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The Making of Masculinities: Fighting the Forces of Hierarchy and Hegemony in the High School Setting

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This study stems from a yearlong qualitative inquiry examining the influence that gender ideologies exercised in the lives of four young men in the high school setting. Utilizing a feminist, post-structuralist perspective (Davies, 1997, 1989; Connell, 1996, 1997, 1989; Martino, 1995), it analyzes how masculinity constructs itself through discursive practices. The study involves four adolescent boys, Michael, Peter, Aiden and Jack, all friends and classmates in a small, Midwestern high school comprised mainly of working class and farming families. This study examines each boy's idiosyncratic positioning within dominant discourses of masculinity, specifically questioning its ability to shape, influence and possibly constrain posture and performance in the classroom setting.

Small Town School and Its Sentiments: Life in the Halls of Davidson High

With its amalgamation of working, middle class and farming families, Davidson High (pseudonym) typified small town Midwestern schooling. Home to 270 students, its intimacy freed it from the bureaucratic practices and structures that often plague larger districts, and the brick and mortar building abounded with nostalgic memorabilia of time-honored traditions treasured by the generations who had passed through its halls. An enduring symbol of community solidarity, it continued to serve as a meeting place where families were brought together to celebrate their shared history through the auspices of Friday night football and basketball games, homecoming parades and graduation ceremonies. Intimate, casual and unpretentious, Davidson High seemed the quintessential representation of American socio-civic education where the school serves the needs of the community and the community in turn stands by its school.

Although outwardly homogeneous with a 97% White student population, Davidson High offered considerable socio-economic diversity. Many students hailed from what the principal described as "working poor" families, as evidenced in the school's free and reduced lunch percentage of 23%; in addition, two recently-built manufactured housing parks looming on the outskirts of town served as blatant reminders of the distinct class differences in the community. Sometimes referred to as "trailer parkies," these families had ushered in a certain degree of community unrest as life-long residents struggled to negotiate the changing face of a community they loved and hoped might never change.

Although admittedly homogeneous in terms of race and ethnicity, Davidson High proved a particularly promising research site in regard to classroom dynamics because its small size precluded curricular segregation; whereas larger districts almost invariably resort to academic tracking as a means of negotiating student diversity, Davidson did not. Regardless of aptitude, students completed a similar core academic path for their first three years, although differences existed in elective courses of study such as foreign language, art and

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vocational study. Although the more college-bound students opted for foreign language and academic elective study, lower-performing students navigated toward woodworking, automotive and home economics courses. In many ways, though, academic hierarchy did not make its debut until the senior year and then only through the auspices of Advanced Placement study in fields such as English and social studies; however, it is important to note that Davidson, unlike many high schools, made these courses available to all students and did not impose admission criteria along the lines of grade point average or standardized test scores. I selected an 11th grade English classroom for this study because I had taught the subject for ten years and was familiar with the content and pedagogy inherent in the discipline. My experience taught me that introspection tended to align itself with literary analysis and that literature often afforded students the safety and distance they needed to delve into layered and potentially embarrassing discussions that might not otherwise unfold, discussions that might render some interesting insights into the boys' views of masculinity.

After explaining to the class that I was there to learn about high school boys and their views of masculinity, Michael, Jack, Peter and Aiden (pseudonyms) approached me in unison to volunteer as research participants. They had all known each other since grade school and were enrolled in most of the same classes; however, I learned that their paradigms toward school and life beyond could not have been more different. For the most part, school "worked" for Michael and Jack; they were "A" students, athletes and college-bound. White, middle-class and "successful," their paths seemed clear and promising. Michael came from a well-known and respected farm family, and his parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins had all graduated from Davidson High. He was captain of the football team, played basketball and track, and was recently crowned homecoming king. He was perceived in the town as the "all-American boy," and if anyone had the right to be arrogant, it was Michael. His place of privilege in the social hierarchy of the school was beyond contest, but he was modest, kind and universally liked by teachers and peers. Peter came from a professional, upper middle-class family where his mother was an attorney and his father a businessman, yet he consciously downplayed his economic privilege as one of the wealthier kids in school through his dress and actions. He often bragged about the "beater" he drove to school and was clearly embarrassed when his friends teased him about "living in a mansion."

Jack and Aiden lived a very different life. Jack came from a working-class, White family where his mom worked at the local grocery store and his father at a factory in a nearby city. Aiden, who described himself as "bi-racial," lived with his White mother who worked a minimum wage job. His father, who is Black, had been absent from Aiden's life for over ten years. Both boys earned poor grades in the majority of their classes and had failed the first semester of junior English. When asked why they had failed, they were hard-pressed to find an answer, although they were clearly distressed by the fact that they would now have to go to summer school or repeat the semester as seniors in a class full of younger students. When I expressed my sympathy, Aiden responded by telling me that, "it was no big deal because we didn't really need English anyway." Whereas Michael and Peter enthusiastically involved themselves in school events, Aiden and Jack openly resisted the institutional structure of the school in many ways. They had quit sports after their freshman year, rarely attended "stupid school events" and clearly relished their reputation as "rebels" in what they viewed as a "conservative" community. When asked, Peter and Michael would tell you without hesitation that future success depended upon a college degree; Aiden and Jack, in contrast, saw little value in "school learning" and could not wait to graduate to get a "real job." In the intimate academic and social world that was Davidson High, the boys interacted on a daily basis and would say without hesitation that they were "friends," but their views of institutional schooling, the role that academics played in their lives, and the world itself could not have been more polarizing.

Methodology

Qualitative research relies upon multiple types of data collection as a means of providing rich and in-depth portraits (Merriam, 1998), and so a repertoire of meaning-oriented methodologies were employed in this study including detailed participant classroom observation, document analysis, field notes, and individual and focus group interviews (Glesne, 1999). Specific categories were not identified at the beginning of the study but rather noted as prevalent themes emerged through inductive qualitative analysis. Two different researcher roles were appropriated in the course of the study. Weekly observations of the boys in their English classroom necessitated an etic perspective to ensure objectivity and influence classroom culture as little as possible. The boys' interaction with the subject matter, the teacher and peers was recorded in field notes, and several classroom sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. The researcher's role was emic in nature in all meetings with the boys outside of the classroom as personal connection was necessary to build trust and facilitate open and honest communication. Interviews occurred in the library conference room, a space safely distanced from the socio-political tensions that tacitly filtered into the halls, lunchroom and classrooms of Davidson High. Although interview questions were scripted in advance, the boys were given latitude to discuss topics that had either interest or relevancy to them, and all sessions were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of discourse analysis. This self-reported data was triangulated with weekly observations of the boys in their English classroom and regular meetings with their English teacher and the school principal, both of whom knew the boys quite well. The aim was to compare the boys' posture and performance during interviews with those staged in the classroom as the two settings offered very different arenas.

The ontological view purported in this study positions knowledge as socially constructed, and so a primary aim was to understand the world as it was perceived and interpreted by the boys themselves. To this end, an interpretivist stance was employed to "make sense of ... and interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.3). Namely, interpretivism provided the research lens needed to understand the social and cultural contexts in which the boys lived. Myers (2009) argued that a premise of interpretivist research is that access to reality is only realized through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. Berger and Luckman (1967) contended that variables such as race, ethnicity, gender and class are social categories whose criteria are determined by human beings; artificially-constructed by groups and individuals, they are neither natural nor inherent but subject to a constant state of flux and change. This understanding of knowledge as socially-constructed explains why categories such as race, class and gender vary within and across micro-cultures. Connell's (1989) discussion of masculinity as a socially-constructed entity is of particular relevance here; arguing from a post-structuralist perspective, he contended that masculinity is actively constructed in society and that school, society, and the peer milieu all offer boys a place in the gender order. Multiple forms of masculinity exist in any given culture but this existence does little to undermine the powers of hierarchy and hegemony, and so a hegemonic form will always exist and have the power to marginalize all competing forms. Connell (1989) noted that this hegemonic form will vary within and across micro-cultures, so what is "appropriately" male in one culture might differ slightly or even significantly from that which is valued in another. What remains constant, however, is hegemonic masculinity's influence in boys' lives, for it requires them to appropriate certain ways of being male to gain acceptance from male and female peers alike. It is through this process, then, that school becomes a major site for the production of masculinity identity among adolescent boys.

This study seeks to gain insight into that production of masculinity as it unfolded in the halls of Davidson High. Through analysis of the boys' posture and performance in the English classroom as well their thoughts and feelings revealed during interview sessions, it provides meaningful glimpses and explanations of the phenomena that guided their social actions.

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I contend that their stories reveal much about the ways in which adolescent boys manufacture masculine identity in the school sphere, because for Michael, Aiden, Peter and Jack, school proved a highly-politicized and gendered arena where the manufacture of one's masculine identity determined one's coveted acceptance or painful rejection within the peer milieu.

Literature Review

Bringing Boys into the Conversation on Gender

The manufacture of an "appropriate" masculine identity, as evidenced in the study of these four young men, is clearly no easy task, for boys are typically taught early on the importance of carefully negotiating and silently coping with the personal trials that invariably accompany their journey through adolescence. Guided by the masculinist notions that parents, teachers, peers and society have imposed on their lives, boys may find this journey solitary and fraught with uncertainty, clouded by feelings of insecurity, confusion and self-doubt they have been taught to disguise. For many boys, the fashioning of masculinity is not, as West (1999) so cogently points out, something that is attained "once and for all in childhood" but rather an ongoing struggle in which they must learn to overcome an "underlying sense of contradiction, ambivalence and incompleteness" (p. 3). Learning how to be "male," then, means learning how to abide by a specific code, yet it is an act that must be asserted over and over again, to oneself, to one's peers, and, most importantly, to society. Buckingham's (1993) observation, that masculinity is neither fixed nor given but actively "defined and constructed" through social interaction and discourse" (p. 93) explains how masculine identity becomes a matter of social definition and continued and exhausting negotiation where boys must "prove" to the world the worth of their masculine identity.

Yet as scholars in the field of men's studies have long pointed out (Connell, 1995, 1996; May, 1998; May and Strikwerda, 1992) masculinity is as much about proving what one is not—namely female and homosexual. Thus in the contradictory and unforgiving world of adolescent masculinity, one must sanction all that is "appropriately" male while simultaneously ridiculing all that is not. This realization is crucial to understanding the behavior of boys who may appropriate masculine subject positions that are admittedly disturbing because of their misogynist or homophobic overtones (Kimmel, 1994, 1996, 2000; Pascoe 2007). Pascoe's (2007) study highlights the power that homophobia wields in boys' lives, as well as the need to ridicule all that is perceived as "effeminate" as a means of insulating oneself from ridicule. While we must be careful not to endorse such positions, we must also strive to understand the ulterior motives that fuel them, namely the desperate need to avoid ridicule and gain acceptance within the peer milieu.

Constructing Identity through Discourse: A Post-Structuralist, Feminist Analysis

Feminist post-structuralist theory suggests that gendered identity constitutes itself through discourse (Weedon, 1987; Walkerdine, 1991; Davies, 1997) and thus offers a useful framework for understanding the various ways in which these four young men constructed their own sense of masculine identity. Davies (1997, 1989) argued that we become gendered through certain discursive patterns that operate in a variety of intersecting ways; although these relationships may go unnoticed, they become inherent in the very structures of our language, thereby operating upon our conscious and unconscious minds and shaping our very desires. The feminist post-structuralist paradigm was utilized because it suggests that our notions of what it means to be "male" and what it means to be "female" are neither biological nor inherent but rather determined by our positioning within dominant discourses of gender. Wittgenstein (1973) defines discourse as our very ways of knowing or being in the world, so natural to us that we generally fail to see their constructed nature or influence in our lives. Because we rarely recognize this influence, we become gendered through language as our positioning within these dominant discourses actively shapes and influences our notions of what it means to be "male" and what it means to be "female" in the social context.

This feminist post-structuralist paradigm provided a useful theoretical framework for this study because it explains how we become gendered through language. Drawing from critical feminist perspectives that reject the male/female dichotomy as a metaphysically fixed identity, these scholars re-conceptualize subjectivity within a socio-cultural field of intersecting discourses. As Griffin and Lees (1997) explained, their theoretical approach concentrated on how masculinity is "done" and how different forms of masculinity are "performed, contested, negotiated, and resisted in a variety of educational contexts by boys, girls, teachers, and parents" (p. 6). In short, masculinity is viewed as a performance, rather than a fixed state, an accomplishment that boys and men must constantly achieve in various contexts. My findings suggest that the boys' positioning within dominant discourses of masculinity not only influenced what they viewed as "appropriate" and "inappropriate" masculine behavior but also what they were willing to say and not say about their own masculine identity. Yet they were typically unable or unwilling to recognize their discursive positioning. When asked, they adamantly maintained that their views of masculinity had not been influenced by any force outside their conscious control, and so the possibility that this discursive positioning might shape, influence and even constrain their thoughts and actions proved untenable to them. Such resistance is not surprising, for post-structuralist research has found that adolescents rarely recognize the socially-constructed nature of gendered identity, choosing instead to view gender as a monolithic category that offers one way of being male and one way of being female (Davies, 1989, 1997; Connell, 1996, 1995; Martino, 1995; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1999). The result is that gender is viewed as both biological and inherent, essentially immune to question, critique or revision. This paradigm explains why the four boys involved in this study failed to recognize their positioning within these dominant discourses of masculinity and the influence it exercised in their lives.

Such resistance might be effectively countered, however, by illustrating to adolescents the socially-constructed nature of gendered identity, for such recognition is prerequisite to their understanding that there are multiple ways of being male and female available to them in our society today. Once adolescents recognize their own discursive positioning within dominant discourses of masculinity or femininity, they can begin to understand how this positioning has restricted their own gendered identity. Martino's study (1995) of adolescent boys highlighted the importance of promoting such critical consciousness as an essential first step in the deconstruction of hegemonic masculine codes that have regulated boys' lives and restricted their personal freedoms. Davies (1997) endorsed a similar view, arguing that once students see that there are multiple ways of being male and female, they can access alternative discourses that position them differently in terms of both masculinities and femininities.

The last two decades have prompted research interest in the field of adolescent masculinity, yet few in-depth qualitative portraits have emerged. Pascoe's (2007) qualitative study offered meaningful insight into the conflicts and tensions that adolescent boys negotiate in the high school setting, yet similar inquiry into boys' lives pales in comparison to that devoted to girls (Wiseman, 2002; Simmons, 2011; Walkerdine et al., 2001; Gilbert and Taylor, 1991; Finders, 1997; Shmurak, 1998; Orentstein, 1995; Pipher, 1994). Whereas researchers have brought girls into the conversation on gender, boys, for the part, remain noticeably absent. This study highlights the urgency of bringing boys into this conversation, for Davidson High, like most high schools, proved a high-stakes arena where hegemonic masculinity had to be enacted upon a daily basis. By offering a glimpse into this arena and giving voice to the salient conflicts and concerns that adolescent boys struggle with in high school, it lends insight into the influence that hegemonic masculinity wielded in the boys' lives and the often covert means by which they mediated it in an effort to avoid ridicule and maintain their positioning within the social hierarchy of the school.

Findings

Making it as a Man: Fighting the Forces of Hierarchy and Hegemony

Freeing boys from the constraints that hegemonic masculinity exercises in their lives is a worthwhile and necessary goal, yet one that will not be easily realized in the politicized and gendered arenas found in most of our nation's schools. Like most schools, Davidson High offered a repertoire of masculine discourses to its male students and so multiple ways of being male offered themselves to the boys each day, yet this coexistence did little to undermine the powers of hierarchy and hegemony as some masculine forms were clearly privileged at the expense of others. Connell's (1989) discussion of hegemonic masculinity is again useful, for by recognizing its "position of cultural authority and leadership" in a given setting, we are reminded of two important considerations. First, it wields considerable influence in boys' lives and, second, it varies within and across micro-cultures. This final point is an important one, because it explains why the individual characteristics and ideals that constitute hegemonic masculinity within a given setting are neither fixed nor universal but transient and idiosyncratic to the culture they inhabit.

Such recognition helps us to understand why the hegemonic form of masculinity that manifested itself in the halls of Davidson High School offered its own unique blend of what the students, teachers, parents and community members valued as "appropriately" male. It celebrated what many might consider "stereotypical" or "traditional" masculine characteristics and behaviors, such as physical strength and athleticism, stoicism and emotional toughness, and heterosexuality. Highly visible and universally sanctioned by community norms and the institutional structure of the school itself, this hegemonic masculine form enjoyed a position of cultural authority, leadership, and prestige within the masculine hierarchy of the school. Furthermore, because it was consistently intolerant of all competing forms, "less desirable" ways of being male faced varying degrees of discrimination, and the boys who assumed them typically endured unwarranted ridicule and rebuke from male and female peers alike, thus relegating them to the lower rungs of the school's social hierarchy.

The power and influence this hegemonic masculine form wielded undermined the notion that adolescent boys have "free choice" when taking up these various masculine subject positions, for the making of masculinities was a process that was fraught with complex social and political realities inherent in the institutional structure of both the school and the peer milieu. Yet it was within the confines of this complex gendered labyrinth that Michael, Peter, Aiden and Jack were forced to mediate issues of masculinity as they staged themselves in the school sphere. Some of these negotiations occurred in the classroom whereas others unfolded in arenas more safely distanced from the auspices of adult supervision such as the hallway or the lunchroom. Regardless of the location, though, issues of power and privilege continued to darken the landscape as social and political tensions enmeshed themselves with students' lives. Such was the setting for the performances these young men staged each day in their efforts to gain acceptance and avoid ridicule, and because it was the boys' own fears that directed their course, they were forever scripted, driven by the very uncertainties and anxieties they fought so hard to disguise.

Fighting Fears: Part and Parcel of the Male Experience

> Little boys are told from their early years onward that they are not supposed to fear, not supposed to be scared of things that they have little or no control over. As the years go by and the boys become men, the 'not-supposed-to fear' becomes embedded in men's minds as 'men do not fear…' and so an image of self-reliance becomes a kind of ruse to hide behind. (Doyle, 1983, p. 216)

Throughout my private conversations with the boys and observations of them with their friends and teachers, fear consistently emerged as a compelling force in their lives, suggesting

they were only too aware of what Doyle (1983) identified as the "do's and do not's of the male experience" (p. 216). Yet they had also learned to fight these fears, and so the perceived need to veil them proved the most salient influence upon classroom posture. Most compelling was the fear of "not measuring up" to the hegemonic masculine ideals that regulated school life, and so masculinity became an ongoing performance that required the boys to appropriate certain subject positions to earn approval from male and female peers alike.

Aiden and Jack talked about this need to "perform" masculinity during an interview in September of their senior year and of the absolute need to disguise vulnerability in the public sphere. As Jack put it, "a guy could never cry in public," an opinion seconded by Aiden who explained "that society just expected men to be tough:"

> Aiden: It's like society just expects guys to be tough and so you just grow up knowing that's the way it is. Like, take whining, for instance, it's never accepted, no matter what... you're just taught not to complain about it... at least for guys that is.
>
> Jack: Yeah you just learn it early on, as a kid you're taught not to complain about it.
>
> Interviewer: So who teaches it to you?
>
> Aiden: Well... it's not just from one thing, but from like everything in society.
>
> Jack: You just sort of learn it growing up. It's like when I used to play baseball and everyone was afraid of getting hit by a pitch but no matter what you were supposed to act like you weren't scared. And if you did get hurt, everyone just told you to 'shake it off' and just deal with it.
>
> Interviewer: Well what happens if you don't 'deal with it'?
>
> Aiden: You just do or else you're made fun of. I mean people might feel kinda sorry for you... inside that is, but they would still think it's sorta weird.
>
> Jack: Yeah... that's why guys don't do that sort of thing... because you just can't.

Aiden's follow-up comment that "these were things that guys just knew" suggested he had internalized, albeit perhaps unconsciously, the host of hidden yet steadfast rules boys learn at an early age. Girls, interestingly enough, lived by a very different set of rules, and Jack and Aiden never tired of discussing the contradictions they observed between their own lives and those of the girls they knew:

> Aiden: It's all completely different for girls though.
>
> Interviewer: What do you mean?
>
> Jack: I think they're just taught differently, so it's completely different for them.
>
> Aiden: Definitely cause they just let stuff get to them a lot more. I think girls are way more stressed out. Guys just don't talk about it, their problems and stuff, not like girls do at least.
>
> Interviewer: So why is it different for girls than it is for you?
>
> Aiden: Guys just don't talk about things like girls do.
>
> Jack: Well, you do have your certain people you talk to about stuff... like feelings you might not tell no one else, but that's it.
>
> Aiden: But it's not like you talk about it to everyone... like girls do. I mean it would be weird if like a guy got all emotional and stuff.
>
> Jack: Yeah, it just wouldn't happen.

Interviewer: Why not? Why won't guys talk about these things?

Aiden: Cause it would be gay (both laugh).

Jack: Uh huh, so a guy would never do it... not in school at least or it would um... be sorta like everyone would laugh. I mean when you think about it, why would you?

Aiden: Yeah... you're just taught not to... and so you don't. You learn to deal with it though so it's not like it's a big deal or anything.

Jack's and Aiden's responses revealed an insightful awareness of the restraints that hegemonic masculine codes had imposed in men's lives, for threaded throughout our conversations was the belief that they would suffer immediate rebuke should they fail to measure up to certain cultural expectations society imposed upon them. For instance, men should not display emotion or vulnerability in public, and so personal feelings were ones to be guarded, shared with only the most trusted of friends. Any failure to do so was a fatal one, a transgression that would, as the boys emphatically explained, result in ridicule, humiliation and, most troubling, loss of reputation.

It is worth noting that Jack and Aiden, although quite capable of identifying the many restrictions that hegemonic masculinity had imposed in men's lives, also resigned themselves to the belief that little could be done to mediate its influence. There were certain cultural mandates that men and boys were taught to live by, and because they perceived this as the natural order of things, any challenge or disruption to that order was futile. They had learned long ago that one's position within the social hierarchy of the school depended upon the ability to conform to this hegemonic masculine form. Hegemonic masculinity was, in their view, both fixed and inherent, and so to resist it was both futile and foolish. Although on some levels they were aware of the constraints that hegemonic masculinity had imposed in their lives, they had no desire to alter a course that had been chartered long ago, and so the best they could do was to accept their fate and enjoy the ride.

This paradigm is all too common for adolescent boys who, like Aiden and Jack, typically hold a prescribed view of the male sex role, set in motion and perpetuated by the society in which they live. Denied agency by the hegemonic masculine constructions that infuse their lives, they too often resign themselves to the belief that masculinity is fixed, inherent and thus beyond contest. As Pollack's (1998) qualitative study of adolescent boys revealed, one unfortunate result of this is an overall sense of hopelessness and despair, put into play and reinforced by the mixed signals society sends about "what's expected of them as boys, and later as men." He argued that the end result is a feeling of "sadness and disconnection they cannot even name" but that causes them to suffer from crises of self-confidence and identity not unlike those experienced by many adolescent girls (p. xxii). However, a fundamental difference exists in the fact that we often fail to recognize these crises in boys' lives because boys, as Aiden and Peter cogently pointed out, rarely feel the liberty or ease that girls might in sharing their vulnerabilities. Pollack attributed this inability to the "Boy Code," an unwritten, outdated and hopelessly stringent code of conduct that harshly and unfairly judges boys and compels them to act a certain way to avoid ridicule and gain acceptance. Of greater concern to Pollack was the fact that society uses shame to force boys to comply with this "Boy Code," for masculine behaviors that fail to conform to these antiquated notions of masculinity are typically condemned and ridiculed. Consequently, shame becomes one of the most compelling and damaging forces in boys' lives because it forces them to disguise their true feelings and veil their vulnerabilities with acts of "bravado and braggadocio." Like Aiden and Jack, who had just "learned to deal with it," the masking of one's fears with a cloak of confidence proved the only means of negotiating the salient social and political tensions that filled their lives.

Fear # 1: Voicing Vulnerability – Big Boys Don't Cry

> Who I am now is nothing like who I was then. As a freshman, you're scared to death... of everyone and everything. You don't even like want to talk in class because you might screw up and like everyone will laugh. But then you slowly get over it and don't care so much. (Peter)

Fear, so poignantly personified in Peter's reminiscence of his freshman year, proved a recurrent theme during the course of this study. The boys would ironically talk quite openly about the many fears and anxieties they had struggled with early in high school while refusing to acknowledge them in their present lives, likely because, as Aiden explained, "No matter what, you couldn't show that you were afraid." Similar to Peter, Michael, Jack and Aiden would paint with precision classroom scenarios accentuated with fear and trepidation while simultaneously insisting that these fears, once so daunting, held no sway in their present lives. This notion of fear continued to surface in the course of our conversations, yet its influence could only be acknowledged when contexualized in the past. Self-disclosure and vulnerability were only possible when situated in the distant past but analysis of the present remained "off-limits," and so the unvarnished truth, one that invited honest examination of their current masculine positioning, was one they simply would not offer.

For instance, as juniors Aiden and Jack often reminisced about the pressures and difficulties they had suffered as freshmen while simultaneously protesting that they "never worried about these things anymore." When pressed to talk about the conflicts and pressures they might be experiencing as upperclassmen, they displayed marked solidarity in their responses, telling me "there just wasn't anything that hard about being a guy!":

> Aiden: No... I mean guys just don't let these things bother them, not like girls at least. Girls are the ones who are really affected by it, but for most guys it's just no big deal.
>
> Jack: Mostly it's hard when you're a freshman, because that's when you need to prove you're all macho and stuff.
>
> Aiden: Yeah cause it's the hardest year, without a doubt.
>
> Jack: I remember feeling that way... that you had to be a certain way.
>
> Interviewer: So how did you 'prove' yourself, as freshman at least?
>
> Aiden: Hmm... well, it's like you can't try too hard cause that would be sort of gay. You just have to be cool about it... not look like you're trying too hard.
>
> Interviewer: What about now?
>
> Aiden: No cause no one really cares anymore... but you did then cause it was a big deal. I mean you just knew you had to act a certain way as a freshman so people didn't give like laugh or make fun of you. I mean you did worry about it then.
>
> Jack: Yeah but you don't have to now... at least for guys.

Emphatic that guys "just didn't care about these things" the way girls did, Aiden and Jack had no shortage of sympathy for their female peers who, at least in their estimation, remained hostage to the forces of peer pressure.

> Aiden: Girls just take the whole peer pressure thing way too seriously... I know girls here who totally obsess about it.
>
> Jack: It blows your mind sometimes cause they're always worried about what someone said or what they look like.
>
> Aiden: Yeah, and I think they just don't realize that guys could care less about these things.

Interviewer: What do you mean... what things?

Jack: Like make-up, hair, weight... all that sort of stupid stuff. Most guys, what they really care about is personality.

Aiden: Yeah and girls keep getting totally stressed about it, but guys are the complete opposite because they could care less what people think.

When pressed to talk about their own masculine positioning, Aiden and Jack repeatedly diverted the conversation to the past or their female peers, a strategy favored by Michael and Peter as well.

Michael: When you're younger it's different... I mean you want to keep everything inside just so no one makes fun of you. I mean girls stereotypically are the ones who talk the most... they share their feelings more often than guys do... and the guys are supposed to keep quiet and not really share things or say a lot or show emotions.

In the year that I spent with these four young men, they continually resisted analysis of their current positioning within dominant discourses of masculinity, carefully disguising the insecurities, fears or vulnerabilities in their present lives. To hear them tell it, as upper-classmen, they had earned their stripes and their place in the social hierarchy of the school rendered them immune to the forces of peer pressure that had once been so daunting; however, their responses suggested to me at least a different reality. The past had obviously left its mark and the fears once felt continued to mark their consciousness and serve as a compass through which they might carefully navigate the tensions and anxieties that had once rendered them so vulnerable in a school environment laden with risk and enmeshed with the social and political tensions that infused their lives.

Fear # 2: Ridicule and Rebuke in the Game of Schooling

The presence of these fears in the boys' lives undermined in my mind at least the social-constructivist vision of the classroom as a nurturing, collaborative space where student voices are equally heard and celebrated (Vygotsky, 1978). Their depiction paints a school reality where social and political tensions suffused classroom life and the threat of peer ridicule held power to silence. For example, in a metaphorical likening of the classroom to the sports field, Matthew identified the fear of ridicule as perhaps the most formidable force in a boy's life, so much so that it compelled him into silence just to avoid its threat:

Michael: You have to really watch what you say so you don't get hurt, feel stupid. A lot of time it's better to act a certain way *just* in case, so that you won't be made fun of by your friends. Like as a freshman you come in and like you're so scared thinking oh boy... and so most guys just kind of sit back and don't really say much because they know they're not supposed to.

Interviewer: What do you mean when you say they're not 'supposed to'?

Michael: I mean no guys spoke up and talked... it was always the girls. If like one guy spoke up, they were kind of like... he's a weird guy to speak up and talk in class. But I think as you got older it really didn't matter nearly as much but I can see now that as a freshman how much that bothered you. I mean I have some freshmen in my classes now and I see this happen all the time. I know they're just scared to talk.

Star athlete, captain of both the football and basketball teams, and member of a family clan that wielded considerable influence in the community, Michael's positioning within the social hierarchy of the school could not have been more secure. It is not surprising, then, that compared to the other boys in this study, he would discuss with greater candor and compassion the fears, anxieties and threats boys experienced in school. He explained that it was the fear of ridicule, and not apathy or stupidity as teachers sometimes assume, that

generally precluded boys from participating in class, for the process of finding voice was a high-stakes one, laden with considerable risk and consequence:

> Michael: Yeah, I mean one thing is that you don't want to be made fun of by your guy friends but it's really bad when like a girl says something to you... that's the worst thing, especially when you're young, that's the worst feeling.

Michael's depiction of classroom life undermines the ideological notion of the classroom as a safe haven where all voices are equally heard and valued, leaving us with a much more disturbing imagery. Even for a boy at the top of the social ladder, the classroom proved a highly politicized arena where the fear of ridicule, especially from girls, created fear and tension in boys' lives. Such tensions have been insightfully explored and skillfully addressed by researchers concerned with the adolescent female's positioning in the school setting (Gilbert and Taylor, 1991; Sadker and Sadker, 1994; Shmurak, 1998). However, as Michael's recollection suggests, they are often overlooked in boys' lives because they are disguised by the boys themselves who, like Michael, consider them inappropriate and thus highly embarrassing. Resulting from the perceived need to conform to hegemonic masculine constructions, boys from an early age are indoctrinated with these stringent and outdated codes, which as Pollack (1998) notes, create considerable tension in boys' lives because of the mixed messages they send. For instance, boys may be told to display greater sensitivity by openly sharing their emotions and vulnerabilities when, in reality, doing so will, as Michael, Peter, Jack and Aiden aptly pointed out, guarantee ridicule and humiliation from male and female peers alike.

This portrait of school life the boys painted highlights fear as a driving force in adolescence, for the fear of ridicule, the fear of rejection and the fear of "not measuring up" to the expectations of others directed the course of their lives. Yet they had also learned to mediate these fears through the sculpting of a masculine identity that aligned itself with hegemonic masculine ideals privileged within the school sphere; this proved an ongoing performance but one worth staging, for it protected them from ridicule and secured a coveted place of prominence in the social hierarchy of a school that was steeped in social and political tensions.

The Sculpting of Masculine Identity: Public and Private Performances

The very presence of these "fears" suggested that the boys' discursive positioning within dominant discourses of masculinity actively influenced school life; despite their continual protests in interviews that they were immune to these forces, observation of them in their English classroom suggested otherwise. Comparative analysis revealed to me that the classroom provided a stage upon which the boys enacted hegemonic masculinity as a means of gaining acceptance within the peer milieu. Throughout these performances, two "unwritten" rules seemed known to all, and it was their ability to comply with them that determined their celebrated acceptance or painful rejection in the halls of Davis High.

Rule # 1 - *Forsaking the Feminine*

The rule that is repeatedly reinforced to boys is to publicly segregate themselves from all that is coded "feminine," for any perception of "effeminacy" is a failure to "measure up" to the hegemonic masculine codes sanctioned by society, parents, teachers, and, most importantly, peers. Several behaviors might unintentionally relegate a boy to the dreaded "unmasculine" category, forcing him to bear the albatross that proclaims his shame to the world and that labels him "sissy" or "fag." The stigmas that accompany these insults are formidable, and so many boys may understandably assume a posture of exaggerated hegemonic masculinity, characterized by aggression, power, and authority, to avoid the charge. Troubling though it may be, such posturing must be seen for what it is – a necessary defense mechanism boys use to disguise feelings of fear and insecurity.

Throughout our interviews, the boys repeatedly alluded to the need to forsake all that was feminine, explaining that the fear of being labeled "gay" was the "worst thing that could

happen to a guy." Although they claimed present immunity to this fear, I doubted their victory song, for observations of them in the classroom contradicted their claims as they continually mediated this fear in one of two ways—through pronounced heterosexism and/or homophobia. The classroom was a stage and literary discussions a vehicle through which they could affirm heterosexual identity through the voicing of sexual innuendos and/or homophobic sentiments. For instance, I observed Michael and Peter in their senior British Literature class, which was viewing a film version of Thomas Hardy's (1971) novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles,* seize the opportunity, along with some of their male peers, to publicly affirm their heterosexual identity through the auspices of literature. Voicing a series of sexual innuendos about Natasha Kinski, the actress portraying Tess, they critiqued nearly every facet of her physical appearance. The performance began with Peter's assessment that because "she had a great bod," they "should have shown you more of it" and Michael's second that she was "totally hot." Other comments, spoken softly by male peers so beyond the pale of the teacher, were even more sexist in tone. The blatant sexism inherent in these side conversations is admittedly disappointing but it was my sense that they were driven much more by the boys' need to publicly affirm their own heterosexual identity to their male and female peers rather than misogyny.

Michael and Peter also affirmed heterosexual identity in the classroom by ridiculing any male literary character they perceived as "effeminate." For instance, while studying Homer's *Odyssey,* they routinely applauded Odysseus for his perceived "manliness" while simultaneously ridiculing his teenage son Telemachus for what they considered his weakness and vulnerability. As Peter put it one day, "He's just sort of gay." I was struck although not surprised by the irony of the boys' reaction, for the *Odyssey* is, among other things, a coming of age story for a young man who must endure humiliation and insult at the hands of his mother's suitors. It is likely that the adolescent boy's emotional and psychological struggles, so poignantly chronicled in the poem and the subject of some class discussion, resonated with the boys more than they dared to admit. If so, then their ridicule of him in a highly politicized classroom arena served as a convenient means of distancing themselves from a character whose masculinity was called into question. Scenarios such as this one, staged by the boys and their male peers throughout the year, revealed the English classroom as a politicized and gendered arena whereby masculinity was reaffirmed by publicly aligning oneself with the hegemonic masculine ideals that dictated the school's gender regime.

Rule # 2: *Embracing Athletics: The Power of the Sports Ethic*

A second, yet equally effective means of solidifying masculinity, offered itself through allegiance to athletics, and so an enthusiastic endorsement of the sports ethic proved a favored route to validate masculine identity and simultaneously gained peer acceptance. Comments made during interview sessions and in class betrayed the boys' belief that entry into adolescent male culture could be accessed through an expressed interest in sports and that athletic involvement and individual prowess in particular would earn a coveted position in the school's social hierarchy. Stein and Hoffman's (1978) examination of the crucial role that sports play in boys' lives and American society offers a meaningful context, for sports functioned as a prominent rite of passage and means of acceptance for the boys who clearly sanctioned the collective American belief that athletic ability is a prerequisite for "manhood" and sports the natural training ground for the "traditional" male role.

Doyle's (1983) examination of this American sports ethic further highlights the role that competitive sports such as baseball, basketball, and football play in young men's lives and society in general. Considered by many to be activities that "build character" and give a young man "a leg up on his climb to manhood," these mainstream sports inextricably link themselves to the adolescent male experience (p. 223). The result is a collective American

paradigm which views participation in competitive sports as a singularly positive endeavor that augments physical strength, endurance, toughness, and self-reliance, a paradigm which grounds itself in the prevailing notion that "everything a young man needs to learn about the real world can be learned in athletic competition" (p. 223).

All four boys had certainly heralded the universality of this cultural message, although Matthew was the last man standing in regard to school sports by the time they entered the senior year. (Aiden, Peter and Jack had all quit sports by the end of their sophomore year.) It is also interesting to note that several faculty members expressed remorse and disapproval over what they considered Aiden and Jack's premature departure from athletics, for both boys had displayed considerable athletic skill that could have greatly benefited the school's athletic teams. In fact, the subject of athletics invariably surfaced whenever I talked with teachers about Aiden and Jack. Comments offered by one male faculty member, Mr. Abrahms, echo the sentiments of other teachers who simply could not understand why Aiden and Jack had chosen to "waste" their talent:

> Mr. Abrams: It's really a shame... I mean Aiden especially is an incredible athlete who could have really made a difference. Jack, too, but they just didn't have the discipline. It's sad for them and the school because they're passing up some great opportunities and wasting a lot of natural talent.

Mr. Abram's opinion, that the boys were "wasting" their time and skill when they could involve themselves in more "meaningful" school activities, reveals a faculty view of institutional extra-curriculars shared by the majority of teachers I interviewed. Aligning itself with the collective American paradigm which positions athletics as a prominent rite of passage for boys and a necessary prerequisite for "manhood," it positions athletic participation as a productive, wholesome endeavor that keeps boys academically focused. These teachers also credited sports with keeping boys "out of trouble," mainly because of the athletic codes that forbade alcohol and drug use and held the boys to a higher ethical ideal. These sentiments were widely shared by parents and community members alike who viewed students involved in extra curricular activities, and athletics in particular, as more "wholesome." As one history teacher put it, "The athletes were usually the ones who knew what they were doing and where they were going." Another male teacher speculated that Aiden's and Jack's poor academic performance and continued absence from school could have been prevented had they only "stuck with sports."

This institutional view, however, was not shared by Aiden, Peter and Jack, who had long since become disillusioned with school-sanctioned sports and thus liberated themselves from the restrictions athletics had imposed on their lives. Yet they repeatedly made it known to me that even though they had "quit their school teams," they maintained a strong interest in sports. Speaking for Aiden as well, Jack told me during an interview, "We still follow sports even though we don't play them anymore, and Peter would often talk about his years of playing baseball. Jack and Aiden routinely recounted past athletic glories during our interviews, bragging of their accomplishments on the football and track fields. All three would discuss at length their favorite college and professional teams, making sure I knew they spent hours watching football and basketball games each weekend. If you were to ask them, Peter, Aiden and Jack would all tell you that their retreat from the sports battlefield had been justified, a decision that carried little, if any, social rebuke or consequence; however, they experienced a compelling need to maintain allegiance to this powerful cultural entity that, they well knew, remained a cornerstone of the male experience. They had long ago veered from school-sanctioned athletics, but their continued allegiance to the collective American paradigm which celebrated sports as one of the most important rites in an adolescent boy's life proved a useful means of shoring up masculine identity and solidifying their positioning within the social hierarchy of the school.

Conclusion: Problems, Possibilities and Reform

By looking into the lives of Michael, Aiden, Peter and Jack, we see the influence that hegemonic masculinity exercises in boys' lives, for it actively shaped their very notions of what constituted "appropriate" and "inappropriate" masculine behavior. The fear of not being able to "measure up" to the hegemonic masculine ideals that regulated school life was evident, and it actively shaped, influenced, and constrained both posture and performance in the classroom setting. There was the fear of ridicule, humiliation, and rejection, but the boys had learned to mask these fears in the classroom, the halls, and on the sports field because failure to do so promised irreparable loss of reputation. This study's findings highlight the need to give voice to these boys so they might mediate these fears and go to school each day believing in their own self-worth. As educators, we must listen carefully to what they have to say, and realize that, despite our best efforts, school is an inherently political place, laden with risk and consequence because of the hegemonic masculine ideals that infuse its culture. For some, however, this will prove a difficult task because it undermines the constructivist ideal that the classroom is a safe haven and forces us to confront the socio-political tensions of school life. It means we must acknowledge the fact that the political invariably rears its ugly head in our nation's schools, and that no issue is more political than gender. There are others who will question whether it is even the business of the classroom teacher to confront the politics of gender and of masculinity in particular in a school system still viewed by many as patriarchal in spirit and tone. The answer to this question is simple – we must confront these politics because we care, and because we care, we must free our male students, as well as our female ones, from the constraints that hegemonic masculine ideals have imposed on their lives.

The pedagogy that I envision, then, draws from feminist post-structuralist theory (Davies, 1997, 1989; Martino, 1995; Griffin and Lees, 1997; Connell, 1996, 1995, 1989) whose conceptual framework rejects masculinity as biological or inherent and repositions it as a socially-constructed entity that is amenable to change. The recognition that this framework provides is crucial for two reasons. First, it helps boys to understand that their positioning within those dominant discourses of masculinity has severely restricted their own gendered identity. Second, it provides them access to a repertoire of alternative discourses that position them differently and thus offer them new and more liberating ways of being male in the world today.

Setting boys upon this course will not be easy, though, for the very notions we seek to examine may preclude many boys from even entering the conversation. Boys may understandably experience discomfort and embarrassment when discussing their own masculinist positioning as the self-disclosure required in such a venture may not only contradict their understandings of "appropriate" masculine behavior but also threaten personal ridicule and ostracism. Yet such hesitancy can be overcome when these issues are unpacked with thoughtfulness and sensitivity, when boys are invited into this conversation in a non-threatening way that engages them in meaningful critique of the hegemonic masculine ideals that have constrained their lives.

And so this conversation, despite its difficulties, must go forward, for as bell hooks (1989) wisely reminded us, talk must invariably precede progress, and so our boys must be given the opportunity to talk and to engage in critical processes of discussion and reflection if we hope to see meaningful change. In our efforts to educate and nurture our students, we must invite their voices and, once heard, heed what they have to say. As they struggle to find themselves and define their own sense of gendered identity, our male students, as well as our female ones, may find mentors in those men and women, whether they offer themselves as teachers, coaches, relatives or friends, who have the concern and conviction to step forward and discuss the complicated and sometimes difficult issues that have both meaning

and influence in their lives. Finally, may they be taught in school that equality, tolerance and respect for differences are ways of life; perhaps then they might live their lives in a way that recognizes and privileges the rights of both men and women in our world.

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