

Mucking Around in Class, Giving Crap, and Acting Cool: Adolescent Boys Enacting Masculinities at School

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Semi-structured interviews with adolescent boys attending a Catholic coeducational high school in Perth, Western Australia, were analyzed using a Foucauldian approach to establish how these boys relate to one another and respond to their experiences of schooling. Their rejection of academic achievement and their peer group relations are tied to acting out problematic forms of "cool" masculinity. The ability of some boys to identify the social dynamics and the consequences of their behaviour for themselves and others suggests entry points and thresholds for school programs in masculinity education.

Des entrevues semi-dirigées auprès d'adolescents fréquentant une école secondaire mixte catholique à Perth, Western Australia, ont été analysées à l'aide d'une approche foucauldienne afin de déterminer le type de relations qu'entretiennent ces garçons entre eux et leurs réactions aux expériences scolaires. Leur rejet de la réussite scolaire et leurs relations avec leurs pairs sont reliés à des comportements problématiques de masculinité jugés « chics ». La capacité de certains garçons d'identifier la dynamique sociale et les conséquences de leur comportement sur eux-mêmes et autrui permet d'envisager des points d'entrée pour des programmes scolaires portant sur la masculinité.

Research with a group of adolescent boys in a Catholic coeducational high school in Perth, Western Australia, shows how boys fashion particular versions of masculinity for themselves through specific social practices such as "mucking around" in class, "giving crap," and acting "cool." Cool masculinity in these boys' lives at school is significant and requires comment. The cool pose has been discussed in the context of African American Black hypermasculinity (see Majors, 1989), but its appropriation and implications for the self-fashioning practices of White middle-class youth have not been equally explored. In fact, Epstein (1998) argues that further research is required to explore the role various masculinities play in how boys negotiate their schooling and the effect on their educational attainment:

This research would fall into a number of areas, but would need, in the first instance, to focus on understanding how different versions of masculinity are put in

place and how boys experience themselves as boys. A further step would be to examine, in detail, the costs and benefits to the boys themselves and to others . . . of the different possible ways of being a boy. (p. 107)

In this spirit, I use a Foucauldian approach to examine how different versions of masculinity affect boys at one school, focusing specifically on mucking around in class and how boys learn to relate in peer group cultures (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). The boys themselves highlight some of the costs of these social practices.

In particular, I use Foucault's (1988a, 1988b) "techniques of the self" and practices of self-surveillance to investigate the ways adolescent boys come to understand and experience themselves as boys. Particular modes of relating and feeling become a regime of normalizing practices through which boys learn to police themselves and others. Their view of a "normal" boy appears to influence how they learn to see themselves as males and relate to others, and they often engage in self-surveillance to police the boundaries of acceptable and desirable masculinities. Rose's (1989) account of subjectivity is along these lines, and it informs my approach to analyzing masculinities:

Technologies of subjectivity thus exist in a kind of symbiotic relationship with what one might term "techniques of the self": the ways in which we are enabled, by means of the languages, criteria, and techniques offered to us, to act upon our bodies, souls, thoughts, and conduct in order to achieve happiness, wisdom, health, and fulfilment. *Through self-inspection, self-problematisation, self-monitoring, and confession, we evaluate ourselves according to the criteria provided by others . . . [and this] . . . depends upon our recognition of ourselves as ideally and potentially certain sorts of [persons]* [italics added] . . . (p. 10)

The boys in this study work on themselves by evaluating themselves according to specific norms for fashioning a desirable heterosexual cool masculinity (see Frank, 1987). They establish their masculinities by recognizing themselves as certain kinds of gendered subjects and, hence, as potentially certain types of men (see Coleman, 1990). This creation employs a regime of practices for regulating and monitoring the conduct of individuals. To acquire a particular form of masculinity, they must accept the normalizing judgement built into the imperative to act, think, and behave as that sort of person (see Mauss, 1985).

Similarly, Foucault (1987) wanted, in his study of madness,

to know . . . *how the subject constituted himself* [sic; italics added], in such and such a determined form, as a mad subject or as a normal subject, through a certain number of practices which were games of truth, applications of power, etc. (p. 121)

He was careful to focus on “how the subject constitute[s] himself” within a field or game of truth/power relations. Different forms of the subject cannot be separated from the regime of practices through which power is channelled and truths are established. These are cultural techniques available within existing practices. I explore the role of such normalizing practices and power relations in boys’ lives at school. In relation to mucking around in class, giving crap, and acting cool, I analyze how boys learn to relate to themselves and others as males of certain types and what techniques of the self are used.

METHOD

This theoretical perspective led to qualitative research using semi-structured interviews to get students to disclose information about their lives and social relationships at school so that I might explore how they were fashioning for themselves particular forms of masculinity. Their school charges fees and draws on a mainly White, middle-class population. Because I had been a teacher at the school, it was easy for me to find subjects; I had taught many, though not all, of the boys I eventually interviewed. I chose boys aged 15–16, part of a Year 10 group at this school, because I had noticed that they tended to congregate in distinctive peer group cultures with the “footballers”/“surfies” dominating a space on the oval where approximately 30 of them would meet to play football (rugby).

Power is important in how the footballers related not only to one another but also to boys who were not part of their group. So, although insiders to the footballer culture are the focus of this study, interviews with two outsiders, Bret and Scott,¹ are included to highlight the abusive effects of the footballers’ practices on non-hegemonic boys (see also Martino, 2000).

FINDINGS

Many of those interviewed linked the footballers’ overt rebellious behaviour with their attitude to study (see also Epstein, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, pp. 132–138). They highlighted the rejection of the value of education embodied in their overtly disruptive behaviour in class and in their open derision of boys who studied or achieved (see Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; Martino, 1999). For instance, Nathan, a footballer and a high achiever, described many of his friends as scorning the value of the education school provides:

A couple of them hate school. Every now and then they say “Oh I’m staying home today.” They never do work; they don’t have any respect for any teachers, their

work, or life while they're at school. They just see it as they have to stay there until Year 10, then they're just dropping out and getting some manual job where they don't have to do much 'cause they don't care what education is doing to them; but then I've got a couple of friends who are like me and they like the education that they're getting and they want to use it.

Many of Nathan's friends reject mental labour and its rewards. But their rejection of school and its rewards — not unlike the attitude of the lads studied by Willis (1977) — cannot be tied to a working-class location (see Martino, 1999); these middle-class boys' parents largely held professional and management positions.

From other boys' comments about the footballers' attitudes to school, it seems that such practices are linked in complex ways to the imperative to act cool, a regime of peer group self-monitoring practices. Pete refers to the footballers as not wanting to look like hard-working students:

Yeah, [those boys who play football on the oval are] my group type of thing. Like Josh, he's . . . quieter than the rest of them. I think he's pretty smart even though he doesn't do that well; I'm not sure. He just doesn't try as hard as he should . . . probably 'cause it looks geekish to try real hard and not talk all the time and that . . . I think most of them don't try 'cause it's not seen to be cool to try. Nic, he doesn't really try that much. He just sits around and does whatever. But he's good, he's funny. He doesn't go out lots, Nic doesn't; he just sits around. And John, he's probably got a bit of brains too, but he doesn't use them much.

He highlights the pressure to demonstrate what Majors (1989) calls a cool pose, disrupting classes or working hard at not "looking geekish" (see also Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 1999), which gives these boys the desirable status of rebels. These boys are enmeshed in a regime of self-surveillance: Their masculinity is in opposition to the demeanour of a hard-working student. Epstein (1998) noted that the hard-working student is also often designated as "feminized other" (see Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, in press).

Bret, a basketballer who rejects the footballers because they "just try and muck around for the sake of it," talks specifically about how the footballers target students who work, particularly the quiet boys:

They think it's cool to muck around. Anyone else who's working — they put them down a bit . . . Like, if they get good grades and that, they call them a square . . . if they see those boys by themselves or in the library or going to class early or something, they might call them a square and all that. And if they find out someone's got really good marks or if they're in the area and they overhear they got a good mark, they might just call them square.

The footballers establish a cool demeanour by putting down other people who become targets in school, where their behaviours and practices are readily visible.

In Foucault's (1982, 1988a, 1988b) interpretive framework, school becomes a site for the production, negotiation, and policing of particular forms of masculinity. Certain "techniques of the self" are employed to denigrate the "other." Thus the footballers establish themselves at the top of a pecking order of masculinities in schooling. They differentiate themselves from boys who choose to work hard in class, do not play football, go to the library at lunch time to complete an assignment, or otherwise do not meet the criteria for acting cool. These practices of "othering" through derisive labels such as *square* get many footballers the reputation of rebels. Not measuring up results in a loss of popularity and status among the dominant boys.

Scott, an outsider, links the desire of many boys to be part of the dominant group to an attempt to avoid being bullied:

To be in the in group you have to be hassling someone else, and they're all hassling each other. There are quite a few groups like that at this school . . . There's . . . that large group, the football-playing surfie sort of guys, and they're one big group . . . someone's the brunt of all the crap for one day and then it's someone else the next day . . . And, you know, they have their kids that tag along, and they're not liked that much and it varies — I was probably one of those kids, I used to get it every now and then . . . I think a lot of people hang around there sort of trying not to be noticed by the . . . more bullying people. But there are sub-groups; and when I was trying to fit into them, their fun part of it would be trying to hassle other people and sort of, yeah, dehumanize them and just keep hassling them . . . I don't know, they just sort of get by hassling everybody and just having a few people they turn to and get them to laugh at the other people; and it's all a bit of a mess really.

He emphasizes the role a particular form of masculinity plays in structuring how boys learn to relate to one another: a system of verbal abuse and put-downs which establishes a hierarchy of masculinities (see also Connell, 1989; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Walker, 1988). Through a regime of abusive practices, a public hegemonic form of masculinity places certain boys on the outside as targets for harassment. The peer-group dynamic revolves around being able to get a laugh at the expense of boys designated as other because they fail to measure up to the norm of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity (see Kehily & Nayak, 1997). The cost of not being part of this group is such, Scott suggests, that some boys choose to be part of the group to avoid being bullied. This analysis draws attention to the emotional dynamics in the normalizing regime. Popular boys become the gatekeepers of acceptable and desirable behaviours for boys.

PROBLEMATIZING THE REGIME

Shaun, aged 16, a member of the footballer group who did not himself play football, also marked out the limits of normalizing regimes of practice for enacting masculinities. And he demonstrates the capacity to problematize the behaviours and attitudes of his peers, a capacity with, I argue, important implications for encouraging boys to interrogate masculinities in schools.

Shaun is considered “socially bright.” He speaks at length about the footballers and their practices, analyzing in detail the ways these boys learn to relate. Especially interesting is how he positions himself within particular normalizing regimes of practice through which certain desirable forms of hegemonic masculinity are fashioned and policed. Although he is a high achiever and does not play football, he is able to enact a desirable masculinity and establish a cool demeanour as a drummer in a heavy metal band. He also emphasizes the hierarchy established in this peer group: Skilled footballers and underachievers wield most of the power and are almost idolized — people just want to talk to them and to be around them.

I think it was because they were pretty popular with the girls and they were also . . . good at stuff like footy [football] . . . , that was why people would want to talk to them . . . they wanted to say something funny around them . . . It's pretty strange when you hear about it, but it actually did happen . . . they were like some sort of rebels, like bad guys, they were cool and they would stuff around in class, they'd get in trouble and like they wouldn't do their work as well. That was kind of . . . a big thing with these guys . . . but . . . you'd see it when people would want to sit next to them and talk to them and stuff like that . . . like they just had this kind of air about them, like they were some sort of idol or something.

The importance of being popular with girls and being skilled at football in high-status heterosexual masculinity highlights the power relations that permeate individual modes of behaviour and create particular forms of desire in normalizing regimes (Foucault, 1978, p. 11).

In addition to “stuffing around in class” and being able to play football, Shaun reiterates, being cool involved giving crap and getting a laugh from your friends (see Kehily & Nayak, 1997).

I suppose that you could say that they act like a bunch of arseholes really. You stand back and you see this big group of people all gathered around the bench under that tree on the oval, and I remember one thing happening. Um, there was a dog shit lying there on the side, there right near the bench. But no one could see it, and people who knew about it would like sit there and they'd be drinking and sitting around there and like try to get someone to walk into it. Finally, some poor

bastard actually did step in it and everyone cracked up and just laughed at him. And like there's this poor person standing there with crap on his foot and he was totally humiliated, and there's this big group, this big pack of guys, around and they were totally like laughing at him, you know, just trying to humiliate him even more and stuff like that. And it's like one way they relate, they like work on other people's weaknesses and stuff like that.

Considerable empathy appears to underlie Shaun's overt rejection of the footballers' abusive treatment of this boy. His willingness and capacity to problematize the behaviours and social practices of his peers are again worth noting. However, despite his strong disapproval of the footballers' actions, he does not voice his criticism of their humiliating practices — which shows the extent to which he has been caught up in the power dynamic in hegemonic masculinity.

During the interview, Shaun also talked at length about how the footballers blatantly contravene school rules as acts of rebellion. As Willis (1977) found for working-class schooling, these boys learn that contravening the rules establishes a form of rebel masculinity.

There's a lot of stuff about being a bad ass. "I give this teacher crap and stuff like that and I got into trouble, like I wrestle when you're not allowed." There are guys out there that will get their shirt and take it out, and they are not doing anything and they just take it out just to be cool or break a rule or something like that. It's pretty stupid when you think about what some guys will do just to be . . . accepted in the group or because they feel they just have to do it. Like if they're like this guy and people see them, they'll think they're a rebel or something, like they'll give the teacher crap and they'll take their shirt out, they won't do their work and stuff like that.

Shaun sees that in defying institutional authority, on occasion boys follow rules for enacting a stylized demeanour. In following these rules, they fashion a particular gendered subjectivity operationalized in a regime of individualizing practices tied to the deployment of specific technologies of the self (see Foucault, 1988a, 1988b).

Shaun rejects particular rules on particular occasions without, it appears, having his masculinity called into question. But he knows that although enacting masculinity is often a situational matter (Coleman, 1990), highly contingent on the circumstances, there are certain rules boys must never break. One such rule is that "guys are meant to have guys as best friends":

I know that there's this one guy . . . who hangs around with a bunch of girls and people call him a "faggot," and that's because he hangs around a bunch of girls and he hasn't got any guy friends really. I suppose it depends on the situation also. Because this guy hasn't got any real male friends, people call him a "faggot" . . . It

depends on what rule you're breaking and how you go about breaking the rule . . . going to the extreme of totally breaking the big rules that all guys are meant to have guys as best friends, not guys and girls being best friends, and stuff like that.

Shaun's use of "faggot" also points to wider regimes of heterosexism and homophobia in dominant forms of masculinity (see Frank, 1993). However, he appears to be exploring the role of homosociality: the requirement for boys to socialize with one another. To emphasize his point that an immutable rule for boys is to "get along with other guys," Shaun mentions Allan, who was new to the school and would "just sit down and never talk to anyone." He compares Allan to another new boy immediately accepted by the group because he was interested in playing football:

So there's a rule of doing stuff that other guys do, like playing sport, playing footy. And . . . you have to join in with them because I remember this Allan guy, he didn't do anything at all, he sat on that bloody bench for the whole time and didn't talk to anyone . . . he would be all shy . . . So there's like a whole bunch of rules that you have to follow, almost like you come pretty much all the time down to where all the guys are and like do something with the guys on the oval.

Later, Shaun says that "guys don't really care about what girls think, they care more about what other guys think."

Shaun highlights how certain rules of conduct must be followed in enacting a stylized heterosexual masculinity (see also Butler, 1990, 1996; Connell, 1989, 1995; Dixon, 1997; Epstein, 1997; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Redman, 1996; Steinberg, Epstein, & Johnson, 1997; Walker, 1988). This involves doing things with other boys, such as playing football, and learning to interact with other boys in ways that are "socially bright." It means getting along with other boys and not being shy. It also involves occasionally breaking rules to establish the demeanour of a rebel. These observations about the imperatives for boys to behave in particular ways within specifiable regimes of regulatory and individualizing practices (Foucault, 1982) can be a basis for problematizing the practices.

TEACHING ABOUT MASCULINITY

Many boys in this study had already developed some capacities for interrogating specific regimes of practice including giving crap, mucking around in class, and acting cool. Even boys from the footballer group, like Nathan, Pete, and Shaun, were willing to reflect on the social dynamics. I do not want to present the footballers' abusive ways of relating to themselves and others as benign or innocent; I believe it is important to consider how to engage such dominant boys in critical practice designed to diminish

these regimes and their effects on their own and others' lives. McLean (1995), for instance, has argued that encouraging boys to focus on the negative experiences and consequences of dominant masculinity can create spaces that allow boys to reject the abusive effects of masculine power:

Getting boys — or indeed men — to recognise the injustice they have experienced themselves can be the first step in enabling them to empathise with other people's experiences of injustice, and to recognise the ways in which they have themselves participated in perpetrating injustice. (p. 23)

My data may be useful in thinking about entry points and thresholds for engaging hegemonic boys in such critical practice (see Martino, 1998a, 1998b, 1999). They highlight the extent to which the dominant boys can engage in self-problematizing practices and interrogate the behaviour and attitudes of their peers. Shaun, in particular, was able to empathize with boys who became the brunt of his peers' abusive practices and who, he claimed, were consequently humiliated.

CONCLUSION

What form such critical practice might take without inciting resistance or merely reinforcing dominant masculinity remains an area for further and important research (Davies, 1995). Any curricula and pedagogical strategies that raise issues about boys' ways of relating at school must help students explore the links between such practices and normalizing conceptions of self and gender. In short, educators need to capitalize on boys' already developed skills and capacities for self-problematization and use these "techniques of the self" to help boys to interrogate masculinities in their lives at school.

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NOTE

1. Participants' names are fictitious.

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