MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES AS COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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Synopsis — This exploratory paper argues that treating masculinities and femininities as localised communities of practice is a useful approach to the question of how and why particular forms of gender are performed at particular times and places. In the paper I consider Lave and Wenger’s [Lave, Jean, & Wenger, Etienne (1991). Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press; Wenger, Etienne (1998). Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press] conceptualisation of learning as taking place through legitimate participation in communities of practice and demonstrate how this characterises the learning of particular forms of masculinity and femininity practice. I further discuss the implications of this for our understanding of identity and for the salience of bodies and bodily forms as reified markers of masculinity and femininity.

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow: rather, gender is an identity tenuously constructed through time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality. (Butler, 1990, pp. 140–141)

INTRODUCTION

I am going to start from the assumption that gender is performative. What I mean by this, to quote Butler once again, is that

...acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never can reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause (Butler, 1990, p. 136)

The body thus performs a gender which is not fixed, but socially constructed and varies between situations. Hence, we have a multiplicity of masculinities and femininities inhabited and enacted variously by different people and by the same people at different times. These are influenced by the form of the body, but not tied to it; they are related to sexuality (particularly to compulsory heterosexuality) but not correlated with it. All this, for reasons of space, and to allow me to proceed to my main argument, I will assume, and not debate.

Given this assumption that gender is performative, and that masculinities and femininities are many and various (though clearly, as they are fully implicated in power relations, some are easier to take up and enact than others), there remains a question: how do we come to perform particular genders at particular times? We do not just get up in the morning and decide that today we will be particular kinds of men and women; we slip into our roles, so imperceptibly that most of the time we do not even notice. It is only when we find ourselves performing, or attempting a masculinity or femininity that for some reason fails to “fit” a particular social situation (being a non-macho man in a pub full of rugby players, to coin a stereotype) that this performative aspect is brought home to us as we subtly, or not so subtly, change our behaviour to fit in better with the situation in which we find ourselves.

I should say at this point that I am going henceforth to try and avoid the use of the word “gender” in this paper. Although it originally came into use as a way of separating ideas about social roles from those of

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Pergamon
Anatomical sex (Hird, 2000; Hood-Williams, 1996; Kessler & McKenna, 1978), “gender” is increasingly being used as a way of classifying phenomena that are effectively treated as sexual differences, while still giving a nod to some idea that they are socially constructed. While most feminist work discusses masculinities and femininities as multiple and shifting, the use of “gender” does not seem to be changing in the same way and at the same rate. Consequently, I think it may be better to try abandoning it for a while, and instead talking of masculinities and femininities—if only to see in what ways this affects our thinking.

To return to the main argument, if we think of masculinities and femininities as performative, we are then faced with the question of which perform when, and how this comes about. It seems to me that this has not really been addressed, and that this gap has led to some interesting assumptions (not to say misinterpretations of Butler) which involve the idea that individuals (however these are defined, and Butler, 1993 herself gives a lot of space to this question) go about choosing one or another, independent of social convention and bodily forms. What I am proposing in this paper is that we can use the idea of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) as a way of thinking about the formation and perpetuation of localised masculinities and femininities.

The idea of a community of practice was established by Lave and Wenger (1991) in relation to the learning of apprentices, and then much further elaborated by Wenger (1998). They were interested in establishing a concept of learning as situated in social contexts and as taking place through what they term “legitimate peripheral participation” in a community of practice. A community of practice, broadly, is a group engaging in a shared practice. Novices to that practice are seen as developing expertise through participation in legitimate and acknowledged activities that contribute to but are not central to the practice; gradually these contributions become more complex and important (for example, an apprentice tailor might gradually move from cutting out) as they progress towards full participation. Through this they develop not just their expertise in the practice itself but their understanding of and embeddedness in the culture that surrounds it:

From a broadly peripheral perspective, apprentices gradually assemble a general idea of what constitutes the practice. This uneven sketch of the enterprise (available if there is legitimate access) might include who is involved; what they do; what everyday life is like; how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; how people who are not part of the community of practice interact with it; what other learners are doing; and what learners need to do to become full practitioners. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 95)

Apprentices are, thus, learning to be part of the community of practice, to be full participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991), with all the many and varied social practices that this implies.

In this paper, I want to explore the possibility of applying these ideas to masculinities and femininities, to see what happens if we treat masculinities and femininities as communities of practice. Such an understanding would imply that children and young people would learn what it is to be masculine or feminine (in various forms and ways in various circumstances) through legitimate peripheral participation in these communities of practice, while simultaneously taking part, as full participants, in their own child and adolescent masculinities and femininities.

This idea first came to me after reading Christine Skelton’s recent book, Schooling the Boys (Skelton, 2001). In her book she analyses the various forms of masculinity inhabited and demonstrated by 6- to 7-year-old boys from a school in an area which is dominated and to some extent terrorised by a group of 14- to 19-year-old youths. For these youths, the “lads,” high status was associated with participation in and leadership of organised crime, particularly in terms of “getting one over” the police. She argues that because of this,

The [6- to 7-year-old] boys in the class were positioned by multiple discourses and a particularly powerful discourse was of being a ‘lad’ or in their cases, an ‘apprentice lad.’ (Skelton, 2001, p. 103)

In this context, some of the boys were already taking part in activities that could be seen as legitimate peripheral participation in the “lads” community of practice:

... childhood was framed in a similar way to that of working-class children in Victorian times and earlier, where the emphasis was on practicing to be an adult.... For example, even the youngest pupils at Brentwood Primary sported hairstyles, clothes and, occasionally with the girls, make-up, which reflected the fashions of adolescents. Children might also be encouraged to drink alcohol and smoke. Shane informed the rest of his Y2 class at ‘news time’ that he had been to the local pub where his dad and his mates had given him some beer. (Skelton, 2001, p. 102)
Skelton reports that two of the boys took their apprenticeship even further shortly after the end of the observation period, by attempting to steal a car.

This somewhat extreme example suggested to me that it might be fruitful to treat masculinities and femininities as communities of practice in which children and young people gradually learn what it is to be male and female within particular communities (including more marginal communities which do not necessarily conform to stereotypes of compulsory heterosexuality or hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995)). This should help us to understand not only how different masculinities and femininities are performed in different social situations, but, in relation to this, how communities of masculine and feminine practices are established, perpetuated, and changed.

This is an initial attempt to work through how we might understand masculinities and femininities as communities of practice, so is generally rather broad-brush at this stage. I am also not, for reasons of space, going to discuss in any detail the impact of power/knowledge relations on this process, except to note that, though ignored by both Lave and Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), such relations are themselves gendered and clearly have an impact on which communities of practice are constructed, become established and achieve dominance, as well as on which communities of practice particular individuals want to and are permitted to participate in. It is clear, however, that power/knowledge is bound up with masculinity and femininity; different knowledge forms are seen as masculine and feminine and used differentially in gendered power relations. The hegemony of particular forms of knowledge (Foucault, 1988) and the relationship of these to masculinity (Walkerdine, 1988) results in a socio-cultural imperative to establish, naturalize, and sustain differences between boys and girls, men and women, from an early age, and this naturalization of difference is part of the process by which children are incorporated, from birth, as legitimate peripheral participants in communities of practice. Because masculine-marked forms of knowledge convey and confer actual power on those who “master” them, it becomes important for boys (both for themselves and to help to sustain hegemonic social forms) to claim privileged access to this knowledge, and hence this power, and to deny them to their female peers (Paechter, 1998). Hence, part of the hegemonic processes that establish sex differences as important and sustain the dominance of masculine-marked knowledge is the naturalization of the development and awareness of these differences as an essential aspect of early child development, through participation in communities of practice of masculinity and femininity. To sustain gendered power/knowledge differences we require our boys and girls to behave differently from birth, and consciously or unconsciously reward them for this (Smith & Lloyd, 1978). As a result, young children hold particularly stereotyped views on what is appropriate for males and females, and strongly police sex segregation in their peer groups (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992; Nespor, 1997; Skelton, 2001; Thorne, 1993). It is my intention to develop my ideas about the relationships between power/knowledge and the operation of communities of masculinity and femininity practice further in subsequent papers.

**PRACTICE**

Wenger describes communities of practice as those in which

...collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. (Wenger, 1998, p. 45)

I am arguing that the learning of what it means to be male or female within a social configuration results in shared practices in pursuit of the common goal of sustaining particular localised masculine and feminine identities. It follows from this notion that the localised masculinities and femininities within which these identities are developed and sustained can be seen as communities of practice.

**Practice** is fundamental to the conception of communities of practice. Shared practices are what holds these communities together, what makes them communities of practice. Practice is also not fixed, but fluid; the practices of a particular community are constantly being shifted, renegotiated and reinvented. It is what the learner learns as he or she moves from peripherality to full membership. In doing so, she or he additionally takes part in the practice of learning.

Learning itself is an improvised practice: A learning curriculum unfolds in opportunities for engagement in practice. It is not specified as a set of dictates for proper practice. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 93)

Wenger (1998) discusses practice in terms of a number of dimensions. I am going now to explore these dimensions as proposed by Wenger and demonstrate how they can be related to the development
and sustaining of localised masculinities and femininities.

Negotiation of Meaning

The negotiation of meaning is central to Wenger’s conception of practice, and is characterised as “the process by which we experience the world and our engagement in it as meaningful” (Wenger, 1998, p. 53). The negotiated production of meaning is a fundamental aspect of being a human being in the world. In our particular context, localised communities of masculine and feminine practice are involved in the constant production, reproduction, and negotiation of what it is to be a man or a woman. Some of the practices that this involves will be relatively constant over time, while others will change more frequently. It is clear, however, that someone who does not share with the full members of a community of masculine or feminine practice an understanding of what it is to be male or female in that context will be at best only a peripheral member of that community. To be a full participant of the community, core meanings must be shared. This is one reason why, for example, communities of feminine practice which share a view of heterosexuality as fundamental to femininity, do not include lesbians as full members of that community, and treat them as outsiders, as Other, as non-feminine or even in some senses non-female.

Practice as a Source of Coherence of a Community

For Wenger (1998), shared practices are a source of local coherence. This occurs through mutual engagement in a joint enterprise which results in a shared repertoire of performances. Negotiating a joint enterprise, he argues, gives rise to relations of mutual accountability between those involved, which include such matters as what is important and what is not, what to do and what not to do, what to pay attention to and what to ignore, what to talk about and what to leave unsaid. Learning all this is an important aspect of becoming an experienced member of the community of practice. Boys engaging in legitimate peripheral participation in some adult communities of masculinity practice may, for example, learn that one does not cry, and that personal hurt is not talked about, while the public expression of anger is perfectly OK. This results in a shared repertoire of practices which may be very heterogeneous but which gain coherence from the fact that they belong to the practices of the community. Such practices are particularly clearly illustrated by the ways in which adolescent peer sub-groups adopt particular, often quite restrictive, forms of dress and behaviour, which can reflect very localised forms of masculinity and femininity.

Practice as a Learning Process

Wenger (1998) argues that communities of practice can be thought of as shared histories of learning. For members of a community of practice, learning can be thought of as a process of being engaged in and developing an ongoing practice. There is no point at which the practice is learned; it is dynamic and constantly being fine-tuned by its members.

Change and learning...are in the very nature of practice; they can be assumed to occur, but they always involve continuity as well as discontinuity. (Wenger, 1998, p. 98)

This learning aspect of practice is very important in conceiving of localised masculinities and femininities as communities of practice. Masculinities and femininities are very dynamic, changing both in relation to popular culture and the mass media and in relation to other localised masculinities and femininities they encounter. Most people are simultaneously members of a number of communities of masculine and feminine practice in the different contexts of their lives; their multiple memberships change the various communities of practice to which they belong. An example of this might be the ways in which various professional femininities are affected by the participation in these of women who also take part in other forms of feminine practice such as lesbianism or suburban mothering, and the reciprocal effect of professional femininities on these other practice groups.

That taking part in a community of practice is a learning process is also clear when we look at groups who are moving towards full membership but are currently legitimately peripherally participating. Children and adolescents go through a relatively slow process of learning to be adults at the same time as learning to be specifically adult males and females; they are legitimately peripherally participating in at least two communities of practice (of generalised locally understood adulthood and of localised adult masculinity or femininity) while remaining full participants (though with an outbound trajectory) of a local community of child or adolescent males or females. Eventually, the statuses switch, as they become peripheral participants in the adolescent communities and full members of those of adults. Transsexual adults, on the other hand, may have a much more rapid trajectory out of their former community of practice while remaining
for some time as legitimate (and sometimes only partially legitimate) peripheral participants, as they learn the meanings and practices that bind together their new community of practice of masculinity or femininity. Furthermore, other changes in identity are often associated with trajectories into and out of localised communities of masculine and feminine practice; for women, one such trajectory used often to occur on marriage, and is now likely to be associated with first childbirth (Miller, 1997).

**Practice as Boundary**

Communities of practice clearly cannot be understood independently of other communities and practices; joining a community of practice involves entering not only its internal configuration but also its relationship with the rest of the world. In the case of many, though not all, of the communities of practice described by Lave and Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), the boundaries are formally fixed, with explicit markers of membership, joining, and leaving rituals. Masculinities and femininities do not operate in this way. Although maleness and femaleness are clearly marked (though in various and sometimes multiple ways) on our bodies and make it much more likely that the communities of practice of which we become members will be correspondingly masculine or feminine, this relation is neither direct nor straightforward. Masculinities and femininities are defined, at least in part, by the Othering of outsiders (Paechter, 1998); this Othering is particularly strong among those whose participation is in some way peripheral or in question, such as children or adolescents. Pre-operative transsexuals are also required to demonstrate a strong boundary between their desired and previous/current sexual designation, in order to qualify as “appropriate” for surgery (Moi, 1999). While the symbolic and actual exclusion of the Other is most obvious in extreme forms of hypermasculinity or hyperfemininity, where the rejection of practices associated with the other sex are fundamental to group identities and cohesion, this also takes place within other specific localised masculinities; for example, middle class “new men” define their own forms of masculinity partly through rejection of the macho (Connell, 1995).

**Practice as Local**

Wenger (1998) sees communities of practice as essentially local; wider configurations, such as the nation, are seen as constellations of interconnected practices. Such an approach reflects our increased understanding that wider gender regimes are built out of and related to localised regimes (Connell, 1987). This also reflects a Foucaultian notion of power and resistance as being local and permeating the whole social body rather than as emanating from above (Foucault, 1978); it is likely that we can understand the power relations within and between localised masculine and feminine communities of practice as contributing to and underpinning power relations within and between wider practices. It is certainly the case that which masculinities and femininities are dominant in a particular social context can be very locally governed, and that this is fundamentally bound up with power relations (Connell, 1995). In studying masculinities and femininities as communities of practices, we have to be mindful both of their local nature, and of their relationship to wider communities and social structures. We also need to have an awareness that “locality” is not always constructed in a straightforwardly spatial way (Nespor, 1994); a “local” community of practice may be geographically distributed, but connected through, for example, ties of ancestry, geographical origins or relationships within virtual space.

**IDENTITIES AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

Membership of such localised communities of masculine and feminine practices are important components of individual and group identity. Knowing that one belongs to a particular community of practice is an important aspect of understanding one’s identity. This leads me to a consideration of how Wenger (1998) deals with identity, and how this relates to my understanding of local masculinities and femininities as communities of practice.

Wenger (1998) analyses identity under five dimensions which relate directly to the various aspects of the community of practice. In this section, I am going to take each in turn and analyse it with respect to localised masculinities and femininities. Through this I hope to establish an initial conception of how masculine and feminine identities are related to the communities of practice of masculinity and femininity.

**Identity as the Negotiated Experience of Self**

Wenger (1998) argues that the formation of a community of practice is also the negotiation of identities. He suggests that “we define who we are by the ways we experience our selves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify our selves” (Wenger, 1998, p. 149). This implies that
our experience of our identity is deeply bound up with our experience of our being in the world. Identity is thus understood through the practices with which we engage, and these clearly include the practices involved in our construction and enactment of particular masculinities and femininities. The ways we act these out do not just concern behaviour; they contribute to our constellated understandings of who we are. Thus, for example, by enacting masculine behaviours focused around competitive sports, some boys and young men both form for themselves and project for others identities at least partially constructed around sporting masculinities (Fitzclarence & Hickey, 2001). Similarly, “racial” and class identities are experienced and enacted in relation to each other and to masculinities and femininities as they are understood within and between specific social groups and subgroups. Clearly, these groups are partially constituted through power/knowledge relations, and these relations make it more or less possible for individuals to take up particular “raced” and classed masculine and feminine identities. This approach is nothing new in our thinking about how masculinities and femininities are taken up by individuals; it does emphasise, however, the complexity and lack of singularity of these identities. If local masculinities and femininities are seen as communities of practice, then this brings to the forefront the possibility (indeed near-inevitability) of multiple membership and therefore of multiple forms of identity, and the concomitant multiple positioning of individuals within power/knowledge relations.

Identity as Community Membership

Wenger (1998) argues that practice defines a community through the dimensions of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. He suggests that because participation in some senses constitutes our identity, these three dimensions also become central to identity. I would argue that in the case of local masculinities and femininities, it is the shared repertoire that is most important (Butler, 1993). To be accepted as “fully masculine” within a particular social grouping, one must display particular characteristics and behaviours. If one does not, one risks rejection from the group on the grounds of Otherness, of not conforming sufficiently closely to the local conception of what it is to be a man. Identity can in this way be seen as being related to competent and convincing performance of a particular role; it is defined not just internally by the individual but externally by the group’s inclusive or exclusive attitude to that individual.

This way of looking at identity has clear implications for how we regard those individuals and groups who are marginal to certain forms of masculinity and femininity, particularly transsexuals in the process of moving between one perceived identity and another. Whether someone is recognised as (and thus in some senses, permitted to become) a full member of the community of masculine or feminine practice will depend on their level of conformity to a whole constellation of practices, some more central to group identity than others. Thus, it becomes not sufficient to claim a particular identity; that identity has to be recognised by group members, which in turn reflects back on one’s understanding of oneself. We have all heard the self-justifications and counter-justifications that surround accusations that someone is “not really a feminist” (and thus cannot lay legitimate claim to a particular form of feminine identity). In some cases, in order to gain such acceptance, individuals have to exaggerate particular aspects of self to compensate for the group’s perceptions that they fall short in others. Female athletes, for example, may exaggerate certain aspects of stereotypical femininity (in dress, behaviour, and sexual orientation) in order to comply with other aspects of local femininity practice and compensate for the resistance to or refusal of others that their sporting interests and prowess represent (Dewar, 1990; Sherlock, 1987).

Identity as a Learning Trajectory

In treating identity as a learning trajectory Wenger (1998) sees it as a work in progress, constantly renegotiated and fundamentally temporal:

As trajectories, our identities incorporate the past and the future in the very process of negotiating the present. (Wenger, 1998, p. 155)

I would further argue that identities and how they are learned can be locational; as we move from one place—or, particularly, institution—to another, we have to take on and learn to inhabit different identities. This is particularly obvious, for example, when children start school. Not only do parents talk about this quite overtly (“you’re going to be a big school boy now”), but it can be observed that children’s experience of themselves as individuals is strongly affected by starting school (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992).

Perceiving identity as a learning trajectory relates clearly to the idea that local masculinities and femininities are continually reconfigured in relation to events and to encounters with other communities. What it means to be a man or a woman (boy or girl)
Identity as a Nexus of Multimembership

Identity is neither a unity nor fragmented; it has to be constructed to include different meanings and forms of participation into one nexus.

Our membership in any community of practice is only a part of our identity. ... Our various forms of participation delineate pieces of a puzzle we put together rather than sharp boundaries between disconnected parts of ourselves. An identity is thus more than a single trajectory; instead it should be viewed as a nexus of multimembership. As such a nexus, identity is not a unity but neither is it simply fragmented. (Wenger, 1998, pp. 158–159)

Clearly, masculine and feminine identities are just aspects of our wider sense of self; I am a woman of a particular kind (heterosexual, feminist) but I am also other things (a parent, an academic, a post-Holocaust Jew) to which my femininity is pertinent but (sometimes, at least) less central. Furthermore, as is the case for all women, I am involved in and enact a variety of femininities (some of which have significant stereotypically masculine characteristics), often simultaneously. My sense of who I am in all this is fluid and built up of my membership in these various communities of practice of femininity and of other things. Treating masculinities and femininities as communities of practice thus has the important advantage of taking into account the ways in which individuals inhabit overlapping masculinities and femininities which change according to time, location, and social context, and allows us to consider how we manage and understand the interrelationships between these (Paechter, 2002).

Identity as an Intersection Between the Local and the Global

Neither communities of practice nor the identities associated with them are formed in isolation; they may affect local conditions but these are themselves related to more global considerations. Clearly, this makes sense in terms of treating masculinities and femininities as local communities of practice. Masculinities and femininities, however local in focus, do not form in a vacuum; they are influenced by the mass media, popular culture, legal considerations (for example, masculinities forming around homosexual practice are likely to differ between contexts in which such practices are legal and those in which they are not), other local and wider masculinities and femininities and the interaction of the members of the community with any and all of these. In particular, local masculinities and femininities will intersect with wider conceptions and practices of masculinity and femininity through the boundary work of members whose membership spans different communities (for example, different ‘racial’ or cultural groups) in different ways. Thus, although communities of masculine and feminine practice are necessarily local, their scope is not limited to the local; they incorporate wider features which may be common to a much wider constellation of masculine and feminine practice communities.

REIFICATION AND THE BODY

A key issue in the development and perpetuation of communities of practice is that of reification. Reification is often treated negatively in social science; in this context, however, it should be seen, initially at least, as neutral. Reification is the process of taking practices and using them as community markers of one kind or another, for example by marking full participation with badges and membership cards, or formalising practices into procedures. Wenger (1998)
argues that participation and reification form a complementary duality which is fundamental to the negotiation of meaning.

I will use the concept of reification very generally to refer to the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into "thingness." In so doing we create points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized. (Wenger, 1998, p. 59)

What this means is that certain concepts become reified as symbolic artifacts and practices; they may then be used not just to focus discussion but as markers of recognition of membership or otherwise of a particular community. Reification can refer to both a process (by which something becomes reified) and a product (the reified object, practice or process), but to be meaningful it must be incorporated into a local practice. In this way, the products of reification are reflections of the practices of a community.

When we consider specifically communities of practice of masculinity and femininity, it is clear that some objects and practices have become reified as local (and not so local) markers of masculinity and femininity in particular contexts. Although clearly bodily form is an extremely important marker of potential membership of such a community of practice (it is by virtue of their genital configuration that baby girls and boys are initially recognised as legitimate peripheral participants in the community of females and males, respectively), other, at first sight more trivial, indications can be very important in particular situations and contexts. This would appear to be because gender dimorphism is so fundamental to most human societies that we feel uncomfortable if we are unsure if a person we encounter belongs to the loose configuration of male communities of practice or to its female counterpart (Donath, 1999; O'Brien, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In most encounters, we are not in a position to inspect someone's genitals, so we rely on other markers of maleness and femaleness and use these to ascribe participation in a masculine or feminine community of practice; primary and secondary sexual characteristics are used as reified objects that mark membership of (usually) one or other of these communities. With adults this can often be quite easy; secondary sexual characteristics or the appearance of these, are usually used for such ascriptions, even if other common markers, such as hairstyle or dress, are ambiguous. For this reason, the development (or removal) of such characteristics is extremely important for transsexual individuals; recognition by both members and non-members of their belonging to the new community of practice is fundamental to full participation, and thus of making the desired sex/gender switch.

Other reified markers of masculinity and femininity come into their own in the case of children, for whom masculine or feminine identity is very important but much less easily identified. Clothed boys' and girls' bodies look basically the same until puberty, so they (and we) need to indicate their group membership using other markers and means. The rules governing these reified markers can be very strong, and separate what is permissible for boys and what for girls so strongly that at times they can appear to override genital configurations. Bem (1998), for example, in her account of an attempt to bring up her two children as androgynously as possible, describes what happened when her son went to nursery school wearing barrettes. Bem had raised her children to see the difference between males and females solely in terms of their genital configuration, which brought her son Jeremy directly into conflict with his peer community of practice, for whom more visible markers were much more salient:

Several times that day, another little boy had asserted that Jeremy must be a girl, not a boy, because "only girls wear barrettes." After repeatedly insisting that "Wearing barrettes doesn't matter; I have a penis and testicles," Jeremy finally pulled down his pants to make his point more convincingly. The other boy was not impressed. He simply said, "Everybody has a penis; only girls wear barrettes." (Bem, 1998, p. 109)

For children, particularly boys, who can see the power of adult men both in the family and in wider society, being recognised as even peripheral members of an adult community of practice of masculinity or femininity is crucially important (Skelton, 2001). As their bodies are unable to act as reified objects in this context, other markers, which for adults may be much more secondary, become central. Boys, for example, use knowledge about and obsession with sports as a way of defining their own community, to the extent that girls' expertise in these areas is not acknowledged at all (Nespor, 1997), while girls gleefully adopt some of the objects that are associated with adult female embodiment (the wearing of brassieres among pubertal girls appears in my experience to precede actual breast development by about 2 years). In these ways, children and young people not only establish their full membership of their own, juvenile communities of masculine and feminine practice, but at the same time lay claim to, at the very least,
legitimate peripheral participation in the corresponding adult communities.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I have made an initial attempt to explore the possibility that it may be fruitful to think about masculinities and femininities as communities of practice which organise their practices in response both to local conditions and to wider influences and considerations. By examining Wenger’s (1998) characterisation of the significant aspects of a community of practice and demonstrating how masculinities and femininities can be understood in this way, I have come some way towards an initial theorisation of masculinities and femininities in these terms. This suggests that the concept of a community of practice can be useful in teasing out what it means to perform a particular masculinity or femininity at a particular time and place, and the role of both the symbolic and the actual body in this performance. There is still much work to be done for this to be properly fleshed out and thought through. In particular, the function and operation of power/knowledge in and between communities of practice needs to be fully accounted for and related to masculinity and femininity practice and performance. Nevertheless, I feel that I have made a start with what may turn out to be a long but fruitful project.

**ENDNOTES**

1. Year 2, ages 6–7.
2. O’Brien (1999) points out that in many online communities, the “veracity” of gender claims is often explicitly tested, and that online groups have devised a variety of ways of doing this.
3. Known as hairslides in the UK, these have become such an unequivocal marker of femininity that they can make even children that one knows are boys, who are wearing “boys’” clothing and have masculine haircuts, look like girls.

**REFERENCES**


