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Materials, skills and gender identities: men, women and home improvement practices in New Zealand

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Materials, skills and gender identities: men, women and home improvement practices in New Zealand

The paper explores the interactions of materials, skills and gender identity through examining DIY practices in New Zealand. It traces the relationship between materials used for home repairs, the competences needed to use them and the (re)production of specific gendered identities. It argues that housing and building materials were an important part of the European settler history of the country and this history forms the context within which New Zealanders work on their houses today. Drawing on interviews with 30 Pākehā homeowners, it explores how both men and women respond to the materials of their homes, how skills are acquired in relation to the demands of the materials used and how these skills become part of the (re)production of specific white, heterosexual gender identities. The figure of the 'Kiwi bloke' is discussed as an important imaginary in the negotiation of gender identities for both men and women. Interviewees saw their DIY activities in the light of the creation and re-creation of this specific national and gendered identity. The paper reveals the intertwining of history and materiality in the continual negotiation and contestation of gendered identities.

Keywords: DIY; New Zealand; Masculinities; Home; Materiality

Home is a potent site for considering gender relations. Often conceived of as the quintessentially feminine space, men's relationship to the home has been less thoroughly explored than women's, but men's domestic activities have been highlighted by geographers as deserving further research (Gorman-Murray 2008a; 2008b; 2011). One aspect of home life that is worthy of attention is men's experience of home as a place to labour, a place to carry out tasks that, like those women carry out in the home, are expected of them by virtue of their gender and which are bound up in imaginings of appropriate masculinity. Whilst this article is not only about men, it is about masculinity and 'male' tasks in the home: the repairs, renovations and improvements that are imagined as men's 'natural' work.

The article explores the interactions of materials, skills and gender identity through examining DIY practices in New Zealand. It examines ways that housing materials converse with people in processes of identity formation. I argue that these

material-people conversations are historically and geographically situated and that skills are the medium through which materials and identities relate. I focus particularly on one gendered identity, white, heterosexual masculinity, in the form of the 'Kiwi bloke', and examine the construction of this identity and how it is negotiated in and with a particular place.

The article bridges literatures on gender identities to that on materials and practices. It contributes primarily to geographies of gender and geographies of home. It does this in two ways: first, it shows the importance of house building materials and DIY skills to conceptualisations of gender performativity (Butler 1990); and second, it shows how place shapes the performance and meaning of masculinity and gender relations.

The article begins by situating this study within a recent turn to materials and practices in human geography and then reviews existing research on home maintenance and gendered identities, arguing that DIY is a potent site for identity construction, it then outlines the methods used in my study. Following this my argument unfolds in four steps which provide the structure for the article.

The first step is that homes are made of particular things. These things vary from place to place and are a product of both what is available and what is socially acceptable as a house building material. I look at the specific context of house building and maintenance in New Zealand. House building was an important part of the European settler history of the country and this forms the context within which New Zealanders work on their houses today. Second, the use of particular materials produces the need for certain skills amongst homeowners. Which skills are seen as being appropriate is a product of social understandings, yet they are not separate from nor only imposed upon the materials. Once we have the knowledge about how to

work with a material we are more likely to consider that material appropriate for our needs, so both the use of the material and the skills to work with it are perpetuated. I show how homeowners respond to the materials of their homes, how skills are acquired in relation to the demands of the materials and how they are transmitted informally to family and friends. Third, once skills have become accepted they can become seen as part of the 'normal', or 'right' ways of behaving and become part of people's sense of self. In the case of DIY skills, this knowledge is gendered so the skills become part of a gendered sense of identity and in the case explored in this article, of the gendered, national identity, the 'Kiwi bloke' (Law *et al* 1999). I show how this figure is as an important imaginary in the negotiation of gender identities for both male and female participants as they discuss their home improvement practices. Fourth, this is a continual process of negotiation, practice and sense making. Discourses are challenged and the meanings of the skills and of the materials they are related to change. Individuals, both men and women, make their own meanings repeatedly as they engage, or not, in DIY, but they do this in the context of what has gone before.

Materials, practices and home

This article is inspired by two strands of research on materiality and home. The first, has explored how objects make meaningful homes for their inhabitants (Blunt 2005a; Morrison 2013; Pilkey 2013). Post-colonial research on home has particularly effectively explored the material cultures of home as a means for negotiating identity and belonging and has shown how the home has been materially and symbolically important in fashioning both nation and empire (Blunt 2005b; Datta 2008; Datta and Brickell 2009; Longhurst *et al* 2009; Tolia-Kelly 2004a; 2004b). This work has tended to be sensitive to both gender identities and national racial/ethnic identities and

to the relationship between them and this attentiveness is important to my approach in this article. A second strand in research on the materialities of home draws on Science and Technology Studies (STS) and considers the importance of non-human others to the creation of home (Blunt 2005a; Hinchings 2004). This work has shown how the most routine and unexamined behaviours, such as washing clothes or showering, are the outcome of interactions between technical possibilities and cultural expectations (Hobson 2006, Pink 2012; Shove 2003; Shove et al 2007).

Related to this, social practice theory has been an important approach for understanding how everyday activities are intrinsically connected to material objects as people make homes (Shove *et al* 2012). Shove *et al* (2012) suggest a scheme of practice as made up of three elements: materials, competence and meaning.

‘Materials’ includes objects, infrastructures, tools, hardware and the body itself. ‘Competence’, includes know-how, background knowledge and can encompass not only a cultivated skill but also shared understandings of good or appropriate performance. ‘Meaning’ includes the social and symbolic significance of participation in a practice, including emotion and motivation. Practices exist when these three elements come together and will disintegrate when links between them are broken. This schema, therefore, offers a way to understand why particular practices might continue or change and what the role of material things is in such transformation.

This article uses this tri-partite approach to practices, exploring relations between materials, competences and meanings to draw out how the materials of homes connect to meanings for those living in them. This resonates with Blunt and Dowling’s (2006, 23) description of ‘home-making practices’ as the means by which homes are made within both social and material processes. Home is a material and imaginative space which is made through routine practices as well as being an

expression and extension of them. Materials express the values and meanings of inhabitants but without social relations a home would be just a house, a sculpture of wood, nails, plumbing and wiring. The article brings these understandings of practice together with the sensitivity to gender and culture taken from the post-colonial approaches to material cultures of home outlined above. It uses and builds on Shove *et al's* (2012) schema by exploring how the carrying and modification of practices relates to gendered and national identities.

Home maintenance and gendered identities

Tim Edensor (2011) has described buildings as particular kinds of places that are always being assembled and reassembled.

Over their lives, buildings are used for different purposes, aesthetically appraised according to contemporary tastes, demolished, renovated. Amended and spatially recontextualised by the erection of adjacent structures and planning redesignations. They are cannibalised, extended and reduced, their textures change as they decay and disintegrate and their meaning transforms as understandings about their design and symbolic qualities are superseded (Edensor 2011, 240).

Buildings are made as a result of material processes: the hardness of stone, flexibility of wood, influx of water, but also of human responses to these and human desires and capabilities when dealing with them. They are continuously decaying and being repaired and repairs can be a vital source of variation, innovation and improvisation (Graham and Thrift 2007). Like other buildings, the materials and technologies used to make homes are specific to geographic contexts. They reflect combinations and re-combinations of natural resources, technologies and knowledges (Datta 2008). Home making is an ongoing activity in which both local and global influences are present, but they are mediated through the lives of home makers (Leonard *et al* 2004).

Looking at DIY activities can expose the ways in which materials, competence and meanings are brought together to produce homes. Home maintenance is a field in which the relationship between materials and competence is significant and where activities – such as DIY projects – are particularly transformative both for those doing DIY and the objects that they work on. This means that DIY has an ‘autotelic’ nature as the changes to house and person suggest other projects. The skills gained doing one thing make another possible and the tools acquired suggest new ways of working and new skills to be gained (Watson and Shove 2008, 75).

DIY, is also an important arena for investigating the production and negotiation of identities, particularly masculinities, within a material context. Research reveals the importance of specific material circumstances in producing home maintenance practices and with them particular understandings of masculinity. Steven Gelber (1997) has argued that in the early twentieth century in the USA the rise of DIY was a key component in men’s renegotiation of their place in their homes. DIY was not undertaken to save money but as a way to be a proper man and a good father. Engagement in DIY was facilitated by housing which had space for workshops and which allowed for modification. Similarly Ray Pahl’s (1984) classic study of the Isle of Sheppey showed home maintenance activities to be a result of relative affluence, again related to the physical form of housing, which offered scope for DIY refurbishment. Pahl locates DIY within class and gender divisions, a very specific history and material circumstances.

The skills needed to carry out home maintenance are the bridge between materials and identities and the autotelic nature of DIY means for many there is an ongoing negotiation and production of masculinity as they work on their homes. Morrison (2012) comments on how important DIY projects can be to heterosexual

subjectivities, with many couples negotiating and building their relationships as they work on their homes together. As couples choose new finishes and designs, their house comes to materially represent their relationship. DIY is valued not only for the ends it can achieve but as a process which cements the couple's relationship and manifests it in space.

DIY can also be a way that identities are communicated across generations and fatherhood performed. Jackson (2006) describes taking part in DIY as carrying the legitimacy of masculine skilled labour and as a way for respect to be built across generations amongst male household members. In contrast, a recent UK study found that expectations of men to be 'hands-on' fathers underpinned a move away from DIY and towards the employment of paid handymen (Kilkey and Perrons 2010). Men would outsource home repairs in order to spend more time with their children, thus impairing the generational transfer of skills. Homes are located within material contexts which affect how much DIY is done, how it is done, by whom, which skills are developed to do it successfully, how they are valued and how and to whom they are transmitted.

Researching home improvement in New Zealand

Research was carried out in New Zealand between 2007 and 2011. Thirty homeowners¹ were interviewed in the cities of Auckland, Dunedin, Hamilton and Wellington. Interviewees were asked what home repairs/renovations they paid for, what work they and other household members did for themselves, how they had learnt DIY skills and how they made decisions about who should do DIY tasks. My project originally aimed to understand the commoditization of home repairs, however, once I started the research, the importance of DIY to narratives of Kiwi identity and the role of materials in the production and negotiation of those identities emerged.

Whilst interviewees were sought systematically to give maximum variety in terms of household income, age, lifecycle stage and household size they still represent a specific ethnic and socio-economic sub-set of the New Zealand population. Interviewees ranged in age from early 30s to 70s and had household incomes in the fifth to tenth deciles for New Zealand (this is typical for homeowners in New Zealand cf Morrison 2012). All the homeowner interviewees were Pākehā (white, usually of European descent, this group made up 67.6% of the population in 2006 (Statistics New Zealand 2013)) but not all were born in New Zealand; as indicated above, this identity is relevant in the analysis of DIY in this context. The majority of households contained two adults with or without resident children; three of these were lesbian couples. Four households were single people (two men and two women). The interviews were carried out with whichever members of the household agreed to be interviewed and these were relatively evenly split between men and women. In six cases both adult partners were interviewed together. Interviews were transcribed and then coded using Nvivo software. The analysis involved the use of both ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ codes – that is some codes were identified in advance based on the aims of the project and others emerged during the analysis from listening to interviewees and reading transcripts. The themes discussed in this article largely emerged during the research process; the importance of materials and the ways people related to the materials in their homes made me look in new ways at my interview data.

I am not a New Zealander and my position as a white, female, non-Kiwi may have contributed to the success of interviewing as a technique for this project as I provided a seemingly unthreatening and ill-informed audience for people’s accounts of their DIY. My gender and nationality seemed to make it acceptable to my interviewees that I knew nothing about DIY. Interviewees were patient in their

explanation of the activities they engaged in and materials that they used. They tolerated my questions about practices, such as painting roofs, which were new to me but commonplace to them. Interviews in homes often included some element of interviewees showing me DIY projects, pointing out materials, tools, books, or ads for products they were interested in and many of which I had not seen. My unfamiliarity with the material and cultural context revealed some things that an insider might take for granted, but it of course left other things hidden and misunderstood. I now present the findings from the study in four steps which link home building materials, through DIY skills and activities to gendered identities.

Step 1: Homes are made of particular things: Home building and maintenance in New Zealand

The first step of my argument is that homes are made of particular things; that those things are place specific and are a product of what is available and what is seen as socially acceptable as a house building material. House building in New Zealand is the outcome of a history that has both produced, and is understood within, specific gender, class and racial/ethnic contexts. The history of European settlement in New Zealand is not separable from a housing history that defined white New Zealanders, particularly white, New Zealand men, as responsible for the physical provision and upkeep of their homes and it is within this context that New Zealanders live in and work on their homes today.

Colonial authorities in New Zealand dictated the forms of cities and within them important buildings (McNaughton 2009) but materials are much more difficult to order into existence than designs. Residential building tends to remain vernacular, a palimpsest of necessities, ambitions, dreams and associations written on and in materials that are locally available and considered appropriate. In the mid nineteenth

century settlers from Europe arriving in New Zealand were confronted with a heavily forested landscape and shortages of essential labour and resources. Settlers were expected to build their houses themselves perhaps with the help of simple plans from books such as *Brett's Colonial Guide* and sometimes with the help of Maori builders (Mackay 2011).

The wooden house became a building block of the colony. Home ownership was part of the fabric of the New Zealand dream and advertising promised European emigrants the possibility of home ownership on a sole breadwinner's wages. Settler society was predicated on the achievement of the sole breadwinner model and a lifestyle, based on high rates of suburban land ownership, which encouraged self-provisioning (Cooper 2008). For Pākehā settlers the ideal was not only of home ownership, but for men to *build* their own homes. Phillips (1996) has argued that this settler history has produced an ideal of nationhood, that is based on an ideal of manhood that, reflecting this self-sufficient past, emphasises physical strength, toughness and an ingenious ability to fix anything (see also Bell 1996; Gorman-Murray *et al* 2008; Gorman-Murray and Morrison 2012).

From the mid-1930s the New Zealand government supported the idea that the ideal 'family' home was made of native materials – local wood and tiles – through the programme of building state houses in the suburbs. These houses were intended to set the benchmark for the 'right' way to live through their situation, form and level of fittings. An example was even sent to the 1950 Ideal Home exhibition in London as a way to encourage emigration from the UK (Skinner 2000). After the Second World War large suburban areas were built made up of mostly timber-framed, single storey, detached dwellings on quarter acre plots of land. Between 1954 and 1964 207,700 such houses were built with government support (Mackay 2011) and the three-

bedroom, single storey suburban home on a large plot became the 'typical' New Zealand home (justlanded.com 2014).

The design of houses and the materials used for house building encouraged (and indeed often demanded) high levels of input from homeowners. DIY was popular amongst New Zealanders in the 1950s and 60s. Manuals specifically aimed at New Zealanders were published in the early 1950s followed in the 1960s by DIY magazines and the establishment of 'Building Centres,' non-profit organizations 'which showcased the latest home building materials and room designs and also provided homeowners with everything they needed to manage building projects or to do the work themselves' (Mackay 2011: 58).

Whilst figures are hard to come by it is suggested that New Zealanders are now more likely to be involved in DIY projects than any other population in the Western world (Mackay *et al* 2007; Morrison 2012), spending perhaps NZ\$1 billion at DIY stores each year (Mackay 2011). DIY also figures in New Zealand popular culture, in newspapers, magazines and TV shows (Leonard *et al* 2004). This DIY enthusiasm is linked to settler history, yet this history means that DIY activities have a racial and gender specificity which is located in the materials of homes, the distribution of DIY skills and the meanings and emotions involved when people carry out their home improvement projects. While this article focuses on the production and negotiation of a specific gender identity through DIY, it must not be forgotten that this identity is also racialised and the competent, ingenious 'Kiwi bloke' exists in relation to less-celebrated Maori and other non-white masculinities as well as to femininities (Phillips 1996; Law *et al* 1999).

Step 2: Materials demand certain skills and abilities

The second step of my argument is that the use of particular materials for housing creates a need for particular skills amongst homeowners. Once skills for working with a material have been gained, that material is likely to be favoured for future projects so both the skills and the use of certain materials are perpetuated. This process of working with materials and learning skills happens, however, within a social context and can change as social relations and other practices change – for example with a change in household composition or the increasing demands of a time-consuming job.

Tim Ingold (2004, 240 quoted in Edensor 2011, 240) describes a building as ‘a condensation of skilled activity that undergoes continual formation even as it is inhabited.’ Participants in the research had, between them, done a huge amount of work on many homes. Homeowners responded to the materials of their houses in a variety of ways. These included repairing their houses, renovating their houses so that they took less work, learning new skills and being inspired to make changes because they knew they were possible. The end result is houses which are not just made from materials, but from the materials and their owners’ responses to them – responses which are themselves situated within specific gendered, social and cultural expectations.

All the research participants had at some point responded to the needs of the materials of their houses as they faced time and the elements in some ways. These commonly included painting inside and out, painting and replacing roofs, replacing windows or doors or rotten siding/weatherboard, fixing dripping taps and worn out flooring. They also insulated their houses from the elements in response to the thermal properties of materials and nature of the house’s design. For many, houses seemed to make constant demands and responding to their needs took up large amounts of time:

[P]art of having a weatherboard house, that we have, means a lot of the time is taken up with doing a bunch of tasks that are required to beat the wilderness away (Homeowner 10).

Homeowner 10 went on to explain that she did not passively give the house her time, but also acted to discipline it somewhat to be less demanding; negotiating between its materials, the skills needed to deal with them and her own priorities and commitments:

Some of the motivation, in terms of the renovations that we've been doing, has been to reduce maintenance. [...] We are about to move into an extension and the extension will be fibre cement boards, again to try and get away from high maintenance, aluminium windows to try and get away from some of the maintenance that's involved in the house.

Renovating homes so they took less time to maintain was an extremely common theme in interviews, with many of the changes homeowners had made to their properties being attempts to reduce the amount of time they would need to spend on them in future. As Watson and Shove (2008) comment, DIY projects are often defined with the aim of closing a gap between how a house is and the demands being made on it. This is an illustration of Kearnes' (2003) point that material is not *a priori* to culture or social relations. In these cases the built fabric of the house is a negotiation between material and people within specific practical, cultural and aesthetic contexts. Materials can be changed, adapted, treated in different ways so that they fit social relations.

During interviews, when people talked about the materials their houses were made from they quickly moved to talking about their DIY skills (or lack of them). Housing materials and competencies to work with those materials were entirely

intertwined in people's decision making around house repairs and renovations. DIY skills were important in determining the materials that would be used in homes and the amount of time, money or energy that might be spent on them and with that the ways that people might be able to live.

Homeowners described to me that they had largely learnt the skills to work on their houses by 'having a go' and 'looking and learning'. When telling me which tasks they would carry out themselves and which they would pay professionals to do, it became clear that homeowners were most likely to do those tasks which involved familiar materials which they felt were easy to work with. Tasks which involved materials that were unfamiliar, or less malleable – particularly those requiring specialist power tools – were the ones that were most likely to be outsourced (along with electicals, plumbing and working at heights). Many described a life course where they had seen their parents carry out DIY and perhaps helped out when they were children, they would then develop skills as they worked on their own homes. Younger homeowners might get involved in reciprocal relationships helping friends and learning skills as they worked alongside, they would then refine and develop these skills subsequently working on their own homes (cf Morrison 2012) and then perhaps help their own children so passing their skills on to another generation. Homeowner 14 describes this 'have a go' attitude and shows how skills are learnt in response to the demands made by the materials of the house:

Well a load of it was just trial and error [OK] or looking at it and thinking 'well, what could you do?' So some things were probably not done [laughs] to a professional standard. Like wallpapering, I just [...] thought 'the bathroom needs wallpapering' or 'the toilet needs wallpapering'. So I just bought some wallpaper and just looked at the instructions on the packet sort of thing. [...] My dad was a... He was a person who taught himself to do stuff like that and he [laughs] – and he wasn't professional at all, but he used to [do] up houses and [laughs] just

sort of...do things by...eye [laughs]. And I guess I just sort of grew up with the attitude of 'oh well, I should be able to do it'.

Similarly, Homeowner 21 explained that she learnt DIY skills from working alongside her mother:

From doing it growing up, I suppose. My mum liked to change the house. So we often were repainting rooms and stuff. Or she decided that she didn't like the hallway anymore, so it needed to be open plan, so all the walls got knocked out.

Homeowner 7 explained why he was now starting to pay professionals to work on his house when he had until recently done the upkeep of it himself:

Three things have changed. One is that our financial situation has improved so that we can actually afford to hire people in. Our jobs have increased in stress and we do start to value time off more and the third thing is that the house is becoming old to the point that it needs more major things that I don't feel I'm capable of doing.

Homeowner 7's experience was typical of interviewees in their 50s. While he had gained skills through working on his homes over many years, he now found that social circumstances, as well as the demands made by the materials his house is made from, made DIY less attractive.

The materials and construction of typical New Zealand homes requires a relatively large amount of ongoing maintenance but repairs may not require the same level of expert skills as work on houses made from less malleable materials, such as brick and stone, or constructed in different styles, such as blocks of flats. This means that New Zealand homes may call to their owners often for attention and offer them many opportunities to gain skills, while the skills needed to keep up a house are possible to gain through looking and learning while working alongside friends or

family. This type of housing is not separable from New Zealand's history of home ownership that also underpins the generational transfer of DIY skills.

The transfer of skills within families and between friends means that some people are more likely to gain those skills than others (Watson and Shove 2008). Simply, men were more likely to be expected to learn skills from their fathers and to join friends in activities where they would learn how to do DIY than women were. A number of the women interviewed had learnt a range of skills from their families but absolutely all the men I talked to have been involved in activities with family, friends or social groups that involved them in some kind of DIY activity. The DIY industry (stores and tool manufacturers) have made great efforts to try to expand their markets amongst women, producing 'women's' tools (pink, of course) and providing guides and training sessions aimed at novices. Amongst my interviewees one woman had attended 'how to' sessions at a local DIY store aimed at women but others seemed untouched by this trend. Men were both given more opportunities to learn DIY skills and were expected to be able to use them within their social networks (Cox 2013).

Step 3: Skills are part of a gendered sense of identity

Step 3 of my argument is that once skills have become socially accepted and are shared and passed on between certain groups of people, they can become seen as part of the 'normal' or 'right' way of behaving for those people. DIY skills are gendered, so having (or not) the competence to do DIY can become part of a gendered sense of identity.

During my research discussions of skills were framed by many interviewees in terms of what was expected of a 'Kiwi bloke'. In part this was because they were talking to someone who is not a New Zealander, but other researchers have found the

same discourse present in interviews with New Zealanders about DIY (MacKay *et al* 2007; Morrison 2012). Discourses that link DIY ability to national identity also appear in popular media (see for example advertisements for the DIY store Mitre 10 http://wn.com/New_Zealand_mitre_10_advert_funny_#/videos. This campaign uses the stapleline ‘DIY it’s in our DNA’ and pulls on stereotypes of New Zealanders as DIY obsessed and Australians as lazy and selfish for its humour²). .

The ‘Kiwi bloke’ is typically ingenious and practically able rather than formally skilled (see Powley 2013 for details). He is able to respond to his material circumstances appropriately and to manipulate materials to meet his ends (Bell 1996; Phillips 1996). This is a version of heterosexual masculinity which necessarily exists in relation to materials and is performed through engagement with materials. A number of themes emerged when the Kiwi bloke ideal was invoked. In conversations with and about men these divided into discussion around the expectation that New Zealand men were ‘typically’ handymen and discussions of those who do not conform to that ideal. In interviews with women about their own DIY the Kiwi bloke was also available to explain their approach to home improvements.

The ideal of the Kiwi bloke was ever present in interviews, with many people describing what they or other household members did as ‘typical’:

[My partner’s] the typical handyman [...]. My dad is also a typical New Zealand handyman (Homeowner 13).

Or as ‘what all Kiwis do’:

We do our own wallpapering and painting and papering and things. But every Kiwi does that [laughs], or most every Kiwi (Homeowner 17).

The typical Kiwi bloke was also something that my participants saw themselves as not being. Yet denials of the handy Kiwi bloke were framed in a way that supported rather than challenged the stereotype. While people were happy to tell me that they or their partners were not typical Kiwi blokes, no one ever tried to suggest that the image was overstated, unfounded or out of date. These denials were also framed in a way which showed how important materials, and competencies to deal with them, were to this form of masculinity. Homeowner 12 stated:

My partner probably doesn't fit the usual Kiwi bloke concept of being a handyman, in fact he tends to harm himself.

This quote suggests both that for her the Kiwi bloke ideal is strong enough to be relevant even when her partner does not conform to it, and that perhaps her partner continues to try to live up to this ideal even though he often hurts himself. It suggests the Kiwi bloke is proficient with tools, and someone who is not, is not a 'proper' Kiwi bloke. Other interviewees who said they did not fit the stereotype also talked about injuring themselves when they did DIY.

Homeowner 17 explained how far he felt he was from being the handy Kiwi bloke:

I'm one of these non – even though I'm a farmer's son – I'm not all that handy as a handyman. So, yeah, I've just done little bits and pieces. You know, built, um, built planter boxes in the garden. Anything that... anything with hammers and nails on the outside that doesn't make... doesn't have to be finished to perfection, I'm OK with. [...] Also my network of friends know that I'm, you know, nine out of ten useless. The New Zealand male...still in the baby booming era, [...] our era, still has an incredible amount of expertise compared – and...and I'm on the lower end of that. [...] I'm at that end of the continuum for New Zealand where I think I'm not quite as handy as I perhaps ought to be.

This quote reveals Homeowner 17 has a very clear idea of what he thinks the ‘New Zealand male’ is and should be. He is precise in delineating the baby boomers as a group who perhaps have greater expertise than younger men and even gives himself a numeric score for his ability. Later he described that when working with groups of friends he is designated heavy lifting while the ‘real’ handymen do more skilled work, showing that there are (skilled) ‘Kiwi bloke’ and (unskilled) ‘non-Kiwi bloke’ ways to do DIY. His attitude is highly respectful of others’ skill and he implies that he *ought* to be more handy – despite the fact that he has done quite a range of DIY over the years and is now in a position to pay professionals.

He went on to make a sideways reference to the ‘brains/hands’ divide, saying:

Every New Zealand male, other than myself and a few other university professor types [we] don’t have chains, everyone else has a chainsaw.

Whilst this was said in partial jest, and as a sweet, self-depreciating comment, it suggests that there is an extent to which ‘university professor types’ do not fit neatly into the category ‘New Zealand male’. Homeowner 17 was typical of the academic men I interviewed in that he was highly respectful of manual work and at no point in the interview invoked any other version of masculinity – for example one founded on intellectual ability, or the ability to provide financially – as a counter to the image of the handy Kiwi bloke. Whilst Homeowner 17’s descriptions of himself as ‘nine out of ten useless’ and as a ‘university professor type’ could be seen as related – a claim that he is an overly-cerebral, highly intelligent person who does not need to be good with his hands – and this could be interpreted as a claim based on class, his discussion actually undermines this by the way he positions himself as part of a social group, a

friend network and a whole generation, that is made up of people who are more handy than him.

This emphasis on physical ability rather than intellectual ability as *the* mark of masculinity is in keeping with existing research on masculinities in New Zealand and Australia (Gorman-Murray *et al* 2008 and Gorman-Murray and Morrison 2012; Law *et al* 1999; Waitt and Warren 2008). The point is not that all men conform to this ideal, or even want to – masculinities are multifarious in New Zealand as they are elsewhere – however, this particular form of masculinity shapes the terrain within which masculinity is imagined and discussed (Schick and Dolan 1999). DIY skills have been incorporated into imaginings of the ‘right’ way to be a Kiwi bloke and the culturally validated meaning of being good at DIY is important in fixing these practices in the way described by Shove *et al* (2012).

Step 4: Meanings are re-made through practices: Or women can also be good ‘Kiwi blokes’

Step four of my argument is that while the relationship between DIY practices and gendered identities can appear to be fixed and stable, there is in fact a continual process of negotiation and sense making as practices are carried out (or not).

Discourses can be contested and men and women make new meanings as they engage, or do not engage in DIY; but they do this within a specific historical and social context. My interviewees found ways to understand and validate their gender identities even when they did not conform to the ‘Kiwi bloke’ ideal and their responses showed the performative, partial and spatially specific nature of heteronormative masculinity. These negotiations and re-shapings were revealed most clearly when men talked about not fulfilling the ideal and when women talked about their DIY practices in terms of whether they were good Kiwi blokes.

Of the men and women I interviewed DIY skills were generally talked about as being masculine. Yet women are increasingly involved in DIY in New Zealand, one survey found that 61 per cent of Kiwi women do DIY (Mackay *et al* 2007) and there was only one household amongst those participating in the research in which the woman did no DIY. Many of my interviewees felt that they did not conform to gendered expectations. Many of the men, like Homeowner 17, were apologetic for their lack of ‘handiness’ and women were also enrolled in the Kiwi bloke ideal. So while these activities were understood and, without prompting described to me, in gendered terms it was not the case that the majority of interviewees experienced a strict traditional gender division in roles and they could use their engagement, or not, in DIY to construct meaningful and valued gendered identities even if they saw these as atypical. Homeowner 16, who is a competent and enthusiastic DIYer, described her interest in this as ‘mannish.’ She said:

I have to say sometimes I feel atypical. Umm...that I...do things that, um, other males and females think ‘why doesn’t she just pay someone?’ Or they think they couldn’t ever do it, and I’m sure that if they tried, they probably could. Um...and I guess part of it is my heritage, coming from a large family where you just had to do stuff.

In her description of her abilities as atypical, Homeowner 16 is unusual. Rather than seeing New Zealand as populated by highly able DIYers, her comment suggests a greater degree of caution on the part of people she comes into contact with. This might be because she is a woman and the surprise that other people express may be at a *woman* doing these things, rather than at anyone doing them. She still, however, positions her ability to do practical things in her upbringing and heritage, and sees DIY skills as the sorts of things that you just learn by having a go.

Homeowner 15 described that it had taken him some time to give up trying to be the typical Kiwi bloke who can mend anything with number eight fencewire³:

There is a kind of cultural thing here, what we call 'the number eight wire'. And... I guess it took me a long time to come to a point and think 'yeah, it's OK [...] It...it doesn't matter'. I used to try and fix things and I'd make such a mess of them and have to get somebody in anyway. I thought, 'well, what's the point of this?' I mean, I'm getting all anxious about this and worrying about it and feeling bad because I make a mess of it. Why not just acknowledge that I can't do those kinds of things? And fortunately my wife is very, in fact she kind of persuaded me to start thinking along those lines, she said 'you know, I didn't marry you because you're practical' [laughs]. My father was practical. [...] There are other things that I can do and I'm, I'm reasonably good at ironing and kind of routine maintenance, things like that. So I don't feel as though I'm kind of totally useless around the place.

I find this quote very touching and it reveals clearly how DIY practices both connect with and disrupt homeowners' identities, revealing the connection between the material, competence and meaning and the on-going process of meaning making through DIY and other household activities. Homeowner 15 seems to be struggling to find a way to value himself and his contribution to the family given that he describes himself as not practical. In describing the difficulty of coming to terms with his lack of practicality he cites both a cultural ideal (the number eight fence wire man) and his father. His lack of proficiency with DIY disrupts his adherence to a single form of masculinity and he re-negotiates his sense of identity through other, equally practical, tasks in order to assure himself that he is not 'totally useless'.

While DIY skills were strongly coded as male they were still part of some women's sense of identity. Homeowner 9 talked with ease about the work she and her partner had done on their house, revealing the large amount of work and high level of skill she took for granted. When I asked her how she had learnt to do these things she

answered in some detail about reading books, learning at school, talking to people but said the main source was her dad:

[P]art of Dad's relationship with me, in terms of being a daughter, and then again, a lesbian daughter, is that process of teaching me to be independent as I'm not going to have a man to do that for me.... Yeah, like as a young woman, prior to coming out, he was really clear that I needed to know how to do basic maintenance on a car, but certainly post coming out he's realised that I need a larger skill set than he would previously.

This quote wonderfully reveals the absolute assumption that home repairs are men's work – because without a man around she will need to be able to do them herself - and the simultaneous assumption that a woman can do this work. DIY practices both connect with and disrupt gender identities. The male coding of the responsibility is not challenged by the teaching of a daughter to do things.

I went on to ask Homeowner 9 where her 'can do' attitude came from. Like many interviewees, she invoked a rural, settler history that demanded independence and that called for 'Kiwi ingenuity'. She said:

that attitude, clearly would be my father, both my father and mother, their willingness to tackle things. I think that's partly their history, they immigrated here from Britain, so in terms of constructing a life here, have actively taught us as kids to be independent and problem solve and do all that stuff as part of that package. [...] So some of that resourcefulness ... we grew up rurally, so part of that philosophy is part of a rural New Zealand philosophy of doing this.

Homeowner 9's response illustrates that masculinised narratives of nationhood and history are also available to women to explain their home repair activities and to help them make meanings as they work on their homes.

Materials require particular responses and encourage people to develop and transmit particular competences. The commonplace nature of home repairs means that

the skills needed to do them are widespread, or thought to be so, and they become part of a gendered, national identity that people then understand themselves in relation to. For the men participating in this research the ideal of the Kiwi bloke was present either as something they identified with or something they felt they fell short of. Whilst many said that they did not conform to this expectation they still used the figure of the Kiwi bloke to discuss their identity. Whilst the stereotype is strongly gendered, this does not mean that it only affects men, or only influences how men think about working on their homes; women understood their DIY skills in reference to the same discourses and these discourses provide meaning for the DIY practices they carried out.

Conclusion

This article has examined how materials become part of the making of a specific gendered identity. It has shown the importance of materials and competences to the understanding of gender performativity and revealed how place shapes the performance and meaning of masculinity. This focus on materials and the skills used to work with them offers an additional way to think about how gender identities are produced, confirmed and challenged. Shove *et al's* (2012) conceptualisation of practices as being stabilized when materials, competence and meanings align but disintegrating when links between them break, could be useful in understanding the unstable but often enduring nature of gender identities more generally.

The article has located the negotiation of gendered identities in New Zealand within a particular material and historical context. I have argued that materials for house building are locally specific and were important to the Colonial history of New Zealand. The material and social circumstances of the European settlement of New Zealand demanded certain skills from homeowners, which became commonplace and

recognised as part of the 'right' way to be a New Zealand man. These skills have carried over into DIY activities today and allow (some) people to make their identities as they work on their homes.

An examination of DIY practices joins up materials with competences and meanings showing how these practices produce specific – contested and accepted – versions of masculinity. Tracing the links between materials and meanings has shown how specific histories and geographies are part of the everyday production and contestation of gendered identities. This is not an environmentally determinist argument: the wood, or tin that homes are made of, do not directly produce ways of being or understanding ourselves. People work on and with the materials, define them as appropriate, understand them as part of houses, choose or reject them and it is this interaction of people with materials that produces both culturally appropriate homes and particular identities.

Masculinities as well as femininities are produced and negotiated within the home, through routine activities that are expected of men by virtue of their gender. Making visible these negotiations, their historical basis, their tentative nature and the porosity of the identities produced is important to struggles for gender equality. Far from being a private sphere, home is a space where nation and Empire are imagined and recreated. In New Zealand the ideal of the Kiwi bloke looms large, strongly rooted in the history of European settlement, a figure who appears to exclude both women and non-white New Zealanders. The participants in this research, however, did not respond passively to this spectre. Rather they engaged in a continual process of negotiation, practice and sense making as they carried out work on their homes. Men and women drew on validated notions of masculine Kiwi identity to understand their experiences. They made their own meanings repeatedly as they engaged (or did

not engage) in DIY, but they did this within particular material circumstances and in the context of what has gone before.

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Notes

1. My selection criteria for participants was people who were responsible for the maintenance of their homes rather than homeowners specifically, however everyone who took part in the study did in fact own their home.
2. Many thanks to Lynda Johnston for making me aware of this campaign and explaining its resonances for a New Zealand audience.
3. Number 8 wire is often used inventively for applications other than fencing. It is now used as a term that epitomises the Kiwi bloke as someone who can turn their hand to anything using the things which are easily available (see Bridges and Downs 2000).

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