Disabling Masculinity

The isolation of a captive audience

Introduction

> Disabled performers years ago,
> had just one outlet, the freakshow
> We've come so far since beginning so low
> The audience of yesteryear just didn't know (Mat Fraser, 2002)

It has increasingly been claimed that soap operas are a valuable platform for addressing marginalised social concerns and it seems true that characters with impairments are featured more frequently than they used to be (not, significantly, disabled people). Indeed, such narratives almost seem to be the lifeblood of the genre, especially dramatic mental health-related storylines. Commercial pressures of the last decade have increased the need for such controversial stories to maximise ratings as Henderson (1999) demonstrates. But have these images improved? And what do audiences do with them?

This paper is based on the findings of PhD research undertaken from December 1999 to July 2000. The research participants included disabled and non-disabled men and women aged between thirteen and seventy. There were seven discussion groups, several of which met a number of times. These were based in 'everyday life'[1] locations and comprised: girls from an independent school (*The Simpsons*); a segregated school group who were mixed sex and all disabled (*Monday Group*); a youth club group of mixed sex and mixed impairment /non-impairment status (*The Tuesday Group*); a group of non-disabled young men (*The Lads*); a mixed sex, disabled group from a day centre (*The Friday Group*); and two groups of single-sex, non-disabled, social groups (*The Men* and *The*

Women). All groups containing disabled people included members with both acquired and lifelong impairments (including those of physical, sensory, learning and mental health-related types). Significantly, although I wanted to recruit a group of disabled

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[1] That is, a fundamental premise of recruitment was familiarity, in terms of group membership and location.

men, the logistics of creating an 'everyday life' group were too difficult to overcome.[2] Several members of these groups also completed diaries, alongside thirteen independent diarists, most of whom were recruited through *Disability Now* magazine. I encouraged all the participants to manage discussions according to their own viewing interests after supplying them with a brief explanation of my own objectives, asking them to focus upon soap opera and impairment or disability concerns. As such, the project has a more ethnographic bias than previous research investigating portrayals of disability and impairment. Interpreting these narratives and dialogues as viewing performances, this paper focuses primarily on the viewing practices of disabled men, set within the context of the soap opera form as both a gendered and 'normality' genre (Darke, 1998).

I am proposing that people tend to engage with and interpret images of people with impairments in a variety of ways which have some degree of correspondence to viewers' structural and cultural contexts and the differential access to the discursive resources afforded to them. That is, the hermeneutic performances of all participants are seen as dynamic and influenced by immediate socio-cultural context; affected by varying impairment and life experiences or opportunities, and the relationships of these variables to preferred points of identification.[3]

It will be argued that watching portrayals of disabled people is a particularly demeaning experience for people with impairments, although paradoxically, greater ontological anxieties have been found to be more demonstrable amongst non-disabled viewers (as suggested by Makas, 1993; as demonstrated in Wilde, 2004).Emotional attachments are taken to be fundamental to these experiences and engagements with soap operas. 'Likeability' of characters is seen as a key element in creating attachments, acting as an important 'trigger for acceptance' (Sancho, 2003). Sancho explains likeability as;

> Creating emotional connections through the use of universally shared qualities e.g., engaging personality, achievement,

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[2] Although this may have been possible in the day centre it would have resulted in a much smaller focus group.
[3] For other participants' interpretations see Wilde, A (2004).

sense of humour.(p10)

Moreover, within the soap opera, portrayals of universally shared or understandable problems, faults and dilemmas are likely to promote stronger engagements (Brunsdon, 2000). However, gender concerns play a crucial role in the attachments and interpretative performances of both disabled and non-disabled participants having significant consequences for the viewing experiences of both male and female viewers. I contend that despite the reported rise in male viewers (Gauntlett & Hill, 1999), British soap operas are likely to provide a particularly alienating experience for men in general and disabled men more specifically. Finally, I want to raise some questions about agency and resistance in such viewing practices, making particular reference to the experiences of disabled men, primarily those with acquired impairments.

Mediocre masculinities - Male attachments to 'The woman's genre'.

Some feminist scholars have suggested that soap operas challenge conventional patriarchal or masculinist modes of subjectivity. For example, Modleski (1979) argues that it is feminine subject positions which are constructed within the intertwining plotlines of the soap opera's structure, particularly that of the 'ideal mother'. That is, the viewer is positioned as someone who possesses multiple, limited identifications, simultaneously empathizing with the troubles of different characters. Ang (1997) suggested that these varying identifications pose a challenge to the fixed identities which characterise masculinist reading positions. That is, she argues that rather than privileging the leading protagonist, female viewers gain their pleasure through fantasizing different subject positions.

The radical potential of the soap opera is seen to be located predominantly in such *polycentric protagonism*; characters sharing the leading roles over time (Buannano,1994). It has also been suggested that a 'feminine' viewing position may offer alternative viewing positions to all viewers, based on masochistic (multiple and submissive) rather than sadistic masculine 'gazes' (singular and objectifying). It is argued that this masochistic position is a likely outcome of melodramas, where the primary points of identification

emanate from strong female characters (Saco,1992,p.29-30). However, this passive, submissive stance, coupled with the privileging of the multiple loyalties of 'ideal mother' as model reader, is likely to play a large part in the disidentification (Butler, cited in McNay, 2000, p103) of most men from the genre, rather than providing radical 'polyphonic' interpretations.

I have proposed that this shared protagonism is far from equal. Identification as an 'ideal mother' *does* reinforce hegemonic ideals of femininity by appealing to an 'ethic of care,' reinforcing victim orientated viewing positions (Wilde, 2004). Providing few points of masculine identification, the narrative privileges 'normal'characters (Wilde, 2004), who tend to be more 'likeable' than disabled ones. Indeed, the preference for characters who are caricatures of normality[4] (Barker, 1996; Wilde,2004) supports the suggestion that soap operas are utilised, above all, for guidance or reassurance in doing 'personal life' successfully (Barker, 1996;Geraghty, 2000).

This project demonstrates that men perform weak engagements to soap operas, particularly at the level of the micro- narrative. This narrative plane is explained by O'Donnell (1999) as the level on which everyday interactions occur, with the emphasis put on relationships. Any interest that has been generated for men has been most apparent in the meta-narrative. This is the level at which topical issues and more eventful story - lines occur (O'Donnell, 1999), typically spanning a few weeks before resolution.

The male participants demonstrated particular interest in those dramas featuring violence and central male protagonists at the meta-narrative level, downplaying narratives which emphasised emotional concerns. The following excerpt, discussing recent events on *Brookside*, demonstrates the only engagement that The Lads group made with topics of impairment:

> John - When Sinbad , you know when er, Sinbad was in trouble, there was, that little girl. Sinbad was going to have to have his legs chopped off.

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[4] Particularly in terms of exaggerated gender traits, e.g. *Grant Mitchell* of *Eastenders.*

Jason -Yeah. I've seen that.
Dave - That's years old.
Darren - And did he have his legs chopped off?
John - No

Similarly, The Men's group remarked:

Vince - You know, I just want to, I'd rather watch er, somebody scoring a spectacular goal or
Harry – Yeah
Vince - climbing a mountain you know, and
Tim - Well Emmerdale had that plane crash thing..

These are quite typical excerpts from both of these groups. In Ang's terms (1997) comments such as this demonstrate a comparatively fixed mode of male identifications, emphasising men's closer engagements with more masculinist modes of narrative.

Typically, such dramatic action-led story-lines are usually not representative of a range of 'multiple masculinities' (Connell, 1987). Rather, they are likely to emphasise a single viewpoint, usually portraying what Connell (1987) has termed 'hegemonic masculinity' in its changing guises. Notably, these 'masculinist' storylines are especially frequent in *Brookside,* a male targeted soap (Allen, 1995). Furthermore, the producers of this particular programme have spurned the soap opera convention of feminised, if not emasculated male characters. This targeting of a male audience is also apparent on the official *Brookside* website. The following quotation was highlighted on the website in April 2003. Framing an actor's views on single fatherhood they stated:

 'Brookside actor speaks out',
There is a perception that in single parent families the father just   ups
and leaves and does a runner and has nothing to do with the child. But, I think there's a lot of people who are in the same position as Sean where he wants access but he's not given it because he's deemed not a good enough father.

Ostensibly, it appears that the producers of *Brookside* have attempted to acknowledge and engage with a wider range of masculinities. Interestingly, storylines of single fatherhood have been a common, recurring theme in *Brookside* (Allen, 1995), defending an approach which seems critical of hegemonic masculinity, moving towards portrayals of men as 'carers'.

Yet these depictions do not depart from an idealisation of unitary male power. Indeed, they are invariably based on an aggressive assertion of individualistic male rights, in this case, the imperative to claim fatherhood. Furthermore, this topic is usually played out at the more monological meta-narrative level as are any subsequent parenting scenes involving single fathers. This narrative placement seems to posit a 'hegemonic father' in the attempt to alter the model reader, and ultimately to engage or even attract more male viewers. So, although a wider range of men appear on *Brookside,* hegemonic masculinity seems to be reinforced.

Interestingly, Brookside's 'lesbian storylines' have also been located at the meta-narrative level. Unsurprisingly, these narratives were the *only* stories which the comparatively 'laddish' men demonstrated an enthusiastic engagement with. Consequently, the producers' appeal to male viewers may have won over a constituency of men who are prepared to engage with a 'woman's genre', but breaking the 'rules' is likely to have contributed to *Brookside*'s demise, through weakening the engagements with female viewers. Indeed, a young woman in the *Simpsons* group was frequently castigated by the other members for her attachment to *Brookside* and there was scant attention given to the programme by other female participants.

Other than the depiction of a wider range of men and voyeuristic lesbian narratives, there seem to be no strategies designed to attract a model reader positioned as male (embracing fluid conceptions of masculinity) in any soap opera. Hence it is unsurprising that ethics of justice or 'action' predominated in men's accounts (Barker, 1996; Wilde 2004). The so-called 'feminine' reading position of the 'ideal mother' was closely reflected in the bias towards the 'ethic of care' which characterised women's discussions of soap opera (Barker, 1996; Wilde, 2004). However it was an ethic of 'natural justice' that predominated within the discussions of older disabled men.

Nonetheless, *all* participants made stronger attachments to characters who were depicted as undertaking the tasks of everyday life, being perceived as more 'likeable' and 'normal', regardless of their virtues (Wilde, 2004).

These highly gendered storylines and clear demarcations between singular and multiple viewing positions have significant implications for men and women's viewing experiences and are reflected in the obvious sexual divisions in ethical standpoints found in this project and elsewhere (Barker, 1999; Wilde, 2004). Men, in general, are less likely to identify with a genre that continues to promote emotional attachments in such an intrinsically gendered, demeaning manner. More specifically, the structuring of the normality and abnormality narratives and common use of archetypes of 'failed masculinity' are likely to isolate disabled men even further.

However the 'readings' of disabled men were variable, revealing significant degrees of correspondence between interpretations, structural contexts and access to discursive resources. These factors will be outlined, after illustrating some characterisations of disabled men within popular soap operas. Then I will discuss disabled men's views, making brief comparison to *The Lads* and *The Men.*

Disabled Men in the soap opera genre

Most of the characters discussed by all groups were male, reflecting the predominance of disabled men, rather than disabled women, within soap operas and most dramatic genres (Shakespeare, 1997). This bias towards disabled men may be due to the reliance on the Oedipal framework as the primary structuring factor for all 'narrative media' (Norden,1994, p.323). Whereas the Oedipal scenario usually forms an overarching structure within media such as cinema and novels, this situation is primarily played out at the meta-narrative (topical) level in soap operas. It is invariably achieved through the use of temporary impairments and resolution of the story by a rewarding of the re-establishment of non-disabled identities, marking a return to the moral authority of the 'normality' macro-narrative. O'Donnell (1999) suggests that such core values, (often those of

solidarity or individualism) are structured on this imperceptible macro-level.

Disabled male characters seem to be used in this way, via the overt route of the meta-narrative, to convey moral messages. Such storylines are resolved in a redemptive or punitive manner, but both trajectories strengthen the portrayal of disabled men as 'castrated' and they invariably involve women as agents of moral reform or objects of 'diseased lusts' (Norden,1994).

Jim McDonald's (*Coronation Street*) impairment narrative was the clearest (and most frequently cited by research participants) of the first of these tendencies. His personality was transformed from 'bad' to 'good' in the process of acquiring, coming to terms with, and eventually losing his impairment. To briefly explain, *Jim* appeared to acquire his impairment as a punishment for his bad attitudes towards his family, culminating in an accident on some scaffolding during an argument with his son. As a new wheelchair user he was very embittered, gave up on most facets of his previous life and nearly on life itself, attempting suicide in July 1998. At this point, *Maud Grimes*, also a wheelchair user, redeemed him by acting as moralising agent. She was what Martin Norden (1994) has termed a *Saintly Sage*. As such, *Maud* accused *Jim* of self pity then advised him to live his life to the full. Soon afterwards, the scenario was resolved as he went on to make a complete recovery from both his impairment and his status as a 'castrated male', signified most blatantly by the return of and remarriage to his wife.

Conversely, *Don Brennan*'s (*Coronation Street*) impairment could not be restored through cure so impairment and masculinity became closely linked with sexual deviancy and the disruption of the 'normal' moral order. This left no (Oedipal) resolution other than death. *Don* acquired his impairment as a punishment for his sudden and uncharacteristically errant ways. Attempting to kill himself after his adulterous affair ended, his reckless driving resulted in the amputation of one of his feet.

Soon afterwards he began an unrequited attraction to the local hairdresser, *Denise Osbourne,* which quickly became obsessional and malicious. His 'stalking' activities were followed by the break up

of his marriage, eventually culminating in vendettas against *Mike Baldwin* and his wife, *Alma*. *Don*'s character becomes an unequivocal portrayal of a disabled man as an *Obsessive Avenger* (Norden, 1994). His obdurate and egomaniacal passion for revenge towards men and his 'forbidden love' for women are common features of characterisations of men with orthopaedic impairments in cinematic narratives (Norden,1994). This is heightened in the soap opera genre by his previous 'normal' disposition. His swift descent into moral degeneracy and the invariable association with mental health concerns is used to tell moral stories which link impairment and masculinity with sexual deviancy and the disruption of the moral order.

There are exceptions to the casting of disabled men as evil or deviant, such as *Mark Fowler* of *Eastenders*. However, most of the participants found him uninteresting, described by one diarist as a 'boring sanctimonious bastard'. He, like other 'ordinary' male characters also tends to be utilised in ways that reinforce the dichotomy between normality and abnormality (as Darke, 1998; 1999, suggests of film). Juxtaposed against narratives which reinforce 'normal' aspects of his life, within the micro-narrative, *Mark*'s impairment related topics are invariably located at the meta-narrative level.

Chris Tate of *Emmerdale* is also a rare example of a long term, more nuanced, disabled character, escaping the more obvious moral trajectories attributed to *Jim* and *Don*. *Chris*'s character is noticeably different in that it doesn't follow the formulaic pattern of *bad guy-moral lesson- moral reform or death*. Although several research participants praised the writing of the character because he has had numerous sexual and romantic entanglements, and his character has remained (invariably) nasty throughout his biographical history, it is significant that the writers chose the most unequivocally obnoxious and bitter male character to acquire a permanent impairment.

More than other disabled characters, his characterisation seems to contribute to a 'preferred' (Hall, 1980) interpretation of disability in terms of 'natural justice.' This was particularly noticeable in the *Friday Group.* They appeared to have more interest in him than the other groups:

> Alison - Do you think every disabled person is as nasty as Chris is?
> Jean - Not really. I suppose it's because he gone through certain things.
> That's why he's like that.
> Geoff - Yeah
> Andrew - I suppose if you are in a wheelchair permanently you can't upset people can you? Because you need their help
> Geoff - No, but you easily get frustrated
> Andrew - It is hard isn't it? When there's no apparent reason for it?
> Never thinking that you'd end up disabled yourself. It's a cruel world isn't it?

Indeed, despite the lack of any permanent 'resolution' for his character, *Chris* is an exemplar of the Oedipal position. Interestingly, pre-dating his impairment, the first storylines he was involved in featured his relationship problems with his father, which were directly related to unresolved Oedipal crises. This was a thread which ran for years, even beyond his father's death in 1997, where after he became obsessed with ruining the life of his father's wife, *Kim*, in true Oedipal fashion. His own relationship with *Kim* had always been marked by everyday antagonisms but also by a series of vendettas. *Chris*'s previous actions towards her corresponded closely with the unresolved Oedipal scenario of: castration fear; failed repression of desire for the (symbolic) mother resulting in; the lack of identification with the father and hence; symbolic castration. Furthermore, his brief marriages to *Kathy Merrick* and *Rachel Hughes* began to collapse in periods where he became intensely involved in his father's romantic relationship. Moreover, his relationships and feuds with most other characters are marked with bitterness and revenge.

He also had a somewhat chequered sexual reputation before his accident, having raped *Kathy*, reformed himself and subsequently married her in 1991. As such, *Chris's* post - impairment experiences continue to portray him as an angry, somewhat obsessive and sexually 'deviant' man (having raped two women and married an ex-prostitute whose services he had previously procured). Although this is often signified at the meta-narrative level, his everyday interactions

with other characters are marked by conflict, anger and scheming. Consequently he has rarely had friends and those that show him any loyalty are usually paid to do so, e.g. his employee *Terry Woods*. Indeed, most of the villagers dislike him, to the point where they have formed campaigns against him or his company after a bus crash (in 2000) where he and his haulage firm was blamed for the accident.

His nasty, bitter character is written into the minutiae of the micro-narrative level but also filters into the meta-narratives and macro-narratives. This is particularly apparent in his highly individualistic 'shrewd' business orientated actions being counter to the more community- based actions and welfare of the other villagers. There are opportunities for *Chris* to transcend some stereotypical disabled male characterisations, particularly in his role as a single parent. However, when this dimension is exploited it usually adds to his failings, seen in his nanny's criticisms of his parental skills (1999) and within infrequent concerns about his son's life. Thus, although Chris has conventionally attractive looks and an active sex life, he has many attributes which render him 'monstrous' i.e. he has often been used as a 'demonstration', ' and remonstration'; acting as a warning (Chua-Eoan, cited in Norden,1994, p317) against deviating from expected (community-orientated, gender and disabled) roles, stigmata which have increasingly been imputed to his sister[5].

Norden explains that, within cinema, narrative characterisations of these Oedipal men nearly always culminate in disempowerment and inevitable destruction as a need for revenge sets them on ' an idiosyncratic quest to regain the phallus' (1994, p.317), against patriarchal authority (p.6). Despite having frequent possession of 'the gaze' as these characters often do (Norden, 1994), this process often structures the whole narrative for disabled men within cinematic images. This can be seen in characterisations such as: *Quasimodo* in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1923); Hook (1991);* or *Hook* in *Peter Pan (1953).*

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[5] Formerly *Zoe Tate* was portrayed as a 'normal' if isolated (lesbian) character, until she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Recently, she has been involved in a number of dramatic storylines, such as burning the church down and (hetero) sexual confusion.

However, this Oedipal scenario is usually resolved quickly in the 'Television of Isolation' by an acquiescence to the moral authority of the normality narrative, accompanied by the rewards of a re-establishment of non-disabled identity. Obviously *Chris'*s character has not conformed to this soap opera format, yet, and his disempowerment seems to operate on a cyclical basis, re-iterating the same Oedipal themes without complete resolution. Somewhat unusually, *Chris*'s impairment references tend to be found in the minutiae of the micro-narrative even though his *Obsessive Avenger* storylines are on the meta-narrative plane. Nonetheless, the intersection of these narratives and those of his sister contribute to making him a clear example of the use of 'abnormality' to uphold the macro-narratives of normality, particularly in the absence of alternative impairment and disability representations and a dearth of comparable 'villains.'

It is these more covert normality discourses which are transmitted most clearly within the interpretative performances of viewers. At this point I want to discuss such negotiations of normality, within the positions taken towards masculinity enacted by disabled male viewers.

Resistance and the three R's

Taken as whole, the disabled men within this project demonstrated a greater degree of engagement with soap operas than non-disabled men, with the participants of the *Friday* group spending considerably more time at home than most other men. Nonetheless the male participants' comments within the *Friday Group* were marked with ambivalence which were less clearly but inextricably linked to masculine codes. Such individuated expressions of masculinity were prevalent within the viewing performances of the disabled male participants, of all ages, in different viewing contexts.

In many ways this can be related to the ways in which disabled men have restricted access to hegemonic forms of masculinity (Gerschick and Miller, 1995). While this is variable, dependent on impairment and a range of other factors, it is most obviously seen in exclusion or marginalization from action orientated endeavours such as sports.

Furthermore, Jewkes (2002) writing of the 'subordinated masculinities' of many prison inmates, demonstrates that the removal of autonomy, choice and responsibility erodes crucial aspects of male identity. She suggests that media provides a crucial resource in enabling prisoners to re- articulate a 'solitary space' (Radway, 1984, p211) in order to construct counter–hegemonic identities.

Certainly, media could play such a crucial role in disabled men's lives but it could also be argued that their performances of 'less hegemonic' variants of masculinity are even more hegemonic due to their individualism. That is, lacking the conventional masculine 'capital' to compete, disabled men may be likely to adopt 'reformulative' strategies (Gershick and Miller, 1995) which are founded upon the desire to demonstrate primary masculine values such as strength and rationality (Connell, 1987; 1996, Seidler, 1994). However, this is less likely to be a reflection of autonomy and more closely tied to the disabling of choice given greater structural constraints and fewer discursive resources.

The prisoner's restrictions in choice, autonomy and responsibility are clearly echoed in the experiences of many disabled men as studies such as that of Gershick and Miller (1995) demonstrate. But unlike the men in Jewkes' study, Gershick and Miller's research suggested that such processes of emasculation result in what Murphy (1990) has termed 'embattled identities'. This refers to the conflict between conventional masculine traits, such as 'self- reliance, strength and aggression, and characteristics of impairment or disability experience which are commonly associated with femininity; e.g. weakness, passivity and dependency. Like prisoners, the barriers confronting disabled men put a range of restrictions on activities and associated roles, whether impairment is of an acquired or lifelong character. However, prisoners are likely to redefine their masculinity according to the structural and discursive constraints of their (comparatively) restrictive male environments (see Jewkes, 2002) which, in some cases, culminates in exaggerated gender roles (Jewkes, 2002), including brutal forms of 'hypermasculinity', such as bodybuilding (Klein, 1995, p118).

There are clear differences for disabled men. Men with impairments have to face such constraining barriers and restrictions while their

everyday environments are relatively unchanged. For example, re-articulated masculine identities are perhaps more significant in the renegotiation of relationships with women and changes made in the lives of men who have to leave their previous employment. Furthermore, in contrast to the prisoners, many disabled men occupy and engage with media in 'feminine' domestic settings, reflected in television programming which, despite many changes, still tends to target women and young people in the daytime and early evening schedules.

In such circumstances carving out a 'solitary space' seems to be a very difficult enterprise. Gershick and Miller (1995) suggest that three main coping mechanisms are used by disabled men in order to re-articulate their identities in such circumstances. They argue that typical coping responses tend to resemble one of three 'patterns'. They classify these responses to the erosion of hegemonic masculine status as; reformulation, reliance and rejection.

Put simply, they argue that rejection involves a renunciation of hegemonic masculinity (understood as a socially constructed phenomenon). As such, it is seen as the most compatible approach to take in espousing 'sociopolitical approaches' to disability which view disability as social oppression.

Conversely, reliance strategies approximate closely with what some disability scholars (Rieser and Mason, 1992) have termed 'internalised oppression'. That is, men accept hegemonic ideals, generating feelings of inadequacy, culminating in compensatory actions founded on the hegemonic framework of masculinity.

Finally, reformulation is identified as a middle-ground where hegemonic ideals are renegotiated in a more achievable manner. For example, conventional masculine standards are transposed into other areas of life, most notably in upholding occupational status (Gerschick and Miller, 1995, p.190) in alternative ways or in putting new emphases into sexual relationships (p194). In the case of men with acquired impairments, they found that the focus is likely to be shifted from physical strength to new forms of athleticism or psychological endurance; willing 'recovery' from impairments, for instance (p.202).

As Gerschick and Miller suggest many disabled men's responses to impairment and disability will not fit neatly within these categories. Nevertheless, rejection and reformulative strategies can be more clearly aligned with the media interpretations of the younger disabled men and diarists of this project. Conversely, most of the male participants of the *Friday Group* can be seen to take a reliant approach, in their frequent adoption of a self-deprecating stance. Talking of depictions of disabled men that have emphasized dependency, with direct references to their own lives, they continued in the following manner:

> Andrew - Well it puts you down, I mean, doesn't it really? It gives the impression you're not trying hard enough.
> Geoff - This is the cheapest way of getting legless.
> (Group laughter)
> Andrew - He's not telling the truth. He only had that leg off because he was chasing all the women, to slow him down.
> Geoff - Well, I wanted to get the part of Long John Silver, with a parrot on my shoulder,
> Andrew - It never worked, did it?

Geoff's comment on 'getting legless' is rather predictable, but as Shakespeare (1999) suggests, it is more likely to evoke a smile than pity for his impairment. Indeed, Shakespeare contends that when jokes expose 'relations of power and oppression' they:

> give disabled people permission to be angry and redirect frustration from impaired bodies, to the contexts which construct impairment as a problem (1999, p4)

Although these remarks may be seen as liberatory from such a perspective, such anger was not explicit and conservative cultural ideals of masculinity are inscribed within them.

That is, they utilised humour to measure their current performances of masculinity in relation to a reconstituted past, founded upon theoretically achievable ideals of masculinity. Nonetheless, their general approach can also be seen to be closer to a reformulative

approach where second order masculine values are substituted for the primary hegemonic principles, as identified by Gershick and Miller (1995, p185) and Hanke (1992) (following Connell, 1987). So, retaining 'core elements of patriarchal ideology' (Hanke, 1987) such as a prioritizing of relationships and emotional expression, the emphasis put upon domestic ties rather than a commitment to working for what is seen to be self and collective improvement, can be seen as reformulation in the direction of 'conservative masculinity' (Hanke,1992,p192-4).

Although this may be seen as a less 'radical' approach to take (particularly on a collective level), privileging new versions of masculine, heterosexual identity over identification as a disabled person does not necessarily negate the presence of resistance on the part of these men. Indeed, the redefining of their disabled masculinites and their lack of identification with disabled male characters both indicate a reluctance to accept 'symbolic annihilation' (Gross, 1989, quoted in Hanke, 1992).

Moreover, like Gershick and Miller's (1995) research participants, these attitudes were expressed by men with acquired impairments but these responses were probably also shaped by the participation of women within the discussion group. Additionally, impairment status[6] and age seem to have played a significant role in interpretative processes. For example, Sonny, the younger man in the *Friday Group* took a less ambiguous approach to his masculinity or, more accurately his identity as a heterosexual man. That is, he did not engage with any impairment or disability related soap opera narratives. He limited his soap opera references to dramatic sexual liaisons, particularly those involving lesbian characters in *Brookside*. Moreover, his referential comments were of a similar character and he made a variety of lighthearted personal sexual innuendos to me.

As such, his performance of masculinity was closest to that of *The Lads* rather than the younger disabled men. This anomaly is of some importance as Sonny was the only (clearly identifiable) younger male participant with an acquired impairment. Clearly identifying with a

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[6] That is, there was a marked difference between male those who had lifelong impairments and those with acquired impairments, although 'severity' or type did not seem to play a major part.

strong hegemonic masculinity, he made a clear disidentification with disabled male characters and made no attempt to perform a reformulated masculine persona. If Sonny held any feelings of inadequacy, or indeed felt that he failed to meet hegemonic masculine norms, these were not expressed within his 'laddish' or other moments.

From Gershick and Miller's (1995) perspective, Sonny's attitude was one of reliance, reflecting hegemonic values in similar ways to the strategies of *The Lads*. Gershick and Miller view this as the most oppressive pattern of action as this strategy believed to perpetuate the existing gender order due to its emphasis on individualism. Despite the obvious aquiescence to hegemonic masculinity, his gender performances can also be seen as a resistant form of agency, as a refusal of stereotypes of disability and impairment, that is, of emasculated and feminised males.

In common with the other disabled people, Sonny's impairment and the disabling of his everyday life afforded him comparatively few opportunities to escape the confines of the day centre or his home, obscuring alternative discourses of disabled identity. Having acquired his impairment in his early twenties, having no children and little work experience he seemed to invest most of his identifications in his sexual potency. Being a member of a relatively 'captive audience' Sonny's disassociation from several key facets of the soap opera highlights his refusal to identify with particular representations of abnormality or disability, privileging the 'normality' of his heterosexual identity.

 The absence (and importance) of anti-oppressive disability discourses was illustrated very well by the long term narrative of an independent diarist, Peter and the responses of the *Monday Group*. Peter had been disabled from birth, watched a few soap operas, and often wrote about the depictions of disabled men.

> Images of disabled people in soaps invariably make me feel worse about myself because they accentuate a negative sense of difference.

However, he concluded his diary by stating that he could no longer write it as he didn't have the time or desire to watch soap operas any more, since he had become employed. The expressions of a rejective approach to masculinity and pride in his own identity had strengthened after gaining employment. These opinions were similar to the young men in the *Monday Group*, the majority of whom had also been disabled from birth.

In many respects the most disparaging comments on representations came from the young disabled men from this group, rather than the young women. They were outspoken about their dislike of impairment portrayals. Their suggestions for alternative story-lines often employed binary reversals, implicitly criticising the 'normality' macro-narrative that structures the soap opera genre. For example, it was suggested that a disabled superhero should be introduced to kill off most of the non-disabled characters. This approach can be seen as 'rejective' whilst simultaneously utilising a strong, 'macho' approach to the construction of new identities. Unlike the findings of Sancho's study (2003), young disabled people tended to be very critical and 'issue driven', often to the point of opposing normalisation (Wilde, 2004). Ironically, perhaps the most significant factor influencing these viewing performances was their access to counter-hegemonic discourses of disability, within the school, coupled with the everyday network of young people negotiating adult identities in similar ways.

'Macho' approaches taken by students in the segregated school contrast sharply with the approach taken by *The Lads* and *The Men.* Whereas, disabled men defended their masculinity primarily through references to alternative points of identification with 'normality', with many (and varying) acknowledgements of collective oppression, the non-disabled men's performances of masculinity often took a more overtly individualistic form, involving 'contests of honour' (*c.f* Jewkes, 2002).

For example, the younger non-disabled men seemed to use soap operas as a foil for the performance of strong heterosexual masculinities, most obviously indicated and measuredby explicit references to television genres which portrayed women in a hyper-sexualised fashion. Maintaining their immediate male hierarchy, they made a primary distinction between 'real lads' and 'wankers', in their

ridicule of other members. Discussing the content of a Hollyoaks 'male rape special':

       Jason - But we don't like to bring that up.
       Dave - Why?
       John - 'Cos we don't.
       (Laughter)
       Darren - Hand strain
       Laughter
       Dave - I watch Baywatch
       Laughter
       Jason- I bet he does
       Darren - I watch it. That isn't a soap.

Dismissing himself as an intended member of soap opera audiences in an immediate Change of subject, Darren asked:

   It's all the women who are all 30 or 40; it's all women isn't it?

For the younger males it is clear that age concerns combine more closely with the identification and consequent refusal of feminine positions and associated emotional connotations, in the 'defence' of hegemonic masculinity. Although *The Lads* performed idealised action-orientated manliness in the most overt fashion *The Men* explicitly disassociated themselves from the genre. Vince for example, stated,
      Well one of the reasons I don't watch soaps is because
      I just think I've always categorised them as sort of kitchen sink
      stuff. You know I don't want to watch what is everyday and
       mundane mediocre and monotonous.

'Contests of honour' and distancing from female or disabled characters were less overt, possibly because these men felt they had less need to prove their masculinity. That is, many of them occupied privileged positions along several axes of hegemonic masculinity, most notably: as non-disabled heterosexual men who had 'proved' their gender status through paternity; participation in professional employment; as men belonging to an exclusively male, 'insider' peer group within the local community.

Masochism or Masculinity?

In brief summary, there were no men within this project who expressed identification with, or claimed pleasure from, soap opera images of disabled men although a considerable number acquiesced to portrayals of impairment and disability as 'natural justice'. Significantly those who resigned themselves to such portrayals tended to be the 'heaviest viewers' or captive audience. It is also significant that most of these men had acquired impairments, whereas those with lifelong impairments took comparatively 'rejective' positions. However, the majority of disabled *and* non-disabled men remained silent on the topics of impairment or disability or refused to identify with such representations, performing much greater attachments to non-disabled characters. As such they disassociated themselves with the more 'masochistic' (Saco, 1992) viewing positions and identifications which are the earmark of the soap opera genre. For many men this resulted in alternative viewing or 'leisure' choices, leaving considerably fewer options for many disabled men.

It has been demonstrated that the disproportionately low levels of engagement with disabled characters is bound up more with textual forms, disabling representations and viewers' gendered identities than preconceived preferences for non-disabled people. The soap opera's narratives of disabled men are placed quite firmly at the meta-narrative level, invariably designating them as 'freaks'. Simultaneously, a range of (non-disabled) normalities are reified and valorized, including the continuing tendency to overvalue of fetishise 'stronger women' (Saco, 1995). So, on these terms, the soap opera does *not* present the never- ending story it is reputed for. Over and over again it invariably retells the indistinguishable Oedipal tales of failed masculinity, providing few 'triggers for acceptance' or attachment for any viewer. The 'masochistic' viewing positions of disabled men are perpetuated, rendering them submissive outsiders towards images of femininity, masculinity *and* normality.

As Emmerdale's Story Editor has admitted,' No one makes soaps out of a concern for social justice' (Henderson, 1999). As a supposed form of social realism that is governed by the same old archetypes, driven by spurious ideas of vicarious audience preferences, the soap

opera often seems to be the ultimate freak show, only this time showing and paying few disabled performers.

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