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Masculinity, health and ecological destruction

by Arran Stibbe

One important way that language is connected to ecology is through the discursive construction of gender. As ecofeminists such as Diamond and Orenstein (1990) and Adams (1993) show, there is a high correlation between patriarchal social structures and ecological destruction, and social structures are created, partially, through language. Discourses which play roles in constructing images of masculinity and femininity are all around, but for this article I will concentrate on one example: an instance of a particular discourse of masculinity which has been called 'hegemonic masculinity'. In Stibbe (2004), I analysed the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the discourse of *Men's Health* magazine, drawing out implications for the emerging concept of health. There other important implications, however, in terms of ecology, and this current article looks at discourse of *Men's Health* magazine in terms of its ecological implications.

The covers of the magazine, seen by far more people than those who actually buy it, display a black and white picture of an 'ideal' man, and a series of short statements in various font sizes. The majority of these statements use the conventional syntax of lifestyle magazines to set up various goals for readers, such as being thin or being a great heterosexual lover (*Lose your belly! Gold medal sex* etc). These are treated as something which is obviously desirable, but they may be implicated more in creating desires than responding to already existing desires. For instance, men may not have realised before that it was desirable to 'Add 2 inches to your chest!'.

Good health is strongly correlated to ecological sustainability: a diet consisting of local produced, varied, organic fruits and vegetables is as good for biodiversity and the land as it is for health, as is avoiding canned and processed food and walking instead of taking the car. However, rather than goals which simultaneously promote health and ecological sustainability, the main goal that the magazine sets up for readers is the achievement of a huge, muscular body. Clearly this goal is related to images of power and masculinity rather than health. The following are just some of the statements from the cover of the magazine:

● SOLID MUSCLE! ● BIGGER BICEPS ● BUILD THIS BODY [with arrow pointing at a huge torso] ● A HARD BODY ● gain muscle ● FIND YOUR ABS! ● ADD 2 inches to your chest ● HARD MUSCLES FAST! ● PACK ON MUSCLE!
(*Men's Health* 06/2000 - 09/2001 covers)

Achievement of a huge, muscular body demands the wasteful consumption of large amounts of food, and the magazine recommends one kind of food over all others:

- meat has big advantages over all other foods: It packs muscle-building protein... (*Men's Health* 2000: December:166)
- Meat is loaded with the protein needed to build new muscle (*Men's Health* 2000:December:166)

- The muscle stoker [recipe]...eat this meal and you'll grow your biceps...That's because the protein in the beef [1lb top London broil] helps to build new muscle tissue (*Men's Health* 2000:July/August:87)
- make your meat beef and you'll also get testosterone-boosting amino acids. Testosterone helps you lift more weight and build more muscle. (*Men's Health* 2000: November, p84)

The cause and effect relationship between been eating meat and growing muscle is clearly expressed in the expression 'muscle-building protein', as if the protein itself will grow muscle without any effort on the part of the person eating it. Likewise, 'protein' is the agent of the verb 'build' in 'protein...helps to build new muscle', rather than the reader. In 'eat this meal and you'll grow your biceps', the reader is the agent of 'grow', but the only activity that the sentence suggests is 'eat this meal'.

Despite the associated risks of heart disease and prostate cancer *Men's Health* is recommending the consumption of large amounts of red meat, in order to achieve the goal of a muscular body. And meat, when produced in intensive units using chemically treated grains, genetic modification and growth hormones, is one of the most inefficient and ecologically destructive ways of producing food (Turner 1999).

This pattern of connections is repeated in relation to convenience food. In accordance with to the masculinist overtones throughout the magazine, cooking is assigned to women (Fiddes 1991:158). If men must cook, then they should do it the masculine way - with convenience foods. The association of masculinity with convenience food is accomplished through a memorable rhyme:

- A Man, A Plan, A Can: All you need is a can-opener (or a wife) (*Men's Health* 2000:June:96).

or a simple equation:

- You + a can opener = 12 manly meals (*Men's Health* June 2000, contents)

or the following imperative:

- Nuke your gut. The TV dinner diet. Three minutes to a leaner waist. These dinners aren't just easy to make, they're a fast way to lose weight...low in calories and *incredibly* tasty. Fill your freezer with these 13 meals... (*Men's Health*:December:133)

In terms of the environment, of course, convenience foods take a heavy toll in terms of packaging materials, processing, and refrigeration. By encouraging men to grow huge bodies on a diet of meat and convenience food, *Men's Health* magazine appears to be using language to establish artificial goals which celebrate hegemonic masculinity and male power, and lead to ecologically destructive behaviour. And if men find that a diet of frozen pizza and canned food does not lead to the hugely muscular and lean body of the cover model, then they can always buy one of the huge SUV cars which are heavily advertised in the magazine as a substitute.

The images in the magazine of huge muscular men and the constant implication that this is the ideal shape for a man have the potential to lead to body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction, in turn, could lead to following the dietary recommendations of the magazine to consume large amounts of meat and

convenience food, or to compensate for the lack of ideal physique through purchase of the range of luxury consumer items offered by the magazine. In this way, social constructions of gender - masculinity in this case - have the potential to encourage behaviours which damage ecosystems.

References

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