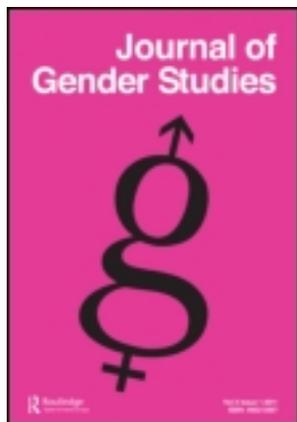


This article was downloaded by: [41.185.166.9]

On: 29 July 2011, At: 07:54

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Gender Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjgs20>

Connell's theory of masculinity - its origins and influences on the study of gender

Nikki Wedgwood ^a

^a Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Available online: 14 Dec 2009

To cite this article: Nikki Wedgwood (2009): Connell's theory of masculinity - its origins and influences on the study of gender , Journal of Gender Studies, 18:4, 329-339

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589230903260001>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Connell's theory of masculinity – its origins and influences on the study of gender¹

Nikki Wedgwood*

Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

(Received 11 December 2007; final version received 21 April 2009)

The Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell's theory of masculinity is the most influential theory in the field of men and masculinities. Along with its enormous impact on the field of gender studies, it has also been taken up across a wide range of other disciplines. Connell's book *Masculinities*, originally published in 1995, has been translated into five different languages and since it was first published its influence has increased with an English second edition being published in 2005. A crucial part of the enduring appeal of Connell's theory is that it provides a critical feminist analysis of historically specific masculinities whilst at the same time acknowledging the varying degrees to which individual men play in its reproduction. Yet, as I suggest here, three key elements of Connell's theory of masculinity have been largely neglected by other scholars. These are: the crucial influence of psychoanalysis and subsequent use of the life history case study method; the importance of non-hegemonic forms of masculinity; and the concept of cathexis. Because this article weaves parts of Connell's own life history into the development of the theory, it is based on a variety of sources, including two interviews with Connell.

Keywords: gender; masculinities theory; Connell; life history; psychoanalysis; cathexis

Introduction

The Australian sociologist Raewyn² Connell's theory of masculinity is the most influential theory in the field of men and masculinities (Messerschmidt 2000, Gläser 2004). In 2003 Connell's book *Masculinities* was voted one of the 10 'most influential books in Australian sociology' by the Australian Sociological Association. Its influence is even greater in other countries, being cited over 1300 times in 246 different international journals across 110 fields varying from sociology, women's studies and education to public administration, forestry and clinical neurology. With its greatest impact on the field of gender studies, it has been most cited in the journals *Men and Masculinities*, *Sex Roles*, *Gender and Education* and *Gender and Society*. The book has also been translated into Italian (1996), German (1999), Swedish (1999), Spanish (2003) and Chinese (2004), with a Japanese translation under way. Moreover, in the 14 years since *Masculinities* was first published its influence has increased, with much higher citation rates in the last seven years (944) than in the first seven years (397), with an English second edition being published in 2005.

*Email: n.wedgwood@usyd.edu.au

A crucial part of its enduring appeal across a wide range of disciplines is that it provides a critical feminist analysis of historically specific masculinities whilst at the same time acknowledging the varying degrees to which individual men play in the reproduction of dominant forms of masculinity, thus overcoming the social determinism of sex-role theory. Yet, as I suggest here, three key elements of Connell's theory of masculinities have been either largely neglected or underdeveloped by other scholars. These are: the crucial influence of psychoanalysis and subsequent use of the life history case study method; the importance of non-hegemonic forms of masculinity; and cathexis as one of Connell's four dimensions of gender relations (Connell 2002a).

This article, which weaves parts of Connell's own life history into the development of the theory, is based on a variety of sources. These include: a two-hour interview with Connell conducted in March 2005 for the chapter of a German book on intellectual genealogies (Wedgwood 2005); a previous interview conducted in September 2004 on the influence of Connell's work on practice as well as theory (Wedgwood 2004); Connell's curriculum vitae; three semi-autobiographical articles (Connell 1991, 1997, 2004); Web of Science citation statistics collected in April 2009; and my own knowledge and analysis of Connell's work.

Origins of the theory

Influence of early research projects about class

Connell's first publication on gender resulted from involvement as a researcher on a large-scale quantitative survey of the teenage population of Sydney, which led to a sex-differences analysis (Connell 1974). However, gender did not become an explicit research interest until the 1980s. Connell's main focus during the 1970s was on class structure in Australian politics, culture and history (Connell 1977, Connell and Irving 1980). In the late 1970s, questions of educational inequality were very much on the Australian political agenda. This, along with a dissatisfaction with the theories of social reproduction that dominated Left accounts of inequality in education at the time (Connell 2004, p. 18), led Connell to conceive a research project based on close-focus research in education. The study was based on semi-structured interviews with 100 14–15 year olds, their parents, and a sample of their teachers. This became a pivotal research project for Connell in several ways.

By focusing on parents' educational histories as well as those of their children, it became the forerunner to Connell's life history research. It also led to Connell writing explicitly about gender at a time when there was a lot of debate about feminism in the Left generally, as well as a lot of debate within feminism. Though the project's original focus was on class differences in educational outcomes, it later extended to gender because, in the process of interviewing male and female students, their mothers and fathers, and their male and female teachers, gender issues became evident. Yet when asked if it would be too simple to say that her interest in gender grew out of her interest in class, Connell agreed:

RC: It would be too simple to say that. It would certainly be true to say that the way I worked on gender was structured by the way I worked on class. So I saw gender as a structure or a system of social inequality, with its own logic and its own internal complexities. That was my approach to understanding gender and that had been my approach to understanding class. But I never adopted the approach that simply translated class into gender theory, which read off gender as 'sex class' and just translated Marx into gender.

The project's findings on gender were written up in a booklet for teachers entitled *Ockers³ and disco-maniacs: sex, gender and secondary schooling* (Kessler *et al.* 1982).

Connell thinks of this as ‘about the best piece of research I’ve done, partly because of the wonderful cooperation in the research team and between the researchers and the readers – the reports were written in a highly interactive way’. Indeed, before being published, *Ockers and disco-maniacs* had been workshopped with teachers from two Australian states. This project also resulted in the publication of *Making the difference* (Connell *et al.* 1982) and *Teachers’ work* (Connell 1985), both very influential books in education; but it was in the modest booklet *Ockers and disco-maniacs*, produced locally by Sydney’s Inner City Education Centre, that Connell first used the phrase *hegemonic masculinity*. The concept was later refined but in this instance it was used to refer to particular kinds of behaviour and ways of being which are made culturally dominant and come to be seen as the pattern of masculinity in general (Kessler *et al.* 1982, p. 10).

Impact of feminism

The secondary education project was not the only reason gender became a very active research interest for Connell. Connell’s thinking about gender was also influenced by more personal factors: ‘I’ve never felt, personally, very comfortable with conventional masculinities. I’ve always identified strongly with women’ (Wedgwood 2005). This comment was later to become very poignant.

Another strong influence was Pam Benton, Connell’s wife, who at the time was involved in feminist projects like setting up a women’s health centre. Connell was also in contact with other feminists through work (Connell 1997, p. 7, 2004, p. 18) and being very active in setting up university courses on gender. For instance, in 1975, as a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Flinders University, Connell helped set up one of the first sociological courses on gender in Australia. When Connell became the foundation Professor of Sociology at Macquarie in the following year, the department set up a stream of courses on sexuality and gender from undergraduate to doctoral level, putting Connell on the frontline of gender politics:

The irony of a male head of department pursuing a feminist agenda was not lost on my fellow-patriarchs in the professoriate, nor on my colleagues in the department, nor on the students. For the most part, the situation was a source of energy; I felt supported, and I was able to support. But there were built-in tensions ... I was assigned to teach a course that centred on feminist theories of patriarchy ... at a time a separatist current was strengthening in Australian feminism ... The department at that time made regular staff–student reviews of each course after it had run. We sat in a dark downstairs room, and for the two meetings and several hours we spent reviewing my course, the place felt like an abattoir ... the memory is very painful ... I felt for the first time under factional attack, and it seemed as if in the final analysis I was being carved up for being the wrong gender. (Connell 1997, p. 6)

There was, however, a more productive side-effect of the development of radical feminism at this time. The various splits that soon began appearing within feminism triggered some feminist academics to begin to theorise patriarchy and gender. This included Connell, who in 1983, published the book *Which way is up?* (Connell 1983b) which ‘tried to link class analysis, gender analysis, psychoanalysis, cultural critique, and mainstream sociology’ (Connell 2004, p. 16). Connell describes *Which way is up?* as an attempt to overcome the tendency of structuralism to postulate closed systems. Though the book did not propound an alternative ‘system’, it did open up a range of questions about, for instance, masculinity and the large-scale dynamics of gender relations which Connell notes ‘have been fruitful for me ever since’ (Connell 2004, p. 17). For instance, it included a chapter on men’s bodies that explored masculine embodiment as an important link between the construction of masculinity and the social power structure of patriarchy.

This was the seed for the conceptualisation of embodiment that later became one of the key elements of Connell's theory of masculinity. In fact, many of the ideas contained in the group of essays in *Which way is up?* evolved and were later synthesised into a fully-fledged theoretical model of gender in the book *Gender and power* (Connell 1987), the development of which has been described extensively elsewhere (Connell 2004). The theory expounded in *Gender and power* – itself an influential publication – was later to underpin the theory developed in *Masculinities*.

A new sociology of masculinity is born

In the meantime, inspired both by feminist-socialist debates on how to theorise power and oppression as well as the empirical evidence of the secondary education research, Connell applied for and got a grant to study gender theory. This project resulted in the publication of the seminal paper 'Toward a new sociology of masculinity', heralding a new era in studying men (Carrigan *et al.* 1985).

The paper was highly influential in turning the sociological spotlight onto men, the other half of the gender relations equation. This was a crucial development in gender theory, given that '[m]asculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition' (Connell 1995, p. 44). Moreover, unlike the men's liberation writings of the 1970s, Carrigan, Connell and Lee's approach to studying masculinity was distinctly feminist. Undoubtedly, this was in no small way due to the fact that two of the authors, Carrigan and Lee, were gay liberation activists and theorists and the other author, Connell, was a transsexual (though undeclared at the time) with extensive knowledge of feminist thought.

Most importantly, 'Toward a new sociology of masculinity' overcame the social determinism of sex-role theory, which had dominated sociological research on men since the 1950s (Wedgwood and Connell 2004). Indeed, Carrigan *et al.* stressed that the domination of women is not an inevitable practice of all men and advocated the study of historically specific masculinities rather than studying men as a homogenous group. Male domination, they argued, is a dynamic system constantly reproduced and re-constituted through gender relations under changing conditions, including resistance by subordinate groups (Carrigan *et al.* 1985, p. 598). Thus they had taken the concept *hegemonic masculinity* originally used in *Ockers and disco-maniacs* in 1982 and refined it. It was now a culturally exalted form at the top of a hierarchy of masculinities. The most radical and enlightening element of their new approach to studying men was their focus on the psychodynamics of gender, which they insisted are inseparable from the social relations that invest and construct masculinity. Foreshadowing Connell's focus on the body in *Masculinities*, they also stressed that men's bodies be made visible '[n]ot as a "base", but as an *object of practice*' (Carrigan *et al.* 1985, p. 595).

In a strange twist of fate, the paper, which was to become the prototype of Connell's seminal book *Masculinities*, was originally submitted to an Australasian journal which wanted a shorter version. It was then submitted to, and accepted by, an international journal – an ironic outcome, given that being published outside Australia certainly would have increased the extent of its impact on the field of gender studies.

Having written the paper, Connell, 'being a good empiricist, thought "Where's the evidence?"' (Wedgwood 2005). Thus it was that in the late 1980s Connell designed a study to elicit empirical evidence on the construction of masculinities which later formed the empirical basis for the book *Masculinities*. Highlighting the hegemony of conservative gender politics, the study – funded by Australia's national research funding body – was

criticised by conservative politicians (before any findings were published) as a conspicuous waste of public funds (Connell 1995, p. 92).

Paradoxically, once the life history material on Australian men had been collected, Connell became very unwilling to write a book about masculinity because of the burgeoning, in the early 1990s, of the genre of 'Books About Men'. These were written by pop psychologists who not only constituted masculinity as an unchanging essence but, picking up on the backlash against feminism, portrayed men as damaged or as in need of restoring. Connell was disconcerted by and very unwilling to contribute to this way of thinking.

Significant elements of Connell's theory of masculinity

When it was eventually published, the book *Masculinities* brought together the ideas, theories, experiences and understandings Connell had been accumulating and refining over nearly three decades of researching, teaching, reading, writing and thinking about class, gender, psychology and sociological theory. Like its forerunner, 'Toward a new sociology of masculinity', the book critically analysed male domination without condemning all men in the process. It also maintained the theoretical structure developed in *Gender and power*, in particular the gender model made up of three structures (later four), namely: *labour* – the sexual division of labour, *power* – the overall subordination of women and dominance of men, and *cathexis* – the practices that shape and realise desire (Connell 1995, p. 74). More recently Connell added a fourth structure – *symbolisation* (Connell 2002a). As Connell explained in an interview with the author:

RC: *Masculinities* pretty much follows the conceptual framework of *Gender and power*. It has probably a stronger historical flavour, is less involved in setting out the categories and more involved in showing how patterns of gender relations actually work and change.

Psychoanalysis and the life history case study method

Central to the grounding of the theory Connell develops in *Masculinities* and the deep insights into gender relations and gender construction is the use of life history case studies informed by psychoanalysis. There were two main influences on Connell's decision to use life history case studies for this empirical project. One was an interest in the relationships between generations, which was piqued by interviews with parents as well as students about their experiences of school in the secondary education project. The other was Connell's enduring interest in psychology and, in particular, the dynamic unconscious.

Connell first began reading Freud as a teenager and later as an undergraduate majoring in psychology. Ideas about development from Freud and Piaget were among the influences that led to Connell's doctoral research on the political consciousness of Australian children and teenagers (1966–1969). Entitled *The child's construction of politics*, this was part of an attempt to understand conservative dominance in Australia (Connell 1971). This solid grounding in psychology would later have a major influence on Connell's gender research and theories, along with an enduring interest in connections between psychoanalysis, social structure and social process. Unlike most social theorists, Connell has always seen psychoanalysis as a therapy, and therefore as case-based, rather than just an abstract form of theory. As Connell explains:

RC: It has always seemed to me that the key stuff in Freud is actually his cases. So I read the cases very carefully again and that also drove me to use life histories. If you look

closely at *Masculinities*, especially the chapter about the Green men [environmentalists], you'll see a very distinct idea of a dialectic of development, derived from psychoanalysis. Especially it comes from existential psychoanalysis, i.e. Freud as read through Sartre. I read Sartre's *Being and nothingness* and *Critique of dialectical reason* and found them very helpful. This has turned out to be a stunningly unfashionable way of reading Freud in an era influenced by Foucault and Lacan!

In the essay 'Dr Freud and the course of history' (originally published in 1977), Connell had already developed an argument that the tools of psychoanalysis, especially the concept of repression, can be used to illuminate how the adult personality is formed by pressures to conform with society, principally by the way in which such pressures are experienced by the young child in the family context (Connell 1983a, p. 9). This, Connell stressed, is an historical process that 'operates simultaneously at the macro-social and the individual level, in which human personalities and their troubles, as well as collective social achievements, are integrally produced' (Connell 1983a, p. 10). Connell's interpretation of Freud, which was significantly influenced by the Frankfurt School, especially Marcuse and Fromm, provided the theoretical and methodological foundation of Connell's approach to studying gender (Connell 1983a, 1994). In particular, Freud's hypotheses that masculine and feminine currents coexist in both men and women and that adult sexuality and gender are not fixed by nature but constructed through a long and conflict-ridden process (Connell 1995, p. 9). This process, Connell argued, can be illuminated through the clinical method – the psychoanalytic case study of the person – and, when done correctly, teases out the layers of emotion which coexist in each person and contradict each other. This approach to studying the person is not individualistic, for it uncovers the relationships that 'constitute the person, the prohibitions and possibilities that emerge in that most extraordinary and complex of social processes, the raising of one generation of humans by another' (Connell 1994, pp. 33–34).

The life history case studies in *Masculinities* explicitly link the minds and bodies of the men in the study to broad social structures like gender and class. In doing so, those being studied remain visible as real, living people with their own personalities and trajectories. At the same time the social structures that shape each person to varying degrees remain explicitly historical, dynamic structures, subject to change and resistance, as well as to being reproduced or recuperated.

The life history case studies also enabled Connell to fine-tune the theory of embodiment from the earlier book *Which way is up?* and, in the process, overcome the recurring problem of other theories of the body based either on biological or sociological determinism or an unsatisfactory compromise between the two. Based on the premise that bodies are both objects *and* agents of practice, the case studies in *Masculinities* reveal how the relationship between the body and the social is two-way and simultaneous and how practice itself forms and is formed by the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined (Connell 1995, p. 61). Thus, powerful social structures remain visible but, in contrast to Foucauldian theory, so too do flesh-and-blood bodies. Unlike Foucault's bodies, Connell's bodies are not always docile, they are not blank pages on which cultural messages are written but are 'addressed by social process and drawn into history, without ceasing to be bodies. They do not turn into symbols, signs or positions in discourse' (Connell 1995, p. 64). Thus, they neither stand outside of nor prior to history but are open to change through social processes. Because Connell's theoretical approach to embodiment grows out of life history research it is informed by practice and this is what keeps Connell's bodies alive and anchored in their own worlds/historical contexts. It thus takes into account the many different ways in which people are embodied, with a particular

focus on gender but not to the exclusion of race, class, age, sexuality, ethnicity, disability or other factors.

Despite the life history method being one of the keys to Connell's theoretical insights into the complexities and contradictions of masculinity construction, only a small percentage of the many books, chapters and articles published on masculinities over the past two decades have been based on life history research (such as Messerschmidt 2000, Taga 2003). Part of the reason for this is likely to be that the life history method is time-consuming and there is ever-increasing pressure within academia these days to produce a large volume of publications. Researchers may also have missed the significance of the close connection between the method, theorising and findings in Connell's work. This is not to dismiss or undermine studies of masculinity that do not use the life history case method but rather to lament the fact that some of the most potent elements of Connell's theory have been overlooked and under-utilised.

A hegemonic concept

In contrast, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been over-utilised, or rather, overemphasised. More specifically, it is sometimes misunderstood by other researchers as being reproduced unproblematically and inevitably. Though most research use of the concept is neither reified nor essentialist (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), where this does occur it results merely in a new form of sociological determinism. This is ironic given that Connell's new approach to studying men grew out of a critique of the sociological determinism of previous gender theories. Subsequently, attention is deflected from the gender order's cracks and fissures as potential sites of resistance and subversion – a prime focus of Connell's analysis. This is probably due, at least in part, to dominant forms of masculinity being the most prominent and the most desirable for many feminists to critically analyse. Though it is important to understand how a system of oppression is reproduced by 'studying up' those in the dominant group, there is little hope of ever undermining the current gender order without also understanding its contradictions and weaknesses.

As Connell has noted, not all of the many uses of the concept have been consistent (Connell 2002b, p. 91). While some empirical studies of masculinity do explore non-hegemonic forms of masculinities in relation to hegemonic forms (Frosh *et al.* 2002, Wedgwood 2003), others do not. Hegemonic masculinity is sometimes used as a free-floating concept, in contrast to Connell's original concept, which is firmly anchored at the top of a hierarchy of *historically specific* masculinities, including subordinate, complicit and marginalised masculinities. This focus on the gender relations among men 'is necessary to keep the analysis dynamic, to prevent the acknowledgement of multiple masculinities collapsing into a character typology' (Connell 1995, p. 76). Indeed, the research method and design in *Masculinities* were devised specifically to study non-hegemonic, as much as hegemonic, masculinities. This was a conscious attempt to add to our understanding, not just of the ways in which the male-dominated gender order is continually reproduced but, more importantly, of the ways in which it is undermined and the ways in which more egalitarian masculinities can be constructed. To this end, the interviewees were specifically selected on the basis that they were men 'for whom the construction or integration of masculinity was under pressure' (Connell 1995, p. 90).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is clearly the most popular and influential element of Connell's theory of masculinity, yet it has also attracted the most criticism.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have written a detailed account of the concept, its development, influence and major criticisms. They defend the underlying concept of masculinity but suggest a reformulation of the concept in four areas. These are: (i) a more complex model of gender hierarchy, emphasising the agency of women; (ii) explicit recognition of the geography of masculinities, emphasising the interplay among local, regional and global levels; (iii) a more specific treatment of embodiment in contexts of privilege and power; and (iv) a stronger emphasis on the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity, recognising internal contradictions and the possibilities of movement toward gender democracy.

Cathexis

Conversely, probably the most overlooked and underappreciated element of Connell's theory of masculinity is the third structure of gender relations – *cathexis*. Using the concept of *cathexis* (in Freud's German, *libidinöse Besetzung*), Connell defines sexual desire 'as emotional energy attached to an object' (Connell 1995, p. 74). In short, because the relationship between the body and the social is two-way and simultaneous, 'the social relations of gender are experienced in the body (as sexual arousals and turn-offs, as muscular tensions and posture, as comfort and discomfort) and are themselves constituted in bodily action (in sexuality, in sport, in labour, etc.)' (Connell 1995, p. 231). An excellent illustration of this can be found in the chapter on the life histories of the gay men in *Masculinities*:

As an adult he can express his desire, facetiously but effectively: 'A big muscly man who I feel I can cuddle up to, and I love being nurtured'. The choice of an object here is defined through a contradictory gender imagery ('muscly'/'nurtured'), and this contradiction is not abstract but embodied ... The social process here cannot be captured by notions of 'homosexual identity' or a 'homosexual role'. As in the heterosexual cases discussed in Chapter 2, both sexual practice and sexual imagery concern gendered bodies. What happens is the giving and receiving of bodily pleasures. The social process is conducted mainly through touch. Yet it is unquestionably a *social* process, an interpersonal practice governed by the large-scale structure of gender ... Gay men are no freer to invent new objects of desire any more than heterosexual men are. Their desire is structured by the existing gender order. Adam Singer cathects not a male body but a masculine body doing feminine things. (Connell 1995, pp. 150–160)

The life history case studies of the gay men in Connell's study reveal how their sexualities emerged from many-sided negotiations in multiple arenas, including emotional relations in the home and sexual marketplace; economic and workplace relations; authority relations and friendships (Connell 1995, p. 16). In other words, sexual desire is socially constructed (along with gender) through a long and conflict-ridden process. Yet, as Connell points out, sexual desire is so often seen as natural that it is commonly excluded from social theory (Connell 1995, p. 74). This may be one reason why so few scholars have focused on cathexis in exploring the reproduction of gender power relations (see Wedgwood [2008] for a rare exception). This neglect by feminists of the social construction of sexual desire is regrettable because many aspects of the gender order, in particular the gendered division of labour and sexual double-standards, are reproduced daily on a large scale within heterosexual marriages and relationships. A better understanding of why people are sexually attracted to some people and not others, for instance, why some women are physically attracted to men who treat them badly is neglected, even in the field of sexualities, but is undoubtedly a crucial feminist issue (Holland *et al.* 1998, Wedgwood 2008).

Conclusions

In an essay originally published in 1977, Connell argued that a recent revival of Freud's work had 'not yet fully realised the strength of Freud's analysis as a basis of a theory of oppression' (Connell 1983a, p. 4). In this article I make a similar claim about Connell's work on masculinities, arguing that it is highly influential, formative even, yet some of its most crucial elements are yet to be fully realised.

Undoubtedly, the influence of Connell's theory of masculinity on the study of gender has been extensive and profound and its impact should not be underestimated. In recognition of her prominence internationally in the area of gender studies, in 2004 Connell was made a University Professor at the University of Sydney. In the same year, she spoke at the annual meeting of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women on 'The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality' (Wedgwood 2004). Indeed, there is little doubt that Connell's theory of masculinity has had a substantial impact on the study of men, particularly within the social sciences but also beyond. Yet, at the same time, the impact has been uneven. In short, this comprehensive theory that was 30 years in the making and which successfully synthesises gender construction at the level of the individual body/mind with broader social structures, has been taken up in a largely piecemeal fashion. This, I believe, has undermined and under-utilised its real potential power to produce even greater insights into the ways in which the current gender order is both reproduced and, more importantly, transformed in specific historical contexts.

When I asked for Connell's opinion on how her study of masculinities has impacted upon gender studies more broadly, she responded: 'Less than I would have hoped'. This is mainly because she feels masculinity is still treated as a separate topic, for instance as one chapter within books on gender studies, and it is not referred to in discussions of psychoanalysis, queer theory, bodies or difference. Connell sees this as unfortunate because she thought of the study of masculinity right from the start as being the gender equivalent of what used to be called 'power structure research' – studying the dominant group to learn how to change the system. I asked Connell if she felt the study of men may be seen by some feminists as detracting attention from women:

RC: That's a reasonable guess. It is very hard to document but I think it is true in the field of education. The panic about 'boys are failing' has diverted attention from equally serious problems about girls' education. We should also remember, in thinking about the shape of feminist analysis, that many feminists have had to focus on the most toxic forms of masculinity, for instance masculine violence towards women. It is also the case that academic feminists have fought a long and difficult struggle to establish feminist studies in an academic environment controlled by men and full of discourses about men. All of those things are relevant to a certain marginalisation of masculinity studies within gender studies. But let the record also show that feminist women have been absolutely crucial in making possible the new research on men and masculinity! This means both intellectually and organizationally ... Germany is one of the places where the work on masculinity has been taken very seriously by feminists and I have been inspired to see the interaction between men and women on gender issues there.

In an illuminating epilogue, Connell has been through a medically-assisted gender reassignment process since the interviews with her cited in this article.⁴ This sheds new light on the earlier statement cited here: 'I've never felt, personally, very comfortable with conventional masculinities. I've always identified strongly with women'. Thus some of the issues Connell has grappled and come to terms with in her theory of masculinity, such as gendered embodiment and negotiating contradictions in gender, she has also had to wrestle and come to grips with in her personal life. It is easy to see how feeling uncomfortable with 'conventional' masculinities may have provided Connell with a good vantage point for

gaining critical insights (and therefore advances) in theorising masculinities and gender. As Connell herself points out: ‘Certainly the way in which gender issues were played out in my experience made it impossible to adopt an essentialist position that simply equated men and masculinity’.

Whilst I suggest this personal and embodied critical insight into gender is another significant factor in the development of such a lucid theory of masculinity, this is not to give it more weight than any of the other factors which have shaped and influenced Connell’s theory of masculinity. Nor is it to suggest that only the experience of being a woman with a male body could have led to such critical insights, or that this in itself would result in such a sophisticated theory, without Connell’s ability to develop large-scale influential theories about complex social systems/structures (for example, class).

Connell’s transsexuality also further highlights, as I have stressed both explicitly in the text and implicitly in the structure of this article, the crucial importance of life history research in understanding the very complex reality of gender.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Raewyn Connell for the interviews which form a central part of this article and John Fisher for advice on conducting citation searches.

Notes

1. This article develops in new ways some ideas first presented in Wedgwood (2005, pp. 216–239).
2. Previously Robert W. Connell but now legally Raewyn Connell, she prefers to be referred to, even in the past tense, as a woman. In feedback on an earlier draft of this article, Connell explained:

There is a basic reason for this, beyond the fact that that is my name and civil status now. Like other transsexual people, when I undertook the medically-assisted gender reassignment process it wasn’t a sex change that happened but a search for recognition of a very long-standing reality. Ever since I was a girl, in fact. What has changed over the years is the way I have tried to deal with that reality.

3. ‘Ocker’ is the archetypal uncultivated Australian working man.
4. It should also be noted that, as a previous doctoral student and current colleague, I have known Connell both before and after her gender reassignment.

Notes on contributor

Nikki Wedgwood has a background in the sociology of gender, with a particular interest in gendered embodiment, sport and life history research. Currently a research fellow in the Australian Family and Disability Studies Research Collaboration at the University of Sydney, she is looking at the role of sport in the lives of young men with physical impairments.

References

- Carrigan, T., Connell, R. and Lee, J., 1985. Toward a new sociology of masculinity. *Theory and society*, 14, 551–604.
- Connell, R., 1971. *The child’s construction of politics*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Connell, R., 1974. You can’t tell them apart nowadays, can you? *Search*, 5, 282–285.
- Connell, R., 1977. *Ruling class, ruling culture: studies of conflict, power and hegemony in Australian life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Connell, R., 1983a. Dr Freud and the course of history. In: R. Connell, ed. *Which way is up? Essays on sex, class and culture*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 3–16.
- Connell, R., ed., 1983b. *Which way is up? Essays on sex, class and culture*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Connell, R., 1985. *Teachers’ work*. Sydney: George Allen & Unwin.

- Connell, R., 1987. *Gender and power: society, the person and sexual politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Connell, R., 1991. A thumbnail dipped in tar: or, can we write sociology from the fringe of the world? *Meanjin quarterly*, 50, 37–47.
- Connell, R., 1994. Psychoanalysis on masculinity. In: H. Brod and M. Kaufman, eds. *Theorizing masculinities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 11–38.
- Connell, R., 1995. *Masculinities*. Sydney: Polity Press.
- Connell, R., 1997. Long and winding road. In: B. Laslett and B. Thorne, eds. *Feminist sociology: life histories of a movement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 151–164.
- Connell, R., 2002a. *Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Connell, R., 2002b. On hegemonic masculinity and violence: response to Jefferson and Hall. *Theoretical criminology*, 6, 89–99.
- Connell, R., 2004. Encounters with structure. *International journal of qualitative studies in education*, 16, 11–28.
- Connell, R. and Irving, T., 1980. *Class structure in Australian history*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Connell, R. and Messerschmidt, J.W., 2005. Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept. *Gender and society*, 19, 829–859.
- Connell, R., et al., 1982. *Making the difference: schools, families and social division*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Frosh, S., Phoenix, A., and Pattman, R., 2002. *Young masculinities: understanding boys in contemporary society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Gläser, J., 2004. Why are the most influential books in Australian sociology not necessarily the most highly cited ones? *Journal of sociology*, 40, 261–282.
- Holland, J., et al., 1998. *The male in the head. Young people, heterosexuality and power*. London: Tufnell Press.
- Kessler, S., et al., 1982. *Ockers and disco-maniacs: sex, gender and secondary schooling*. Sydney: Inner City Education Centre.
- Messerschmidt, J., 2000. *Nine lives: adolescent masculinities, the body, and violence*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Taga, F., 2003. Rethinking male socialisation: life histories of Japanese male youth. In: K. Louie and M. Low, eds. *East Asian masculinities: the meaning and practice of manhood in China and Japan*. London: Routledge Curzon, 137–154.
- Wedgwood, N., 2003. Aussie rules! Schoolboy football and masculine embodiment. In: S. Tomsen and M. Donaldson, eds. *Male trouble: looking at Australian masculinities*. Melbourne: Pluto Press, 180–199.
- Wedgwood, N., 2004. Keepin' it real: an interview with R.W. Connell. *Nexus*, 16, 5–6.
- Wedgwood, N., 2005. Robert W. Connell: Theorie der Männlichkeit und ihre Entstehungsgeschichte [Connell's theory of masculinity: a brief life history]. In: B. Kortendiek and A. Senganata Münt, eds. *Lebenswerke: Porträts der Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung*. Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 216–239.
- Wedgwood, N., 2008. For the love of football: Australian Rules football and heterosexual desire. *Journal of sport and social issues*, 32, 311–317.
- Wedgwood, N. and Connell, R., 2004. Männlichkeitsforschung: Männer und Männlichkeiten im internationalen Forschungskontext [Masculinity research: men and masculinities in the context of international research]. In: R. Becker and B. Kortendiek, eds. *Handbuch Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung: Theorie, Methoden, Empirie*. Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 112–121.