Private Men, Public Anger: The Men's Rights Movement in Australia

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The men's rights movement has an increasing presence in Australia's cultural and political landscape. This paper provides a feminist analysis of the processes of men's rights collective identity, focussing on constructions of masculinity and fatherhood, and the ways in which these constructions circulate between the public and private spheres. These processes also involve the re-figuring of discourses of power and equality and a rejection of the notion of patriarchy, thus allowing men's rights men to identify as part of a collectivity and, in some cases, become politically active.

INTRODUCTION

The men's rights movement was in the news again during 1999 following the trial and sentencing of Robert Clive Parsons for the murder of his estranged wife, Angela, outside the Dandenong Family Court. The murder occurred during a custodial and maintenance hearing involving the couple's two children. During the attack, in which Angela Parsons was stabbed repeatedly, Robert Parsons yelled "it's over bitch, it's over." Giving evidence for Parsons a forensic psychologist said that Parsons had been "seduced" by the men's rights group Parent Without Rights, and had "found solace" at their weekly meetings (Towers 1999, 3).

This most recent case is one of several incidents over the past few years in which men have murdered their wives, former wives or partners during Family Court hearings. In general, these crimes have been defended in the media by spokesmen for men's rights groups, such as the Men's Rights Agency and The Men's Confraternity, who argue that such actions are provoked by what they term the "raw deal" that most men get before the Family Court, primarily because this institution has been "taken over" by feminists. Put in its crudest form, men within these organisations argue that the gender equity pendulum has swung too far and, as a result, men are now disadvantaged and discriminated against.

Feminists find the arguments of the men's movement difficult to accept, and maintain that their essentialist claims about male and female power demand the same level of scrutiny that has been applied to those made by the women's movement in the same contested arena. In particular, the claim that women have become the true power holders in our society seems contestable since it seems clear that, at least in terms of institutional power, men are still holding most of the cards. And yet what has been seen over the past few years in Australia is that the discourses of men's rights are increasingly flowing into the social and symbolic worlds, and finding voice in the media and amongst social commentators as a part of the ongoing backlash against feminism.

At this point there has been little or no work that directly explores the connections between these cultural rumblings about men and masculinity and the formation of social movements, and as a result there is an inadequate understanding of these processes. There are certainly assumptions, and there is dismissal of men's activism as "backlash" and misogyny and while there is no doubt that these elements are there, what is of greater theoretical significance is how they came to be.

If an essentialist hatred of women is not being assumed, how is it that these men have come to take up and inhabit a men's rights identity? Developing this knowledge seems crucial if feminists, and others interested in gender equity, are to respond in ways that are constructive, dialogical and allow for the possibility of greater understanding between genders. If the processes of collective identity for social movement activists are not understood then it remains difficult to respond to their rhetoric, their processes of meaning making remain unknowable and take on a reified appearance as empirical object.

THE MEN'S **MOVEMENT**

Broadly speaking, the men's movement can be understood as being organised into four strands: mythopoetry, men's liberation, pro-feminism and men's rights. When most people speak of a "men's movement," it is the mythopoetic or spiritual strand that they are thinking of: the popular image of "wildman weekends" at which men are encouraged to get in touch with their "deep masculine".

Linked to mythopoetry is Men's Liberation; a broad movement based on support groups in which men are helped to break out of the alienating "male sex role" by getting in touch with their emotionality and recognising the possibilities for men beyond traditional masculinity. Pro-feminism stands in opposition to these other strands and pro-feminist men believe that they can work as allies with women in a struggle to transform traditional masculinity and our patriarchal society (Flood 1996, 21 - 23, Mudge 1997).

Men's rights is widely understood as being the "backlash" strand of the men's movement. That is to say there is a widespread belief amongst men's rights activists that the women's movement has "gone too far" and has harmed men in profound and fundamental ways. Men's rights men "deny any idea of men's power and argue that men are now the real victims" (Flood 1996, 22). Men's rights activists, whilst adopting the self-help strategies common to other strands of the men's movement are also specifically active around issues of men's health, the education of boys and men, and perceived injustices and anti-male biases in family law.

My research focus has been on the arena of family law, in part because this has been the most significant and heated site of activism and debate in recent years. More importantly, however, and as will be argued below, it appears that the distress and anger following marriage and relationship breakdowns, and the subsequent impact on men's relationships with their children, is a primary motivation for many men involved with men's rights organisations. In this sense then, men's rights and father's rights become interchangeable terms, as almost all men's rights activism in the family law area is centred on issues to do with children whether it be contact, child support or other relationship issues.

Other research has demonstrated that the men's movement is made up, almost entirely, of white, heterosexual, middle-class men in their forties and fifties (Rood 1997), and that much of the energy of the movement in fact comes from this identity. As a whole (with the exception of pro-feminism) there is a failure within the men's movement to adequately acknowledge the privilege that comes with this identity and, indeed, there is a certain amount of refiguring involved that sees heterosexual, middle-class masculinity reconstructed as culturally disadvantaged (Flood 1997, Connell 1995).

RESEARCHING MEN'S RIGHTS

In researching men's rights activism, my central research problem was the process of mobilisation of personal angst into collective identity and political activism. For men's rights men this process entails a set of sequential experiences and interactions, beginning usually with a crisis in the personal life space of the man, which is then explored and understood by them as an example of powerful external social forces impacting on men and masculinities. The interaction with other men and the consumption of public, cultural examinations of the "crisis of masculinity" provide an arena for the transformation to develop. These processes form the basis for common action, which emerges in small men's rights groups organising politically around specific dimensions of the "masculinity crisis".

The theoretical framework in which these experiences are placed in this paper is a small part of that developed by Alberto Melucci (1995; 1996), which seeks to explore the processes of collective identity for social movement activists. This lens allows me to step a little outside the usual bounds of gender studies in order to examine an aspect of gender relations from a new and different standpoint.

Melucci's framework allows for a focus not only on the political agenda of the movement but also on the *cultural* agenda of men's rights activism as well as *the processes* by which collective identity is formed. There is an important distinction between old and new social movements. Touraine (1985) points out that "[n]ew social movements are less sociopolitical and more sociocultural" (1985, 780) than the older social movements such as the trade union movement. Melucci argues that:

> In the past twenty years emerging social conflicts in advanced societies have not expressed themselves through political action, but rather have raised cultural challenges to the dominant language, to the codes that organize information and shape social practices. The crucial dimensions of daily life (time, space, inter-personal relations, individual and group identity) have been involved in these conflicts, and new actors have laid claim to their autonomy in making sense of their lives (Melucci 1995, 41).

Melucci further points out that the term "movement" has itself become inadequate to describe the kind of "systems of action" and "collective phenomena" that are contemporary social movements, taking the form of "solidarity networks with potent cultural meanings" easily distinguishable from more formal and political organisations (1995, 52-53).

The empirical research that provided the data for this analysis took the form of six in-depth interviews with men in the men's movement. This small number is due to the

fact that gaining access to my interview subjects was not always easy. My initial approaches were met with a fairly high level of suspicion. This was, in part, due to the recent publication of the Kaye and Tolmie (1998, further references in text) article, which several organisations felt had betrayed the trust that they had placed in the researchers for that article. All of the registered political patties (The Australian Men's Party and The Abolish Child Support/ Family Court Party to name but two) refused to speak with me at all. Other interstate organisations agreed to answer questions via the mail but failed to return their responses. The men who did agree to participate were mostly middle-class, highly literate and had been involved in the movement in some way for quite some time. With the exception of the one subject who rejected the men's rights position, all the men interviewed were divorced with children.

This is a feminist analysis of the processes of men's rights collective identity, focussing on constructions of masculinity and fatherhood, and the ways in which these constructions circulate between the public and private spheres. These processes also involve the refiguring of discourses of power and equality and a rejection of the notion of patriarchy, thus allowing men's rights men to identify as part of a collectivity and, in some cases, become politically active.

THE "RIGHT" MASCULINITY?

Masculinity has become increasingly contested as a meaningful category, and in a very real sense men's rights activism serves to expose what is at stake within dominant discourses of gender and masculinity, in what Melucci (1985) describes as a social movement's "prophetic function" (1985, 797). In other words, when the symbolic meanings that men attach to discourses and practices of masculinity have been revealed there is an initial insight into the processes of collective identity that are at work in the men's rights movement.

There is a general agreement among the various strands of the men's movement in Australia (and elsewhere) that traditional masculinity is restricting, damaging and limiting to masculine identity and possibility (Flood 1996). Indeed, it has been argued that dominant representations of masculinity are now more in line with notions of "Sensitive New Age Guys" who are in touch with their own feelings as well as those of their partners and children (Lupton and Barclay 1997). Much of the newer collection of men's self-help books, for example, promote these representations and "interpellate men as maimed or incomplete subjects" (Buchbinder 1998, 46).

Questions have certainly arisen from critics of these movements about whether the representations they circulate are anything more than an expression of their desires to return to an idealised and "authentic" masculinity (Messner 1995). Nevertheless, a new, and increasingly, dominant masculinity has emerged and been taken up in the process of collective identity formation for men in the men's rights movement: that is the man, wounded by an aggressive feminism and the loss of his place in the world, yearning for a "true" masculinity in which he is both in touch with his feelings *and* in control.

What is clear from my research is the depth of the conviction among many men in the groups that my subjects represented that they (and all men) are being damaged by

"the culture's" resistance to this "new masculinity." There is a high level of resentment for what they perceive as a cultural, or social, desire to maintain traditional masculinity through the expectations which are still held of men; that is that they be strong, that they be stoic and that they continue in their roles as provider and defender of the intact nuclear family unit. They see women as reaping many rewards from the incremental changes wrought to society's structures and institutions, whereas men have not only remained constrained by cultural expectations they have also been damaged and disadvantaged by what they see as a cultural acceptance of criticising men or "male bashing." This resentment is a key factor in their formulation of collective identity as men's rights activists, as illustrated below:

> [T]here's been this thing about valuing women, putting women into their role in history and that sort of stuff as well. But at the same time there's been a denigration of men going on. So it's been like, instead of just women gaining status, there's been a move to sort of take that status, you know, as if there's only a certain pool of status and you have to take it away from men more to have a bigger stock to build on. And so at the same time that this is happening men are feeling put down, not just because women's status is rising, but because there's been an active sort of campaign of gender vilification... If you want to denigrate just about anything you call it male or masculine, and I think that's what everything else comes down to. ("Neville")

Warren Farrell (1986, 1993) articulates the fundamentals of men's rights discourse, particularly in his canonical text *The Myth of Male Power,* as do others such as Herb Goldberg in *The Hazards of Being Male: Surviving the Myth of Masculine Privile ge* (Goldberg 1976). This discourse relates directly to the processes by which men's rights men come to form what they perceive as an oppressed collectivity. There is general agreement that society and the state have been effectively "feminized," or at least captured, by the women's movement. This belief is articulated as something of a misandrist conspiracy theory that can be used to explain everything from men's shorter life expectancy to low levels of father custody after divorce. These writers believe that men *(all* men) are disadvantaged, discriminated against and oppressed by systems that ignore this situation and therefore ensure its continuation. Again, what is missing in these texts is an analysis of male power and privilege. Indeed they go so far as to argue that, for most men, power is an illusion, and that women are the true power holders in society through their roles as the primary carers and nurturers of children. For example:

> [E]ven if you go back to, like, the Dick van Dyke show, sort of back then... women were really the power brokers in that structure. I mean the man may have gone out to work or whatever, but they had nothing to do with power making or decisions. It was, in particular, women, who formed the children and that really is a position of enormous power. ("Terry")

Men's rights men mobilize discourses of power as relating purely to individual experience, with little conceptualization of social structures or spaces beyond those involved in daily personal and family life (although even within the family gendered power relationships are often invisible or denied (Smart 1989). Collier (1995) points out that for many men there is a genuine "disjunction between the very real *experience* of

personal dis-empowerment ...and *the/acts* of power" (1995,35). The importance of this must be stressed, and as Brod (1995) makes clear:

> We serve no one, we advance no just causes if the only message we bring is that these
> men are simply wrong about their experience of power, or that they're not being honest,
> or that they suffer false consciousness. (Brod 1995,92)

Williams (1998) drawing on Samuels, provides a clue about how, or why, these men may be experiencing dis-empowerment at an individual level. Samuels has argued that men's *identities* have indeed been undermined by social and economic changes, and it is this experience which they encounter as a lack of power (in Williams 1998, 89). This notion of powerlessness forms a part of the collective identity process that is decidedly circular in nature, that is, as men experience feelings of powerlessness they seek out other men to validate this experience and in this process reinforce an ideological standpoint that interprets men as vulnerable and suffering, thereby authenticating their feelings of powerlessness.

Contained in this discourse is an interesting theoretical shift in the ways in which masculinity is understood and represented. Historically, masculinity has been conceived as a "monolithic unproblematic entity" (Mac an Ghaill 1996, 1) sexually neutral and universal, and in this way avoided "the need to define its own specificity" (Threadgold and Cranny-Francis 1990, 20). Feminist scholarship has pointed to the ways in which this has, in turn, led to the construction of the feminine in terms of, and as dependant upon, the masculine universal, and has critiqued the claims of masculinity to represent an idealised version of human existence (Poole 1990). Early gender relations studies did little to disrupt the dominance of this discourse, and early feminist scholarship concentrated primarily on naming and making visible the experience of women and girls. The discursive shift at this moment is an echo of this feminist strategy. In the process of constructing a collective identity as men's rights men there is a new concern with the specificity of male experience and the significance of these experiences in the construction of masculine discourse, representation and subjectivity.

A key (and highly contested) site in which this specificity is being dragged into the light is around discourses and experiences of fatherhood. From my research it has become clear that no other issue or concern carries as much weight in the process of collective identity formation for these men than the ways in which they experience fatherhood, and the ways in which they perceive fatherhood to be understood in the cultural and social realm.

FATHERHOOD

Fatherhood is a site of primary significance both to discourses and practices of masculinity and as a focal point for tensions in gender relations (Lupton and Barclay 1997, 3). This significance has, however, been overlooked, or at least underestimated, in most academic writing on masculinities in the past decade, which has chosen instead to focus on "bodily power and action, physical strength and engagement in education and paid labour" (Lupton and Barclay 1997, 4). As a consequence, the ways in which men constitute their

identities as men (and in this context as members of a social movement) in relation to their roles and identities as fathers has been largely ignored. Fatherhood needs to be made central to further studies of masculinities as it is clearly at the heart of questions of "new" masculinities, and is functioning interdiscursively to call into question notions of power, rights and equality.

Williams (1998) points to the fact that there has been such a dramatic shift from historical constructions of paternal masculinity to the current discourses of the "new fatherhood" that fatherhood has, to some extent, "become a lens through which other [male] roles [such as worker, citizen, husband/partner etc.] are now signified" (Williams 1998,63). Indeed, the extent to which masculine identities are constituted by (among other things) this "activation of familial commitment" (Collier 1995, 25) is little understood, a point further underscored by research from the Family Court which highlights the fact that "the significance of the parent-child relationship for men has not been clearly understood" (Bordow 1992, 75). The focus until very recently has been on the public representations of masculinity at the expense of more private, but no less important, familial relationships.

Smart (1989) points to the ways in which the three quite separate discourses of the "new fatherhood," father's rights and the New Right have become entangled in this debate over the meaning and significance of fatherhood as a cultural category. The "new fatherhood" is closely related to the emerging "new masculine" as discussed above, and can be seen in the many representations of fathering that currently abound in popular culture: on television, in advertising, and so on. "New fathers" can be seen to be enjoying close and loving relationships with their children and sharing their care in ways which depart dramatically from the traditional and distant *paterfamilias.* However, as Smart (1989) points out, it remains questionable whether these men represent any real change in the ways fatherhood is understood and practised at a social and cultural level. Nevertheless the discourses of father's rights and the New Right both rely to some extent on the symbolic capital generated by images of the "new fatherhood," and while the three discourses part company over issues of economic dependence, they can be seen to be enjoying a symbiotic relationship with one another that is allowing fatherhood a new discursive space based upon political and moral grounds (Smart 1989,10-18). In terms of collective identity men's rights men clearly see themselves as "new fathers," or at least believe that this is the type of paternal relationship they would enjoy were they not denied access to their children.

It is inadequate to speak of fatherhood as if it were yet another unified entity. Clearly men *and* women participate in the production and reproduction of discourses of parenting and it is also clear that these discourses are taken up by men in multiple and varying ways that express multiple and varying modes of masculinity (Lupton and Barclay 1997, 16). The most significant point to come out of my research is the particular ways in which fatherhood becomes a focal point of men's lives at the time of a marriage or relationship breakdown where there are children of the relationship. It is at this time that the investment men have in their masculine identities *as fathers* becomes clear, and for them becomes the focus of enormous pain and anger. For example:

> I vowed that I wouldn't be like my father, and I fortunately had the opportunity, being
> young enough - a middle-aged dad retiring - financially secure, I was able as an older
> dad to be financially secure and found that I wanted to have input into my children. I
> think a lot of other fathers are wanting to do that more. Yet the system pushes them
> away... I think this is an important point, fathers these days, they're more of the sensitive
> new-age guy or whatever you want to call it, they are trying to get away from the macho
> image, they want to be more involved yet the system pushes them away. "Once a fortnight
> sir, that's your lot." And it's a very destructive, heart-breaking thing for a father. ("Wayne")

It is in quotes like this that the seeds of the men's rights discourse become evident. There
are elements in this quote both of traditional notions of paternal control, contemporary,
modernized "new" fatherhood, as well as anger and resentment at the ways in which
institutions have responded to their hurt. It is these factors, and how they relate to men's
understanding of themselves as men, that form the emotional base for their collective
identity as men's rights men.

There is a belief within the men's rights movement (that is shared by other strands
of the broader men's movement) that fatherhood is not valued in the same way
that motherhood is valued. This is seen as having two components, one being the idea
that men are simply not as competent when it come to parenting, and the other being
that fathering is not seen as being as significant as mothering to the welfare and wellbeing
of children:

> I've heard a Magistrate say, "Well a kid doesn't really need a father to grow up and
> survive and to be a good person, they don't need a father any more." That's a ridiculous
> statement, because kids need both parents. And I'm a great fighter for this. ("Bill")

There is an argument here that is expressed in a discourse that relies heavily upon
the three discussed above, that is, the "children need fathers" argument. Within the
men's rights movement this is a discourse which "shall not be challenged," and is a
large part of the appeal behind the success of men's movement writers such as Steve
Biddulph (1994, 1997) who particularly stresses the importance of fathering, and
Robert Ely (1990) who also emphasises the damage done by "father hunger,"
particularly in the lives of male children. The men who participated in my research
have clearly taken up this belief:

> Boys, when they are growing up for instance, desperately need a father. It makes no
> sense to separate those boys from their father. And so there's a lot of pain that men feel
> about that, and that is exacerbated by the assumption of the Family Court that, for the
> most part, it's okay to sideline men from their children's lives. ("John")

This idea that fathers are essential to children's emotional development contains an
implicit and "normative, functional male gender role" (Collier 1995, 56-57) or the idea that
the primary function of a father is to model for their sons "the way men are." Collier (1995)
points out that this "abstraction and de-politicising of masculinity" (1995, 57) in terms of a
male sex role does not take account of the power relations in which masculinity is itself
constructed. Smart (1989) argues further that this claim dis-empowers mothers by "placing
father's rights closer to the interests of children than mothers' claims" (1989, 9-10).

The new discourses and debates that are emerging around fatherhood serve to expose what can be termed the "patrifocal" core within the processes of collective identity of the men's rights movement. This emotional base of men's rights collective identity, which is fuelled primarily by hurt, anger and a sense of injustice, is active in forming a collective identity that incorporates ideas of a damaged masculinity and unappreciated fatherhood and which serves to make fatherhood a public issue (Williams 1998, 92) as the impetus and focus for political action. Yet what is missing is both an analysis of paternal masculinity which has an understanding of power at its centre, and the theoretical framework to make sense of the ways in which fatherhood circulates between the private and the public spheres.

PUBLIC/ PRIVATE

There are two main points that need to be made about the public/private divide in relation to men's rights. The first speaks directly to collective identity and was discussed above in terms of fatherhood. The interviewed men all stressed the primary importance of their family relationships, particularly with their wives/partners and children. At no point did these men define themselves in terms of their occupation or public status. In terms of their own identities and the collectivity they had formed with other men the focus was entirely on their private lives: the breakdown of their relationships, their roles as fathers and their hurt and sorrow at not having the full time relationships with their children that they desired. In this sense their masculine and paternal identities were almost wholly constituted in the private rather than the public sphere. Further, they expressed resentment at the ways in which society still defined them by their public roles and economic capacities.

Following from this is the second point. The boundaries between public and private have become far more blurred, particularly in the past two decades. As a part of the feminist project/s women have been "making the invisible visible, speaking of problems that have no name, making voices, decentering the centre, recentering the other, making the private public..." (Hearn 1992, 17). Previously "private" concerns such as domestic violence, incest, and even child custody and child support have become "public" issues in which the state has a role as arbiter and watchdog. Lupton and Barclay (1997) argue that the distinction between private and public in relation to parenthood is now "somewhat arbitrary" (1997, 150) and for men's rights men this is perceived as having had a destructive effect on their families and subsequently in the control they have over their lives, particularly after a separation or divorce:

> You've got to remember that in a lot of marriages there's constant conflict and children are exposed to that all the time, and do we rush out and arbitrarily pull one of the parents out of the family? There's all sorts of strange things that happen once families are separated that you wouldn't dream of happening while the parents are still together, it just seems a very arbitrary sort of thing. ("Neville")

It is here that men's rights men express much of their anti-feminist sentiment, as they perceive that what has occurred historically through the women's movement's claims

for citizenship, and the exposure of previously private concerns, is the feminization of public institutions with the result that these institutions now discriminate against men. Williams (1998) argues that within this discourse is the argument that "men's loss of rights and privileges in the public sphere require compensation through enhanced rights in the private sphere" (1998, 92) and that making fatherhood a public (and political) issue "repositions mothers within a new form of relations of domination" (1998, 92) based on the rights of fathers. This is the point at which men's rights discourse shifts from concerns about the constitutive nature of the public / private divide in terms of gendered identities to their concerns about the ways in which overlaps between public and private serve to regulate and control men's lives. In other words, it is the discursive space opened up by their patrifocal processes of collective identity that enable men's rights men to locate their private experiences in the public world and thereby to construct their political agenda.

CONCLUSION

In his "State of the Court" address at last year's National Family Court Conference the Chief Justice of the Family Court, the Honourable Alastair Nicholson, aired his opinion on the men's rights movement, which he described as a "sinister element" who "have an agenda to change the law to the disadvantage of women" (Nicholson 1998, 8). His speech marked a point of escalation in tensions between the Family Court and the men's rights movement, who responded angrily in letters to the editor after an extract of Nicholson's address was reprinted in the *Sydney Morning Herald.* The concluding section of the reprinted text is, however, worthy of consideration:

> These people [men's rights activists] do themselves and their children a great disservice. There are issues relating to men and families that deserve to be aired. There are people who could receive better and more caring results from the system. More could no doubt be done but these people actually stand as an obstruction to change. Their own bitterness and their inability to look beyond their own cases and the supposed injustices that they have suffered stand in the way of any sensible dialogue (Nicholson 1998, 8).

In a sense Nicholson has identified the core of the problem with men's rights activism: in coming from anger and bitterness men's rights men have misidentified the problem and therefore seek change in the wrong direction. In continuing to blame women and feminism, men's rights men fail to recognise the cultural and social factors that are central to their own processes of collective identity, and towards which they may more productively work for change.

As political actors men's rights men rely heavily on the discourse of equality, in the tradition of liberalism and individual rights. In claiming their rights as fathers before the Family Court the men's rights movement demands joint custody as the presumed starting point for all custody decisions on the basis of fairness and equality to both parents, and also calling on the argument that children need fathers. Men's rights men are highly vocal in accusing the Family Court of a bias against men despite the fact that in the mere ten per cent of custody cases that are actually contested, men are successful in 37 to 44

per cent of cases (Kaye and Tolmie 1998, Alexander 1997). These percentages are surprisingly high given that, before separation or divorce, it is women who remain the primary carers of children in the vast majority of families. To accuse the Family Court of a feminist inspired bias, however, seems to fundamentally miss the point. It is liberal legal discourse, with its continued reliance on more traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, and the role of mothers and fathers, that may be responsible for the direction of custody decisions. It is here that there may be some genuine common ground between feminist and masculinist movements, in terms of working toward a cultural change in gendered attitudes to parenting.

In examining the discursive space created by the processes of collective identity I have identified the key areas in which men's rights men construct their subjectivities - as private men, as loving fathers and as angry activists. The risk now, however, is seeing that space remain occupied, and become dominated by, "those who would seek to retain, but constitute in new ways, a hierarchical, heterosexual gender order" (Williams 1998, 91). Men's rights discourse is not the only viewpoint on fatherhood, family relations and family law (Kaye and Tolmie 1998), but there is a significant risk that unless those with other viewpoints can find a way to engage with men's rights, the men's rights position will become dominant, at considerable cost to women and children. The importance of this research is that it serves to clarify the workings of collective identity formation for men's rights men, revealing a core of emotional anguish that is not widely validated outside the men's movement. There is enormous possibility that in validating men's emotional experiences of paternal masculinity, particularly following separation and divorce, some men may reject the subsequent processes of men's rights collective identity that locate power only in the personal, and construct feminism as the enemy.

For those who are concerned with this issue understanding the processes of collective identity is a critical step. It is in their collective identity that we can conceptualise men's rights as something beyond anti-feminism and misogyny, and find other ways of responding to the hurt and pain in men's lives that men's rights men articulate. As Flood (1997), an active pro-feminist and former editor of *xy magazine,* argues:

> We need to take up the issues about which men's rights men are vocal, offering an alternative analysis of their character and causes. We have to try to reach the men who otherwise might join men's rights organisations and in some cases who have their pain turned into anti-woman backlash. Doing so will be challenging, and it may involve questioning aspects of the feminist-informed analyses we have held so far. I believe that recognition of areas of men's pain and even disadvantage is compatible with a feminist understanding...but it may take some reworking for this compatibility to be realised (Flood 1997, 38).

So far it has been argued that, for many men, the importance of their private family lives in constituting their masculine and paternal subjectivities is underestimated. When their private lives are altered through a marriage or relationship breakdown these men must search for a language and a discourse that articulates and validates their distress. At present the men's rights movement offers the most visible alternative identity, and thus they have had measurable success in terms of claiming space in the symbolic and material

worlds where collective identities are produced. The challenge for feminists, and for pro-feminist men, is to offer an alternative that speaks just as effectively to the areas of men's lives that may be damaged, whilst maintaining an analysis of power that recognises many men's advantage. In this way the theoretical concern of this paper, that is understanding the processes of collective identity for men's rights men, becomes a tool for political effectiveness that can challenge and resist a backlash movement.

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