The concept of gender relates to the relationships between men and women, and to the way members of society are divided into the two groups based on their assigned biological sex at birth. These groups are allocated different gendered attributes and social roles which affect all features of social life. The concept of gender embodies cultural attributes and definitions relating to masculinity and femininity as well as the sexual division of labour (Bradley 1999). Gender thus refers to cultural specific patterns of behaviour which are identified as masculine or feminine. It is socially constructed and differs across social classes, cultural and ethnic groups within the same society, as well as from one society to another. Gender also relates to ways in which different life chances and life choices are assigned within different social groups. Representational practices based on gender define and possess a power to establish normal behaviours (Weedon 1997). Children, as members of a society, learn what it is to be masculine and what it is to be feminine from an early age. Through inherent beliefs, boys are praised for male achievements and girls for girliness, to the extent that language also becomes more masculine or feminine. Gendered discourses influence ways in which males and females behave, feel, think, play and dress. Gendered expectations are subsequently fulfilled. The gendered nature of individuals is further intensified by the gendered nature of social institutions, such as the family, education system and the workplace (see for example Kimmel 2000). Thus gender is socially constructed through a process which continues to shape males and females throughout life depending on their assigned sex at birth.

The concept of gender functions as a crucial tool for analysing ways in which males and females are socially constructed (Oakley 1997). While males and females may be biologically different, cultural traits of femininity and masculinity are often treated by society as opposites. The fluidity and political power of differences relating to sex and gender effectively disappears so that sex means gender and gender means sex. Biological differences are frequently linked to the construction of gender inequality. However, it is gender inequality that strengthens observable gender differences in attitudes and behaviour (Kimmel 2000). Central to the gender inequality question is the public (masculine) versus the private (feminine) debate and where domestic responsibility persists in the hindrance of access to the public spheres for females.

Discourses are gendered if it is suggested that males and females do things differently. The gender difference discourse maintains essentialist thinking which advocates assigned gendered attributes as natural (Sunderland 2004). This discourse retains a commonsense status through which the world is viewed and is often used to justify rather than explain perceived masculine behaviour, such as the natural boisterous behaviour of boys. Gendered cultural patterns inevitably lead to gendered power relations, situating some groups into superior positions and others into subordinate positions as everyday practices are engaged with (Bradley 1999). Thus a focus on differences reinforces dominant binary discourses which continue to marginalise specific groups, such as females, nonwhites and working classes. Power needs also to be linked with agency whereby power functions in a different manner at different sites. Agency offers us explanations of asymmetries of power (Bradley 1999). Different gendered powers can be identified in different sites, with a tendency for masculine power to
be situated in public arenas, and feminine power in private arenas. Advantages that men generally lay claim to, or the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (Connell 1998), remain prevalent in society. However, it is important to recognise that advantages are relational and not all men have access to this patriarchal dividend to the same extent. Thus, not all men are equally powerful and, similarly, not all women are equally oppressed.

Although we are all multipositioned in variable degrees at different times, there appears to be an inevitability in the way binary pairs are or have been constructed: male/female, white/black, us/Them. Binary pairs become so fundamental to our way of thinking that we often do not even realise that we are using them in our understanding of the world. The inevitability of binary opposites may be reinforced because we learn to see binaries as part of an apparently unconstructed absolute truth (Davies 1997). In our society, a person belongs to one of the categories of the binary pair male/female. The privilege of the first, more dominant term is dependent on the ‘otherness’ of the subordinate term (Davies 1997). Through binary opposition, political issues allow identification of others to become the source of societal problems. Hierarchically arranged binary categories are often constructed unconsciously or unintentionally through the processes of language. In this way, oppositions are created out of what are only differences and these gender differences construct masculinity and femininity as a binary opposition. Indeed, the binary nature of gender maintains stable gender identities, often defined hierarchically, at the expense of, for example, gay people (Butler 1990). However, each time binary oppositions like male/female are reinforced as part of a natural state, so too other binary opposites are reinforced, like powerful/powerless, truth/untruth. Thus it is important to deconstruct this fictitious opposition and to deconstruct, as it has also been described, this ‘violent hierarchy’ (Sunderland 2004).

The masculine/feminine dichotomy and the question as to how and why an individual needs to belong to a category is challenged within feminist poststructuralism to enable differences within a range of any particular elected category to exist without the inevitability of binary opposites, and without the need to be categorised in limiting positions (Davies 1997). A general feminist theoretical recognition of the idea of diversity within categories continually eludes many ethnographers in respect of issues relating to masculinities, resulting in suggestions for a need to move beyond these theoretical dichotomies which have been fictitiously conceived (Conway-Long 1994). Feminisms have highlighted the diversities among females, but it is also important to recognise diversities among different groups of males and that binary opposites operate within masculinity. Feminism offers men positions to be more ‘free’ (Kimmel 2000). Biological essentialism often results in the binary nature of gender being accepted as natural, with a hegemonic form of masculinity considered the norm for males. In multicultural Western countries, such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, white males often retain a power through reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity. Males who do not easily fit a hegemonic masculine framework are often revealed as disadvantaged. Indeed, when heterosexuality is seen as the only option for ‘real men’ then positions such as homosexuality become seen as ‘abnormal’ (Buchbinder 1994). Heterosexuality and homosexuality thus operate as binary opposites with disadvantages intensified by a lack of easily accessible alternatives to hegemonic heterosexual masculinities discourses.

Gender difference discourses which focus on masculine/feminine dichotomy and embrace views of essentialised differences are disadvantageous to both females and males. Females fluctuate between different discourses: for example, new discourses that suggest they can succeed in what are perceived as masculine arenas and old discourses that they retain the main responsibility for domestic
arrangements. Males similarly fluctuate between different discourses, such as new discourses that incorporate tenets of gender equity and old discourses that housework is still a feminine job. The gender difference discourse is particularly not emancipatory for females and distracts attention from evidence that women are still the second-class sex (Sunderland 2004). Females continue to experience lower salaries, lower status jobs, lower paid work, and remain responsible for most of the housework. Women's achievements are often negated or ignored, giving an appearance of continually having to start from scratch rather than building on previous achievements.

The schooling system is a significant site where social constructs such as gender are constructed. Although schools need to redress such issues, essentialised notions are nevertheless often reproduced (Kimmel 2000). For example, although Australia purports to strive for equality, when it was perceived that females might be succeeding in high-status masculine subjects in the 1990s and early 2000s, projects were set up in order to address the educational needs of boys at school. Such government policies and actions reinforce socially constructed attributes, definitions and hierarchical nature of masculinity and femininity. Popular media in other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America also attributed blame to girls for succeeding at the expense of boys. The 'poor boys discourse' is a gendered discourse with a familiar and international theme which links closely to the men's movement argument and to the 'boys will be boys' discourse and can be seen to generate gender difference discourses as well as their associated hierarchical nature. Hegemonic masculinity discourses with their compulsory heterosexuality practices somehow justify misogynist and homophobic behaviour and absolve males from the need to strive academically (Sunderland 2004).

Gender is often coded to mean women (as ‘race’ is often coded to mean black), so that men's spaces are often depicted as neutral or ungendered (Pettman 1992). Pretence to neutrality benefits specific groups of males through identification of feminine and masculine roles where these roles exist in binary opposition to each other. Classification by gender affects our lives and makes it impossible to be 'gender neutral' (Bordo 1990) in our society. Although masculinity and femininity are constructed culturally, they become constant locations of political struggle over meanings that have actual life effects for males and females (Jordan and Weedon 1995). The socially constructed categories of 'women' and 'men' homogenise females and males while they disguise their association with ethnic and social class identities (Pettman 1992) and effectively reinforce their links with femininity and masculinity. Gender issues relate to both males and females and contradictions should be seen as an indication of political differences. Groups who are already privileged or prejudiced by gender and also ethnicity and social class are further advantaged or disadvantaged through being positioned within or opposite power-linked categories such as male, white and ‘us’. However, variables along social constructs potentially provide multiple positionings. Through feminist deconstruction, binary opposites are metaphysically transformed to become multiples (Davies 1997). Feminist poststructuralism offers us ways in which to deconstruct the social concept of gender and to perceive and access multiple possibilities of gender, masculinity and femininity. Binary opposites are frequently seen as fixed unchanging categories, but if seen metaphysically these categories become part of a range of possibilities leading to a multiplicity of potential gender identities. The academic use of the terms ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’ has become fairly common as the world entered the twenty-first century.

It remains important to examine the construction of gender in order to deconstruct the ideals of both masculinity and femininity and the ways in which these are persistently normalised. By complicating our
understanding of gender, it is possible to address and incorporate other influences in the construction of gendered social positions, such as ethnicity, socio-economic status and sexuality (Collins et al. 2000). At the beginning of the twentyfirst century, attitudes of males and females have changed to incorporate the understanding that there should not be gender inequalities for males and females. However, behaviour remains gendered – for example, school students continue to choose gender-typical subjects (see, for example, Collins et al. 2000). The inevitability of a male/female binary opposition can be challenged through understanding the fluid and discursive nature of the social construction of gender. Although gender is often linked to biological characteristics, it is a social construct and like femininity and masculinity is linked to learned behaviours. There is a need not only to problematise gender, but also to acknowledge that gender is inclusive of males as well as females. Masculinity is not natural and fixed. Male heterosexuality is a dominant but unstable category. Social discursive practices have the effect of contradictory positionings for males which highlight the fractured and fragile nature of identity construction for males (Mac an Ghaill 1994). Although males are not generally oppressed or exploited by sexism, they may still suffer as a consequence. Gender may not necessarily be the most significant component of a male's identity, but it will have a relational influence with other social constructs like ‘race’/ethnicity, social class and sexuality.

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