

The trouble



STEPHEN FROSH, ANN PHOENIX and ROB

PATTMAN find that the image of the angrily grunting and inarticulate teenager does not stand up to scrutiny.

TEENAGE boys have a troublesome reputation, making them central figures in contemporary moral panics. Media and government, teachers and police; all focus on boys mainly as potential problems. Their apparent underachievement at school and the escalation of street crime, linked especially to mobile phone theft, are the main recent examples. Other sources of concern include 'control' problems ranging from delinquency to sexual abuse perpetration (e.g. Farrington, 1995; Vizard *et al.*, 1995).

Many researchers in the area of gender and identity have also drawn attention to an apparent 'crisis' in contemporary forms of masculinity, marked by uncertainties over social role and identity, sexuality, work and personal relationships, and often manifested in violence or abusive behaviours towards self and others (e.g. Frosh, 1994, 2000; Jukes, 1993). This both reflects and contributes to the production of a parallel *developmental* 'crisis' for boys, engaged in the process of identity construction in a context in which there are few clear models and in which the surrounding images of masculinity are complex and confused – ranging from classic 'macho' rock stars and sportsmen to 'soft' new fathers.

More generally, changes in employment and in normative gender relations mean that boys and young men are having to forge new, more flexible masculine identities. Understanding of the ways in which they manage this task is made especially complex by the fact that masculinities are racialised and expressed through social-class positions (Back, 1994; Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Pattman *et al.*, 1998). What is considered masculine by a working-class black peer group may be different from what is considered masculine by an upper-class white peer group.

So how have researchers responded to concerns over this supposed crisis in masculinity? How have they attempted to understand how boys and men are dealing with social changes?

What does it mean to 'do boy'? The study of boys and masculinities is not new; indeed, Willis's (1977) study of white working-class young men making the transition from school to employment produced findings that fit with current claims that masculine cultures are violent, misogynist and anti-school. However, a decade or two ago it was more easily assumed that even if specific groups of boys and young men were considered problematic because of their poor educational performance and culture of toughness (e.g. working-class, black), this was not to be seen as a general problem with masculinities. In contrast, more recent writers have been inclined to assume the existence of just such a general problem and have suggested a variety of (sometimes contradictory) explanations, including the absence of adult male role models in the classroom (Pollack, 1998), boys' problematic behavioural styles (e.g. Jackson, 1998; Salmon, 1998) and the impact of feminism (Kryger, 1998).

Some researchers have pointed out, however, that the evidence on which notions of a 'crisis' in masculinity have been constructed is not as robust as might be expected. For example, they argue that there has been a neglect of the fact that working-class and black boys have always done badly, while the most privileged boys continue to do well; and that there is an implicit blaming of girls, women teachers and feminists and neglect of the fact that half of all girls in Britain do not gain five grades A–C at GCSE (the standard measure of academic success).

These and similar complications with the data make simple explanations of the underachievement of boys in terms of some essential mismatch between school achievement and the masculine psyche, or masculine socialisation, less than helpful (see Skelton, 1998; Yates, 1997). Instead, several researchers have argued that the ways in which boys act as masculine, and their masculine identities, need to be seen as gendered practices that are relational, contradictory and multiple. In this respect, a gap in our current understanding of boys and masculinities is of complex notions of what it means to 'do boy' in specific contexts (Connell, 1996; Davies, 1997) – of the multifarious ways in which young masculinities are made.



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with boys

For reasons such as these, we have come to view gender as performative and relational. Here we are drawing on work arguing that masculinity exists only in relation to femininity and is constructed, through everyday discourses, in various 'versions' or masculinities (e.g. Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). This is not to say that boys and men create themselves out of nothing, in any way they wish. Rather, there are popular and culturally specific ways of positioning boys and men that, for example, emphasise their toughness and propensity for 'action', whether it be harmless, responsible or disruptive. In this regard, our work follows ethnographic and discursive studies that address boys' cultural practices. These studies converge on the idea (first developed by Connell, 1987, 1995) that different types of masculinity are *constructed* out of possibilities made available in particular societies and cultures. There are two especially key issues here. First, the everyday practices

associated with what Connell (1995) theorises as 'hegemonic' masculinity (the ways in which 'approved' modes of being male are produced, supported, contested and resisted). Secondly, the commonalities and differences in gendered identities created by, for example, social class and 'race'. Few studies in this area have taken this theoretical perspective to identity. Fewer still have included a mix of 'racialised' and social-class groups, as well as girls, in order to get a broad understanding of gendered identities.

The voices of young masculinity

Our own thinking on these issues arises out of a large ESRC-funded research project on 11- to 14-year-old boys in London schools that we carried out from 1997 onwards (Frosh *et al.*, 2002). It examined aspects of 'young masculinities' that have become central to contemporary social thought, paying attention both to psychological formulations and to social policy concerns.

The study entails in-depth exploration, through individual and group interviews, of the way boys in the early years of secondary schooling conceptualise and articulate their experience of themselves, their peers and the adult world. As such, it offers an unusually detailed set of insights into their world – how they see themselves, what they wish for and fear, where they feel their masculinity to be advantageous and where it inhibits other potential experiences. In describing this material, we explore questions such as the place of violence in young people's lives, the functions of 'hardness', of homophobia and football, the discourse of boys' underachievement in school, and the pervasive racialisation of masculine identity construction (Frosh *et al.*, 2000a, in press; Phoenix & Frosh, 2001).

The boys in our study were drawn from 12 secondary schools in London, including private and state sector, single-sex and coeducational schools. We conducted 45 group interviews with groups usually of four to six young people, nine of which included girls. From the boys who had taken part in the group interviews we selected 78 volunteers for two individual interviews, separated by two to four weeks. We also interviewed 24 girls, once each, with a focus on their thoughts about boys.

What was most important about our style of interviewing was that, although we ensured coverage of a range of preset areas (for example, relationships with boys and with girls, intimacy and friendship, attitude towards social and media representations of masculinity), we concentrated mainly on being 'interviewee centred'. The interviewer took a facilitative role, picking up on issues the interviewees raised and encouraging them to develop and reflect upon these and to provide illustrative narrative accounts. The second interview in particular explored repetitions, contradictions and gaps in the material from the first interview, allowed more focused investigation of specific points relating to the research questions and offered the respondent the opportunity to reflect and



comment on the process of the interview itself.

Here we want to summarise just a few general 'findings' from the mass of data available. The first of these is simply that 11- to 14-year-old boys (and the girls we interviewed) have sophisticated understandings of the current contradictions associated with the negotiation of masculine identities. For example, many boys recognised that popular masculinity is pervasively constructed as antithetical to being seen to engage with schoolwork. Yet some were clear that they wished to attain good qualifications without being labelled by other boys in pejorative terms. Many saw masculinity and toughness as inextricably linked but said that they themselves were not tough, leading them to give self-justificatory accounts of why they might be exceptions to the masculine norm. A common view constructed by the boys related to the racialisation of masculinity, with African Caribbean boys being seen as particularly masculine (as in other studies, e.g. Sewell, 1997), while nevertheless often being disparaged. These contradictions were related to some significant themes in the ways it was possible to 'do boy' in London, four of which we turn to now.

Differentiating boys and girls *Boys are defined in large part in terms of their difference from girls, and so have to avoid doing anything that is seen as the kind of thing girls do.* Talking about girls was a substantial part of most interviews. Sometimes the topic of girls was introduced by the interviewer, but often girls featured prominently when boys discussed issues such as popularity, academic work, fighting and sport. For many boys it seemed impossible to talk about themselves without referring to girls.

Boys commonly posed a number of gendered oppositions involving denigration and idealisation of femininity. While boys asserted themselves as tough and active, several of them described girls as more mature, evidenced in their attitudes to



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schoolwork and friendships and their ability to be serious and to give emotional confidences. A number of boys seemed to project on to girls a capacity for closeness and sympathy that they denied existed in boys. We also found that the construction of heterosexual desire seemed to involve a positive affirmation of these gendered oppositions; that is, gender difference was eroticised.

The girls we interviewed were similar to the boys in their construction of gendered dichotomies, though they attached quite different meanings to these and evaluated the 'feminine' and 'masculine' components differently. Almost all the girls were highly critical of boys for being immature, irresponsible and troublesome. They saw themselves, in opposition, not only as mature, sensible and conscientious, but also more engaging and as having a much wider range of interests than boys. However, their negative constructions of boys were usually qualified in ways that undermined simple and straightforward divisions between good girls and bad boys. Often girls attributed boys' 'bad behaviour' to peer pressure with the implication that when they were on their own boys could be all right. In addition, some boys were constructed as exceptions and seen as 'nice'. As with the boys, however, the girls tended to eroticise gendered difference: they wanted as boyfriends not 'nice' boys, but boys who were funny and sporty.

'Hegemonic' masculinity *Popular masculinity involves 'hardness', sporting prowess, 'coolness', casual treatment of schoolwork and being adept at 'cussing', attributes that are regulated or 'policed' in peer culture.* There is considerable debate in the literature over the existence and significance of an organising mode of 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' masculinity. However, the interview material provided

by these boys suggested some very influential themes in determining boys' popularity and also their views of themselves and others as properly 'masculine' (Phoenix & Frosh, 2001).

The function of hegemonic masculinity as a method of social regulation amongst young men is especially important. This could be seen, for example, in the ways in which football was a key motif in the boys' constructions of masculinities and was raised as an important theme by both boys and girls: the relationship of a boy to football to a considerable extent defined the degree to which he was considered appropriately masculine. Style is also important and is a particularly racialised marker of masculinity, with African Caribbean boys being high status in this respect. Social-class issues also operated, with both working-class and middle-class boys expressing caution about, or dislike of, boys from other social classes. This was particularly marked among private school boys for whom social class spontaneously emerged as an important preoccupation.

In addition, our data provide evidence of ways in which boys police their identities by constructing certain boys as transgressing gender boundaries, and rendering them effeminate or gay. Homophobia was extremely pervasive; and we have examined this in relation to fears and anxieties associated with popular ways of being boys (Frosh *et al.*, in press).

Parents *Relationships with parents are of considerable continuing importance to young teenage boys, but are also regulated in gender-specific ways.* When boys spoke about their relations with adult men and women, usually this concerned their parents. Most boys constructed their mothers as more sensitive and emotionally closer to them than their fathers, who were seen to be more jokey but also more distant and detached. Twenty-three boys (out of 78) indicated that their fathers were much less available for them than their mothers; only two said that it was the other way round; and many boys wished they could see more of their fathers, with some indicating that fathers did not respond adequately to their needs for help. Nineteen boys specifically mentioned turning to their mothers when things went wrong, for instance over being bullied or getting into trouble at school, compared with four who turned to their fathers.

Education *The power of certain images of appropriate masculinity often militates*

WEBLINKS

'Emergent identities: Masculinity and 11-14 year old boys': www.regard.ac.uk/cgi-bin/regardng/showReports.pl?ref=L129251015

Trust for the Study of Adolescence: www.tsa.uk.com

YoungMinds mental health charity: www.youngminds.org.uk

Young Voice: www.young-voice.org

against educational achievement, by making it difficult for boys to demonstrate an interest in working towards school success. Few boys managed to be both popular and overtly academically successful. We found that 'having a laugh' was a way of being a boy in relation to adult authority and classroom learning, and was part of an oppositional culture around which high status could be constructed. Conscientiousness and commitment to work were, in contrast, feminised.

However, many of the boys also expressed anxieties about impending examinations and whether they would achieve decent grades. In the individual interviews some boys admired girls for working hard, and were critical of boys for their obsessive focus on football and their relative lack of commitment to schoolwork. Teachers were not considered to provide identificatory models. Many of the boys in the study expressed resentment against what they perceived to be teachers' favouritism towards girls. This perceived bias was, in ethnically mixed schools, reported to be racialised. Black boys were seen to be (unfairly) punished more than were white boys (Frosh *et al.*, 2000b).

Food for thought

Our research brought home to us how rich and full of expression can be the accounts boys give of their lives. The image of the angrily grunting and inarticulate teenager is not one that stands up to scrutiny when one looks at what can happen when boys are given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, and are encouraged to talk.

It is worthy of note that almost all the boys who were interviewed individually became engaged in very thoughtful and rich discussions with the interviewer, often entrusting him with deeply felt material that they seemingly did not speak about elsewhere. Material of this kind included uncertainties over friendships, disappointments with parents, anger with absent or unavailable fathers, feelings of rejection and 'stuckness' in relationships, ideas about girls, and fears and aspirations for the future.

All this suggests that, given the right circumstances, boys can be very thoughtful about themselves and their predicament. Even at age 11, they are often capable of reflecting in a complex way on how their actual lives are at odds with what they would wish them to be, and even about how constraining certain aspects of masculine identity might be for them. They often spoke particularly poignantly about losses and also about how much value they placed upon parents who attended to them sensitively and seriously – and how disappointed they were by parents who did not.

We found that boys could be sophisticated and thoughtful about all these things – about what they could learn from relationships with girls (though they tended to idealise and disparage them), about how social class is divisive (though they usually reiterated class assumptions in their talk), about the destructive power of homophobia on their relationships with each other (though they continued to mock and pillory boys thought to be gay) and about the injustices of racism (though they drew on

discourses of 'race' continually). Building on this thoughtfulness, without moralising but by simply questioning boys' experiences – and also without embodying sexism, racism and homophobia in teaching and other adult practices – will never be enough on its own. But at least it is something that could be done, and could make a difference to boys. We see a role here not just for teachers and counsellors in schools, but also for educational psychologists, who are often faced with demands to help deal with very troublesome boys or who may be acting in a consultative role with schools. More broadly, psychologists of various sorts are having an input into the current debates on 'what to do about boys'. We hope that this input would include a recognition both of the power of social 'discourses' to govern boys' identity construction and behaviour, and of the extent to which boys nevertheless often seek alternative ways of 'doing boy'. Given the opportunity, many young teenage boys are eager to think and talk about their lives, and about how to make things better.

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