Understanding boys': Thinking through boys, masculinity and suicide

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ABSTRACT

In the UK, the media are reporting increasing rates of childhood suicide, while highlighting that increasing numbers of pre-adolescent boys (in relation to girls) are diagnosed as mentally ill. In response, academic, professional and political commentators are explaining this as a consequence of gender. One way of doing this has been to apply adult defined understandings of men and masculinities to the attitudes and behaviours of pre-adolescent boys. As a consequence, explanations of these trends point to either 'too much' masculinity, such as an inability to express feelings and seek help, or 'not enough' masculinity that results in isolation and rejection from significant others, such as peer groups. Using a discourse analysis of semi-structured interviews with 28 children aged 9–13 (12 male, 16 females) and 12 school staff at a school in North East England, this article questions the viability of using normative models of masculinity as an explanatory tool for explaining boys' behaviours and suggests that researchers in the field of gender and suicide consider how boys' genders may be constituted differently. We develop this argument in three ways. First, it is argued that studies that use masculinity tend to reduce the formation of gender to the articulation of power across and between men and other men and women. Second, we argue that approaches to understanding boys' behaviours are simplistically grafting masculinity as a conceptual frame onto boy's attitudes and behaviours. In response, we suggest that it is important to re-think how we *gender* younger boys. The final section focuses specifically on the ways that boys engage in friendships. The significance of this section is that we need to question how notions of communication, integration and isolation, key features of suicide behaviours, are framed through the local production of friendships.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, a number of concerns about men and boys are emerging across Europe, each with their own local (national) inflections (Dudink, Clark & Haggermann, 2008; Hearn & Pringle, 2009). More specifically, the UK is presently witnessing a state-led anxiety, where themes such as a lack of role appropriate models, low achievement/failure at school (compared to girls) and increasing violent behaviour appear to be threatening an ascribed cultural sanctity of boyhood. Although suicide rates did rise in the UK in the latter decades of the 20th century − especially among young men (Congdon, 1996), they began to decline steadily from the 1990s, especially in London and, by 2005, rates for those aged 15–35 years were at their lowest for almost 30 years (Biddle, Brock, Brookes, & Gunnell, 2008). Nevertheless, statistics continue to suggest that the rate of suicide for

men in the UK in 2008 was 17.7 per 100,000 compared to 5.4 per 100,000 females (ONS, 2010). However, fuelled by information via hospital based studies and charity press releases, media reports suggest that suicide behaviour in pre-adolescent boys (between the ages of 7 and 12 years of age) is becoming increasingly problematic (Brookes, 2009). It was argued that in 2006–2007 there were more than 4000 recorded incidents of 'intentional self harm' by young people aged 14 and under. The latest worldwide annual suicide rates for children ages 5–14 are 0.5 per thousand for females and 0.9 per thousand for males (Pompili, Mancinelli, Girardi, Ruberto, & Tatarelli, 2005). Statistics from the Information Centre for Health and Social Care (2007) suggest that boys under 10 were twice as likely to experience behavioural, emotional and mental health issues and in response a UK Minister for Education explained: 'We know that girls are better than boys at asking for help when they need it. That is why we are calling on professionals working with children to keep a close eye on boys in particular and spot when they are distressed' (Revill & Lawless, 2007: 2). Coyle and MacWhannell (2002) highlight how media reports use moral templates to make suicidality understandable and thus socially and

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culturally intelligible. In a similar way, suicide behaviour is emblematic of a collective national responsibility for social, emotional and psychological failure (see for example, Bow, 2009; Campsie, 2009; Jones, 2008). Of key importance for those working in the field of gender and suicide is that explanations, interventions and the suggested resolutions of such failure are read through a model of gender with a dependence upon fixed binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity (see Canetto, 1995; Cleary, 2005; Scourfield, 2005). More specifically, masculinity has become a 'catch all' phrase to explain *all* male behaviour. Male behaviours are being explained by either 'too much' or 'not enough' masculinity and 'unhealthy' masculinities have been documented (Robertson, 2006; Seymour-Smith, Wetherell, & Pheonix, 2002). Importantly, a cause and effect model of masculinity has emerged. In response, we argue that it is important for those working in the field of gender and suicide to consider how gender identities may be differently constructed, organized and cohered. Paradoxically, this may mean identifying the gendered nature of suicidality, whilst simultaneously questioning dominant explanations of gender identity formation.

There has been a growing use of the concept of masculinity to examine a range of social and cultural arenas and more recently it has been applied to male suicide (Dourais & Lajeunesse, 2004; Rudmin, Ferrada–Noli, Skolbekken, & Arne, 2003; Stice & Canetto, 2008). However, masculinity often operates along a continuum, with too much masculinity perceived as producing violence and aggression, and with too little masculinity perceived as creating vulnerability and risk. For example, as Miller and Bell (1996: 318) point out:

> Any coherent account of men's mental health must include an appreciation of two important elements and the ways that they are linked and sustained through socialization and social structure. The first element is the male capacity to harm as both internally and socially validated; the second, the experience and form of male vulnerability and distress.

This 'cause and effect' model of masculinity presents men as 'damaged and damage doing', with masculinity providing the normative parameters through which males undertake destructive behaviours. One of the features of the masculinity literature is that all males, irrespective of social class, 'race'/ethnicity or sexuality can be located within the masculinity continuum. Much of this work provides an excellent insight into the dynamics of masculinity practices. For example, O'Brien, Hunt, and Hart (2005) identify a range of ways in which masculinity shapes men's relationship to healthcare. Their focus groups with a diverse range of men identify how certain groups of men view engaging in healthcare as 'less manly'. As a consequence, conventional notions of masculinity filtered out acceptable and unacceptable heath practices. One of the interesting aspects of O'Brien, Hunt and Hart's work is that it differentiates men across a number of social characteristics and highlights how age appears to be an important aspect of how masculinities are constructed. They found that groups of younger men who had stronger investments in masculinity produced less engagement with healthcare practices. At the same time, more psychologically orientated work assumes that the meaning of 'boy', 'masculine' and 'masculinity' are interchangeable. For example, Gini and Pozzoli (2006) in their self-report study on bullying with 113 six–to-ten year old children use femininity - masculinity scales that were based on typically masculine/feminine personality traits. Therefore, 'noisy' is deemed masculine and 'chatterer' is deemed feminine. In their analysis, boys with more feminine traits are more likely to be subject to physical abuse and participate in suicidal behaviour. This article argues that it is useful to think about boys' gender outside of this model of identity. Scourfield (2005) usefully points out that one of the consequences of adopting a simple gendered frame based upon singular categories of male and female is that the complexity of social and cultural location become concealed. In other words, the dynamic nature of identity formation becomes simplified by a monolithic male/female binary. Furthermore, as Addis and Cohane (2005: 635) highlight: 'Approaching important questions only from a perspective of difference is a bit like assuming we can only understand one racial, cultural, or ethnic group by comparing it with another'. Embedded in a gender dichotomy framework is an assumption that: '…like has only to identify with like and acknowledging difference means respecting the boundary between what one is and what one cannot be' (Benjamin, 1995: 50). In effect, when trying to understand boys' behaviours it is important to reflect upon how 'boyness' requires a uniformity and coherency between that which is deemed the same and that which is identified as different. We wish to develop this point and suggest that approaches to suicide behaviour may benefit by considering models of gender that may not be captured by conventional models of gender that rely on masculinity or masculinities.

Study description

Aims

This study was part of a broader intellectual project that is exploring the formation and practice of masculinities with boys, adolescents and older men (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2005, 2007). In effect, we are involved in critically evaluating theory-led and practice-based approaches that draw upon the concept of masculinity, in order to develop new ways of conceptualising how we *gender* bodies. The overall focus of the research was to explore boys' understandings and experiences of schooling in North East England, examining relationships between pupils and teachers, pupils and pupils and the wider schooling environment. Discussions included issues about home, family life and leisure activities.

Sample and process

Located in the North East of England, Walcote West (all references to place and names of participants are pseudonyms) is a 'middle school' that provides a bridge between elementary and high school education for over 400 pupils aged between 9 and 13. As a key part of the research involved building upon existing knowledge and hypotheses on masculinity, pre-adolescence and schooling, the school selected had to meet a number of criteria. This selective sampling in advance of the fieldwork ensures that the sample provides a "preconceived, but reasonable initial set of dimensions' (Glaser, 1978: 37). Due to access and cost logistics, a North East conurbation was selected. Two potential schools within the locality met the criteria of being state funded, had an age roll between 9 and 13 and were co-educational. However, Walcote West was the only school with a catchment area of pupils from a diversity of social and economic backgrounds, and was thus selected. The data collection for this project took place during 2002–2003. However, despite a number of changes, such as intensification of government initiatives to address boys' underachievement and the increasing centrality of mobile communications in children's lives, the data collected continues to operate as a productive catalyst to explore current theoretical and conceptual approaches. Access to the research site was relatively unproblematic and after a number of meetings between the Head and the Deputy Head teacher, the researcher shadowed a randomly selected class one day a week over the course of one term. A letter to the parents of all pupils within the school was sent to ensure a greater population for sampling.

Although, three parents requested clarification, there were no objections. Another sampling issue involved selecting which students to focus on. One of the themes of the research was to explore how pupils' relationships developed within science and arts based classrooms. Another consideration involved examining pupils' experience of Personal and Social Education (particularly 'relationship education'). Given that the initial agreed shadow phase involved one day over one term (this was subsequently expanded to two days over a whole academic year), there was one class whose curricula covered these areas. As a result, semi-structured interviews with all 28 children in the class (12 male and 16 female) were conducted. Six months into the project, students began approaching the researcher and requesting to be interviewed. These were often undertaken with a friend and usually focussed around an event or episode that they wished to discuss. A further 4 interviews with boys and 3 interviews with girls were undertaken by student request. A further 8 male and 8 female focus groups were carried out. Given the range of children's cultures within the selected class, it was decided that self-selected clusters of friendship would form the basis of the groups. The research team decided that each focus group involved at least two different friendship clusters and consequently, all students were able to participate in one or more of these groups. The interviews and focus groups lasted from 20 min to an hour. They were conducted during Personal, Social and Health Education as well during lunchtime breaks. Twelve members of staff, primarily those who were their subject and form tutors, were also interviewed. All interviews and focus groups were carried out by Chris Haywood (CH), tape recorded and transcribed. Classroom observations, alongside break time and lunchtime observations were supplemented by a number of informal conversations with other staff and pupils, both inside and outside school lessons. Also, over the duration of the research, all students within the selected class participated in and provided audio diaries.

Analysis

Discourse analysis was used to analyse the data. One of the common elements in this approach is that discourse operates as an analytical metaphor that understands social and cultural phenomena as *speaking*. A discourse is constituted by: 'complex bodies of values, thoughts and practices, including communicative acts and scientific knowledge alongside unspoken actions, and the deployment of lay knowledge within webs of power relations' (Sharp & Richardson, 2001: 198). The implication is that at particular social and cultural moments, meanings are arranged in specific ways or, in other words, such arrangements articulate relations of power (Foucault, 1981: 101). As a result, a crucial aspect of discourse analysis is that it explains *how* objects are considered, spoken and understood; how objects are brought into being through meanings. Of key importance is the move away from the statement as revelation, towards understanding the statement — the text — as functional. In this sense, statements function to establish ways of knowing and understanding and correspond with broader epistemic possibilities of being. All the transcripts of interviews, focus groups and field notes were read through and the various interpretive repertoires that were used by boys to explain their experiences of schools were documented. The analysis generated three main analytical themes: i. Gendered difference and similarity, ii. Gendered subjectivities and identifications and iii., The embodiment articulation of gendered power. These broad themes enabled cross-referencing between the different foci of the research. For example, we were able to identify how strategies of 'Othering' that some boys used to explain underachievement were also employed to justify bullying practices. The analysis in this papers also was reflexively undertaken in light of two axioms. First,

that the analysis should recognize: 'the importance of scrutinizing basic categories, concepts, and assumptions' that underpin existing research on masculinity (Peterson, 2003: 63). Second, that the research was keen to avoid applying 'adult' definitions to children's explanations (Punch, 2002; see also James, 2007; Lahman, 2008).

The focus of the present article is on certain themes which emerged relating to, for example, masculinity and emotional disclosure.

Ethics

The ethical position adopted by this article is similar to that adopted by Christensen and Prout (2002), who argue that there should be no distinction between adult and child when conducting research. It is suggested that all children are not similar and that there are wide differentials between children as between adults and children. Therefore: 'The premise…is that ethical practice is tied to the active construction of research relationships and cannot be based in presupposed ideas or stereotypes about children or childhood' (Christensen & Prout, 2002: 484). As a consequence, whilst recognising the specificities of children's lives, the 'rights, feelings and interests of children' are given as 'much consideration as those of adults' (ibid.; 493). Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Graduate School at Newcastle University.

Study Findings

Prompted by an emerging concern about pre-adolescent boys and suicidality by the media, we argue that researchers in the field might wish to consider reflecting on the applicability of existing approaches to gender. One of the difficulties with this argument is the lack of information of suicidality with this age group. As Tishler, Reiss, and Rhodes (2007): 815 point out: 'Much of the available literature describing suicidality fails to separate children younger than 12 years from adolescents for analysis and discussion'. Furthermore, there are a range of identificatory issues surrounding childhood and suicide behaviours. As Pompili et al. (2005): 64 point out: 'Theoretical concepts indicated that children are too immature to have feelings of depression and hopelessness and popular beliefs tend to create a picture of children who are protected from life adversities by benevolent caretakers. Such work indicates the importance of critical distance when "reading" suicide behaviour'. Therefore, it is argued that future research on pre-adolescent boys and suicide may take into account how 'masculinity' as a descriptive and explanatory concept of male genders is unproblematically applied across age categories. Therefore, we are suggesting that researchers in the field of gender and suicide consider how boys' genders may be constituted differently. We elaborate on this argument in three ways. In the first section, we argue that masculinity studies tend to reduce the formation of gender to an articulation of power between men and women and other men. We suggest that the dynamic of power for younger boys may not be articulated in such ways and use a notion of institutional gender confusion to explore this. In the second section, we argue that approaches to understanding boys' behaviours are simplistically grafting masculinity as a conceptual frame onto boys' attitudes and behaviours. As Cleary (2005): 156 points out: 'If there are multiple masculinities and femininities it hardly seems credible that emotional experiences can be divided in this simple dichotomous way'. In response, we suggest that it is important to re-think how we *gender* younger boys. The final section focuses specifically on the ways that boys engage in friendships. The significance of this section is that we need to question how notions of integration and

isolation, key features of suicide behaviours, are framed through the local formation of friendship patterns.

Institutionalizing emotional disclosure

It has been suggested that a poor connection between child and school is a common risk factor associated with suicide (Bridge, Goldstein, & Brent, 2006; Rishel, 2007). Fergusson, Beautrais, and Horwood (2003) suggest that risk of suicidal behavior and ideation were related to school truancy, school suspension, high school achievement and low levels of school enjoyment. Furthermore, much work has been carried out on the relationship between schooling, masculinity and emotional distress (see for example, Ferfolja, 2008; Grossman, et al., 2009). What is noticeable in this account is that the formation of gendered identities is often located at the level of individual subjectivity. In the study of Walcote West, it was *institutional* rather than *individual* anxiety around gendered identities that appeared to be impacting upon emotional disclosure. In this way, emotional distress was not a consequence of a particular attribute or personality trait, rather it was produced through an institutionalized gender confusion. More specifically, the institutional production and regulation of boyhood produces 'boyness' within attendant normative emotional boundaries. For example, when discussing teacher expectations the boys highlight such gendered uncertainties:

Brian: Like Jack got in trouble when he fell over and he was crying.
Chris H: Trouble from whom?
Brian: The teacher…like they'll always say you're a big boy, or things, don't act like a girl.
Chris H: What do they mean?
Harjot: Don't know…teachers always say girls are this or that or better.
Chris H: So what do boys do when teachers say this?
Harjot: Depends.
Ian: Different things, 'cos, like the teachers want you to be tough.
Harjot, Yep, like be more grown up all the time.
Ian: Like a older man.
Brian: But don't make sense….no-one knows what they mean.
Harjot: They don't know what it means, 'cos Phil he's tough and James he's really tough.
Ian: An' all the teachers don't like them 'cos they're always in trouble.
Boys Focus Group 2, 2003

It is useful to situate these boys' experiences within the broader formation of modern English schooling. Historically, the reframing of education through a moral philosophy to one of a moral psychology results in self-governance and discipline as a sign of normality. According to Fendler (1998: 52) the emergence of the modern schooling institution resulted in a transformation of power, where individuals are no longer governed by an external force but through their own self–discipline, where: 'The educated subject, then, became endowed with a new sort of power, namely, the power to govern itself'. As a result, the individual who is self-disciplined is recognised as educated and civilised. In contrast, Fendler suggests that the inability to control oneself is a sign of an uneducated subject. Thus at Walcote West, maturity became the symbolic material that was transferred onto the bodies of pupils to identify 'uneducated' behaviours. Furthermore, the pedagogy at Walcote West not only required and depended on childhood, it was a childhood where cultural codes of 'femininity' were symbolically central. For example, various practices in lessons were judged through the lens of maturity and immaturity. In a science lesson the following practices were used as a means of judging pupils' maturity: going

'disorderly' into the class, slovenly sitting in chairs, answering questions in a 'silly' voice, talking, bags and coats in the wrong place, not following instructions, not completing homework, not leaving the class tidy, and not leaving the class orderly were all used as markers of immaturity but simultaneously 'boyness'. This was clearly articulated by the boys:

Edward: Schools are for girls.
Chris H: What do you mean?
Edward: Our teachers just prefer girls.
Ian: Yeah, they'd be happier if we weren't here.
Chris H: Why do you think that?
Pete: Well, yeah. If a boy is sitting next to his friend, teachers break you up.
Ian: Tell you, you have to sit next to a girl.
Pete: But they don't do the same to girls….They can sit wherever they like.
Edward: Its like they're at home and the teachers are the parents and we're just like visitors.
Ian: No, more like strangers….they probably think we're aliens or something really bad.
Chris H: Why do they split you up?
Edward: Don't know, cos they say if you sit next to your friend you won't work. But sometimes I'm not sitting next to my friend an' sometimes they move me to sit next to a girl an' she's my friend.
Chris H: So what are the teachers doing?
Pete: They do your head in….its like they see girls and boys as different kinds of animals…an' we're the trouble, the one's making trouble.
Ian: You can't say anything, cos they say: 'will you stop moaning, you don't see girls moaning'.
Boys Focus Group 3, 2003

Therefore, on one hand, boys were being judged through a normative 'adult' masculinity, whilst on the other, it contravened a normative feminine code that aligned itself with the institutional dependence on (feminised) childhood. In other words, boys' identities were being controlled and regulated through an interplay of adult masculinity and feminized childhood. This is also illustrated around boys' experience of bullying:

Brian: We have talks on bullying but yer know that what they really mean that, that the real bullies are always boys.
Gary: Like they're always picked on as the naughty ones, so the same.
Chris H: What do you think?
Gary: Girls bully kids, they can bully the teachers, some bully the boys, the little ones but it isn't seen as bullying:

Chris H: By whom?
Gary: By teachers.
Brian: And I think the girls know this, learn this, so they can do what they want.
Gary: Even if they have fights.
Brian: The teachers say no tolerance for the bully but if I was bullied by a girl, they wouldn't believe me….Like what yer supposed to do
Boys Focus Group 2, 2003

Cleary (2000) has identified how the experience of victimization was more prevalent with students who reported suicidal behaviour. However, he also suggests that unlike girls who are victimized, boys' who experience victimization are more likely to report their involvement in violent behaviour than suicide behaviours. Of key importance for this special edition is that we need to place boys' identities within institutional contexts in order

to explore *what* gender means and how gender is lived out. Canetto (1995) usefully highlighted how notions of masculinity shape and explain men's suicide. In other words, men's actions were interpreted through socially ascribed masculine codes. In effect, normative understandings of gendered behaviour impacted upon how men's deaths were interpreted. Thus, the application of cultural codes of masculinity frames how death is read. Such a process resonates with media reports of a crisis of male identities (see for example, Pelling, 2009; Woods, 2009). In such accounts maleness becomes *explanatory* of a series of behaviours. However, much work has identified how the physiological category of 'maleness' is made possible through social and cultural interpretive frames. It is suggested that being male in schools is subject to contradictory institutionally-led emotional expectations. Work with Lesbian and Gay students in schools has highlighted how the institutional regulation and control of sexual identities produces emotional distress and discomfort (Rivers & Cowie, 2005; Warwick, Aggleton, & Douglas, 2001). We would argue that a similar process is taking place around gender identities. More specifically, this section has argued that one of the difficulties facing those researching boys' suicide behaviour, is the need to contextualise gender within institutional locations such as schools or the family. In so doing, we may begin to identify how adult interpretations of gender may differ from children's feelings of gender. The following section explores in greater detail the issues surrounding the ascription of gendered difference through the constitution of masculinity.

Regendering boys: the masculine outside of masculinity

There is a growing understanding of the relationships between lesbian, gay and bisexual young people and suicide (see for example, McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008; Cash & Bridge, 2009; Zhao, Montoro, Igartua, & Thombs, 2010) on how masculinity creates and sustains harmful experiences. Saewyc et al. (2008), in particular using their multivariate logistical regressions, found that bisexual youth were comparatively more at risk than any other sexual identity categories (see also, Russell & Joyner, 2001). However, care needs to be taken when using sexual identity categories to explain younger children's emotional distress. More specifically, there is the possibility of an automatic ascription of adult sexual identity categories onto younger boys. The importance for studies on gender and suicide is that for younger boys the expression and articulation of the sexual may take place in ways that are not contained by (political) identity categories. For example, work on early childhood by Thorne (1993) and Davies (2006) highlights how weak heteronormative structures produce indeterminate gender identifications.

This was an area that appeared salient in our study. Although it is suggested that the demonstration of sexuality operates as an important component in the constitution of older boys' identities (Mills, 2001; Paetcher, 1998), many of the boys at Walcote West actively rejected any direct public association with sexual relationships. For instance, Harpal asserted that he was not into all that 'love shit', and Paul argued that going out with girls was boring. Furthermore, in an interview that focused on romantic relationships, Darren distances himself from (hetero) sexual practices. For example, boys in our research, while fully aware of heterosexual/homosexual discourses, did not use such discourses to self identify with particular identities. Alongside this, although discourses of homophobia may have been articulated, it was not self evident what these discourses were being used for or what they meant. Therefore, although explicit homophobic language may be used, it is important to locate such language within children's interpretive structures, rather than through simplistic models of sexual politics.

Darren: …and then there was Morrisson's birthday. Rochi and I were watching Kentucky Fried Chicken [bestiality video] and that where all the women were fucking ponies…but…I just take the Mick [make fun] out of girls and stuff and that is the usual thing…'cos I like football. Chris H: so…
Darren: I just don't bother …I mean… like…don't bother going out with them…they are just not interesting.
Interview, 2002

Darren reveals an interesting interplay of an emerging sexual literacy that does not automatically inform a conventional gendered identity. Furthermore, the public 'disinterest' in heterosexuality generates particular tensions in the demonstration of 'real boyness'. It is important to establish the narratives that underpin boys' identities because models of masculinity that depend upon a notion of difference − such as misogyny, homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality − are often unproblematically applied to younger boys (Epstein, 1997; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002). However, in boys' focus groups at Walcote West, they revealed a range of factors that had major significance for being a boy. For example, the ways in which they articulated 'being scared' were complex and revealed a number of tensions. They identified how they could demonstrate their fear (and vulnerability) when discussing computer games, films or television programmes. However, discussing fears around schooling and the loss of friendships, being subject to physical and verbal violence and unfamiliarity within a new school were seen as troubling.

Edward: One thing boys can't be is scared.
Chris H: Scared of what?
Edward: Well, you can talk about bein' scared sometimes.
Chris H: Like when?
Edward: If it's a video or some game but not real things.
Chris H: Like what?
Edward: Like if you think about going to secondary school and you're a bit scared.
Chris H: So, who could you talk to?
Edward: No-one, I reckon. Not to teachers and not to your mates.
Chris H: And what kinds of things are there to be scared of?
Edward: Oh, just things, I reckon.
Chris H: So what do you think some boys might be scared of?
Edward: Like there's stories about certain schools round here. They're really rough schools, so you wouldn't be safe, would you? I reckon there's lots of things, like getting' bullied.
Chris H: What would be the main things some boys worry about?
Edward: Just things like losing your mates from here, being in a new place, learning all the teachers names, there's lots of teachers there, not like here.
Chris H: Can you talk to anyone about this?
Edward: Don't think so….you just have to sort it out.
Interview, 2002

The above extract highlights that reducing boys' identities to existing models of masculinity immediately imposes notions of misogyny and homophobia. The above account reveals how boys' confusions and fears are not simply accounted for by sexual politics, but encompass a wide range of factors. Understanding the space between these boys' experiences and their gendered identities involves an intervention that is similar to Chu's (2004) work with boys. In her research, Chu explores the cultural construction of masculinity and boys' negotiation of it. In doing so, she challenges many of the popular common sense understandings about boys and the apparent victimhood of masculinity. Although not dismissing the pressure of masculinity, she suggests boys' own subjectivities have an important role in the development of self-identities.

Building upon Piaget's (1952) notion of accommodation and assimilation, Chu argues that boys undergo processes of internalization and resistance. She argues that boys' sense of self cannot exist independently from the cultural constructions that are projected through other people's expectations and assumptions. However, boys are able to resist because their agency is more dynamic and actively involved in the formation of identities. From her interviews with boys, she found that rather than being passive victims that are subject to 'traditional' masculinities, they were highly reflexive about their emotions. This was at the level of their own thoughts and feelings but also within interpersonal relationships with others. Alongside this, they were aware of how masculinity is constructed and the pressure that was on them to take up these identities. In this way, boys' identities are not fixed in terms of their acceptance of masculine pressures. Therefore, Chu suggests that there is a gendered space outside masculine constructions. It appears as a space of identity work that is not free from cultural constructions, but a place where boys can work with them and on them and position their own self-identities in relation to them.

The concept of masculinity needs to be re-calibrated in order to accurately capture how boys' identities and subjectivities are being configured. It may also be pertinent to identify the discourses through which boys' identities are articulated. For example, Landstedt, Asplund, and Gadin (2009) identify how negotiating gender identities for young people aged 16–19 – mediated through masculinity and femininity – posed particular risks to their mental health. If gendered identities are negotiated outside of conventional models of masculinity, the discourses and nature of risk may need to be reconsidered. This is crucial in terms of identifying how emotional distress is interpreted and discussed. Diagnosing distress is crucial to implementing protective strategies that in turn can promote an effective literacy of risk recognition (Beautrais et al., 2007). Therefore, crucially, it is important to establish how pre-adolescents gender their emotional distress. We need therefore to be aware of the possibility of considering notions of suicide and gender outside the category of masculinity. The next section provides greater depth on the 'content' of boys' identities, in particular boys' friendships. This enables greater critical scrutiny when employing concepts of masculinity to explain boys' *practices*.

Managing gender: boys, childhood and friendship

Integration and isolation have been identified as important factors in the communication and disclosure of emotional distress (Bearman & Moody, 2004; King & Merchant, 2008). Understanding the gendering of friendship is important as this enables us to understand how relationships are interpreted. Therefore, this final section examines what friendships mean to younger boys. Way (2004): 187 suggests in her research with boys that: 'While friendships with other boys were often abandoned during late adolescence, the boys' resistance to emotional neutrality or stoicism in their language seemed to be maintained throughout adolescence'. In our fieldwork we found that the boys' accounts of friendships support a view that girls' same–sex friendships are characterized as expressive; face to face; 'just talk' and having intimate confidants. For example, during an interview with Gary and Paul, at Walcote West, they argued that girls operated different friendship practices to boys. When the interviewer challenged the boys' assumptions that they were different, it emerged that investments in friendship styles were an important indicator of gendered difference:

Gary: We don't do all that girly stuff, 'friends forever'…like we know who we don't like and we tend to stay away forever…
Chris H: When you fall out it lasts longer?

Paul: Yeah, I fell out with Darren in year six (two years ago) and I still don't talk to him.
Boys Focus Group 1, 2003

Research with the boys provided evidence of an understanding of emotional intimacy that did not appear to depend upon public demonstration. We need to be cautious about simplistically measuring boys' patterns against girls' patterns. From our own research, we identify boys' understandings of their friendships with other boys within a complex interplay of rigidity and fluidity. For example, transitory alliances or episodic 'joinings' would almost spontaneously emerge between different boys in a range of school contexts. These 'friendships' operated as mechanisms for coping with school life. They represented a series of strategies enacted in order (in their words) to get through the lesson.

Jonathon: …I don't. I mean I wouldn't sit next to Ian and Danny in other lessons…but you need to like..really get through the lesson…being with them means you can have a laugh..

Just as quickly as the groups of boys came together during lessons to relieve their boredom and monotony, they would dissolve and disappear. This may suggest the need to reconsider the meanings that are ascribed to intimacy. In so doing, we implicitly problematize an ideal type of friendship that can qualitatively measure intimacy.

Amit–Talai's (1995) study of friendship in Canada suggests that schools create the social conditions through which particular friendship practices occur. She argues that the organization of the curriculum and its associated structuring of formal and informal contacts, as well as the institutional designation of pupils' free time and geographic space, have a major impact on definitions of friendship and how it is lived out. We found that similar social conditions, such as spatial dynamics and academic achievement, impacted upon boys' friendship in an English context. At Walcote West, pupils were not allowed to leave the premises at break or lunch times. They were also not allowed to enter the school buildings (an exception was use of the library to carry out homework). In the winter, the 400 pupils were often forced to stay in a crowded playground that was too small for group games. As a result, the pupils would seek to pass their time away as quickly as possible and this often involved looking for what they called 'targets'.

Jonathon: …it's dead cold and like…and no-one's letting you inside and…you've had dinner. I mean…you have to find something to do…no footballs are allowed in the yard so some try playing with a tennis ball or kick around a can…like Jin and Fan…sometimes we find a target and have a laugh…until we can get inside…
Interview, 2002

In the following interview, Adrian and Darren explain their experience of being a target.

Adrian: Well a lot of people are not grown up…well there are not many people who are not mature and will, like talk to you, but some of them are not mature and are not grown up and act like really stupid - really stupid…
Chris H: Can you give me an example?
Adrian: Me personally…erm…erm…because like I can not see, people think…..like think, oh 'spaccas' [Slang referring to spastic paralysis - used by boys and girls as an insult of others' perceived mental and physical ability]. I mean I do not know that many people who do this childish behaviour - like they touch us on the shoulder, Darren as well…. come and touch us on the shoulder..
Chris H: Touch you on the shoulder?
Darren: Cos right when I am in the yard with them – you know – I am not mentioning names, people like in our class

keep coming over to Adrian touching him on the shoulder and keep running round him and that and… they laugh at him when he tries to get them…

Adrian: I just can't work it out…I mean like I wish people would see us as a normal person…like not a blind person…

Requested interview, 2003

The experiences of Adrian and Darren as 'targets' illustrate how the organization of the school can serve to structure the context for boys' relationships. Walcote West contained a centre for the visually impaired and these two pupils, Adrian and Darren, would spend all their free time together. Darren was partially sighted and Adrian had total blindness. It was the policy of the school that the visually impaired were integrated into school life as much as possible. Darren and Adrian holding hands was a technique used by them to physically support and lead each other. Their publicly tactile and emotional relationship was for other boys exceptional. It made many of the other boys feel uncomfortable. Research has suggested that when masculine resources are being used and drawn upon to perform and consolidate a masculinity identity, homosexuality and femininity are often used as codes of the cultural difference to generate normative parameters (Epstein, 1997). One of the disturbing yet interesting characteristics demonstrated in the extract above is that embodied or performed gendered difference operated through an alternative discursive dynamic of physical competence and agility. It should also be noted that physical and emotional abuse was identified as one of the ways through which intimacy could be achieved (See also Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2007). It is argued here in a similar way, that we need to move away from understanding intimacy and emotionality as an individualised psychological dynamic; instead it is important to connect it to the contextual institutional dynamics. Thus, in this case, the institutional ethos of integrating children with visual impairment into the everyday world of schooling creates the possibilities for Darren and Adrian's relationship to become a 'target'. What tends to become lost in academic discussions of boys' identities is the emotional subterfuge that is carried within the process of identity formation. Of key importance for this article is that the resources through which friendship is made are not empirically or conceptually representative of conventional models of masculinity. This is not to suggest that boys do not hurt or commit violence towards other boys, rather that such practices may not be reducible to a masculinity identity. Further research is required to explore the emotional narratives that boys' relationships are worked across. Given that friendship has been identified as an important factor in suicide behaviour, understanding *how* such friendships are gendered is of key epidemiological importance. According to Dervic, Brent, and Oquendo (2008): 286 point out in their review of suicide and pre-adolescents: "The most efficient preventative strategy is early recognition of suicidality, with timely referral specialized institutions." As we have indicated, friendships are often differently experienced and practiced within groups of boys and that friendships do not necessary operate through the narratives that are embedded in adult masculinities. This may provide important implications when evaluating the impact of friendships on suicide behaviour.

Conclusion

This article is a response to media accounts that are reporting a rise in pre-adolescent suicide behaviour and tend to explore suicide through simplistic dyadic categories of male and female. As such there is a tendency to homogenize the category of male so that boys and men may appear to share the same lifestyle challenges. On one hand, this allows us to draw out the gendered continuities across generations; on the other it limits the possibility of generationally-

led explanations of attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, the overriding emphasis in this article has been to urge caution when identifying and explaining pre-adolescent suicide behaviour. It is suggested that existing models of masculinity may not be able to capture the generational specificities of boys. The first area that requires caution is that risk factors are individually located rather than institutionally produced. In the first section we illustrated how institutions operate through complex cultural narratives that position boys' within gendered confusions of what constitutes a 'good pupil' and a 'real man'. It is suggested that boys are caught within such narratives and that institutionally-led gendered confusion impacts upon how emotional distress is communicated. One of the implications of this confusion is to consider how protective strategies implemented by schools take into account their own internal institutional discourses. Alongside this, the second section considers how we make sense of pre-adolescent boys' identities and the implications that this has for the identification of risk. One of the features in this section is that the discourses that adults use to make their masculinities may not be appropriate for younger boys. More specifically, the identity models of masculinity that are currently in place to explain male behaviours may have little purchase on younger boys' gendered identities, as they may be forming their gendered selves through different social and cultural codes.

The significance of moving beyond models of masculinity and considering a different configuration of gendered identity is that we may begin to explain *how* risk factors may be interpreted. The final section explored a critical reflection on the gendering of friendship through the experiences of young people themselves. Although it is recognised that boys' friendships have an important role to play in suicide behaviour, it is important to consider how those friendships are practiced. Thus, understanding processes of isolation and integration within the context of boys' friendships provides us with a template through which emotional distress is communicated. Finally, it is suggested that further research is required that explores directly the relationship between boys' gender identities and the discourses that they use to understand and explain suicidality. Fundamentally, for those working in the field of gender and suicide, it is important to question the concept of 'boys' and the implicit connection of masculinity with boys' subjectivity. It should be noted that studies of boys and masculinities have the potential to collude in the current backlash against feminism by implicitly suggesting that boys are now the 'real victims' of gender arrangements in late modernity (Bennetts, 2007; Stone, 2007). In this context, and with statistical caution, we should take into consideration that girls outnumber boys in their experience of non-fatal suicidal behaviour (Pompili, 2004; O'Connor, Rasmussen, Miles, & Hawton, 2009). In response, it is intended that this article contributes to a discussion on suicide behaviour through the political deconstruction of 'boyness'. In turn, it is hoped that the article will contribute to further reflection on how we understand the institutional production of emotional distress, the constitution of boys' identities and boys' friendships.

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