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Title:

**Multiple readings: the interventionary deployment of
essentialism within a feminist poststructural framework**

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Abstract

Through a description of the methodology informing a study into the potency of boys' peer culture in shaping dominant masculinities, this paper describes the strategic and interventionary deployment of essentialist theories of 'identity' construction within an anti-essentialist framework. Through a feminist poststructural engagement with multiple narrative positions (Prain 1997; Lather 1992) or readings the study's methodology embraced the essentialist theory of group socialisation as useful in organising the study's data and providing a framework to begin analysis and interpretation. Additionally, this unified lens was effective in foregrounding what seemed to be a fixed line of power unifying the boys' dominant and collective masculinities. The anti-essentialist or feminist poststructural reading, on the other hand, exposed the seeming unity of these dominant understandings as multifaceted, contradictory and unstable. Rather than conceiving of the essentialist reading as a foundational premise within the objectivist/relativist binary from which other positions might be 'objectively' judged (Cherryholmes 1988), however, the study's feminist poststructural methodology deployed essentialism within Derrida's construction of *difference* (in Adams St. Pierre 2000) In this regard, the essentialist reading was positioned as one among many contextual, partial and historically contingent truths.

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Essentialist and anti-essentialist theories of identity construction

Essentialist understandings of identity construction have their genesis in the modernist discourses of humanism. Over hundreds of years the humanist imperative has been to organise the disorder and incoherence of society into 'rational' order and regularity. In attempting to construct and maintain this order and regularity humanism has subsumed difference under identity through a concern with defining the essence of categories and things "to get at that single, unique factor that enables one to identify something or someone and group it with others of its kind in various structures, thus producing, and even enforcing, order out of randomness, accident, and chaos" (Adams St. Pierre 2000: 481). In so doing, humanism has, through language, constructed categories, binaries and hierarchies that privilege uniformity and similitude over difference and minority (Foucault in Adams St. Pierre 2000). These "...totalising narratives are explanations which attempt to transcend human difference such as race, class, gender, and culture" (Meacham & Buendia 1999: 510). Humanism has thus produced a multitude of value-laden 'truths' and bounded domains of knowledge that define and preserve our daily existence (Peters 1996). The 'truths' of humanism have so shaped the structure of society that they seem to reflect the natural and inherent order of things (Foucault in Adams St. Pierre 2000). We take them for granted - most of us don't see them as ordering and regulating our daily lives, much less as value-laden and contestable because they have become our own truths. These truths "envelop us every moment and have become 'natural'" (Adams St. Pierre 2000: 478):

Humanism is the air we breathe, the language we speak, the shape of the homes we live in, the relations we are able to have with others, the politics we practice, the map that locates us on the earth, the futures we can imagine, the limits of our pleasures. Humanism is everywhere, overwhelming in its totality; and, since it is so 'natural,' it is difficult to watch it work (2000: 478).

Undergirding this imperative for order and regularity lies the privileging of the rational within the humanist construction of the rational/irrational binary rooted in the beliefs that:

...reason and its science philosophy can provide an objective, reliable and universal foundation of knowledge; that knowledge acquired from the right use of reason will be 'true'; that by grounding claims to authority in reason, the conflicts between truth, knowledge and power can be overcome; and that freedom consists of obedience to laws that conform to the necessary results of the right use of reason (Flax 1990: 41-42).

Within this quest for an objective, reliable and universal foundation of knowledge underpinned by the 'right' use of reason and rationality humanists construct the self as a unified, stable and autonomous entity (Flax 1990). In this regard, as Peters (1996) explains, the sole standard of rationality, that purportedly underpins all knowledge claims, irrespective of time and place, is the unified transcendent human. Within this view of the self as unified and stable, language practices and discourse, which are positioned as reflecting an innate, intrinsic order, are somehow detached from the rational self (Adams St. Pierre 2000; Peters 1996). The understanding behind this is a theorising that categories and things have an intrinsic essence - thus language is seen as somehow transparent because there is a direct and fixed correspondence between linguistic symbol "...and the object or tangible experience to which the sign refers" (Derrida in Meacham & Buendia 1999: 512). The desire here, as Adams St. Pierre (2000: 486) notes is to remove reason from the "...realm of human activity (so that it) remains untainted... by the disorder, chaos and irrationality of daily existence."

The anti-essentialist tenets of postmodernism and poststructuralism were generated as a response to the totalising narratives and grand truths of humanism. Poststructural thought positions the humanist quest for an objective, reliable and universal foundation of knowledge as impossible - the process highly dubious and questionable. Through poststructural lenses a universal foundation of knowledge is impossible because knowledge is seen as never absolute, transcendental or outside time but always complex, multi-faceted, historically located and value-laden. The reason and rationality of knowledge are seen as constructed through dynamic and non-innocent socio-political language practices that are neither fixed nor unified and thus are inextricably woven into the disorder and supposed 'irrationality' of daily existence. As Adams St. Pierre (2000: 483) explains:

...language does not simply point to preexisting things and ideas but rather helps to construct them, and by extension, the world as we know it. In other words, we word the world.

Poststructuralism thus responds to humanist tenets concerning the direct correspondence between language or linguistic symbol "...and the object or tangible experience to which the sign refers" with Derrida's suggestion that the "sign does not refer to a singular object but to possibilities amidst 'a system of differences'" (in Meacham & Buendia 1999: 512). As Meacham and Buendia (1999: 512) further clarify, "that which the sign refers to is not perceived directly, but in relation to other signs which differ from it." Indeed, poststructuralism places this direct correspondence - the humanist naming of essence or identity under erasure (Derrida in Davies 1993) through illuminating the failure of the boundaries and categories constructed by language and theorising that "the subject does

not exist ahead of or outside language but is a dynamic, unstable effect of language/discourse and cultural practice ... In fact any 'coherence of identity (has been) imagined in order to disavow and supplement the failure of identity'" (Clough in Adams St. Pierre 2000: 502).

Once we begin to shift our understanding and consider that language is not transparent, that the thing itself always escapes, that absence rather than presence and difference rather than identity produce the world, then the fault line of humanism's structure becomes apparent. (Adams St. Pierre 2000: 484)

In constructing meaning from difference rather than identity, poststructuralists point to multiple instead of singular interpretive possibilities (Payne 1993) and are suspicious of the humanist imperative to 'pin down' the essence of categories and things in order to construct a 'rational' and coherent society. Poststructuralists view this process as rewarding identity and punishing difference (Adams St. Pierre 2000) and as fixing meaning in a far from objective and reliable manner. In this regard, poststructuralism questions the apparently intrinsic and historically fixed social order of humanism by identifying the grand truths which fabricate particular categories, binaries and hierarchies and exposing them as non-innocent, political constructs "...of knowledge, truth, rationality, and subjectivity that humanism put forward centuries ago to make sense of a world very different from the one we live in today, one that (many poststructuralists) now believe requires different inscriptions" (Adam St. Pierre 2000: 477).

Poststructural socio-political assertions which illuminate plurality and difference within a theorising of the subject as fluid, precarious and dynamic, oppose and aim to destabilise and subvert identity as a ground of political theorising and activism because identity politics are seen as reducing the subject to an irreducible and unitary essence to the ends of assimilating narrow interest-group ideals and perspectives (Seidman 1993). The positing of an identity, thus, is viewed as an act which works to exclude and repress difference through normalising and disciplinary socio-political forces. This signification is seen as marking the beginnings of conflict, domination and hierarchy. Poststructuralists reject a logic of identity as boundary-defining and necessarily producing of a hierarchical order. Explained within Derridean theorising, identity is understood as metaphysical and purchased through the construction of binary categories which serve to exclude, repress or repudiate the Other (Fuss in Seidman 1993).

The superior term (within the binary) belongs to presence and the logos; the inferior serves to define its status and mark a fall ... the first term in a binary thus indicates presence and the power of presence, consciousness, rationality, and so forth (Spivak in Adams St Pierre 2000: 482).

The identification of subordinated subjects within these metaphysical binaries is thus seen as reinforcing and confirming the centrality of dominant and repressive codes. With this in mind, poststructuralism proposes an anti-identity politic as a means of deconstructing and subverting the notion of a unitary subject to the ends of exploring alternative social and political possibilities (Seidman 1993).

The concepts of subject position and subjectivity within poststructuralist thought signify a critical shift from humanist conceptions of identity. While within a humanist perspective 'identity' is conceptualised as being essentially stable and semi-fixed, for poststructuralists, an individual's subjectivity is conceptualised as being "constantly achieved through relations with others (both real and imagined) which are themselves made possible through discourse" (Davies 1993: 10). This theory provides ways of understanding how an individual

can take up or reject a number of different subject positions within a myriad of different discourses and contexts. It also allows an understanding of how, through discourse, an individual may be positioned or subjectified in restrictive or limiting ways by others. Identity or subjectivity is thus theorised to occur through individuals locating themselves, or being located by others, within social practice and discourse. This process constitutes a dynamic and multifaceted process poststructuralists term 'subjectification' in place of the static humanist term 'identity formation'. In this sense the individual is seen as an active agent within the social world rather than an object to be shaped "according to the dominant position of the time" (Lowe 1998: 207).

Within this understanding of identity or subjectification as constructed through discourse, poststructural theory has provided a framework from which to examine socially structured relations of power in the production of subjectivities (our conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions) (Hollway 1984). The poststructuralist practice of deconstruction has allowed essentialist conceptualisations of identity as binary opposites (e.g. male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) to be disrupted as taken-for-granted normalities by investigating the ways in which these binaries are held in place. Through an examination of power and the production of meaning and subjectivity through language and discourse, human realities can be seen as a construction - a cultural product (Sarup 1988). Thus, the ways in which our realities are constructed within hierarchies of power can be explored and deconstructed to expose the ways in which particular groups are oppressed and marginalised (Kamler, Maclean, Reid & Simpson 1994). Within poststructural theorising the deconstruction and reinscribing of power is enabled because power is defined as a human relation enacted within fluid, dynamic and unstable language practices and discourse (Weedon 1997). Analysis within this paradigm centres upon examining: how we are spoken and written into existence by ourselves and others through constructed and constructing language practices and discourse; and how we might generatively reconstruct alternative ways of being which are neither restrictive nor limiting. Thus, the theory moves beyond thinking of identity or subjectivity in terms of unities and allows conceptualisations to explore pluralities and diversities (Scott in Lowe 1998).

The study

My recent doctoral studies (Keddie 2001) explored the peer group understandings of five male friends between the ages of six and eight years and sought to examine the ways in which the group's social dynamics interacted to define, regulate and maintain dominant and collective understandings of masculinities. Data were primarily gathered organically through my informal peer group discussions with the boys over a six-month period. These discussions were centred upon exploring the boys' collective thoughts, emotions and values and concerned particular areas of interest to the group. Specifically, the study sought to examine peer culture in relation to: how dominant masculinities were understood and practised; how these dominant understandings were shaped, regulated and maintained within the group; and, how these dominant understandings were disrupted and contested within the group.

The study illuminated the potency of peer culture in shaping and regulating the boys' understandings of themselves and others. Within this culture strong essentialist and hierarchical values were imported to support a range of gender(ed) and sexual dualisms. Underpinned by constructions of 'femininity' as the negative 'other', dominant masculinities were embodied, cultivated and championed through physical dominance, physical risk, aggression and violence. The following describes how the study interpreted the boys' understandings of masculinities: firstly, through the unifying lenses of essentialism, and secondly, through the complex and multi-faceted lenses of feminist poststructuralism.

The study's essentialist lens

Judith Rich Harris' (1998) insights into peer culture were particularly meaningful in providing an 'essential' or unified understanding of the dynamics and potency of peer group relations in shaping behaviour. As with many such theories of socialisation (underpinned by humanist tenets), her work can be criticised as over-simplifying and unifying through "obscuring our recognition of the complex and contradictory ways in which we are constantly constituting ourselves in the social world" (Davies in Lowe 1998: 206). Within the context of deploying this theory in a strategic and interventionary manner, however, a number of key ideas within Harris' theory of group socialisation were integrated within the study's methodological framework as useful tools for analysing and interpreting the boys' peer group understandings. This essentialist reading crystallised the potency of peer culture in shaping the boys' understandings of masculinities, providing a crucial beginning point from which to displace the seemingly fixed line of power unifying the boys' collective 'identity(ies)'.

Group Socialisation Theory

'Groupness'

Harris' theory of group socialisation is underpinned by an understanding that children's behaviours, perceptions, language and culture are primarily shaped through their identification with a peer group. Group socialisation theory posits self-categorisation and 'groupness' as a child's central means of identity construction. This process of self-

categorisation is conceptualised as children 'seeking out' and identifying with "a group of others like themselves" (1998: 285) with membership to a particular category or groupness informing, shaping and governing behaviour. The theory positions children as actively engaged in this process of peer group identification - they don't want to be different, "oddness is not considered a virtue in the peer group" (1998: 341). Group socialisation theory thus positions children as willingly conforming to their peer group's norms - well aware of the expectations and ramifications of behaviour specific and appropriate to their social category. Within her theory of groupness Harris contends that peer group behaviour is situational and usually appropriate to the norms of the particular group. She asserts that "when groupness is salient (individuals) see themselves as members of whichever group is in the spotlight at the moment. When groupness is not salient, (individuals) see themselves as unique" (1998: 177).

Theorising the dynamics within the peer group

'Attention Structure' and 'Leadership'

Group socialisation theory illuminates the importance of comparison in children learning about themselves. Through comparing themselves and being compared with others in their social category, the theory submits, children develop an understanding about what kind of people they are. Harris contends that positions varying in status within a peer group are assigned or acquired through within-group comparison, differentiation and competition and are critical in shaping an individual's self-concept. Within the social context of peer culture, comparison to those holding high status, the leaders, informs behaviour and understandings because, as Harris asserts, children 'want most of all to be like the kids who have high status in their peer group' (1998: 245). Within-group relations, she proposes, centre on the group's leadership and 'attention structure': to whom does the group pay attention?

Characteristics of leadership and their importance in shaping peer behaviour are significant aspects of Harris' theory. She asserts that the leaders of children's peer groups - those

positioned "at the top of the 'attention ladder'" (1998: 245) - are usually the oldest or most mature members and are positioned thus through possessing such characteristics as "force of personality, imaginativeness, intelligence, athletic ability, sense of humor, and a pleasing appearance..." (1998: 267). These leaders, the theory argues, are afforded many privileges and can impact on the group's norms: attitudes, ideals and behaviours; and the group's membership: who is in and who is out. Moreover, the leaders of high status peer groups can also impact on how others (non-members) behave.

Theorising the dynamics between peer groups

'Group Contrast Effects' and 'Intergroup Hostility'

Within the framework of group socialisation theory, differentiation within a peer group is said to weaken when other peer groups are present. Self-categorisations are thus seen to shift from *me* to *us*. In this regard, when another group is present, comparison, differentiation and competition between groups becomes apparent. Harris describes the differentiation between groups as 'group contrast effects'. While the commonalities of the group, her theory posits, are exaggerated by the influences of group members, the group also works to contrast with, and mark difference from, other groups. This sort of self-identification with, and salience of, groupness "makes people like their own group best" (1998: 242). In this sense, the group often works to recognise, value and exaggerate the commonalities of their group and de-value or distance themselves from the commonalities of other groups. Harris proposes that these group contrast effects tend to create difference or make existing differences between groups widen, commonly resulting in an 'us versus them' mentality manifest in intergroup hostility, particularly noticeable between boys and girls of middle childhood.

Group contrast effects act like a wedge. They force themselves into any little crack between two groups - any difference between them - and make it wider. Such effects have their origin in the deep-rooted tendency to be loyal to one's own group. I am one of us, not one of them. I don't want to be like (yuck) them. (Harris 1998: 242-243)

Group socialisation theory's unified conceptualisations of 'groupness', 'attention structure', 'leadership', 'group contrast effects' and 'intergroup hostility' were drawn on within the study's essentialist reading of the boys' peer group behaviour. These simplified understandings of group behaviour were particularly useful in organising the study's data and providing a framework to begin analysis and interpretation. Specifically Harris' essentialist concepts helped me to identify the dominant understandings of masculinities within the group and foreground the subjects' seemingly immutable taken-for-granted binary truths. Harris' conceptualisations of leadership and attention structure or hierarchy provided me with the means to pin-point how these understandings seemed to be shaped, regulated and maintained within the group. In this regard, and consistent with Spivak's (1993: 130), comment concerning any act of analysis, I drew on "unified terms to get started."

The study's feminist poststructural lens

The study's methodological framework was strongly underpinned by the tenets of feminist poststructural theory. Immersion within this perspective directed the research focus to the relations between the language, power, subjectivity and social organisation (Weedon 1997) of the boys' peer group. The study drew on feminist readings and interpretations of the poststructural concepts of subjectification through language and discourse. The study's central focus was thus concerned with foregrounding how social power, embedded in the language and discourse of the boys' peer group, was exercised in the (re)constitution of the group's gender(ed) subjectivities. This lens made visible the ways through which the

dominant practices and understandings of a boys' peer group shaped and regulated its subjectivities: the boys' conscious and unconscious thoughts, emotions and desires, their sense of themselves and the ways through which they understand themselves in relation to the world (Weedon 1997).

As a feminist researcher, the theoretical principles underpinning poststructuralism were personally significant because of their potential to be politically generative. Specifically, these principles offered a way of exposing taken-for-granted ways of seeing and enabled oppressive and restrictive subjectivities to be re-thought and re-worked to explore alternatives to dominant and dominating ways of being. Particularly important in this regard was the poststructural principle referring to the discursive constitution and (re)production of an individual's subjectivities through language and social practice, and the belief that subjectivities and meaning are never fixed and unitary but fluid and precarious - discursively (re)constituted each time we think or speak (Weedon 1997). Thus, femininity and masculinity are viewed as culturally endorsed and socially inscribed constructs which are located within a particular point in time. Ways of being male and female are, in this sense, constantly constructed and endorsed through everyday discourse (Alloway 1995). In this regard, participation within, and subjectification through, discourse is seen as shaping and gendering individual behaviour with dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity defining and sanctioning the constitution of 'normality' and deviance (Gee in Grieshaber 1998). Against this backdrop, the poststructural dynamic view of the subject offered a way of conceiving 'gendered' subjectivities as amenable to change through the reconstruction and use of alternative language and discursive processes.

The political significance of decentring the subject and abandoning the belief in essential subjectivity is that it opens up subjectivity to change. In making our subjectivity the product of the society and culture within which we live, feminist poststructuralism insists that forms of subjectivity are produced historically and change with shifts in the wide range of discursive fields which constitute them. (Weedon 1987: 33)

Feminist poststructuralism provided a number of theoretical lenses that facilitated the interpretation of masculinities as discursive categories (re)produced through historically and culturally specific language practices. The specific language practices and collective or dominant discourses of the boys' peer group, which might be seen as limiting and restricting their understandings of themselves and others, could be understood as discursively produced through the social interactions of the group, rather than inherent or fixed and unchangeable. The theory offered an explanation of how these boys' dominant understandings and practices were (re)produced through a focus on the way power was dispersed within the group. Through analysing the dynamics of the boys' peer group interactions, particularly the relationship between power and the production of meaning within the group, strategies and areas for change were identified in relation to exploring opportunities for resistance to, and disruption of, dominating and restrictive masculinities (Weedon 1997).

This theoretical perspective enabled a conceptualisation of the peer group as an organiser of social power and constitutor of knowledge, truth and reality. The dynamics and interactions of the peer group and the ways in which power was organised and distributed within it were seen as (re)constituting the boys' dominant understandings of masculinities specific to this context. The organisation of social power within the group was also seen as critical in limiting the authority and power of marginalised discourses (Brown 1994). In this regard, some ways of being were seen as "more possible than ... others" (Davies in Mac Naughton 1998: 160). These dominant discourses were thus taken as shaped by the exercise of power and shaping of peer group interactions, working to govern the boys'

behaviour, and condition and limit their understandings of masculinity (Mac Naughton 1998). Indeed, compliance with these dominant discourses were seen as critical in maintaining status within the group and avoiding exclusion. Notwithstanding, while language as discourse was seen as forceful in shaping and regulating the boys' peer group subjectivities, it was also conceptualised as an important site of political struggle and thus, constantly open to challenge and redefinition. Challenge, or resistance to language as discourse was thus seen as crucial "in the production of alternative forms of knowledge, or where such alternatives already exist, of winning individuals over to these discourses and gradually increasing their social power" (Weedon 1987: 111).

To these ends, the theory offered transformative possibilities because it questioned and challenged the taken-for-granted humanist truths underlying socially inscribed gendered power relations seeking to disrupt and expose their inequitable nature. Through undermining and rendering fragile the dominant and gendered understandings of masculinities within the boys' peer group "discursive spaces from which the individual can resist dominant subject positions" (Weedon 1987: 111) were revealed. Thus feminist poststructural analysis allowed for a radical re-thinking of genderedness, opening unbounded possibilities for how social relations of gender might be transformed (Weedon 1997).

Using the essential reading of the boys' peer group behaviour as a useful starting point, my analysis then turned to a feminist poststructural response - an illumination of plurality and difference within a positioning of the subject as dynamic and fluid. This reading allowed a complex and detailed analysis of the power relations and socio-political dynamics within the group. This level of analysis placed the boys' apparent 'groupness', constructed through the seemingly fixed power of leadership, hierarchy, differentiation and intergroup hostility, under erasure and exposed the group's dominant truths as contextual, partial, multi-faceted and highly unstable. Conceptualising the peer group's discourses within feminist poststructural lenses as a response to the essentialist reading of group socialisation theory enabled a foregrounding of multiple points of disruption, conflict and contestation. These points of disruption provided generative possibilities and clues for how dominating and restrictive discourses of masculinities might be deconstructed and reconstructed.

Multiple readings: the study's strategic deployment of essentialism within its feminist poststructural framework

The study's methodological framework strategically deployed an essentialist reading of peer culture within a poststructural engagement with multiple narrative positions (Prain 1997; Lather 1992). Consistent with Spivak (1993) the study's essentialist lens can be seen as making sense of the boys' peer group understandings through the application of a kind of linear reasoning. This reductionism provided a simplified illumination of the dominant gendered truths which shaped and governed the boys' collective identities. The reductionism of group socialisation theory was, in this sense, deployed as one possible way to crystallise the limited and limiting nature of the socio-political dynamics within the boys' peer group.

The poststructural lens, on the other hand illuminated the limits of this reading through: revealing the impossibility of coherence and unity (Davies in Francis 1999); resisting the totality and convention of this inscription and way of knowing; and attempting to open and extend dialogue and questioning in the exploration of alternative ways of being (Prain 1997; Lather 1992). This proliferation of meaning responded to the reductionism of group socialisation theory by acknowledging and investigating multiple perspectives within the group's understandings of masculinities. This provided a politically generative beginning point in relation to identifying the junctures or fractures within the group's dominant discourses where the boys' gendered understandings were to either be renewed and strengthened or disrupted and challenged (Butler 1990). In this regard, and

drawing on Spivak (1992: 803), the study's methodology sought to "...act in the fractures of identities in struggle" to disrupt and challenge the taken-for-granted masculinities of dominant peer culture.

Rather than discarding the reason and linearity of Harris' theory of group socialisation, then, the study positioned this reading as useful (Spivak 1993) in: organising the study's data; locating and naming the group's grand narratives (Adams St. Pierre 2000); and providing a point of departure (a crucial point from which to respond through feminist poststructural lenses).

Adams St. Pierre (2000: 479) makes a significant point here when she explains that "poststructuralism cannot escape humanism since, as a response to humanism, it must always be implicated in the problematic it addresses." In analysing and interpreting the study's data thus, the essentialist reading can be seen as constructing its own failure through "...setting up boundaries, limits, and grids of regularity and normalcy." The poststructural lens can be seen as making intelligible and thereby contestable these grids of regularity and normalcy and "...refusing humanism" by "finding points of exit from its ubiquitous dominance" (Adams St. Pierre 2000: 479). Against this backdrop the totalising or essentialising of the group enabled an explanation of difference to be possible (Francis 1999). The study's methodology thus engaged with "...the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics" (Derrida in Adams St. Pierre 2000: 506). To these ends the essentialist and hierarchical values of the boys' peer group which supported a range of gendered and sexual dualisms were exposed as one narrative among many other possible narratives.

The poststructural presupposition of, and strategic deferral to, essence and its deployment of "essentialism against itself ... in its determination to displace essence" (Fuss 1989: 13) has placed this methodology under attack by many critics who accuse it of being relativistic within the relativist/objectivist binary (Adams St. Pierre 2000a). In this regard, poststructuralism is criticised as being inherently contradictory because, on the one hand, it positions as impossible the objectivist humanist tenets which essentialise and unify, but on the other hand, relates or defers to these foundations in order to reject and displace them. In one sense, as Fuss (1989: 5) points out, "essentialism (can be seen as) subtending the very idea of constructionism" (or anti-essentialism) and as "essential to social constructionism" (or anti-essentialism). Indeed, it is Fuss' contention that "we can never truly get beyond essentialism" (1989: 13). In terms of a poststructural response to the totalising narratives of humanism this may be true, but, as Cherryholmes (1988) points out, the relativist/objectivist binary only exists within the structuralism of humanism where there are universal foundations from which other positions might be objectively judged. Within this frame of understanding "no alternative between objectivism and relativism" is offered (Adams St. Pierre 2000a: 25). For poststructuralists this binary does not exist, therefore, the theory cannot be relativistic because it does not subscribe to the notion of foundational truth(s). Within poststructural theorising thus the issue is not one of relativism but one of difference (Derrida in Cherryholmes 1988). Against this backdrop, one can see that truth, defined in poststructural terms is fundamentally different to how it is defined in structural or humanist terms. Cherryholmes (1988: 185) explains:

Relativism is an issue for structuralists because they propose structures that set standards. Relativism is an issue if a foundational structure exists ... a Derridean might argue, however, that the issue is one of difference, where meanings are dispersed and deferred. If dispersion and deferral are the order of the day, what is relative under structuralism is difference under deconstruction. If there is a foundation, there is something to be relative to;

but if there is no foundation, there is no structure against which other positions might be 'objectively' judged.

In dispute of the assumptions that produce the objectivist/relativist binary (Adam St. Pierre 2000a) the study's feminist poststructural framework positioned its essentialist reading of peer culture as only one (albeit dominant) truth among many contextual, partial and historically contingent truths. In this regard, the essentialist reading was not positioned as a foundational premise within the objectivist/relativist binary from which other positions might be objectively judged (Cherryholmes 1988). Rather this reading was positioned as a dominant narrative with multiple alternative interpretive possibilities and meanings with the foregrounding of these alternatives made possible through a reading informed by difference rather than relativism (Meacham & Buendia 1999).

Along similar lines, the study's methodology discarded the humanist construction of the rational/irrational binary. Within this metaphysical understanding there would seem little alternative to positioning the study's essentialist lens as 'rational' and the study's feminist poststructural lens as 'irrational'. And within a study politically and methodologically informed by feminist poststructural theory - this would mean a privileging of the irrational. As Adams St. Pierre (2000: 487) notes: "The proliferation of reason certainly does not mean that we either discard it or privilege the irrational, since both of those alternatives maintain the rational irrational binary." The study's discarding of this binary was critical in not only foregrounding the limits to particular modes of rationality, but also in proliferating multiple ways of seeing rationality and irrationality, for example, the rational within the seemingly irrational and the irrational in the seemingly rational. However, as Mouffe (1988: 37) clarifies, "affirming that one cannot provide an ultimate rational foundation for any given system of values does not imply that one considers all views to be equal." Rejecting this binary (and the obligatory privileging of rationality or irrationality) then did not mean I abandoned or did not privilege my interpretive truth of the boys' dominant peer culture. As Foucault (in Adams St. Pierre 2000a: 25) explains: "postmodernism (or poststructuralism) does not imply that one does not discriminate among multiple truths, that 'anything goes". The study's feminist perspective necessarily discriminated amongst the multiple possible truths within the boys' dominant peer culture, and in this sense, the truths of (poststructural) feminism were privileged, but critically, truth was defined within this paradigm as complex, multiple and contextual rather than simplified, unitary and fixed.

Reflective Notes

The study's methodology, drawing on Rutter and Smith (in Fitzclarence 2000), sought to integrate rather than disregard the work of other disciplines in seeking to understand, interpret and re-present the dominant peer culture of a group of young males. The study attempted to do this in a strategic and generative way. In this sense, Harris' essentialist reading of peer culture, namely her unified understandings of groupness, attention structure, leadership, 'group contrast effects' and 'intergroup hostility' within her theory of group socialisation were deployed in organising the study's data and providing a useful framework from which to begin analysis and interpretation. These unified terms were also useful in crystallising the potency of peer culture in shaping the boys' behaviour in relation to foregrounding the seemingly fixed line of power unifying the boys' collective identities.

Within the study's feminist poststructural methodology however, it was critical to define and explain the strategic deployment of this essentialist lens since these two theoretical perspectives are nearly always seen as diametrically opposed. In doing so, the study's methodology firstly drew on a poststructural engagement with multiple readings, and in this sense positioned its essentialist reading of peer culture as only one (albeit dominant) reading, amongst a myriad possible alternative readings. Secondly, in rejecting the charge of

poststructural relativism the study also rejected positioning its unified reading of peer culture as a foundational premise from which other truths are judged (Cherryholmes 1988). Thus, within a poststructural framework, which disputes the existence of foundations the issue for the study's methodology was not one of relativism but one of difference. This definition and explanation of the study's essentialist lens within a poststructural engagement with multiple narrative positions or readings allowed 'essence' to be deployed in a way that exposed its fragility. Positioning this lens as only one possible and non-foundational reading within a feminist poststructural proliferation of meaning and perspectives illuminated the partiality and contingency of this way of seeing and enabled these metaphysical understandings of identity to be analysed, deconstructed and written out of existence.

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