



Q33109 – Language and Feminism

Men Going Their Own Way: an exploration of in-group and out-group positioning on the r/MGTOW subreddit

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In this essay I will be examining discourse on the popular r/MGTOW subreddit. I will be using the framework of positioning theory to ascertain how in-group dynamics are forged between its members, and how they position other, non-members in the out-group. Discourses of hegemonic masculinity, such as gender differentiation and homosociality feature prominently in how these dynamics are achieved. Furthermore, I will be looking at competing discourses of femininity that are present in the forum, and how this works to strengthen the bonds of the in-group, and further exclude the out-group.

Anonymous online communities such as MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) are a burgeoning site for anti-feminist discourse, and there is a lack of academic attention given to this. The MGTOW-adjacent group 'Incels' were featured widely in news reports in late 2018, especially given their connections to a variety of shootings in North America. While MGTOW doesn't necessarily share the same violent nihilism as the Incel groups, those in MGTOW forums do espouse some of the same toxic, anti-feminist rhetoric, and both share the same misogynist view of women. For that reason I think it is important to develop a greater understanding of how this forum operates, and why it seems to appeal to so many young men.

Background

My approach in this essay is inspired partly by developments in post-structuralist sociolinguistic theory, particularly the concept of identity that it puts forward. Bucholtz and Hall give a definition of identity as 'the social positioning of self and other' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: p.586), and this significantly informs the way this essay looks at the data I have collected. Identity is something that emerges in social interaction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: p.587), rather than something static and internal that exists prior to interaction. Identity arises through what are called 'indexical processes' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: p.594). These processes include: mentions of identity categories and labels, implicatures and presuppositions about the identity of one's self or another, displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, and the use of linguistic structures and systems ideologically linked to specific personas or groups (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: p.594). A similar approach can be seen in postmodern feminist linguistics, where there was a turn from the traditional dominance and difference approach, and gender was seen to be socially constructed (Cameron, 2005: p.484). Gender identities are produced 'ongoingly', they are performed (Cameron, 2005: p.484), and are not simply something determined by biological sex.

Kiesling (2007) applies this postmodern approach to gender identity to masculinity, describing it as 'performed', and defining it as 'a quality or set of practices... that is stereotypically connected with men' (Kiesling, 2007: pp.655-656). He writes that men, particularly white, heterosexual,

middle-class men, are often left out of linguistic study, claiming that this is due to their 'unmarkedness', which is a function of their dominance: white, heterosexual men are often the invisible standard to which other identities are compared, but Kiesling stresses the importance of 'problematizing' these categories (Kiesling, 2007: p.654). Kiesling also draws on the work of R. W. Connell, who proposed what is known as *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity embodies the most currently 'honorable' ways of being a man, and all other masculinities are positioned in relation to it (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: p.832). It is conceived of as the pattern of practices that allow male domination to continue (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: p.832). While this concept proves useful in informing my viewpoint, it is quite vague. Indeed, Kiesling saw it as difficult to apply to men's linguistic practices, and set out to 'decompose' it into four main cultural discourses of masculinity (Kiesling, 2007: p.657). These discourses are as follows:

Gender difference: a discourse seeing men and women as naturally exhibiting different behaviour, and being inherently biologically different.

Heterosexism: a discourse seeing masculinity as heterosexual.

Dominance: a discourse identifying masculinity as dominant, authoritative, and powerful.

Male solidarity: a discourse of homosociality, promoting a natural bond among men (Kiesling, 2007: p.658).

These discourses are experienced as desire by men, rather than as constraints on male behaviour (Kiesling, 2007: p.658). The four cultural discourses outlined by Kiesling are all very prominent in my analysis. Since I am looking at in-group and out-group positioning, male solidarity will be my focus, however, each of the other three (in particular dominance and gender difference) are utilised in the data I have collected in order to create that sense of male solidarity amongst the forum's users. While these four cultural discourses are not present universally in the dominant forms of masculinity, they are considered to be prominent in the US and in the UK, and since my data is focused on a Western context (Lin, 2017: p.78), their application proves useful.

Despite its growing popularity, little academic research has been done into online anti-feminism. One study I found informative, however, was an ethnographic study conducted of the r/MGTOW subreddit by Jie Liang Lin, who talks about it in relation to masculinity and homosociality (Lin, 2017). Lin describes how the men involved in MGTOW view themselves as victims of 'gynocentrism', they believe that Western society has been corrupted by feminism, and the only way for men to live is to abandon women, and to '[nurse] their besieged masculinities with the support of other men online' (Lin, 2017: p.78). This idea of a supportive community of males, who reinforce one another's masculinities links clearly with Kiesling's discourse of male solidarity set out above. Lin also writes that 'MGTOW believe modern women have been "brainwashed" by feminism' (Lin, 2017: p.89). This is something I develop in my findings, as it is emblematic of the discourse of low female agency that I uncover.

Positioning theory, introduced by Davies and Harré (1990), is another development in sociolinguistics that significantly informs my essay. It echoes the post-structuralist idea of identity that I set out above: for positioning theory an individual emerges through the process of interaction and is constituted and reconstituted through their discursive practices (Davies and Harré, 1990: p.46). Positioning is defined as 'the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines' (Davies and Harré, 1990: p.48), and there can be both other-positioning, where one person positions another, and self-positioning, where one positions oneself (Langenhove and Harré, 1999: p.24).

Methodology

The data I have collected comes from two popular threads from the r/MGTOW subreddit; a subreddit being a forum dedicated to a particular topic within Reddit. MGTOw stands for Men Going Their Own Way, signifying a group of men who, due to their perception that feminism has undergone a period of rampant growth and come to dominate the Western world, believe that interacting with women has become either a) too dangerous, or b) not worth their time. This particular subreddit is popular by the standards of Reddit, with around 89,000 subscribers at the time of writing. Its popularity seems to have grown as Reddit began to ban or 'quarantine' other large anti-feminist forums (such as the Incel forum r/braincels, or the more broadly reactionary r/TheRedPill). This popularity, coupled with the fact that the title of the forum explicitly positions its users as men, makes it a perfect source for data involving the overarching discourse of anti-feminism, as well as the specific and competing discourses within that. Furthermore, the anonymous nature of the forum gives its participants freedom to express more openly their extreme misogynist views without fear of repercussion, so the data makes a perfect selection for my analysis. The two threads I have selected have a large number of upvotes (a quantification of approval on Reddit), as well as a large number of comments, as I think it is a safe assumption that these posts provide a more authoritative representation of the anti-feminist narrative propagated on the forum.

For this essay I will be analysing my data through the framework of positioning theory, the genesis of which I described above. This framework will allow me to understand the ways in which the users of the forum are positioned through interaction as an in-group, and in turn how they position others as an out-group, as well as how these two types of positioning are interrelated. In any discourse there are a select group of available subject positions one can be positioned in, and Davies and Harré give the example of the two positions in the discourse of romantic love: the agentive male hero, and the passive princess (Davies and Harré, 1990: p.53). In the discourse of the r/MGTOW subreddit that I am analysing, I identify two distinct subject positions available for men, and one for women, each ascribed different levels of agency. As I will develop later, one of these subject positions constitutes the exclusively masculine in-group, while the other two represent the different available out-group positions.

Bamberg (1997) develops the positioning theory outlined by Davies and Harré, setting out three levels of narrative positioning (Bamberg, 1997: p.337), which I will outline as follows:

- Level 1: How the narrators positions themselves in relation to other characters.
- Level 2: How the narrators positions themselves in relation to their audience.
- Level 3: How the narrators positions themselves to themselves.

In my analysis, level 1 positioning will mainly involve how the users of the forum position the out-group, level 2 positioning will involve how the users position themselves and their audience as in-group, and level 3 positioning will involve how the users perform a hegemonic masculinity, although all three levels are heavily interconnected. Though not a story in the traditional sense, the r/MGTOW subreddit provides a jointly produced narrative in the metaphorical sense (Davies and Harré, 1990: p.53) relevant for the application of positioning theory, as I will set out at the beginning of my analysis.

Data analysis

In this analysis, I will show how those interacting with the jointly produced narrative present throughout the r/MGTOW forum are positioned, and how they position others, as well as how participating in the narrative transforms the users from an assumed subject position of 'victim' to one of perceived agency and self-ownership. There is a clear in-group of the forum's users, self-positioned broadly as the protagonists, who are initially positioned as victims of an imagined dominant feminism, the proponents of which, in this narrative, are positioned as the antagonistic out-group. I will first demonstrate how the users position women as an out-group by looking at the competing discourses around femininity: there is a discourse presenting women with no agency, as little more than biologically-driven bodies, and another presenting them as actively evil 'misandrists'. I will then set out how this, as well as the out-group positioning of non-MGTOW men, constitutes the formation of a masculine in-group, and how this formation transforms the users from their perceived subject position as victims to a more agentic position.

Throughout the forum, the only subject position made available for women is as part of the out-group. Women are positioned here via two different discourses of femininity, evidenced in the writings of the forum's male user-base. Based on replies to a thread entitled 'What shocked you most about women?' (Appendix 2), I will set out how these discourses are linguistically constructed. The first of these discourses I would call 'actively evil femininity', and the second 'passive femininity'. The discourse of 'actively evil femininity' is constructed using the semantic field of warfare. Here, women are positioned as the enemy of man, and the language used suggests a violent struggle (see bold emphasis):

"...**weaponized** scarce resource..."
 "...system empowering women to be able to **destroy men** whenever they want..."
 "...their nature makes them **a threat to us**..."
 "...**merciless**..." (Appendix 2)

The more passive of these discourses positions women largely through the lexical field of animal behaviour: women are frequently positioned as subhuman animals that are entirely swayed by their biological instincts, and are ascribed no agency. This lexical field is evidenced in some of the following excerpts (see bold emphasis):

"...geared towards **primal desires**..."
 "...their **nature**..."
 "...**biological** programming..."
 "...their abilities of manipulation and survival are hard wired thru [sic] **evolution**..."
 "...their **biological imperative**..."
 "...They don't have to be taught...it is inherent due to **biology**..." (Appendix 2)

This lack of agency is also evidenced through sentences such as 'when her hypergamy has decided she wants something more' (Appendix 2), where 'hypergamy' is given the agent position, as if a woman's actions are not decided by her, but by some innate instinct. This effect is also achieved through the initialism 'AWALT' (Appendix 2), meaning 'all women are like this': there is only one, very clearly defined subject position for women. Using a combination of these two discourses, the forum's users position women as inherently evil: not only are they positioned as constantly waging war with men, but this opposition is also inherent to their female biology, and so they are forced into a permanent out-group.

In positioning women as this out-group, and creating a narrative of war, the forum's users also enact a language of victimhood, creating the boundaries through which the users position themselves as an in-group. In a popular post entitled 'An open letter to the PUA, MRA, Incel and Tradcon refugees' (Appendix 1), user u/denizenoflaniakea explicitly attempts to forge an in-group between r/MGTOW's users and those newly joining the forum from other anti-feminist sites. The post from u/denizenoflaniakea builds off the positioning of women as a deadly out-group, and he makes a subject position of 'victim of feminism' available to the forum's male participants, which they must take up in order to form an in-group with one another. I will now demonstrate how this in-group subject position is created through a discourse of male victimhood.

The semantic field of warfare is extended into a metaphor of refuge: the narrative produced on the forum positions the in-group, available through interaction with the forum, as a safe place for men given the war they claim to be experiencing. The users are described as 'refugees' (Appendix 1) in the title of the open letter, and this metaphor is extended in the line 'we are all refugees, expelled from the comfortable home we had in the illusion by the harsh reality' (Appendix 1). Similarly, the MGTOW forum is described as 'refuge and fortress to any man seeking asylum from the insanity of the world today' (Appendix 1), further building on the semantic field of war and the refuge metaphor. The poster also writes that 'This forum is many things, a comedy club, a fight club, a shrink's office and a hospital for the male mind and all men are welcome' (Appendix 1). These metaphors, drawing on traditionally male spaces, the comedy club, the fight club, the fortress, link to Kiesling's idea of the discourse of male solidarity. Kiesling (2005) connects this discourse of homosociality to the desire of returning to a perceived 'golden age' of male friendship, experienced by young boys, and uninterrupted by heterosexual attraction (Kiesling, 2005: p.702). By rejecting romantic love and sexuality, and focusing on male solidarity, the r/MGTOW users are clearly attempting to return to this 'golden age'.

However, creating this sense of homosociality through the language of victimhood and healing contrasts with the discourse of male dominance he proposes. Indeed, a lot of the language used to position the forums users as an in-group doesn't support the discourse of male dominance at all: users of the r/MGTOW forum do not see masculinity as the dominant force, but femininity. However, through participating in this joint narrative, the users enact a reclaimed hegemonic masculinity and sense of self-ownership, transforming in their narrative from the subject position of passive victims to that of agentive self-owners. MGTOW is a subject position enacted through participation in this forum. This is evidenced in comments such as 'by adapting and accepting the way things truly are we can forge a new path for ourselves' (Appendix 1): here the inclusive 'we', and 'ourselves' are used to foster community amongst the users, and 'we' is placed in the agentive position, giving the users a sense of power and control over themselves. The self-possessive 'Own' in the forum's title further demonstrates this.

Furthermore, the subject position of victimhood that forms the in-group is theoretically open to any man, but it is only those that accept this positioning and participate in the production of this narrative that are able to position themselves as masculine. Another out-group subject position is that of 'feminism enabler', and men are positioned here in virtue of their non-participation in the MGTOW narrative. This subject position is articulated through a variety of naming devices and insults. An extended metaphor, drawing from the Matrix films, is also used to frame the boundaries between in-group and out-group men. In the film, the protagonist is given a choice

between taking a red pill and a blue pill. The blue pill allows him to remain in the world as he sees it, but the red pill allows him to see the real truth of the world he inhabits. In the forum, the term 'blue pill' forms a shorthand for those men that do not see the truth of MGTOW (Appendix 1). Furthermore, common naming devices used to position male feminists in the out-group include: 'beta', as opposed to alpha male (Appendix 2), 'simp', denoting a person who overly desires female attention (Appendix 1), and 'cuck', a man who enjoys watching his wife engage in sexual intercourse with another man (Appendix 2). Each of these naming devices positions those in the out-group as lacking a certain traditionally masculine quality, generally dominance; through using them, the users of r/MGTOW not only position male feminists in the out-group, but also reinforce that same sense of masculinity and dominance in themselves.

Discussion

My findings in the above analysis show how the anti-feminist narrative jointly produced by those who participate in the r/MGTOW subreddit works, and how the boundaries of in-group/out-group formation are set. Bamberg's three levels of positioning clearly apply to how the forum's users construct their identities as men. Looking at level 1 positioning, we see how posters like u/denizenoflaniakea open up a subject position of victim for themselves in relation to women, who are positioned as hostile and antagonistic through the two discourses of femininity I set out. Looking at level 2 positioning reveals how users position themselves in an in-group with their audience, initially by taking up this position of victim, which is heavily linked to level 1 positioning.

Though in their initial positioning as victims the forum's users are not granted much agency, by looking at level 3 positioning we can see how, as I demonstrated, the user's interaction with the forum constitutes, in their minds, the enacting of a more agentive, dominant masculinity. Wortham's (2000) theory of narrative self-construction states that in narrating 'narrators often enact a characteristic type of self, and through such performances they may in part become that type of self' (Wortham, 2000: p.4). This concept clearly applies here, where the users are seen to reclaim a masculinity they felt they had lost, through performing it in the forum.

My findings also show that the users of the forum adopt Kiesling's discourses of hegemonic masculinity, in particular gender difference and homosociality, in the positioning of these groups. Though the forum does stray from the discourse of male dominance, in that men are initially positioned as victims who lack real agency, the discourse of male dominance is enacted through participation in the narrative, where the users are able to reclaim a sense of agency and power over themselves: by self-positioning as victims, the forum's users feel they have taken an assertive step against feminism.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this essay I have shown linguistically how users of the r/MGTOW subreddit position themselves as an all-male in-group, and how they position other non-MGTOW men, and all women, as a threatening out-group. The forum's users portray women as evil and non-agentive, and male feminists as lacking important qualities of masculinity. The narrative jointly produced by the forum's users uses linguistic techniques to depict a war between men and women, in which r/MGTOW is a safe space for those on the losing side. Through the discourse of homosociality developed on the forum, men are able to reclaim the masculinity that they feel they've lost, in the form of self-ownership.

This study is important, as there is a clear lack of academic research on what is a very popular **INNERVATE** Leading student work in English studies, Volume 11 (2018-19), pp. 152 - 160

online movement and breeding ground for dangerous anti-feminism. It is important to understand how the narrative of anti-feminism operates, and why it is appealing to certain types of men: I believe that this essay takes an important step in understanding that. For further research, it would prove fruitful to look into other popular online anti-feminist spaces, particularly those less open to the public. It could also be interesting to look at how the few women that engage with the forum to criticise its posts use language to reassert their agency against the discourses of femininity I uncovered in my analysis.

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Appendix 1

'An open letter to the PUA, MRA, Incel and Tradcon refugees' -

https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW/comments/abckvr/an_open_letter_to_the_pua_mra_incel_and_tradcon/ (Accessed 27/1/2019)

u/denizenoflaniakea:

...

This forum is many things, a comedy club, a fight club, a shrink's office and a hospital for the male mind and all men are welcome. But it is not a place to foster fairy tale feel-good bullshit views of the world or a place to sell hold frame bruh books or man up bravado. MGTOw is refuge and fortress to any man seeking asylum from the insanity of the world today, and with its knowledge and wisdom, any man can save himself from the jaws of the gynocentric system.

I write this with the intent to help illuminate MGTOw to some of the newcomers from these other parts of the manosphere and also to welcome you guys. In truth, we are all refugees, expelled from the comfortable home we had in the illusion by the harsh reality but by adapting and accepting the way things truly are we can forge a new path for ourselves. So whether you are a PUA afraid of accusations or a disappointed MRA or a depressed Incel or a Tradcon looking for a religious NAWALT, welcome. I hope you stay and read and come to terms with the realities of this cold world we live in and, in time, let go of erroneous notions you may have previously held.

Happy New Year and GYOW.

...

u/denizenoflaniakea:

Thank you for your response. However, I am a bit confused as to what exactly do you mean by our own erroneous notions. You stated that we have many cases of humble braggings, emotional shaming and absolute reductionisms. Can you give a few examples because I am hardpressed to remember seeing any of these in this sub. As a matter of fact, humble bragging is in the not allowed list on the sidebar. As for shaming, I believe you are confusing smh type reactions to simp behavior when it is displayed on many posts. And every simp displayed is a man we can only hope will one day awaken. We despise and severely criticize the action and feel sorry for the poor brainwashed simp.

...

u/hobbyprojecthunter:

It's nice to see a brotherhood of men trying to stick together against the dehumanizing outlook of the rest of the blue pill world

Appendix 2

'What shocked you most about women?' -

https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW/comments/6ilt33/what_shocked_you_most_about_women/ (Accessed 27/1/2019)

u/Fearless_Ser:

I will start. How merciless they are. They are so shallow and weak, but that little of mind that they have, they use it to be as merciless as possible. Edit - 206k+ views, 1720 comments, 1884 upvotes! Thanks for the answers, they're great!

...

u/publicconsciousness:

How most are completely geared towards primal desires i.e sex. Few have real hobbies. I have literally seen girls on dating sites say that texting is one of their hobbies.

...

[deleted]:

But I'll never be convinced that sex is the same enjoyment for them as it is for us. Their nature just locks them into the material extraction game for every instant of their life. It must be hell to be a woman - we already knew that though.

...

u/philetto:

If a woman enjoys sex that much, why does she use it as a weaponized scarce resource?

...

u/dtaj:

sad but necessary for the survival of our species, just dont feel to sorry for them and understand their nature makes them a threat to us.

...

u/gamermainer:

Proof of biological programming. Men: to spread our seed widely. Making it available to all females. Female: to pick the best seeds available to them and then grow the best specimen they could with their options

...

u/enslavedopethfan053:

AWALT when it comes to certain things for sure. I can't say AWALT 100% and no one can. We'll never meet every single woman on the planet to determine that however ENOUGH of them are like that and like you said even if there is a unicorn or two out there, why waste the time looking for her? You could date 1000 girls and the chances of finding that NAWALT is highly fucking unlikely.

...

u/enslavedopethfan053

The problem though is that women are sooo good at being deceptive that she could put on the greatest act on the planet for you to make you truly believe she is a NAWALT and make you believe it. Ten years later when her hypergamy has decided she wants something more, she's gone. A true NAWALT I feel would be a woman who was raised by a single non beta cuck father who was put through the ringer by a few ex's and has decided to raise his daughter(s) to not be like the majority of women and that includes very little influence from the mother as possible (which unless she is dead or MIA, is unlikely to happen). That to me is how rare a unicorn is. That is the way I truly see a NAWALT existing is through those circumstances.

...

u/trek13:

I'm not sure about the "cunning creatures" description. I think their abilities of manipulation and survival are hard wired thru evolution and sharpened by social programming. They are running more on instinct and emotion, not intelligence and planning.

...

u/itisforsexy:

Exactly. If it wasn't for the system empowering women to be able to destroy men whenever they want for any reason, or even no reason at all, I might be tempted to search for a NAWALT.

...

u/bluereel:

It's just their biological imperative being incentivized by our fucked gynocentric society. Try and move beyond hate and accept them for what they are; appreciate their nature so you can avoid it like the plague.

...

[deleted]:

They don't have to be taught...it is inherent due to biology