Steely determination? Constructions of masculinity in a former UK steelworker community

Through qualitative interviews and overt non-participant observation with fifteen former steelworkers and their sons, changes in perceptions of masculinity are explored across a generation in a deindustrialised community in Sheffield, UK. Despite some policing of their behaviour by the fathers, heterogeneity in both options and choices regarding employment and life outside of work resulted in the sons conceptualising masculinity in different and often complex ways. The younger men are found to orientate to, modify or reject tenets of traditional masculinity depending upon what best aligns with their personal circumstance, which naturally changes over time. The evidence does not point to a crisis of masculinity, more plausibly a crisis in masculinity as what constitutes acceptable masculine behaviour - in a community characterised as having relatively homogenous views – changes, but the gender binary, importance of masculinity to young men's identity, and the patriarchal dividend remain intact.

Introduction

Social and economic changes have the potential to shine a spotlight on the inherent contradictions in hegemonic masculinities, as men may find it increasingly difficult to meet the established behavioural and social embodiment ideals held by their society (Reid, 2018). Such 'crises' of, or in, masculinities (Morgan, 2006) offer fruitful opportunities to explore how men conceptualise masculinity and make sense of their own identities, as they navigate both stubborn cultural contexts and ever-changing structural conditions. Indeed, there has been renewed interest in a potential crisis of masculinity among the white, heteronormative working-classes, partly due to their implication in the growth of right-wing populism and unexpected electoral successes cross-nationally (King, 2019). While much is said about, and on behalf of, those in communities conceived as being politically and economically 'left behind', we actually know relatively little about their experiences of the profound social changes they encounter (Walker and Roberts, 2017) nor of how masculinity is conceived as circumstances change (Slutskaya et al., 2016). Existing literature presents mixed evidence, from men finding it

difficult to 'unlearn' social and cultural attitudes associated with their predecessors (Kenway et al., 2006) to those openly resisting hegemonic ideals (e.g. Roberts, 2013).

Through qualitative interviews with fifteen former steelworkers and their sons, this article contributes to extant research by mapping conceptions of masculinity across two generations of men in Sheffield, Northern England, an area of deindustrialisation – defined as the systematic reduction in industrial capacity of a formerly industrially developed area (Strangleman and Rhodes, 2014). This process has dramatically altered the labour market and familial arrangements men in two generations of the same family can achieve, and thus traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity are difficult to attain. Through non-participant observation the ways in which masculinity is policed between, and within, these two age cohorts is also explicated, with a view to understanding if and how hegemonic forms of masculinity are facing a crisis.

The aims of this article are as follows: firstly, to understand how former steelworkers (aged 60-70) conceptualise masculinity and their perceptions of what constitutes a 'man'. Second, to compare these ideas with those of their sons (aged 22-35) who have grown up in the same community but with a markedly different labour market outlook. Latterly, to establish how hegemonic masculinities are reaffirmed, modified and/or rejected by these younger men who may be forced to challenge these traditional notions of what it is to 'be' a man. As the British steel-working population has declined markedly since the early 1980s, this represents a closing window of opportunity to capture the experiences of those who worked in the steel industry, adjusted to life 'after' steel, and the ability to compare these experiences to those of their sons. This contributes to our understanding of how conceptions of masculinity change over time, and whether such change constitutes a crisis of, or in, masculinity.

Masculinity in 'crisis'?

Conceptually, hegemonic masculinity embodies the 'currently most honoured way of being a man', thereby expressing ideals and desires that become constituted in social practice (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; 832). As such, hegemonic forms of masculinity are in essence 'a re-enactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established', and thus 'the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation' (Butler, 1990; 140). In other words, men effectively 'do' masculinity in much the same way they 'do' gender (e.g. West and Zimmerman, 1987) i.e. by behaving in ways that do not risk their accountability as competent,

masculine social actors. The ascendency of hegemonic forms of masculinity within a given context are achieved through cultural appropriations of (heteronormative) gender-appropriate behaviour, reinforcement from institutions within a society, and ultimately compliance from subordinated masculinities and women. As such, hegemonic masculinity is policed and legitimised as masculine identity even by those men who are not able to achieve it, through risk to their social accountability for deviating too far from its ideals, and some accrued benefits of man's general subordination of women - the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Consequently, it has long been posited that there are multiple masculinities, as men orientate to hegemonic ideals to differing extents depending upon a range of cultural and structural factors (Schwab et al., 2016).

Culturally, men in the UK have traditionally been positioned as 'breadwinners'; the household's primary financial earner and/or labour market participant (Warren, 2007) and thus have not taken principal responsibility for caring and housework. Breadwinning is a term used not only to describe patterns of behaviour but is ideological, implying normative and prescriptive ideals that shape women and men's identities (Demantas and Myers, 2015). The centrality of breadwinning to masculinity has proved remarkably persistent, with many sole- and main-breadwinning women reluctant to report themselves to be their household's main financial provider (Author, 2020). Structurally, the male breadwinner model has been largely facilitated and reinforced by state policy, for example disproportionate parental leave entitlements (Lewis, 2001), and labour market segregation and a gender pay gap (Crompton, 2006).

Due to its fluid and socially constructed nature, forms of masculinity are variant at regional and local levels, and negotiated across the intersection of education level and demographic characteristics such as race and class (Coles, 2009). At more localised levels therefore, specific masculine practices with 'regional significance' determine what hegemonic masculinities are, which in industrialised cities like Sheffield can be tied to breadwinning and a collective steelwork identity (e.g. Beattie, 1998). A regional hegemonic masculinity, then, provides a cultural framework that may be materialised in daily practices and interactions (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and studying at this level enables us to assess the lived experiences of men (and women) grappling with normative ideals and the tensions and changes that exist within these over time. Economic and social changes coupled with the persistence of breadwinning to male identity mean that a disjuncture often exists between expectations of themselves as men, and the reality of their family lives (Reid, 2018).

As gender relations are historical and thus hegemonic forms of masculinity come into existence in specific circumstances, they can be displaced by new forms of hegemony. Therefore, when changes in employment and the family occur, hegemonic conceptions of masculinity dominant at a certain time and spatially, may not be sustained. Morgan (2006) distinguishes between a crisis *of* masculinity that suggests the entire 'order' of practices and discourses forming the basis of masculinity is flawed and fundamental change required; and a crisis *in* masculinity, which suggests that resolution to changing circumstances is possible by a reconfiguration of some masculine practices. Evidence of the former can be seen in the proportionally higher rates of criminal and anti-social behaviour by men, lower levels of comparative educational attainment, and health-related indicators such as suicide rates (McDowell, 2012), indicating that hegemonic forms of masculinity are untenable. Where many men continue to receive the 'patriarchal dividend', men are likely to use their agency to both align and distance themselves to hegemonic masculinity when it is strategically desirable to do so (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Therefore, some tenets will be sustained, and others are open to tension and internal contradiction. As a result, there may a crisis *of* hegemonic masculinities, and some variants of it, but not of masculinity due to its multitude of forms and fluidity, which allows adaptation across new spatial and geographic locations.

The context of deindustrialisation is synonymic with a decline of the male-breadwinner model given its association with secure, full-time, male-dominated work, and masculinity centred around breadwinning, craft-based work (Strangleman, 2005). This becomes open to tensions and contradictions as men navigate these ideals while their lived realities may present challenges to adherence (Reid, 2018; Slutskaya et al., 2016). Precarious labour markets such as those which have suffered the decline of heavy industry (Gardiner et al., 2009) and unemployment (e.g. Damaske, 2019) therefore offer a threat to men's identities. Straying from 'favoured' forms of masculinity can be psychologically painful (Neeley, 2013) with many men finding it difficult to construct an identity around home life (e.g. Kelan, 2008) thus evoking a range of coping mechanisms. For example, couples may 'carry on as usual', sustaining an unequal domestic division of labour despite male job loss, in an attempt to avoid further deviating from social norms (Gush et al., 2015; Schnurr et al., 2019). On the contrary, those men who adopt more 'flexible' gender identities recognise the benefits of emancipation from breadwinning pressures (Humberd et al., 2015) and may distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity, working to make it a less salient part of their identity (Kramer et al., 2015; Latshaw, 2015). Alternatively, men may 'undo' hegemonic masculinities by expanding their

conceptions of masculinity, such as incorporating dual-breadwinning or more involved fathering (Peukert, 2018; Schwab et al., 2016) into their identities as men.

The steel industry as a premier arena to enact masculinity

Steelworkers 'have long been used to represent the epitome of masculinity and masculine labour' (Catano, 2003; 5). Employment often characterised as physically demanding with risk of danger, injury and unpleasant conditions, are typically perceived to be the work of 'men' (Wicks, 2002). The social embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, i.e. the body as both object of, and agent in, social practices that constitute masculinity conjures ideals of a physique capable of manual labour over the course of long working hours – to the point where the nature of the work and masculine norms of the industry pose harmful risks to one's health. Indeed, steelworkers in Sheffield during the 1950s and 1960s described it as 'hell with a career structure' (Beattie, 1998; 18).

Working-class masculinity in these communities is inextricably linked to occupational identity. Recognising that what constitutes skilled work has an ideological component partly determined by the power – and inexplicably sex – of those who perform it (see Phillips and Taylor, 1980) steelworkers were able to affirm such status through trade union power and the centrality of steel to their community's economic prosperity. Maynard (1989) contends that this is particularly the case where men's power and privilege can be undermined by their social class and occupation, which is plausible when undertaking 'unpleasant' work. Traditionally, the attachment of such employment to skilled knowledge, a 'job for life' and decent, regular pay, simultaneously secured men's position as the patriarchal breadwinner in many households (Nayak, 2006; Parry, 2003). That working-class masculinity was centred on occupational pride and breadwinning is evidenced in the hostility women faced when attempting to unionise, which posed a threat to men's dominance in the employment sphere (on wages and control of 'their' craft) but also in the home (a reduction in their partner's financial dependency). The result of these processes has often been a degree of homogeneity among such groups who develop shared understandings of their social situation and identities both inside work (canteens, trade union meetings) and in social spaces outside of work (Linkon, 2014). Men are thus encouraged to act in ways that both secure and reinforce legitimacy, as heads of families, a band of brothers in the community, and so forth (Wicks, 2002).

Yet, the masculinity of steelworkers has long been under threat in the UK. Initially threats were posed with the transition to mass production as craft-based, autonomous working, strong trade union presence and a paternalistic hierarchy gave way to reduced agency and control of the 'shop floor'. Masculinity is often associated with a given craft itself, which denotes a body of skills and knowledge that traditionally facilitated a 'job for life' and thus a career (Ackers, 2017), elevating craftsmanship to an essential component of masculine identity. Beyond this, deindustrialisation in the North of England and the growth of unemployment, part-time and precarious work, alongside increased female education and employment participation has led to the male breadwinner model becoming somewhat obsolete (Nayak, 2003). Patterns of behaviour from households in these communities vary from overt resistance to change (and a clinging to traditional male breadwinner ideals) to a re-evaluation of household roles (Leach, 2005). Research has long outlined the potentially detrimental impact of unemployment on masculine identities, including steelworkers (e.g. Legerski and Cornwall, 2010), yet the enduring processes of restructuring may actually have become part of a communities internalised (collective) psyche (McLachlan et al., 2019). Drawing upon research in South Wales, Walkerdine and Jiminez (2012; 94) assert that steelwork becomes cemented as the embodiment of masculinity in some communities to the extent that it is 'central to community survival', being passed from father to son.

There are several implications to emerge from this review of the extant literature. Deindustrialisation undermined the resources that many working-class men have relied upon to construct their identities, a loss inherited by their sons. Accepting that hegemonic masculinities come into existence in specific circumstances, one might expect that the aforementioned conceptions of masculinity (physically arduous and dangerous work, collective occupational identity, and so forth) may have been displaced by new forms of hegemony in former steel-working communities in Sheffield. Therefore, this provides a fruitful context for understanding conceptualisations of 'being a man' among both former steelworkers and their sons, and identifying any differences. Furthermore, establishing how hegemonic masculinities are appropriated or contested, or new forms developed, will tell us much about the resistance of certain tenets of hegemonic masculinity and where change is most likely.

Sheffield: the steel city

Sheffield is synonymous with steel, credited with inventing the first true stainless steel in the late 1800s and world-renowned for its cutlery and tableware production, cumulating in the label 'Steel City' (Beattie, 1998). The labour history of Sheffield can be characterised as one of rapid growth due to the expansion of the iron and steel industries in the 19th-Century, with unemployment rates consistently below the national average (Tweedale, 1995). This contrasts with accelerated decline from the 1960s onwards as privatisation, higher energy costs and an influx of cheaper steel from abroad led to widespread job losses from these heavy industries (Taylor et al., 1996). National employment in the steel industry that stood at 320,000 in 1971 has declined such that the number of steelworkers employed in Sheffield is over double that found anywhere else in England, yet represents just 9,000 people (Rhodes, 2018). The steelworks that remain tend to be small and medium-sized enterprises producing bespoke, often made-to-order goods.

At the turn of the century, unskilled (particularly young) men in Sheffield faced a low-wage, service-dominated labour market and the first generation of young men in the post-war period to experience downward mobility compared to their fathers (McDowell, 2012). The same men who, two decades previous, would likely have found employment offering an average industrial wage and relative security over their lifetimes instead entered a labour market where such opportunities had all but vanished. For Sheffield more broadly, there was a period of recovery as government and regional initiatives led to a marked increase in public sector employment under the New Labour government (notably 1998-2007), and an attempt to modernise through investment in service and knowledge industries. In particular, female-dominated professions such as health and social work, education, and public administration employment in Sheffield increased much more rapidly than in any other part of the country (Lane et al., 2016). However, successive New Labour governments did not reverse the anti-labour legislation and initiatives of their Conservative predecessors, indeed there was a continuation of anti-industrial policies that meant the lives of the working-class men in Sheffield were not markedly better than before (Mollona, 2009).

In the time that has elapsed since much of the excellent research in this area was conducted over a decade ago, the younger men in this sample entered a labour market adversely affected by government-led austerity measures in response to the 2008 global recession. Cuts to benefits, public services, and an increasingly workfarist regime has pushed increasing numbers

of working-age people into low-paid, precarious employment. Sheffield has been labelled the 'low pay capital' of the UK, with wages 10% below the national average and over a quarter of workers receiving less than the living wage (Resolution Foundation, 2017). The UK's recovery was largely propelled via financialisation and rentier capitalism, neither of which have been to the betterment of working-class men in the steel city. These younger men have been navigating Sheffield's above national-average rates of non-standard working arrangements (notably zero-hour contracts), lower levels of trade union representation, and increases in poor - often illegal - employment practices, such as unpaid overtime and workplace harassment (Thomas et al., 2020). Revisiting these Sheffield communities represents a fruitful avenue for research in order to hear the accounts of those men navigating markedly different social and economic contexts while developing a sense of self and masculinity.

Methods

To achieve the stated aims, individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with fifteen retired, former steelworkers (aged between 60-70) and their sons (aged between 22-35), totalling thirty. Interviews were relatively unstructured, lasting on average 70 minutes, and were conducted in Sheffield, Northern England between September 2019 and March 2020. Data was also collected via overt non-participant observation between the two groups (nine father-son pairings in one, and six father-son pairings in another) over two separate afternoons in public houses that they frequently met, listening to them interact and share stories of navigating life and masculinity. While there was no meaningful input from the researcher to initiate or steer these conversations on either afternoon, prior participant information sheets had described these events as an opportunity to hear about what life is like for men in this part of Sheffield now, and how it might compare to the recent past. The main rationale for complimenting the interviews with this data was not only to see how experiences between the two groups directly compared, but to witness the dynamic between each group; in particular how masculinity was both policed and reaffirmed across and between the two age cohorts. There was no pre-agreed finish time and conversations lasted between three and three-and-a-half hours.

Criteria for the sample included: men who had worked in the steel industry in Sheffield for a minimum of ten years during their working lives, and sons who were born following the steep decline in employment opportunities in this industry, yet remained living in the same areas of

Sheffield that they had been raised in. There was no purposive sampling for all the older men to be retired, or that all the younger men had never been gainfully employed in the steel industry, but both are true of the sample. Due to the white working-class nature of this particular community, thirteen of the fifteen father-son pairings identify as White British, with two fathers of West Indian descent, whose parents were economic 'Windrush' migrants recruited during nursing shortages at Sheffield hospitals in the late 1950s. The sample was accessed in two ways; via gatekeepers from an earlier, unrelated study conducted in Sheffield, and gatekeepers who administrate the Sheffield History Forum, an online resource where residents interested in their city and its history share experiences and information - with snowball sampling deployed to further increase the response rate. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity, and while respondents are in a position to self-identify, approval was given by all.

The qualitative interviews utilised interview guides (according to the principles of Kvale, 1996) and thus designed with four general topic areas, and a number of potential follow-up probes. The four topic areas centred on respondents' views on what masculinity incorporates; how they as individuals orientate to these conceptions of masculinity; how they feel masculinity has, and will, change over time; and what the barriers to fulfilling masculinity are for men in their community. Probes were informed by the literature, for example breadwinning, how masculinity is embodied, and occupational identity were terms employed.

Both interviews and the non-participant observations were audio-recorded and notes taken during the observation relating to how both groups interacted with each other. These transcripts and notes were analysed using King and Horrocks (2010) three-stage analytical framework, where initial themes are developed from the emergent qualitative data before links drawn to extant theory and empirical research. Guided by Tracy's (2013) phronetic iterative approach, this process was repeated in cyclical fashion, alternating between the new data (via the unstructured nature of the collection techniques) and existing concepts and research (aided by the probing questions). This enabled rich, original perceptions of masculinity to inform the resultant discussion. Respondents were given the opportunity to review and revise transcripts once they were completed, of which no changes to the data were made.

<u>Findings</u>

Collective affirmation

The most striking disjuncture in the accounts of the former steelworkers and their sons was the greater degree of heterogeneity in conceptions of masculinity among the latter. The inextricable link between steelwork and being a breadwinner was a key theme throughout the fifteen interviews with the former steelworkers, despite the fact that many of the older men had not worked in steel for over thirty years:

'We lost being a steelworker, which was a huge part of who we were, our identity. And it's a double-edged sword, because that was how you provided. You were brought up to do both, and you left school as young as fourteen to do it, so that was a difficult thing to come to terms with' (Stuart Warner, aged 70; interview)

References to a collective 'we' and 'us' were common even in the individual interviews:

'It was just what we did. There was a sense of communal pride in being a steelworker and dutifully providing for our families. None of us drove nice cars or wore fancy suits to work, but we were somebody. Our little old city famous for something that we helped create, and we could put food on the table too' (Roger Hollis, aged 64; interview)

This created a contradiction with their own (working) life trajectories from the 1980s onwards, which were typically not characterised by secure employment – in the steel industry or otherwise – directly threatening both occupational and breadwinning tenets of their masculine identity. This led to a range of responses as they navigated a more uncertain labour market in much the same way their sons have. The so-called 'lucky ones' found relatively stable employment in local government positions leading up to retirement:

'It wasn't the same as working in the mills of course, the comradery, customs and other things just weren't there, and some felt uneasy about working for a government that had put us out of work in the first place. But this was a chance to still contribute something to the city, and we were back into trade unions too – which was a way to continue fighting the government' (Neil Peters, aged 66; observation)

Others moved between short-term, often casually-contracted work, encompassing a wide variety of jobs. Eoin Wedgbury compiled a list of twenty-two different types of work that he

had undertaken after being relinquished from his role at a steel mill in 1981, including painting and decorating, transporting goods and people, and a range of manual labouring positions.

While both age cohorts espoused similar attitudes towards work, namely that working hard was part of their core values and underpinned the provider role that was central to their identities, the former steelworkers were defined by a (shared) occupational identity that was much less prevalent among their sons. In effect, only one-fifth of the younger men considered themselves to have a career that they were proud of and wanted to pursue. This supports findings in other deindustrialised areas (e.g. Wicks, 2002) where validation is rooted in social interactions specific to that location, i.e. work that may be considered arduous and not wholly appealing to a wider population is a source of collective pride and self-worth as part of one's past or present identity. This related to frequent references when together to 'former glories', which their sons recounted – often with humour:

'A lot of them talk about big engineering projects that are currently in the news, just to show off the knowledge and skills they've retained. Within an hour of them drinking of a night, you'll hear the same stories of former glory. The times the union fought management over pay and won, etcetera. I think the experience has been romanticised in their minds somewhat over the years' (David Wright, aged 30, manual labourer; observation)

Through to more recent action, for example:

'One of the old mills was to be demolished and make way for private rented flats about eight or nine years ago. As an ode to the good old days a bunch of us banded together and protested, also getting the local MP involved. Anyway, we won! It's still there, a reminder of our importance past' (Mike Fawcett, aged 66; observation)

Conceptions among the younger generation

Without that same level of shared collective experience as their fathers, the younger men offered up greater variance in their conceptions of masculinity across the interviews. The gendered identities of young men in Sheffield reflect the particular gender regime they actually find themselves within, and nostalgic evocations of a regime that no longer exists. That a particular conception of manliness appeared to be so firm among the older generation (tied

principally to notions of a breadwinning steelworker, but also extended to other customs such as the ability to 'hold' one's drink) contrasted markedly with a real lack of clarity among the younger men. It appears much more difficult for them to garner a shared sense of masculinity and identity as they responded to the disjuncture in idealised notions of masculinity and their lived realities by 'doing' masculinity in diverse, complex and often contradictory ways. In a sense, these younger men were not able to achieve safe passage to affirming their masculinity that previous generations of their family had.

This can be seen in the attitudes towards being the household's primary earner, which varied much more significantly among the younger men than it did for their fathers. There were certainly some for whom the legacy of breadwinning informed their sense of masculinity and self. As documented elsewhere (e.g. McDowell, 2012) in the context of low educational attainment and what was perceived to be a 'tough' labour market, this led to potentially self-destructive and even illicit means:

'I have done things I'm not too proud of – gambling, borrowing money from the kind of people you don't want any association with, petty crime. I was caught between wanting to provide for my kids the best I could, but knowing that this wasn't the behaviour of a role model. It was tough, but providing came first' (Adam Hollis, aged 35, security; interview)

A minority found it difficult to ascertain the centrality of breadwinning to their identity, considering it something of an unwelcome necessity. For example:

'It's a tough one. I don't think being a financial provider is that important to me. I grew up with very little and I don't think that's what makes you or your kids happy ultimately. But I do continue going to a job I don't like very much, so I guess yes, it must be!' (Timothy Ryan, aged 27, call centre; observation)

One of the sons went further to defiantly downplay financial provision as critical to his sense of masculinity:

'I would happily stay at home if [partner] was able to earn enough for the both of us. My dad shakes his head disapprovingly when I say this, but genuinely, I take no satisfaction from work whatsoever, and a lottery win would see me retire tomorrow!' (Luke Rodgers, aged 31, manual labourer; interview)

For the majority of their sons, notions of breadwinning had paved the way for a more pragmatic 'provider' role in the context of a perceived lack of secure, well-paid work on offer to working-

class men in this community, and changes in female education and employment participation. Providing financially was deemed extremely significant to their identities as men, with a feeling that there was greater responsibility on themselves to earn than is the case for their female partners, but that sharing this responsibility was desirable:

'Women obviously work in better paid jobs than perhaps my dad's generation, and one income isn't really enough to get by on for a lot of families. So, I think finding a partner with her own career ambitions is very attractive for a lot of men. But I do still feel that in reality there is greater pressure on men to bring money in' (Anthony Jackson, 25, fitness instructor; observation)

Accounts reveal a degree of conceptual elasticity over what a 'provider' role constitutes. For some this equates to either working the longest hours or bringing in the greatest share of the household income – even if the difference to their partners' contributions is marginal, signalling a symbolic (as much as material) importance. In other words, where the difference between working hours and/or earnings with their partner was only slight, this was deemed socially acceptable as they were not deviating too far from 'norms' of expected gendered behaviour, and simultaneously they were afforded the benefits of the patriarchal dividend by a disproportionately low share of the household's unpaid labour:

'My mates prefer to go out and get second jobs, even "rubbish" jobs, just to feel like they're doing their best in terms of bringing money in, more so than they would mucking in more with housework' (Matthew Edwards, aged 22, removals workers; observation)

The inextricable link between masculinity and class was particularly evident during the non-participant observations, with a perceived greater class consciousness among the older men key to their more collectivised views and experiences:

Make no mistake we were fighting a class war against Thatcher's government. Going through something like that as a group bonded us. People are more individual nowadays, they're forced to look after number one. Our class is important to us and it's very important to these lad's generation, they just don't realise how much (Roger Hollis, aged 64)

No I do get that. There are issues we face as men that men from other backgrounds don't contend with – for instance, we always hear that white working-class boys don't do well at school, but you have to ask whether the support for them is good enough. We know class is

important, it's probably not used much around here anymore because people aspire to be more than that, to be better off financially (Lewis Wedgbury, aged 34, courier)

Yeah it's tricky, because you're kind of told to work hard and you'll be able to afford nice things and live more comfortably. So you're aspiring for a life that isn't working-class, but told to be proud that you are. I think people avoid these complex questions about themselves (Chris O'Neill, 23, bartender)

Not having a clear and explicit sense of what hegemonic masculinity means for today's men was compounded by uncertainty surrounding the centrality of class to their lives, and any communally agreed notion of what working-class masculinity entails beyond loose parameters set by the older generation. Effectively, without the same sense of collectivity the younger men were not always clear how to evaluate themselves, and against what criteria.

Confusion or emancipation?

Without the collective affirmation seen among their fathers, there was a mixture of confusion regarding what is expected of a 'man' in contemporary society and a degree of perceived emancipation from what were considered outdated ideals. This is perfectly encapsulated by the inherent contradictions between tenets of hegemonic masculinity. For example, many of the younger men felt that the provider role had been superseded by a desire to *appear* wealthy, as many of their compatriots felt pressurised into exaggerated public displays of masculinity:

'A successful man is probably one who has accumulated wealth for himself and can afford nice things. I think social media has fuelled toxic masculinity. These so-called alpha males post pictures of their £400 trainers and dinner in expensive restaurants. And when they get lots of girls liking the pictures, it validates to other men that this is what you need to be doing too' (Dean Joseph, aged 24, warehouse operative; interview)

Contradictions in these competing perceptions of masculinity were dutifully noted i.e. that the money used to create a persona of wealth naturally took away from money that could be spent providing for one's family, with references to sending their children to a 'good' school, or for a house deposit in a 'nicer' area. Other perceptions of masculinity extended to a particular type of physique through to more involved fatherhood:

'It's impossible to live up to all of the ideals. A lad around here can't be a good provider for his family, have an expensive house, car, all of those things. And if you work long hours to provide for your family how can you have enough time and energy for the other stuff – things like going to the gym to bulk up? Be an involved dad? You'd need to be superman' (Gareth Schofield, aged 25, administrator; interview)

These younger men felt that although their masculinity was policed by their community to an extent, there is such variance in life 'projects' (for example, working in a feminised service job, engaging in involved fathering, not participating in the drinking culture) that there is a degree of emancipation from hegemonic masculinity ideals. This was situated in comparison to their fathers who, despite some variance in responses to the threats to their masculinity in the past (which oscillated from sustained opposition to reluctant acquiescence) presented a relatively homogeneous masculinity and sense of self:

'I think the views of us old lot are probably outdated now. It was fine to think that men were suited to work and women were better suited to managing the household. And it wasn't an insult in any way – it's hard work raising children and keeping a house in order, and they managed the finances too' (Neil Peters, aged 66; observation)

Indeed, despite a perceived sense of masculine superiority in the group discussions, there was sympathy for their sons based upon their own experiences of the changing economic and social context from the 1980s. Such transformation has led to a reconfiguration of identities that employ both shared experiences and commonalities, and individual circumstance. For example, fathers and sons shared numerous common values, such as espousing very similar political views, interests and leisure activities, but also differences in other areas.

Contradictions in conceptions of masculinity even among the fathers, who displayed a relatively homogenous understanding of what it encompasses, were evident in the non-participant observations. For example, there would be disapproving murmurings among the older men about how the sons could have behaved in more 'gentlemanly fashion' to female staff working at the public house, construed as holding eye contact, manners, and paying compliments. Yet, when interacting with female staff themselves, it was common to perform perceptibly overexaggerated acts of chivalry – to women often less than half their age – with frequent use of sexist terms of endearment including 'love' and 'dear' (though they were unaware of the sexist nature of such terms). These performances would be followed by other fathers querying why the sons without partners were not following suit to "chat them up". Only

on one occasion, as Vernon Edwards complained about the younger men failing to offer one female member of staff help with carrying drinks to their table, did Daniel Warner retort that the fathers were propagating condescending and outdated views.

Enduring customs of masculinity

While unable to mirror some of the ways their fathers accomplished masculinity, the sons inherited and continued a number of their customs, primary examples being an unswerving loyalty to Sheffield's local sports teams and alcohol consumption. Regarding the latter, the former steelworkers would drink on a daily basis, both in and outside of work:

'It was common to nip to nearby pubs where the drinks were lined up on the bar waiting for us during work breaks, to maximise drinking time, or we would send the apprentices for them if we couldn't get out on busy days' (Stuart Warner, aged 70; observation)

For the younger men it was a rite of passage into manhood to drink, typically before the legal drinking age, and often with their fathers. Similarly, the former steelworkers bore the evidence of their masculine work via scars and even missing finger tips (as a result of incidents in the steel mills and beyond), with two men requiring assistive equipment for walking due to physical impairments directly caused by their work. The body was also a site to 'do' masculinity for their sons with nine of the fifteen men presently or previously engaged in work they described as physically arduous and potentially dangerous (ranging from manual labouring, security, fitness, the armed forces and a firefighter). Eleven of these younger men considered the gym to be, or have been, centrally important to their daily lives as the social embodiment of hegemonic masculinity was evident:

'It doesn't bother me, but as a skinny bloke you can be spoken about in quite emasculating ways. People joking that your [female] partner might be tougher than you, have to do the physical jobs around the house that are supposed to be "men's" work, things like that' (Chris O'Neill, aged 23, bartender; interview)

This again highlights some of the internal contradictions that naturally exist as there are multiple, and competing, hegemonic masculinities. For those men who pursued a muscular physique, strict dieting did not permit copious and frequent drinking, prompting one father to find humour in this trade-off:

'He might look like a big man, but he drinks like a little girl' (Ian Schofield, aged 62; observation)

Such references illustrate the policing done by the fathers as they attempted to reaffirm their own masculinity over these younger men. Despite an average age of 64 the former steelworkers drank significantly more than their sons during the non-participant observations, compounded by a series of seemingly trivial behaviours. Behaviourally the fathers exerted a degree of control over proceedings, for example they decided the seating arrangements by choosing their seats first, through to instructing (as opposed to asking) the sons to order and carry their drinks - acts typically undertaken with deference save for the occasional muttering of dissent. In dialogue the fathers were much more likely to interrupt than they were to be interrupted, with their sons demonstrably more guarded when expressing themselves, not without cause as the fathers were much more likely than the sons to take issue with their thoughts and suggestions. As a further illustration, there were many references to the amount of time their sons spent 'on' their appearances, their tight-fitted clothes, and how their tattoos and body piercings were excessive. Yet, the younger men framed such things in masculine terms – notably as a way to 'get girls', with sexual promiscuity one purported tenet of hegemonic masculinity.

A commonality both cohorts of men shared was equating a lack of control over their own lives as a threat to their masculinity. Luke Rodgers who had spent a significant period of time unemployed, reclaimed his masculinity by stating that this was his choice – that 'anyone working 9-5 for low pay is a slave to the system' – and in somewhat fighting against the establishment he was 'doing' his own version of masculinity. This is completely at odds with his father's view of masculinity, characterised as a 'grafter' and someone who avoided unemployment and welfare benefits; yet his tales of manhood were also fraught with versions of fighting this (oft- opaque) notion of 'the system'. For him, fighting those responsible for de-skilling his trade and eventually closing the steel mills, was an attempt to reassert his masculinity. The anxiety created by feelings of powerlessness among both fathers and sons in this sample was attributed to a propensity by both to vote 'leave' in the recent EU referendum, with Sheffield the only one of Northern England's largest five cities to do so:

'A lot of my mates voted [for] Brexit, I think largely because they don't feel like they have much control of what happens in their lives, and this was one way to feel powerful…the chance to affect something so important. Slogans like "take back control" really appealed to them' (Benjamin Fawcett, aged 34, firefighter; interview)

Is there a crisis of masculinity?

The previous sections illustrate themes of both continuity and change in how masculinity is conceived across the two age cohorts. Table 2 provides further evidence of the ways in which masculinities are policed, modified or rejected, drawing from the non-participant observations. Again, respondents were more guarded than in the interviews when articulating ways they may subvert hegemonic masculinity, demonstrating that the perceptions of counterparts from both generations may determine what they are willing to disclose publicly.

Table 1 here

The data reveals that there is a complex and unorderly dynamic driving conceptions of masculinity, particularly among the younger men. Their masculinity is policed to a degree by the older generation and their peers, and despite a greater willingness to disassociate with aspects of hegemonic masculinity, many of the cultural frames informing the fathers' sense of 'being men' have remained fairly constant. As conceptions are questioned, modified and elements may be rejected, they feel that there is much greater freedom in terms of socially acceptable masculine behaviour. Crucially however, the data does not point to a crisis *of* masculinity as conceptions of such behaviour are changing in a community considered to possess relatively homogenous (and traditional) views on gender.

At no point was there any real troubling of the sex categories by either cohort of men, i.e. of 'being a man' in a more general sense. Both fathers and sons subscribed to the gender binary and felt that elements of masculinity were important to the well-being of families and society. Indeed, maintaining a sense of masculinity was of some importance to all of the men in this sample, who aspired to fulfil some tenets of 'being a man' depending upon which were achievable or desirable; ultimately developing a notion of masculinity that worked for them personally. In effect, masculinity is not seen as something the men wish to do away with – despite acknowledging some of the damaging effects of its hegemonic forms. As such, while there are possible 'crises' *in* masculinity as forms become rejected or modified, the data reveals

a continued subscription to it and a likely continuance of this as new forms of acceptable behaviour become enveloped within expanding conceptions of masculinity.

To illustrate this point, perhaps the major difference between both cohorts was the greater emphasis on non-financial provision for their families by the younger men, with many social comparisons drawn to their fathers:

'It was a different time in that sense, and I don't begrudge him not being there more in person. That part of our culture is still really evident amongst the older lot, even now if my little one starts crying my dad will say "he's crying for his grandma"' (Nathan Tomlin, aged 35, hospitality; interview)

Irrespective of the motivations for more involved fathering, there is evidence in these accounts that taking on a more primary caring role, in lieu of being able to provide a breadwinning wage, was part of their redefining what 'being a man' is. Some were taking a great deal of life satisfaction and pride in taking ownership of caring duties – feeding, playtime and helping with homework were frequently referenced. Others were conceptualising their engagement in traditionally feminine activities in 'manly' ways, often attempting to rationalise and give them a degree of functionality, such as referring to household chores as 'jobs'. Across all dialogue with the fifteen younger men there was no hint of emasculation towards anyone engaging in high levels of unpaid labour, and a suggestion that masculinity in this sample had certainly absorbed notions such as involved fathering as a compatible ideal.

As such, the men navigate the legacies of masculinity in their community, which involves a degree of policing from their fathers and others, and a context that does not easily facilitate a path to hegemonic masculinity. With variance in their responses, these men are using their agency to situate themselves in alignment with tenets that are achievable or desirable for them, and expanding conceptions of (socially) acceptable masculinities, which gives them a degree of freedom to do so. As noted above, this demonstrates a possible crisis 'in' masculinity, yet continued subscription to different tenants of masculinity mean that the parameters are always changing and (hegemonic) masculinity might be undermined but proves remarkably persistent.

Concluding reflections

The first major contribution of this article relates to our understanding of how conceptions of masculinity change over time. In the type of community oft said to be relatively homogenous

in its views due to its distinctive economic and social history (Nayak, 2006; Parry, 2003; Wicks, 2002), perceptions of 'acceptable' masculine behaviour have changed across a generation. The former steelworkers conceptualised masculinity in much the same ways research presented over a decade ago (e.g. Beattie, 1998; Gardiner et al., 2009; Strangleman, 2005) signifying the remarkable endurance of occupational and breadwinning identities to men who, to varying degrees, were unable to fulfil either role in later life. This homogeneity in perceptions of masculinity was reaffirmed through enduring social customs, notably drinking real ale and nostalgic (often romanticised) storytelling, which were occasionally used to invoke a sense of masculine superiority over their sons. For their sons, perceptions of masculinity were much more varied as they attempted to fulfil some of these traditional ideals and yet distance themselves – willingly or as a result of constrained choice – from other tenets. For example, providing financially for one's family remained centrally important to their masculinity, but a 'provider' role is much more flexible than that of 'breadwinner'. These younger men were satisfied to have either the highest earnings or longest paid employment hours in their household, not necessarily both, suggesting a symbolic as much as material importance to their identities.

The second major contribution of this article is that changes in conceptions of masculinity from first to second generation did not represent a crisis *of* masculinity, rather an expansion of what constitutes acceptable masculine behaviour. Without shared recourse to an occupational identity or the ability to be a breadwinner, these men have made many different choices regarding employment, involvement in parenthood, attitudes towards drinking, and more. As agentic social actors, they formulate their own conceptions of self that conform sufficiently to traditional tenets of masculinity – so as not to risk social accountability or their receipt of the patriarchal dividend – yet modified and rejected others, depending upon their personal circumstances. Masculinity itself was not threatened, rather its multiple forms (as originally conceptualised by Connell, 2005) continue to expand as men engage in a wider pattern of behaviours. To continue with the above example, relinquishing the breadwinner role enabled these men to express a greater desirability to share responsibility for household earning. Simultaneously, a commitment to either higher earnings or longer employment hours was viewed as sufficient to avoid an equal share of the responsibility for their households' unpaid labour (housework, childcare, and so forth) resulting in something of a personal win-win, with their masculinities intact. While the ideals and social practices that sustain masculinity become

more complex and diverse, masculinity itself does not appear to be facing an existential crisis at this time, in this community.

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Theme	Former steelworkers	Their sons
Of central importance to masculinity	Someone who provides for their family, and looks after their mates (John Ryan) I second that - looking after your own, never dodge a round of drinks in the pub, and never cross a picket line (Vernon Edwards)	I think it's widely accepted that you're supposed to at least provide the basics. So for that you're expected to work hard, even if you don't want to (Dillon Peters) Spot on, you look for anything to make work as pleasant as possible – often that's finding mates there. It's what we have to do so make the best of it (Daniel Warner)
How masculinity is reaffirmed and policed	Some things have changed, but others have stayed the same. People still assume there's something wrong with you if you don't graft, drink, watch football, and so on (Harry Barlow) Aye, as another example, if one of the lads is showing off a new jacket, we'll subtly inquire that the kids aren't going without while they treat themselves, things like that (Leon Joseph) For sure, we're always taking note (Philip Tomlin)	There are definitely times I've been peer pressured into chatting to a girl, or stand toe-to-toe with a boss, purely because I think that's what others expect from me. Like Harry said we all make sure to do at least something that confirms our status as men (David Wright) Yeah you're always mindful of how the older generation think I, as a man, should behave. Even if you behave differently, you're conscious of it and it definitely affects your decision-making (Dean Joseph)
How masculinity is modified or rejected	I think we all feel that we've been perhaps more affectionate with our grandkids than we were our own kids. It could be for many reasons, but I do believe we've softened up our views in that regard over time (Mike Fawcett) You have men doing jobs that women used to do, and vice versa. Women earning more than men, men looking after kids. A whole array of things have become more acceptable to my mind (Eoin Wedgbury)	Work is drilled into us as being the most important thing, but I don't accept that. If you die your boss isn't thinking about you a week later, but the family you give up time with will be indefinitely (Luke Rodgers) Even though many of us would be wary about actually testing this theory, I think pretty much anything is acceptable nowadays, people are more-or-less free to be and do as they please. My views definitely aren't the same as my dad's (Wayne Barlow)

Table 1. Excerpts from the non-participant observations relating to the overarching research aims