masculinity?”, many participants interestingly took the opportunity to reject the question’s premise, asserting that either expectations did not exist, or that they felt no expectations. To get them to discuss geographical differences, every participant was asked where they live, and where they have lived in the past, and whether they felt any differences in terms of masculinity in those differing locations. Around two-thirds through each one, I showed them all three of the five-minute sitcom excerpts, and I asked them questions such as whether they liked the male characters in each clip and whether they would describe them as masculine or feminine. I was looking for both the differences and the similarities before and after they were shown the clips.

As stated, I made the decision some way through my fieldwork to include interviews as well as focus groups¹². This was not my initial intention, but as stated, emergent methodology adapts to circumstances not only epistemologically but also logistically. Ten participants, as I managed to gain in the focus groups, did not achieve the range of participants I needed – I had not spoken to any bloggers or to any office workers. While I was in contact with the office workers, several of them expressed reluctance to take part in a focus group but were happy to be interviewed. For these, the design was like the focus groups, though some took place over Skype for logistical reasons based on travel and participant schedules. Interviews were bookended by the same word association as the focus groups, and were semi-structured around thematically selected open-ended questions, where the participants were encouraged to digress. Additional questions were added to each based on the recruitment criteria – for example, I asked the bloggers, both of whom were not paid for their blogging work, to talk about the differences between their blogging and their day jobs. There were, though, a few differences. The interviews were shorter, so I only showed the interviewees one sitcom clip, selected based on the profile of the participant and with which clip I suspected they would be most familiar, to encourage engagement with the clip. In an interview with a blogger¹³, for example, I was aware his day job involved public relations for a small company, so I opted for the *New Girl* clip, in which Schmidt has a similar job.

On top of logistical differences, there are some epistemological and ethical differences (though these two categories are also interlinked). Both interviews and focus groups are always going to have to deal with issues of researcher reflexivity, placing the researcher in a position of power over the researcher (England, 1994; Finlay, 2002; Ward, 2016). There were several facets of my fieldwork, some

¹² My ethical approval covered the interviews as well as the focus groups, as specified in appendix 3.

¹³ See appendix 1, and also table 2 on page 90 for a detailed outline of the participants’ backgrounds, recruitment criteria, and locations.

by design and some incidental, that partially mitigate this power imbalance. First, as discussed above, the semi-structured nature of the interview, allowing the participants to move the conversation and digress onto other topics grants them some autonomy over the interview process. Second, my own positionality and lived experience was very similar to many of the participants, exemplified by the story detailed at the very beginning of this thesis when I found myself smiling at a similar experience to several participants. And third, some of the opportunity sampling meant that I had met several of the interviewees in social scenarios once or twice before, putting the interview or focus group in a context of familiarity that would also help to level the imbalance. However, while the focus group's imbalance of numbers provides participants with greater autonomy, the interviews made the participants more directly accountable even while this allowed for a more in-depth discussion of individual experiences. At the same time, the focus groups' focus on interaction between participants may to some extent limit the participants' willingness to divulge more personal stories or emotional responses – especially in masculinity research (Ward, 2016).

As I carried out the fieldwork, I took note of several criteria for which my analytic method would need to account. I found that the participants' subject positioning was complex and varied. At different points in the focus groups and interviews, they took up competing and contradictory positions as well as stating competing and contradictory viewpoints. Faced with new information (either from each other, myself, and especially after watching the sitcoms), they would in some way negotiate or modify what they thought. I therefore need to be able to understand in-situ interaction and how subjects are formed in the everyday by responding to each other and other stimulus. The dichotomy produced here between the imposition of outside discourses on smaller interactions produced some problems with my methodology, which was one of the main challenges in figuring out how I would analyse the two datasets.

I found that the participants' understandings of what was happening on the screen often directly contradicted what I understood to be happening. Considering the power imbalance between researcher and participant, I was concerned to be able to examine why these different readings were produced. However, like the sitcoms, it was clear that the participants used and employed discourses, both from outside and from the sitcoms themselves, to construct their own specific images of reality. I found that these articulations regularly took the form of recurring tropes and ideas, or certain phrases that regularly areas of vocabulary, specific arguments. My methodology needed to take advantage of the production of these interpretations of reality, and reflect them against the discourses that they deal with, and the realities they subsequently construct – meaning I needed to be able to provide a constructivist account that analysed how the participants constructed reality.

3.3.3 Methodological criteria

The criteria produced from data collection indicate some similarities between the sitcom and focus group and interview data – the approaches both need to be constructivist, be able to deal with discursive conflict, and be able to analyse discourse as a topic. Some of the separate criteria do not have to conflict, either. The sitcoms require a method that acknowledges how narratives work, and the focus groups and interviews need to give the participants autonomy, as well as examine the methods used to overcome discursive conflict. The main difference between the two analytic approaches is that the analysis of the focus groups and interviews needs to appreciate in situ negotiation, and the sitcoms as a narrative whole. The two types of data I have chosen therefore require different, if ontologically similar, analytic approaches.

Critical discourse analysis

For the sitcoms, critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough, 1992) was chosen as I needed an approach to the sitcoms able to identify the conflicts that shape individual narratives in each episode or storyline. For my analysis, narrative refers to the idea of narrative structure – the disruption and resolution of something that is the basis for a story. In this sense, identifying the narrative of a sitcom does not require a methodological orthodoxy; the harder part is analysing what discourses the nodal points of the narrative refer to, discuss and make salient.

Van Dijk argues that critical discourse analysis (CDA) is concerned with “the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance” – or, more specifically, “critical discourse analysts want to know what structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events play a role in these modes of reproduction” (van Dijk, 1993: 249-250). CDA is used to identify the tools used and mechanisms created in order to reproduce certain power relations. It is “critical” in the sense that it does not take such power relations for granted, instead treating them as objects of analysis in themselves. It therefore satisfies the criteria of a holistic approach, looking at how such mechanisms are used to achieve an “end” in reproducing power, and therefore are geared towards a specific construction of reality. Among these mechanisms, in the sitcom, is the subject position – and how the subject positioning in texts dovetails with the subject positioning of my participants will become key in linking the sitcoms to the focus groups and interviews.

However, this holistic approach is not appropriate for the analysing the focus group and interview data (despite van Dijk stating above that it can be used to analyse interaction), as my participants constructed their realities through interaction. There was no pre-defined endgame, such that a CDA approach for this data would risk denying participant autonomy by granting interpretative authority to

the researcher – though this could be mitigated to an extent by a more sensitive CDA approach, other methods of analysis already provide mechanisms to avoid this problem.

Discursive psychology

For my interviews and focus group transcripts, I required an approach that explores how interactional conflict is negotiated and resolved, leading me towards two possible analytic approaches: conversation analysis (CA) or discursive psychology (DP). Both these approaches are interested in the question, “why this utterance here?”, but disagree over an epistemological question of what can be extrapolated from close analysis of the transcript. CA analyses talk between multiple people that looks at the micro occurrences within conversation, such as pauses, overlap, agreement, disagreement, hesitation, and interruption. Developed largely by Sacks (1995; see also Silverman, 1998), it applies a central focus to interaction between individuals, and how turn-taking crystallises relations of power between individuals. DP as a broad methodological approach can encompass different scales of micro interaction but is still concerned with the function of interactions between individuals. Perhaps the main difference between CA and DP approaches, though, is that DP finds reasons for utterances outside the text, while CA takes any pertinent context to be present in the interaction.

In the late 1990s, Wetherell and Schegloff engaged in a debate about the relationship between discourse and interaction. Schegloff (1997) first accused discourse analysts of imposing their politics on their analysis, and instead argued that politics may already be a constitutive element of the data, such that detailed technical analysis of interaction is more than enough. In response, Wetherell (1998) argued CA does not adequately contextualise each utterance to be able to answer *why* that specific content is chosen, as opposed to *how* that utterance is formulated by the participant. In order to establish *why*, the researcher must put the participant in context, of the interview situation as well as their identity. Schegloff’s short reply (1998) asserts that Wetherell is asking “why this utterance here?” from the wrong position, which he says is actually one that the analyst must consider *on behalf of* the participant, not as an analyst himself. As such, for Schegloff, a reflection on discourse is not outside the bounds of CA, as participants may orient towards wider socio-political issues themselves, and that political assumptions do not come from the researcher.

While CA’s emphases on interaction and conversational conflict satisfy some of my criteria, CA tends to focus on minor interactions at the expense of wider discourses. While some argue discourse can be systematically considered by CA (see, for example, Speer, 2005), DP already includes a systematic consideration of turn-taking and its relationship with discourse. Often associated with Potter and Wetherell (1987), as well as Edwards (1992; 1993), DP is both deontological and constructivist, focussing on “how social order is produced through discursive interaction” (Scharff, 2011: 26), and how speech and action achieves an external(ised) reality. As Speer argues, DP’s anti-cognitivism,

dealing with how speech achieves certain ends as opposed to analysing internal mechanisms through which discourses determine cognition, transcends the issue of the inside/outside of the words on the page (Speer, 2005: 104-105). By focussing on how speech achieves things, anti-cognitivism makes it irrelevant whether the researcher can study what is not explicitly stated, arguing that the (ir)relevance of discourse to interaction is a false dichotomy; discourses are only intelligible through interaction, such that discourse produces *and* is produced by interaction, both external and internal to it. DP provides an explanation for the production, and negotiation, of discourse within interaction. It can still tack towards a fine-grained approach to turn-taking (indeed, various proponents of DP disagree on how fine-grained DP can and should be), but explores how consensus, interruption, disagreement, positioning, and other phenomena that occur in talk achieve the construction of discursive realities.

The criteria outlined at the beginning of this section are further elucidated by three key concepts used in DP. The first is ideological dilemmas. For DP, contradiction is not a problem for ideology, but a function of it – ideology works by contradicting itself (Billig et al., 1989). Thinking about the conflicts within ideology, or within discourses, enables the processes of everyday reflection on the world. Secondly, DP understands subject positions as ‘locations’ within a conversation. They are “the identities made relevant by specific ways of talking” (Edley, 2001: 210). Subject positioning for DP is always variable, and often presents as contradictory (Potter & Wetherell, 1987); in response to each turn, subjects position themselves in new and different ways. Finally, DP employs the use of interpretative repertoires, described as “a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate action or events” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 138). These often consist of stock phrases, grammatical patterns or specific methods for dealing with situations in talk. Like subject positions, they are often adopted in ways that look contradictory. Though like discourse, they are not the same; interpretative repertoires are specific pieces of interaction, where discourse consists of a wider and more expansive set of ideas. Though the latter delimits the former, they are different things.

3.4 Discursive method(s) for data analysis

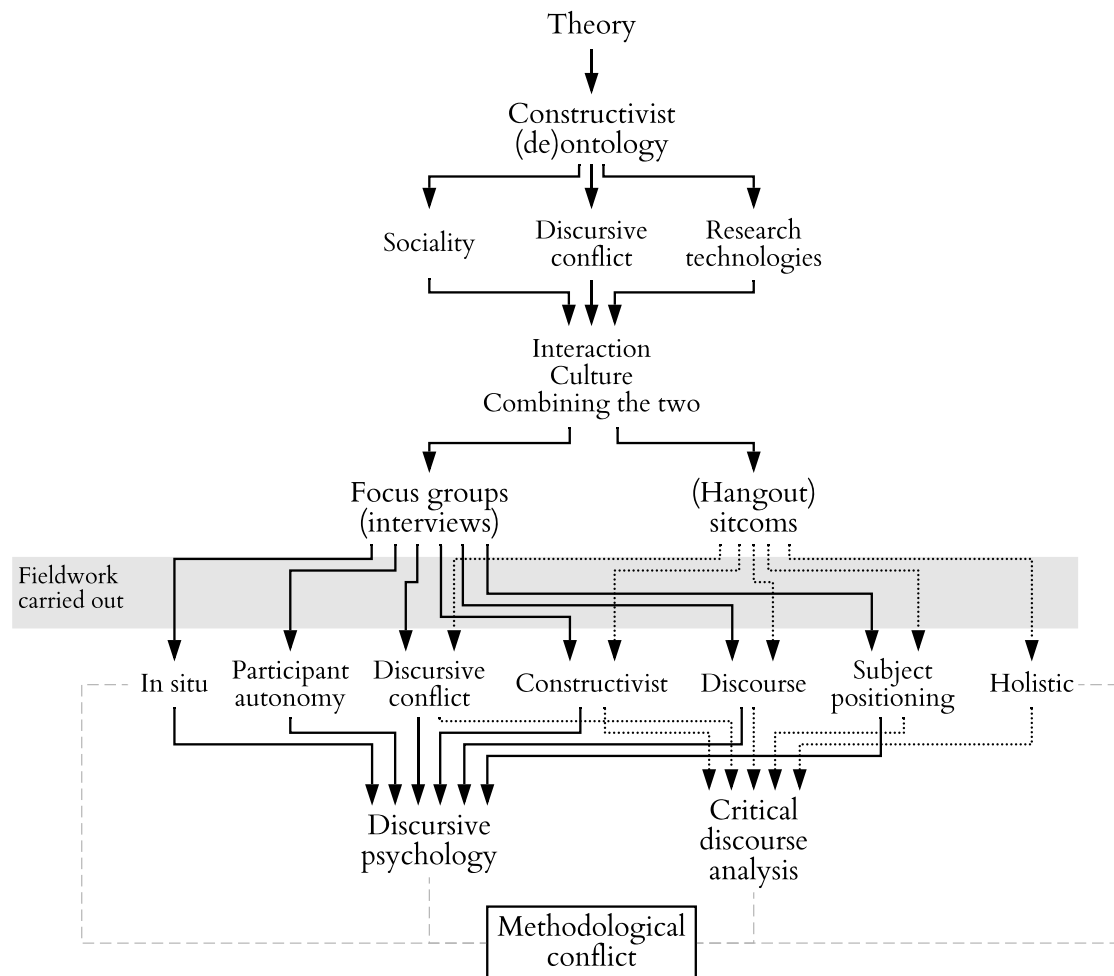


Figure 2 – Complex methods diagram

Figure 2 above illustrates the process of methodological emergence in more detail than figure 1 on page 41. It highlights that the conflicting elements of critical discourse analysis and discursive psychology need addressing, which is the aim of this final section of this chapter. In order to do this, it is worth re-examining my two empirical research questions here, labelled 1a and 1b on page 10, which contain three sections or stages – what are the discourses on masculinity, both competing and consistent, that arise from the sitcoms, and the focus group and interview data, and how are those discourses resolved and negotiated both in and between each? The first stage is to identify the discourses on masculinity in the sitcoms. The second stage is to identify the discourses on masculinity in the focus groups and interviews. The final stage is to bring these two datasets together.

Indeed, these two datasets were not used separately, but to answer the same questions and analyse the same discourses. There are three areas in which I drew on this relationship: one epistemological,

one empirical, and one interpretative. Epistemologically, I drew on the differences between the locations of each dataset, and the ways they encode and negotiate discourse. While the sitcoms represent a narrative whole, a dataset in which speech is deployed with forethought towards the construction of scenes, episodes, seasons and whole shows, speech negotiates discourse in conversation in situ, in quick response to individual situations. The differences here formed a key part of my analytic method. Empirically, I corroborated the links between the datasets by showing clips from the sitcoms in the focus groups and interviews. This logistical element allowed me to examine the interplay between culture and consumption at an immediate level. And, interpretatively, I examine the contradictions and continuities between my readings of the sitcoms, and my participants. In all these areas (epistemological, empirical, and interpretative), I was equally interested in continuities and discontinuities in the relationship between the two datasets. This section of my methodology provides a detailed account of the processes involved in each stage, explaining how I carried out the analysis using a two-pronged methodology that emerged from data collection.

3.4.1 A critical discourse analysis of hangout sitcoms

The first part of my methodology is a critical discourse analysis of four hangout sitcoms, *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *New Girl*. I analysed these before, and independent of, carrying out my focus groups and interviews, so it would work as a standalone analysis (I kept up with the sitcoms that were still being broadcast throughout the research process). The aim of this was twofold – first, I wanted to answer the first “third” of my main research question asking: how do these hangout sitcoms encode and decode the problematic conflict put forward by the concept of male femininity? And second, based on this analysis, I wanted to select three clips from the sitcoms for use in my focus groups.

This process began, as stated above, with watching every episode of each sitcom. From here, I identified the stories that were about men or masculinity, which often came with specific signposting. Television frequently decodes itself and makes its themes and discourses quite clear (Eco, 2004 [1984]), and a lot of the sitcom episodes I analysed used the words “masculinity” or “manhood”. For each of these stories, I noted down the nodal points of the narrative – the exposition of the status quo, followed by its disruption, and finally its resolution. From here I was concerned with two things: first, I aimed to look at the themes and discourses that the storylines were interested in examining. Critical discourse analysis being about the study of power, I aimed to look at the gender power structures the narrative of each storyline challenge and those which the storylines keep intact. And second, I wanted to uncover the frequent and regular mechanisms used to do this. These both became legible by grouping certain types of character together. Masculinity in the hangout sitcom appeared to adopt a certain vernacular, with certain tropes and ideas adhering to similar characters between sitcoms. Here, it became useful to

adopt the concept of subject positions, as male characters adopted certain positions that employed similar ideas to negotiate the conflicts between masculinities and neoliberalism. These were not character types, as they were not always coherent or applicable to the same characters over time and narrative.

I was then interested in examining how these subject positions reflected and negotiated wider discursive questions: what subject positions were presented as disruptive? What subject positions were presented as problematic and unproblematic? What subject positions were presented as good and bad? The aim was then to identify the subject positions frequently used, and then I could use those positions in order to see how my participants position themselves against their own readings of the sitcoms. Though these questions will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter, which discusses the sitcoms, it is worth briefly explaining this by summarising the three subject positions. First, the postfeminist male singleton, a phraseology borrowed from Brabon (2013), encodes the conflicts between masculinity and neoliberalism as a series of insecurities about heterosexuality, with male characters positioned as both desperately worried about being alone and incomplete because of being alone. Second, the hyper-heterosexual douchebag adopted a campy hyper-expression of both neoliberal subjectivity and masculinity injected with moments of pathos and sympathy. Finally, the househusband presents as a feminised, yet hegemonic, version of masculinity, in a comfortable happy relationship that nevertheless reveals several contradictions in neoliberalism's relationship with the family and with gender.

3.4.2 A discursive psychological analysis of focus groups and interviews

Analysing the focus groups and interviews, as stated, required a different approach to the sitcoms, due to the different ways in which discourses were used in each. Though I could have treated the interview and focus group transcripts as analytically different, I opted to treat them largely the same (this is discussed in more detail towards the end of this section). By this I mean the analytic method was the same, consisting of a fine-grained discursive psychological approach, exploring how discourse is made immanent in interaction, and how forms of otherness conflict and challenge discourse. As Potter and Edwards (1993) point out, discursive psychology relies on the researcher's abilities to adapt its tenets to given situations. For my purposes, particularly interested in discursive conflict as that conflict comes out in interaction, a fine-grained approach was necessary.

I began the analysis by transcribing each of the focus groups and interviews with a simple notation, ignoring, for the moment, the minor elements of interaction such as interruptions, overlap, and volume and tone changes. I then combed through the transcripts, noting down the use of similar themes and phrases. Here, I developed a familiarity with the types of discourses being accessed, the positions the participants were putting themselves in, and the othered constructions they positioned themselves against. I was interested in how the focus groups and interviews, as well as the participants more

generally, drew on both similar and different ideas, where they agreed with one another as well as where they disagreed. As such, this stage of the analysis aimed to place the focus groups and interviews in a wider discursive setting.

Once I grew familiar with the types of discourses being accessed, I grouped various ideas together on the basis that they involved similar positionings. I noticed three broad constructions of masculinity that drew upon certain phrases, ideas, and grammatical patterns – in other words, I identified three interpretative repertoires (IRs). This is discussed in depth in chapter 5 on page 89, but I will briefly summarise them here. The first, which I call advanced masculinity, grouped together constructions that positioned participants as more advanced versions of man than constructed others. The second IR, called outsider masculinity, grouped together constructions of men who either wanted to call themselves feminine or identified with subgroups such as nerds, geeks, or hipsters. And, the last one, which I call individualism, grouped together constructions of participants' subjectivities that said they did not care about gender norms, or that they were neither masculine nor feminine but individual. Identifying IRs, it should be pointed out, is not objective, and there is no guarantee that another researcher would produce the same set as I did. Instead, the identification of these three IRs should be a lens through which my research questions are explored.

Once I had identified the three IRs, I read through a hard copy of each transcript, and used colour-coded post-it notes to mark where each IR was used. I then identified where certain IRs tended towards individuals or groups, aiming to examine how each was used in each group. Though all three IRs appeared at various points in every focus group and interview, some were notably more common than others, while a few interviews and focus groups either contained an individual who used one IR more than the others, or the group or interview itself flitted fairly equally between two of them. Then, using the colour-coding, I identified a maximum of four interactions from each focus group and three from each interview that exemplified the same IR for each. So, for the focus group I did with two hipster-identifying men, the outsider masculinity IR was notably more commonly used, so I found four extracts that best exemplified the outsider IR. There were a few other criteria for selection of my extracts. As well as looking for good examples, I chose extracts that best exemplified discursive conflict, as well as ones where IRs were challenged. Finally, I selected extracts from across the range of the focus groups, including at least one from after the participant had watched the sitcoms.

It is worth pointing out several things. First, the selection of extracts for each IR will never be perfectly delineated; it is the nature of an IR that it is incomplete, contradictory, and deployed constructively to create meaning in social interaction. Therefore, all the participants employed some degree of all three IRs at various points. However, extracts were selected to show certain things about each IR, which are largely methods of performing femininity or anti-masculinity as a method to resolve the dilemma between the masculine and neoliberal subjects. However, none of the IRs do this without

reproducing a new dilemma in themselves, which many of the extracts attempt to work through. So, the chapters on the IRs explore how they represent a (de)construction of masculinity, and negotiate with othered discourses, as well as the sociopolitical reasons for that negotiation. And second, I asked all participants whether, and in what ways, they might consider themselves feminine. Though some of these extracts are included, quite often (though not always) they said more about how a fear of femininity constructed masculinity than about what the participants themselves thought about the content of femininity – for example, there were various deflections of the concept of femininity that contained themes that were much better explored via other extracts.

Once I had selected the extracts (of which there are 33), and demarcated where each passage or unit of talk might be said to begin and end, I returned to the audio files of each and transcribed the extracts using a more fine-grained notation (a key to which is included in appendix 6). My aim was then, using the three IRs, to examine how discourses on masculinity and on neoliberalism were being accessed, discussed and negotiated between the participants, myself, and the sitcom clips. I aimed to explore how participants used the three IRs to construct various “others” against which they positioned themselves. For example, participants treated the subjects they read on the screen in much the same way they interpreted and constructed subjects they encounter in other interactions, using what they saw on the screen to make statements about themselves. And in another example of the benefit of emergence, participants constructed otherness through geographical difference with other men in the UK, which occurred more often than either I or the literature might have implied, forcing me to explore the relationship between masculinity, geography and neoliberalism in more depth.

My analysis was fine-grained, looking at how the micro-processes of interaction, and the rules developed for that interaction, incorporated relations of power in the focus groups and interviews. It is through this intersubjectivity, and specifically through the taking up of positions against each other (as well as imagined others), that masculinity was constructed. I stated at the beginning of this section that the focus groups and interviews were analytically treated the same. So, where discursive psychology is interested in the discourses on masculinity that the participants were drawing upon in order to transmit an image of themselves, it is important to consider the company to whom such images were transmitted. My position as a researcher on masculinity will produce a different image from the participants than the focus group. This is both an ethical and an epistemological concern, incorporated into the analysis with a simple awareness of the nature of each transcript. Each participant’s subject positioning was therefore considered not only the context of the particular conversation, but also the context of the audience for and against whom they are positioning themselves, whether it was just me as a researcher, or the other focus group participants. As this positioning often changed and was revised in response to the sitcoms, my analysis was concerned with how and why these changes occurred, and what elements of discourse, taken from the subject positions occupied by the characters, forced a reflection and renegotiation of masculinity.

3.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have used the concept of emergent methodology to explain and justify my methodological choices. I explored how a constructivist ontology, and therefore an anti-cognitivist epistemology led me to the hangout sitcom, and to focus groups and interviews, examining disjunctures and continuities between the two. This methodology, produced after the establishment of several criteria stemming from data collection, is a critical discursive analysis of sitcoms, followed by discursive psychological analysis of focus group and interview transcripts. This process involves locating subject positions in the sitcoms and the discourses those positions reflect and exploring how participants positioned themselves before and after the sitcom clips, as well as how they negotiated discourses in situ. In the next chapter, I put this methodology into practice with a critical discursive analysis of the four sitcoms.

4

Recuperating masculinity in the hangout sitcom

“But our society has undergone a paradigm shift. In the information age, Sheldon, you and I are the alpha males. We shouldn’t have to back down. I’m going to assert my dominance face-to-face.”

Leonard Hofstadter, character in *The Big Bang Theory*

The character Leonard Hofstadter is an experimental physicist with tenure at the California Institute of Technology, and a nerd obsessed with comics, sci-fi, and gaming. In the above quote he articulates a theory of masculinity with internal complexity, power relations and conflict. “Alpha males” only exist within a system where some men are not alpha males, an acknowledgement that there are guys not like Leonard who have, a lot of the time, had power over “nerdy” or “geeky” guys like Leonard. Implicit in this is the suggestion that there are power relations between these different types of masculinity, where some are more dominant than others. Leonard emphasises the importance of the male body, too, “asserting his dominance face-to-face”, constructing a conception of masculinity in which brawn is valued over brain, next to a more advanced version in which brain is now valued over brawn. The most revealing part, though, is that patriarchal relations are kept intact. Leonard is not interested in using any change to masculinity to challenge power, but instead wants to use the newfound power of previously feminised men such as himself to assert dominance and have sex with women. He does not care to challenge the system as opposed to recuperate it to work better for men like him.

The process of recuperating dominant forms of masculinity is a recurrent theme in my thesis, and central to the four sitcoms I chose to analyse. I have already outlined in the methodology section the method of critical discursive analysis, and here I will examine what that means in the context of the relationship between the hangout sitcom and neoliberalism. I will then introduce the sitcoms – *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother (HIMYM)*, *The Big Bang Theory (TBBT)* and *New Girl* – briefly outlining the main characters the shows’ premises. Then the bulk of the chapter will be split into three sections, based on the three male feminine subject positions that characters adopted within the sitcom. The postfeminist male singleton (PMS) builds upon insights into postfeminist masculinities, exploring how certain anxieties and insecurities about neoliberalism manifest as a nerdy, neurotic and lonely heterosexual man searching for a soulmate. The douchebag could be considered update of the “jock” character type in US movies and TV, approaching the contradictions between neoliberalism and masculinity by performing exaggerated and campy versions of both, resulting in something approaching metrosexuality. And the third subject position, the househusband, specifically deals with the potential disjunctures and continuities between the nuclear family and neoliberalism, exposing some important contradictions in the constructions of neoliberal masculinities. None of them, I argue, can resolve the problem without resorting to rescuing the patriarchal settlement to which the challenge of femininity is posed – each, however, does it in importantly different ways.

4.1 Culture, sitcom and critical discourse analysis

4.1.1 Culture, television, narrative, and sitcom

In section 2.1 on page 15, I showed how media culture plays an important role in constructing the self-discipline of the body (Boni, 2002; Foucault, 1991; Genz, 2009; Hakim, 2016; Mathiesen, 1997; Urla & Swedlund, 1995), and doing so in a global context (Bauman, 1998; Bell, 2013; Cantor, 2001; Connell, 2005a; Hearn & Melechi, 1992; Nayak & Kehily, 2013). Culture in general, then, (re)produces discursive formations that articulate hegemonic ideology. As such, cultural artefacts are inherently contextual, producing a specific set of meanings from the socio-political context in which they are produced. The exact nature of the relationship between culture and politics, though, is not always clear. Raymond Williams (2009) argues that the analysis of culture is “the attempt to discover the nature of the organisation which is the complex of these [political] relationships” (R. Williams, 2009: 35). Stuart Hall takes up Williams’ definition, particularly concerned with how social life works to produce a set of values or meanings. For Hall, culture is intrinsically linked to ideology, such that cultural studies is an attempt to grapple with the problem of ideology, which he says “concerns the ways in which ideas of different kinds grip the minds of masses, and thereby become a ‘material force’” (S. Hall, 1996: 27).

In studying culture, Hall's aim is to, like Williams, reconstruct the society that surrounds it, and the dominant of hegemonic ideas that define that culture. However, while ideology produces a set of cultural meanings, there is a second round of meaning-making at the point of consumption. Influenced by individual positionalities, we produce specific localised meanings when we consume culture, which Hall calls encoding and decoding (S. Hall, 1993). Cultural studies therefore might be characterised as a cluster of methods for decoding cultural artefacts (here, I use critical discourse analysis) aiming not just to decode from the perspective of an individual subject but aim to identify how and why a specific cultural object was produced in relation to ideology, and what power interest that serves.

Television, though currently undergoing some big changes with the advent of streaming platforms, was throughout the 20th century and remains today one of the biggest forms of culture and entertainment, both in terms of consumption and the value of the television industry (Handley, 2018). Television occupies a cultural space where it is both mass culture, and consumed in the home, and no form of television is more relevant to this description, perhaps, than the sitcom. To briefly summarise the history of the sitcom, its earliest incarnations began in the late 1940s as radio shows, amidst the growth of the post-war economic consensus. Hamamoto (1989) argues that its piecemeal storylines in individual episodes mark out these early radio sitcoms as methods of mediating the cultural clashes of the time, specifically related to the shifts in constructions of class and immigration the post-war period. As such, here, sitcoms come to serve the purpose of resolving in neat ways the problems of specific ideologies – indeed, throughout the 50s, 60s, and 70s, most sitcoms focussed on the family unit, and the intergenerational conflicts produced by changes to the shift in economic distributions (Hamamoto, 1989; Haralovich, 2009). As such, discourse itself becomes the topic of the sitcom (Attallah, 2003), as ideology is negotiated.

Hegemonic ideology and economic consensus change, and the late 1980s saw a shift away from the economic redistribution of the post-war period to a neoliberal consensus. In 2014, Gwen Ihnat, for online culture magazine *The A.V. Club*, wrote that “*Friends* changed the sitcom landscape” in the same period. Ihnat argues that *Friends* (1994-2004) became television's most popular sitcom with a formula that “did not revolve around a family home or workplace, but a makeshift clan that seemed familiar to Gen Xers who were forming their own similar connections” (Ihnat, 2014). Rather exploring happy coupledom, this sitcom is more “interested in the *processes* of the formation of the couple, rather than the end result, around which there is no enigma” (Thompson, 2015: 22). Various names have been given to this format, which essentially follows the premise of a “twenty-something, heterosexual home-building” (Hartley, 2001: 67) plot revolving around an ensemble cast, including the “pal-com” (Wild, 1995) and the “hangout sitcom”, referring to the tendency for the format to be set in two or three primary locations at which the characters “hang out”.

The hangout sitcom contains several specific elements that explore the discursive conflicts and disjunctures of neoliberal ideology. First, it features neoliberalism's ambiguous relationship with otherness. While it centres and celebrates nerdy men (such as Ross in *Friends*, Ted in *HIMYM* or all the main male characters from *TBBT*), as well as the immigrant and working-class cultures that formed the neoliberal city (Zukin, 2011) through various foods and locations as well as main characters with immigrant families, its focus on small friendship groups can serve to treat otherness with a degree of contempt. As Chidester (2008) argues othered characters are included often in tokenistic appearances, and end up being, rather than characters in themselves, plot points that happen to the main characters. Indeed, Brook (2006) has argued specifically that such sitcoms contain a "virtual Jewish ethnicity", where many of the main characters are Jewish, yet Jewishness itself is obscured and not named, such that otherness is subsumed but not given due attention.

More generally, the characters of the hangout sitcom tend to follow a set of life milestones that the show naturalises, such that betterment is perceived to reside in relative career success. Howard in *TBBT* goes from mid-level engineer at the beginning of the show, to astronaut by the end; Jess in *New Girl* goes from primary school teacher to primary school principal, while her partner Nick goes from bartender to successful author; Rachel in *Friends* starts as a runaway bride and waitress to fashion executive; Marshall in *HIMYM* goes from law graduate to Supreme Court Justice. Self-entrepreneurship and self-improvement puts the onus of improvement on individual action, with the sitcom rarely accounting for the existence of sociocultural barriers, recalling individualised notions of neoliberal subjectivity (Brown, 2015; R. Gill & Scharff, 2011; Han, 2017; McGuigan, 2014). On top of career progression, the hangout sitcom constructs the heteronormative nuclear family as narrative endpoint, telling the story (literally in the case of *HIMYM*) of the formation of the family, rather than depicting family life itself. The family in the hangout sitcom is always present, yet often depicted as a clash with the work and labour-orientated values of the show's main characters, with Robin in *HIMYM* a prime example, as she rejects building a family in favour of working – indeed, this aspect of the hangout sitcom tends to have more of a detrimental effect on the women than the men. This attitude towards the family, both celebratory and also potentially deconstructive, echoes neoliberalism's relationship with the family, too (Brecher, 2012; Dingo, 2004; Stratton, 2015).

So, the hangout sitcom emerges in the same political juncture as the onset of the hegemony of neoliberal ideology and the related ubiquity of a postfeminist moment within popular culture (Genz, 2009; R. Gill, 2007; Taylor, 2012) – indeed, Hamad (2018) argues that *Friends* is "an unacknowledged ur-text of millennial postfeminism". I also contend that the intersection of these phenomena constructs particular forms of postfeminist masculinity (Brabon, 2007, 2013; Byers, 1996; R. Gill, 2014; Negra, 2006; O'Neill, 2014), inflected by a perceived diminution of economic and cultural patriarchy, as well as a shift in the dynamics of heteronormativity. As discourse is central to the sitcom, my analysis is primarily about drawing out and exposing the discourses that the sitcoms (re)negotiate (Hamamoto,

1989). On top of this, based on my focus on neoliberalism and the sitcom's explicit negotiation of hegemonic ideology, my analysis also adopts a critical edge, in the same sense as critical theory that specifically critiques and deconstructs ideological hegemony (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). The sitcom is uniquely well-placed for such a task, in making discourse the primary topic of its narrative. As such, my critical discourse analysis here aims to identify specific narratives about masculinity in the hangout sitcom, ascertain the moments of discursive formation, disruption, and resolution, and critique the discourses, competing and consistent, that emerge from these moments. Such moments sometimes include the plots of individual episodes, sometimes they refer to individual characters' narrative arcs, and sometimes they might refer to more general plotlines that happen over the course of several episodes or seasons.

My findings have shown that such moments of discursive negotiation between the conflicts of neoliberalism and masculinities, can be broadly separated into three subject positions. These subject positions are not character types (though they do adhere quite often to the same characters) but refer to the ways in which such conflicts are negotiated through the construction of certain character traits. Each subject position may be taken up at different points by different characters, to suit the narrative end and discursive negotiation of a storyline. For example, it was frequently the case that characters who had largely occupied postfeminist male singleton or douchebag positionings came to adopt househusband subject positions more frequently as their narrative arcs ended. The next section briefly outlines the premises and main characters of the four shows.

4.1.2 Hanging out with neoliberal men

Friends (1994-2004) has six main characters. Ross and Monica Geller are a Jewish brother and sister, with the show largely set in an apartment they inherited from their family. Monica is a chef, and by season five is in a relationship with Chandler Bing, getting married in season 7. Chandler's job is something in an office to do with I.T., the exact nature of which is unknown. Ross is a university lecturer in palaeontology with an on-off relationship with fashion industry worker Rachel Green. The other two friends are Joey Tribbiani, a womanising actor who lives with Chandler, and Phoebe Buffay, a masseuse who moves in with Monica before the series begins.

How I Met Your Mother (2005-2014) tells the story of Ted Mosby, a young architect in New York City, who narrates the show from the future to his two children, detailing the story of how he met their mother. Ted also has an on-off love interest, Robin Scherbatsky, a TV journalist who struggles with emotional awareness. His best friend is Marshall Eriksen, a law student, and later lawyer, who in the first episode becomes engaged to his long-time girlfriend Lily Aldrin. Barring one season-long split, the two are together for the entire series duration. The group is finished by Barney Stinson, a serial womaniser obsessed with suits.

Set in Pasadena, California, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) follows the lives of a group of nerds, the central pairing being flatmates Leonard Hofstadter, an experimental physicist, and the mostly asexual former child prodigy Sheldon Cooper, a theoretical physicist, both working at the California Institute of Technology. The show begins as Penny (surname unknown), an aspiring actress, moves in opposite them, triggering an on-off romance between her and Leonard – they eventually marry. Sheldon later gains a love interest after a perfect match on an online dating site with Amy Fowler, a neurobiologist, the two also marrying. They have two other friends, Raj Koothrappali, an Indian particle astrophysicist who is unable to talk to women, and Howard Wolowitz, a hypersexual Jewish aerospace engineer, who marries Bernadette Rostenkowski, a graduate student.

Set in Los Angeles, California, *New Girl* (2011-2018) features Jess Day, an “adorkable” (a portmanteau of adorable and dorky that was used in advertising the show at its start) primary school teacher who moves into a house with three single men after her boyfriend cheats on her. These three men are Nick Miller, an underachieving bartender, and on-off love interest and later husband of Jess’s, Winston “Schmidt” Schmidt, an insecure Jewish marketing worker, and Winston Bishop, a former basketball player who quit his career in Latvia and later becomes a policeman. Also central to the show is Jess’s best friend Cece Parekh, a half-Indian model who develops an unlikely stable relationship and marriage with Schmidt.

All four have all been (or are being) fully broadcast in the UK, all on Channel 4/E4, while all of *Friends*, *The Big Bang Theory* and *How I Met Your Mother* are all available, or have been at some point, on the streaming platform *Netflix*. The cultural relevance and importance of a television show is difficult to quantify, but in the first eight months of *Friends* becoming available on *Netflix* in the UK, it was the most watched show on the platform, outstripping its nearest rival by three times according to Ofcom viewing figures (Youngs, 2018), while *HIMYM* was on *Netflix* in the UK until November 2017. *TBBT*, meanwhile, consistently ranks highly among E4’s viewing figures (Jones, 2012), attracting well over 18 million viewers each season since 2012 (Anon., 2018). *New Girl* is perhaps less popular than the other three, but all of its seven seasons have been broadcast on E4 in the UK and are available on the streaming platform *All4*. It is also worth noting that the popularity of television over the past 15-20 years has spawned an online industry of illegal streaming and downloading of programmes, making these sitcoms widely available. Participants generally expressed good familiarity with all the sitcoms.

Table 1 below, for the sake of ease, details the three subject positions, along with the resolving method by which they overcome the contradictions of neoliberalism and masculinity, and the characters in each sitcom who most frequently occupy those subject positions. The asterisks indicate unorthodox or unusual instances of a subject position.

	Postfeminist male singleton	Douchebag	Househusband
Method of resolution	<i>Insecurity, displacement</i>	<i>Overcompensation and humour</i>	<i>Familial excusal</i>
<i>Friends</i>	Ross	Joey	Chandler
<i>How I Met Your Mother</i>	Ted	Barney	Marshall
<i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	Leonard/Raj*	Sheldon*/Howard	Howard*/Leonard*
<i>New Girl</i>	Nick	Schmidt	Schmidt*

Table 1 – Sitcom male subject positions

4.2 The postfeminist male singleton

Postfeminist insecurities, mostly about the possibility of heterosexual romance, abound for male characters in popular culture, with several authors examining a the preponderance of a postfeminist male singleton (PMS) character type as a counterpart to the postfeminist female singleton (archetype Bridget Jones). Negra describes the postfeminist male singleton thus: “in a (perverse) spirit of gender egalitarianism, deficient/dysfunctional single femininity is now increasingly matched by deficient/dysfunctional single masculinity” (Negra, 2006). Often, for a male singleton, “preoccupation with the temporal and discourses of time-panic are represented as feminine” (Thompson, 2015: 32), with constant neuroses over love, marriage, and settling down. Brabon (2013) has explored the PMS in contemporary comedy movies about men, arguing that the postfeminist male singleton encodes an economic and social anxiety that emerges as a set of insecurities about heterosexuality and finding ‘the one’. The postfeminist male singleton, says Brabon, is doubly-encoded, then, representing both a loss or deficit, as well as a reconfiguration, of masculine power. As such, the freedom granted by the single status of the PMS (demonstrated quite often by an overwhelming heterosexual success in a series of often fleeting female sexual partners), a freedom once celebrated in the figure of the bachelor earlier in the 21st century, is juxtaposed with an anxiety about remaining single, unlovable, and unfit for familial life. As Salter and Blodgett (2017: 49) point out, in *Friends*, Ross opens the series divorced from a wife who now identifies as a lesbian, while Ted is ostensibly the narrator of his show telling the story of how he met his children’s mother, but instead seems to be chronicling hopeless relationships one after another”, meanwhile, in *New Girl*, Nick’s inability to carry out the most basic of life admin demonstrates a lack of fitness for the family.

In a lot of ways, one would be hard pushed to describe Ross as masculine; he works in academia, is notably uninterested in sports, is not particularly big or strong, and lacks confidence among others. In fact, he is to an extent an archetypal nerd, driven often by a fear of bigger and stronger men. This last point about his own personal insecurities is a major factor in key parts of Ross's narrative, and is central to the on-off nature of his romantic relationship with Rachel. At school, we find out, Rachel was Ross's sister Monica's best friend, with the three of them growing up in close proximity together, which is where Ross's interest in Rachel began. In one scene, we see Ross dressed up and ready to take Rachel to her high school prom when her actual prom date picks her up later, despite Ross being two years her senior, a moment caught on video that once watched spurs the relationship between the two in adulthood. It is only as an adult, therefore, that Rachel finds out that Ross was in love with her throughout school; we later find out that Rachel has had feelings for Ross for nearly as long a time as he had for her, yet the show places the pathos on Ross more than Rachel. Though the audience is encouraged to empathise with Rachel, it is largely implied that Ross's inaction is what delayed their relationship for such a long time. We see the story from Ross's perspective, such that as soon as Rachel finds out about Ross's prom chivalry, Rachel instigates their first kiss on screen, implying that the major barrier to their not getting together sooner was Ross's inaction. This storyline has a few important implications. First, it reinforces the suggestion that heterosexual romance relies on male action and female passivity. It is not implied that Rachel could have instigated the beginning of a relationship considering she harboured feelings for Ross for so long. And second, its narrative centres the actions of male rather than female emotions. Though the audience is encouraged to see it as a missed opportunity for Rachel also, the centring of Ross's emotional wellbeing reinforces the well-worn idea that heterosexual romance should centre men, and treat women as the things that happen to them. As such, Ross's nerdiness may well imply some sort of subordinated masculinity, but his masculinity remains, importantly, intact.

If the centring of male emotions is key to the on-off romances of the PMS, nowhere is this more explicit than in *HIMYM*. The show's premise, off-camera narration, and even title, describing how the male main character, Ted, met the mother of his two children centres the journey around his insecurities and wellbeing. Indeed, the audience does not meet the mother until the final episode of the final season, and she is given very cursory attention when it is revealed in the penultimate episode that she has died before the show's story is being told, and that the entire show, really, is about how, even though Ted loved their mother, he has always been in love with his on-off girlfriend Robin. On top of this, the entire final season of the show, bar the last two episodes, tell the story of Robin marrying Barney, Ted's womanising friend, yet still centring the story of Ted, only for the show to inform us in the penultimate episode again that Robin and Barney divorced only a few years after they were married. The entire show gives narrative duties to Ted, whose voiceover means that we see everything from his perspective. Ted, like Ross, can be described as not typically masculine in many ways; he is an architect who dreams

of creating an artistic masterpiece, loves the *Star Wars* movies and is determined to convince his friends in a running gag that some knee-high heeled red leather boots he owns are high fashion.

Whilst we might fairly add Leonard and Penny's on-off romance from *TBBT* into this category also, with Leonard's nerdiness undermined by a continual lack of personal self-esteem that causes an ugly possessiveness over Penny, the role of the PMS is not always quite as simple. *TBBT* features Raj, too, who finds himself physically unable to talk to women and worries about being unlovable by women and unsuitable to familial happiness, and *New Girl* features an on-off romance between Nick and Jess that, as the title of the show suggests, appears to centre Jess's story rather than Nick's. To begin with the former, Raj has a form of selective mutism, in which he is physically unable, at the beginning of the show at least, to speak to women, unless he is drunk. Though Raj's literal inability to talk to women implies a strong level of heterosexual anxiety, in many other ways, Raj is the exact opposite of Leonard. While both are mocked for effeminacy by their friends, and both are nerds, Raj seems relatively happy and secure in his supposed effeminacy. He is unapologetic in his enjoyment of chick lit, as well as the television programme *Sex and the City*, and Sandra Bullock movies, and practises a daily beauty regimen. In contrast, Leonard is not just embarrassed at being labelled effeminate in any way, but also continually embarrassed at being seen to be a nerd in public, and especially in the context of heterosexual romance, at one point literally hiding all his nerdiest paraphernalia from his flat because he thinks it will put Penny off ever dating him. Yet, despite the many ways in which Raj is constructed as the most comfortable of the four male nerds in *TBBT*, there are two ways in which his character is demeaned such that any vague positivity attached to Raj's often-anti-masculine performance is undercut. In the first place, much of Raj's apparent effeminacies are put down to racial difference and a form of orientalism (Said, 2003 [1978]) rather than to gender, as such displacing the possibility of a positive reading of male effeminacy. As Lee (2015) points out, Raj's relative eunuch status, as the only of the four male leads to never have a long-term romance with a woman, plays into longstanding stereotypes about asexual effeminate Asian-Americans (Chua & Fujino, 1999; Dhingra, 2012). And, on top of this, while Raj shows relative happiness to continue with his chick flicks and beauty regimen in the face of mocking, he feels the need to continually fend off accusations of homosexuality in order to retain a certain construction of masculinity. As such, despite Raj's possible version of the PMS presenting somewhat differently, he is complicit with the same structures of masculinity as a relatively straightforward PMS.

In terms of Nick and Jess, it should first be noted that *New Girl* relies quite strongly on postfeminist reconfigurations of gender, in that while the show's eponymous new girl, Jess, is a woman, she can be fairly described as the female postfeminist singleton (R. Gill, 2007; Taylor, 2012). The show's title, *New Girl*, and premise of a woman moving into an apartment with three men already suggests that the show is concerned with neoliberal feminist notions of empowering femininity in an unchallenged masculine world, as well as a focus on individual over collective empowerment of women

(R. Gill, 2007; Lazar, 2009). For example, the first episode of the show features Jess struggling through her breakup by watching the movie *Dirty Dancing* on repeat and eating lots of ice cream, while her career trajectory from class teacher to principal indicates postfeminist notions of female empowerment (Lazar, 2009). Indeed, while the show often demonstrates a collective feminine camaraderie between Jess and her best friend Cece, a lot of their relationship is defined either by talking about men, or by encouraging each other in their career rather than as women as a group. Jess's status as a female singleton, though, also takes place in a context in which she, like Rachel in *Friends*, the mother in *HIMYM*, and Penny *TBBT*, remains largely the passive partner in her relationship with Nick. Though her pep talks with Cece often revolve around encouraging each other to play active roles in forming romantic relationships, tellingly, Jess insists that Nick made the first move. Nick and Jess's first kiss occurs in the corridor between their two bedrooms, when Jess is still in a relationship with another man, Sam. When Sam finds out about the kiss, both Nick and Jess insist that it was Nick who made the first move. Additionally, the show maintains a patrilineality that Gayle Rubin (1975) might recognise, as much of the drama in Nick and Jess's relationship plays out in the similarities and difference between Nick and Jess's dad, who frequently talk about Jess without her knowledge. Indeed, at one point, Nick takes entirely seriously Jess's dad's refusal to sanction their relationship, while Nick's eventual proposal takes very seriously a deadline that Jess's dad sets for him. As such, the active/passive binary of the on-off heterosexual romance is maintained.

Generational difference, while it marks out some significant continuities between generations of masculinities, also attempts quite often to explicate some differences. In one storyline in *HIMYM*, the novelty of neoliberal masculinities are the topic of conflict. The plot of second season episode *Aldrin Justice* revolves around Ted's rather bullying boss, Mr. Druthers, at his architecture firm, who designs a building for a big bank, that no one apart from Ted can see looks exactly like a penis and scrotum (though, interestingly, we do not see the building on screen). When the plans for the giant penis-shaped building are revealed, and the bank chiefs reject them, Ted goes directly against his boss's orders and shows them a different, more elaborate plan on which he has been working. The idea of towers or skyscrapers as phallic imagery is well-worn: as Williams observes, "in the popular imagination, the most shamelessly sexual building form is the tower, an idea so widespread it is beyond cliché" (R. J. Williams, 2013: 87). Mr. Druthers' design makes explicit this association, which rejected by the most obvious of neoliberal men, a group of city bankers, implying that neoliberalism requires a different form of masculinity. The rejection of Druthers' design indicates that the specificities of the skyscraper are as important as its form, which Williams relates to architectural profile. Williams argues the Seagram building in New York resembles its architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's large size and dandyish attention to detail, being wide and darkly imposing and also emphasising "pure line, fine materials and exact detailing", where "special attention was paid to the room numbers, doorknobs, elevator buttons, bathroom fixtures and mail chutes, as well as the furniture" (R. J. Williams, 2013: 93). Williams relays

the architectures of the skyscraper as an expression of the architect's phallus or masculinity, similarly to *HIMYM*. Like his skyscraper and phallus, Mr. Druthers is ruthless, unpleasant and dominating, his masculinity uncompromised and constantly in need to assert itself obviously. Ted's design and masculinity is much more carefully adorned and delicate and somewhat hidden. Parallel lines can be drawn here between Ted's adorned skyscraper and Lacan's concept of femininity as the adorned phallus (Lacan, 1985), where indeed it is common for the building to be described with feminine pronouns, and as the property of the architect. As Ted's design wins out, Mr. Druthers' masculinity is made to look outdated, positioning Ted's PMS as more advanced.

The PMS in the hangout sitcom, then, resolves certain tensions between neoliberalism and masculinity by presenting the insecurities of the subject position as the response to certain material changes to masculinity. The on-off heterosexual romance of the PMS plays into certain gendered assumptions about passivity and activity, suggesting a renegotiation of the heterosexual contract in which heteronormative familial happiness is not guaranteed, yet still requires the passivity of women. Arguably, the PMS demonstrates a certain femininity, here echoing my concept of hollow femininity to be outlined in chapter 9 in detail, present in contemporary formations of masculinity, that nevertheless retain masculinist assumptions and keep the patriarchal dividend intact, but also marks a change that is presented as normal. The normality of the insecurities and vague feminisation of the PMS's masculinities, I argue, are quite often achieved by contrasting the PMS with the next character type I explore, the douchebag.

4.3 The douchebag

The womanising jock is not a television trope that began in the 1990s, but the hangout sitcom features a specific version of it. There is a male subject position in the hangout sitcom that resolves the problems faced by masculinity in a neoliberal era through overcompensating certain elements of both masculinity and neoliberalism. So, while he talks about women as if they are objects of sexual desire and nothing more, his attempts to woo women often come up against reactions of incredulity or disgust. For every homophobic insecurity he has, he spends another two hundred dollars a new designer shirt. While his job in finance may in some ways present as masculine, he overcompensates for the lack of manual labour with frequent gym trips. I call this subject position the douchebag¹⁴, and he is most

¹⁴ When giving this chapter as a paper at one conference, one audience member questioned my use of the word *douchebag*, which refers to the bag used for administration of a tool use for vaginal cleaning called a *douche*, and thus indicates that a "douchebag" has frequent sex with women. I am using *douchebag* as a direct quote from

recognisable in *Friends* as Joey, in *HIMYM* as Barney, in *New Girl* as Schmidt, and in *TBBT* the role is most frequently taken up in slightly different ways to the other three shows by either Howard or, interestingly, Sheldon.

I mentioned at the end of the previous section that the characteristics of the PMS are normalised as a contemporary version of masculinity, and quite often it is via the douchebag that this occurs. The overcompensation of self-discipline to adapt to neoliberal subjectivity marks out the douchebag's character position as an extreme version of neoliberal masculinity, thus normalising the neoliberal assumptions encoded into the PMS. In this sense, the douchebag may be read as an update of the literary trope of the fool. In the process of othering the fool, it is made clear how his actions (as the fool is seemingly almost always male) serve as a mirror or constitutive other that forms the identity of the more central character. Shickman, for example, argues that King Lear's court fool, serves as a mirror to the King, presenting to the audience as a didactic, reflective warning concerning King Lear's stubbornness and refusal to learn from past errors (Shickman, 1991: 80-82).

Joey might be considered the innovator of the douchebag's fool role. In an early episode, Joey, an aspiring actor, successfully lands a role to star in an Al Pacino movie. However, it quickly emerges that the role is not quite what he expected; in the fictional movie, Pacino's character has a nude scene that he does not want to perform, meaning Joey is hired as Pacino's body, or "butt" double. After an awkward attempt at filming, in which Joey over-acts by clenching his buttocks too hard, the director fires him. There are several things to say about this scene, the first of which is to note the contrast between Al Pacino as a signifier of masculinity and the role Joey is hired to carry out to turn the male gaze onto the male body. The role of a nude body double elucidates many of the continuities between the modalities of bodily self-discipline for the feminine and neoliberal subjects. To turn back to the literature, the role requires all three of the forms of discipline described by Bartky (1998), requiring a body of a certain shape and size, constructing the body as an ornamented surface, and also demanding a certain set of movements and positions. Yet, in this narrative, Joey's over-acting and perhaps over-discipline does not produce a positive result; the neoliberal threat to the equilibrium is rejected, meaning Joey at this point struggles to really inculcate a neoliberal disposition. Such a moment might be read, with the episode being so early on in not only the run of *Friends* but also the dominance of the hangout sitcom, as the beginnings of the conflict between neoliberal and masculine discourses.

Similarly, in *New Girl*, Schmidt's job at an advertising firm in which he is the only male employee comes with a gym obsession and a complex about his body that manifests in a strong self-

New Girl, where Schmidt has a jar he must drop money into every time he does or says something a douchebag would have done or said.

discipline and a refusal to eat certain foods. However, where Joey struggles, Schmidt does not; though both have certain bodily disciplines that relate to their jobs, Schmidt's willingness to defer to those disciplines makes him successful, in contrast with Joey. In a season 2 episode, Schmidt engages in a series of contests with his cousin, also called Schmidt, to settle on who has the right to be called "the one true Schmidt". The contests begin with a series of bodily-related tasks, such as weightlifting, press-ups and farting, before round two, a competition judged by the other flatmates over who can present the nicest-looking plate of food. Eventually, Cece, Schmidt's ex-girlfriend, tells them that a true contest of masculinity rests on who is more comfortable in their masculinity, and therefore the winner is whoever can bring himself to kiss their housemate Winston.

Here, it is useful to reflect on the narrative structure of equilibrium, disruption, resolution. The equilibrium is presented at the beginning, where the viewer is presented with the first Schmidt, while the second Schmidt is introduced as a threat to this equilibrium. So, clearly this narrative is not as simple as being presented with a simple version of masculinity, followed by the introduction of femininity (again, this version of femininity is rather hollowed out). Rather, the introduction of the second Schmidt exposes the fragility with which masculinity, in the show, is constructed. With two identical subject positions thrust up against each other, the show only has room for one, and so each consciously attempts to construct the douchebag as best they can. The problem here is not who can use the name Schmidt, to which the resolution is both, but who is more masculine. While the second Schmidt wins the competition, the first one wins out in who is more masculine through a process of displacement of homosexuality onto the other Schmidt – he may be obsessed with muscle definition, cosmetics, and knife skills, but he is not willing to sacrifice his masculinity to being gay, like the other Schmidt. The conflict here is not the battle between the two Schmidts, but a battle between newer and older forms of masculinity, the content of which bothers neither. Because of this, masculinity and the continuing dominance of men stays firmly intact. To compare this storyline to Joey as a "butt double", in both neoliberal bodily discipline comes into direct conflict with masculinity's fear of femininity, but we see perhaps neoliberalism towards the beginning of ideological hegemony in one, and in a much stronger position in the other. In the *Friends* example, therefore, neoliberal bodily discipline is the disruptive element of the plot, where in *New Girl*, broadcast 20 years later, that disruption is assumed to be the norm, even while masculinity stays intact.

So, if Joey's struggle to imitate Al Pacino's backside represents an early example of the douchebag's overcompensation and over-performance of both neoliberal subjectivity and masculinity, and the contest of Schmidts is a more fully formed contemporary version, then Barney in *HIMYM* comes somewhere in between. Barney owns what he calls a "play book", in which he devises and records very detailed strategies for attracting women. Barney's "play book" combines neoliberal and masculine precepts in an almost campy manner, detailing a series of heterosexual manoeuvres in almost commodifiable product. Outside of a sitcom, there is very limited possibility of any of Barney's "plays"

working, such that his masculinity is quite often the butt of jokes, despite his play book containing various strategies that verge on sexual harassment. Barney is played by the openly gay actor Neil Patrick Harris, a fact Thompson links with Barney's hyper-heterosexual performance, arguing that Harris's open homosexuality and Stinson's perfect grooming and fetishistic aestheticism "work together to bring 'campness' to the fore as a key element of Barney's characterisation ... exposing cultural images of masculinity and outmoded ideas of masculinity as the 'natural' form of man" (Thompson, 2015: 24). In contrast, Ted's PMS role looks tame in comparison.

Barney's performances of masculinity are painted as a result of his own insecurities, which in turn lead him to not only name Ted his best friend, but also to name himself Ted's best friend, a fact that Ted vehemently denies, and which Barney ignores. Indeed, it is frequently the case that the PMS and the douchebag are written such that the douchebag overestimates his closeness to the PMS. For example, in the *New Girl* season 2 episode "Naked", Jess accidentally sees Nick's penis (before they start dating) and her response of laughter makes Nick feel insecure on a first date with another woman. Schmidt, who considers Nick his best friend, realises that this makes him the only flatmate at the time that has not seen Nick's penis. For the rest of the episode, thinking that not having seen Nick's penis means they are not that close friends, Schmidt is upset enough to concoct various methods of trying to catch a glimpse, such as peaking over a cubicle, hiding in the bathroom when Nick attempts to shower, and various forms of emotional pleading. The concern over being friendless reveals something of the douchebag's insecurities. By positioning the douchebag as an outdated form of masculinity, the ensuing anxiety over the lack of homosocial relationships points towards some form of deconstruction of masculinity, suggesting that a lack of support networks and emotional openness is not the healthiest way to live. Indeed, the best friend relationship between the PMS and the douchebag is frequently played out as healthy and positive, for Schmidt and Nick, as well as Ross and Joey in *Friends*, Ted and Barney, and Sheldon and Leonard.

Schmidt grew up with an overbearing mother and an absent father. In place of his father, it is strongly implied by the sitcom that Nick occupies the role symbolically instead. When, in series 5, Schmidt finally reconnects with his biological father, we see a montage of flashbacks of Nick acting as Schmidt's father replacement, bringing him a conciliatory milkshake every time a previous attempt to meet his father falls through. Conversely, Nick's father, whose main source of income is deliberately scamming people, was always present, but never particularly warm or reliable. Nick's relationship with his mother is not really explored in the show, yet it is strongly implied that while Nick stands in as Schmidt's replacement father, Schmidt serves the social role of "mothering" Nick. *New Girl* suggests Nick's father's lack of reliability and morally dubious income does not "prepare" Nick for the world around him, painting him as a failure – he drops out of law school before the series begins as he is happy working as a bartender, and has an indescribably poor credit rating that is mocked when he refuses to open a bank account, preferring to keep his money in a box next to all his unopened, unpaid bills.

Schmidt encourages Nick to re-attend law school on several occasions, and helps him to open up a bank account. The mutually supportive relationship this paints encompasses a moderate critique of masculinity, suggesting that emotionally supportive homosociality between men as a more positive relationship than competitiveness. However, Schmidt's supportiveness is largely based around instructing Nick in various forms of neoliberal self-discipline. Indeed, it is further implied in the nexus between parental relationships and male kinships here, that Schmidt's experience of a loving if overbearing mother prepares him for neoliberal disciplines in a way that Nick's father does not. Where Schmidt's lessons in femininity and womanhood from his single mother have resulted in success, the masculinity that Nick is taught by his father fails to make him capable of functioning in a neoliberal world. So, while their relationship presents something of a deconstruction of masculinity, that deconstruction remains continuous with neoliberal subjectivity.

Schmidt's lack of a father figure is likewise portrayed as negative, and a direct cause of Schmidt's douchebag behaviour, complete with a first season post-episode skit about a "douchebag jar" that he must put money in every time his friends say so, with misdemeanours including: the purchase of personalised condoms, indicating interest in the use of hypnosis lessons to have sex with women, and talking about his "sharkskin laptop sleeve". Never having had a father, Schmidt has learned a hollow femininity, which means that his desire to be a man results in a clichéd and affected performance of masculinity. As such, the show injects a lot of pathos into Schmidt's storyline, with sensitive stories about Schmidt overcoming his own masculine insecurities. In the season one finale, Schmidt has just begun to date Cece, and he visits her at work to drop off a present. Cece, who works as a model, is in the middle of a photoshoot with another male model, in which she engages in sexually suggestive poses with him. Schmidt lets jealousy eat away at him, and deciding that he is not worthy of Cece, breaks up with her, thinking she can attract a higher calibre of man. Several seasons later, after some up and down, the two finally settle into a happy relationship and are the first of the group to get married. As such, Schmidt's narrative arc largely consists in his progression from an immature, insecure misogynist and lothario to a secure, happy, wholesome husband and father, amid a series of trials that present his prior persona as understandable and sympathetic.

So, pathos and sympathy frequently underpin comedy performances of the douchebag, with Barney following a similar path to Schmidt. Barney's womanising lothario status more pronounced than perhaps any other character in any of these sitcoms, camped up to the point that his flat resembles less a bachelor pad and more an outhouse of the Playboy Mansion, complete with silk pyjamas and a television screen twenty feet wide (see also Shaw, 2015). A *HIMYM* fan channel on YouTube has even counted the number of women that Barney at least claims to have slept with throughout the show's run, totalling 195 (MeetatMacLarens, 2011) – usually a number associated with sex addiction, yet here simply played for a joke amounting to something like "boys will be boys". Yet, we are encouraged to sympathise with Barney throughout most of the show, from his backstory in which he became so

addicted to sex after the love of his life left him, to his sad rural upbringing and loss of virginity to his mother's friend. In the end, Barney has a child after a one-night stand and it is implied he becomes a responsible, loving single father. The pathos here encourages the viewer not only to excuse often unsavoury behaviour from douchebag characters, but to develop a sympathy for the difficult position into which masculinity is put today, of the struggling adaptation to a new set of capacities to the neoliberal subject, while retaining the heteronormativity and virile sexuality of masculinity.

I mentioned earlier that Sheldon in *TBBT* represents a version of the douchebag in an interesting manner. In fact, he adheres to nearly all the tropes that the other douchebags do: a lack of a father figure through childhood, campy comedy storylines underlined with a degree of pathos, a PMS best friend in Leonard, an extreme competitiveness, and an often-misogynistic view of women. However, there is an important difference between Sheldon and the three characters who tend to occupy douchebag roles in the other sitcoms, in that Sheldon is most of the time an asexual nerd¹⁵. Neoliberalism has an ambiguous attitude to the family (see Brecher, 2012; Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2007); whilst capitalist production is built on the nuclear family, neoliberalism's continual expansion into further markets, as well as focus on an ontological individualism, undermines the process of building families. As such, Sheldon's relative asexuality is the other possible extreme to which neoliberal individualism is taken, opposite the sexual promiscuity of the other douchebags; long-lasting bonds simply get in the way of processes of self-entrepreneurship, and it does not really matter whether that takes the form of abstinence or promiscuity. Indeed, both are also continuous with masculinity, with promiscuity and sexual prowess often dovetailing with an attitude that considers women below men, which Sheldon takes to such an extreme that he is uninterested in the feminine vagaries of romance.

However, I said that Sheldon is "most of the time" asexual – in season ten, he marries Amy Fowler, who he has been dating for three or four seasons by this time. There is a wider context to the relationship, though, most notably that Amy can largely be viewed as a "female version" of Sheldon. More precisely, Stratton (2016) argues that Sheldon's lack of growth and implied autism allows him to present a naturalised set of neoliberal assumptions. Like I have argued about the douchebag more generally, Stratton argues that Sheldon is constructed as a contemporary "fool" trope, following the idea of the fool as a truth-teller who articulates naturalised maxims unironically. Demonstrating many features of Asperger's syndrome, "Sheldon has learnt certain aspects of social life but they are not internalised" (Stratton, 2016: 6), making many of his pronouncements clear explications of neoliberal ideology. For example, in the season one episodes "The Big Bran Hypothesis", Sheldon insists on

¹⁵ It has been pointed out that constructions of asexuality as an autistic condition suffered by hyper-intelligent white men presents highly problematic images that fall into ableist, anti-black and anti-LGBT tropes (Walters, 2013).

sneaking into Penny's apartment in the night in order to clean her untidy living room. This reversal of the traditional gender role, where previously we might see a mother tidying her son's messy room in the night, marks out the importance of domestic cleanliness for both Sheldon and neoliberal man, recalls linkages in the literature between domestic labour and femininity (Delphy, 1984). Sheldon also writes a literal friendship contract between him and Leonard, and in later seasons, his deep investment in making sure his marriage to Amy is sufficiently documented and represents a clear neoliberal contract. Sheldon and Amy's marriage therefore marks an interesting method of making heterosexual marriage amenable to neoliberalism, making its legal contract status explicit. Being played for laughs, the potential subversion in his observations is diminished, naturalising the ideology behind Sheldon, in suggesting that deconstruction of dominant discourse is humorously abnormal. Indeed, the exaggerated humorous performance of Sheldon's relative asexuality, like Barney's heterosexuality, is underpinned with the fact that Sheldon's actor, Jim Parsons, is openly gay, injecting a comedic performativity.

4.4 The househusband

The hangout sitcom's relationship to the family, like neoliberalism's, is different from predecessor US sitcoms, such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) or *Happy Days* (1974-1984), shows that feature family or families as the topic rather than telos. Indeed, the hangout sitcom contains a contradictory relationship with the family, much like neoliberalism as discussed in section 2.4.3 on page 32 (see also Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Brecher, 2012; Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2007). These relationships are defined not by an obvious mutual dependency, but a contradictory set of subtexts – though neoliberalism in some ways begins to dismantle the nuclear family, processes of production still rely on it. Similarly, the hangout sitcom, I have argued, features the family not as a subject, but as a plot endpoint. The family is always assumed in the hangout sitcom to be the destination for the main characters – while settled family life is the clear aim for the PMS, the douchebag receives his absolution through, if not the nuclear family, then at least something similar. As such, the third and final male subject position in the hangout sitcom is what I have called the househusband, a character who gets married early on in the show's run, stays married for the rest of the show's duration, and best exemplifies neoliberalism and the hangout sitcom's contradictory relationships to the family. These characters, represented most often by Chandler married to Monica in *Friends*, Marshall married to Lily in *HIMYM*, Howard married to Bernadette in *TBBT*, and, interestingly, one of Coach and his girlfriend May or Schmidt married to Cece in *New Girl*, are usually portrayed as relatively down-to-earth and level-headed. The househusband is cannot be described as a comedic straight man, but he is not the butt of jokes like the douchebag and PMS often are – humour instead comes usually from a perceived emotional softness and a refusal to engage in masculine competition.

Marshall's emotional softness is best exemplified in the season one episode "Life Among the Gorillas", in which Marshall begrudgingly begins a new corporate law job, one that he feels he has to take to advance his career and ultimately work towards a career in environmental law, which is his passion. In an overt metaphor framed against his childhood love of a fictional anthropologist's book, also called "Life Among the Gorillas", Marshall imagines himself as an anthropologist among his bantering misogynistic new male colleagues, picturing them as gorillas. Via referencing the scientific theory of evolution, his masculinity is constructed as literally more evolved than his colleagues. The substantive differences between Marshall and the others are highlighted in a scene early in the episode where they mock Marshall's lunchbox, which his wife Lily has made for him, cutting off the crusts of his sandwiches and leaving an affectionate note in there for him. After acting the anthropologist and putting on a misogynistic act, Marshall eventually gives up and decides that being himself is for the best, exemplified when he sings a duet of the Elton John and Kiki Dee song "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" with Lily on a work karaoke night. While the episode therefore makes Marshall's colleagues the comedy characters, and in response portrays him as a more advanced version of man, it still makes a joke of the karaoke song at the end. The actor, Jason Segel, plays the scene in an almost campy comic way such that despite the scene implying Marshall's decision to revert back is a good one, it is still played as if such outwardly loving and emotional performances of masculinity are the outlier. So, despite the househusband being portrayed as a more desirable, more dominant form of masculinity, long-term relationships are still constructed as effeminate and campy by *HIMYM*¹⁶.

I mentioned earlier that Barney, Sheldon and Schmidt (Joey less so) all come from families in which a parental absence or imperfection drove their relative douchebag subject positionings. Marshall, though, is from a family that is depicted as loving and largely wholesome. In fact, the family's contradictory role in neoliberalism here is also exemplified by the position Marshall's home family occupies – Marshall's rural Minnesota family, the idyllic nuclear family, is portrayed as an older, traditional, slightly out-of-date form of familial kinship, that still comes across as idyllic that is not really at home specifically in the city. While Marshall is in many ways represents a dominant form of masculinity, he struggles to escape some level of denigration as a result of his rural upbringing. In the season four episode, "I Heart NJ", Ted contemplates moving to New Jersey with his girlfriend, and Marshall offers his views about New York, where the group all currently live, which plays into a largely friendly rivalry between the two US states. Where New Jersey is typically constructed in New York as backward, obnoxious and loud, New York is often constructed in New Jersey as snobby, elitist and effeminate. Marshall declares to the disdain of the group that despite living in New York, he hates it,

¹⁶ Marshall and the gorillas became the third clip that I used in the focus groups and interviews – once again I will refer back to my reading of this clip in several occasions throughout the rest of the thesis.

and loves New Jersey – though two very different places, Minnesota and New Jersey come to represent largely similar othered rural areas. His main objection is that his body is not suited to big city life: “I’m too big for New York, okay? I’m always trying to fit into cramped little subway seats or duck under doorways that were built 150 years ago.” So, where New York is taken to emphasise forward-thinking and mind over body, Marshall’s large size and Minnesotan upbringing is taken to be unsuited to this.

These ideas recall the association of body over mind that is emphasised in discourses on rural masculinities. Stenbacka (2011) has shown how Swedish television constructs rural men as backward as opposed to urban men, through an attachment to machines, physical labour and traditional gender attitudes within marriage. For example, in the Swedish docudrama *Anything for the Village*, a group of rural men invite an urban man to improve their culture and service sector, painting a picture of the rural as in some way needing help from a forward-thinking urban viewpoint. Indeed, this contrast of different forms of labour, where services and customer-facing work is associated with the urban and hands-on physical work associated with the rural, is echoed by Bye, whose study of the Nordic forestry industry found “local tensions between those who have a book-based education and those who have hands-on knowledge” (Bye, 2009: 283). For Stenbacka (2011), this is given rise by narratives put forward by popular culture, and both of these narratives can be read from *HIMYM*.

Bye (2009) shows that one point at which rural men in her study aim reassert their masculinity is through domestic and familial ties, and notably through fatherhood. *HIMYM* often highlights Marshall’s femininity through attaching it to a more caring form of masculinity than that of Ted or Barney’s New York-centric perspectives. Much is made throughout the show of Marshall’s closeness to his family, something the other characters with their dysfunctional families find perplexing. The results of this are twofold, and somewhat contradictory: while Marshall’s caring masculinity helps him on the way to an acceptable and hegemonic form of manhood through making him the first of three main men to start a family, this element of him is also shown to be somewhat backward. In both situations, however, Marshall’s masculinity is constructed within the confines of neoliberalism. His femininity is given a twofold pass, both because it is heteronormatively reconciled as necessary for starting a family, and through dismissing it as a side-effect of his being rural; Marshall’s heteronormative reconciliation simultaneously helps to displace the otherness of his rurality.

The househusband, though, is not always from a typical nuclear family. Both *TBBT* and *New Girl* largely have the househusband position occupied by a character who just as often occupies the douchebag role. For both Howard in the former show, and Schmidt in the latter, in fact, the journey from douchebag to househusband is the key part of their narrative arcs. Here, heteronormative bliss becomes the naturalised and logical endpoint for all masculinities, the moment at which their insecurities vanish because they have found a woman who loves them. Both have stereotypically Jewish overbearing mothers, Howard even to the extent that at the beginning of the show, he lives with his

mother even as a grown adult with a master's degree in engineering. Howard's immaturity is compounded by frequent misogynistic jokes, such as an early episode where he develops a mathematical formula for the likelihood of a woman sleeping with him, which includes what he calls "the Howard co-efficient", calculated by the woman's "neediness times dress size squared". He also shows a sexual interest in Penny early on, even though she is disgusted enough by his attitude to sit him down halfway through season two to directly address his attitudes to women. However, Howard manages to quickly turn her disgust into sympathy by telling Penny that his unpleasant attitudes stem from being mistreated by women in several relationships in the past – we see again here an example of the douchebag's mistreatment of women becoming a point of pathos. After Penny shows sympathy, Howard attempts to kiss her, leading her to punch him in the nose. Having clearly not learnt his lesson, Howard chalks off the interaction as having got "halfway to pity sex" with her. This scene successfully achieves several things. First, it completely negates any male responsibility for misogyny, sexism or patriarchy, framing Howard as a victim of male insecurity and oppression instead of holding him accountable, and, second, Penny's disgust at the idea of Howard as a sexual prospect marks out the nerd as insufficiently masculine.

In season three, Howard meets Bernadette, at the time a graduate student, and the two marry a season later. Now married to Bernadette, Howard's sexual advances to women largely stop, and instead his heterosexual misdemeanours come to haunt him, positioning his masculinity as further advanced and less comical having adopted a househusband position. In season seven, for example, Howard and Bernadette go on a double date with Raj and another woman, who realised she recognises Howard for the fact that she had been on a date with him several years before Howard was married, and he had clogged her toilet and flooded her bathroom. As such, Howard's earlier explicit misogyny is framed as backward, with his masculinity updated to suit heteronormative equilibrium. The only way for the douchebag to receive any real absolution from his past is to marry a woman, as is the case with Schmidt in *New Girl* too – Schmidt drops much of his douchebag behaviour when he and Cece develop a healthy relationship, as he overcomes his own insecurities developed from his overbearing mother, much like Howard.

Chandler has a different backstory entirely – his parents are divorced, though still friendly, after his dad, Charles Bing, comes out as a gay man who works as a drag queen called Helena Handbasket in a show called "Viva Las Gay-Gas", though Charles's identity is very vaguely defined, with the writers either deliberately or unknowingly conflating drag queen and trans woman identities¹⁷. This is a source of much consternation to Chandler, who finds himself so embarrassed by Charles that he avoids

¹⁷ Indeed, it is difficult to know whether to call Chandler's father Charles or Helena, and what pronouns to use when referring to them.

his father for many years. Charles/Helena serves as a plot device to construct Chandler's gender, such that his father's apparent dysphoria becomes a key element in various plot points, such as a love of musical theatre that he is roundly mocked for, and several implications that his interest in sports is merely for his acceptance as "one of the guys". Nevertheless, Chandler's relationship with Monica is by far and away the longest of any romantic relationship in *Friends*, and as such, he is held up as, in some way, a dominant form of masculinity – both Ross and Joey at various points seek out Chandler's advice on romance and relationships. So, while the hangout sitcom frequently frames the emotional work invested into long-term heteronormative relationships as effeminate, through framing Chandler's identity as effeminate, it retains the heteronormative nuclear family as the logical endpoint for masculinities.

4.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I outlined the ways in which the hangout sitcom might be considered a neoliberal subgenre of the sitcom format, partly thanks to the coincidence of its advent with the onset of neoliberalism, but also in terms of the way it handles family themes, otherness, and asserts various forms of individualist and postfeminist politics. I then used various examples from the sitcoms to analyse how the three subject positions I drew from them deal with the conflicts between neoliberalism and masculinity. The postfeminist male singleton uses neuroticism and insecurity about heterosexuality to explore these contradictions, as in Ross in *Friends*, Ted in *HIMYM*, Leonard in *TBBT*, and often Nick in *New Girl*. The douchebag over-emphasises both masculinity and neoliberal subjectivity in campy performances, overcompensating for the contradictions between each, yet also injecting pathos and sympathy into the character. This can be done in different ways, as I explored in the differences between the hyper-heterosexuality of Joey in *Friends*, Barney in *HIMYM*, Schmidt in *New Girl*, compared with the asexuality of Sheldon in *TBBT*. Last, I looked at the contradictions that inhere in the househusband's apparent occupation of dominant masculinity, and his feminisation thanks to domestic forms of labour, as well as associations with the body and with geography, through characters such as Chandler in *Friends* and Marshall in *HIMYM*, and the interesting transitions of Howard and Schmidt from douchebag to househusband in *TBBT* and *New Girl*. From the individual storylines through to the broad similarities between them, much of this analysis brings forth the contradictions between neoliberalism and masculinity, exploring how those discursive conflicts are negotiated, dealt with, and resolved, or even left unresolved, in various ways. These conflicts, by now established as a key element of my research, worthy of analysis in themselves, will now be used in two ways: reflected upon in my discussion chapter 9 as data in themselves, and also used to introduce such conflicts in my focus groups and interviews with short clips of some of the sitcoms.

In this vein, it is worth saying something about the selected clips before I move on: in section 3.3.2 on page 50, I outlined the three clips I chose to show in the focus groups, stating I chose and edited the clips before I analysed the sitcoms. To briefly reiterate, I chose clips from three markedly different time periods to explore the extent of ideological hegemony; I chose clips that had clear narratives of discursive conflict; I opted for a thematic diversity in the storylines of each, and in order to encourage interaction with the clips, I chose ones that would be typical storylines of the characters involved. Additionally, on page 51 in footnote 10, I mentioned that because I selected the clips before I analysed the sitcoms, none of the participants ended up interacting with anything from *TBBT*, and as this chapter (and the next three) demonstrates, nerd and geek culture became an important element of my research. Though I would rectify this were I to re-undertake or expand the research, it did not appear to stunt discussion of nerd and geek masculinities, with *TBBT* even being mentioned by participants explicitly, and other times describing themselves as geeks or nerds. Also, though I aimed for thematic diversity in selecting the clips, the aim of showing the clips was to analyse if and how participants interacted with the direct conflicts of neoliberalism and masculinity on screen, looking for discontinuities between the sitcoms and participants as well as continuities. On top of this, male nerds were not completely absent from the clips themselves, even if they were not the topic of discussion.

5

Disavowing masculinity with interpretative repertoires

The next three chapters after this one each explore each of the three interpretative repertoires (hereafter, IRs) that I drew from the focus group and interview data, and how those IRs were constructed, negotiated and challenged throughout the conversations. I begin with the advanced masculinity IR, followed by the outsider masculinity IR, then the individualist IR. Before this, chapter 5 introduces the relationship between the three IRs, neoliberalism and masculinity, using two examples from the same focus group to outline how my analysis unfolded.

5.1 Interpretative repertoires

My analysis of the focus groups and interviews identified three interpretative repertoires employed by my participants in constructing their identities as men, which I call advanced masculinity, outsider masculinity, and ‘individualism’. Each of the IRs consisted in the positioning of the participant against what Wetherell and Potter (1992: 95) might call “some absent other”, here constructed as an excessive or outdated masculinity, usually drawing upon discourses about rural (Bye, 2009; H. Campbell & Bell, 2000; Stenbacka, 2011) and generational (Goedecke, 2018; Harris, 2017; McLeod, 2002) difference. Therefore, all three of them disavowed masculinity, maleness, or patriarchy in different ways, a finding that recalls several other pieces of research, such as Wetherell and Edley (1999), Holmgren (2011) and Goedecke (2018), and Gilson (2016). Paradoxically, in invoking excessive or outdated masculinities as othered, the participants themselves found various ways of attempting to position themselves as, if not feminine, then at least as marginalised, subordinated men, or ambivalent about masculinity. However, the sense in which we can call such positioning either feminine or othered in any material way is dubious – in chapter 9, I expand on this with the concept of “hollow femininity”.

To summarise the three IRs, it is instructive to see how they answer two central questions: first, does the participant see masculinity as having any influence on how he acts? And, second, does the participant abide by the rules that they see masculinity as setting? Figure 3 below outlines the answers to these questions about the IRs, with additional information that will become pertinent throughout my analysis, about how and why each IR was used in conversation, and how the IRs roughly correspond to focus group, interview, location and recruitment criteria.

	Advanced masculinity	Outsider masculinity	Individualism
<i>Does the participant see masculinity as having any influence on how he acts?</i>	Yes	Yes	No
<i>Does the participant abide by the rules that they see masculinity as setting?</i>	Yes, but	No	n/a
<i>What is the conflict that this IR negotiates?</i>	How do you simultaneously account for and other backwards masculinities?	Can masculinity ever be “outside” if it remains masculinity?	How do you identify as male while rejecting the idea that gender is relevant to you?
<i>What conversational moment calls for this IR?</i>	Sustaining masculinity /patriarchy	Accounting for interpersonal relationships	Rejecting masculinity/abrogating responsibility for patriarchy
<i>In which interviews or focus groups was this IR most common?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Johnny, David, and Kurt (6.1/8.2) • Jarvis/Lou (6.2) • Iggy and John (6.3/7.2) • Robert (6.4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • George and Ringo (7.1) • Iggy and John (6.3/7.2) • Elliott (7.3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Riley, Freddie, and Paul (8.1) • Johnny, David, and Kurt (6.2/8.2) • Roy/Matt (8.3)
<i>Which location is this IR most common?</i>	London, northern university town	London	Southwest town, northern university town
<i>What recruitment criteria does this IR most associate with?</i>	Femininity, office work, bloggers, hipsters	Hipster, nerd, bloggers	Femininity, retail work, office work

Table 2 – Participants and interpretative repertoires

The first IR I have called “advanced masculinity”. In this model, the participant positions himself against an older, backwards, and outdated form of masculinity. This IR sees masculinity as relevant to the everyday life of the proponent, and indicates the participant wants to be seen as masculine in some sense, but with an important caveat. In the advanced masculinity IR, masculinity has changed, with the participant positioning his masculinity as further evolved or advanced. This constructed “backwards” man was not only temporally different, but also often geographically different (regularly invoking classed or racial stereotypes), with the advanced masculinity IR often referring to a perceived urban/rural divide in forms of contemporary masculinity (Bell, 2009).

When employing the “outsider masculinity” IR, participants again accepted that they are in some way influenced by norms of masculinity, but that such influence involves rejection of or ambivalence about masculine norms or denial that they behaved in a masculine way. As such, participants using this IR position themselves as outside of more dominant forms of masculinity, openly expressing a sense of otherness, often through nerd, geek or hipster cultures. “Outsiderness” here was often woven into a story several participants told, where negative experiences with boys at school who the participant perceived to be more masculine became direct causes of finding acceptance and success in London, where they as outsiders found that they thrived.

In the third IR, which relied on various forms of individualism, the notion of paying any attention to gender norms was rejected, whether they existed or not. The participants who responded in this manner said that they did not view gender as relevant to their lives of identities, even while identifying fully as male¹⁸. Most often, the individualist IR recalled McGuigan’s notion of the cool-capitalist subject of neoliberalism, who is nonchalant and uncaring, at least performatively, about the outside world. As such, the ontological individualism of neoliberalism is heavily articulated in this IR. Additionally, it can be connected to literature on postfeminism, in which culture or politics is taken to be irrelevant to subject formation.

5.2 Examples with and without sitcoms

Below, I have used two extracts from the focus group that took place in a university in a northern town to both explore how the three IRs were used often contradictorily in conversation and to exemplify how my methodology works. Extract 1 contains examples of all three IRs. On line 1, the “image” to

¹⁸ This is not to link the individualist IR to current trends among young people towards genderfluid, non-binary or genderqueer identities (Hines, 2018; Marsh, 2016; Risman, 2018) – if anything, the two ideas, as I will show in chapter 8, are almost contradictory.

which I refer is an abstract, normative male body image as perceived on social media platforms, prompted by the invocation of that image by the participants.

Extract 1

- 1 Greg Is that an image that's af—(0.4) affected any of you (1.4) at any point?
- 2 David: ↑When I was younger. (0.6) I mean, I was umm -- I'm a short guy, like, I'm 5ft 7
3 now. When I was younger I was always like the little kid in cla:ss and (.) it always
4 got to me quite a lot but these days, like (.) who gi:ves a shit like it just for me it
5 just do:esn't matter↑. (.) I'm perfectly comfortable with who I am and what I look
6 like↑ so (1.0)
- 7 Johnny: ↑Ye-ah (.) no I think I (.) from a young age now I've always been (.) quite skinny
8 so (.) that's always be:en (0.9) been a little bit of an issue for me, not anymore but
9 (0.4) ((intake of breath)) I was always you know the skinniest person at scho:ol, err
10 in my group of friends
- 11 David: mmm
- 12 Johnny: >So I think yeah< that probably affected me a little bit=
- 13 David: =°probably°=
- 14 Johnny: =but not anymo:re
15 (1.1)
- 16 Kurt: °yeah° (0.6) I mean, I've always been a bi:t (0.9) pretty (.) pretty:: you kno:w, I've
17 'ad problems with my weight li:ke in the past when I were at school but I mean
18 li:ke (1.8) I mean li:ke (0.4) I've been (.) improvin' a lot and that, and it tend=I tend
19 to see it now on the reverse, 'cos a lot of people who look good in school tend to
20 (0.5) let themselves go (.) [which] is interestin'=
21 David: [mmm]
- 22 Johnny: =ye:ah it's true

When David first responds, he opens on lines 2-6 by first employing the outsider masculinity IR, positioning himself as an outsider compared to the other boys by building on a longstanding association of masculinity with bodily strength (M. Atkinson, 2008; Hearn, 2012; D. H. J. Morgan, 1992). At line 4, however, he moves slightly, asking and emphasising “who *gives* a shit?”. Where at school he was made to feel an outsider, today he seems to feel much more ambivalent about masculinity, moving toward an individualist IR, saying “just for me it just doesn't matter. I'm perfectly comfortable with who I am and what I look like” (lines 5-6). Here, David demonstrates one way in which two of the repertoires can interact. In table 2 on page 90, the outsider masculinity and individualist IRs have completely

different answers to whether the participant believes masculinity to have any relevance to the way he acts. For the former, he does, and for the latter he does not. By deploying the two IRs in tandem (not just concurrently), David here demonstrates how IRs are used, not as coherent constructions of discourse, but as often contradictory concepts deployed in situ.

Johnny responds by using the outsider masculinity IR too, emphasising difference from his school friends again through his body shape, asserting he was the “skinniest” (line 9). With encouragement from David, including several murmurs of approval, he takes a similar tack – it does not bother Johnny anymore (lines 8-9). Johnny does not explain why this is the case, and though David does not explicitly do so either, David does reference outside influence on his ambivalence on line 4 when he says “these days”, perhaps referring to a structural shift in the construction of masculinity. So, despite the apparent agreement between Johnny and David, Johnny steers clear of the advanced masculinity IR by not making his rejection of masculinity incumbent on anything other than being an “other” or an outsider, explicating the difference between the two repertoires.

Likewise, Kurt begins by constructing an outsider masculinity on line 16-18, when he seems to identify with the other two by starting with a “yeah”, and comparing his situation of having “weight problems” at school to Johnny being the skinny kid. However, for Kurt, his eventual positioning moves towards some conception of an advanced masculinity, as he positions himself against a backward other on lines 19-20, saying that “the people who look good in school tend to let themselves go”. Though he does not explicitly reference men or masculinity in this passage, given the context of the conversation, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that Kurt here is constructing an explicitly masculine other, indicating that the bodily discipline of those men who were popular at school has somewhat diminished in more recent years, thereby positioning Kurt himself as a more advanced form of masculinity.

In this example, there are several points worth highlighting. First, none of the men are keen on actively endorsing any form of masculinity, though there are arguably a few occasions of passive forms of endorsement. Through various techniques, they all work to distance themselves from masculinity, yet in doing so, position themselves as a different type of masculine. Second, they do this by constructing others against which they define their own versions of masculinity, each time in this example taking the form of the popular boy(s) at school, implied in David’s “little kid in class” (line 3), Johnny’s “skinniest person at school” (line 9) and more explicitly constructed Kurt’s “people who look good in school”. And, third, by answering an unqualified “yes” to, or remaining ambivalent about, the existence of masculinity, these three repertoires all fall short of a serious critique of masculinity (this is not to say moments of critical reflection did not occur on occasions).

Though otherness was explicitly constructed in extract 1, participants frequently used characters in the sitcom clips as othered forms of masculinity against which they constructed their own sense of masculinity. Using the same focus group, extract 2 below demonstrates how the same stories became

imbued with a different repertoire, and came to contradict each other, after interacting with the sitcoms. This extract followed the clip from *New Girl* in the same focus group, in which the two Schmidts engage in a competition about who is the manliest, through a series of contests that start with a clash of bodily strength, and end with determining who is able to kiss another man.

Extract 2

- 1 Greg: Which of the two (.) Schmidts did you: sympathise with more? (0.6) The younger
2 guy or the older guy?
- 3 David: Sort of, umm, a:ctually, maybe the younger guy, because of sort of (.) 'cos he's
4 physically sma:ller (0.7) u:mm (0.8) and on that basis, I: (.) felt I could connect
5 with him more
- 6 Greg: Mm hmm
- 7 David: But, otherwise, I just thought them (0.7) pair of go:ons really, like! hhhh
- 8 Johnny: Yeah, I wouldn't, u:h, yeah, I wouldn't probably say I'd sympathise with either of
9 them.
- 10 Greg: Right, okay.
- 11 Kurt: Nah, I think (.) probably: (.) neither of them.
- 12 Greg: Okay
- 13 Kurt: I mean, like (.) could pick up (.) certain thi:ngs, I mean (.) I haven't watched it
14 before, but do they represent different forms of (.) masculinity don't they hh?
- 15 Johnny: I've never: (1.0) I've never had to measure myself [doing] (.) stupid shit like that=
16 [right]
- 17 Greg: [[against somebody], if you know what I mean↑]
- 18 Johnny: [[Yeah hhhh] it's ma::dness, innit]
- 19 David: [hhhh]
- 20 Greg: Like you might do something stupid, but you don't do it (0.4) because you're in
21 Johnny: competi:tion with somebody, to try and show you're mo:re (.) more of a man (.) or
22 more, or even just a person. [But u:mm] yeah, that's=
23 [hhh yeah]
- 24 David: =so I wouldn't sympathise with him for= or doing that. I just, yeah (.) it's not my:
25 Johnny: (2.0)
- 26 David: Ye:ah, I agree.
- 27 Johnny: But lads do that, don't they?
- 28 David: Ye:ah

My reading of this clip differs from David, Johnny and Kurt's. As I argued in section 4.3 on page 79, though the show presents an ideological dilemma between the two Schmidts, the clip is better read as a dilemma between the two different contests in masculinity, with the body challenges (squats, weight lifting, loud farting) standing in as a pre-neoliberal masculinity, the latter (kitchen and knife skills) as neoliberal masculinity, with the conflict being resolved by assuring audiences that homophobia remains a part of both forms of masculinity. For Johnny, David and Kurt, the relevant conflict is between the two Schmidts.

As in the first extract, David is the first to respond to the clip – and like the first extract, David's first instinct is to recall being smaller than the other boys at school (lines 3-5), using that to identify with the younger Schmidt's positioning. However, he then distinguishes himself from both Schmidts, emphasising that the two of them are a "pair of goons, really" (line 7), producing perhaps a kernel of a critique of masculinity, thereby distancing himself from masculinity. David uses Schmidt to show how outsider masculinity goes wrong: whereas David uses the sense of outsider masculinity as an opportunity to distance himself from masculinity, Schmidt uses it to recuperate masculinity. Such is the function of their reading of the clip, as exemplified by Kurt later in lines 13-14: "do they represent different forms of masculinity?". Reading the main conflict in the clip as between the two characters, the younger Schmidt offers a useful foil to all three of the men, allowing them all to entrench the outsider masculinity repertoire and simultaneously make it amenable to the existing gender power structures.

We see this in the consensus that the three of them reach. After David labels them goons, Johnny and Kurt both concur on lines 8 and 11. Kurt's question on line 14, asking if they represent different forms of masculinity, thereby making the reading explicit, paves the way for Johnny to strengthen this position, saying, assertively, that they are doing "stupid shit" (line 15). This positioning carries through, with significant cooperative overlap, until Johnny, without much fanfare, says on line 27, with "but lads do that, don't they?", despite having just denied having ever taken part in such things. Provided the dilemma in the show remains between the two men (at least for the participants), there remains the opportunity for masculinity to adapt to become friendlier. After all, this would not have to speak to wider power structures. Identifying that the dilemma is itself a reflection of the discursive reproduction of masculine power structures would have to involve questioning one's own masculine subject position, which none of the three IRs make possible.

5.3 Chapter summary

The two extracts and analyses of each have shown examples of the three IRs, and additionally how the sitcoms were used by the participants in the focus groups and interviews to negotiate (and in

this scenario, entrench) these IRs. I have exemplified how speech is used to achieve and adopt subject positions to produce each IR. Importantly, the IRs are best read through smaller interactions that demonstrate how and why the participants' subject positions are adopted. The next three chapters use this fine-grained discursive psychology approach to examine each of three IRs, putting them in wider contexts, exploring their implications in terms of the current state of masculinities and neoliberalism.

6

Advanced masculinity, and geographical and temporal conflict

The advanced masculinity interpretative repertoire is a set of phrases and linguistic patterns that represent a possible discursive resolution, broadly conceived, to the dilemma between the neoliberal and masculine subjects. Specifically, the advanced masculinity IR appears to reconstruct masculinity as more “advanced”, which many participants achieved through positioning themselves as either geographically or temporally more advanced than other forms of masculinity, often by articulating or performing an “ethic of care” as a feature of a personal political position on issues of social (in)equality. To analyse these extracts requires three earlier “levels” of conceptual consideration: how the subject is formed, how an ethic of care and progressive politics was articulated, and how temporality and geography were deployed as vectors of difference in said articulation. In this section I will explore four different examples taken from my fieldwork, exploring how temporality and geography were utilised, as well as drawing out the discursive issues these examples suggest, and their political implications (importantly in relation to neoliberal subjectivity). The advanced masculinity IR can be to some extent contextualised within research into profeminist men, and men’s roles in feminism. For example, Egeberg Holmgren and Hearn (2009) find that self-proclaimed feminist or profeminist men put a lot of work into “passing” as feminists, through various techniques, including by producing a nominal critique of men or masculinity. Here, the focus is on how such men are read and perceived as feminists, but the method of producing a progressive feminist disposition comes across as primarily cosmetic, echoing some of my own conclusions. Similarly, Baily (2009) finds that the role of men in feminism often stems from the notion that patriarchy is damaging to men as well, which is not dissimilar from some indications from my participants that their progressive politics stem directly from their non-

conventional masculinity. However, my findings differ from such research by framing the issue in relation to masculinity, finding that positive attitudes towards progressive politics inhere in a contemporary (arguably neoliberal) form of masculinity. So, although Baily touches on the relevance of an individualised “liberal feminist” ontology that forms such attitudes, with this IR I am interested in how it is informed by a wider neoliberal approach to social and political issues.

It has often been noted that neoliberalism proposes a new settlement between deregulated markets and an inclusive, yet individualised, social politics – Eagleton-Pierce (2016) explained how neoliberalism has individualistically co-opted mid-20th century social movements. For McGuigan (2013, 2014), the language of inclusivity and diversity is not just a sufficient condition of neoliberal subjectivity, but a necessary condition of the posture of the neoliberal subject, inculcating a “cool” attitude that performs many of the features of oppositional cultures of the past. This political stance took on a specific form and articulation when talking about masculinity, which involved the embrace of an ethic of care (see page 23 for a more detailed discussion). To briefly recap, an ethic of care is a critique of ethical theory by feminists that reformulates notions of ethics as a duty to the other over a duty to behave in a certain way or reach a certain end. Theorists such as Gilligan (1982) argue that such a notion of ethics is somehow socialised or imbricated in the construction of womanhood or femininity. As such, the ethic of care was developed as a way of conceiving of women’s moral development, often linked not unproblematically to notions of motherhood. However, the advanced masculinity repertoire also employed two vectors of difference against which participants constructed their masculinity, which were temporality and geography (when I talk about geography, I am referring to the human part of geography, the sociological relationships and differences between regions, areas, localities, and types of place). The notion of advancement suggests some form of temporal difference, but geographical difference was just as prevalent – though, where geographical difference was used to construct a participants’ masculinity, it was a construction that showed certain areas to be more temporally advanced. So, where an ethic of care was articulated, it was done so partly by constructing a less evolved form of masculinity that showed no care for the other, a notion which itself contains a contradiction.

So, the advanced masculinity IR produced a dilemma: in order to perform an ethic of care, participants frequently invoked a necessarily *negative* construction of a more backward other that conflicted with attempts to appreciate and understand the other as another acting subject. So, when confronted with the complexity of a more tangible other, through experience, another participant, or in one or more of the sitcom clips, the advanced masculinity IR became somewhat flimsier. It is this dilemma that I will explore, along with how the notion of a care ethic was properly expressed in my focus groups and interviews. The advanced masculinity IR produces a need to simultaneously denigrate and care for another, a tension brought into light when the other is made tangible.

6.1 Northern towns

The focus group I carried out in a northern university (see appendix 1, focus group 1) was notable for the fact that the three participants came from almost the most widely dispersed set of locations possible in the UK – one from Brighton, one from a former mining town in the north, and one from a small town in Scotland. This was perhaps one reason that geography became salient throughout the group, and as we will see, the three men in the group used their hometowns to explore and position masculinity, where geographical difference was taken to be a marker of how progressive or not an idea of masculinity might be perceived to be.

Contemporaneous geopolitical conditions in England perhaps also influenced the frequency with which more local conceptions of masculinities arose. The university group took place in January 2017, seven months after the UK narrowly voted to leave the European Union. This result was interesting for a few reasons, not least of which that it seemed to be the peak of a growing disparity between different localities in the UK (Koch, 2017). Much media attention drew from two constructed narratives when discussing the geography of the referendum, both of which played out a dichotomy of tradition against progress. The first of these is between a traditional north perceived to have driven the Brexit vote as a nativist, closed-border project and a progressive and multicultural south (Jessop, 2017), with the second narrative between rural areas and urban areas (Rushton, 2017), the latter of which is taken to be in some way more liberal and open to change than the rural. These two dichotomies, it should be noted, were also highly racialised and gendered (Achilleos-Sarll & Martill, 2019), as seen in the extensive media coverage of a disaffected group of white working-class men, who were often seen to be the main demographic who drove the Brexit vote (Koch, 2017; MacLeavy, 2018; Rushton, 2017).

Discussion of geography often turned towards Brexit, and a perceived role that masculinity played in Brexit. This plays out in extract 3 below, which broadly lead from my opening question to the participants about whether they found it difficult to live up to expectations of masculinity. Kurt had raised the prospect that the expectations that he faced as a man were relative to the conditions he grew up, notably to class, race, and location, and here David and Johnny express agreement.

Extract 3

- 1 David: ((tuts)) I dunno about you, but I sort of feel qui:te (.) I'm, like, being from
- 2 Brighton, I sort of feel like, being from such, like a liberal a::rea (.) of:, umm, the
- 3 cou:ntry, it's sort of (0.6) it's sort of ha:rd to say that it's going to be like that all
- 4 over (redacted) because it's not true, but sort of as a, as a generalisation, there are
- 5 less pressures in that ki:nd of sense.
- 6 Johnny:

7 °Yeah° and I think (.) I, I mean I was always pushed to:, towards education and
8 going to university, uh (.) to kind of= what you, Kurt was talking about was never
9 really a consideration for me. (.) Err: from family essentially. Been brought up by
10 Kurt: my parents that, in that way (.) where: school was everything almost=
11 Johnny: =yeah=
12 =getting an education, and going onto university was (1.3) that was the kind of (.)
13 Greg: that was the [stage], that was the next step that was always gonna be:
14 Kurt: [right]
15 Johnny: °yeah°
16 Kurt: yeah
17 Greg: °ye:ah° [it]
18 Kurt: [d'you]= sorry, go on, were you=
19 Yeah it's just about money, it's just about mekkin' cash, you know. You're, you're
20 Greg: no one 'round the area unless you're mekkin' cash.
21 Kurt: Yeah.
22 I mean, if you ne- if you ain't got no cash to show, or if you ain't got a car to show,
23 then you're no one†. I me:an, li:ke, it's mo:re (0.4) I me:an, I'm sort of outside of
24 that culture, 'cos I wa:sn't, I wasn't white†. I mean, like, there wasn't that so:rt of, so
25 much pressure, I was listening as an outsider, so, uh, generally (1.9) wasn't that
26 much pressure from like the area, you're just pushed away, bu:t (.) seeing as there's
27 been more immigration I mean like it's tended to: I think the area's gotten a little
28 Greg: mo:re (1.2) a little more (.) multicultural since (.) then, but (.) [still]-
29 Kurt: [And] that's: (.) that's changed things?
30 Greg: It's changed things a bit, but Brexit's just blown stuff up [and then, 'specially]=
31 Kurt: [okay:: ye:ah sur e]
32 =since you've got like, I live (.) well I live not too far from Rotherham, I mean like
33 Greg: you got all the racism, which is just=
34 David: ye[ah]
35 Kurt: [ye]ah
36 =a lot of people couldn't tek it no more, and a lot of people just moved ou:t(h).
37 Johnny: (1.8)
38 Kurt: See that's kind of (.) I feel so far removed from that almost, [from]=
39 David: [yeah]
40 Johnny: [yeah]
41
42

43 =my own, my own personal- I lived in (redacted) in Scotland, for most of my (.) teenage years and (.) e:rmm it's been predominantly white° (.) e:rmm you know, communities, I'd ninety-nine per cent of people living there were white.

There are three different accounts here from the three participants, each built around the logic of the advanced masculinity repertoire and expressed through geographical difference, but with a different positioning in relation to that geographical difference.

Kurt was the only black participant in my research, and grew up in a former mining town in the north – he asserts that his race made him an outsider, thanks to a white masculinity in his area that is constructed as backwards and old-fashioned, and simultaneously the norm. In this extract (lines 21-27), Kurt positions his masculinity with a sense of liminality, adopting many of the tropes of a sense of outsider masculinity. He constructs a distinction between a white masculinity that is about performing material wealth (“if you ain’t got a car to show”) that envelops the larger area in which he lives, and a black masculinity that he has experienced, explicitly talking about experiencing masculinity as an outsider. As he discusses the changes that a more diverse population has made by forcing masculinity to break down borders between white and black masculinities, he suggests that “Brexit’s just blown stuff up” on line 29 – for him, black masculinity’s otherness has been pushed into stark relief by the referendum vote. Johnny and David’s silence might be read as a product of the philosophy of the ethic of care, of responsibly formulating a relationship between self and other when the other lacks the privilege the self does. Eventually, it is directly acknowledging this privilege which is the strategy Johnny opts for, positioning himself more on the “inside” of Kurt’s constructed white masculinity. This ethic is fundamentally other-regarding, performing a version of privilege that is able to check itself against the other.

Again, it is notable here that throughout this entire exchange, masculinity remains natural and intact. For Kurt, the success of diversity in his area is that it brings the outsidership of black masculinity closer to the expectation produced by white masculinity, at no point questioning masculinity in itself. Similarly, Johnny references race and talks about cultural differences in masculinity, but leaves masculinity itself intact. An interesting interaction comes about a minute or so later, too, as shown in extract 4, below:

Extract 4

- 1 David: I was saying, I was sayin' for weeks, in fact even now, after Brexit that (.) where
2 are these, who are these pe(hh)ople who voted for [this], because I've never,
3 never met them, never seen them.
4 Johnny: [Ye(h)ah], yeah, exactly.

Here, David constructs a very different version of himself to Kurt, where extract 4 is, at first glance, congruent with his assertions in extract 3 (though this idea will shift slightly after having watched the sitcoms in extract 5). The key tenet of masculinity for David is that he uses his upbringing in Brighton to articulate a version of masculinity that is simultaneously advanced in relation to a more backward masculine other, while also aware of David's own position. So, in extract 4, we initially see something that looks very similar to David's previous assertion from extract 3 on the previous page (line 2) that his childhood in Brighton, being a "liberal" city, lead to his advanced masculinity, echoing some of the assumptions about Brexit in terms of an urban and rural divide, and also some of the tropes about rural masculinity being employed as a backward other (Stenbacka, 2011). But extract 4 also highlights a tension that many of the participants using the advanced repertoire spent some time trying to overcome, which is between the construction of the backwards masculine other, and the material reality of the backwards masculine other. In order to display oneself as an advanced man, the construction needs to reject the possibility of that material reality at the same time as being open to a sociopolitical explanation of its existence and a more generously cosmopolitan understanding of that form of masculinity. Brighton is positioned for him in extract 3 as an isolated place, where the constructed other is unproblematically drawn from; in extract 4 David puts Brighton in a wider geopolitical context in which the other is acknowledged as a real and material thing, even if that thing still relies on many of the tropes of the constructed other.

Johnny's story in relation to geography is slightly different yet again, though certainly it is more closely aligned with David's than with Kurt's. Johnny's backwards other is always more tangible, and we see the dichotomy of construction against materiality much earlier from him, in his first contribution in extract 3 between lines 6 and 9. Johnny attempts here to in some way own the white masculinity Kurt has constructed in order to express his solidarity with Kurt. He deals with the dichotomy better than David does, but the tension becomes more apparent after he watches the clip from *New Girl* and I ask the three of them whether they sympathise with one of the characters more.

Extract 5¹⁹

- 1 Greg: What are th= What are the differences between (.) the two th= the two of them (0.9)
2 ↑if any?
3 (0.9)
- 4 Johnny: ((sigh)) hmm ((tuts))
- 5 David: To be honest, (.) not an awf – I mean I don't see it as an awful lot, because they've
6 both just got this (0.6) blinding desire to best the ↑other.
- 7 Johnny: °Yeah:° (.) I felt like the bigger one, the bigger guy (1.3) was the one ((wh))'o (1.0)
8 who mm-most kind of (1.8) ((tuts)) (.) didn't (.) think about too much what they
9 were doing, whereas I, I, I got a sense that the younger one (.) probably just did it
10 because of (.) 'cos it is a competition= he didn't wanna back (.) down if you know
11 what I mean=
- 12 Greg: mm
- 13 Johnny: °yeah° (.) But yeah it is hard to say ().
- 14 Kurt: Yeah (.) think they're both insecure as each other. (.) 'Cos like=
- 15 Johnny: Hh ye:ah
- 16 Kurt: I mean does he represent an older form of like (.) old, you know, old= the older
17 generation's masculinity and then he represents, like, the younger, with the younger
18 generation (.) when they were going on about, like, pescetarian or something. hh
- 19 Johnny: At the end of the day though, it's probably Wilson who's the most masculine person
20 there: you know, it's [(you know)]=
- 21 Greg: [Winston?]
- 22 Johnny: The person who's [most comfortable in their]:= [with] them[selves].
- 23 Greg: [yeah yeah yeah, hh yeah]
- 24 David; [yeah] [He's] not, he's not
25 even in the competition, [like, yeah yeah yeah I know what you mean].
- 26 Johnny: [ye:ah, like he] doesn't care,
27 like he's just doing it for a bit of fun

The question I ask confronts the three of them with a problem: to remain faithful to the advanced repertoire means identifying with neither character, while expressing an ethic of care that shows an understanding of how the masculinity of the two Schmidts is constructed as a reaction to the insecurities

¹⁹ Extract 5 immediately follows extract 2 in the full focus group transcript, and in my analysis here I will also refer to extract 2.

of each. Both Schmidts, both versions of masculinity, are to be disavowed, in order to achieve a version of masculinity that is more up to date. David at first attempts to square this dilemma by opting to express sympathy with one of them on a physical basis (3-5 in extract 2). He rejects the masculine norms that imagine masculinity to be about physical size by identifying with an anti-normative aspect of masculinity in small size. The performance of both, however, is quickly rejected afterwards (line 7), followed very soon after by Johnny (8) and Kurt (11).

Here, the sitcom gives a face to the previously absent constructed other, the tangibility of which opens the opportunity for significant cooperation of the three participants against something they can actively agree on. There can be no discrepancy about the practices of the outdated other, as there are two examples here on screen, both of which, they agree, are a “pair of goons” (extract 2, line 7). The pertinent factor here is how the substantive form of the other, rather than the imagined one, allows the participants to modify or negotiate their positions from extracts 3 and 4. David, we have seen, uses the tangibility of the other to go some way to solving the dilemma of advanced masculinity, using the characters he has seen on screen as the other to his advanced concept of masculinity. Kurt, though starting from a slightly different position, likewise uses the sitcom clip to reinforce his otherness, as we see in lines 16-18 of extract 5, that the younger Schmidt represents an older form of masculinity. David and Kurt both use that tangibility to position themselves as men in stronger terms.

The interesting part, as discussed earlier, is line 27 in extract 2 on page 94, Johnny’s “but lads do that, don’t they?”. Johnny has disavowed aspects of his own masculinity in extract 3 on lines 6-9, by acknowledging privilege by admitting that going to university was a natural progression for him, and at first glance, this in extracts 2 and 5 looks a similar tactic – showing an awareness of a negative politics of masculinity, here constructed as laddishness. However, this line has a secondary purpose that highlights one of the problems with an advanced masculinity: no matter how “progressive” the politics of advanced masculinity are, it remains masculinity (as the clip shows), and once one steps outside of the binary that the participants read (between older and newer forms of masculinity), masculinity itself is called into question. Johnny’s intervention here therefore solves this problem by retaining the masculine “lad” trope as fine and normal.

Johnny reflects further with two interesting contributions, both in extract 5, on lines 7-11 and 19-22. Lines 7-11, on the same dilemma between positioning himself against and showing understanding for the masculine other – whereas the younger Schmidt thinks too hard about his masculinity, the older Schmidt has more sympathy on the basis that it is just what he does without really thinking. Johnny alludes here to an awareness of structure, demonstrating a version of masculinity with what might be seen as a better developed ethic of care. And on lines 19-22, Johnny names Winston the most masculine character in the show, perhaps indicating that Winston is the character he would most identify with most. Here, he recites a common trope that being a man is about being “comfortable in your

masculinity”. Once again, this produces a disavowal that Johnny is keen to articulate: Winston is not only indifferent towards gender stereotypes, but he is also the only black character on the screen. As Gilson (2016) suggests, Johnny here seems to want to move beyond the privileges of his upbringing, and the perks of being a white straight man in a neoliberal era by adopting the performances of not only a feminised (ethic of care) but also a racialised other.

6.2 The foreign other

In two of the interviews I carried out with office workers in south west England (see appendix 1, interview grouping 5), the constructed other was made tangible through experiences in two non-British European countries: Italy and Romania. These two provide for an interesting comparison. Lou, aged 24, was born and raised in the same south west town where he now works, but didn’t go to university, instead opting to take a year out working at a ski resort in Italy. Jarvis, 29, on the other hand, was born and raised in Romania, to a Romanian family, and only moved to England in his early 20s. Whereas Lou constructs himself as the self against the other, Jarvis constructs himself as what might be seen as a backwards masculine other. The two interactions with othered foreign masculinities for these two therefore serve to make an interesting comparison. As with the previous examples from the focus group in the north of England, both use geography as a vector that partially determines a back- or forward-facing masculinity, but in different ways.

Extract 6

- 1 Lou: Uhh, there's a lot more::, uh, impatience, (.) a lot more, umm, energy, and, umm
 2 (1.2) directness↑. (1.8) Umm:: (0.7) err: (.) so, a, a, an example would be: the way
 3 that they drive. Umm: (1.3) the lack of (.) the, the lack of regard for other road
 4 users that there is. There, there's just a general (.) intensity, and a general, umm
 5 (1.9) almost carelessness or fearless= fearlessness=
 6 Greg: Yeah.
 7 Lou: =to (.) the way they (.) they act (0.6) on a day-to-day basis↑. Umm, and their (.)
 8 and their interactions wi' women↑ are definitely, definitely different. (0.5) Umm
 9 (2.4) there's a lot (.) a::nd (.) it's: certainly not true of all the country, it's a, it's a,
 10 obviously it's a stereotype, but to an extent, it does live up the stereoty:pe of (.)
 11 Ita= Italian men↑ being very, umm: (2.0) they chase af= they do chase after
 12 women↑ a fair amount↑=
 13 Greg: Yeah.
 14 Lou:

15 =you know there's a very different attitude towa::rds (.) umm: <the way they (.)
 16 err: (.) approach women↑>. So (.) for example nowadays in, in, over here in the
 17 Greg: UK, I (.) would be: (0.5) surprised to see: (1.3) a ma::n (.) [walk up, walk up to a
 18 Lou:]=
 19 [(sneezes) oh excuse me]
 20 = a stri= walk up to a, a str= a woman he's never met, a stranger, and say::, can I
 21 have your number, or:: umm (.) I= what are you doing later, or: (0.6) generally
 22 Greg: ↑flirting with her explicitly.
 23 Lou: Mm hmm.
 24 Umm, I think that's less common now↑, whereas in Italy, there was a, there was a
 25 lot o' that. Err, there's still a lot of, a lot of catcalling, a lot of err:: (1.2) general
 kind of, umm: (1.4) male upmanship towards women↑.

Lou is responding to my question about experiencing any differences in relation masculinity during his year in Italy compared to his childhood in the UK. He begins to talk about what he sees as Italian masculinity, before encountering a problem he needs to remedy on line 5 in describing Italian masculinity as “careless”. The aim of the construction is clear: to articulate that while Italian masculinity is careless, Lou is not. Yet the negative construction of carelessness risks betraying a stereotypical view of a homogenous Italian masculinity, therefore belying a less-than-progressive politics attached to Lou’s gender. Lou quickly corrects himself, offering “fearless” as a compromise, though the dilemma he has constructed becomes the driving force behind the remainder of this excerpt. On lines 9-10, Lou pre-empts criticism of his description of “Italian men” by trying to argue that the stereotype exists for a reason, and that it is not descriptive of all Italian men. He tries to inoculate himself against criticism, therefore, by mitigating some negative implications of stereotyping: the idea the stereotype is universal and that, perhaps, there is good reason for the stereotype to exist. There is a hesitancy in the rest of what he says, nevertheless, he shows between lines 14 and 28 a hesitancy and a determination to use the right words to articulate what he means without portraying an image of himself that is old-fashioned. Once again, Lou demonstrates that the advanced masculinity repertoire relies on a backwards masculine other whose construction belies a lack of progressive credentials.

Importantly, Lou positions himself as outside of the masculine image he conjures up, one that is different to the masculine other constructed by the northern university group, as Lou has a tangible experience of a masculine other that is attached to an identity category – Italian men. Many of the tropes of his other are the same, but the tangibility makes it, in certain ways, less of a problem. Jarvis, in extract 7 below, also has a tangible experience of the masculine other, as it is a position that he himself takes up.

Extract 7

- 1 Jarvis: Again↑, it's mostly to do with age. (.) You get a lot of cultural influences, bu:t
2 mostly to do with (.) age, and I fou::nd because I am from the countryside (0.8) err:
3 (.) there is a: (1.1) not a big difference, but there's a difference in (.) like, people
4 that have grown up (.) in like proper countryside and then people who have (.)
5 grown up in the city.
- 6 Greg: Mm hmm. Yeah.
7 (2.4)
- 8 Jarvis: Bu:t↑ (.) if you break it do:wn↑, if you look at it (1.6) from like a sim= really
9 simple point of view, it's pretty much the same thing. It's just (.) I guess it's just
10 influences, it's just (.) I guess, like, city boys have a lot of: umm: (2.2) ((tuts)) let's
11 call it like popular culture influences tha:t (1.0) like, make them change the way
12 they:= they act and stuff.
- 13 Greg: Mm hmm. (2.0) What do you= what do you mean (.) by that, so=
14 Jarvis: ↑Uh: (3.1) umm::
15 (6.8)
- 16 Greg: So you're talking about differences between: (.) [basically, sort of]=
17 Jarvis: [Yeah.]
- 18 Greg: =urban and rural: (.) masculinity?
19 Jarvis: Yeah. (.) Yeah. °Yeah.°
- 20 Greg: Can you give me an example of=
21 Jarvis: 'Cos cou= 'cos country-wise↑, I don't, I don't really see a difference↑. There's small
22 differences, but they: (0.6) overall they don't really make a difference↑.

Jarvis in many ways openly embraces a backward otherness without any obvious political or performative aim, constructing a more advanced version of masculinity in the UK associated with modern trapping such as popular culture and the city, in contrast to his rural Romanian masculinity. But more importantly, he focuses on the divide between the urban and the rural over a more nation-oriented difference when asked, stating he does not see nationality as a huge difference. The comparison when he says this is very different to Lou, who spent a good minute justifying his generalisation about Italian men through stake inoculation, displacement and excusal. Jarvis has no such qualms, asserting his difference as a rural man matter-of-factly and without excuse. In essence, he shows no desire to overcome any perceived dichotomy between the need to distance oneself from another that you must also care for, perhaps because he himself inhabits a liminal space that positions his masculinity as

neither self, nor other, as a Romanian national settled in the UK. While the construction of the binary is the same (backward and forward looking, relying on a geographical difference), he shows no interest in positioning himself on it, bar the first few lines which show, at best, an ambivalent attachment to his rural upbringing, an interesting counterpart to past research on rural masculinities in which men construct rural masculinities in a less ambivalent way (Brandth & Haugen, 2005; Bye, 2009). Indeed, Jarvis seems reluctant to identify as a rural man, an ambivalence that shows through in a direct comparison again in the way that he consumes the sitcom clips, in comparison to Lou's reading. Extract 8 shows Jarvis ruminating on which character in *Friends* is the manliest.

Extract 8

- 1 Greg: If you had to rank the characters in terms of ↓manliness (1.0) who would you put
2 first and last? (6.4) Just instinctively?
- 3 Jarvis: Mm. That's a bit strange, becau:se (2.1) I, I've seen, I've the show↑ so I know how
4 they deal with, like, confrontational stuff↑.
- 5 Greg: Yeah. Yeahyeah=
- 6 Jarvis: But Chald= Chandler would just shy away instantly: and then Ross is co- kind of,
7 s= (.) in, like (0.5) somewhere in between a::nd (.) Joey would be the guy that (.)
8 goes in and (.) like tries to be the boss and stuff↑.
- 9 Greg: Okay.
- 10 Jarvis: But tha::t doesn't really make him masculine↑, it just makes him an idiot↑.

Sociality, and particularly confrontation, is key for Jarvis in constructing what he sees as masculinity, and this carries over into his reading of the sitcoms. In extract 8, when faced with comparing the “manliness” of the three main male characters in *Friends*, his instinct is to turn to confrontation, and how they approach social situations – in other words, how they interact with the other. For him, he seems to build from an axiom that asserts that those who deal with confrontation as a leader are the more masculine. Yet for him, masculinity is unproblematically about how one confronts the other head on rather than using an ethic of care to produce a responsible relationship with the other.

For Lou, masculine confrontation is about heterosexuality, suggesting that Italian men are more matter-of-fact about interacting with women, a form of confrontation seen to be a bad thing. For Lou, the backwards masculine other here suffers from an excess of masculinity. Such a construction of a foreign other as having an excess of masculinity is well in line with other research on the topic (Collins, 2005; Gabilondo, 2006; Marinaccio, 2009). Indeed, the exclusion of a hypermasculine other to demarcate the boundaries of a hegemonic masculinity is often seen to be a key constructor of

masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Demetriou, 2001; Messerschmidt, 2010) – what is more novel is the construction that hypermasculine other takes. We can see an example of this taking place more conventionally (or without the element of foreignness) when Lou is given a more tangible hypermasculine other in Barney Stinson, having watched *How I Met Your Mother*.

Extract 9

- 1 Greg: So, what, what, what (.) do you like about How I Met Your Mother? What parts of
2 it do you find funny?
3 (2.0)
- 4 Lou: Umm, I do think it plays off a lot of traditional (.) gender (0.6) roles, there's a lot of
5 gender types.
- 6 Greg: Okay.
- 7 Lou: Umm (0.6) there was a lot of them were: (.) present in that clip. (1.9) Umm: a lot of
8 ma::le umm: (2.3) umm:: (2.5) °I don't really know (.) what I'm looking for°,
9 †point-scoring? A lot of, err: social point-scoring†, a lot of, umm (1.3) using
10 †anecdotes (.) for (1.4) umm:: †valida:tio:n, and for, umm (3.0) particularly for (.)
11 for †humour and for: (2.3) err:: (1.6) credit.
- 12 Greg: Mm hm.
- 13 Lou: ((tuts)) Umm: so †there's a, there's a lot of that†. (.) Umm: and obviously (1.4)
14 everyone that's paired off in: (.) in: relationships (.) couples, or: (.) in the case of,
15 umm: whatever the (.) chur= chap, umm: (.) Neil Patrick Harris plays, name is, I
16 can't remember, [is he] called Barney, I think it is.
- 17 Greg: [Barney.]
- 18 Lou: Yeah (0.5) umm and in his case, he's a bit of a (.) serial monogamist (.) so (1.8)
19 umm: but it's still very much, umm: a, a clear divide between men and women†,
20 umm: (1.6) there's always: (0.6) men and women doing certain things, umm: (.) so:
21 and I †think, in, to an extent, that does work, it does, it does play off a lot of
22 traditional (1.3) little (.) traditional, umm: roles, but (1.6) sometimes the (1.1)
23 umm: (1.5) humorous= the humorous conclusion (1.4) umm: (0.5) like, so there,
24 there was a lot of, umm: (2.0) a lot of joking arou:nd, a:nd mm: traditionally=
25 traditional men and traditional: umm: (1.2) laddish activity.

Lou had, just before this, described *HIMYM* as overly “American” and “corny” (these are direct quotes) in its humour, but admitted that he finds the show funny (indeed, he laughed several times as the clip was played). Asked what he finds funny, he reads the show as ironic or self-aware, that it “plays

off gender roles” rather than playing into them (line 4) – he reads it as a deconstruction of, rather than discursively congruent with, masculinity. He adopts a ‘knowing position’ in relation to the sitcom, in which he is “in on the joke” that the writers are making, perhaps heightened by the actor Neil Patrick Harris’s open homosexuality dovetailing with the hyper-heterosexuality of his character. Here, he shows none of the prevarication in highlighting the excess of masculinity that Barney performs, as there is no need to show any sort of understanding of the other when that other is known to be not only entirely fictional, but constructed by Lou as an outward parody of hypermasculinity. There is no need to be sympathetic with Barney as there is no danger of eschewing any ethic of care, so he is free to position himself against “traditional men and traditional laddish activity”, being neither traditional nor laddish.

6.3 Rural geek to urban nerd

For geek and nerd masculinities to be feminised as a form of devaluation or emasculation is not a new or novel finding (Kendall, 1999, 2000, 2011). However, the two men in the focus group recruited because of their jobs in a London technology start-up (see appendix 1, focus group 4) positioned being nerdy or geeky as an advanced form of masculinity, on the basis that more feminine (or feminised) masculinities are viewed as hegemonic in a more modern(ist) setting. They saw a direct causality between their emasculation as young geeks in rural schools, and their happiness as established nerds in London in what Leonard from *TBBT* calls the “information age”, or what has variously been called cognitive (Boutang, 2011; Morini, 2007) or knowing (Thrift, 2005) capitalism, forms of masculinity explored in more depth by Bell (2013) and Poster (2013). Indeed, as Harris points out, the feminisation of labour under cognitive capitalism does not indicate any real attempt to modify the material conditions of gender relations as opposed to reflecting the material needs of capitalism (Harris, 2017: 80). What we see, therefore, in the relationship between advanced masculinity and geek or nerd masculinities, is a complicity with existing gender relations and power structures, both patriarchy and capitalism, that is, once again, at odds with the attempt to demonstrate and perform a propensity to an ethic of care. Of the two participants here, Iggy, aged 28, has a fairly senior role in the company, and now lives in a gentrified area of London, having been born and raised previously in the (non-London) south east of England. John, aged 22, has a more mid-level role in the company, and lives in central London after growing up in the south west of England (it should also be noted I had met John once or twice before).

Extract 10a

- 1 John: We:ll, I †guess for me, I g= oh my:., my †parents are quite traditional†. Ermm (.)
- 2 but they're not in a way. They're: they're forward-thinking but also very (.)

3 rese:rved and:= yeah I know it's a: contradiction, bu:t yeah. I guess the culture here
4 in London is far more (.) open-minded (1.0) to: these kind of things.
5 Iggy: I think particularly once you get out into the countryside, li:ke (.) (redacted²⁰) is a
6 (1.1) only recently cosmopolita:n area of the U[K] and [it's] quite kind of
7 removed=
8 Greg: [Right.]
9 John: [mm]
10 Iggy: =so: you get (.) I would ↑say:., you:., there is: (2.1) it's (.) yeah there are more
11 traditional values=
12 Greg: Right.
13 Iggy: =more entrenched traditional values=
14 John: Yeah
15 Iggy: =there:.. Umm, not that they're obvious on a daily basis, but I think (0.4) you are
16 conscious of it (.) I guess. °Yeah°.
17 John: ↑Umm, °in terms of masculinity in (redacted) (.) I think the people I knew in
18 (redacted²¹) were far= would (.) theoretically be far more concerned with
19 masculinity than I am=
20 Greg: Right.
21 John: =particularly. (0.8) Bu:t, yeah, I don't know, maybe that's just 'cos I've (.) met
22 some [di:cks at] (.) dicks at school [hhhh].
23 Greg: [In (.) in what way?] [hhhh] Yeah, yeah, I'm familiar with them.
24 Iggy: Ye:ah I suppose I didn't have a ↓particularly positive: (0.9) experience of: (1.7)
25 what might have been considered to be the masculine male [at school] either=
26 John: [Ye:ah, exactly].
27 Iggy: =and that's fucking shit like, it, you tended to associate it with being unintelligent.
28 John: Yeah I guess so. Also, yeah=
29 Iggy: =>That's problematic, isn't it?< [I realise that now]
30 John: [hhhhhhh]
31 Iggy: I associate be:ing the a- the apex of my gender with being unintelligent. I don't
32 think I, I don't think I do, actively, but (0.9) I think I would understand somebody:
33 (0.5) [who's tradition]ally manly=
34 John: [↑Well, I guess it's, it's=]
35 Iggy: =like good at sports and this kind of stuff as, as lacking in other areas.

²⁰ This refers to the town in which Iggy grew up.

²¹ Both of these redactions refer to the county in which John grew up.

Extract 10b²²

- 1 John: ↑Ye:ah. I †don't know. So maybe it is: quite negative. I guess I probably would
2 have seen the (.) alpha male at school and gone, <"I'm gonna try and be not like
3 that person"> [hhhhh].
4 Iggy: [hhhhh] It seemed to b:e, yeah, there wasn't much I:: (1.9) would've
5 (.) yearned to be about that person I don't think. Maybe more popular with girls↑,
6 but (.) that's probably about it. (1.5) Ye:ah (0.4) it's weird.

Both participants here, Iggy and John, work to position themselves as outsiders in the more rural areas in which they grew up, through a negatively constructed traditionalism based on a UK intranational geopolitics and generational difference, seen in lines 1-18. This is not just generational, though, as both also state that school was not a particularly fun experience for them as not particularly masculine men, compared to the relative success the two of them both achieve now in a more “cosmopolitan” setting, as Iggy put it. However, Iggy actively brings out on line 28 the dilemma that the advanced repertoire produces, describing his normatively negative construction of the “traditionally masculine” as “problematic”, indicating a realisation that he might subconsciously consider unintelligent those at school who were more masculine. I argue that there is a relation to capital and labour here – the switch in the identity of Iggy and John from nerd at school to alpha male is down to their skillset, and the type of work they do. Though they use some concept of positioning themselves outside the norm in order to help demonstrate their credentials as feminine somehow, their argument reasserts their current status as top of the masculine ladder. In so doing, they combine the masculine and neoliberal subjects, thereby underpinning a new backwards other who is unfit for work under cognitive capitalism.

As a result, John changes tack, and in extract 10b, produces a moment where he deliberately negates something that he had said earlier on line 17 of 10a. Discussing his time at school, he said that masculinity never concerned him in the way that it did for other boys at school, that he paid far less attention to it. Now, though, he expresses an explicit concern with what was masculine, and an intent to not perform gender in the same way that he saw other boys at school performing it. He may not be concerned with trying to emulate masculinity here, but there is instead an awareness of what masculinity involves for him to avoid performing it. This is an attempt to solve the problem that Iggy produces by

²² 10b came around 20 seconds after 10a, leaving around a page of transcription that said largely the same things as extract 10a.

suggesting that it is problematic to view hypermasculinity as unintelligent, attempting to recover a stronger awareness of the masculine other in order to avoid being seen as problematic, yet still couching the other in negative terms as a type of person he does not really want to be seen as.

Both Iggy and John, therefore, employ the caring tropes of the advanced masculinity repertoire in order to disavow what is constructed as an excessively hypermasculine other and construct a masculinity with a better and deeper understanding of the other. This is, in other words, a form of masculinity that disavows masculinity through attempting to embrace the feminisation of nerd or geek masculinity – indeed, other authors have examined how the ascension of forms of masculinity associated with nerdiness or geekiness has not really come with any improvement in gender relations, particularly in online spaces. In line with this scholarship that describes and explores a “feminised” nerd masculinity beneficial to neoliberal capitalism (Bell, 2013; Salter & Blodgett, 2017), extracts 11a and 11b below take place almost immediately after we watched the *How I Met Your Mother* clip, and Iggy’s positioning demonstrates that there is no critical questioning of masculinist structures as a whole as long as the advanced masculinity IR remains wedded to a concept of masculinity.

Extract 11a

- 1 Greg: Would you, would you describe him as masculine in that episode (.) at all?
2 John: ↑Mmm. No.
3 Greg: No?
4 (2.8)
5 Iggy: I think it has more to do with what they: po- the- what they position as masculine in
6 that (0.8) episode↑=
7 Greg: Okay.
8 Iggy: =which is they position:: (0.7) kind of like whooping: jock douchebags: who: (.)
9 just wanna talk about==
10 John: ↑True, I guess you're right, ye:ah.
11 Iggy: =banging film stars and stuff like that, like, " uh:h:, du:de, like yeah!" and then
12 disrespecting somebody: who: (1.5) comes with a different point of view as ma- as
13 the masculine in that.

Extract 11b

- 1 Iggy: What I enjoyed was the knowledge of Neil Patrick Harris
2 John: Was what↑?
3 Iggy: Neil Patrick Harris=
4 Greg: Yeah=

- 5 Iggy: =who's gay=
 6 Greg: =yeah, yeah=
 7 Iggy: =lecturing him on what it is to be a man. I thought that was amusing.
 8 John: Yeah↑ [well it's it's: it's: that] is, it=
 9 Iggy: [It's kinda, it's kind of ironic, but]
 10 John: =it is irony, and that is, that's his character as well
 11 Iggy: Yeahyeahyeah. Yeah. Fucking love Neil Patrick Harris.

Asked whether Marshall in the *HIMYM* clip could be described as masculine, I receive two responses: John's straightforward "no", and Iggy's prevaricating "it has more to do with what they position as masculine". Iggy's response not only demonstrates again a desire to show care for the other, but simultaneously shows he is aware of the internal complexities of masculinity, which can encompass both being in a long term relationship and also "whooping jock douchebags" (line 8). He continues this positioning throughout, simultaneously making himself look more advanced, more modern and up to date, while attempting to show he understands those who are not in the privileged position of a more advanced masculinity than he is – this time, like many of the other participants throughout, Iggy uses the tangible construction of the other offered by the sitcoms in order to position himself. And then, quite quickly, he reconstructs much of that typical model unwittingly, in a passage characteristic of the general use of the advanced masculinity repertoire.

In extract 11b, he says he "enjoyed the knowledge of Neil Patrick Harris", "who's gay", "lecturing him on what it is to be a man". Iggy here distinguishing between what it is to be a man and what it is to be gay, attempting to provide a critique of heteronormative structures. His love of Harris, expressed on line 11, indicates a construction of himself as anti-homophobic, what McCormack calls "inclusive masculinity" (McCormack, 2012). This construction can be read as an attempt to reconstruct an ethic of care that appreciates the complexities of the other in a different way to the backwards other. But Iggy positions being gay as at odds with masculinity, constructed consequently as normatively heterosexual, a construction that retains a heteronormativity. However, in forming this version of himself, he never actually critiques the othering of gay men in order to produce a heteronormative "typical" masculinity, as goes his own description. The binary he hints at is never named as such, only hinted at and seemingly presumed as natural, and as such, the problems with this form of masculinity remain intact.

So, while geek and nerd masculinities still seem to be constructed here and by others as feminised, their combination with the advanced masculinity repertoire sees a version of geek or nerd masculinity that remains full of contradictions, both in its framing as more progressive and caring, and in its tendency to remain complicit with masculinist structures.

6.4 Flamboyance and sociality

The final set of extracts I will look at that employ the advanced masculinity IR come from my interview with Robert, one of the food bloggers (see appendix 1, interview grouping 6). Robert is 25, grew up in a London suburb and now works for a small food company, producing a food blog on the side. The distinguishing feature of Robert's use of the advanced masculinity IR is its explicit link to his blogging as a type of "immaterial labour" (Lazaratto, 1996), and a focus on a sort of individualisation and self-responsibilisation. Like Iggy and John, Robert described how certain character traits of his are particularly useful to the type of labour entailed by blogging. However, unlike Iggy and John, the main character trait cited by Robert is an enjoyment of face-to-face interaction with others rather than an ability to understand the other that came from an outsider status in formative years. Additionally, Robert seems less interested in whether that makes him more or less successful or masculine – his enjoyment of face-to-face interaction with clients is simply a way of him describing how he is well-suited to a certain type of work. In extract 12, early in the conversation, I had just asked Robert to talk about working as a food blogger in comparison to his day job, with the aim of getting him to compare the differences between the two types of labour.

Extract 12

- 1 Robert: I co:uld'n't (0.7) I ca:n't (1.3) ima:gine (0.5) the pain of (.) say being a: co:der or
2 being locked away in a room. I have to do a job that's very interactive with other
3 people↑.
- 4 Greg: Okay.
- 5 Robert: I think that's why= how I fell in with this job↑= it's, it's, yeah, you're selling a
6 product, you've gotta be out face-to-face, meeting people, ma::le, fe::male (.) you
7 know, every: Tom, Dick and ↑Harry. And the same as (.) with my blogging as well,
8 like, °you know°, I go to blogging lu::nches (0.8) umm:: (.) and you:'re plonked in
9 a scenario where you have to go to dinner with (0.7) °you know°, ten people you
10 don't know↑.
- 11 Greg: Mm hmm.
- 12 Robert: Umm:: (1.4) and I: (.) >absolutely love that<. So:: (1.5) differences I s'pose, it's
13 just different spheres, °you know°, a little= on one end of the spectrum I'm (0.5)
14 just eating food a::nd then: (.) going back into my reserved hole and then thinking
15 about it and writing about it↑. The other: (0.6) spectrum to that is kindof (1.0) being
16 in a (.) corporation↑ (.) umm:: (0.8) having:: kindof (.) rules to follow↑, umm (.) it's

17 a= umm: (.) thinking about, like returns on investment (.) umm:: yeah. >My
 18 ↑blogging's very much just ↑me::<, it's (.) just me and me alo:ne↑, and then I (.) I
 19 kindof meet people along the ↑way where (.) my job is, °you know°, I've got (0.9)
 20 umm rules to adhe:re to::, a::nd (1.4) umm:: (2.8) ye:ah, dunno.

Much of this is descriptive characterising Robert's labour as a blogger as being flexible, sociable and self-responsible, implying high amounts of both emotional and aesthetic labour. The key element he emphasises is sociality, which is not only identified as important to the work, but also identified as being part of his character. He describes himself as uniquely suited to this line of work, which is where his backwards other is constructed on line 1 of extract 12, that he "can't imagine the pain of being locked in a room" at a desk. This image is the one against which he defines himself, that he "has to do a job that's very interactive with other people". Sociality is contrasted against asociality, with Robert constructing a version of himself that likes to interact with other people. Indeed, sociality is itself a key part of the ethic of care, being as it is a redefinition of a gendered version of ethics that refocuses on the relationship between self and other.

It is interesting that he does not particularly couch this in any surrounding discourse about masculinity. He is not creating a version of masculinity imbued with a new sociality that redefines its relationship with the other, but simply asserts this is him. He still uses the trope of a backward other in invoking the idea of someone sitting behind their desk all day to define himself, but there is no real explicit gender going on here. However, when asked whether he is feminine in extract 13 below, general sociality becomes heterosociality.

Extract 13

1 Greg: Umm, would you: describe yourself:, in any way, as ↓feminine?
 2 (4.2)
 3 Robert: ↑Yeah. I get on: wi::th fema:les I think a lot better than ↑males, umm:: (3.4) I've
 4 bee::n= people have thought, li(hh)ke= even through work, actually, it's quite funny
 5 hh. I was seeing= I saw this girl for a whi:le and then I knew her ex-boyfriend
 6 through work↑, and when she to:ld him about= 'cos they're still ↑mates= when she
 7 told him about me (.) he was like, "↑wuh? What, I th= I thought he was GAY," and
 8 I was li:ke, that's not the first time someone's said that to me. Umm: so yeah, I
 9 suppose ↑so:: Umm: (1.0) I'm quite flamboyant, umm: (1.2) but for me that's just,
 10 that, that= doesn't make me:= feminine or masculine, that's just (.) really who I am
 11 to be honest↑.

12 Greg: Right.
 13 Robert: Like, feminine= I'm, I'm not loud in a bad way↑, but I'm very conf- very confident↓.
 14 Umm:: (1.3) yeah I suppose I just get on with females more than I do males, when I
 15 think about it. And may::be that (.) labels me more ↑feminine than ↑male, but (.) uh,
 16 I personally don't believe so↑, but the:n, yeah, I think people have called me ↑gay::.
 17 It's not, it's= you know, it's not a shock to my guy group, when they're like, ah it's
 18 so you, when I do something that's (.) inverted commas, a bit gay. Umm: (1.2) but
 19 yeah. I don't really see= °no°, I don't think I'm more feminine than anyone else. Just
 20 (2.3) °me I suppose°.

Here, a more tangible other begins to emerge, and many of the characteristics described from the discussion of his blogging are made relevant, but in an explicitly gendered way. Indeed, Robert makes aesthetic labour explicit by talking about flamboyance on line 9, being encoded as feminine, as well as talking about being mistaken as gay (D'Emilio, 1983; Drummond, 2005; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017). He specifically positions himself as feminine, partly by asserting that he “gets on with females a lot better than males” – there is a clear, and this time gendered, ethic of care produced, where Robert is interested in how he responds to other people as a marker of his gender. He is different from his friends in this regard (who he seems to imply are men, despite stating that he gets on better with women), who are constructed as his masculine other, for now. These tropes are not allied with any assumptions about success in any conventional way – his idea of what femininity is, is not a tool for particular success, even though he draws some links between gender and labour in linking sociality with femininity and women. And, additionally, his responsible relationship with the other is not just about the masculine other, but everyone, with both men and women discussed.

However, this does not mean that a dilemma does not begin to emerge in extract 13. He constructs a sort of inclusive masculinity by accepting some level of flamboyance, as others have labelled him, and is perfectly happy to do so without prevarication. In comparison to those who think he is gay, Robert shows no real care for whether they think that or not. While positioning himself as more advanced than his masculine friends, Robert uses a series of tropes and stereotypes that are well-embedded, through linkages drawn between flamboyance, campness, gayness, male gender deviance, and femininity on lines 3-9 (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017; Shugart, 2003). So, while his ethic of care makes more explicit reference to the other than other participants have done, Robert nevertheless achieves an hollowed out idea of femininity that is linked to a number of problematic ideas about what exactly constitutes femininity, potentially reifying tropes and stereotypes of femininity without thinking too critically about it, such as constructing communication as feminine. An ethic of care relies on an understanding of the other is internally discursively complex, and contradictory to a construction of a feminine other without

making that other tangible. As with the other examples of the advanced masculinity repertoire, the otherness he constructs contradicts the heterosociality he aims to articulate. So, even though it is not him who has autonomously constructed the content of femininity by labelling himself flamboyant, instead of reaching beyond what those associations are, Robert at first accepts a level of otherness that is contrasted against the backwards views of other men. While he constructs his gender as more advanced than his friends' ideas of masculinity, that is because he to some extent essentialises a collection of concepts and ideas about femininity without fully acknowledging the complexity of everyday performances of femininity – this 'hollow femininity' became a key feature of much of my research, and is expanded upon in detail in section 9.4 of this thesis.

At the end of this short extract, though, he begins to perhaps notice this, on lines 19-20, and suggests that he is not more notably feminine than anyone else. This new dynamic of otherness is later negotiated in relation to the sitcom, more clearly ruminated on in extract 14 next, where Robert uses the *New Girl* clip to produce a newer version of masculinity by recalibrating his version of the other in relation to the characters he sees on screen.

Extract 14

- 1 Greg: Umm= w= err (.) do you think either of them (.) are mo= is more masculine than
 2 the other?
 3 (2.5)
- 4 Robert: They're masculine in the sense that they're both blokes:, umm: (.) I don't think
 5 either of them are more masculine than the other, like, and it kind of proves it when
 6 they both start talking about (.) cutting julienn:e peppers, and they both †know
 7 about it, so:: (.) who= umm= if you're looking at masculinity as kind of macho, as
 8 in, like, drinking, showing off, muscles (.) then they both fail on masculinity.
- 9 Greg: Mm hmm.
- 10 Robert: Umm, fall, big, you know, they both fall flat on their arses, which is I suppose is
 11 the irony of the clip. It's hh †you know, the masculinity's kind of all-encompassing,
 12 it doesn't matter whether they listen to Chopin, or: you:: (.) love to drink, like,
 13 seven pints in one sitting†, it's kind of:= (2.4) I suppose masculinity is:: (.) just what
 14 you= who you are as a gender, I suppose, you're just a male.
- 15 Greg: Umm:: (1.6) how about the other characters? 'Cos you know, you know the show,
 16 how about the other characters, umm: Nick and Winston, and, and Coach as well.
- 17 Robert: †Ni:ck (.) from what I can rememb= I mean I've only really seen like the †first 2
 18 series I think†? Ni::ck=
 19 Greg: Okay, so you won't remember Coach then.

20 Robert: No:: <Nick is:: (.) from memory: (0.9) qu=> hhh (.) he falls into another form of
 21 masculinity: I think↑, like, just kind of lazy:: (1.0) just blokey bloke, like a bit
 22 scruffy:: (.) umm: (1.0) moans a lo::t, umm: (.) yeah, just moans about everything,
 23 but (3.3) yeah, I mean, I can't really remember it too well actually, to give an
 24 honest= (.) or: a true representation, but he does fall into another category of (.)
 25 bloke, of kind of just like stay-at-ho:me, just loves to drink a beer while the TV::,
 26 umm: (.) which, ↑yeah, when you think, it's not even like a masculine thing↑, like,
 27 I'm sure there's girls that love just chilling and watching TV with a glass of wine,
 28 like, it doesn't make them (.) ma:sculine, but, umm, yeah, he:, he would kindof (.)
 29 engender that (.) type of bloke↑.

Presented with the *New Girl* clip, as we have seen before, the question about who is more masculine poses an interesting dilemma in which choosing one of the two Schmidts is an unacceptable response. Robert is no different, showing on line 3 some hesitancy about how best to approach this question. So far, Robert has not really shown any need to account for masculinity, because a lot of what he has said has skirted round explicitly gendering his character as masculine. Yet, his hesitancy here demonstrates that Robert has a stake in this question, and indeed his first response (line 4) does not really answer the question: stating that the two of them are both male does not answer who is more masculine.

His eventual answer, though, after this, is interesting. Instead of choosing one, he says that neither is masculine (line 8), based on a set of tropes about what masculinity is (“macho, drinking, showing off, muscles”). This reading shows Robert to be, in some sense, outside of this competition. Though he may have revealed a stake in masculinity, he explicitly rejects giving a strict meaning to what masculinity is, demonstrating an awareness of the internal complexities of gender performance. He then firms this up, and on lines 13 and 14 looks beyond masculinity as a performance that precedes gender, instead seeing masculinity as the performance after gender itself has been produced. This is then bolstered by his description of the character Nick, as he talks about a different form of masculinity that succeeds the achievement of gender in the first place.

There is a lot more hesitation, pausing, lengthening words, and repetition in extract 14 than Robert has previously demonstrated, such that *New Girl* has confronted him with a number of concrete examples of more masculine men, against whom he has constructed his own more feminine/feminised masculinity. These concrete examples make it far more difficult to exclude the other, though he makes an attempt to move beyond demoting hypermasculine tropes by removing them from masculinity in itself, when on line 27 he says that he’s “sure there’s girls that just love chilling and watching TV”. Nevertheless, despite Robert’s first attempts to construct himself and his labour as more to do with an

advanced sense of what labour is, the gendered aspects to this new conception of labour quickly become apparent, producing, like all uses of the advanced repertoire so far, a contradiction between the constructed and tangible other, highlighted by the performance of an ethic of care.

6.5 Chapter summary

The advanced masculinity IR is used to construct a form of masculinity against men whose masculinity is deemed excessive and outdated. This is achieved through two vectors of difference, in geography and temporality. Both were on display where I looked at the use of the advanced masculinity IR in the northern university focus group, looking at how geography became particularly pertinent, perhaps in relation to the geographical diversity of the university environment. Similarly, interviews with Matt and Jarvis in section 6.2 both use geographical otherness to express forms of masculinity more advanced than the others. Iggy and John also used geographical difference as key to constructing masculine positions for themselves, which itself rests on a binary construction of the backwards towns in which they grew up and a forward-thinking, more political progressive London, where masculinities with neoliberal capabilities are more suited to the latter than the former. Finally, Robert links what he describes as flamboyance with sociality and the reflexivity of his blogging work, combining elements of what appears to be some reference to otherness to the capabilities of the neoliberal subject.

The advanced masculinity IR therefore resolves of the contradictions between the masculine and neoliberal subjects through an ‘update’ to existing forms of masculinity. It takes masculinity to still be relevant, but only if that version of masculinity can take on and absorb elements of neoliberal subjectivity. However, in doing so, it produces another contradiction, in attempting to both account for and other constructed versions of outdated or backwards masculinities. As the next IR, outsider masculinity, will demonstrate, at the moments where those constructions of outdated or backwards masculinities are made more tangible, a different strategy for discursive resolution is required.

7

Outsider masculinity, nerds, geeks, and effeminacy

This chapter will explore how the outsider masculinity interpretative repertoire was used to negotiate the contradictions that are produced by the discursive renegotiation of the masculine subject in response to neoliberalism. Where the advanced masculinity IR is typified by modification of masculine subjectivity by portraying a more neoliberal masculinity as more socially advanced, another argument frequently advanced by participants was that an “outsider” masculinity, quite often (but not always) identified with nerd and geek masculinities, is the predominant and powerful form of manhood today – a theory espoused by nerdy men in academic studies (Bell, 2009, 2013; Kendall, 2011) and in popular culture (*The Big Bang Theory*, 2007 - 2019; Roeder, 2013). I have called this set of ideas and responses the “outsider masculinity” IR.

As with the other IRs, there is a contradiction in the outsider masculinity IR. Briefly put, the problem is this: can any sort of masculinity ever be considered “outside” if it remains masculinity? Or, if this IR is outside the norm, how can it be masculinity, and if it is masculinity, how can it be outside the norm? Concepts of otherness or “outsiderness” have been frequently shown to help constitute the norm or self against which it is defined, from Hegel through to de Beauvoir (2010 [1949]). Connell has even outlined a concept of “complicit masculinities”, to describe men who may not rigorously perform masculinity, but whose complicity nevertheless means they benefit from a patriarchal dividend (Connell, 2005b: 79), with various others showing how masculinities specifically portrayed as non-normative remain entirely complicit with existing gender structures, often within a neoliberal setting (Bell, 2009, 2013; Kendall, 2011; Pop Culture Detective, 2017). Yet, to perform outsider masculinity, the men expressed negativity towards the very concept of masculinity, therefore consciously rejecting masculine norms, even while programmatically propping them up. Outsider masculinity contains a tension in a need to disavow the very structures it helps to discursively form.

I am not the first to use the phrase “outsider masculinity”, and indeed not the first to related to neoliberalism or material conditions in some way. Hellman (2016), for example, argues that male skateboarders outline a version of outsider masculinity through narratives around risk-taking, in relation to a neoliberal conception of entrepreneurship and consumer creativity. The positive elevation of an outsider masculinity, as opposed to a conventional or normal one, here emerges as key in the use of such an idea. Indeed, Atencio and Beal (2011) argue that alternative or outsider masculinities have recently emerged as a form of positive social capital in post-industrial society, and, similarly to my study, find that such social capital is predominant among middle-class white men, similarly to my sample. Though there are other uses of the concept of outsider masculinity, notably in less positive sense of outsidership with young men in prison (see Reich, 2010, for example), the notion of the cool outsider follows on from previous uses of the idea.

A lot of the time, participants using the outsider masculinity IR expressed the feeling of being an outsider at school to being more successful later in life, a narrative was not couched in a way that saw a material change to masculinity as opposed to a sense that their new environment was an “outside” one where outsider masculinity makes more sense or fits in better. In this sense, the outsider masculinity IR positioned the men who employed it as a group explicitly following a different norm of masculinity rather than the hegemonic form.

In order to explicate this difference, as well as explore how the outsider masculinity IR attempts to solve the dilemma of neoliberal masculinity, and instead produces its own dilemma, I have used three different groups of interviews. The first looks at the focus group I did in London with hipster-identifying men. The second is with the same focus group I examined last in section 6.3 on page 110, with Iggy and John, looking at how they used a different IR. And last, I look at an interview with one of the bloggers, Elliott.

7.1 Feminine boys done good

I interviewed Ringo and George as they both in some way identified with being hipsters (see appendix 1, focus group 3). At the time of the double interview, Ringo was 28, and in the process of setting up a small business, while George was 19, and studying a creative undergraduate degree in London. Like all the interviews I did, all three IRs featured in this hipsters interview. However, broadly speaking, the outsider masculinity IR was the most frequent, as the two men asserted a sense of being more at home in London but because of an environment that rewards a nerdy and sometimes explicitly, if misguidedly, feminised (by the participants themselves and by others, rather than by me as a researcher) outsider masculinity. Ringo and George gave slightly different accounts of their masculinity

that both follow this idea, and in this section I am interested in both accounts as they work on their own and as they interact with one another.

Extract 15

- 1 George: Yeah, no. Umm (0.9) In my answer: to the original question, [umm]
- 2 Greg: [yeah yeah]
- 3 George: of-- yeah. ↑I: I feel like throughout my life so far: I've sort of (0.8) tried to or, or
- 4 had a conscious effort to sort of avoi- avoi:d (.) ((tuts)) umm (.) the expectations of
- 5 masculinity (.) to a certain extent. Umm I feel like (.) in sort of school, that lead to:
- 6 me being labelled gay, whereas I'm not↑. Umm (1.8) And that, uh, and it was (.)
- 7 sort of that, along with sort of, the (.) the popular kids, is, is how I sort of, umm
- 8 ((tuts)) (0.7) labelled it as:, you know, you've got this group of popular kids (.) with
- 9 guys that are very much adhering to: the masculinity: umm expectations and
- 10 stereotypes↑, a:nd of course it's, it's impossible to avoid that completely, especially
- 11 as a young, a younger child. Umm, but I feel like (.) just naturally, I've always been
- 12 aware of: (1.1) of that, and increasingly:, just↑ out of (0.6) how I want to: to go
- 13 about things, how I treat people, how I want to be, umm, (.) I've (0.4) supposed, I
- 14 suppose in a, in a small way I sort of rebelled from (.) that idea umm which I say,
- 15 on one hand (.) umm: ((tuts)) (1.1) when I was younger made people treat me
- 16 negatively ((tuts)) umm: (1.2) on the other hand, I think it's made me develop into
- 17 the person that I am, umm, and (.) err has caused me to err: view gender and people
- 18 and life in, in the way that I do. Umm: ((tuts)) (.) yeah↑, yeah, no I think (1.7) I
- 19 think that's how I've sort of dealt with it, that's how I view it now and that's how I
- 20 sort of developed that.
- 21 Ringo: I mean I think in cert—I think in so:me ways, it gets: (1.4) ee-- both easier: and,
- 22 and harder:. ‘Cos about, I mean, I'm, I'm (.) about, about ten years older than you,
- 23 and I'd say, I, I think I was the same when I was your age, quite consciously
- 24 wanting to, to: (0.9) to, to not, not be a jock, not be a: sort of that kind of butch
- 25 ma:n=
- 26 Greg: Yeah, yeah
- 27 Ringo: =Ermm, and (.) and obviously it is, as, as you get older, it is easier to sort of fi:nd
- 28 (0.6) ways to live, that, that are satisfying without having to do that. But I definitely
- 29 sort of (1.4) re- remember when I was younger sort of, and even sometimes now,
- 30 feeling that, that (.) in many ways, to conform to those kind of stereotypes it's
- 31 kinda, kind of easy to do=

32 George: Yeah.

33 Ringo: =you know just have to compete like everyone else:

34 George: Yeah.

35 Ringo: Ermm:: and in some ways I often fee:l (.) that I:'m certainly financially, I think you
 36 are↑ rewarded for behaving like that, 'cause sortof= the=when I= when I've (.) had,
 37 the, the best jo:bs I've ha:d, I've had to behave like tha::t. I've sort of had to be::, be
 38 aggressive, be very blu:nt, be very unca:ring umm: and I think lots of: (1.0)
 39 bu:siness= and big business really is that. It's that you don't take how people feel
 40 into consideration, and that's= (.) co- considering sordof work is sort of, in most
 41 shifts (.) is often seen as a very: (.) negative trait↑ (.) in a: (.) sordof successful (.)
 42 employee (.) and I think that's a bad thing. But I mean I think (.) it's also sordof
 43 seen as a:: as a feminine thing (.) to care abou::t (.) the way people feel.

Responding to my opening question, “is it difficult to live up to expectations of masculinity?”, George asserts that he deliberately rejected those ideas at school, that he “sort of rebelled” against masculinity when he was younger (lines 13-16). On line 6, he substantiates the feeling or position of being an outsider by mentioning that at school he was sometimes labelled gay, where we see one of the experiences which distinguishes the outsider masculinity IR: George’s sense of femininity, or anti-masculinity, might have begun because that was how others labelled him, but that label later became something George adopted for himself, constructed in a positive way. He says that this experience shaped him, that the experience of being an outsider at school made George “develop into the person that” he is, and caused him “to view gender and people and life” (lines 16-18) in the way that he does. He frames this experience in hindsight as overwhelmingly positive: his feminisation at the hand of the others at school directly granted him access to a positive, socially progressive politics.

Ringo recognises much of his experiences in George’s story, that feminisation by others at school was actually positive, in that he rejected a lot of the “jockish” elements of masculinity. But Ringo also goes a step further on lines 35-36, making a structural connection between masculinity and capitalism, stating that it was when he behaved in a more masculine, brusque manner, in a way that showed little care for other people, he received a greater financial reward. Ringo indicates that masculine behaviour is rewarded by capitalism, though his framing of this assertion shows, at best, ambivalence towards behaving in a masculine way, and at worst, an active dislike. Ringo explicitly frames his performance of masculinity for monetary reward as an act, a way of achieving an end that is not true to any of his beliefs. As such, Ringo portrays himself as “other” to that form of masculinity, which is not something that he wants to achieve or constructed as something faithful to himself. Indeed, this construction is not

dissimilar to much of the work on masculinity that explores how the concept of personal sacrifice and stoicism cuts across cultural differences in masculinities (Gilmore, 1991).

George and Ringo have so far positioned themselves as masculine outsiders – in the following extract, which occurred about halfway through the interview, their sense of being an outsider is reversed in a contradictory way, as they both develop narratives about how that became an asset socially and culturally in, importantly, urban environments, later on in life. My question at line 1 of the following extract sounds leading, but there are two pieces of important context. First, leaving a hometown for a city and finding yourself more accepted in the city came up several times in other previous interviews and focus groups, and second, both Ringo and George had been significantly discussing their masculinity in terms of geography up to this point for several minutes, making links between their being an outsider early on in life and where they are now.

Extract 16

- 1 Greg: Do you think (.) that kind of experience: (.) in any way influenced your decision -
2 so you're from (redacted), you're from (redacted) - do you think that influenced
3 your decision to leave (.) those areas?
- 4 Ringo: Yeah, possibly. (1.1) Uh:, I mean I think (.) mo- a:ll of the people I was (.) good
5 friends with at school, uh, have ↓gone, and the people that, that are sortof still, I
6 mean I'm from out, yeh just outside (redacted)=
- 7 Greg: Right.
- 8 Ringo: U:mm (0.9) and I thi:nk the people that are still there are: (.) are, like (I said), yeah,
9 the popular kids, and the people who enjoy, who enjoyed school in a very
10 traditional way. (.) A:nd the people who weren't sortof (2.0) ↓I dunno, who weren't
11 sortof thinking outside of the box. Lots of, lots people end up in ↑Bristol, some in
12 ↑Manchester, London, Brighton. (.) U:mm (0.8) there're cities in the UK that are:=
- 13 Greg: All, all urban areas.
- 14 Ringo: =yeah, urban areas. I think (redacted) less so= I dunno if it's just it was the nearest
15 city, but I think (redacted)'s not (.) particularly liberal city, it's not a liberal city is it,
16 you know, [it's more boring than the rest of them]
- 17 Greg: [it's not cool is it? It's not cool]
- 18 Ringo: [No:]
- 19 Greg: [Like], you think of Bristo:l, you think of Manchester:, you think of London, and
20 you think of like Shoreditch, and this is all, like, cool areas.
- 21 Ringo: Ye[ah]
- 22 George: [ye]ah no=

23 Greg: =sorry if I keep smiling by the way! It's not me smiling at your suffering! It's quite
 24 similar [to my experience as well]!

25 Ringo: [hhhhh]

26 George: Um, I think in a, in a, in a longer sort of form, in the sense of, y'know, I came to, I
 27 came to London, (1.3) because I (.) <I decided I wanted to (.) obviously succeed in
 28 something. I think I:: (1.3) I think the:: umm:... ((tuts)) Be:ing less: accepted (.)
 29 maybe, umm: (1.0) I found something, I found filmmaking, umm, (.) and, and that
 30 whole sort of (.) media industry, that whole media (.) umm, sort of idea, very much
 31 just on ↑YouTube, ↑online (.) became very, very interested in it, and s:o (.) moving
 32 to London for me, umm, was very much just like in following what I want to do. I:
 33 (.) have decided a long time ago (.) like a lot of people do I'm ↑sure, that I want to:,
 34 (.) I want to be ↑great at what I'm ↑doing, you know. I've got this ambition and this
 35 drive, which I ↑think is fuelled by (1.7) not (.) being the popular kid, not going
 36 along with that= you know I found my thing like a lot of people do, and, uh, for a
 37 long time now, for a lot of years, through school and college, I've worked very,
 38 very hard to, to really try and (.) achieve what I ↑want to achieve (.) to find that,
 39 umm (.) I find a lot of happiness in that, you know, that possible success, in the
 40 small successes that I've ↑had.

Ringo talks about his experience here in fairly anonymous-sounding, vague terms. Though he addresses the question directly initially (“yeah, possibly”) on line 4, he gives an account of how this happened at and after school. His friendship group, presumably outsiders like him rather than, in his words, “the people who enjoyed school in a very traditional way” (line 9), have all left the city where he grew up, while those who did enjoy school are still there. Much of the Ringo’s prevarication between lines 4 and 10 about how to construct the two school groups again hearkens back to the problems with the advanced repertoire, in constructing a more advanced masculinity against a stereotype while also trying to show care for the other – but as with the outsider masculinity IR, instead, Ringo continues to construct himself as an outsider who found a home in the city. This entails a sort of karmic retribution, where being more popular at school has “left behind” many of Ringo’s schoolmates²³, while those who

²³ This perhaps follows particular media narratives related to Brexit and other UK community-based research (MacLeavy, 2018; Rushton, 2017) about class, race, and “left behind” communities, as outlined in my literature review. Such media narratives feed into the positionality of my participants and their relationship to neoliberal capitalism, by drawing links between two different binaries: a traditional masculinity being associated with being “left behind” and an outsider masculinity being more in tune with the times.

were more feminine, more open to change, like Ringo and his friends, managed to escape. On top of this, there is a suggestion from both Ringo and George of the discovering their “authentic” selves in the city, which is itself constructed as an authentic space. The “hipster” identity, it has been noted, relies partly on an invocation of authenticity (Gilson, 2016), from reclamation of vintage clothing in hipster fashion through to the aesthetic reuse of industrial spaces (Zukin, 2011).

Next (from line 28) it is George’s turn to give his account of this narrative, in a story that he tells about himself, about how and where the person he “came to be” (in his words) fits into the social world. He re-establishes his experience of being an outsider at school – “being less accepted” and “not being the popular kid” (35). He then draws a direct link between those experiences at school, and his move to London to pursue filmmaking. He came to London “because he decided he wanted to succeed in something” (27), thanks to an ambition and drive fuelled specifically by “not being the popular kid”. George’s story makes a positive of being an outsider, finding that place where his masculinity fits in well. However, the positives for George begin to extend specifically into the labour market, contrasting with Ringo’s earlier declarations about being rewarded by artificial displays of “aggressive” masculinity, but also echoing popular narratives about nerds and other potentially marginalised subjectivities being the beneficiaries of a newer form of capitalism (Bell, 2009; Roeder, 2013). His classmates feminised him, and he therefore then moved to London, where he finds in that feminisation and rejection an ambition, leading to “success”. How and why do George’s negative school experiences bring him success, where Ringo finds he needs to put on an act?

The concept of “success” on which this narrative is built has been called into question. Halberstam points out how the concept of success commonly understood is both masculinised and productive in an explicitly capitalist sense, concerned with wealth accumulation and economic participation and contribution (Halberstam, 2011) – when we talk about success, in other words, we are normally talking about masculine, capitalist success. However, Halberstam also suggests that this particular notion of success is under threat, thanks to a moment of capitalist crisis, and that an embrace failure, associated with rejecting capitalist concepts of work and material accumulation, represents the potential for oppositional, feminist and anti-capitalist strategies. More specifically, Halberstam (2011) associates his politicised concept of failure with a queer politics, in which gender categories are expanded and rewritten. Perhaps because he is nine years older than George, Ringo’s performances of hypermasculinity that have remunerated him are equated with success: when he follows the masculine script, he has found financial success. George is measuring success by a different metric, not in economic contribution, but in finding a vocation that he enjoys and making a life of it, a notion of labour devoid of the concept of a wage.

However, I do not think that George is following Halberstam’s suggestion that we politically embrace “failure”, but that this is a notion of success based on precarity and minimal remuneration in

such a way that may not involve economic contribution, but is entirely congruent with neoliberal capitalism. George succeeds in his definition, but that lack of financial gain is specifically what makes his labour useful to the market – as Harris (2017) points out, the casualisation (often linked with feminisation) of the labour market is not a freedom but a symptom of neoliberalism requiring flexibilised, atomised individuals. So, while there is some level of embrace of anti-masculinity, that embrace is at least partially produced through the creation of effective neoliberal subjects – George does not seem interested, following Halberstam, in a structural critique of gender through his rejection of success.

Extract 17, below, was midway through a discussion about Brexit, and generational attitudes to gender, race, and sexuality. Interestingly, Ringo attempts to perform what he appears to view, rightly or not, as a version of hollow femininity, by explicitly rejecting the masculinist notion of success he had described earlier.

Extract 17

- 1 George: I ↑think, ah, I ↑think my, my ↓dad's actually a really interesting case umm. (1.0) He
 2 (0.6) at heart↑ (.) he is: the most ↑loving ma:n (0.5) umm (1.3) a:nd yeah (.) really
 3 great guy (0.7) very much has influenced the way that I ↑am, for sure. ↑Bu:t (.) he
 4 has this: (.) this angry: umm: (0.5) different side to him↑ that I say, it is very racist,
 5 it is very sexist. I think it comes from his upbringing, his ↑dad very traditional:
 6 umm: (.) his ↑mum very traditional. Umm: (1.4) I think he:: very much like a lot of
 7 men probably his age, fifty::, fifty-two I think he is umm: (2.4) it's, it's, it's a very,
 8 is, common thing for them to be sordof holding onto: (.) this more old-fashioned
 9 negative view on sexuality a:nd (.) race and (.) equality (0.9) and I think he (0.8)
 10 he:: (.) he KNOWS that he's wrong, he knows that he's being (.) ridiculous when
 11 he's being ↓racist and when he's being ↓sexist (0.8) but he still has these principles
 12 that he's trying to: umm: (1.2) to::: (1.9) ((tuts)) (.) justify↑.
- 13 Ringo: Yeah.
- 14 George: And so: you have these ridiculous conversations ↓with him (.) and he knows that
 15 he's being a twa:t, but he's, he's: all, "uhhh!". Umm: he's got his opinions: (.) that
 16 he's sordof echoing and you can hear his dad saying them and (1.7) very much like,
 17 like Brexit, he's got (0.5) the ideas of the working man I suppose↑, umm: o:f, of
 18 what it all means (0.8) umm: (0.6) a:nd (1.9) and it, it, is very: the masculinity, the
 19 (.) umm: (.) the male sordof drive behind how he (.) is (.) inform= eh, uh, in, how
 20 he is informed, and how he is (.) trying to inform those opinions (0.7) it is all about,
 21 "uhhh, this that and the other" umm: (1.3) the good old days:=

22 Ringo: Ye:ah
 23 George: =you know↑?
 24 Ringo: Yeah, it's, it's the idea of (.) of, chh, of not listening, really. (0.9) Umm: sort of, a
 25 pri:de in not listening. (.) And that's:= this is quite rare for me, actually, to be
 26 speaking this much, I've sort of deliberately been trying to:: in the last sort of year
 27 or so:, been trying to (.) listen, more than I spe:ak. (.) Umm (.) m= m= in many
 28 ways as a, as a sort of= that's my= been my personal response to the Brexit ↓vote,
 29 has been making sure I pay more attention than, than, than, than I've= than I've put
 30 out. But I thi:nk (1.2) it's very often sort of a stereotype of, of men, isn't it, they
 31 don't listen and like you're talking about= I've had conversations wi:th (.) sort of (.)
 32 uh, not, not specifically my, my, parents, but my::, my, my girlfriends' parents↑ (.)
 33 and it's the kind of thing where they::= as, as you say, you can, you can make
 34 people (.) acknowledge that what, what you're saying is: (0.5) correct, like, “oh, are
 35 you= oh, so you:'ve, you've got friends that are black, you've got colleagues that
 36 are women, are they (.) wo:rse tha:n, than the white men you get on with?” No of
 37 COURSE they're not! (.) Okay then, what, then, AAAAHH you know! It's just
 38 (0.6) re= re= refuse= a refusal to change these opinions even (.) in the face of: (.) of
 39 evidence, umm:

By the time I did this interview, Brexit had come up enough times that I broached the topic myself – and I asked the two men whether they had had any arguments about Brexit with family members. This passage brings with it the tropes of both the advanced masculinity IR and media narratives surrounding Brexit – a progressive, inclusive, anti-racist, LGBTQ-friendly politics contrasted with a backward, older generation that is geographically and culturally left behind. The two descriptions, of George's dad and Ringo's girlfriend's family, help to construct a position resembling McCormack's idea of inclusive masculinity (McCormack, 2012). George constructs this by using his dad as an example of traditional masculinity. Yet, he does not prevaricate or worry about portraying his dad negatively, because in this scenario it is not his dad that is the other, but George himself. In the advanced masculinity IR, there is a need to show an ethic of care and position yourself against a backward other at the same time; in the outsider masculinity IR, George *is* the other.

Contrast this with Ringo – beginning with line 24, Ringo talks about listening, as he says that he has responded to the Brexit vote by trying to listen more than he presumably has done in the past. The idea of listening more than speaking is imbricated a gendered binary in which listening, or more generally emotional labour, is associated with women (Abstract, 1989), also indicated by Ringo riffing on George's description of his dad as stubborn and obstinate. Indeed, it also recalls the ethic of care, as

discussed at length in the previous chapter. Concerned by what he conceptualises as a masculinity-driven Brexit, Ringo produces a conscious response that instead of dismissing the other by talking over them, he wants to provide a platform to understand the other on their (and not his) terms. So while he accepts the premise of the binary he talks about, he is more interested in identifying himself with the feminine side of that binary. Ringo describes that binary explicitly on lines 30-31, saying “it’s very often a sort of stereotype of men, isn’t it?”, and noting his tendency to talk more in the past, by trying to deliberately listen more in future, having linked a lack of listening skills with stereotypical masculinity. Having previously framed his performances of masculinity as atypical, Ringo emerges from this encounter consciously suppressing masculinity, positioning him as “naturally” masculine even while mitigating the worst excesses of masculinity.

I have suggested here that George and Ringo in these examples each suggest a different ontology of outsider masculinity, even while they appear to talk about the same thing. Where George makes otherness the primary feature of the formulation “outsider masculinity”, Ringo prioritises masculinity over otherness. Consider my question at the beginning of this chapter: if it is masculinity, how is it outside the norm, and if it is outside the norm, how can it be masculinity? Compare, for example, Ringo in extracts 16 and 17 – in 16, he often finds himself performing a hypermasculinity for financial gain, against his better judgement. In 17, he finds himself attempting to identify with what he constructs as the feminine side of a gender binary, and although that performance may be in line with his better judgement, it is framed as against the grain of his character. For all the indications that he finds a more natural home outside of masculine performances, here he indicates that it is in fact his natural home.

Given the above, to what extent is outsider masculinity merely complicit, and to what extent, even if it is not consciously complicit, does it serve to discursively enable masculine structures? Having watched the *How I Met Your Mother* clip, this dichotomy emerges as pertinent when faced with a more concrete other against which Ringo and George can discuss the relationship between outsidership and masculinity, and how these concepts relate to one another. Extract 18 takes place immediately after the clip ended.

Extract 18

- 1 Greg: So (1.1) based on that clip†, do you like Marshall?
- 2 (2.3)
- 3 Ringo: Umm:: (0.8) he seems nicer than that othe= yeah (.) †yeah, he seems ni:ce†. I think
- 4 he seems to recognise that (0.6) that behavi:ng (.) like a: (.) toxic man (.) isn't: a
- 5 good thing to do:.
- 6 Greg: Yeah.

7 Ringo: But he:: (0.5) does it anyway↑. But he'd rather= that he'd rather than confronting
8 that unpleasant behaviour he joins in↑ (0.4) perhaps's a: (0.7) a sign of weakness↑
9 (0.9) dunno but he's= fact that he: naturally (.) doesn't behave like them is (.) uh in
10 his favour.

11 Greg: George:?

12 George: Yeah↑ (0.9) yeah no, obviously, li:ke ((clears throat)) they are, they are like being=
13 he's, he's the better: (.) the better person:. Umm: (1.1) it's just the representation of
14 such a typical: (.) scena↑rio. Umm (0.9) like everything we've sort of spoken about
15 really:. Umm: (2.1) the= eh he:: recognises: (1.6) that it's: that it's (.) the wrong
16 way to be (.) but yeah, like you say: (1.8) he: would rather confo:rm (.) and fit in (.)
17 professionally↑ (.) to better his (1.2) to better himself in, in his career I suppose is
18 what he's doing umm (.) or to: actually get along with people at work, umm:: (.)
19 than (.) to be himself (.) becau:se (2.4) the people in question are so shallow (.) that
20 that's all they see (.) umm (.) yeah.

21 Greg: Does: (.) the, I mean, we, you= presumably you remember the context of, of him
22 getting that job?

23 George: Ye:ah.

24 Greg: I mean, does that change (1.4) for you, does that <make it (.) more, sort of like
25 (0.7) acceptable?> Might be the wrong word, but (.) for him to kind of change? In
26 order for him=

27 George: Like↑ (.) for, like, in, in a real life context, and like I don't think anybody should (.)
28 have to.

29 Greg: Yeah.

30 George: Equally I don't think anybody shou:ld (.) umm: to= should act like that, but (0.5)
31 obviously that's an exaggerated (.) scenario, but I think it's still very: (.) real. Umm:
32 (.) the:se (1.3) I s'pose you could say doucheba:g men↑, umm: 'cos they are, you
33 know.

34 Greg: They are douchebags, yeah[yeah.]

35 George: [That's] that's what they are, umm: ((tuts)) it is, it is a
36 way that people do a:ct, umm: (.) at the pub↑ or at work↑, in that, in that (.) situation
37 and umm I don't think, I don't think, even (.) to: succeed in, in a jo:b, I don't ↑know,
38 maybe= maybe:: that's, that's someone's personal opinion, isn't it but I think (1.8)
39 maybe:: if, like, my financial situation was on the line↑, maybe I would↑? Act like
40 Marshall in that scenario. But in an ideal world, I'd never:: (.) I'd never think that
41 it's alright, or the right thing to do to conform (.) to something that you know's
42 wrong.

Ringo essentially described the scenario in this clip in extract 15: a man typically uncomfortable with hypermasculine behaviour enacts a form of hypermasculine behaviour for financial reward. Ringo responds first here, and by now the problems with an outsider masculinity IR are fairly exposed. Marshall, for Ringo, “seems nicer” (3) than the other men in the clip to whose pressure he bows, on the basis that Marshall recognises that toxic masculine behaviour is a bad thing. But he follows this declaration on lines 7-9 with a number of qualifications and prevarications, using “but” twice, “perhaps” and “dunno” once each, and pausing six times. Though Ringo sees Marshall’s recognition of toxic masculine behaviour as a positive, he is less sure about Marshall’s later performance of toxic behaviour, and seems to compromise on line 9. Recognising that remaining within the confines of masculinity is going to involve compromise, Ringo accepts that there is some room for its performance as long as it a cosmetic performance rather than a feature of character. George agrees that “obviously” Marshall “is the better person” (12-13), even if he does not think that, unlike Ringo, “anybody should act like that” (30). So, George accepts Ringo’s premise that Marshall’s recognition of toxic masculinity gives him a greater moral standing than the “douchebags” he works with, but comes to a different normative conclusion about that premise.

This premise is interesting, as it is the conclusion of a discussion about conforming, as opposed to one directly about the juxtaposition of masculinity and outsiderhood. George’s invocation of “an ideal world” on line 40, where it might be possible to behave in a non-masculine way and still be rewarded for it, posits the existence of naturalised masculine structures. In this sense, both position themselves as individuals swept up in a set of ideas that they do not necessarily agree with – in George’s words “conforming and fitting in professionally” (16). Marshall, and by proxy, Ringo and George, find themselves able to be good because toxic masculine behaviour is seen *prima facie* to be bad, such that masculinity itself is never really called into question; what it means to “fit in” professionally, what success or failure mean, and the relationship between masculinity and financial gain are not questioned. What is at stake, rather than fitting in, is the fleeting coherence of outsider masculinity long enough for Ringo and George to position themselves. George’s maxim on line 30 that he “doesn’t think anybody should act like that” despite it being a “very real” scenario, specifically (re)constructs a naturalised masculine reality even as it tries to keep an outsider position coherent, contrasted against George’s “ideal world” on line 40 in which it might be. Personal responsibility for masculinity is shrugged off, as Ringo and George (and Marshall) are framed as those trying to do good in a bad scenario.

7.2 Nerd boys done good

This section employs extracts from the same focus group as section 6.3, where I looked at how Iggy and John, two men at a technology company (see appendix 1, focus group 4), employed the advanced masculinity IR. However, they also sometimes employed the outsider masculinity IR, taking up specific positions in relation to specific scenarios. IRs are not used in coherent ways, but as devices for positioning subjects in relation to the features of the specific dilemmas they faced (Edley, 2001; D. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wetherell, 1998). This section will refer back to section 6.3, therefore, in order to look at the interchange between the advanced and outsider masculinity IRs, and how and why that interchange occurred. In short, the outsider masculinity IR became more prominent at points at which Iggy and John found it necessary or useful to reject masculinity as a whole, rather than to use it to try and demonstrate the hegemony of nerdy or geeky men. So, where the ideal world that George constructs in section 7.1 is too intangible, instead, the advanced repertoire asserts itself as a real world “failsafe”. How this movement between IRs works, and the political implications thereof, will be discussed throughout this section.

Extract 19 below occurred very near the beginning of the interview – other than the word association, this came seconds after the first question I asked whether they find it difficult to live to expectations of masculinity.

Extract 19

- 1 Iggy: I think I think, I think about it i:n the context of my: (.) of my relationship, my long
2 term relationship with my girlfriend†, and how:: (2.0) there are aspects of it that
3 probably do:: (1.1) fit in with it and aspects that don't with fit in with this sort of,
4 this kind of entrenched idea of masculinity, like. I: put up some pictures yesterday,
5 which meant I had (.) to nail some stuff to walls=
6 John: Hhh
7 Iggy: =I, you know, measuring it out and stuff, and I thought, oh this is quite kind of
8 "rooh, this doesn't happen [very often]"=
9 John: [hhhh]
10 Iggy: =this is quite a thing but then I'll fi:nd (1.5) that (1.9) we both ha::ve (.) we both
11 hav:e (.) full time jobs and she's (.) extremely successful (1.7) a:nd (.)=
12 John: Yeah, it's=
13 Iggy: =it's just like stupid stuff like, I probably iron more than she does.
14 [I kind of weirdly enjoy it.]
15 John: I guess it [matters what you::] descri:be as masculinity.

16 Iggy: It does yeahyeahyeah.

17 John: 'Cos, I dunno↑, I guess: (.) I nat- I, I c- I like (.) building things↑, and doing things

18 around the house, I guess I l= <I do enjoy: doing things that are associated to

19 masculinity>=

20 Iggy: Mmm

21 John: =but I don't necessarily think about masculinity when I'm doing them (0.8) hhhhhh

22 Iggy: Actively thinking about [masculinity], ye:ah.

23 John: [yeah exactly] yeah.

24 Greg: So [d'you] think↑= sorry, go on↑.

25 Iggy: [I=] No:, I was just gonna say, I don't, I, I know what

26 you mean, I think it (.) I don't (.) I don't, I wouldn't say I ever (1.9) I've never been

27 concerned with this concept of (.) like, you know, ma:n up or anything like that. I

28 don't find that very interesting, but (2.3) in your, in some moments, you do think

29 about what it means to be: that, or to be that role I guess.

30 John: ↑Yeah (.) no, [I] think you do (0.4) in terms of=

31 Iggy: [mm] =negatively or positively.

32 Greg: So: is it subconscious, there, is there some sort of subconscious thing going on?

John: ↑Mmmm (.) I guess you can, uh, it matters where you source your principles.

Greg: [Right.] [yeah, yeah]

33 John: I think [most] people have principles, [and whet]her you would say "I'm doing

34 these principles because I'm a man" or (.) doing them because you're a you↑, or a

35 (0.4)= Dunno, it matters where you source your identity from.

36 Greg: In what sense?

37 John: Umm::.

38 Greg: What (.) yeah, what sort of places are you talking about?

39 John: What, in terms of where you source your ident↑ity from?

40 Greg: Yeah yeah.

41 John: Well I guess ((incoherent mumble)) obvious example (.) with me then, would

42 probably be am I a (.) a man or a geek?

Iggy constructs not just a rejection of masculine norms, but in rejecting an image of a certain model of masculinity, he uses stereotypical images of femininity (notably domestic labour – “I probably iron more than she does” on line 13) to construct his own gender. This is not to say that he constructs himself as feminine, but that he adopts what might be seen as stereotypical feminine ideas to describe his own approach to gender. He says that some DIY he did the previous day, putting up some shelves, is something that doesn't happen very often, also stating that he “weirdly enjoys” (14) doing housework

like ironing. Though both ironing and putting up a picture are examples of domestic labour, various studies have found that, in the past, the creation of certain male spheres in the home, such as DIY, barbecuing, or the “man shed” or “man cave”, work to create “islands of untainted masculinity and purified pockets of virility” (Kimmel, 1987: 262). So, arguably, both of these things position him as an outsider, the former by making a typically masculine activity an abnormal situation for him, and the latter by taking pleasure in domestic labour, which is framed as typically non-masculine.

There may be an argument here that the abnormality of doing DIY for Iggy is not really that non-masculine today at all: the recent decline in sales of DIY products in the UK from shops such as Homebase or B&Q (Chapman, 2018) would position Iggy as part of the curve, rather than acting against it. Moisio et al (2013) found that for men with a middle-class background (which, in their definition, would include Iggy), DIY has become a leisure activity rather than “labour” as such – it is a form of consumption done for fun, fashioning the man as a “suburban craftsman”, rather than necessary housework. This framing, which fits in with Iggy’s framing of DIY as something novel or fun, allows Iggy to distance himself from masculinity by attaching masculinity to something older and outdated, and positions him, therefore, as anti-masculine. Such a rejection of masculinity still comes at a cost, though, as for Iggy it is still “weird” or perverse for a man to enjoy housework. So, while enjoyment positions him as outside of masculinity, weirdness reaffirms that it is still abnormal – to just enjoy it unapologetically would entail a very different type of response.

The problem of whether or not you can be both masculine and an outsider to masculinity appears to creep in, as while both John and Iggy see themselves as not typically masculine, they are men, forcing them both to be realistic about the extent to which they identify with being an outsider. Their solution at first is to consider some subconscious level on which they assume and perform masculinity: “I don’t necessarily think about masculinity when I’m doing them” (line 21). In response to the problem of being both outside and masculine, geek or nerd masculinities emerge as a potential third choice, a separate type of masculinity that is sort of marginalised, and sort of not (Bell, 2013; Kendall, 2000, 2011).

It is easier for Iggy and John to opt for outsider masculinity – but there is an interesting development in contrast with extracts 10a and 10b in section 6.3, which occurred several minutes after extract 19. I noted earlier the similarities between the outsider and advanced repertoires, in that both rely on othering a concept of “traditional”, “toxic” or “backward” masculinity, but that the advanced masculinity IR relies on a shift in masculine structures rather than an individual finding their own form of outsider masculinity. In the time between extract 10b and 19, the topic of conversation turns to geography, with Iggy and John having positioned themselves as outsiders up until then. Now, the tangibility of the traditionally masculine other presented by geography, as well as the relative material advantages that they see “nerd” masculinity granting them, see them reconsider their position as masculine outsiders. Instead, they become hegemonically, if still not “toxically” masculine in a system

of economic exchange that rewards geeks and nerds (Poster, 2013). Instead of swimming against a tide of toxic masculinity, they are swimming with a tide of nerd masculinities.

When it suits them to use a different repertoire again, they do, as shown in extract 20. Faced with the smaller micro-relations of their office, both Iggy and John switch back to the outsider masculinity IR, constructing a world of ideal gender relations in which their outsider-ness is once again against the norms of society. The next extract occurred in the context of a general conversation about gender in the workplace, triggered by my asking whether they believe their office to be a “friendly work environment” for women.

Extract 20

- 1 Greg: You're talking about being in a work environment that I assume you both feel quite
2 comfortable with?
- 3 Iggy: [Yeah [()]]
- 4 John: [Yeah [()]]
- 5 Greg: [Right] Yeah (.) but you're saying is: (.) quite masculine?
- 6 John: It's a (.) I guess for me, it's a different kind of masculine. It's a, probably a more
7 (0.8) subtle kind of masculine=
- 8 Greg: mm hmm
- 9 John: =erm and that's what I'm kind of understanding is that it's not just about (1.1)
10 jockey boys: or:: (.) [bald] blokes shoutin' or whatever. This this this there is a=
- 11 Greg: [yeah]
- 12 Iggy: =no, it's, yeah it's more nuanced than [that]
- 13 John: [yeah]
- 14 Iggy: It, it, it, has more to do with: (3.2) creating a space (.) or being conscious of (.)
15 sharing a space (1.5) with: (.) different people basically.
- 16 Greg: Mm hmm.
- 17 Iggy: You're right, it's not partic- it's not (.) what you traditionally think of as (.) heavily
18 masculine because you've got=
- 19 John: =no it's not, (there's—yeah)=
- 20 Iggy: =programmers (.) by and large are not (1.1) that kind of person I think, I would say.
- 21 John: Yeah:
- 22 Iggy: Uh (.) they've probably come on a similar path to a lot of us (0.9) like, you know.
23 (2.4)
- 24 John: Yeah (.) I ↑agree, I agree. I think, yeah, it's a different kind of mascu[linity].
- 25 Greg: [right]

26 Iggy: [mm]
27 John: It's (.) it's ↑definitely, you can't deny it's male(.)-dominated a:nd uh: (0.8) yeah,
28 generally led by men.

Both participants had expressed a belief there is a specific type of masculinity common in the technology sector – yet both are also hesitant to say they are comfortable with masculinity. The advanced masculinity IR will not do, because it risks making them complicit with gendered structures they are keen to try to reject. Instead, faced with being held accountable for specific experiences of theirs, they opt to revert back here to the outsider masculinity IR. Doing so ensures that they can construct a version of masculinity specific to their workplace, even while they contradict things that they have previously stated about masculinity as a whole having advanced. So, instead of their workplace benefiting from a change to hegemonic masculinity, it instead is constructed in a masculine opposed to hegemonic masculine norms: a “different”, “more subtle kind of masculine” (lines 6-7).

Iggy and John’s decision to position themselves as outsiders sheds light on a key difference between the advanced and outsider masculinity IRs, each of which would tend toward a specific reading of the concept of “programmer masculinity”. To use programmer masculinity with the advanced masculinity IR is to look at being a programmer as the new hegemonic form of masculinity, prioritising the “masculine” element over the “programmer” element – what might be called programmer *masculinity*. The outsider masculinity IR presents programmer masculinity as an othered or marginalised gendered option, among others, for programmers – i.e. *programmer* masculinity. The problem is that these two are ontologically incommensurable – the former advances a concept of masculinity that relies on a hegemonic model, where the second relies on a model with multiple types masculinities. The question for Iggy and John is therefore which of these options is more beneficial to them in relation to the scenario.

So, the general aim of all three IRs, as discussed, is to disavow or distance oneself from a form of traditional masculinity while still performing as men, thereby overcoming the problems that arise when the masculine and neoliberal subjects come into conflict. With this aim in mind, positioning oneself in relation to general, and not specific, discussion of masculinity, permits a wider net, and not necessarily a complete rejection of masculinity. In terms of specific scenarios and experiences, such as when Iggy and John discuss their office relations, a more explicit rejection of masculine performance, where the benefits of the patriarchal dividend are limited, is called for. So, through a series of images, they opt for masculinity as a subset of programming, rather than making programming inherently masculine, by comparing programmer masculinity with a more dominant image of “jockey boys or bald blokes shouting” (line 9-10). Programmers are given a ‘special’ position in relation to masculinity, with

many, according to John, having gone through many of the struggles with masculinity with which both Iggy and John faced at school (lines 20-22).

The conversation here reaches an abrupt stop, the result of a stalemate between the two IRs, with the tension revealed between the two reflected on in the five lines after the pause on line 23 – notably with John’s assertion on line 27 that “you can’t deny it’s male dominated, yeah, led by men”. This fact, derived seemingly from John’s own experiences, is revealed as the material situation from which the two attempt to distance themselves by adopting the outsider masculinity IR throughout while facing the same problems as Ringo and George in section 7.1 – outsider masculinity is still masculinity. The conflict between the two IRs is deliberated further in the next extract, very shortly after the two have watched the clip from *New Girl*.

Extract 21

- 1 John: It's interesting they tried to resolve that by who was theoretically the most manly as
2 well, as opposed to, I dunno, some other competition, which I would use, "who
3 would beat you in a game of chess?" (laughs).
- 4 Iggy: Mental acuity, yeah.
- 5 John: Yeah, exactly, that's it.
- 6 Greg: Is that not masculine or manly in a different way though?
- 7 John: What, a game of chess?
- 8 Iggy: You could argue that, yeah.
- 9 Greg: Any sort of competition really?
- 10 John: Ummm, no, I don't think it is, I think it's... Is competition inherently manly?
- 11 Greg: Dunno.
- 12 Iggy: I think, I think you could ar- you could argue that (0.9) people might assume chess
13 is quite manly.
- 14 John: ↑Yeah?
- 15 Iggy: Old school ↓ga::me, about [↓strategy::, wa::r] stuff like that (.) you know.
- 16 John: [Ye:ah, I guess so]
- 17 John: Well, ↑I'm a, I play a lot of strategy games, so (1.0) dunno, does that make me
18 manly? Not really, does it? [hhh it kind hh= it makes me hhh=]
- 19 Iggy: [It makes you very manly John!]
- 20 John: It makes me nerdy! [hhhh]
- 21 Iggy: [Yeah] (.) We:ll, here's a question. We're dev= deviating. I
22 won't deviate.
- 23 John: We're, ↑we're do-- no no [let's do it, ↑yeahyeah]

24 Iggy: [I was gonno ask] (1.6) do you think (.) n:erdy and
 25 masculine are mutually exclusive (.) anymore?
 26 Greg: I [was] about to ask exactly that.
 27 John: [yeah] uumm::
 28 Iggy: 'Cos I don't think, I don't think that's the case. I think the, the (.) suc- successful
 29 men in our world are Elon Musk (.) they're: Mark Zuckerberg (.) they're the
 30 brothers who started Google off: (1.2) you know. I think that (.) and (.) more and
 31 more, particularly within our, our industry (0.6) the person who's successful, the
 32 person who sets something up is (2.1) the nerd, the programmer who [had the] idea.

Interestingly, Iggy and John very quickly position themselves against both Schmidts, framing them as backwards and unlikeable, in comparison with other focus groups and interviews where the participants initially take a side. John's first response to the competition between the two Schmidts is to propose an alternative to the two conceptions of masculinity posed by the on-screen characters: a test of "mental acuity", as Iggy puts it on line 4, through a game of chess, recalling accounts by research into the relationship between masculinity and gaming (Braithwaite, 2016; Burrill, 2008). The framing of this is interesting: while it positions him immediately as an outsider in relation to the other two Schmidts, he still accepts the general premise of the competition in at least two aspects. The concept of manliness is retained, with a different tilt, while the aspect of competitiveness is as much a part of his proposed test as it is in *New Girl*. The only difference is the content of the competition, and concept of what it means to be manly.

John receives approval in the conversation from neither Iggy nor myself – I suggest on line 6 that chess and/or strategy games might indicate a certain, different, type of masculinity, also suggesting that there is some sort of continuity between John's competitiveness and the Schmidts' competitiveness on line 9. Meanwhile, Iggy on line 12 says that you could argue that chess is itself quite a "manly" game. In light of the lack of approval, John therefore begins to interrogate this more on lines 17-18, asking if his enjoyment of strategy games makes him manly. Instead, on line 20, John reveals the underlying aim of what he is trying to achieve through the chess proposal: to portray himself as a "nerd" rather than a man, two conditions which are portrayed as mutually exclusive, an assumption that Iggy immediately challenges. Once again, the outsider and advanced masculinity IRs come into conflict, though on this occasion, Iggy and John adopt contrasting strategies. John is more concerned with portraying himself as an outsider, whereas Iggy appears happy, keen even, to employ advanced masculinity.

Here, Iggy sort of contradicts what he has said earlier. Where he had previously assumed a mutual exclusivity to masculinity and "nerdiness" (extract 19, line 42), here he sees not just complicity but explicit continuity. Fully embracing the advanced masculinity IR by equating financial success with

masculinity, he portrays the nerdy technology geek as the hegemonic man (lines 28-32). Though I have not included any more of the interview beyond this, John after extract 21 seems fairly convinced by Iggy's interpretation, drawing on links between the obsessive collecting nature of nerds in relation to comic books, computer games and movies, and masculinity. This extract then leads onto a sort of "conclusion" to the two in which the advanced masculinity IR appears to supersede the outsider masculinity IR.

Why is this conclusion reached? In short, it is because the closing conversation does not force the two of them to account for specific actions, instead asking them to reflect on wider societal discourses, and so the dilemma with the advanced masculinity IR, discussed in the previous chapter, is not really made pertinent.

7.3 Embracing femininity

The final set of extracts in this chapter come from an interview with Elliott, recruited on the basis of a food blog that he runs in his spare time alongside full-time work (see appendix 1, interview grouping 6). Elliott's relationship with masculinity was probably the most explicitly "outsider" of the three interviews in this section, as he was happy, when I asked him, to describe himself as feminine. A number of other factors that intersected with Elliott's masculinity: he is not very tall, he attended an all boy's school and he is a second generation Chinese-Malaysian migrant. Elliott made the last of these particularly pertinent, and echoed the sentiments of previous scholarship on transnational Chinese masculinities, in expressing a form of masculinity not necessarily averse to femininity, but one that adopts certain characteristics of care and flexibility (Chua & Fujino, 1999; Louie, 2014). All three factors (his height, school and ethnicity) worked to construct a masculinity not concerned with masculine norms, meaning that, to an extent, the problem of the idea of "outsider masculinity", about whether masculinity can ever be considered "outside", began to evaporate, if not disappear.

Extract 22 was triggered by a response Elliott had given to the first question of the interview, where he said that the Chinese culture of his family and early upbringing meant that he has "probably always been subject to a slightly different standard of masculinity". A few minutes later, I asked him if he could elaborate.

Extract 22

- 1 Elliott: I think (.) probably (.) well I guess (.) the the expectation of masculinity that I:
- 2 have (0.6) is pretty much the:, oh y'know: (0.8) ah: you've gotta be a ma:n, you've
- 3 gotta be bra:ve, you've gotta be= you know:w↓, bold and confident and stuff like

4 tha::t. I don't think (.) the Chinese ca:re if you:'re (.) not confident (1.0) as long as
5 you're: (.) you know↓ (.) doing right by your family.

6 Greg: ↑Okay. That's interesting.

7 Elliott: So I think (.) I think it's (.) just different <↑aspects> (.) [of] it in some ↑ways.

8 Greg: [Yeah.]

9 Elliott: I me:an if I, I had to:= and umm I- I literally↑ just (.) started thinkin' about, I didn't
10 think the way I= (0.7) changes that (1.8). These As= Asia:n (0.6) masculinity
11 revolves around (.) caring for the family↑ (.) whereas Western masculinity
12 rev:olves arou:nd (1.6) your physical: (1.4) your physical attributes, I guess, in
13 [some] ways.

14 Greg: [Okay]. (1.1) So, what was, umm:: (1.0) what part of Asia is your family from↓?
15 Elliott: Uhh, they're Chinese Malaysian, so they were (.) born in Malaysia, but (.) yeah (.)
16 from the south of China, their parents were from.

17 Greg: Right okay, so your parents, err:: so you're a second= sec= (0.5) second-generation
18 immigrant↓, is that ↑right?

19 Elliott: Yea:h, essentially.

20 Greg: Yeah, okay, cool (.) Umm (1.0) right okay, that's interesting. (.) ↑Umm (2.2) so
21 you, you, you, you (1.0) feel you, you weren't really raised with any kind of: (.)
22 Western version of masculinity then?
23 (3.1)

24 Elliott: ↑Umm (2.5) I think I was expo:sed to it↑, but I just knew that it was not something
25 I could live up to because (.) you know, I'm (0.6) short Chinese guy.

26 Greg: Mm hmm↑. Yeah.

27 Elliott: I've literally just never::= then (.) when I was sixteen I went to work part ti:me in a:
28 in the jewellery department↑ at the local shoppin' centre↑=
29 Greg: Yeah.

30 Elliott: =sellin' sunglasses and handbags.

31 Greg: hhh yeah

32 Elliott Like you know↓ masculinity was never (1.2) a thing in my mind↑ (.) really↑. I just
33 didn't give a shit.

At first glance, it is difficult to see any sort of positioning in relation to masculinity going on, as opposed to more of a racial and cultural positioning, as Elliott talks about an experience of difference that is about material othering, rather than a discursive othering – he does not talk about schoolmates or anyone else treating him a certain way, but of a general feeling of being structurally othered, following previous research on Asian masculinities as weak, feminised and asexual, marginalised in

relation to dominant white and Western masculinities (Kang, 1997; Park, 2013). In this sense, Elliott does not at first glance look as though he is trying to “achieve” something in this portion of the conversation, stating no value judgement on either version of masculinity he describes, nor constructing any sort of masculine “other” against which to define himself. His statements about masculinity, on this basis, have no end in relation to any masculine positioning, rather than

However, his fairly nonchalant description of two forms of masculinity, “Asian” and “Western” (lines 10-12), as an outsider to both, reveals a distaste for both when he says “I just didn’t give a shit” on line 33 at the end. Distaste is even hinted at from the beginning, where he hesitates about the extent to which race factors into his understanding of masculinity, eventually stating “the expectation of masculinity I have” (line 1). Elliott does not say, for example, that his masculinity is Asian, or that he is actively conscious of following some sort of guideline or ideal type of Chinese masculinity. Rather, he positions himself only as someone who can recognise those expectations. Likewise, when he discusses an idea of what white Western masculinity might be, he positions himself outside of those expectations, giving a more material reason: against the notion of “physical attributes” (line 12) of strength and size, he always knew that Western masculinity were never something he would be able to live up to, as “a short Chinese guy”. He has never really tried, or had a desire, to be anything he considers as masculine.

His racial/cultural background here interestingly puts Elliott in a liminal space, outside both masculine constructs, Western and Asian. A theme of liminal identity is fairly common among discursive research into the experiences of migrants (see Noussia & Lyons, 2009; Sargent & Larchanche-Kim, 2006) – for Elliott, liminality extends to his gender, too, with two different notions of what masculinity means vying not just against each other, but against a more individual struggle with gender, outside of cultural differences. The notions of care, sacrifice and working for your family (it should be pointed out that this set of ideas not exclusive to literature on Asian masculinities (S. Gill, 2018; Gilmore, 1991)) is framed as archaic and backwards, something about which he is not really bothered, while the physical and bodily expectations of Western masculinities are simply out of the question. Liminality makes him look beyond masculinity, as in the next extract, in which I asked Elliott: “would you describe any aspects of yourself as feminine?”. While other participants chose to in some way avoid the question, Elliott gave a full, thoughtful answer.

Extract 23

- 1 Greg: Umm: (1.1) would you describe any aspects of yourself as feminine?
- 2 (2.)

3 Elliott: Umm: I think so, yeah. Umm: (1.3) li:ke (2.4) I've always found it ea:sier to talk
4 to:: women than men. Umm: (.) and I, I'm not, you know, I don't know where this
5 stems from †originally, but for example when I started my job a:t the jewellery
6 counter in (redacted) when I was sixteen (.) umm: (1.3) I think I almost (2.1) was=
7 ↓well, you know obviously all my colleagues were female† (.) all my clients, all my
8 customers were †female (.) so I kind of had to do: (.) I had to learn how to socialise
9 with women and I think (.) it probably: (0.8) pushed me towards tha:t a lot.
10 Right.

11 Greg: Umm, yeah, I think (0.7) as in= in terms of, you know, did that= not ho::ned my
12 Elliott: skills, but that bit, I found it a lot easier to talk to women because I was <constantly
13 in the company of †women>?
14 Yes.

15 Greg: I do think even before that point, I did find it easier to talk to women, umm, just
16 Elliott: generally. (.) Umm, and I think that was probably linked back to the fact, you
17 know, that I kno:w that I'm not the most masculine of people†.
18 Mm hmm.

19 Greg: Umm: (.) so you know, what did I have goin' for me at that time†? hh Apart from
20 Elliott: my short stature was: (.) you know (.) I'm a good listener†, and I'm= I'm good= I
21 guess I, I have quite a high level of empathy† that (1.0) not only most men don't
22 have (.) but in some ways, but a lot of women don't have either†. Umm: so I was
23 often the one that women would come and (0.6) like, girls (.) our age, like, you
24 know, if we ch= chat on MSN and shit like that†, and I was often the one they'd talk
25 to about, you know, problems with their boyfriend and stuff†.
26 Yeah.

27 Greg: And then, I= I wasn't, I wasn't trying to be the shoulder to cry on† (0.8) but I think
28 Elliott: they just knew I was (.) you know, I was good at picking things apart† and stuff like
29 that†, (.) so I think some ways I've always tended towa::rds (.) the female (2.0) the=
30 the= well, the general way that females talk rather than men.
31 Yeah.

32 Greg: Err: because:: (0.6) yeah, I= (2.3) yeah, I think, you know, uhh= even then, you
33 Elliott: know back then (1.0) I went to an all-boys school† where I= when we were at that
34 age, you know fourteen plus all the boys in my school were only (.) concerned
35 about getting' drunk on the local park (0.6) drinking VK†s, smoking weed, and you
36 know trying to get with another girl†.
37 Yep.

38 Greg:

- 39 Elliott: I had absolutely, like, no interest in those things, re:ally, at that time↑, like (0.6) you
 40 know↓, would I have liked to join them and stuff, well, yea:h, but (.) my parents
 41 would never have let me out of the house late enough↑ (.) like my parents used to
 42 pick me up from house parties at half nine. (.) Umm (.) you know, I think it is just
 43 the, the circumstances and upbringing I had (.) forced me:: in some ways (.) uh, in
 44 that particular way and also (1.4) it ↑didn't bring a dislike of men, but definitely a
 45 dislike of the (.) men at my school↑. Because they were all primarily focused on
 46 one thing. You know, I met, I= you know= the= when I was::= I got invited to a
 47 house party from someone at work, and I met loads of kids from the local
 48 comprehensive who we always used to joke about: 'cos you know, we were a
 49 grammar school and all-bo:ys (.) umm: and actually they're:: some= now they're
 50 still= some of them of them are still really good friends, male and female↑.
- 51 Greg: Yeah.
- 52 Elliott: Umm: (1.) but I think, you know (2.5) I just find it easier to relate to women than
 53 men↑.

In this extract, Elliott changes his mind four times about what exactly he means when he talks about being feminine, which, as I will show, is a result of dialogue about what actually constitutes femininity – here, he perhaps most clearly demonstrates what I in chapter 9.4 describe as ‘hollow femininity’. He begins on line 3, a fairly tenuous femininity, saying that he has always found it easier to talk to women rather than men, quickly substantiating by relating it to the experience of working at a jewellery counter aged 16. His argument here hinges on the notion of how interacting with others contributes to constructing femininity. If femininity, following Butler (1990), and West and Zimmerman (1987) among others, is a (re)produced performance following situated discourses and understandings of gender, then Elliott’s argument makes sense; by internalising the performances of others we understand what gender means, and take on the performative bodily dispositions to reproduce gendered discourses. In a space predominantly populated by women, it is not inconceivable that this could constitute a form of femininity, especially with the suggestion of emotional and aesthetic labour implied by the nature of service work.

On line 16, Elliott’s first change of mind begins as he describes the emotional labour he associates with femininity not as a description of himself, but a method of heterosexual gain. Femininity is displaced by heteronormative desire, as Elliott asks “what did I have going for me at that time?” (line 20). Emotional labour is made the means by which Elliott performs heterosexuality, a performance that can contain any feminine dispositions within the realms of masculine acceptability. He describes himself as a “good listener” (21), with a “high level of empathy” (22), and a “shoulder to cry on” (28),

and through this he finds himself able to socialise with and talk to women. Emotional labour, presented as identical with femininity, is a means to an end.

The unstable conceptual terrain on which his argument stands starts to crack open on line 30, where he changes his mind for the second time. His hesitations between lines 30 and 31 indicate a change of plan, where “the way that females talk” becomes “the *general* way that females talk” (my emphasis). The addition of “general” separates the risky essentialist-tinged link between all women and femininity, and is a way for Elliott to begin to hint at the advanced masculinity IR, performing “progressive” politics by avoiding stereotypes.

Then, seemingly noticing that essentialism seems to be slipping in, Elliott’s mind seemingly changes for the third time, as the function of his purported femininity changes again. Because he separates gender from its generalised attributes, it is no longer necessary to position himself as masculine, as “being a man” and masculinity are deprived of a necessary relationship. He therefore almost completely contradicts himself on line 39, when he says he “has absolutely no interest” in getting drunk in the park, smoking weed, and importantly, “getting with another girl” (line 37). Previously he strongly indicated he performed emotional labour for heterosexual gain, by suggesting that his listening skills were all he had “going for him”. Realising how this positions his past self at the time when he was at school, his new take on it, rejecting those masculine activities and heterosexual gain, he positions his current self as a “progressive” or profeminist man.

Perhaps noticing the contradiction, or perhaps just realising that this strategy of self-presentation might not work based on what he has previously said, Elliott’s mind changes for the fourth and final time, as he reverts back to wanting to do all the things the other boys at his school were doing. However, this time, it is displaced not by heterosexuality, but cultural milieu. He would have liked to partake in those activities, he says, were it not for his strict parents (40-41), and “circumstances and upbringing” (43). By using race, as stated at the beginning of the analysis of Elliott, he moves slightly past the problem about outsider masculinity being simultaneously outside and masculine by producing a third option. Yet, this third option is bound up by linking it essentially to femininity, which is how Elliott’s flip-flopping is produced.

At the beginning of this section of speech, when he has no interest in partying with his schoolmates, he positions himself as more outside than masculine. Then, noticing the problem here, when he would have liked to party with his schoolmates, he is predominantly masculine, and forced to be outside by his parents, before he embraces the outsiderness once again by positioning himself against the constructed other of his hypermasculine schoolmates. Finally, he tries to reach some sort of compromise or resolution to this problem by displacing outsider masculinity with race. This is, then, a very live and conflicting negotiation of the problems of “outsider masculinity” as a gendered position.

The next extract looks at a section of the interview with Elliott where, having watched the *Friends* clip, I ask him about the gender of Joey's gender performance as he struggles as Al Pacino's "butt double", introducing a tangible other to Elliott, against which he can position himself and potentially clear up some of the changes of mind he has negotiated so far.

Extract 24

- 1 Greg: Would you: err:: (1.0) would you describe (0.9) would you describe Joey as
2 masculine?
3 (4.5)
- 4 Elliott: Err: (3.3) ↑yeah. (2.6) ↑Yeah, I g= I guess, I mean you know, he's obviously the
5 physical traits, the: (.) and that's, you know (.) one of the main sellin' points around
6 (.) strength for Joey. Umm: (4.0) ↑yeah, you know, I would describe him as
7 masculine. (.) Probably, I guess the mo:st (1.3) traditional masculine (0.6) of all the
8 males in: (1.2) Friends↑=
- 9 Greg: Okay.
- 10 Elliott: =overa:ll.
11 (2.9)
- 12 Greg: How would you (.) rank the other two then? Who would you say is more masculine
13 out of, umm: (0.8) err:: (.) Ross and (.) Chandler?
- 14 Elliott: Hh °oh I dunno::, they're both pretty low:°.
- 15 Greg: hhhh
- 16 Elliott: Probably Chandler then ↑Ross, I ↑guess. Umm:
- 17 Greg: Okay.
18 (2.9)
- 19 Elliott: But then, I guess= you know, they're completely different (0.9) ↓pe:ople. who, I
20 guess, you know (.) don't show any of those traditional masculine traits.
- 21 Greg: Sure.
- 22 Elliott: Umm::
23 (5.9)
- 24 Greg: Would you describe any of them as feminine then↑?
25 (3.8)
- 26 Elliott: ↑Umm: (.) I think they all have: (.) you know (.) feminine traits↑, even Joey. Umm
27 (1.5) can't recall it precisely now:= if Daisy²⁴ was here, she, she could, but you

²⁴ "Daisy" is a pseudonym for Elliott's long-term girlfriend.

28 know I'm sure there're episodes where there's like signs that Joe:y (1.1) unvei= un=
29 uh, reveals, where he turns out to be very sensitive and stuff like that, umm: (1.4)
30 and obviously: (.) Chandler and Ross are both (.) quite sensitive as we::ll umm:
31 (4.0) ↑Yeah, but I, I guess it depends on specific (.) aspects of feminine↑, what are,
32 what is, you know, I guess, feminine↑. Umm (.) I wouldn't be able to (.)
33 ((inaudible)) though I guess, yeah.

Asked whether he would describe Joey as masculine, Elliott recalls the description of “Western masculinity” outlined in extract 22 revolving around physical attributes, a metric that sees Elliott mark Joey as the most masculine of the three. Elliott looks at the situation as though from outside, taking a principle of masculinity and applying it to Joey. No mirror is held up to his experiences, nor is Joey’s masculinity used to position Elliott against Joey. Instead, Elliott attempts a measured analysis, placing himself outside of the situation.

However, this analysis reveals an otherness seemingly constructed along racial lines – “traditional masculine” (line 7) and “physical traits” (5) both, as mentioned, recall Elliott’s conception of Western masculinity. By theorising about Joey’s masculinity in this way, Elliott positions his masculinity very differently to Joey, Ross, and Chandler’s, who are judged against parameters that apply to white men, and not to Elliott. None of the characters, he says, really show any masculine traits (line 20) – here, Elliott is positioning himself not against the characters but against the construction of masculinity he uses to analyse the three characters.

Perhaps the more interesting, and deliberative part, comes on line 26, where, after some hesitation, he responds to my question “would you describe any of them as feminine?” in a more thoughtful way, that perhaps indicates more of a personal stake in the issue. As with extract 23, this paragraph demonstrates a conceptual question about what exactly femininity entails, this time stated explicitly. Where his experience of emotional labour, and the links drawn between that labour and femininity, only saw the issue of the content of feminine performance raised as an implication of his deliberation, here, faced with the notion of examining the performances of another, Elliott concludes that it is very difficult to judge whether any of the characters are feminine, as it “depends on specific aspects of what feminine” means. It is, as with the other IRs, only when faced with a tangible other that the dilemma of outsider masculinity reveals itself: what exactly are the elements of Joey that are masculine and feminine, and therefore if Elliott’s masculinity is outside, and even feminine, how is it still masculinity?

7.4 Chapter summary

The outsider masculinity IR involves taking up a position “outside” the masculine norm, disavowing performances that simultaneously are key features of the neoliberal subject and occasionally interpreted as feminine. I have shown three examples of how the outsider masculinity IR works, in three different scenarios. In the first one, I explored some of the basic tenets of the outsider masculinity IR, particularly how the neoliberal moment gives license to a feminised version of (unproductive) labour that often can look progressive, leading Ringo and George to view their own performances of feminised labour as outside of the masculine norm, in a particular geographical venue. In the second set of extracts, I looked at how Iggy and John employed the outsider masculinity IR in response to scenarios in which they were held to account for specific actions of theirs, where they used the advanced masculinity to reflect more widely on gender structures. As such, they position themselves to achieve what seems like a coherent neoliberal masculinity, yet exposes some important dilemmas. And, finally, I looked at how Elliott’s experience of race and culture brought to the surface a sense of outsidership that nevertheless struggled through the same issues, particularly in relation to the stereotypes of Anglo-Chinese masculinities as particularly neoliberal.

As a discursive strategy, the outsider masculinity IR encompasses various attempts to resolve the contradictions between the neoliberal and masculine subjects by positing or constructing a new version of neoliberal masculinity as outside of existing versions of masculinity. Such a strategy, as demonstrated, struggles to move beyond the obvious problem with this: can it exist outside of existing forms of masculinity while remaining a form of masculinity? Its attempts to retain an attachment to masculinity, and not move to something beyond its bounds, exemplify the contradictory relationship between neoliberalism and masculinity more widely. Again, where this problem became more tangible, a different discursive strategy was produced, in which gender was constructed generally as irrelevant to participant’s everyday lives, which is the topic of the next chapter.

8

Individualism and the (ir)relevance of gender discourse

Chapter 8 examines a set of responses to questions about gender where participants asserted that their individual identities superseded any influence of any wider gender structures, which I have called this the “individualist” interpretative repertoire (IR). As will be shown here, the modality of individualism indicated by the participants was reflective of the individualist ontology of neoliberal culture (Brown, 2015; Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; Genz, 2009; McGuigan, 2013), and so, of the three IRs, the individualist one is the most explicit example of the contradictions between masculine and neoliberal subjectivity. My analysis will show how participants therefore tried to position themselves as neoliberal masculine subjects, defined by a freedom to choose and enact masculinity how they want, positioned against a non-neoliberal masculinity restricted by strict cultural norms. Of course, the remotest acknowledgement of gender discourse denies the possibility of a full individualist ontology, begging the question of how users of the individualist IR can call themselves men while rejecting the idea they are influenced by gender at all. This conflict is a result of various features of neoliberalism’s specific strain of individualism.

To recall both Lukes (1973) and Eagleton-Pierce (2016), individualism predates neoliberalism, but the neoliberal version owes a lot to preceding ones. To place this chapter in context, then, there are a few features of neoliberal individualism that are important here. The first is the notion of autonomy, or free choice, the idea that individuals choose options and make decisions free of any outside constraints. This was frequently invoked, yet seems to contradict itself in that such autonomic subjectivity defines an idea of what is and is not possible. Second, the autonomy of the neoliberal subject is paired with a notion of the free-consuming individual, a construction that permeates several discussions in this chapter. Third, neoliberalism constructs an abstract individual, whose “instincts, faculties, needs, desires, rights, etc., are assumed as given, independently of social context” (Lukes,

1973: 73). This aspect of neoliberal individualism came into conflict with the free consumer whose lifestyle choices are not presented as inherent, but the result of a cultural context. And, last, neoliberal individualism contains a notion of political individualism, which, as discussed in the literature review, views liberation politics as individual rather than collective.

Neoliberal individualism is reflected in McGuigan's (2013, 2014) conception of neoliberal subjectivity, and postfeminism, particularly as discussed by Gill (2007; 2011), Brabon (2007, 2013) and Genz (2009; 2009). McGuigan (2014) argues that neoliberal subject adopts a "cool" posture independent of cultural norms or outside influences, similarly to neoliberalism's conception of free choice. Meanwhile, postfeminism can be characterised as a sensibility in which feminism has collectively liberated women to the point that political action rests on individual actions, responsabilising the subject and avoiding any structural or cultural explanation. Both these ideas were prominent in the individualist IR.

This chapter contains three sections, looking at how participants who use the individualist IR struggled to determine how free they are to enact masculinity how they want, and how they still identify as men if they do not think gender is relevant to their lives. The first section comes from a focus group in the southwest with three employees of a men's fashion high street chain. The second is from a focus group in a northern university, where two participants in this group used the individualist IR more than the third, and in the final section, I have combined extracts from two interviews I carried out with office workers in the southwest.

8.1 What expectations?

A lot of previous research has explored how men in service work negotiate gendered discourses around masculinity and aesthetic and emotional labour (Abstract, 1989; Nickson & Korczynski, 2009; D. Nixon, 2009; Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson, 2003), with which my research shares some thematic interests. The increase in young people, and particularly men, taking on jobs in service work, is indicative of a wider change in labour and gender structures related to neoliberalism (Coyle, 2005; Morini, 2007), and for this research I was interested in looking at these changes from the perspective of men who have seen them firsthand. This section therefore contains three extracts from a focus group I carried out with three men who worked together in a branch of a national men's clothes shop in the southwest of England (see appendix 1, focus group 1). Riley, aged 30, was the manager of the shop, while Freddie, 19, was a supervisor, and Paul, 18, a sales assistant.

The individualist IR was by some distance the most prominent here (as it was more widely in the southwest), and they spent a lot of time addressing to what extent men are free to enact gender as they want. They came up with various answers, including discussing masculinity as a bodily property, but

not really producing any definitive conclusions. The discussions, though, were interesting. Extract 25 is from very near the beginning of the focus group, shortly after I asked them whether they found it difficult to live up to expectations of masculinity, and Freddie's opening was the first response after a pause of several seconds.

Extract 25

- 1 Freddie: I don't think there's really (0.8) err much expectation of manhood (.) now.
- 2 Greg: No?
- 3 Freddie: No. (0.9) Well there is sort, like, a bit↑, but it's: (1.0) a bit (.) blurred.
- 4 Riley: Depends from where you are around the world and what culture you're from still.
- 5 Freddie: [yeah]
- 6 Riley: [Like there] still is:: extreme: (.) masculine, and only men (.) do (.) this and with
7 like, there, there's still parts of the world where women aren't allowed to do stuff.
- 8 Freddie: Yeahyeahyeah
- 9 Riley: A lot of things. (0.8) So (1.0) in that respect, from, from where we are, I'd say, it,
10 Fr- Freddie is right, the world is becoming (1.3) it is becoming a lot more equal
11 but there still are extremists out there (.) who would say otherwise. (2.1) But in, in,
12 in the workplace of what you're saying, I would say: that men be- can be:: (4.1) the
13 right ↑words? I don't ↑know hhh. ↑Me:n, men, men can be influ:enced to be:
14 slightly camper in, within the fashion retail industry I would say. I was never that
15 into: fashion or clothes as much as I did before I worked in the fashion re(.)tail
16 ↑sector.
- 17 Greg: Okay.
- 18 Riley: From working in, in, in a game shop, where it is basically, well, you've got,
19 without being stereotypical, but you've got the ↑geeks, but you do have the
20 extreme, just kind of: men, most of them are metallers, most of them have big
21 beards, most of them have tattoos (1.1) umm=
- 22 Greg: Yeah.
- 23 Riley: =and that's kind of defined (.) the manliness even down in history, men have
24 tattoos, they're big, they're (.) (rock) (1.5) [I]=
- 25 Greg: [So] there's something specific to
26 fashion (.) retail (.) that you think (.) [cha:nges]=
- 27 Riley: [I, I would], would say, yeah yes, absolutely. I
28 wouldn't say it changes everybody, I'm not saying it would- I've said, I say that
29

30 everybody's: everybody's (a giant) cup of tea (0.5) different flavours of cups of
31 Freddie: teas (0.7) but=
32 Paul: [hhh]
33 Riley: [hhh]
34 It's:, it's the case (.) ↑yeah yeah, you do: (0.4) I well, I mean I, it's happened to me.
35 Not as:, I mean I, I don't mind it happening to me, but err, err (.) I was never like
36 this. I was a full on metaller, I was a big raaaar, full-on masculinity. I ↑wasn't (.) I
37 naïve: to the other side of it. I, I mean I've always been open; I, I'm an open person.
38 I, I, umm, not gonna shut off:: (1.0) the, the more feminine ↑man, but it has:: (.) I
39 Greg: mean, I'm not, I'm not extremely camp, but I can be if I want to be hhhh.
40 Riley: And that's, that's been affected by: (.) [the work you do]
41 [That's, yeah yeah] yeah that, that is right,
42 Greg: the influence of working in the fashion sector (0.6) (°that's°)
43 Freddie: Is that something (.) you guys (2.0) [experienced?]
44 Greg: [I don't know] if, °really°↓
45 Freddie: You don't feel it's changed you?
46 Greg: Not really. Not (1.2) not from what I really notice, no.
47 Paul: No?
°Me neither to be honest (.) no°

The question I asked presupposes the existence of expectations or outside structures that form masculinity. Freddie's initial response on line 1 ("I don't think there's really much expectation of manhood now") straight away adopts the individualist IR, rejecting that premise, and arguing that today expectations do not exist. On line 3, he seemingly notices that to reject expectations removes coherent meaning from masculinity or manhood and finds a more compromised position: "there is expectations, but it's a bit blurred". The idea of blurriness indicates he is not entirely clear what he wants to say, moving from positing a lack of gender structures to implying structures that are in some way unclear or ambiguous. "Blurring" indicates a sort of fluidity to the construction of gender, and the potentiality for a broadening out of existing gender categories. This sentiment echoes Gill's description of gender from a post-feminist sensibility as a free choice of practices, rather than something constrained or restricted by outside influences (be that discourse, structure, culture, or anything else) (R. Gill, 2007). On the reasoning that it is the individual's responsibility to freely select the gendered options they desire, Freddie's assertion that expectations are "a bit blurred" chooses an option that rejects the socially backwards aspects of masculinity.

Riley takes over from Freddie, arguing for a correlation between the strictness of gender structures and cultural or geographic difference: “it depends where you are ... and what culture you’re from” (4). Starting to employ the advanced masculinity IR alongside the individualist one, he describes an unspecific part of the world where gender regimes are more “extreme” (6) and less egalitarian, using geographical difference to construct a western world “becoming a lot more equal” (line 10). Here, “the western world” is constructed by Riley positively as consisting of free-choosing individuals, compared to a faceless and strict gender regime elsewhere. Building on this, opining on masculinity more generally, and also echoing himself the aesthetic labour often required from service staff (D. Nixon, 2009), he says men “can be influenced to be slightly camper within the fashion retail industry” (13-14)²⁵. Riley proposes a similar idea to Freddie, that masculinity represents a range of different offers, but differs slightly in saying that these offers are grounded in certain fields and cultures: working in a clothes shop is one possible way of doing masculinity, but he also compares this to “geeks” and “metallars” (lines 19-20) (as in metal music). Indeed, this is apparent in his formulation of men becoming camper in fashion retail earlier on: “men *can* be influenced” rather than *are* influenced, presented as an option and not a foreclosed outcome. Men, or at least western men, are presented here as fully free.

However, an essence to masculinity seems to creep in on lines 20-21. Despite suggesting that there are different, equally valid, versions of masculinity, he indicates that masculinity is a bodily property relating to “big beards” (20), “tattoos” (21) and “big” stature (24). Despite the existence of multiple masculinities, he puts forward the view that some generalities between men exist, linked to bodily presentation as male. If the body is the starting point, he seems to suggest there can still be multiple masculinities on offer based on that starting point, exemplified in his metaphor about tea: “everybody’s different flavours of cups of teas” (29-30). Such a statement makes no judgement on how those cups of tea are produced, and does not preclude the possibility of a gendered essence. For Riley, his own increase in “campness” is contextual: when he worked in a game shop, he was more geeky (18); when he worked in a clothes shop, he was more fashion conscious. But at all times it was masculinity; at all times culture only influenced him as a male-bodied person.

Freddie and Paul then assert their own free choice, stating that the outside influence of working in a clothes shop did not affect their masculinity at all (lines 42-47). The free choice individualism has been displaced here with a more essentialist individualism, where the individual is located not in a freedom to choose, but in a certain essence not really affected by outside influences. Here, we see a reflection on the direct conflict between neoliberal individualism and the more classical homo

²⁵ Riley’s use of the concept of “camp” seems to be largely consist in men’s consciousness of their appearance, qualified with his being more “into fashion and clothes” (15) having worked in the shop.

economicus but played out with gender. The neoliberal masculine subject is free to choose how they are a man, where the non-neoliberal masculine subject is not. The role the male body plays in this conflict was a recurring theme that the next extract deals with. I asked the following question about halfway through, after appearance was frequently mentioned.

Extract 26

- 1 Greg: How do you feel (0.9) in= appearance kind of (.) interacts with (.) being a man?
2 (1.4) In what sense, in what sense is:: (2.0) being a man today (1.1) focused on your
3 appearance?
- 4 Freddie: It's not so much anymore. I ↑mean it's= things are changed.
- 5 Greg: Right, okay.
- 6 Freddie: Uum: (2.9). Yeah, you have the stereotypical view of a man↑ (0.5) which is: (.)
7 what I was saying like big, an:d (0.9) doesn't really care too much about their
8 'pearance, (0.8) but (0.9) a lot= well most men nowadays seem to (.) actually care
9 about what they look like.
- 10 Greg: Yeah. (0.9) Wait (.) so you are saying (.) there's more care (1.2) in appearance, or
11 there's less?
- 12 Freddie: More. (1.1) Umm; hence why people go the gym (.) basically.
- 13 Greg: Right.
- 14 Freddie: 'Cos they're actually caring about their appearance. (4.3) I ↑think (.) I dunno things
15 like skinny jeans (1.1) tha:t (3.0) I dunno I just feel like (.) that's: (1.8) if you're (.) I
16 dunno (.) 20 years back, that wouldn't be (.) manly. Now (0.6) majority of people
17 (1.3) men=
- 18 Riley: If you go thirty years back it was though. (1.7) They used to wear skinny jeans↑.
- 19 Freddie: Well yeah.
- 20 Greg: Try and kind of (.) speak up?
- 21 Riley: SORRY! They used to wear skinny jeans, yeah (.) so (0.5) °though it, it, is, °
22 fashion's changed though, I mean we, you could say that (.) men haven't been vain,
23 but you could go back even to ancient E:gypt, and there's men (.) wearing makeup.
24 (0.8) Why are they wearing makeup↑? (1.4) They want (.) to look better. Uh it's
25 vanity again, oh some, some men for spiritual reasons. (.) You go back to any
26 ancient culture, there's: (.) there's vanity or whatever (.) so I mean (.) makeup isn't a
27 modern thing, it's been arou:nd (1.0) for thousands o' years so it↑= you could say
28 it's, it's kind of in our nature but ↑it's the same well you look at animals, they (.)

29 they want (.) to, they, they do the same thing as us, (1.0) but then that= there's: a lot
30 (.) I would say there's: more obviousness in animals as well betwee:n (0.4)
31 masculinity and= there's, there's clearer (.) elements. But, umm
32 (2.2)
33 Freddie: I think it's more accepted (1.3) to::
34 Greg: What, men (.) focusing on their appearances?
35 Freddie: Yeah (.) stuff like that.
36 Riley: Just the day and age, with the acceptance o:f homosexuality., the acceptance= well
37 in this culture (.) in England, right now (.) hopefully, umm: the:: the acceptable
38 (0.8) the, the (1.0) racism is ebbing away still, it's, it's still going, it still hasn't
39 entirely gone umm and it is, it is, uh, a much more, culture's open to dress how you
40 want (1.5) and: to do what you want. So so, yeah, I agree with Freddie in that aspect
41 (.) that it's: (.) kind of more acceptable to dress: (.) however you want really.

In the first section of the conversation, ending line 17, Freddie seems (on first reading) to completely contradict himself. On being asked to what extent being a man today is focused on appearance, he replies, “it’s not so much anymore”, as “things are changed” (4). Shortly afterwards on line 12, having been asked whether men care more or less about appearance today, he replies “more”. So, having said that masculinity is not so preoccupied with appearance today, he then says men are more concerned today with their appearance. What happens between lines 4 and 12? Broadly speaking, Freddie argues that men have moved away from an appearance based purely on embodiment to one that is about an external gaze, and specifically some form of aesthetic work or self-care.

On lines 6-7, he conjures up what he sees as a stereotypical embodied image of a man as “big” (7), and it is this facet of masculine appearance that he says is less prevalent nowadays. So, when he replies on line 4 that being a man is “not so much” focused on appearance anymore, he does not mean a general concern with appearance, but a specific type of appearance – the same type of big bearded man that Riley constructed in extract 25. The relationship between masculinity and appearance here is not one of looking nice for an external gaze, but one that makes masculinity about the male body as it is embodied, and not seen. Line 12 indicates a movement away from that: men, rather than necessarily masculine performance, are more intent on looking good, on being the focus of an external, rather than embodying masculinity – a binary that has been problematised with the concept of the female gaze (Benson-Allott, 2017; Goddard, 2000). Such a view is backed up on line 14, when he says, “they’re actually *caring* about their appearance” (emphasis added). As Hakim (2016) has argued, a renewed gaze on the male body and a focus on physical self-improvement and a capacity aesthetic labour both define spornosexuality and are important capabilities of the neoliberal subject. Indeed, aesthetic labour

is considered key to the fem contemporary debates around the feminisation of labour (Morini, 2007; Power, 2009). Such a version of masculinity, outlined by both Hakim and Freddie, is new to masculinity in that it is driven by external gaze, but also continuous with neoliberal subjectivity's ideal type.

Riley talks about masculinity and appearance historically on lines 21-26, again constructing a negatively framed other, this time based in the past rather than in another location. The more interesting part than the content of what Riley says is how it serves as a foil to Freddie. After close to a minute of Riley's talking, Freddie says "I think it's more accepted" (line 33), which is immediately approved from Riley when he situates today's masculinity in an era of a more tolerant and socially liberal politics (lines 36-41). Riley, as Freddie did earlier, seems to contradict himself here – despite having just invoked various cultures throughout history in which men have adorned their bodies (lines 21-31) to demonstrate how a preoccupation with men's appearances is nothing new, he now compares contemporary gender discourses favourably to a general past ("the day and age", line 36). Again, though, the apparent contradiction here is not really a contradiction at all; the difference between the historical cultures Riley invokes and the culture of the UK today is presented on lines 39-40, when he says "culture's open to dress how you want and do what you want". In other words, the key difference is choice. As before, Riley presents men's appearances as more fluid, and part of a marketplace where we are free choosers.

The next extract, 27, took place immediately after the *HIMYM* sitcom clip. In the clip, Marshall represents a more desirable model of masculinity than his work colleagues, but he also conforms to fit in with those colleagues. Marshall's situation therefore represents a potential challenge to the individualist IR, with Riley finding a way to make Marshall's story make sense with the individualist IR.

Extract 27

- 1 Greg: Do you li:ke (.) Marshall?
2 (1.9)
3 Riley: [Yeah↑]
4 Paul: [Yeah]
5 Greg: Yeah↑? (.) Do you like him:: (1.2) mo::re than:: (.) do you like the people he
6 works with?
7 Riley: No.
8 Freddie: No.
9 Paul: Err:: (.) no.
10 Riley: No I didn't.
11 Greg: No↑?

12 Riley: Didn't: get (.) to really: you didn't (.) really get the feel of them↑, but the: (.)the=
13 Greg: From [what you saw of]=
14 Riley: [from anything that sort] of stood out, no, not=
15 Greg: No
16 Riley: =not particularly (.) no.
17 Greg: So what was it you sympathised with about Marshall?
18 Paul: He (.) kind of has to be like that if he wants to: (.) fit in or (0.6) like (.) get on with
19 (.) everyone he works with↑.
20 Riley: I wouldn't say he has to be like that, but he:: he wa= he wants to= (.) he wan= he
21 wants to fit in (.) as: (.) much. I (.) ↑personally wouldn't (1.5) I wouldn't take that. (.)
22 [Right]
23 Greg: But [that's] him. ↑Tha= ↑tha= ↑that's hi= that's him as a person. He doesn't wanna
24 Riley: cause conflict, or I wouldn't cause conflict as such, but I would, I would (.) I dunno,
25 I'd do something about it. Either way, he:'s. he:'s umm: (1.8) yeah, he's, he's, he's,
26 more of a romantic; the other guys: (.) clearly aren't, they've (.) they've got (.)
27 personally less brain cells. Umm so yeah (.) that's all I have to say about that. >I
28 don't really know him as much I know Joey.< hh
29 D'you, d'you think you're a, d'you think you're a romantic, then↑? Is that your=
30 Greg: I wouldn't say I'm a romantic-romantic. But yeah↑, I'm certainly (into the si:de)
31 Riley: that I've have had love letters from my wife, I've written love letters back, I've, I'm
32 more than happy to admit it. And I: I like that kind of thing. I like ↑poetry in life,
33 why not↑? (1.7) BLOODY BORING otherwise, wouldn't it? hhh
34

Though Freddie does not answer whether he likes Marshall, both Riley and Paul say they do, and all three of them dislike Marshall's work colleagues. This response is relatively unsurprising, as Marshall's character is simply more pleasant than the others, which is clear in Paul's response on lines 18-19, saying that Marshall "has to be like that", that it is not Marshall's choice. Riley then seems to notice this problem, as to suggest that Marshall has no choice would challenge the idea of free choice. He therefore on lines 20-21 disagrees with Paul, saying "I wouldn't say he has to be like that", and that Riley himself "personally wouldn't take that". Riley condemns Marshall's decision not to choose *and* presents Marshall's masculinity as better than Marshall's work colleagues. He first positions himself as free to choose in comparison to Marshall, by saying he does not "need" to change. Then, Riley suggests that Marshall "wants to fit in" (21) and "doesn't want to cause conflict" (24-25). By doing so, Riley essentialises Marshall's character, giving him certain traits that are positively masculine, particularly

that he “doesn’t want to cause conflict”. However, these positive traits at the same time provide positive reasons for Marshall to change his character. Changing one’s character is permissible if it is done for good reasons.

Consider in extract 25 (line 14) that Riley said he became “camper” having worked in fashion retail – what is the difference between Riley changing to fit into the workplace and Marshall changing? Broadly speaking, there is no difference for Riley. On line 20 in extract 27 Riley says, “I wouldn’t say he has to be like that”. Riley therefore presents Marshall’s decision as a free choice with the wrong path taken but for good reasons, while Riley’s decision is right simply for the ends it achieved in moving away from masculinity.

Riley uses an individualist paradigm to identify with Marshall, and label himself a “romantic”, further strengthening his identification with Marshall’s positive masculine traits. On lines 27-28, he draws a connection between not being “a romantic” and having “less brain cells”, implying also the inverse, that a sense of romance is somehow linked to intelligence. This link leads me to ask him whether he considers himself a romantic (30), and though he hedges his bets slightly, avoiding the idea of “romantic” as a noun, he describes himself as romantic in various ways – sending and receiving love letters (32), enjoying “poetry in life” (33). Riley positions himself as masculine but in a positive way, drawing out supposed features of masculinity that can be imbued with some positivity. Masculinity here is seen as a facet of Riley’s character, a description of what Riley is that is subsequently labelled masculine. Such a posture, I argue, is enabled by the consumerist individualism that inheres in neoliberal culture.

8.2 Interpreting expectations

The following extracts were taken from the same focus group in a northern university (see appendix 1, focus group 2) as section 6.1 in relation to the advanced masculinity IR. However, as I have shown in the previous section, interpretative repertoires are rarely employed neatly or coherently – they are used in various situations as far as they suit or fit with the aims of the person employing them. In this section, I will be looking at a different set of extracts in relation to the individualist IR, and specifically how the individualist IR was espoused by two participants, David and Johnny, and challenged by the third participant, Kurt. These challenges were not direct from Kurt, but instead presented an account of masculinity where acting free of masculine discourses was not an option. Extract 28 below covers the response to my opening question.

Extract 28

1 Greg: The first-- the first question I've got written down is: (.) is it easy to live up to
2 expectations of manhood or masculinity?
3 (2.3)
4 David: ((exhales through lips, like braying horse))
5 Johnny: I think the expectations are: (.) are changing slightly now and [then]=
6 David: [ye:ah]
7 Johnny: =everyone has their own (.) interpret[ta]tion=
8 Greg: ['kay]
9 David: =ye:ah=
10 Johnny: =of what it is
11 David: I think following that <it sort of depe:nds, it depends> (.) how you: follow (.) those
12 expectations and how you define those expectations (0.5) because I think (0.6)
13 everyone has their ow::n definition↑, everyone has their own expectation↑, it's sort
14 of up to you:: (0.5) how you'll then follow through with that. And if you (0.8) you
15 know, even uh if it's something you think about a lot or not at all↑.
16 Johnny: Yeah I think it's based on=
17 Kurt: =°yeah°=
18 Johnny: =on social factors and (.) and your background and what's=
19 David: Ye::ah
20 Kurt: °Ye::ah°, 'specially background depends where you're from↑. 'Cos, li:ke, I me:an
21 (0.8) I can imagine like when you said you lived in Leeds I mean it were less (.)
22 traditional, but where I'm from it's (.) more traditional you ↓know it you've gotta:
23 live up to the: (.) tough guy (0.4) the tough guy standard if you know what I mean
24 Greg: Yeah, [yeah]
25 Kurt: [The tough] working class guy [who] works in uh:
26 Johnny: [wuh-]
27 (1.2)
28 Kurt: in: mo:re somewhere more manual.
29 Johnny: Yeah I think it does c-c-come down to class I think (.) to a certain degree.
30 David: Ye:ah (.) I'd agree with that.

After David struggles for words on line 4, Johnny gives two possible answers one after the other, opening with the advanced masculinity IR with “changing slightly now” (5), and then moving onto the individualist IR with “everyone has their own interpretation” (7). David builds on this second answer on lines 11-15, his main contention here that “it depends how you follow and how you define those

expectations” (11-12). In other words, masculinity is not prescribed but described and interpreted. This assertion hinges on a discursive, individually-centred interpretative view of gender – the categories of masculinity are suggested to be broad, but existing, parameters.

Kurt’s intervention on lines 20-23 throws some doubt on David’s account, describing a “tough guy standard” (23) based on his geo-cultural background that does not particularly seem open to interpretation or redefinition. Where the previous group agreed about the ability of men to choose whatever aspects of masculinity they like, in this focus group Kurt challenges such a model. Gill argues that there is an “almost total evacuation of politics or cultural influence” (R. Gill, 2007: 153) from postfeminist sensibility, which is an important assumption of David’s model until Kurt directly describes the importance of politics and culture to masculinity. Interestingly, though, both Johnny (29) and David (30) seem to quite quickly agree with Kurt, changing their minds despite having produced a more individualist definition beforehand. I think there is a reason for this.

There are two elements of masculinity that Johnny and David outline have changed. The first is that masculinity is newly diverse and open to interpretation, while the second is an implied positivity to the content of these new masculine ideals, such as the introduction of a more caring model of masculinity, or of a masculinity more friendly to feminist or anti-racist politics. Kurt’s intervention produces a problem, because they both have to accept Kurt’s account’s existence in order to demonstrate the more caring version of masculinity (as discussed by Elliott (2016)) they have put forward, even while this denies the idea that masculinity is open to interpretation. Kurt’s model suggests that interpretation is less important than the structural element of masculinity that already exists before it is interpreted. Of course, it is possible to argue that the idea of a more caring version of masculinity is already at odds with the idea of interpretation, as the contention that a new version of masculinity exists at all (be it caring or not) seems to foreclose a specific image of masculinity rather than leaving it open to interpretation. So, Johnny and David’s change of mind can be largely put down to the internal dynamic of the focus group, rather than a sudden philosophical shift. Faced with direct evidence that challenges their view of things, David and Johnny step aside and allow Kurt to produce something that denies their own views.

The next extract is a repeat of lines 1-9 of extract 3, which I examined in relation the advanced masculinity IR several chapters ago, and which took place in the focus group shortly after extract 28. I have reintroduced it here as it demonstrates a development of David’s positioning, considering Kurt’s intervention.

Extract 3*

- 1 David: ((tuts)) I dunno about you, but I sort of feel quite (.) I'm, like, being from
2 Brighton, I sort of feel like, being from such, like a liberal a::rea (.) of:, umm, the
3 cou:ntry, it's sort of (0.6) it's sort of ha:rd to say that it's going to be like that all
4 over (redacted) because it's not true, but sort of as a, as a generalisation, there are
5 less pressures in that ki:nd of sense.
- 6 Johnny: °Yeah° and I think (.) I, I mean I was always pushed to:, towards education and
7 going to university, uh (.) to kind of= what you, Kurt was talking about was never
8 really a consideration for me. (.) Err: from family essentially. Been brought up by
9 my parents that, in that way (.) where: school was everything=

Here, David on lines 1-5 adopts middle position between being able to interpret masculine expectations towards a model that sees that ability as a situated position. He says, “being from a liberal area”, “it’s sort of hard to say it’s going to be like that all over the place” (2-4), putting his own position into a broader social context. In other words, his background allows him a certain position of privilege where he feels, himself, free to adopt or drop characteristics of masculinity as he sees fit. He explicitly identifies “less pressures” (5) around masculinity. So, faced with Kurt’s material construction of a masculinity that denies his own experience, David reverts to a version of the advanced masculinity IR, while still retaining the free choice of the individualist IR. The individualist IR, it becomes clear, is useful in situations where a disavowal of masculinity on an abstract level is particularly useful, such as when held to account for a negatively constructed version of masculinity. Faced with a more concrete other who must be understood and appreciated for the sake of a progressive masculinity, this abstraction needs to be made more grounded.

So, Johnny and David have constructed a binary within masculinity, with one side that is caring, fluid and individually centred, and another that is uncaring, rigid, and driven by strict cultural norms, and both Johnny and David identify with the first. David, for example, in extract 3, uses the negative concept of “pressure” to describe the second concept of masculinity, while Johnny’s description of going to university frames higher education as a good thing for masculinity (extract 3, lines 6-7). Neither of them denigrate those who adhere to a different type of masculinity, but they are interested in critiquing that different type as a structural norm. When faced with Kurt introducing cultural context to masculinity, David says that masculinity is not the same everywhere, which allows him to frame his more interpretative, fluid version as in some way oppositional or counterhegemonic, in spite of its adherence to the neoliberal model of subjectivity.

In extract 27 in the last section, Riley specifically found a way of accounting for Marshall’s actions by essentialising certain features of his character, perhaps similarly to how Kurt and Johnny

responded to Kurt. Here, having watched the same clip, they take a similar tack, and we find them ruminating on the merits of Marshall's inherent character. Extract 29 takes place very shortly after the three participants have watched the sitcom clip – the *HIMYM* clip was the second clip they watched, so this extract took place before extract 5 (in section 6.1).

Extract 29

- 1 David: The one thing I would say is that I don't that i:s mas, like, the, I don't think that's
2 male specific. I think tha:t=
3 Greg: Right.
4 David: =<pressure to fit i:n> in social groups is somethi:ng=
5 Johnny: Yeahyeah
6 David: =that, umm (.) is applicable: (.) across: (0.8) just every: ki:nd of: group of people,
7 like, reg- in regard to gender:, ethnicity:, umm, all kinds of demographics.
8 Johnny: Mmm (.) I'd agree with you. Maybe that, it's some of the sor- some of the specifics
9 are a little bit different so you might not find a [group] of females talking like that.
10 David: [yeah] yeah
11 Johnny: You might do, but (.) yeah. Generally though, that, it, you know, that (.) want to fit
12 in
13 David: Yeah.
14 Johnny: Or need to fit in (.) yeah (.) happens (.) to everyone.
15 Greg: Would you have done the same?
16 (1.5)
17 Johnny: ((exhales)) I'd like to say no.
18 David: Ye:ah (.) I'd agree with that
19 (1.2)
20 Johnny: <I'd like to say no, yeah> (1.8) Yeah (.) I wouldn't, you know, you wouldn't come
21 up with a (.) °with a fake story, I don't think°.
22 Greg: hh no, no, but do, like (.) to an extent†
23 Johnny: You might act a little bit differently.
24 Greg: Ye:ah.
25 David: You might, [I think, I think] you'd be=
26 Johnny: [In a new group]
27 David: =sort of, not quite your full self, but I am generally: (.) a believer i:n "I am who I
28 am, and if you don't like it, you , you don't have to deal with it".
29 Johnny: Yeah.

30 David: I've j- you know, it's not for you to (.) it's not for you to be deciding

31 Johnny: Yeah.

32 David: =or=

33 Johnny: Yeah, I think err ye- (1.0) no there's been definitely occasions in the past where I've

34 changed (0.6) you know, my personality slightly just to fit in to a new, a new: (.)

35 group.

36 David: Yeah.

37 Johnny: I think (.) just at that initial phase, yeah. It's not something that I'm (.) particularly

38 proud of doing, but (.) mmm you know. I wouldn't say I changed too much, but it's

39 just tryina (.) to adapt yourself to a new environment, new [people].

40 David: [Yeah]

41 Johnny: There is certain ways you speak to certain people.

42 David: Ye:::ah

43 Johnny: °So: (.) [but]°

44 David: [But] (.) I dunno about you, but I'd say, the, like, even after those changes,

45 I'd say I'm still me↑.

46 Johnny: YEAH (.) no, absolutely, yeah (0.7) yeah. I don't feel, like you know (.) a

47 completely different person, or= (1.2). You can, you can put on a different persona

48 sometimes (2.0) °yeah°.

David and Johnny initially read the clip as not about masculinity, but about a general human condition to “fit in”. The “need to fit in” (14) is not specific to men or women, even while the specifics of this scenario are unambiguously male in content. Interestingly, this explicitly refers to social pressures, where before they had been reluctant to acknowledge them. Social pressures are, in David’s words, “not male specific” (line 2). Johnny briefly acknowledges that “some of the specifics” (line 8) might be a little different, but the existence of social pressure to conform is universal. They achieve two things here. First, it allows them both to fit their behaviour into their general stance of anti-masculinity. If social pressures are not really related to gender, then men do not need to be masculine as there is no social requirement to do so. And second, it positions Johnny and David as to some extent outside the norm. If they are able to critique the social world, they demonstrate that the social world is something that they can pick and choose to their benefit. Once again, they construct themselves as free choosers.

On line 15, I ask them if they would have done the same as Marshall, forcing them to imagine a social pressure to conform to masculine norms. So, on lines 17 and 18 (after a brief pause), David and Johnny begin to draw a distinction between “acting a little bit differently” (23) and what seems to be framed as changing your inherent character. When asked if they would have done the same as Marshall,

to fit in to a workplace by putting on a hypermasculine act, they come up with the sentiment “I’d like to say no” (17), showing an awareness of societal pressures, but also a desire to avoid them. This strategy is different to Riley’s in the previous section, in extract 27. Where Riley constructed a version of Marshall that did the wrong thing for the right reasons, David and Johnny are more nuanced. Social pressures, for them, exist, but they would like, ideally, to be strong enough to ignore those pressures and determine their own paths.

8.3 Ignoring expectations

The group of office workers in Somerset mostly used two different IRs – the advanced masculinity IR, explored in section 6.2, and the individualist IR, which I will look at here. The four extracts in this section are from two separate interviews (see appendix 1, interview grouping 5). Matt, aged 21, works in finance, having grown up in the south east and studied in London. Roy, 26, works in the same department and grew up in a similar location to Matt, but spent several years as a primary school teacher before moving to finance.

The individualist IR for these two came with an acknowledgement of the existence of gender discourses and gender structures, but with the assertion that both Matt and Roy largely ignored them. The dilemmas they faced meant they both ended up trying to do the same thing: constructing a position from which they attempted to critique gender structures from the outside, yet only doing so by relying on problematic reified gendered images. I am going to look at Roy here first, with an extract that came approximately halfway through the interview. Just before this, we had been discussing his current workplace in a finance office, and I changed the topic by asking why and how he chose to study primary school teaching.

Extract 30

- 1 Greg: Why did you choose to study primary school ↑teaching?
- 2 Roy: Umm: I got a job when I was about fourtee:n in: (.) a:: (.) an after school club (.)
- 3 and I was working with ↑children and sta:yed there (0.7) think I was thirteen
- 4 actually (1.5) so then= just I (.) carried on working there until I was eighteen, umm
- 5 (0.9) and so it was just something I enjoyed doing↑. (1.6) ↓Err: and went down that
- 6 route, yeah.
- 7 Greg: And that was ju:st (.) that was just a job you found to (0.5) earn a bit of money
- 8 while [you were doing]=
- 9 Roy:

10 [Ye:ah, yeah] that was literally just to get money (.) umm: yeah. I had a
 11 fe:w, a few odd jobs actually when I was younger (1.0) umm ((tuts)) So: I work=
 12 worked= work, worked for a shop, and the:n (.) there was, there was sort of my two
 13 regular jobs and then I also did (0.8) some ga:rdening bits umm: (.) was a
 14 handyma:n (.) at an office hh for a little bit umm: (0.7) But yeah, a few other little=
 15 Greg: little odds and sods (.) just to try and make money hh.
 16 So (.) do you[†] consider yourself masculine, at all?
 17 Roy: (1.9)
 18 Greg: Err:: err: (1.8) <I wouldn't say I was a feminine bloke> [hhh]
 19 Roy: [Right.]
 20 Erm:: (2.1) err: well I'm not in= I'm not into sports or anything like that. °I, uh, I, I
 21 have° (0.6) no idea about (.) what's going on in the world of sports (.) umm; I've
 22 never really followed it myself[†], umm: but like (.) I guess in the (1.0) in the: (2.6) if
 23 you look like, like a (.) ma:n (.) a classic man in the movies, I don't, you know, I
 24 don't really cry:: or any things like that. And I don't= it depends what your
 25 Greg: definition of masculine is but (.) I wouldn't say= I wouldn't say I was feminine↑=
 26 Roy: [Right.]
 27 [I'm] not very sensitive (.) I'm not very good at a::rt hhh (1.0) or any things like
 28 that but (.) I'm also not (.) very good at (.) a lot of the (.) stuff I probably would say,
 people would say was masculine, so.

UK government statistics from 2016 show that men make up just 15.4% of primary school teachers (Anon., 2016) – Roy had even pointed out earlier in the interview that he was one of just two men studying primary school teaching on his course. One might therefore expect that his answer might reference the novelty of being a male primary school teacher. Instead, he frames it as explicitly about labour and about monetary gain. Aged 14, he says, he got a job in a primary school, and then just stayed there. It was not about any inherent feature of Roy's character, but simply about dealing with the hand that was dealt him. Roy recalls themes of sacrifice that again have been prominent throughout these interviews – he was just trying to make money, and any connection to femininity is purely coincidental. Here, the more classical economic subject of “homo economicus” is invoked, the individual maximising his monetary accrument and gain, while gendered considerations do not enter into it.

That he steered away from gender here led me to ask on line 15 if he considers himself masculine. After pausing, he replied, at a slow pace, “I wouldn't say I was a feminine bloke”, and then laughed. Roy answers the opposite question – though he does not want to be seen as masculine, he seems more concerned with *not* being seen as feminine, which was likely to have been triggered by an inference

that my question implying that he *was* feminine. Even despite this implication, here it might be instructive to reconsider how fear of the feminine informs masculinity (Chodorow, 1978; Craib, 1987) as Roy is clearly not interested in labelling himself masculine, but is concerned for some reason at the idea that he might be feminine. He is still a man, he insists, but he just struggles to identify with any of the ideas of what it means to be a man; in fact, he reels off a set of images about what we might imagine a man to be. He is not into sports (line 19), he does not “look like a classic man in the movies” (22), he does not cry (23). But on the other hand, he is not feminine either, and again, he gives examples: he is not very sensitive (26) and he is not very good at art (26). Of course, all these concepts or images he draws on to distance himself from are loaded with cultural meanings, and do not capture any sense of masculinity or femininity beyond isolated images. Broadly speaking, this allows Roy to position himself as an outsider to gendered ideas, observing and critiquing from the outsider, yet these critiques rely on certain reified images of what masculinity is. I will explore this after and in tandem with extract 31 from Matt’s interview, as the small differences between Matt and Roy’s positionings draw out some important aspects of the individualist IR.

Extract 31

- 1 Greg: Okay so the first kind of (.) general question err: is: is it easy to live up to
 2 expectations of masculinity? (1.8) Or do you find it easy (.) in your experience?
 3 Matt: I do:n't= (1.0) I don't ↑really think about it (.) on a day-to-day basis to be honest↑.
 4 (1.2) Umm: it's not something quite typ- I think I'm quite oblivious to it↑?
 5 Greg: Right.
 6 Matt: So it's not something I rea::lly think about. Umm: (0.9) it's only if other people
 7 bring it up, that's when you think about it. Umm: (1.3) so yeah I never think about
 8 it. It's like (.) the only time recently, I can think of now, is: (1.1) someone asked me
 9 once how do you look at your nails (.) apparently there's a certain- there's a man
 10 way and there's a female way.
 11 Greg: Yeah, yeah.
 12 Matt: °hh yeah and that's°, that's (.) the only (1.1) time I ever really thought about it. (1.8)
 13 It's not (.) yeah. (1.3) I'm quite passive to that.
 14 Greg: Right. (1.5) So: do you, do you consider yourself masculine?
 15 (3.8)
 16 Matt: Umm, well I'm a guy↑ so I have to have an element of (1.4) y'know, masculinity,
 17 but other than that (.) I wouldn't say I was: the most: (.) masculine person in the
 18 world↑, but I wouldn't say I was, you know (0.5) very feminine either. I'd say,
 19 y'know (.) general healthy mix, I hope↑ hhh.

Matt's example of gendered behaviour is very specific, as he talks about a "man way and a female way" to inspect your nails (lines 9-10). Though the way he talks about this phenomenon implies he does not think it is a good indication of anything, suggesting it is all he "can think of now" (8), it is also all he produces. However, Matt had earlier said on lines 3-4, that masculinity is not something he "thinks about on a day-to-day basis", as if that is a particularly important gauge to determine masculinity and femininity (and that is the case whether you might consider gender as a characteristic or as performative). When I then ask him about whether he considers himself masculine (the same question as with Roy), he replies that he must have some elements of masculinity to be a man, but that he is not overly masculine or feminine (17-18). Matt's statement here is an explicit example of him trying to carve out a place between masculine subjectivity and neoliberal subjectivity by trying to distance himself from both.

Extracts 30 and 31 follow a very similar pattern. Both begin, through different opening questions from myself, with the participant describing himself using a series of gendered images. For Roy, in extract 30, those images are related to labour, including primary school teaching, service work, gardening, repair and "handyman" work, and finally office work (lines 9-13). Matt in extract 31 gives one example, of inspecting fingernails. Both then use these images to express disinterest in identifying as masculine or feminine. Roy says his labour was towards an apparently non-gendered aim of "making money" (line 14), while Matt declares himself "quite passive to" masculinity (line 13). On noticing this, I then ask the same question of each, "do you consider yourself masculine?" (line 15 for Roy, and line 14 for Matt). Here they take slightly different routes but end up at the same conclusion. For Matt, it takes a little longer, acknowledging masculinity, but still disavowing femininity, saying "I wouldn't say I was, you know, very feminine either" (18). Roy's disavowal is in his first sentence after the question, "I wouldn't say I was a feminine bloke" on line 17.

This framing – neither masculine nor feminine – that appears, almost identically, for both Roy and Matt, shows both unready to fully relinquish masculinity, which they stop short of explicitly disavowing. Yet for both Roy and Matt masculinity is *not* a desirable position. When asked "do you consider yourself masculine", their responses attempt to mitigate the extent to which anti-masculinity makes them seem feminine. Neither is willing to describe himself as masculine or as feminine, but instead each produces a series of reasons why they are neither. Indeed, these reasons through which they nominally opt out of gender serve to position them as critically aware, such that they can, from a distance, observe how gender works and criticise gender clichés.

They both therefore work to distance themselves from existing gender relations at all, constructing an individualised, unencumbered subject position. Roy and Matt are not free choosers of multiple cultural gendered *options* (like David and Johnny in extracts 25, 26, and 27) but free choosers

of their identity devoid of any existing structures *at all*. But, more importantly, their answers sustain masculinity as a structure even while they purport to disavow it in some way. When each is asked about masculinity, their first instincts are not to deny masculinity, as one might expect if masculinity has been properly rejected. Instead, Roy and Matt are both keener to assert that even if they are not masculine, they are not feminine, indicating that the binary gender structure remains unchallenged.

The importance of being “not-feminine” is revealing. Semiotically, masculinity and male performances rely on being ‘not-femininity’ (Butler, 1990; Saco, 1992), and indeed, various psychoanalytic theories have explored how masculine performances rely to some extent on rejecting femininity (Chodorow, 1978; Craib, 1987). So, while Roy and Matt use the individualist IR attempts here to reject both masculinity and femininity (indeed, following the logic of neoliberal subjectivity), when they respond to a question about their masculinity by rejecting femininity, they reveal the construction of their own gender as specifically anti-feminine rather than anti-masculine. For them it is still more important to disavow femininity. Matt’s train of thought, as I will show below did not change after watching and discussing the sitcoms. In the next extract, 32, Matt has just watched the clip from *New Girl*, and I ask him whether he liked either of the two Schmidt characters.

Extract 32

- 1 Matt: Like, yeah, one of them (.) the older one, you know, could be a laugh↑, but, err: (.)
 2 he'd be (0.6) maybe too ↑serious. Umm: (0.8) and all I've seen is: kind of, doing
 3 some stupid competition (.) and he wouldn't stop. I would take this as (.) ↑fun, you
 4 know, not ideal. You don't know what you're gonna do in this (.) you're probably
 5 gonna be nasty. (2.8) Umm: and the other one, he, I dunno↑, he seemed a bit of a:
 6 (2.1) dunno:, bit of a (.) coward↑, if that makes sense.
- 7 Greg: Right, okay.
- 8 Matt: Uh:: (1.1) he seemed, he did seem very feminine, to me. And he:=
- 9 Greg: He did↑?
- 10 Matt: I dunno, I, uh, not (.) that that's a bad thing, could be a really nice person. But (1.7)
 11 ↑yeah (0.7) it's not someone I'd probably really hang around with, no:. I don't think
 12 either of them would be, to be honest. (1.9) But you can't judge a book by it= its
 13 cover (0.6) hhhh

Having asked which Schmidt he likes better, Matt responds that the older one “could be a laugh” (line 2). The rest of the response is somewhat muddled, but the more coherent fragments are when he describes the older Schmidt as “maybe too serious” (3) and “all I’ve seen is kind of doing some stupid

competition” (3-4), suggesting that he does not think he has enough evidence to make a value judgement about the characters. Then, he describes the younger Schmidt as “a bit of a coward” (7), which is then followed with “he seemed very feminine” (9). It is unclear whether Matt meant to construct a link here between cowardice and femininity, and offered the chance to clear that up, he seems to imply that it is not the case, saying about the younger Schmidt’s purported femininity, “not that that’s a bad thing” (11). After this, he jumps between trying to acknowledge his ignorance about drawing judgements based on such little knowledge, and making those judgements.

Though the part where Matt describes Schmidt as feminine looks like it might be most relevant, I think his jumping between those two ideas is revealing. Matt’s premise so far has been that he is, in his words from extract 31 “oblivious” to gender (line 4), which, on a performative level, achieves the individualist “coolness” of neoliberal subjectivity. In *New Girl* he sees a very explicit gendered interaction, with two characters both grappling with how they interact with gender norms and ideas. His obliviousness is therefore called into question here, as to reach a judgement on the characters requires some reflection on the way that the characters are written as reflecting a certain performance of masculinity. So, Matt ends up variously interested and uninterested in judging the characters, in the end revealing, once again, the problem with the individualist IR: the existence of gender denies the possibility of full individualism.

The next extract is from after the sitcoms, but the conversation led from the *HIMYM* clip tangentially rather than directly. Instead, it is from nearly right at the end of the interview, from the word association game with which each interview and focus group started and ended. Roy’s closing one here was much more thoughtful and forthcoming than the hesitation from the beginning of the interview, offering words thematically quite different.

Extract 33

- 1 Roy: Ye:ah I think the word, actually= ah I think↑ (.) as we've been speaking, I've been
 2 thinking more about: (1.0) what I think of masculinity it's not something I dwel
 3 on=
 4 Greg: Yeah.
 5 Roy: =I'm not a (.) dweller generally so umm (0.7) yeah I think the words will change
 6 quite a bit (1.5) from what we said= from what I said earlier now I've thou:ght
 7 mo:re, we've discussed more things↑.
 8 Greg: Yeah.
 9 Roy: Yeah so yeah (.) go ahead.
 10 Greg: So (.) well, the first one's men (.) again.

11 Roy: Men↑? Sorry yeahyeahyeahyeahyeah it's uh ((internet connection down here))
 12 Greg: Yeah s'alright↑.
 13 Roy: Umm: (2.6) uhh ah hh now I've said hhh. Umm:: I'd say: (.) sort of stro:ng or
 14 emotionally strong.
 15 Greg: Okay.
 16 Roy: Or:: (0.7) sta- stable, I'd say. (1.8) Umm: reliable.
 17 (3.8)
 18 Greg: Cool↑.
 19 Roy: That's (.) all, that's= that's all been the same thing so you got like emotionally↑.
 20 Greg: Ye:ah.
 21 Roy: Know what I'm trying to say, I'm (0.7) you know, not umm: (1.1) can be relied upon
 22 for: (.) emotional support↑. (2.4) Doesn't need lookin' after in that sense, that's what
 23 I'm tryna (1.2) convey.
 24 Greg: So how was= >what, how, why have<, why have you: (1.6) why have you gone for
 25 different w= 'cos previously you said banter, manly and sports, and that's a very
 26 different image of: (1.1) [man]lines::.
 27 Roy: [Yeah.]
 28 Greg: Why is that, why has that changed?
 29 Roy: Erm: be↑cause ((exhales)) I think (.) because as we- as we've been speaking, I
 30 guess, when you sai- when you said men before, I was trying to think of: (.)
 31 y'know, what, how maybe society (.) [sees men]
 32 Greg: [mm hmm] yeah.
 33 Roy: Umm (0.6) and now, as we, as we've been: (.) talking, I've sort of thought more
 34 about how I (1.2) see: men: masculinity in that= in that way.
 35 Greg: Okay.
 36 Roy: Which is for me, different to probably: (0.7) how (.) they (.) how society currently
 37 conveys masculinity in like (.) y'know, umm: magazine covers and things like that.

Just prior to this, I told Roy that we were going to do more word association. His response to this was on line 1, beginning again with the same trope that masculinity is not something he “dwells on” (2-3), resembling Matt’s “obliviousness”. However, this interview allowed him to reflect and “dwell”, so he presents himself as more prepared this time around. So, having said he would be more reflective, he first chooses a similar word as at the beginning to associate with men, picking strong, then quickly correcting himself by saying “emotionally strong” (14). Themes of emotional labour and an ethic of care become important here, and he follows up with concepts of stability and reliability on line 16. He

is clearly trying to get at a certain theme and is not fully happy with these words, however, saying that what sums up his idea is “doesn’t need looking after” (22).

When I ask him about the stark comparison between these words and the ones at the beginning, he draws a distinction between “how society sees men” (31) and “how I see men, masculinity” (34). Here, he presents a sort of solution to the individualist IR’s central dilemma of what role gender plays for men who say they are not concerned with masculinity. For Roy, similarly to David and Johnny in section 6.1, the key is that he can choose to interpret masculinity in various ways. What matters is not the masculinity of “banter”, “manliness” and “sports”, but the masculinity of emotional strength, stability and reliability. As long as he can use these aspects of masculinity, Roy can stay masculine and let himself be an individual. After all, this version of masculinity is one that is on offer, and those offers are fully open to interpretation. Of course, like others, Roy’s solution to the dilemma does not really solve the problem as much as reallocate responsibility or accountability for masculinity. It does not address a structural question about masculinity so much as allow Roy only to be both individualist and masculine.

For Roy and Matt, then, like David, Johnny, Riley, Freddie, and Paul, what is at stake is the character of the individual and the way they interpret or disavow certain forms of masculinity. They allow the neoliberal and masculine subjects to co-exist through adopting a certain individualist method to constructing one’s masculinity. using certain images that are friendlier to a progressive politics but never really call into question masculinity as a wider structural issue.

8.4 Chapter summary

The individualist IR takes on many forms of individualism that may be recognised as neoliberal, notably the abstract individual, essentialist individualism and consumerist individualism. Gender here is treated as a free and conscious choice, where individuals pick and choose the aspects of gender they want to enact, free of any restraint. Here, essentialist individualism came into conflict with the free-choice individualism of the consumerist conception, with contrasting statements about everybody being different and being free to choose how to perform gender. This was evident in the focus group with Riley, Freddie, and Paul, with Riley’s assertion that “we’re all different flavours cups of tea” up against his assertion that men can be influenced to be “camper” working in retail. The relevance of wider cultural or political norms is unclear here, a situation momentarily resolved in the focus group with David, Johnny, and Kurt, through the idea that expectations of masculinity can be interpreted by the individual. Here, the use of the individualist IR to abrogate responsibility for patriarchy or disavow masculinity was made clear, particularly in comparison to the exploration of the same focus group’s use of the advanced masculinity IR. Finally, Roy and Matt employed an individualism in which they

believed themselves free of any expectation at all, stating that they hoped they were neither masculine nor feminine, and that gender structures are irrelevant to them. Individualism here took the form of a postfeminist sensibility, in which gender was taken to be largely irrelevant to the everyday lives of Roy and Matt.

To return to the main theme of this thesis, the individualist IR resolves the problem of conflicting neoliberal and masculine subjectivities by asserting the overall irrelevance of outside influence to the IR's proponent's everyday life. This form of individualism, however, is heavily inflected with neoliberal modalities of individualism, which itself demonstrates the presence of political influence, while also demonstrating neoliberalism's hegemony of subjectivity. On top of this, the assertion of rejection of outside influence resulted in its own contradiction, coming, as it did, from a group of cis men who still identified as men while asserting gender was irrelevant to their lives. This dilemma, along with the dilemmas produced by the other two IRs in chapters 6 and 7, demonstrates neoliberalism's uneasy and complex relationship with gender, and answer my empirical research questions 1a – what are the discourses on masculinity, both competing and consistent, that arise from four US hangout sitcoms, and focus groups and interviews with men around England? – and 1b - how are those discourses resolved and negotiated both in and between each? The discourses on masculinity made pertinent by my participants and the sitcoms largely concerned the problems with making masculinity suitable for neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalism, and negotiate the contradictions that arise from attempted discursive resolutions to such issues. In the next chapter, the IRs from the focus groups and sitcoms, as well as the dilemmas that arise from them, as well as the three subject positions read from the sitcoms, will be employed to answer, in-depth, my theoretical concerns in questions 2a and 2b: Is it at all accurate or useful to call these discursive formations “male femininities”? To what extent can we derive any political optimism from this?

9

Male femininities, neoliberal masculinities and hollow femininity

This final chapter deals with what I labelled on page 10 research questions 2a and 2b, concerning how accurate it is to describe neoliberal masculinities such as metrosexuality, hipsterism and spornosexuality as “male femininities”, and to what extent we can derive any political optimism from the notion that masculinity might be facing some disruption. I explored in chapters 6, 7, and 8 how participants used three different interpretative repertoires to disavow masculinity in various ways, yet very few of them felt positive about calling themselves feminine. As such, in this chapter I critique the discursive background against which rejections of masculinity are being made in both the sitcoms and in the focus groups and interviews. More specifically, to what extent are these rejections derived from neoliberalism’s unhappy marriage with patriarchy (B. Campbell, 2014; Delphy, 1984; Hartmann, 1979), and to what extent are they explicit structural critiques derived from autonomous and critical subjectivities? Of course, these two ideas are not necessarily mutually exclusive; it may be that the intersection of neoliberalism and patriarchy offers the seeds of the dismantling of both. But even in that scenario, it is questionable whether that intersection means that the possibility of a radically different structure is even possible if the critique stems from here.

This chapter, then, draws heavily on both datasets, and the continuities and discontinuities between them. In my introduction to section 3.4 in the methodology chapter on page 61, I outlined the three key links I made between the two datasets – the epistemological relationship between how the two locations encode and decode data, the empirical relationship forged by showing clips from the sitcoms in the focus groups and interviews, and the interpretative relationship between my readings and the participants’ readings of the sitcoms. These three relationships will all be drawn upon in the coming

chapter, which begins by gathering four key themes that emerged from both sets of analysis – rejections of masculinity, the feminisation of labour, masculine geography, and what I call ‘hollow femininity’. This chapter uses my analysis of the data, including the three interpretative repertoires and the three male subject positions derived from the sitcoms, combined with the theoretical concerns that underpinned that analysis specifically relating to femininity, neoliberalism, and masculinity, to tie together these themes to stimulate a discussion of the state of neoliberal masculinities insofar as they might be described as male femininities. I draw on three key features of femininity that seem to be guiding any suggestions that neoliberal masculinities might be feminine: a feminine bodily discipline, experiences of masculine otherness, and a fluidity of meaning. I then examine the extent to which we might use male femininity as either a critique of neoliberal masculinity, or potentially an accurate description, and question whether any real political optimism may be taken away from this.

It is worth reiterating here that there will always be a question over the extent to which I, as a researcher, can definitively trace the genealogy of any single statement as it comes from conversation. The background of any participant, as well as the specifics of the conversation they, will always be both relevant and not relevant to any single utterance. I have therefore tried not to be deterministic in exploring the relationship between any single utterance and its background.

9.1 Rejecting masculinity

Almost universally across the sitcoms and my fieldwork, some form of masculinity was attached to a negative normativity. While *How I Met Your Mother* (*HIMYM*) portrayed an excess of masculinity as bad and outdated, and *The Big Bang Theory* (*TBBT*) continually rejects confrontation and physical strength insofar as they are considered masculine, participants in both focus groups and interviews rejected a backwards masculine other, interpreted the more masculine sitcom characters negatively, and explicitly rejected the concept of masculinity.

9.1.1 The backward masculine other

Plenty of previous research into the construction of manhood and masculinity has found that men construct a different kind of masculine “other” in order to bolster the construction of their own masculinities (Edley, 2001; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). In my empirical data, that ‘other’ took three main forms: a generational other, a geographical other, and a sitcom character (usually one, or both, of the two Schmidts from *New Girl*, or Marshall’s workmates from *HIMYM*). There are several discursive points to be drawn out here in relation to neoliberalism.

In my chapters 3 and 4, I outlined the basis of a political ontology in which ideological hegemony is achieved through the construction of a politicised subjectivity (Lemke, 2001; Oksala, 2010). In such a model, the assumptions and values of ideology are inscribed into the everyday actions and formations of subjects, and those ideologies are most discernible from their idealised subjectivities. In relation to the construction of neoliberalism, I looked at how Harris (2017) argues that neoliberalism as an ideology relies on the interpellation of individuals not as autonomous subjects, but as what he calls “human capital”. By this, he means that subjectivity is to some extent, in favour of people becoming tools in a process of production. As such Harris draws on a broad but not total generational divide in the global north between millennials, born roughly between 1980 and 1995, therefore having grown up in a neoliberal era, and those known as “baby boomers”, born roughly between 1945 and 1965. As such, Harris traces a generational conflict that can be linked to the transformation of the economic consensus in the 1980s, from a broadly post-Keynesian settlement, to neoliberalism, and the sense in which the two differ in their construction of the subject; where the post-war post-Keynesian settlement interpellates subjects as autonomous individuals, neoliberalism instead interpellates individuals as capital in themselves. However, the autonomy granted by the post-war consensus, he says, means that the baby boomer generation tends toward treating the complaints and problems of a millennial generation treated as human capital, as self-entitled and spoiled, rather than as subjected to a series of generational and ideological disadvantages.

For McGuigan (2013, 2014), there is a relation between the self-entrepreneurship of the neoliberal subject, and the same subject’s politics of the self, which foster a hedonism in the form of a rebellious posture. The neoliberal subject here is a kind of human capital to the extent that they must sell themselves, rather than just products. The neoliberal subject is therefore interpellated as “cool”, where coolness is in the practices and cultures of politically subversive and oppositional subcultures of the 21st century. As a result, neoliberal subjectivity is positioned within a framework that appears, at least performatively, to adopt a progressive politics of the social, importantly for this research in relation to gender – and, building on the generational conflict between the neoliberal subjects of the millennial generation the post-war baby boomer generation, that progressive politics is performed in my fieldwork as a rejection of the previous generation’s values. This may be reflected, then, in the rejections of constructed backwards political views, such as those from George in extract 17 on page 128, describing his dad as both “racist” and “sexist”. George himself, conversely, is both non-racist and non-sexist.

George is not thinking about the differences between his and his father’s generations, but the difference between himself and his father. I pointed out in my analysis on page 129 that George’s construction here actually portrays George as the “other” and his dad as masculine, allowing George to disavow masculinity. This generational difference, then, is framed as about the societal dispositions of individuals, drawing on the individualist ontology of neoliberalism, in which intentional views and values are treated as the constructions of individuals rather than reflecting wider societal values. By

framing it this way, racist and sexist structures are not called into question, and neoliberalism's relationships with race and gender are fully upheld by a purely personal disavowal of masculinity through the construction of a generational other. However, it is important to note that the process by which neoliberal structures are left uncritiqued is not by totally ignoring neoliberalism, but by presenting neoliberal social values as positive. This is done via maxims that present neoliberal self-responsibilisation less as an outsourcing of social problems through pushing responsibility away from ideology and onto individuals, and more a celebration of the diversity of individuals, recalling notions of neoliberalism's abstract individual (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; Lukes, 1973).

We see this strand of thought in Gilson's (2016) work on hipsterism and neoliberalism; the social relations that define neoliberal culture are presented by both Gilson and his participants as cause for reasonable optimism, as they question and challenge some of the assumptions of patriarchy and race relations. But for that to be the case, these disavowals of masculinity must be taken at face value, which would not only contradict the discursive psychology used to analyse my transcripts, but also ignore the frequent disavowals of femininity that occurred throughout my fieldwork, too. While disavowing masculinity can look like an implicit embrace of femininity, considering semiotic perspectives in which masculinity and femininity are defined as binary signs of each other, on several occasions the disavowal of masculinity is often paired with a simultaneous disavowal of femininity. In extract 30 on page 164, Roy, for example, disavows both sides of the gender binary. Seemingly inferring that my question about whether he would consider himself masculine was a suggestion that he may not have been masculine, Roy responded that he would not say he "was a feminine bloke", going on to develop a series of images and ideas about his own identity and experience to back up the idea that he is neither feminine nor masculine, while Matt then does the same in the same section in extract 31. Where the participants distance themselves from both masculinity and femininity, two effects are simultaneously produced: first, the purported neutrality of the participant in relation to gendered norms serves to make any consideration of outside discourses on gender irrelevant, instead promoting the primacy of the individual as responsible for themselves. Indeed, the attempt to unencumber the subject of any influence at all (let alone interpellation or construction) from consideration of discourses features in literature on postfeminism (R. Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009) and neoliberalism (Han, 2017; McGuigan, 2013) alike, but here also has a second important effect in relation to masculinity. That effect is that the proposed irrelevance of outside discourses or culture effectively remains neutral on the dominance of an outside structure, thereby refraining from any substantive critique of the structures that benefit men and masculinities. Here, the unencumbered subject presumed by neoliberalism is sustained concurrently *with* the patriarchal dividend.

So, the rejection of both masculinity and femininity under neoliberalism and the rejection of both for men have two different aims. For the former, it aims to unencumber the subject from cultural considerations and therefore construct a worker fully amenable to the self-discipline and self-

responsibility of neoliberalism. For men, the disavowal of masculinity is for the same ends; the disavowal of femininity as an afterthought also sustains masculinity. This amounts to a contradiction in neoliberal masculinity, but also the beginnings of some problems with the suggestion that any neoliberal feminisation of masculinity might be cause for optimism as a deconstruction of gender. So far, any supposed feminisation is not progressive, but works to sustain masculinised structures. Indeed, what is suggested so far by these discussions is not so much male femininity, but male anti-masculinity, or the introduction of some form of otherness into dominant forms of masculinity. But this leaves a key contradiction unanswered: how does masculinity itself become anti-masculine?

9.1.2 Hegemonic masculine otherness

The phrase “hegemonic masculine otherness” aims to embody the contradiction that stems from formations of hegemonic masculinity that attempt to perform otherness, such as attempts to paint a nerd as simultaneously othered and as the new “alpha male” (see Roeder, 2013). The participants construct the backward masculine other so far in a seemingly contradictory way, in that while they are using one of geography, temporality or the sitcom character as the other against which they define themselves, in a wider sense of the power relationships between masculinities, they also construct themselves as “other”. They regard the “backward masculine other” figures as acting out a more dominant form of masculinity to their own, with the participants positioning themselves enacting an “othered” masculinity. Though it is not really possible to summarise any real essence to femininity, as explored in the literature review, a sense of otherness is certainly a key feature to femininity. De Beauvoir (2010 [1949]), for example, examined how otherness becomes inscribed onto female bodies, while contemporary literature on postfeminism explores the senses in which otherness remains hidden behind postfemininities that on the surface focus on individual empowerment (R. Gill & Scharff, 2011; Lazar, 2009; McRobbie, 2015). Indeed, for femininity, otherness usually suggests some level of subordination – however, here, I do not think this is the case. Instead, otherness is fetishised and drawn upon to sustain unequal power relations, which is a complex and contradictory process.

Consider two contrasting examples: in extract 2 (page 94), Johnny constructs himself as the “other” to a traditional, backwards masculinity, before sustaining masculinity with the line “but lads do that, don’t they”. George’s full narrative (in extracts 15-18 in section 7.1) of his own life begins with an experience of masculine subordination from childhood that later in his life becomes an advantage. Both recount an experience of masculinity as subordination, but at first glance, they look like they contrast with one another. While Johnny explicitly condones laddish behaviour, George shows significant discomfort with it. But rather than viewing George and Johnny’s positions as opposites, it would be more accurate to describe these two experiences as different methods to reach the same end, to portray masculinity as diverse and elastic enough to have room for their own version of it. For Johnny,

“lad” masculinity is an option within that, on which George is relatively agnostic, but still portrays himself as free to choose how he performs his own masculinity. As such, a masculine individualism is sustained by the inculcation of a certain sense of otherness, as subordinated and marginalised masculinities become implicated in dominant forms of masculinity.

The experience of otherness by men has been key throughout my research – from the interpretative repertoires that incorporate outsider and advanced masculinities, through to key linkages drawn between marginalised boyhoods and later masculine success, and the nerd culture of *TBBT* and the troubled childhoods of Schmidt in *New Girl* and Ross in *Friends*, a sense of being both male and othered is prominent. Concepts of marginalised and subordinated masculinities might be useful here, but perhaps the more pertinent is the idea of complicit masculinities. Though otherness implies a certain level of marginalisation or subordination, if George and Johnny’s masculinities are less interested in rupturing masculinity as opposed to sustaining it, then it would be more accurate to describe such processes as complicit. As Connell states, very few men actually live up to hegemonic masculinity, yet most men gain some sort of material benefit from patriarchy (Connell, 2005b: 79). Both the sitcoms and focus groups demonstrate men who do not fully endorse the worst elements of masculinity – even going so far as to deny their own masculinity, to distance themselves from the its excesses and the excesses of patriarchy, but are uninterested in questioning those elements, living alongside them and gaining from a patriarchal dividend. There is an extent to which one might argue that all masculinities are to some extent complicit insofar as they endorse any concept of masculinity whatsoever. Even while men whose masculinity is to some extent subordinated or marginalised do not necessarily secure the same benefits from masculine structures as other men, even marginalised and subordinated masculinity is still masculinity, and so still complicit.

So, even while there are substantiated descriptions here of material marginalisation, those descriptions do not come with explicit rejections of masculinity, but the adoption of a vague sense of otherness related tangentially to femininity but still complicit with masculine structures. Suzanne Moore expresses concern that the masculinities of what she calls late modern capitalism, but might also be called neoliberalism, exploitatively appropriate a sense of authentic otherness (be that blackness or femininity) to perform a postmodern coolness (Moore, 1996). In the process of this appropriation, such otherness is itself constructed in a way that wrenches it from material reality and power relations. Gilson (2016) describes a similar phenomenon in his exploration of hipsters, though with a little more political optimism than Moore, suggesting that what he says is a neoliberal adoption of certain forms of otherness hints at a positive social politics. Either way, he makes little indication as to the content of this otherness, and the power relations at play here. Indeed, this is also present in McGuigan’s “cool” neoliberal subject, who takes on the tropes and ideas of marginalised groups to perform a disaffected disposition (McGuigan, 2014). The use of anti-masculinity to paradoxically sustain masculinity begs a further question of what it might look like for participants to formulate an anti-masculinity that is not complicit

in the sustenance of patriarchy. The obvious answer might be what Hearn (2015) calls “the abolition of men”, of the destruction of the regimes of power upheld by masculinity. But it also might be that a more explicit embrace of femininity, rather than one that sustains existing power structures might be a start, though that might run the risk of re-essentialising femininity.

Even if it is performative, then, part of neoliberal subjectivity involves some sort of disavowal of masculinity, which gives way to a theoretical question: to what extent is neoliberal subjectivity feminine? As I have discussed in section 2.4.3 on page 33, various authors (R. Gill, 2007; R. Gill & Scharff, 2011) have argued that the ideal neoliberal subject performs an embodied femininity in many ways, notably in the labouring capabilities of the neoliberal subject, which involve capabilities for affective labour, and flexibility. Next, I turn the discussion in the direction of the feminisation of labour, placing the rejections of masculinity and the prevalence of a masculine otherness so far discussed in the wider political context of neoliberalism.

9.2 Feminisation of labour

If there is little political optimism to be derived from rejections of masculinity, considering that masculinity is sustained, it begs the question of what the substantive features of neoliberal masculinity are that mark it out from other forms of masculinity. The gendered discourses that emerged from both the sitcoms and from the focus groups and interviews reveal a substantial socioeconomic anxiety within contemporary masculinities. Again, this is not a new or novel suggestion: socioeconomic anxiety is central to many recent studies (Brabon, 2013; Negra, 2006). And, indeed, the effects of an increasingly feminised labour market on younger men is not a novel area of study (Nickson & Korczynski, 2009; D. Nixon, 2009). However, my suggestion goes further than this, to indicate that the forms of feminisation that sometimes appear to surface among contemporary masculine lifestyles and in men’s consumption patterns are bound up in the same set of discourses – hence, a parallel can be drawn between 30-year-old Riley in the southwest of England saying that working in retail made him camper, and the story of Joey in *Friends* giving up some acting work because he does not want to show his backside on television, or between Robert’s love of floral shirts and Sheldon from *TBBT*’s refusal to update a wardrobe that looks like it belongs to a 13-year-old. To differing extents, and in different ways, all these phenomena speak to the substantive transformation, but importantly, sustenance of, masculinity within a neoliberal era.

9.2.1 Neoliberalism and affective labour

To briefly summarise, neoliberal capitalism is much more reliant on forms of labour that do not involve production, but a renewed focus on affective forms of labour, such as emotional and aesthetic

labour. With manual labour no longer dominant, a decrease in career stability, and the increasing intertextuality of discourses and signs in the neoliberal era, emotional and aesthetic labour, and a capability for flexibility become important. Such capabilities are typically associated with femininity, considering their importance to domestic labour, and as such, some have argued that the neoliberal labouring subject is feminine. As Morini argues, for contemporary capitalism, arguably, “women are more appreciated precisely because of the qualitative/adaptive characteristics they are assumed to guarantee” (Morini, 2007: 57).

Plenty of literature on this phenomenon exists, quite often in post-industrial areas of the UK where the difference between manual labour and jobs such as service or freelance work is at its most stark (Abstract, 1989; D. Nixon, 2009; Pettinger, 2005). Indeed, much of this literature deals with the unsuitability of young men in these areas to adapt to the type of work they want to do, resulting in frustration, anger and a certain amount of political turmoil. In terms of my own research, and in relation to masculinity, Kurt outlines the process well in extract 3, in section 6.1 on page 99, where he talks about Brexit having blown stuff up. In what seems like a different vein, but actually explores many of the similar themes, Jon Stratton (2016) argues that Sheldon’s plain-talking in *TBBT* reveals an explicit version of neoliberal man, fully capable of looking after himself with a strict household regimen. So, the idea that the feminisation of labour has had some sort of impact on masculinity is not unique to this thesis.

The so-called feminisation of the neoliberal subject can be easily read from my data at various points. For example, Riley asserts in extract 25 on page 151 that, “men can be influenced to be slightly camper in, within the fashion retail industry I would say”, by which he seems to imply a decline in personal attachment to masculinity, from him being a “full-on metallor” to being “into fashion or clothes”. However, I have already pointed out that what emerges from Riley’s argument is not so much a rejection of masculinity via feminisation, but the sustenance of the masculine subject via the inculcation of othered, feminised discourses; he uses the individualist IR to make this seem like his decision, rather than reflective of wider structures and shifts in power. There is an interesting comparison to be made with Ringo, who mostly employed the outsider masculinity IR, in extract 15 in section 7.1. Ringo makes an explicit link between acting masculine and financial reward, therefore denying the suggestion that contemporary capitalism rewards feminised labour. However, I pointed out that he also suggests that when he behaves like this to get financial reward, it is a deliberate act that goes against his character. Yet, these two differing stories retain the same end, in asserting the importance and primacy of personal and individual choice in the construction of gender. Like Riley, therefore, Ringo sustains a form of neoliberal individualism, making gender a matter of individual character rather than one determined by outside structures.

If the ideal neoliberal subject is defined by certain capabilities that are not commensurable with masculinity, then for neoliberalism, masculinity becomes somewhat defunct – so what is the use of sustaining masculinity here? The most obvious answer is that the material interests of men do not evaporate that easily. For a start, even though neoliberal subjectivity bears a resemblance to something that looks like femininity, it is both simplistic and somewhat inaccurate to suggest that neoliberalism is anti-masculine. Neoliberal capitalism has seen some significant shifts in the gender ideologies of capitalism, largely in the ways that women are represented in high-powered jobs in government and finance sectors (Lazar, 2009; Motschenbacher, 2009). However, it is still the case that women feel the brunt of inequalities forged by capitalism (see, for example, Keen & Cracknell, 2017), and it would not be unfair to describe neoliberalism's constant expansion as characterised by a certain masculinity (Brown, 2015). Yet there is still something going on in my fieldwork that indicates some friction between neoliberalism and contemporary patriarchies. It is worth reconsidering the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy here: the two systems are intrinsically linked, but the marriage between them is not always as friendly as their oft-shared interests might sometimes suggest (Hartmann, 1979). A change in the capacities of the neoliberal subject is not enough to challenge a long history of patriarchy on its own; in fact, my research is partly based on an increasing conflict between the two in a neoliberal era.

The two examples just mentioned, of Ringo and Riley, indicate toward this friction: at what point does the nominal anti-masculinity of neoliberal subjectivity just begin to deconstruct masculinity? Though both, I have argued, grasp for the same end, they use different IRs and therefore characterise differently the same dilemma of at what point the feminisation of labour presents a problem for masculinity. I have previously argued that where the individualist IR largely serves the function of rejecting masculinity as whole, the outsider masculinity IR is more often used for exploring personal relations and recounting specific stories. So, where Riley's use of the individualist IR serves to reject gender altogether, even while preserving masculinity, Ringo's use of the outsider masculinity IR disavows his own performances of masculinity. Therefore, while Riley suggests that the feminisation of labour does not matter for masculinity because gender is increasingly less important both to him and generally, Ringo instead positions himself more on the feminine side of a binary. So, even though both turn to the idea that gender is a matter of individual character, the individualist IR indicates that the feminisation of labour is not a problem because gender is increasingly unimportant, the outsider masculinity IR suggests that it is a problem for masculinity because gender is so important to the construction of individual subjectivities.

The wider function of the feminisation of labour as it relates to power is therefore called into question: if the function of the feminisation of the neoliberal masculine subject is to sustain itself, is there a breaking point at which such feminisation challenges masculinity per se rather than revising it? In Ringo's formulation he observes that, to an extent, masculinity retains its usefulness to capitalism

and the process of production but uses it to position himself as outside of the masculine norm, suggesting that his own position as someone who dislikes masculinity poses some sort of threat to masculinity. If Ringo is right about this, then there is a potential for disruption of masculinity that stems from the feminisation of labour.

9.2.2 Neoliberalism vs. masculinity

In the section 2.4.3 on page 32, I explored different theorisations of the new relationship between neoliberal capitalism and contemporary forms of patriarchy, looking at “multi-racial white supremacist patriarchy” (James, 2015) as well as “neoliberal neopatriarchy” (B. Campbell, 2014). These different concepts share an understanding of a certain postmodern sensibility that characterises the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy, where subjectivity is not neatly gathered, but rather defined by a certain fluidity. Consider for example, Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity, or the late modernity of Jameson, or most notably the anti-masculine masculinity of neoliberal manhood. Contradictions and multi-signification are perhaps at odds with what might be seen as a fixity and rigid meaning associated with the masculine, suggesting that feminine bodily discipline is not the only feature of femininity that appears on the surface to define neoliberal masculinity. We might understand an increasing internal complexity and contradiction to masculinity through the lens of Kristeva’s theorisation of a binary between the semiotic and symbolic realms (Kristeva, 2005; Moi, 1986). For Kristeva, the more feminine, fluid, open meanings and signs of the semiotic realm become rigidified after childhood as signification becomes more rigid and coherent, with signs becoming associated with single meanings and ideas. She asserts positively that there is something more politically optimistic and profeminist about the semiotic realm, and that an embrace of femininity, rather than its denigration, would not be a bad thing for feminism. Neoliberal masculinity might therefore be considered to some extent consistent with the semiotic realm’s fluidity of meaning and internal contradiction.

Such lack of fixed meaning is exemplified several times throughout the focus groups and interviews, particularly when the participants are asked about masculinity directly. The most obvious example of this is Freddie’s inability to define masculine expectations beyond being “blurred” in extract 25, section 8.1 (page 151). Freddie then uses the individualist IR to suggest that masculinity represents a range of choices, as I argued in my analysis, that blurring offers people the best of any concept of gender they want, and that it is this ability to adapt to gender as it changes that is important. Similarly, extract 12, section 6.4 (page 115), sees Robert contrast his day job in an office with his side project working as a blogger by contrasting the types of labour he is expected to carry out in each. His day job is presented as restrictive and unfree, as “being locked in a room” to carry out menial tasks, having to “follow rules”. In contrast, the labour of working as a blogger opens up the possibilities of meeting new people, of adapting to situations, of interactivity. This realm is presented by Robert as feminised, thanks

to a certain sociality and interaction with others constructed as feminine. However, he also makes this positive vision of his work as a blogger entirely congruent with neoliberal individualism: where his office job is about answering to others, he says his blogging is “all about him”. Once again, the flexibility of neoliberal subjectivity is framed in individualist terms.

A new commitment to flexibility and a capability to carry out affective labour therefore does not indicate any problem for the individualism that underpins neoliberalism, but in fact seems to bolster it. Yet there is still a question remaining over the possibility that a blurring of gender norms indicates the beginnings of some sort of deconstruction or dismantling of them. The first thing to point out here is that the muddy definition of gender discourse is not actually new: at various points in the literature review, I explored how many authors have pointed out that the vagueness of what gender and capitalism both actually are is as important to their survival as anything else, notably in section 2.4. From Demetriou’s argument that hegemonic masculinity is a discursive bloc able to take on often subversive and oppositional elements (Demetriou, 2001), to the proposal that contemporary forms of capitalism frequently market anti-capitalist dissent (D’Emilio, 1983; Eagleton-Pierce, 2016; Hennessy, 2000; Jameson, 1984; Sennett, 2006), both the absorption of dissenting subjectivities and an inability to pin down those structures as coherent are important strengths of both capitalism and patriarchy. However, neoliberal masculinity seems to indicate a form of feminised bodily discipline detached from the power relations of gender, and instead renewed for neoliberal subjectivity and production.

Bartky (1998) argues that there are three categories of bodily discipline that construct what can be recognised as a feminine subject: the production of a certain size and configuration of the body (which is temporally dependent on the particular configuration of the time), the production of a repertoire of movements and postures, and the construction of the body as an ornamented surface. The construction of the neoliberal masculine worker requires a similar bodily discipline, particularly considering the applications of aesthetic labour. Such an argument has already been made by Hakim (2016), who suggests that the male body-work required of the spornosexual speaks to certain modes of neoliberal self-discipline. Bodily discipline and work is also present in my focus groups, unsurprisingly perhaps in the focus group with the retail workers in the southwest, such as Riley’s assertion that clothes retail work can make a man “camper” in extract 25 in section 8.1, which seems to imply a movement towards men engaging in the last type of bodily discipline, in the use of the body as an ornamented surface.

However, it is not only clothing adornment of the body that is relevant to the neoliberal subject. Reconsider Robert’s discussion of his blogging work as requiring face-to-face interaction with people he has never met before in section 6.4, extract 12. Such work requires the ability to set a good impression at short notice, “being plonked in a scenario where you have to go to dinner with 10 people you don’t know”, and as such a level of aesthetic work to be able to interact in brief meetings. It should also be

noted that blogging and other such work often requires a certain deference to clients that pay you, and a deferential body language, similar perhaps to Iris Marion-Young's description of the inhibited and deferential body movements that define femininity (Young, 2005), as discussed in the literature review in section 2.2.1. This plays out in the sitcoms, too, presenting moments not only when bodily movements and adornments are important to masculinity, but also, to look at Bartky's first mode of feminised bodily disciplines, when the actual construction of a certain shape and configuration of the body becomes important to the construction of a masculine subject. The construction of the masculine body also here takes on a set of features amenable to neoliberalism.

In the *Friends* clip I used for the participants, I argued in section 4.3 on page 78 that Joey's job not only requires him to be on display, but requires his nude body to be filmed, something he struggles to handle. Such a clip can be read as the direct conflict, put on screen, between the uninhibitedness of masculinity and the inhibited bodily discipline required of neoliberal subjects. His sense of masculinity in the scene directly contrasts with the necessity of bearing his backside to the camera, as he attempts to adopt masculine faces, tensing his body and buttocks to make them firm, instead of opting for a natural look, which I contrasted with Schmidt's successful inculcation of neoliberal bodily disciplines in *New Girl*.

Interestingly, the question of bodily discipline and its relation to aesthetic labour or work is most prevalent in the sitcoms when involved with the "douchebag" character type. Joey and Schmidt, and notably also Barney in *How I Met Your Mother*, all loosely speaking occupy the position of the douchebag more than the other characters in their shows, and all three are regulars at the gym and proud of their bodies. In section 4.3 I argued that the douchebag character type constructs the socioeconomic shift in the position of masculinity mostly using a familiar comedic trope as a funny character with moments of pathos. However, the comedy he represents serves to poke fun at a familiar phenomenon: an insecure, feminised man unsure of his position. The familiarity of this role helps to construct that feminisation as normal and regular, by positioning certain feminine traits exhibited by the househusband and douchebag subject positions as far more reasonable in comparison. Such processes occurred when various participants watched the clips that featured each of these three characters.

Jarvis, for example, in extract 8, in section 6.2, was asked to rank the three main male characters from *Friends* in order of manliness, uses confrontation as a metric, and say that Chandler "shies away" from confrontation, Ross is "somewhere in the middle", and Joey "goes in and tries to be the boss". While he begins to portray this as masculine, Jarvis then quickly says that it does not make him masculine, but makes him "an idiot", thus depicting the behaviour of the gym-going and body-conscious Joey as foolish, and making Chandler and Ross's behaviour much more reasonable and normal. The aim is not to depict Joey as masculine as such, but to make the behaviour of the other two look reasonable in comparison. Similarly, Johnny in extract 5 in section 6.1, argued that Winston was the

most masculine person in the clip with the two competing Schmidt characters because he was “most comfortable” with himself. Once again, the clip successfully depicts Schmidt as an extreme compared to a much more reasonable depiction of masculinity in Winston.

The depiction of a less extreme version of masculinity as more reasonable suggests that while bodily discipline and aesthetic work on the body is key, there is also an important part of the neoliberal masculine subject that is more considered and level-headed. Indeed, it will not have gone amiss here that in arguing that a specific type of gazed-at body is the result of a feminised bodily discipline of the neoliberal subject, somehow nerd and geek culture still manage to fit into the same category. Affective labour, then, perhaps does not fully encompass the capacities required of the neoliberal subject, but also the notion of immaterial labour. At the beginning of my sitcom chapter, I quoted *TBBT*'s Leonard arguing that in the “information age”, the nerd is “the alpha male”, indicating that a form of nerd or geek masculinity is dominant (see also Bell, 2013; Poster, 2013). As I have argued, though, the dominance of nerd and geek masculinities contains within it a semblance of marginalised masculinity that in fact hides a perpetuation of many of the major problems with masculinity in the first place, exemplified by the frequent sexism encoded into *TBBT* discussed in chapter 4 and by other authors (Kendall, 2000; Salter & Blodgett, 2017), and also the nerd and geek masculinities that emerge from the focus group with Iggy and John in section 6.3.

Neoliberalism, I argue, now requires a certain bodily discipline of the masculine subject, in order to produce a labouring subject fully capable of the affective labouring demands of neoliberalism. Much of this is then centred around certain male lifestyles, including hipsters and metrosexuals. However, it is also important to note that there is another aspect to Foucault's notion of discipline, which is the construction of spaces and buildings amenable to the creation of such subjectivities (Foucault, 1991; Lemke, 2001). The hipster, but also the nerd and to an extent the spornosexual, are all in some sense co-constitutive with urban spaces. Indeed, I have touched already upon the particular role of urban space and a division between urban and rural masculinities in my research, and the next section takes this discussion further, exploring the links between masculinities, urban space, the rural, and neoliberalism.

9.3 Masculine geography

As has been discussed a few times, my interviews and focus groups took place in the context of the UK referendum on membership of the European Union in 2016, which accounts for much of the discussion of geography in my focus groups. However, there is also a parallel to be drawn between the geopolitics espoused by my participants, by the sitcoms, and by what might be called the “urban hegemony” of neoliberalism (İçli & Özçelik, 2012), or what Rossi calls the “city-neoliberalism nexus” (Rossi, 2017), where neoliberalism is not only an ideology of the city, but also of the culture of the city.

These are two separate points: first the growth and development of neoliberalism has seen states funnel disproportionate amounts of money into the major cities of the global north, resulting in severely unequal development in those places (İçli & Özçelik, 2012): the cost of living in London is significantly higher than that in the majority of the rest of the country. And, in terms of the culture of the city, the cramped space and atomisation of subjectivity within major cities lends itself to the specific type of individualisation of subjects favoured by neoliberalism (Rossi, 2017: 179).

9.3.1 *Hipsters, geeks, metrosexuals in the city*

The focalisation of neoliberal ideologies within the city is evident in the hangout sitcom: *Friends* and *HIMYM* are both set in New York City, *TBBT* in Pasadena, California, and *New Girl* in Los Angeles. The makeup of each of the main friendship groups consists of what Chidester (2008) calls the “closed circle” of the sitcom of no less than four and no more than seven at any point, and it is frequently noted by the shows that the sole focus on the main characters constructs a reality inside each of the sitcoms in which everything outside of the group, from side characters to bigger events, are rarely developed or of much interest to the writers. At one point in *New Girl*, for example, a joke is made about the guest appearance of a character who had left the show and was therefore no longer a part of the group, Coach, and how he had not appeared at other major life events of the remaining characters, including a wedding. Side characters, though frequently part of storylines, are given short shrift, often undeveloped, and not characters so much as plot devices used to further the development on the main characters. Perhaps the only other character you could argue features in each of the sitcoms is the city itself, from expensive apartments in converted city warehouses to the cafes in which the characters hang out, to the pathetic fallacy of the soul-searching midnight walk in the rain, to the speed at which the characters appear between destinations and also appear so far away from non-urban spaces. The focus on the main characters, then, comes in the context of isolating other people within the city from the main characters on the screen.

Neoliberal masculinity comes up against a more rural, non-neoliberal form at various points throughout the sitcoms; perhaps a general example is the ongoing gag about Sheldon’s early life in *TBBT* (interestingly now turned into its own prequel sitcom, titled *Young Sheldon* (2017-present) and perhaps worthy of its own analysis in terms of masculinity). Now living in Pasadena and having a successful career as a tenured professor of theoretical physics after receiving his first PhD aged 16, Sheldon’s early life was in rural Texas, where he is cast as an outsider for his interest in intellectual pursuits over manual labour. Such jokes contrast a masculinised form of rural manual labour up against a feminised form of intellectual labour by using the contrast between urban and rural as their focal point. Here, nerd/geek lifestyles are implicated in a wider binary of masculine/feminine and urban/rural, in which it is hard to distinguish much difference between them. Yet, as Salter and Blodgett (2017) point

out, Sheldon is not politically progressive – far from it. Sheldon’s geek masculinity, presented as an authentic marginalisation in the story about his origins and his family, actually serves as a smokescreen for the existence of a certain number of regressive attitudes, particularly towards women and towards Penny, as I noted in chapter 4.

Marshall’s rural Pennsylvania upbringing in *HIMYM* is also the topic of frequent jokes; he and his brothers are all comically tall, and as a contrast with the food of New York City, his mum’s signature salad recipe, a joke in itself, features excessive amounts of mayonnaise as well as jellybeans. Marshall is portrayed as soft and weak compared to his brothers, despite himself being rather tall, when he complains about how brothers are always engaging in physical playfighting with him (similar to Schmidt’s rivalry with his cousin in *New Girl*). It is important here that Marshall has brothers and not sisters, as *HIMYM* then posits that rural masculinity is somehow backward and excessively masculine in a way that the city, and soft men like Marshall who are suited to the culture of the city, is not (Brandth & Haugen, 2005; Bye, 2009; Stenbacka, 2011). Indeed, the rejection of rural masculinities by men constructed as soft in some way, leading to the settlement of a new home in the city, is not a plot unique to the sitcoms, but also features prominently in the focus group with Ringo and George in section 7.1.

In section 7.1, beginning on page 122, Ringo and George both cited experiences with parents, as well as friends’ parents, as motivation for performing masculinity in a certain way. George describing his dad as racist and sexist in extract 17 plays into these discursive formations, as discussed, framing George himself in a positive light. However, as I discussed, this framing also features an attempt to perform an ethic of care, and specifically to demonstrate a sensitive understanding of the authentic identity of George’s dad. Authenticity has indeed been a key feature of much of my research, suggesting there is something of a nexus between certain neoliberal masculine lifestyles, and an image of the city that relies on a certain conception of authenticity. Zukin (2011) argues that the gentrification of “authentic” urban spaces that accompanies neoliberalism’s centralisation of the city is a material process that produces significant and important inequalities that contrast with the self-purported neoliberal progressive politics of many of my participants. So, where the attempt to gather and understand an authentic urban experience constructs the hipster identity, such authenticity precludes the possibility already of a progressive politics. Not only does gentrification fetishise urban working-class authenticity, but it also destroys the authenticity of those places by turning them over to the market. Such destruction carries on into other realms than spaces too, into certain hipster practices, and hipster fashion.

In section 6.1, extract 3, David compared his upbringing in Brighton with Kurt’s experience of living in England’s post-industrial north by acquiescing to Kurt’s description of facing pressure to make money as a man growing up in the north, in what I argued seemed like an attempt by David to demonstrate an ethic of care. However, as I then argued, this then contrasted with extract 4 shortly after

in which David constructed a backward masculine other geographically who fulfilled many of the stereotypes of working-class masculinity, especially in relation to the EU referendum. As such, the supposed progressiveness of city masculinities are perhaps shown to be increasingly reliant not just on the rejection of working-class masculinities, but on more rural masculinities too. Despite hipster masculinities seemingly fetishising non-urban masculinities, they also pathologise them as “othered”.

Indeed, research into rural masculinities has examined how rural masculinity is often used as a signifier for a certain masculine virility and toughness; it seems that in the sitcoms, as well as in the focus group, rural masculinity comes to symbolise a similar set of images. Such fetishisation appears on the surface to stem from a good intention, to emulate that which is authentic as opposed to almost parodying it. Indeed, it plays into the disaffected and cool attitude of McGuigan’s neoliberal subject (McGuigan, 2014) by adopting what might be seen as a cool, outsider position. But for Ringo and George, there is a simultaneous disavowal of their non-London upbringings and embrace of the spaces, clothes, and practices of those cultures once inside London.

In terms of place more generally, but also in relation to the city, two particular participants stand out: Jarvis, whose Romanian upbringing and education presented him with a specific view of the relationship between masculinities and geography, and Elliott, whose Chinese-Malaysian background points to a specific relationship with geographical difference. Jarvis’s interview, explored in section 6.2, was most interesting for the fact that he positioned himself as the backward masculine other in the UK for the fact that he is from rural Romania, suggesting the existence of an image of a “global north” that is actually centred around the city – even though Jarvis says there is no real difference between countries, he still states that masculinity where he is in the UK is less “simple” (extract 7) than rural Romania. Nevertheless, he does not live in an urban part of the UK, indicating, to borrow a Lacanian term, that the imaginary he might have of the UK is not congruent with the reality of what exists in the UK. As such, Jarvis’s construction of the difference between the rural and urban masculine suggests that the image of the progressive and positive city masculinity remains largely a discursive fiction, useful for the construction of a neoliberal masculinity in order to sustain, or at least avoid calling into question both capitalist and patriarchal structures.

Elliott, on the other hand, whose interview is explored in section 7.3, finds that the outsider masculinity IR best sums up his relationship with the geography of masculinity, stating that his own sense of masculinity lead him to feel feminised in lots of ways, notably for being “short and Asian” as he put it, suggesting that despite neoliberal masculinity favouring some of the features of femininity often associated with literature on Asian masculinities in the UK (Chua & Fujino, 1999; Dhingra, 2012), such as a nerdiness or smartness with numbers (like others, notably Ringo and George, he then talks about using this experience for himself in London), it retains a level of whiteness that suggests neoliberal masculinities are not as progressive as suggesting they are feminised might seem like on the

surface. Like Ringo and George, too, Elliott grew up neither in London nor in the post-industrial north of England – instead, Elliott grew up in a suburb of London, or more specifically in an old provincial market town. While my examination of masculine geography has so far looked at largely either London or the post-industrial towns of the UK, these old provincial market towns also bear significant hallmarks of the struggle between neoliberal subjectivities and masculinities, perhaps even in a starker way than the other two.

9.3.2 Masculinity and middle(-class) England

Masculinity in the city is not a new area of research, and nor is masculinity in the post-industrial towns of northern England and Wales. However, as has been pointed out by Steven Roberts (2018), there is a middle-ground between the full embrace of neoliberalism in the city and its full rejection in post-industrial areas, where masculinity has been ignored. There is a vast swathe of old provincial market towns largely in the south where the battle between masculinity and neoliberalism is much less explored, and much less resolved, in the sense that the men in these towns have in a lot of ways been left behind by the uneven development of cities under neoliberalism, but on the other hand do not present the city and neoliberalism itself as a particular problem. My focus groups and interviews in the west country were in such a town. As discussed in the methodology in section 3.3.3 (page 58), looking at the differences between conversation analysis and discursive psychology, there is a fine line to be drawn here between taking a specific element of context to account for the full extent of individual utterances, and so the lack of resolution to the problem of neoliberal masculinities in such towns cannot be projected as uniquely determinant of particular phenomena. Nevertheless, there is a clear interaction between the two in much of the discursive analysis I presented in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

In terms of the IRs, it is relevant that the IR most commonly associated with the interviews and focus groups in the southwest was the individualist IR. If I were crudely deterministic, this is not what I would might expect. The ontology of individualism that is associated with neoliberal culture that the individualist IR frequently resembles seems like it should not be so prominent in a place where the dilemmas of neoliberal masculinity seem so unresolved. However, there are a few points to make here: first, I am not making a deterministic argument. In the first place, ideological hegemony is not static, but exists in a state of flux (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), and so the apparent discontinuity between these two phenomena should not be read as a problem. Additionally, neoliberalism is particularly multifaceted, supple, and subject to change and challenge within itself; its elasticity is its strength (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005). Therefore, its different elements, such as individualist ontology of the self and a flexibilised neoliberal subject do not necessarily come as a package, provided neoliberalism's material ends are sustained. Second, it should be noted that IRs are not ontologies or philosophies in themselves (though they might be associated with wider ontological positions), but clusters of strategic

responses to certain situations (Billig et al., 1989; Wetherell, 1998). The individualist IR, I have already noted, is useful for abrogating any responsibility for patriarchy, or rejecting masculinity entirely. In these terms, the individualist IR then allows individual men to deny attachment to any discourses whatsoever, and instead assert an internal essence that makes any discursive contradictions evaporate.

This thesis is less concerned with the status of neoliberal masculinities in such market towns, and more concerned how the conflict between neoliberalism and masculinity present in such places generates utterances and interactions in my focus groups and interviews (indeed, these locations not only do not feature in the sitcoms, but they also do not really have the same history in the USA as they do in England). These towns are not neoliberal in the way that larger cities are, and nor are they forgotten by neoliberalism such as post-industrial towns and cities have been. Hence, the contradictions and problems between neoliberal and masculine subjectivities often produce conflictual and confused responses. The particular reactions in provincial market towns were often explicit in the reactions to the sitcom clips, as the sitcoms all present neoliberalism as almost totally normalised and as such present a potential problem in how to react to them: should the participant reject the normalised neoliberalism of the sitcom, or present as familiar with the progressive politics of neoliberalism. Lou, for example, in section 6.2, extract 9 (page 109), describes *HIMYM* as overly “American” and “corny”, showing disdain for neoliberal assumptions, and framing them as backward, despite then saying that *HIMYM* does well to deconstruct and play with gender norms. Lou struggles to resolve the problems surrounding a certain image of neoliberal masculinity in the sitcom with another, more classical, image of what he understands masculinity to be. In the rejection of ‘American corniness’, Lou recalls campy images of the US that almost feminise it, but at the same time uses Barney as a point of rejection of masculinity. So, for Lou, *HIMYM* presents dilemma in how to respond, and reveals a conflict in the construction of his own masculinity as neither neoliberal nor typically masculine. Indeed, this is apparent as he flits between the advanced masculinity IR and the individualist IR.

The focus group with the service workers in the southwest in section 8.1 is also heavily characterised by conflicts and contradictions: in extract 25, I explored Riley’s confusion between a gender essentialism that pervades traditional views of masculinity and the individualisation of performances of masculinity characteristic of neoliberalism. In extract 26, I dissected what Freddie meant when he said today that men are more focussed on appearance, yet that appearance matters less to masculinity, and in extract 27 I dealt with a conflict between an internal essence of masculinity and whether it is okay to deny that internal essence by adapting to the conditions of the workplace. There is not much that discursively separates these three – all of them approach the problem of how masculinity might be sustained considering the counter-discourses to it that arise from the construction of neoliberal subjectivity, and therefore detail heavy contradiction. For Riley, essentialist masculinities come into conflict with individualist ones; for Freddie, the male body is shown to be both essential and irrelevant to the construction of masculinity; and in extract 27, Marshall’s adaptation to his workspace is both

simultaneously Marshall's choice and is forced upon him. The individualist IR therefore becomes a way of overcoming an ideological dilemma central to the construction of neoliberalism – the introduction of what could be femininity and feminine discourses to the labouring subject.

Something of a geography of masculinity is evident here. Compare the views of this focus group, for example, to the construction of the provincial market towns of the southwest and the east coast as backward and crude by Iggy and John in section 7.2. Both Iggy and John seem at ease in the neoliberal city, and sceptical of the politics of the towns where they grew up, despite showing an awareness at various points throughout their focus group that there might be something unfair or inaccurate about the images they paint of those towns. On the other hand, Kurt's account of the lack of urban redevelopments of neoliberalism in his hometown in extract 3, section 6.1, where he draws on a left-behind narrative that emerged after the European Union referendum in which Brexit has “blown stuff up” in terms of exacerbating cultural divides, demonstrates an explicit problem with neoliberalism and almost a rejection of the neoliberal subject conjured up by the EU. The market towns of the south and southwest present a version of masculinity neither untouched by the affective labours of the neoliberal city, nor fully conquered by it.

To an extent, then, I am exploring much of the same terrain here as literature on postfeminist masculinities. One of the themes Brabon (2007) explores, in particular, is the negotiation of a new socioeconomic position for postfeminist men, in which the promise of remuneration in exchange for manual labour that contributes to the functioning of a capitalist economy is not guaranteed (whether it was ever guaranteed is up for debate, anyway), and so men are forced to reckon with a position in which they experience a subjection from capitalism that withers away some of the material benefits of the patriarchal dividend. But the crux of my argument is that there is a new feminine bodily discipline, and a new flexibility and fluidity to masculinity, as well as a sense of otherness, by which masculinity is somewhat sustained, paradoxically.

Theoretically, this might be described as, in terms of gender relations, a collapse of the subject and object. If men might typically be considered subjects of gender relations, and women the objects (again, a number of theoretical frameworks highlight this distinction, albeit in very different ways, from de Beauvoir (1992) to Mulvey (1975) to Young (2005) to Brownmiller (1984)), then any erosion of the patriarchal dividend arguably sees the collapse of this subject/object relationship into one. Here, the relevance of male femininities begins to appear, as these three things, fluidity of meaning, otherness, and bodily discipline, alter the surface presentation of masculinity. However, there is a problem in this construction of femininity, in that it appears only on the surface of neoliberal masculinity, adopting much of the practices of femininity for the sustenance of masculinity. Here, I therefore describe male femininity as a “hollow femininity”, a version of femininity hollowed out of its power relations,

wrenched from the female body and removed from gender relations, becoming instead a surface change in masculinity in order to adapt to the particular demands of neoliberal subjectivity.

9.4 Hollow femininity

So far in this chapter, I have discussed how the sitcoms, interviews and focus groups constructed masculinities that reject masculinity in the first section, that inculcate feminised forms of labour in the second, and that rely on accentuated differences between men in different geographical locations within the same country in the one just before this. All three of these discussions address the question my fieldwork approached: what are the discourses on masculinity, both competing and consistent, that arise from the sitcoms explored, the focus group and interview data, and how are those discourses resolved and negotiated both in and between each? However, this thesis also has a broader conceptual concern, which has also been discussed, asking how a critical assessment of femininities as an analytical lens might inform an exploration of recent and contemporary forms of masculinity.

Several times throughout the discussion of the three interpretative repertoires, as well as in the analysis of the sitcoms, femininity was made explicitly pertinent by myself and also the sitcoms and participants. However, frequently, when femininity was discussed, the word femininity became a signifier for a nebulous cluster of discourses, practices, and embodiments that never developed a complex sense of what femininities might encompass. *New Girl*, for example, implies on several occasions that Schmidt is feminine because he behaved in a camp manner in response to his phobia of spiders, while it is suggested in *The Big Bang Theory* that Sheldon's relative asexuality marks him as feminine. Meanwhile, Matt thought that the way he looked at his nails might make him feminine; Robert thought his flowery shirts might be feminine; and George thought that his lack of interest in being like the popular boys at school suggested some sort of femininity. These examples are all specific practices, conjuring up something resembling feminine performativity – yet, if they lack one thing, they extract femininity from a network of power relations, from heteropatriarchy through to capitalism. As such, they decontextualise femininity to the point of making it an empty signifier, adaptable to any meaning such that male femininity refers to any conception of masculinity that deviates from the classical capitalist masculine subject. Femininity here is deployed for a specific purpose, of recuperating contemporary masculinity for the present moment by simultaneously wrenching femininity from its context. I refer to this use of femininity as “hollow femininity”.

So, the hollow femininities expressed by male femininities both should and should not be considered forms of femininity. On the one hand, the appearance of modalities of femininity for the purpose of merely recuperating masculinity potentially decontextualises femininity to the point of rendering it something like an empty signifier. Femininity, for all its definitional elusiveness, has a

genealogy that goes beyond marginalisation of otherness and into resistance, and not only in the women's movement, who organised throughout much of the 20th century around the recognition of female, femme, and feminine identities, but also ranging from the gender deviance of gay men during the gay rights movement in the UK and USA in the late 20th century, through to the use of the hijab as an anti-colonial uniform against French colonial forces in the Battle of Algiers. The articulation of otherness, and particularly femininity, as a voice of subversion and progress has a long theoretical history, too, ranging from Cixous's "écriture féminine" (Cixous, 1976) to Spivak asking "can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak, 1988). As such, turning the surface level appearance of various facets of femininities into a recuperative tool for masculinity appears almost an appropriation of the already oppressed, and a watering down of a serious voice of otherness.

9.4.1 Whither male femininity?

Every participant was asked whether they would consider themselves feminine in any way. As I said on page 64, some of the answers provided ample opportunity for analysis, while some were less interesting. In particular, the two bloggers I interviewed, Robert and Elliott, gave interesting answers. In extract 13, in section 6.4 on page 116, I asked Robert if he would describe himself as feminine. His explicit "yeah" was followed by several examples about what femininity is, from getting on better with women, through to other men thinking he might be gay because of his self-declared flamboyance. As my analysis in that section showed, much of this, rather than any substantive rumination on femininity, works instead to distance Robert from other, more masculine men, positioning himself as more advanced in his masculinity. Similarly, Elliott in extract 24 in section 7.3 (page 146) uses the example of being around women as a way of exploring his identification with femininity, where I examined how such an example begins to resemble a performative theory of gender. However, Elliott then changes his mind about this idea several times over the next few minutes, in the end just deciding that the individualist IR will dig him out of his hole, suggesting that femininity here is being used towards an end rather than being an end in itself. Both therefore use the concept of femininity as a blank canvas against which they can prop up various ideas to suit them, Robert to position himself as advanced and Elliott to various ends until he decides that the individualist IR is the best one for him in that specific scenario, rejecting masculinity as a whole and distancing himself from masculinised structures. Femininity here is hollowed out to the point of being almost completely extracted from power relations and from any substantive question, being used as an empty concept for political purposes.

If an idea of femininity is indeed being used for an end, that begs a few questions: first, what end is it being used for? Second, why femininity? And third, would it indicate the existence of a certain type of male femininity? My answer to the first question has been clear throughout: the use of this hollow version of femininity serves the purpose of rejuvenating a neoliberalised masculinity in the face of the

feminisation of the labour market and of the neoliberal subject. Indeed, in extract 12 (page 115), just before extract 13, Robert favourably compared his blogging work to his office job, comparing a more advanced and feminised sociality against a masculinity he constructed as solitary, lonely, and deficient in the labour market. In terms of the second question, then, of why femininity is deemed to be useful, the answer appears to lie in this feminisation of the labour market, requiring new atomised and affective capabilities from the neoliberal subject (R. Gill, 2007; R. Gill & Scharff, 2011). However, this does beg a further question: if femininity has really been hollowed out here, then why is the feminisation of the labour market relevant, and more widely, why use femininity at all? If femininity is stripped of its meaning, then why does the shift from the more (neo)classical masculine subject have to involve the inculcation of anything specific rather than simply an internal shift? If that is the case, then the male femininities produced by neoliberalism are not a complete political dead end in being completely congruous with neoliberalism, but in fact contain real seeds of oppositional and profeminist potential. These questions are also heavily imbricated in the same nexus as the third question I asked at the beginning of this paragraph: if there is something tangible in the femininity of the male neoliberal subject, then it follows that neoliberalism is somehow implicated in the production of a whole taxonomy of male femininities, including hipsterism, metrosexuality and spornosexuality.

It is worth first noting that the feminisation of labour as a concept or description of a certain process is always in danger itself of either essentialising femininity or, like my own argument, hollowing out femininity as to be verging on meaninglessness. Discussions about the feminisation of labour either take on board a certain set of essentialised characteristics of femininity and broadcast them back out, or they identify so many nebulous practices and ideas that are then attached to femininity post hoc such that femininity ceases to have a coherent identifiability, as argued by Morini (2007). As such, exactly what “feminisation of labour” means here is central to the debate. On this, it is perhaps best to consider the concept of the feminisation of labour as less of a description of a reality, but as a critique of neoliberalism. Various competences are attached to the notion of the feminisation of labour within the literature that discusses it, adaptability, reflexivity, flexibility (Coyle, 2005), aesthetic presentation (Pettinger, 2005), and emotional investment (Nickson & Korczynski, 2009). The characteristic that these things share is not that they are somehow transcendently feminine, but that they revolve around various sorts of discipline normally associated more with the feminine body than the masculine body. The feminisation of labour, therefore, is perhaps best seen as a critique of the disciplined worker-subject, and the techniques of discipline therefrom, rather than as an empirical description of observable phenomena.

However, the notion of femininity goes a bit further in my research than discipline alone, as my suggestion is that an element of that feminisation is no longer unique to just discipline, but has emerged more generally into culture to an extent that is recognisable in the everyday, as something called male femininities – including a certain fluidity to the performance of masculinity and a sense of masculine

otherness. To some extent, these issues are related to current debates about a contemporary “gender revolution”, in which young people are argued to be currently redefining their relationship with gender norms, evidenced in recent high visibility of trans, genderfluid, non-binary, and genderqueer identities (see Hines, 2018; Risman, 2018). However, whether cis men performing the self-disciplines of neoliberal subjectivity in the service of recuperating normative masculinities can be considered part of any gender revolution is highly questionable. Here, the specificities of labelling this phenomenon as femininity and not just hybrid or new masculinities or something similar come to light. We identify the fashion consciousness of the metrosexual and the reflexivity of the blogger, or the otherness of the hipster and the emotional investment of the sales assistant, as feminine not at random, but because it is intertextually linked to a set of surrounding discourses. To understand why femininity specifically, and why the feminisation of the neoliberal subject ekes out into neoliberal culture, I want to reconsider three examples: Iggy and John discussing their atypically masculine workspace (as they describe it), Riley’s self-identification as a “romantic” (page 158), and the general relationship between attractiveness and intelligence in *TBBT* (see page 73).

In section 7.2, extract 20 (page 136), Iggy and John describe their workplace as masculine, but “a different kind of masculine”. I examined how this description served to construct masculinity as a subset of programming, thereby placing a higher value on the element of being a programmer rather than being masculine. In doing so, they elevate programmer masculinity above other forms of masculinity, while still retaining a sense of otherness to programmer masculinity, labelling it “a different type”. Similarly, in *TBBT*, there is a juxtaposition between two hierarchies of masculinity: one, framed as outdated and crude, in which physically strong men have the power over physically small or weak men, particularly in the field of dating attractive women. In this hierarchy, naturally, the main characters are not really empowered. However, in the wider and more important hierarchy, the men of *TBBT* are framed explicitly as “alpha male”, even with the contradictions that entails. It is this wider structure in which the nerd men of the information age are elevated to the position of power that is important here. Though both these examples are related to feminised forms of labour (or at least non-manual and affective labours), and inadequacy of the (neo)classical masculine subject for the labours of neoliberalism, they also exalt in and celebrate a sense of otherness within a new form of masculinity. The negative experience of Iggy and John at school – and the same goes for George and Ringo in section 7.1 – are not celebrated by them purely because of the labouring capabilities and aptitudes they might have instilled, but also because they contain within them a kernel of authentic otherness, much like femininity. Neoliberalism’s disaffected politics, and nonchalant coolness elevates and celebrates the experience of the other, which begins to answer the question of why a hollow femininity becomes important to this equation. Any authentic experience of otherness attaches itself to the coolness as well as the caring ethic of the progressive social politics of neoliberalism.

Potentially, there is an interesting shift in the heterosexual contract occurring here, too, as has been proposed by researchers into postfeminist masculinities (Brabon, 2013; Genz & Brabon, 2009). For example, in extract 27 in section 8.1 (page 156), Riley describes himself as a romantic, having written and received love letters with his wife, also drawing a link between romanticism and intelligence; i.e. to be romantic is to be more intelligent. Having a sense of romance, drawing on typical understandings of female heterosexuality, could be read as an attempt to frame Riley as atypically masculine, and it certainly reads that way. Yet, it also reads such that Riley wants to put himself above, in some way, other men, specifically by labelling himself romantic and attaching that romance to intelligence. Femininity of some description here is used, therefore, to convey a superiority.

None of my participants Iggy, John, George, Ringo, Riley, Elliott, Robert, or the writers of *TBBT* are particularly interested in femininity as such as a concept, and certainly not in the way that they deconstruct (or attempt to deconstruct) masculine normativity. Instead, they are interested in femininity perhaps only in terms of what it needs to mean in a particular moment, emptied of any inherent meaning enough to only provide use where it might be attached to other regimes and discourses of power. In this sense, the fluidity of meaning often attached to femininity by psychoanalytically-informed approaches (Cixous, 1976; Moi, 1986) seems to make it appropriately amenable to a definitional slipperiness. Yet, it is not only this, but also femininity's relationship with otherness that can attach itself to the disaffectedness of neoliberal subjectivity, neoliberalism's elevation of a version of authenticity, and the inadequacy of older forms of masculinity for the capabilities of the neoliberal subject. Might it make more sense, therefore, to talk of neoliberal masculinities and not male femininities?

9.4.2 Whither neoliberal masculinity?

Masculinity is always contingent on surrounding contexts, and particularly on the formations of surrounding structures (Beynon, 2002; Connell, 2005b; Gardiner, 2002; Gorman-Murray & Hopkins, 2014). I have already explored the role played by capitalism in the construction of masculinity, and the often-fraught relationship between capitalism and patriarchy (Delphy, 1984; Hearn, 2009). I also explored the development of that relationship, as contemporary forms of capitalism and patriarchy create rifts and shifts in the construction of gender regimes (B. Campbell, 2014; James, 2015; Ortner, 2014). And indeed, what I have examined so far has concerned the relationship between neoliberalism and masculinity. Though I am interested in the possibility of using the category of male femininities to critique and understand masculinity in a neoliberal era, it is also possible that the phenomena I am analysing are merely an update of the category of masculinity for a neoliberal era, or that there is something slightly feminised about neoliberal masculinities. This concern is not just what phrase or concept suits the phenomena and the data better – after all, that does not follow from my epistemology

and methodology. Instead, it is more concerned with the ways in which hollow femininity fleshes out and recuperates masculinity considering the necessary capabilities of the neoliberal labouring subject.

The advanced masculinity IR is most relevant here, as an explicitly updated version of masculinity. The main function of the advanced masculinity IR, as discussed, is to sustain masculinity considering surrounding circumstances. I looked at John and Iggy's joint interview in sections 5.4 and 6.2, for the ways in which they flitted between the advanced masculinity IR and the outsider masculinity IR. The lack of coherence surrounding the use of the two IRs suggests a lack of coherence, even despite the fact that an interpretative repertoire is not itself a coherently used resource in the first place, but instead is used as it becomes useful in the conversation as it unfolds at a particular moment. As stated, the general uses of the three IRs are as follows: the advanced masculinity IR is useful for moments at which masculinity needs to be explicitly sustained; the outsider masculinity IR was used when a participant needed to account for or describe certain micro-relations between individuals; and the individualist IR was used as an end to either reject masculinity as a whole, abrogate the individual from the patriarchal dividend, or both.

It is worth examining Iggy and John's change of usage here. In section 7.2, I examined how the two of them used their workspace to articulate a conception of programmer masculinity that they elevated as superior to other forms of masculinity. In the same interview, which I examined in section 6.3, they use some very similar concepts to position themselves outside a version of masculinity they construct as dominant – but this time, the masculine relationships they construct are not in their current jobs, but involve a temporal relationship between themselves as children, too. John says that he saw the “alpha males at school” and decided “I'm going to try and not be like that”. The addition of temporality changes the outsider element into one of advanced masculinity instead. So, what we see is not just an experience of otherness, but an account of how that otherness became dominant. As such, neoliberal masculinities construct something that looks like otherness, and has the hallmarks of an authentic otherness, but uses it as a means to construct and update masculinity for neoliberalism.

Otherness, though, is not femininity – nor is bodily discipline inherently feminine, nor an ethic of care, nor a fluidity of meaning. However, while neoliberal masculinity has not appeared to dismantle femininity in any way, and indeed also appears actively comfortable within neoliberal discourses, the kernel of authenticity contained within the otherness, the bodily discipline, the ethic of care and the fluid meanings produced by the collision of neoliberalism and masculinity, potentially indicates something of a rupture to patriarchal discourses. Yet, there are two points to make here: while that potential for rupture comes from within the subjection of neoliberal subject, it may not be entirely appropriate to be fully optimistic about male femininities yet. And, second, there is a danger that the hollowness of male femininities does a major disservice to the complexity and history of the notion of femininity itself. Femininity is often seen in the focus groups and sitcoms as an accessory or an

adornment with several negative attachments, rather than an autonomous concept. Yet it would be a mistake to see femininity as weak, as Julia Serano observes: “if you require any evidence that femininity can be more fierce and dangerous than masculinity, all you need to do is ask the average man to hold your handbag or a bouquet of flowers for a minute, and watch how far away he holds it from his body” (Serano, 2007: 19).

9.5 Chapter summary

This chapter drew together four main themes of the findings of my sitcom, focus group, and interview data, examining the theoretical and political implications of the ways in which gender and neoliberalism were negotiated in and between each. In the first section, I examined how rejections of masculinity serve to illustrate the recuperative nature of the femininities that can be read from neoliberal masculinities, looking at the construction of the classed and geographical difference constructed in the backward masculine other. I also examined how the tension between masculinity and otherness was left unresolved. I then looked at the feminisation of labour, mainly at debates surrounding the dominant forms of labour in contemporary capitalism, exploring how notions of affective labour have challenged masculinity, and how neoliberalism itself both sustains and challenges the dominance of men. I then looked the geography of neoliberal masculinities, both in relation to the neoliberal city, as well as the construction of masculinities in the provincial market towns of the UK. Finally, I examined my concept of hollow femininity to critique how femininity is deployed by the recuperative processes that update masculinity for a neoliberal era. In the next chapter, I conclude the thesis by reflecting on this critical concept, looking at some of the wider implications of such a critique, where my contribution fits in to wider research, and how such a critique might be further developed.

10

Conclusion: Neoliberal men

This thesis has examined the intersections between neoliberalism, neoliberal subjectivity, femininity, men, and masculinity. I have explored how capabilities for affective labour and certain modalities of bodily discipline, as well as a paradoxical relationship with otherness and a fluidity of meaning cut across notions of feminine and neoliberal subjectivities, and the ways in which masculinity is reconciled with these feminised facets of neoliberalism. I have found that to resolve these contradictions, men often take up positions of “hollow femininity” in which a surface level performance of various feminine dispositions is readable from certain types of men under neoliberalism. However, hollow femininity is a form of dehistoricised femininity only interested in questions of power insofar as power remains upheld by men and by patriarchal structures.

This concluding chapter reflects critically on the research, looking at its strengths and weaknesses while highlighting the contributions I have sought to make in various intersecting fields. I then suggest some ways this research might be taken further, before concluding.

10.1 Reflecting on the research

Over the next three subsections, I reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of three parts of my thesis: methods, empirical findings, and theoretical conclusions. In doing so, I discuss potential gaps in my research, and outline where I have contributed to contemporary debates in various areas.

10.1.1 Methods – participants, discourse, sitcoms

First, I reflect on my methods, which used multiple locations and two different methodological orthodoxies. To begin with, my sample of participants (see appendix 1) has some limitations. Sixteen

is a limited number, even for discursive analysis, while the diversity of my sample perhaps leaves something to be desired. To begin with, I had only one focus group take place in the north of England, which was in a university and so not necessarily representative of the surrounding areas. An extra focus group with local men (which, it should be stated, I did attempt to organise) would have enhanced the diversity of discursive negotiation and presented a different viewpoint. Additionally, my sample was specified as straight and cis and not diversified beyond geography, meaning that it was mostly white and very middle-class. I argued in section 3.3.2 on page 51 that the lack of diversity is itself worthy of analysis, as the white middle-class nature of the sample gives some indication that male femininities and hollow femininities are products of the recuperation of dominant masculinities rather than anything revolutionary. While this is true, a more diverse sample in terms of class, race, gender identity, and sexuality would most likely produce some different interpretations of the questions I raised, and of the sitcoms, shedding some more light on the relationship between neoliberalism and masculinity.

It is also, perhaps, worth pointing out that this was my first piece of empirical research, and so my first attempt at recruitment and at interviewing. Though I carried out some pilot interviews with friends before I embarked on the research, I believe my lack of experience shows in some of the transcripts of the earlier focus groups and interviews. My interviewing abilities improved as I carried out the fieldwork, but at points early on, there were discussions that could have been explored more in-depth, or lines of questioning that seem to end abruptly. With the experience gained, some of these earlier focus groups may have contained more in-depth discussion.

In terms of the methodology more widely, though the idea of emergent methodology I believe was justified by the results, it arguably leaves something to be desired. Though this is less of a problem for the sitcoms, which I watched back after I had determined my analytic method, having an established analytic method for the interviews and focus groups from the beginning could have pushed them more towards all the topics eventually covered. I still believe my methodology was appropriate in the circumstances, but perhaps some further questions remain around what an alternative methodological approach may have looked like.

Multiple methods were established as the intention from the outset of the research, though it would be imprecise to describe my methods as “mixed methods” – both the cultural analysis and the focus groups and interviews were viewed as linked elements of an analytic whole. My methodological approach here essentially built upon theoretical conceptions of the function and dynamism of discourse. Indeed, this ontology informed the three aspects of the relationship between the sitcoms and focus group/interview transcripts that I outlined earlier – the epistemological differences between their handling of the same discursive formations, the empirical link created by directly linking the two in the focus groups and interviews, and the interpretative difference in my readings and the participants’ readings.

I noted in my methodology chapter that cultural studies approaches tend to give a monopoly of interpretation to the researcher, with research tending to relay the researcher's interpretation. Such an approach was the topic of chapter 4, giving my own reading of how the hangout sitcom recuperates masculinity in a neoliberal era. However, to account for the ways in which culture is read by those with different backgrounds, I explored how the sitcoms were used by participants, contributing to debates around participant autonomy, and researcher's monopolies on interpretation by providing concrete empirical links between discursive negotiation in both mass media culture, and in interaction. Using multimedia in the focus groups provided additional opportunities for the participants to rethink and renegotiate discursive formations by positioning themselves against the characters and storylines they saw on screen. Understanding how participants respond to and interact with culture is not itself new, as the use of photographs and images to trigger responses is a well-established cluster of methods, while it should not be forgotten that focus groups are used in marketing research to test audience responses to movies and television. However, I hope that the specific discursive approach I used could be expanded upon for use in further studies.

On top of this, I argued in my methodology chapter that the sitcom represents a uniquely appropriate location for decoding hegemonic discourse, thanks to its origin as a radio genre in post-war USA that conveniently negotiated contemporaneous discursive conflicts through a clear narrative structure. My deployment of the hangout sitcom as a site of neoliberal discursive conflict intervenes in fields of cultural studies on television and film by suggesting that as a subgenre it serves as an entryway into examining how both neoliberalism and contemporary television construct and deconstruct gender. Studying the sitcom, and even the precise sitcoms looked at here, is again not new, but to conceive of the hangout sitcom as a broadly defined neoliberal subgenre of the sitcom, and then using it to begin an inquiry into neoliberal gender regimes, ties together much of that existing literature. This argument, presented *prima facie*, suggests that given sitcom subgenres are important sites at which hegemonic discursive formations can be decoded – indeed, the hangout sitcom as a neoliberal subgenre could be a thesis in itself, examining the ways in which it encodes not only gender politics, but also politics of race, sex, sexuality, class, and the city.

10.1.2 Empirical findings – sitcom men, disavowal, geography

In chapter 4 I argued that there were three main male subject positions – the postfeminist male singleton, the douchebag, and the househusband – in the hangout sitcoms I analysed, each of which negotiated the conflict between masculinity and neoliberalism in a slightly different way. As I just stated, these three subject positions are worthy of an individual piece of research, but even as part of the thesis, it is a typology that builds on research into representations of masculinity on screen, and particularly feeds into debates around the shifting socioeconomic positions of men (Bridges, 2014; Mac

an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Segal, 2007). Indeed, to an extent, all three of these subject positions construct non-hegemonic forms of masculinity, much as the three interpretative repertoires (IRs) in chapters 6, 7, and 8 do.

That lots of men are eager to disavow some construction of masculinity is not a new finding – authors such as Wetherell and Edley (1999), Egeberg Holmgren (2011) and Goedecke (2018) have produced similar findings. However, where I believe my research offers a new finding is in the typology of disavowal produced. Wetherell and Edley found general methods of disavowal, and research into caring masculinities and hybrid masculinities has offered some interrogations and critiques of the contradictions produced when a man somehow disavows masculinity, while other authors have found disavowals of masculinity relevant to certain intersections. This thesis, on the other hand, has offered a critique of differing methods of disavowal, the specific contradictions they produce, and both the discursive and situational contexts in which they occur.

Indeed, the related discursive contexts of each interpretative repertoire are perhaps most relevant here, linking a lot of previously nebulous literature on masculinities via a critical-discursive analysis of neoliberalism and neoliberal culture. I argued in the introduction to this thesis that one of my main interventions was in tying together a broad range of conceptions about new directions in masculinities, including literature on men in service work (Pettinger, 2005; Coyle, 2005; Nickson & Korczynski, 2009), metrosexuality (Coad, 2009; Hall, 2014), hipsters (Henke, 2013; Gilson, 2016), caring masculinities (Elliott, 2016), and hybrid masculinities (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). My suggestion is that all these phenomena should, at least to some extent, be linked to neoliberalism, and specifically to an ongoing set of contradictions between neoliberal and masculine subjectivities.

Much of this relates to, and I argue is enriched further by, an examination of the ways in which neoliberalism, as well as neoliberal culture and subjectivity are gendered. I have argued that neoliberalism has a tendency towards femininity, through subjective capabilities of reflexivity and bodily discipline, and that such a tendency is at conflict with masculinity. Not only does this contribute some relevant findings to critical studies on men and masculinities, but also to a developing cluster of literature on critical femininities (see Hoskin, 2018), by examining the relationship between femininity and neoliberalism via a study of masculinity. For example, I argued that the neoliberal subject puts forward a performance of an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1984), a modality of what I argue is hollow femininity. Such links have been made with a slightly different tilt through debates on the feminisation of labour, looking at young men adapting to service work – for example, Pettinger (2005) and Coyle (2005). However, this study has put the conflict in a wider discursive setting, examining such adaptive difficulties in a neoliberal setting, via a critique of femininity. I also drew together several rarely connected phenomena through my theorisation of neoliberalism and masculinity, exploring how men's

lifestyles such as hipsterism and metrosexuality, as well as rises in sales of men's cosmetics, and geek and nerd masculinities are related to neoliberal forms of labour, and to femininity.

I have also contributed to debates about the relationship between neoliberalism and the city, about how gentrification intersects with gender, as well as class and race (Zukin, 2011; Rossi, 2016). Urban space and authenticity, and the way these concepts were deployed as vectors of difference, emerged as a key part of the development of my research, demonstrating that city as both a conglomeration of public and private spaces could benefit from a feminist, gender-orientated analysis. For example, I have theorised gentrification's paradoxical relationship with otherness as derived from the same discursive formations as neoliberalism and linked these debates to masculinity's abilities to take on discourses that contradict them. On top of this, I have expanded on and taken up Roberts' (2018) suggestion that sociological research on masculinities in the UK tends to ignore the "missing middle", places that belong neither to post-industrial areas struggling to adapt to changing masculinities nor to London and similar big cities. The southwest town that was the subject of interviews with the service workers and the office workers offered notably individualist disavowals of masculinity, producing a series of conflicting and contradictory images, analysed in section 9.3.2 on page 189.

10.1.3 Theory – neoliberalism, masculinities, femininities

Literature on neoliberalism is plentiful, and right now, perhaps, slightly de rigueur. Flew (2014) argues that it is ubiquitous enough to be categorised as an all-round denunciatory category, while it has spread from academia into public discourse, from journalism to various denunciations from politicians in both the UK and the USA. Indeed, at various points, I considered using less well-established conceptions of contemporary culture and capitalism that have similar implications with less of the baggage, including liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) and late modern capitalism (Jameson, 1984). However, I opted to carry on using neoliberalism for a few reasons. First, the broadness of the concept meant that there was a large amount of literature available for me to locate my research. Second, neoliberal subjectivity, which grew to be a key part of my research, was itself heavily theorised. Third, the linkages between neoliberal capitalism and neoliberal culture have been well researched (for example Brown, 2015; McGuigan, 2013). Additionally, the relationship of neoliberalism with gender, gender discourse and ideology has already been examined at length (for example Gill, 2007).

It is in this area, the intersections between neoliberalism and gender, that my research makes its main critical intervention. Indeed, the intersection between masculinity and neoliberalism is, it would be fair to say, complex and multi-faceted. The idea that "geeks will inherit the earth" (Roeder, 2013) obfuscates the re-entrenchment of misogyny in nerd culture, while the lamentation in some quarters that metrosexual men's flirtations with feminine performances and the hipster's preening attention to his aesthetic represent the death of men ignores the classed and racial intersections that demonstrate the

complicity of both forms of masculinity in oppressive structures. Such complexities indicate that the concept of male femininities itself fails to capture the discursive formations involved in the tension between neoliberalism and masculinity. Not only does it look conveniently neat, but its reliance on (and, potentially, reproduction of) a quite orthodox gender binary perhaps suggests not only a simple inaccuracy in terms of the production of neoliberal masculinities, but also a lack of critical imagination. If gender categories are fluid, changing, and always subject to surrounding contexts, why use the descriptor “femininity” rather than explore the material changes on their own? This is especially the case considering the potential for the use of the concept of femininity to re-entrench certain ideas and concepts about femininity that are potentially not only damaging but also inaccurate. Will the category of hybrid masculinities (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), or caring masculinities (Eisen & Yamashita, 2017; Elliott, 2016; Hrženjak, Humer, & Kuhar, 2006), not suffice?

However, I have stated several times already that “male femininity” is not a descriptor, but a concept of critique, looking at the ways in which neoliberal subjectivity has reconfigured men and masculinity. Using it, I examine particular features of neoliberal masculinities not captured by other, previous concepts. Specifically, I have aimed in this thesis to look at how the neoliberal subjectivation clashes with, and forces changes in, the creation and formation of masculine subjectivities. A thorough examination of femininity here was useful in elucidating certain features of neoliberal subjectivation, notably in forms of affective labour, bodily discipline, a specific form of otherness and a fluidity in meaning. Femininity assists in making some of these concepts clearer, framing neoliberal masculine subjectivities through the prism of the historical subjection of women. So, while male femininity remains fixed, to some extent, to the gender binary, this thesis has aimed to pull apart the complexities that already exist within the gender binary, and examine the ways in which those complexities play out at the intersection between gender and neoliberalism.

Herein is a danger that “male femininities” gives a false impression that neoliberal men, ranging from nerds to hipsters to bloggers to service workers, suffer from a material oppression manifested in a hollow femininity, that stems from the intersection of neoliberalism and masculinities. While I suggest the feminisation of geeks, nerds, hipsters and other forms of neoliberal masculinities aims to devalue and demote certain men, male femininities should not be considered an argument that neoliberalism structurally oppresses men. Neoliberal men can be broadly considered, as the character Leonard Hofstadter put in the quote used on page 67 at the beginning of chapter 4, “alpha males”: men of the dominant or hegemonic type in neoliberalism. Neoliberal men, as they are studied here, are largely white, middle-class, heterosexual, and university educated. Rather, male femininities as a concept should be considered a critique of neoliberalism and masculinity, and of the ways in which the contradictions between the two find some resolution in the adoption of some feminine modalities, in a way that depoliticises femininity.

Therefore, “male femininities” as a critical concept is to some extent an effort to de-essentialise both masculinity and femininity – not to draw on feminine histories in a way that denies them, but to emphasise that those histories are not inevitable, and that gender is radically contingent. Yet, contingency is itself a form of meaning that still is, at points, relatively stable. Even while discursive formations are constantly in flux, they are still recognisable at a given point. By emphasising that these discursive formations are used differently according to surrounding socio-political contexts, I hope to highlight that such stability is, at the very best, fleeting. As such, where conflict and contradiction become evident, as in the very phrasing of male femininities, there is the possibility of conflict destabilising contingency. In other words, there is a potential that even the hollow femininity of male femininities represents the possibility of subversion and destabilisation – not in the performance of male femininities, but in their naming. At the point at which masculinity adopts various aspects of femininity, it risks becoming conceptually unstable, an instability that points towards either a re-intensification of masculine normativity or a semiotic anarchy.

Re-intensification is, to an extent, already going on – arguably coinciding with a crisis in the hegemony of neoliberalism, the growth of the Men’s Rights movement, together with the alt-right, and their various related subgroups, are heavily critical of contemporary masculinities, taking them to be weak and effeminate. The men active in these spaces quite often use hipsters as examples of the weakness of men today, a phenomenon that “male femininities” risks reproducing. Indeed, the idea that hipsters (and others) are materially effeminate men, considering the amount of aesthetic work such lifestyles use, is a common trope across a range of media. Apart from the fact that such beliefs are driven by an anti-feminine misogynist disposition, they also undermine the fact that nothing particularly revolutionary is going on here, other than masculinity being updated in its context, a process that gender discourse is constantly undergoing. Labelling contemporary masculinity feminine, then, serves to disguise the continuing dominance of men, be they hipsters or not.

10.2 Further research

10.2.1 Expanding the sample

Above, I mentioned that my sample of participants could be open to some critique. The research took place not just in the UK, but in England, and in three specific locales. My recruitment was limited to the opportunities that fell before and within several deadlines, and did not seek diversity of sampling beyond geography. This project could be expanded further in these areas. Some additional purposive sampling in terms of class might offer some reformulations of the ways in which authenticity becomes a key marker of neoliberal masculinities, while sexuality might offer an interesting perspective in relation to femininity. The relationship between trans masculinity and neoliberalism could also open new findings on the relationship between neoliberal masculinities and femininity. Meanwhile, a

purposively stratified sample in terms of race, as seen in discussions with participants Kurt in section 6.1 and Elliott in section 7.3, could elucidate a number of these conceptual discussions further, from authenticity through to debates surrounding masculinity and otherness.

Not only this, but there is the potential of expanding this research to include interviews and focus groups with men from other countries. Neoliberalism is certainly a global ideology, but on top of this, the importance of globalisation and transnational cultures on masculinity should not be underestimated. Considering the frames of reference on offer in this thesis, particularly the use of US sitcoms in the focus groups and interviews, developed Anglophone countries in the global north seem like good candidates: not only the US, where the sitcoms come from, but potentially Canada, Australia, or South Africa. However, Retele (2015) argues that masculinities researchers in the global north could do with making their research less intro/intraverted, by which he means to suggest that a transnational perspective on masculinities is important to understand and appreciate the researcher's own reflexivity and location. Here, transnational research indicates the importance of understanding globalised discursive formations as they are negotiated beyond the imperialist Anglophone global north, and not just as a comparative project between nations, but as a dialogue or polylogue that informs a global perspective (Connell, 2005a; Hearn, 2015; Hearn, Blagojević, & Harrison, 2013). Indeed, transnational research is an increasingly important area of study with critical studies on men and masculinities, and one with the potential to particularly elucidate my research considering my focus on neoliberalism and what might perhaps be described as a methodology already semi-transnational in its combination of British men and US sitcoms.

10.2.2 Beyond the sitcom

The four hangout sitcoms I used were key to my thesis, not only enriching the focus group and interview data, but also serving as points of analysis on their own. At the very beginning, starting with my initial research proposal, sitcoms were just one of a myriad of cultural artefacts of interest to me; I also looked into using movies that had relevant characters (see Hansen-Miller and Gill, 2011 on men in the pal-com) as well as some form of social media analysis (see Hakim, 2016). Both could have ultimately enriched the study, but two datasets was more than enough for a single thesis. However, it is worth pointing out that the latter location just mentioned, social media, opens up a number of interesting opportunities. For one, it is perhaps better suited to the previously discussed 'crisis in sociological method', as Savage and Burrows put it, in taking advantage of diverse and expanding technologies. On top of this, it removes some questions about the relationship between researcher and participant, as it presents an opportunity to analyse participant-produced texts that were not created solely for the purpose of research: this is a logistical aspect which modifies some ethical concerns too. And, last, particularly if one were to use a photo-sharing platform such as Instagram, it includes the added bonus

of some visual analysis, which is an opportunity to flesh out some of the discourses surrounding gender performativity, body and aesthetic work, as well as the concept of authenticity discussed in relation to the hipster. As such, some sort of analysis of social media represents an ample opening for some continued research – not only as its own data, but perhaps mirroring my research by using social media to elicit responses from participants.

10.3 Male femininities?

This thesis has examined the ways in which the apparent incompatibilities of the neoliberal and masculine subjects are negotiated and resolved in four US hangout sitcoms, looking at three common male subject positions that attempt to resolve the problem in different ways. Driven by a sense of lack of place, economic and sociocultural insecurities, and a refiguring of heteronormativity, the male characters in US sitcoms are written in ways that re-adapt masculinity to a neoliberal era. I examined how men aged 18-30 in three different locations in England dealt with such conflicts, in a northern town, in London, and in the southwest. Driven often by temporal and geographical difference, I found that most of these men used various methods for disavowing masculinity, through three interpretative repertoires. Some men believed themselves to be somehow masculine, but thought that masculinity had advanced in a somewhat positive direction. Some men thought that they occupied a masculine position, but that such a position was simultaneously outside the masculine norm. Some believed themselves to be above or over gender, such that any masculine or feminine discursive formations were not relevant to them as individuals. In any case, all three appeared reluctant to identify as masculine. Yet, hollow performances of femininity from participants, giving way to an enduring fear of being labelled feminine, point to the main problem with these disavowals of masculinity: masculinities might have substantively changed, but they have only substantively changed for the sake of survival.

Perhaps the hollowness of male femininity might be an inkling of a good thing; if masculinity is changing, which it seems to be on at least some level, then maybe it is best that it does so in this way. Much of this will depend on one's opinion on whether masculinity requires reforming or abolishing. The continuing dominance of men, including its apparent ability to (even if unstably) simultaneously erase much of the history of femininity and take some of its dispositions as recuperative tools, suggests that masculinities require something closer to abolition than to reform.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – List of participants

Focus groups

1. Southwest service workers (shown all three clips):

- *Riley* – 30, white, born and raised in southwest, manager of shop
- *Freddie* – 19, white, born and raised in southwest, works in shop
- *Paul* – 18, white, born and raised in southwest, works in shop

2. Northern university (shown all three clips):

- *Johnny* – 27, white, born in Scotland, now works at a northern university
- *David* – 20, white, born in Brighton, now an arts undergraduate at a northern university
- *Kurt* – 25, black, born in the north, studies postgrad at northern university

3. Hipsters (shown *Friends* and *How I Met Your Mother*):

- *Ringo* – 28, white, born in non-London English city, now in London, setting up a secondhand shop
- *George* – 19, white, born in southwest, now an arts undergraduate in London

4. Office private sector workers (shown *How I Met Your Mother* and *New Girl*):

- *Iggy* – 28, white, born in east coast town, now in London, senior role at tech company
- *John* – 22, white, born in southwest, now in London, middle role at same company

Interviews

5. Finance office:

- *Roy* (shown *How I Met Your Mother*) – 26, white, studied primary school teaching, now works in finance in southwest
- *Matt* (shown *New Girl*) – 21, white, born in east coast town, studied in London, now works in finance in southwest
- *Jarvis* (shown *Friends*) – 29, white, grew up in Romania, where he is from, works in southwest England
- *Lou* (shown *How I Met Your Mother*) – 24, white, born, raised, and works in southwest

6. Bloggers:

- *Elliott* (shown *Friends*) – 25, Chinese-Malaysian heritage, born in London suburb, now has day job in London and spends evenings blogging
- *Robert* (shown *New Girl*) – 25, white, from southern provincial county, now works a day job in London, and blogs on the side

Appendix 2 – Advertising for recruitment

The following 6 adverts were all printed on A4 paper with rip-off strips with my email address on the bottom on the paper. Adverts 1-5 were placed around various men's toilets in several universities and cafés. Advert 6 was used to place in staff rooms of various shops and service providers.

MEN!
Are you feminine?

If you consider yourself to be feminine in any way at all, and are aged 18-30, I am interested in your views. I am carrying out focus groups and interviews to research the changing nature of men and masculinities.

If you are interested, please email me at gregory.wolfman@hud.ac.uk and include the word "femininity" in the topic

Primary researcher: Greg Wolfman

1 – Feminine

MEN!
Do you take pride in your appearance?

Do you follow the latest fashion trends? Do you have a morning beauty ritual with moisturiser, beard oil and hair wax? If you do, and are aged 18-30, I am interested in your views. I am carrying out focus groups and interviews to research the changing nature of men and masculinities.

If you are interested, please email me at gregory.wolfman@hud.ac.uk and include the word "appearance" in the topic

Primary researcher: Greg Wolfman

2 – Appearance

MEN!
Are you a hipster?

Do you have a man bun, an 80s shirt, and a sourdough starter in your fridge? If you do, and are aged 18-30, I am interested in your views. I am carrying out focus groups and interviews to research the changing nature of men and masculinities.

If you are interested, please email me at gregory.wolfman@hud.ac.uk and include the word "hipster" in the topic

Primary researcher: Greg Wolfman

3 – Hipster

MEN!
Are you metrosexual?

Do you work hard on your abs, wear Calvin Kleins and carefully style your hair every morning? If you do, and are aged 18-30, I am interested in your views. I am carrying out focus groups and interviews to research the changing nature of men and masculinities.

If you are interested, please email me at gregory.wolfman@hud.ac.uk and include the word "metrosexual" in the topic

Primary researcher: Greg Wolfman

4 – Metrosexual

MEN!
Do you reject masculine norms?

Do you consider your gender to be non-traditional, constructed, or fluid? If you are aged 18-30, I am interested in your views. I am carrying out focus groups and interviews to research the changing nature of men and masculinities.

If you are interested, please email me at gregory.wolfman@hud.ac.uk and include the word "masculinity" in the topic

Primary researcher: Greg Wolfman

4 – Masculine norms

Seeking male research participants

I am carrying out focus groups and interviews to research the changing nature of men and masculinities, and looking at how jobs for men differ today from the past.

If you are a man who works in retail and customer service, and are aged 18-30, I am interested in your views.

If you are interested, please email me at gregory.wolfman@hud.ac.uk and include the word "work" in the topic.

Primary researcher: Greg Wolfman

5 – Retail staff

The flyer below was used specifically in London, mostly in coffee shops around the areas of Shoreditch, Dalston, and Hackney, known to be “hipster” areas.

University of
HUDDERSFIELD

MEN!



I am a researcher at the University of Huddersfield looking into changes in **men and masculinity** over the past few decades.

If you are willing to take part in a **focus group lasting around 2 hours**, including a free takeaway meal, and **potentially a follow-up interview** afterwards, and feel you fit any of

the following categories, please get in contact:

- You take particular care in your *appearance*
- You act *feminine* in some way
- You use *male cosmetics*
- You have been described as or identify as a *hipster*
- You have been described as or identify as *metrosexual*

Although I support and engage with work and research on LGBTQ identities and experiences, **this research is on heterosexual cis-men only.**



If you fit any of these criteria and would be willing to take part in a focus group, please get in contact:


Main researcher: Greg Wolfman
gregory.wolfman@hud.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr. Tracey Yeadon-Lee



Appendix 3 – Ethics approval

The next six pages contain the consent forms, information sheets and guides for the focus groups and interview participants. The information sheet was sent on first contact, while the guide was distributed at the time of the interview or focus group.


Focus group consent form
The changing nature of men and masculinities in the UK

Researcher: Greg Wolfman

Please read and ensure you fully understand this form before you sign. One copy of this form will be kept by you, the participant, and one by me, the researcher. If you require any further details, feel free to ask, or email me at a later time.

I understand the aims and nature of the research I am taking part in: Y/N

I consent to take part in it: Y/N

I understand I can withdraw from this research at any time up until 1st September 2017, during or after these sessions: Y/N

I understand that the information gathered will be securely stored and only accessible by the researcher: Y/N

I understand my details will not be disclosed to anyone, and pseudonyms will be used in any publications to this effect: Y/N


I understand I may be quoted directly in publications, under a pseudonym: Y/N

I understand the need to treat any personal information learned about other participants as confidential: Y/N

If satisfied with this, please sign, print, and date below:

Participant	Researcher
Name:	Name:
Signed:	Signed:
Dated:	Dated:

Queensgate Huddersfield HD1 3DH Telephone +44 (0) 1484 422280 Fax +44 (0) 1484 516151
 Vice-Chancellor: Professor Rob Quilligan MBA PhD DSc
 An exempt charity and centre of excellence for vocational education and research


The changing nature of men and masculinities in the UK
 Greg Wolfman
 University of Huddersfield
Focus group information sheet

This study aims to uncover the ways in which manhoods and masculinities today differ from those in the past. Revolutions in masculinity seem to occur every year, from the dandy through to glam rock, right up to today's hipsters, new men and metrosexuals, often bound up in a narrative of a crisis in masculinity. The research to which you are contributing aims to understand the nature of these changes and new identities and practices, and the ways that they might (or might not) be friendlier to women and to gender equality. Please note that the conversation today will be recorded and transcribed.

What is a focus group?

A focus group is a discussion among multiple people for the purpose of research. These focus groups will be made up of no more than 5 people, who will have been recruited on the same criteria as you.

Do I have to take part?

You can elect to remove yourself from the process at any time, without questions or reasons. This includes withdrawing now, during the focus group or interview, or even after this. An email can be sent at any time.

What will I need to do?

The focus group will last about 2 hours, and some food and drink will be provided. During the session, you will be asked to watch and reflect on several television clips. I ask that you contribute whatever thoughts you have relating to your own experiences or not. I would ask that you bear in mind these groups are intended to be fully confidential and that you do not share any personal details or information from inside the group with others.

Will my identity be disclosed?

All the research will be published under pseudonyms, and the only person with access to the data will be myself. Quotes from you may be used in the research, as accounted for in the consent forms. I ask that you show a similar consideration for others in the focus group.

What will happen to the information?

I will transcribe the recordings from these sessions, and keep all the documents in a passworded folder on university computers. The information will then be used for my PhD thesis, which will also potentially include presentations at academic conferences and potentially publications in academic journals.

Who can I contact for further information or if I wish to participate?

If you are in any doubt or you have any concerns, please contact main researcher Greg Wolfman at gregory.wolfman@hud.ac.uk or primary supervisor Dr. Tracey Yeardon-Lee at T.Yeadon-Lee@hud.ac.uk.

Queensgate Huddersfield HD1 3DH Telephone +44 (0) 1484 422280 Fax +44 (0) 1484 516151
 Vice-Chancellor: Professor Rob Quilligan MBA PhD DSc
 An exempt charity and centre of excellence for vocational education and research

Male femininities: A critical reading of the subversive potential of new manhoods
Focus group guide

These focus groups are designed to allow the participants to lead the discussion structured around their own experiences and positions. They will follow a "funnel" structure, beginning with general questions about their experiences, allowing them to move on to particularities and similarities among themselves, before introducing potentially provoking clips from film and television to allow for the possibility of a re-evaluation of these discussions. This guide therefore includes general themes rather than a list of questions.

The themes that will prompt these discussions will be:

- Why the participants responded to my advert or agreed to participate.
- What it means to be a man today.
- Whether the participants feel they "live up to" those meanings and practices.
- How they feel the experiences of men might have changed over recent years.
- How their experiences are informed by intersections of race, class and locality.
- How the participants view their positions in terms of feminism and gender equality.
- To what extent they consider themselves feminine.
- To what extent personal feelings about femininity interact with their manhood.
- Whether, and if so how, the film and TV clips deal with their own experiences and with the concept of manhood.

Interview consent form

The changing nature of men and masculinities in the UK

Researcher: Greg Wolfman

Please read and ensure you fully understand this form before you sign. One copy of this form will be kept by you, the participant, and one by me, the researcher. If you require any further details, feel free to ask, or email me at a later time.

I understand the aims and nature of the research I am taking part in: Y/N

I consent to take part in it: Y/N

I understand I can withdraw from this research at any time up until 1st September 2017, during or after these sessions: Y/N

I understand that the information gathered will be securely stored and only accessible by the researcher: Y/N

I understand my details will not be disclosed to anyone, and pseudonyms will be used in any publications to this effect: Y/N

I understand I may be quoted directly in publications, under a pseudonym: Y/N

If satisfied with this, please sign, print, and date below:

Participant	Researcher
Name:	Name:
Signed:	Signed:
Dated:	Dated:

The changing nature of men and masculinities in the UK

Greg Wolfman
University of Huddersfield

Interview information sheet

This study aims to uncover the ways in which masculinities and masculinities today differ from those in the past. Revolutions in masculinity seem to occur every year, from the dandy through to glam rock, right up to today's hipsters, new men and metrosexuals, often bound up in a narrative of a crisis in masculinity. The research to which you are contributing aims to understand the nature of these changes and new identities and practices, and the ways that they might (or might not) be friendlier to women and to gender equality.

Please note that the conversation today will be recorded and transcribed.

Do I have to take part?

You can elect to remove yourself from the process at any time, without questions or reasons. This includes withdrawing now, during the interview, or even after this. An email can be sent at any time.

What will I need to do?

The interview will most likely last one to two hours. I ask that you contribute whatever thoughts you have relating to your own experiences or not.

Will my identity be disclosed?

All the research will be published under pseudonyms, and the only person with access to the data will be myself. Quotes from you may be used in the research, as accounted for in the consent forms.

What will happen to the information?

I will transcribe the recordings from these sessions, and keep all the documents in a passworded folder on university computers. The information will then be used for my PhD thesis, which will also potentially include presentations at academic conferences and potentially publications in academic journals.

Who can I contact for further information or if I wish to participate?

If you are in any doubt or you have any concerns, please contact main researcher Greg Wolfman at gregory.wolfman@hud.ac.uk or primary supervisor Dr Tracey Yeaton-Lee at T.Yeadon-Lee@hud.ac.uk

Male femininities: A critical reading of the subversive potential of new manhoods

Interview guide

These interviews are designed to allow the participants to lead the discussion structured around their own experiences and positions. The participants will have previously been involved on focus groups based around similar issues, which the interviews hope to interrogate further in a more intimate setting. They will all have been introduced to the concept of femininity during the focus groups, allowing expansion on any thoughts they have had since the last time I saw them. These interviews will be semi-structured, and be prompted by several themes and points of discussion.

As these interviews will be taking place after the focus group, the following themes may not be exhaustive, as points of discussion from the focus groups will also be included.

The themes that will prompt these discussions will be:

- How the participants might have reflected on anything brought up at the previous sessions.
- Whether, and if so how, they think of themselves as feminine.
- What it means to be a man today.
- Whether the participants feel they "live up to" those meanings and practices.
- How they feel the experiences of men might have changed over recent years.
- How their experiences are informed by intersections of race, class and locality.
- How the participants view their positions in terms of feminism and gender equality.
- To what extent they consider themselves feminine.
- To what extent personal feelings about femininity interact with their manhood.

Appendix 4 – Focus group and interview design

The following designs were general structures for the focus groups and interviews. For the bloggers, retail workers and office workers, I asked a few extra questions about describing their jobs.

Focus group structure (general)

(This structure applies to all the focus groups apart from the retail one, who will have a few different questions based on their work. The questions are only guidelines, and are not exhaustive. Discussion will be allowed to veer in whatever direction provided it is on men.)

Start with brainstorm (10 mins):

1. Men/manhood
2. Masculinity
3. Gender equality

Move on to direct questions (up to 45 mins):

Is it easy to live up to expectations of manhood/masculinity?

Is appearance important to manhood/masculinity?

Is there a generational difference between you and your parents? If so, what is it?

How do you feel that your upbringing affects your experiences as a man?

Has manhood helped to determine your career at all?

Do you feel that gender equality is good for men or that you benefit from it?

Do you call out sexism if you see it?

Would you describe any aspects of yourself as feminine?

Show clips in this order:

Joey butt double (Friends, 1994, S01E06)

Marshall work gorillas (How I Met Your Mother, 2006, S01E17)

Schmidt vs Schmidt (New Girl, 2012, S02E08)

Discuss clips (45 mins):

Do these clips reflect your experiences at all or do you identify with any characters?

How would you describe Joey's, Marshall's, and Schmidt's manhoods?

Interview structure (bloggers)

Start with brainstorm (3 words each):

1. Men
2. Masculinity
3. Gender

Move on to direct questions (up to 30 mins):

- Is it easy to live up to expectations of manhood/masculinity?
- Is appearance important to manhood/masculinity?
- Have you always lived in London? Geographical differences in masc?
- Has manhood helped to determine your career at all?
- How do you shop for clothes?
- Do you go to the gym?
- Describe your work/average day
- How does blogging work differ to other work you've done?
- Is blogging a gendered community/profession?
- Do you feel that gender equality is good for men or that you benefit from it?
- Would you describe any aspects of yourself as feminine?

SITCOM CLIP

Discuss clip (15 mins):

- Do these clips reflect your experiences at all or do you identify with any characters?
- How would you describe Joey's, Marshall's, or Schmidt's manhoods?
- Are these characters likeable?
- Would you describe them as feminine?
- Has reflection changed any of your views?

Brainstorm (3 words each): 1. Men

2. Femininity

Appendix 5 – Glossary

- Geek* Similar (though not identical) to nerd (below), and not a new concept, the stereotypical geek is booksmart, bespectacled, bad at sport, academically successful and the teacher's pet. The geek has existed for many years, and is not exclusively male, though it may be argued that typical images of the geek conjure up young men rather than women.
- Hipster* Though not exclusively men, the hipster certainly evokes a certain image of a twentysomething man who lives in a certain area of a city, keeps his beard and hair well-trimmed, and enjoys certain niche pursuits such as seeking out the best coffees, cocktails, kombuchas and vintage clothing. Associated in London with areas such as Shoreditch, Hackney, and Dalston, hipsterism is often culturally associated with processes of gentrification as middle-class university graduates move into big cities and conglomerate around specific areas, driving up prices and driving out local people.
- Lumbersexual* Bearing a similar look to the hipster, "lumbersexuality" is not a sexuality, so much as a style or perhaps offshoot of hipsterism that involves the cultivation of a certain look involving chequered plaid shirts, *Levi's* jeans, leather boots, a bushy beard and perhaps a small woolly hat – imitating a stereotypical lumberjack.
- Metrosexual* Coined by journalist Mark Simpson in 1994, "metrosexual" men are fashion-conscious consumers, modifying masculinity by making it about designer clothes, men's cosmetics, and appearances. Embodied perhaps most obviously in the early 2000s by David Beckham's constantly changing style, according to Simpson the archetypal metrosexual wears *Davidoff 'Cool Water'* aftershave, *Paul Smith* jackets, corduroy shirt, chinos, motorcycle boots, and *Calvin Klein* underwear. The metrosexual has been linked to the expansion of markets through the late 1980s and early 1990s.
- Nerd* Similar (though not identical) to geek (above), the nerd combines the booksmarts of the geek with a particular set of cultural interests, notably fantasy and sci-fi genres of books, movies, and TV, as well as an interest in both comics and gaming. In popular culture, the nerd has perhaps had something of a renaissance in recent years, with *The Big Bang Theory* a key part of this renaissance, as well phenomena like the mainstreaming of comic book movies.
- New man* Emerging in the 1980s, the new man, according to the dictionary, "rejects sexist attitudes and the traditional male role, esp. in the context of domestic responsibilities and childcare, and who is (or is held to be) caring, sensitive, and non-aggressive". A

response to shifting socioeconomic conditions, the new man was arguably the precursor to the metrosexual, though its novelty, even at the time of its inception, is questionable.

Spornosexual Like metrosexual (above), “spornosexuality” was coined by journalist Mark Simpson. In an article in 2014, Simpson declared “the metrosexual is dead – long live the spornosexual”, arguing that the metrosexual has been replaced by a similar concept much more focussed on a gaze on the nude male body. Literally derived from the word “porn”, and much more image-based (particularly considering social media), Simpson argues that several male athletes, such as David Beckham and Cristiano Ronaldo, most strongly represent the spornosexual.

Appendix 6 – Transcription notation key

- (.) A full stop inside brackets denotes a short pause, a notable pause but of no significant length.
- (0.2) A number inside brackets denotes a timed pause.
- [] Square brackets denote a point where overlapping speech occurs.
- >< Arrows surrounding talk like these show that the pace of the speech has quickened.
- <> Arrows in this direction show that the pace of the speech has slowed down.
- () Space between brackets denotes that the words spoken here were too unclear to transcribe.
- (()) Where double brackets appear with a description inserted denotes some contextual information where no symbol of representation was available.
- U When a word or part of a word is underlines it denotes a raise in volume or emphasis.
- ↑ An upward arrow denotes a rise in intonation.
- ↓ A downward arrow denotes a drop in intonation.
- A horizontal arrow denotes a sentence of interest.
- CAP** Capital letters denote that something was said loudly or even shouted.
- (h) A bracketed 'h' indicates that there was laughter within the talk.
- = The equal sign represents latched speech or continuation of talk.
- :: Colons represent elongated speech, a stretched sound.
- ° Degree sign indicates quiet speech.
- ~ The tilde is used to represent technological difficulties in online interviews such as lag or cutting out.