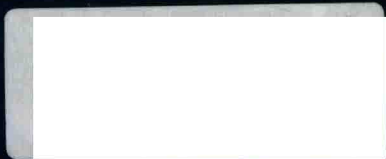# Masculinity and Education

Edited by
Amanda Coffey and David James

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Masculinity and Education

The uncertain, complex and problematic relationships between masculinity and education have come to occupy a prominent position within the sociology of education in recent years. This collection of chapters brings together a range of different perspectives, offering both empirical and theoretical contributions to our understanding of this subject.

The chapters seek to broaden our sociological understanding by considering masculinities in relation to a variety of educational settings and contexts. These include the role of football in the playground of a junior school, the question of why more boys study AS-level mathematics in England, the changing rhetoric of education ministers and attempts to increase the number of male primary school teachers in Australia. The collection also engages with the broader context of gender politics and educational theory and the volume concludes with a study of the move away from class analysis within educational theories in recent decades, taking English white working class masculinity as its main focus. It offers a perceptive insight into a crucial and current area within the sociology of education.

This book was originally published as a special issue of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*.

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Contents

Introduction

David James & Amanda Coffey

This book brings together contributions to debates and discourse on masculinities in educational settings. There are several reasons why the Executive Editors decided to assemble a collection of chapters on masculinity and education from recent issues of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. First, a substantial number of articles appearing in the journal over recent years have had something to say about the topic; indeed we counted some 26 in the period since 2000. We wanted to highlight the contributions that the journal has made to sociological research and understanding in the area. Second, whilst the concerns of these chapters went across the various 'phases' of institutionalised educational arrangements, or were variously focused on pupils, staff, institutions and so forth, we felt there were good reasons to read some of them together, as a collective contribution. Third, we felt that the empirical and theoretical work in these chapters reflected some important currents and shifts in sociological reasoning, thus providing a barometer of sorts. Fourth, as well as being intrinsically interesting and worthwhile, the work collectively makes a valuable contribution to the conceptualisation of certain sets of persistent problems and remaining opportunities, and therefore to the potential for positive change.

It is not the purpose of this short Introduction to give a complete 'cook's tour' of the chapters. Something of this can be gained from reading the Abstracts. Rather, we wish to draw attention to some of the themes and connections from within, between and across the chapters. The first thing to say here is that despite the range of focus and some marked divergence in theorisation, there is broad agreement about how to define masculinity, or the extent to which it might be defined. This is more than a break with simplistic 'socialisation' models, though this aspect remains important. We felt all the authors represented here would agree with the summary offered by Jon Swain in the first chapter, even if they would emphasise different facets and expand upon different implications: '...masculinity is a relational construct occupying a place in gender relations, there are multiple masculinities, there is a hierarchy of masculinities, and masculinity is a precarious, life-long ongoing performance' (p. 6).

Connell's continuing influence on the field is very clear, and the concept of *hegemonic masculinity* (Carrigan *et al.*, 1987; Connell, 1995) remains a point of theoretical anchorage, providing as it does a relational understanding infused with concepts of power. *Hegemonic masculinity* is the idealised form, marginalising other forms and defining the norm. The concept provides particular analytical purchase in the chapters by Jon Swain and Emma Renold, and is important in the delineation of gender-relevant physical education in the chapter by Trish Gorely *et al.* Swain, for example, shows that in the case of junior school boys, '...the game of football influences the construction,

negotiation and performance of hegemonic masculinity [...] Hegemonic masculinities were found to be constructed in relation to other masculinities and femininities, which necessarily become subordinated and marginalised' (Swain, p. 17). In Renold's study, we see a subtle account of processes and practices as boys negotiate opposing masculinities that are created in 'official' school and 'social' school; we see how '[m]any boys were learning the hard way, and early on in their schooling careers, that studiousness and academic success conflict with conventional forms of hegemonic masculinity' (Renold, p. 32). For their part, Gorely *et al.* relate this conceptualisation of masculinity to a topic discussed earlier by Connell, namely the recognition that physical education in schools is *particularly* implicated in the reproduction of gender divisions and the elevation of hegemonic masculinity. Their chapter examines the prospects for gender-relevant physical education programmes that challenge educational and societal institutional practices to engage in '...explicit critique and *dis*-articulation of the muscularity/gender/sport discursive formation' which seeks 'to show how degrees of muscularity come to be associated with particular masculinities' (Gorely *et al.*, p. 63). This does not however lead them to arguments for the replacement of competitive sport with other activities. Rather, they follow Bryson in pointing out that different sporting activities vary greatly in their relationship to hegemonic masculinity, and insist that a gender-relevant physical education – a process that 'interrupts the habitus' – is both possible and desirable.

Several of the chapters in this collection incorporate important theoretical and conceptual development within the sociology of gender and education. Heather Mendick's chapter is a strong example of a post-structuralist direction, and she is right when she claims of her own approach:

> I have broken with the dominant pattern of research in gender and mathematics education, and in the sociology of gender more generally, that maps masculinities onto men and boys and femininities onto women and girls ... and so tacitly reinforces oppositional concepts of gender (p. 94).

Instead, 'Masculinity and femininity are viewed as fluid properties of practices not people', (and then, quoting Butler), 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (p. 88). Mendick uses this approach to frame a fascinating account of two different girls who are studying at advanced level in upper secondary education in the UK, each finding different solutions to the intricate and complex reconciliation of gendered oppositions as they study the discursively masculine mathematics. Contrary to some expectations of a post-structuralist analysis, Mendick also arrives at practical recommendations – first making masculinity safer for women (and femininity safer for men), and second changing the epistemological constructs around mathematics itself so that there is more acknowledgement of its processes rather than 'right' and 'wrong' answers, and more space for student 'authoring'.

The sociology of masculinity and education must, of necessity, take full account of the concepts and visions that circulate in gender politics and in the wider culture and the ways in which these make certain policies and practices appear more or less realistic, even more or less inevitable. Masculinities, as discursive repertoires, continue to be powerful in terms of interpellation in a range of settings, as illustrated in a number of the chapters presented here. Cath Lambert's chapter examines a new rhetoric of

educational leadership that emerged in the UK under New Labour, exploring a move away from a 'discourse of derision' towards one of 'recognition', a 'third way' of 'something for something'. Comparing major speeches from leading UK politicians of the time – Blunkett, Morris and Miliband – Lambert is able to illustrate the use of militaristic language and metaphor in constructing a new 'space' for head teachers, one that is characterised by 'strategic masculinism' (Blackmore, 1999). Yet whilst it augments the traits characteristic of hegemonic masculinity with 'being creative' or 'flexible', this new transformational leadership excludes '...negative or "weak" emotions such as guilt, anxiety or insecurity. Their omission suggests that these are not appropriate feelings or behaviours' (p. 109).

The two chapters from Australia also pay specific attention to wider shifts in what we might term 'common sense gender politics'. Earlier we mentioned, in passing, models of gender role socialisation: such models underpin a swath of policies in the English-speaking countries that have sought to increase the numbers of male primary school teachers. Taken at face value, the rationale for such measures is highly appealing. The argument goes that an increasingly 'feminised' teaching profession fails to provide sufficient male role models to boys, and that this is likely to hinder their socialisation in general and their educational achievement in particular. Martin Mills *et al.* show how an Australian policy both constructs and offers solutions to this problem, re-positioning men as 'disadvantaged' whilst failing to address how 'feminised' teaching is devalued and how those men already in the system are advantaged. Yet it is one thing to offer critique of such policies and quite another to illustrate why they have wide appeal, take hold and have contradictory consequences: it is here that Mills *et al.* offer most insight. The authors connect masculine essentialist assumptions to widespread concerns about boys' underachievement, but also to the rise of 'recuperative masculinity politics' and 'mythopoetic' popular literature, such as *Iron John: A book about men* by Bly (2004) and the work of Biddulph (e.g. 1997). Mythopoetic writing is anti-feminist and harks back to a vision of pre-feminist times when, it is assumed, men were men, and everyone knew what was expected of them. The view 'often constructs men and boys as lost souls who are on the verge of becoming depressed, suicidal and violent offenders' (Mills *et al.*, p. 75). The chapter by Malcolm Hasse, also based in Australia and also taking as its starting-point calls for more male primary school teachers, complements the one by Mills *et al.* It closely examines male primary teachers' accounts of experiences and finds that mythopoetic assumptions are widespread and woven into everyday practices. These practices variously undermine female teachers' positions, or create space for presumed essentialist male behaviours, including opportunities to 'stand up for yourself': 'It is apparent that current hegemonic masculine characteristics of being stoic, self-reliant and strong are valorised and considered important for survival in the adult world' (p. 121). Hasse warns that the employment of more male teachers may work against 'the best interests of gender justice' unless these teachers have a much more critical appreciation of gender processes than those revealed in his study.

Concentrating on those new to teaching, Annette Braun's chapter offers a highly original account of teaching as physical and embodied practice, and the analysis focuses on 'the appropriately gendered body' and 'the gendered authoritative body'. Braun skilfully combines elements of Bourdieu and Butler in her discussion of dispositions and the performance of gender (and importantly, the fact that the latter is not 'optional'). Drawing on her data and on the earlier work of Halford *et al.* (1997) and Shilling (2008), she points out that men and women are in different places in relation

to professionalism and appearance: 'Embodied professionalism and thus authority as expressed in dress is evidently more straightforward for men than for women in school environments … it appears that women have to reconcile professionalism with being female, whilst men accentuate their masculinity by appearing professional' (Braun, p. 135).

Braun also illustrates the powerful processes new teachers face which reproduce heteronormativity, showing that 'Femininity, in both women and men, emerges as the most closely monitored and judged: women are to avoid anything that may be construed as too sexual or too masculine, and effeminate men become a "legitimate" object of homophobia' (p. 138). Such analyses have major implications, not just for our understanding of gender processes in schools and how these may be challenged or shifted, but also in regard to how new teachers are educated and supported in the early part of their career.

The final chapter included in this collection is by Mairtin Mac an Ghaill and Chris Haywood. This sets out what might be termed a 'sociology of sociologies', charting the way in which in recent decades some educational theories – together with post-modernist, post-structuralist and late modernity theories – propelled a move away from class analysis. The chapter takes working class masculinity as the main focus, addressing the 'classificatory shift of white English working-class males, who have moved from an ascribed primary *socio-economic* status to an embodied *aesthetic* performance' (p. 144). The authors develop the argument, touched upon in a number of the chapters, for 'holding onto a productive tension between materialist and post-structuralist postions' (p. 145). They point to the importance of Reay's reconceptualisation of class (e.g. that it is 'a complicated mixture of the material, the discursive, psychological predispositions and sociological dispositions', Reay, 1998, p. 259) and make a similar point in relation to a strong form of intersectionality, citing Holvino (2008). The net result is a convincing case for 'the continuing dynamic significance' and explanatory power of class analysis.

This collection of chapters thus offers valuable opportunities to engage with a number of theoretical and empirical contributions to understanding masculinity in education, and to connect with a number of ongoing debates within the sociology of education.

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'The Money's Good, The Fame's Good, The Girls are Good': the role of playground football in the construction of young boys' masculinity in a junior school

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ABSTRACT   *This paper looks at the influential part played by the game of football in the social construction of hegemonic masculine practices among a group of Year 6 boys in an English junior school, which is an area that remains under-researched. Football forms a large part of school life for many children (the majority of whom are boys) and is sated with masculinising associations: this paper argues that football acts as a model for the boys, and they use the game as a way of constructing, negotiating, and performing their masculinity. Football is seen as a key signifier of successful masculinity, and its practices are a major influence on hegemonic masculinities, which are performed and defended in relation to other masculinities and femininities that become subordinated and marginalised. Girls are excluded from the games, along with some of the boys in the subordinated group who become feminised by their lack of skill and competence, and are subjected to homophobic abuse, as the hegemonic group acts within the 'cultural imperative' of heterosexuality. The games of playground football are viewed as a series of ritualised and fantasised performances, and this paper proposes that the body plays an essential role in the formation of masculine identities, with competitive displays of skill and strength. The school policies and organisation of football are also considered, and the power struggles and tensions this causes, not only between pupils, but also between teachers and pupils, and between teacher and teacher.*

Introduction

Although a number of writers (see, for example, Whitson, 1990; Hayward & Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Parker, 1996; Fitzclarence & Hickey, 1998; Martino, 1999) show how particular types of masculinity are constructed and reconstructed through the institution of sport, only a few significant empirical studies investigate the part played by football in the social construction of masculinity in school (Renold, 1997; see also Skelton, 1997; Connolly, 1998). This research is situated in the microcultural experiences of the playground, and is primarily concerned with the nature and dynamics of the interpersonal encounters and relationships within the boys' cultural networks of a Year 6 class. It focuses particularly on the perspective of the dominant group of boys involved.

This paper proposes that football is replete with masculinising meanings and practices, which have a powerful role in the production and reproduction of male hegemony. It specifically looks at how football is used as a medium in *one* of the arenas in which gender identities are constructed, negotiated and performed. Identities are understood to be an incomplete, ongoing life project that are constructed through social interaction and enduring struggle (see, for example, Hollway, 1984; Butler, 1990; Hall & du Gay, 1996; Hey, 1997).

Conceptualising Masculinity

The basic proposition of much recent feminist and feminist-inspired work on masculinity is that the masculine character is socially constructed, not biologically given. Much of my theoretical conceptualisation of masculinity is influenced by Connell (1987, 1995), who states that 'different masculinities are constituted in relation to other masculinities and to femininities through the structure of gender relations' (Connell, 1992, p. 732); relations that unfold within changing structural constraints. By transferring Gramsci's concept of hegemony (which he used in the context of class relations) into the area of gender relations, Connell contributes a valuable insight into how to incorporate power into an analysis of masculinity. He argues that power is differentiated, with different meanings and versions assuming a particular dominance in certain localised sites, which in this instance is the playground. Therefore, there will not only be a variety of competing and frequently contradictory masculinities on view, but also a hierarchical ordering, with a hegemonic form gaining ascendancy over and above others, which are consequently marginalised (pushed to the edges) or subordinated (actively pursued and assaulted). Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as 'culturally exalted' or 'idealised' (Connell, 1990, p. 83), while Kenway & Fitzclarence (1997, pp. 119–120) call it the 'standard-bearer of what it means to be a "real" man or boy'. It is not necessarily the most common form, nor does it mean that it is always dominant, nor that it is uncontested or uniform in nature; indeed, in many ways, it is fragile and insecure, and there is a constant need to maintain and defend it. However, it is the leading form of masculinity on show, claiming the highest status and exerting the greatest influence and authority; most significantly, it is able to regulate thought and action by being able to define what is the norm. Although it does not necessarily involve physical violence, it is often underwritten by the threat of violence. To sum up, masculinity is a relational construct occupying a place in gender relations, there are multiple masculinities, there is a hierarchy of masculinities, and masculinity is a precarious, life-long ongoing performance. Being a boy is a matter of constructing oneself in, and being constructed by, the available ways and meanings of being a boy in a particular time and place; or, as Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) maintain, it is about negotiating a 'set of storylines' and 'repertoires of action' (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 51).

Background and Methodology

The findings arise from a small, preliminary study that is part of a larger, comparative project into the construction of boys' masculinities in the junior school, and in which early analysis is beginning to suggest certain emergent themes. The work took place at a school which I shall call Bridgehead Junior School (all names of places and people have been changed), over a period of 8 weeks beginning in February 1998. Bridgehead is an average-sized junior school with eight classes, and is situated on the outskirts of a small

town in Southern England. It serves an area of mainly privately owned housing with a significant minority of local authority owned properties; 11% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, and less than 1% of pupils come from homes where English is not the first language.

The descriptions and interpretations come from interview transcripts and fieldnotes, which are derived from 25 semi-structured group interviews of both lower- and upper-school pupils (usually of two or three children on a friendship basis), and the non-participant observation of the informal games of playground football, with a particular concentration on one class of Year 6 boys (10 and 11 year olds). The sample was large enough to recognise a number of diverse masculinities, and to provide access to the cultural meanings and practices of a group of about six boys (who were the dominant group), who shared similar perspectives in a particular local setting. Specifically, the data was sufficiently rich to enable me to theories and test out ways in which the boys performed a particular version of masculinity through the game of football.

Researching young children's understandings can be difficult (see, for example, Epstein, 1998; Mayall, 1999). Before I interviewed the boys, I spent the first 2–3 weeks observing and getting to know them (talking to them, having lunch with them, helping them with their class-work, etc.) in an effort to gain their confidence. When it came to the interviews, I tried to make them as close as possible to the social encounters and interactions found in everyday life, but I also used directive questioning in order to test various emerging theories, pursue and clarify points arising during the interview, and to cross-check data from other boys.

I found that there was a dialogic arrangement between some of my initial theories and the empirical data that I began to uncover. It is, undoubtedly, important to acknowledge that the ontological status of the data will inevitably be mediated and constructed through the views of the subjects and the researcher: there will be manifest relations of power; there will be managed impressions and presentations of self; responses will be shaped by their perception of the person asking the questions; and their responses will be produced from within the context of the interview, and are not merely passive reflections of the world outside the room. These caveats may be even more apposite when young children are involved. However, I would propose that the data presented in this paper still refers to an actual, existing material social and cultural world, and that it provides access to the ways in which the boys experience their world and the meanings they attach to it: it is how they saw it. Moreover, it is important to emphasise that my findings are not only based on the interviews, but also derive from my field notes and observations of the football games over the 8-week period.

School Policies and the Organisation of Football

There was a school football team, and two weekly football practices (for the lower and upper school), under the direction of Mr Hawthorne, the only male teacher, apart from the head. Along with about 20 boys, eight girls regularly attended the upper-school squad on Wednesdays, and one girl, Anna, had played a few times for the Bridgehead school team.

Space

The playground and breaktimes are formally nominated spaces and times in the day when pupils are ostensibly allowed to choose how they wish to spend their time and

road

Year 6
versus
Year 5
games

Year 3
versus
Year 4
games

field

non-footballing
playground used
during morning
break

footballing playground
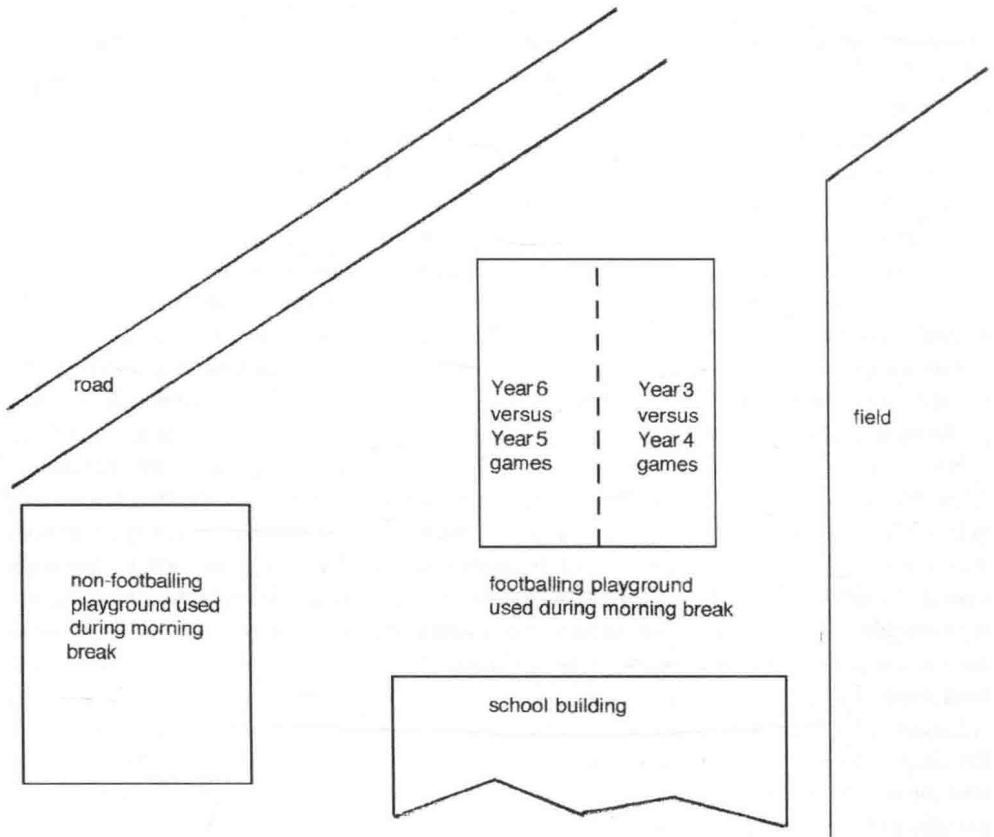used during morning break

school building

FIG. 1.

pursue their own interests. For many of the boys that I spoke to, breaktimes were seen as the antithesis of school work; they were generally highly prized and valued, and were enjoyed by the overwhelming majority.

Bridgehead had extensive grounds, a large proportion of which was grassed; however, due to wet weather and early morning frosts, the grassed areas were only in use in the early autumn, and then again during the summer term. For the rest of the year, pupils had the use of two playgrounds, one of which was specifically put aside for football at morning break (see Fig. 1).

The football playground was divided down the middle, and dominated by two separate games which took place every morning break (which lasted for 15 minutes). The school was divided into lower- and upper-school pupils, but since the February half-term, the staff had collectively decided to change the organisation due to the common perception and interpretation that there had been too much inter-year group friction and aggression when the two top years had been playing together. Although the Year 3 and Year 4 pupils were allowed to play football together every day, the upper school had been further divided into Year 5 and Year 6, and even then, some staff felt that the Year 6 games caused a disproportionate number of behavioural problems.

The two footballs were provided by the school and, in practice, the two games were organised by Year 3 playing against Year 4, and the two upper-school classes playing

each other within each year group. Thus, there were no problems in choosing sides; they were prearranged.

Many researchers find the playground to be heavily gender segregated (see, for example, Delamont, 1980; Ross & Ryan, 1990; Thorne, 1993), and this was certainly the case at Bridgehead. The physical space was dominated by boys and access was restricted: although a few girls could be observed on the football playground, they were generally marginalised and confined to the very edges, and consisted of small groups walking, almost parading with arms often linked, round the perimeter. Whereas one or two girls could be observed joining in with the lower-school game, the upper-school side was an exclusively all-male affair. The vast majority of the girls and the non-footballing boys spent their time on the other playground, where the main activities seemed to be talking, eating tuck, playing hopscotch, and various hiding and running games, the most popular of which was called '45 Home'.

Time

Football was not allowed before the start of school after a window had been broken a few years ago: this meant that between November and April, Year 5 and Year 6 were only allowed to play football for 15 minutes every other day, which could mean that they were only actually playing for a period of 30 minutes per week. This was because football was also prohibited at lunchtime (which lasted 1.25 hours) during the winter months, a practice which went back some years after some of the midday assistants had gone to the headteacher and said that they were unable to cope with the 'football problems'. This practice had become institutionalised and normalised into an everyday part of school life, and the boys that I talked to seemed to accept it without question.

Power Relations and Resulting tensions

Edley & Wetherell (1996) state that any acceptable theory of masculinity will have the concept of power at its centre. The notion of power presented in this paper is appropriated from the work of Foucault (1977), where rather than being exercised from above through coercion, power is viewed as decentred, multiple, invisible, and inter-nalised within the practices of everyday life, even at the most microscopic levels (Layder, 1994).

The school is, by definition, a regulatory institution; its organisation and its policies towards football created a form of disciplinary power that was aimed at controlling the boys. The school used various techniques of power, which included surveillance (from both teachers and other pupils), classification (where groups were differentiated from one another), and normalisation (where judgements were made by comparison with a preconceived norm). However, the boys' networks themselves were saturated by, as well as structured through, divisions of power, with the hegemonic groups' ability to define what constituted as the exalted form of masculinity, policed by its own self-regulation.

There were a number of simmering power-related tensions beneath the surface, which were a direct result of the school's policies and organisation of football: these were not only between the pupils and teachers, but were between pupil and pupil, and between teacher and teacher.

An illustration of pupil–teacher antagonism occurred one day at morning break, over the decision of whose turn it was to play in the upper school. Normally, there should not have been any dispute, but it had been raining the day before and, as the Year 6 boys