On Leadership and Fitting In: Dominant Understandings of Masculinities within an Early Primary Peer Group

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Abstract

This paper argues the importance of examining the collective dimension of masculinities in the early school years through a description of a study into children's (young males') peer group relations. Specifically, the paper attends to the significance of the peer group in shaping behaviour, and in particular exaggerated 'masculine' behaviours, and illuminates the inadequacies of conventional teacher practices that individualise and pathologise group behaviours. The nature and dynamics of the peer group and the way these dynamics interact to form particular understandings of masculinity are illuminated through a snapshot of the study's data, presented as a narrative. Drawing on elements of group socialisation theory, within a post-structural foregrounding of socio-political relations of power, the contextuality and contingency of the young males' peer group behaviours are interpreted.

Introduction

In a school dormitory at Trinity Grammar, one of Australia's most exclusive private schools, a 16-year-old boy is tied to a bunk with school ties by two of his 'mates' and stripped to his boxer shorts in the presence of fellow students. On another occasion, in the company of student on-lookers, these same two boys tie him up again. He screams as they 'indecently' assault him with, among other such implements, a wooden dildo, dubbed 'The Anaconda', that one of the boys had made in woodwork class (ABC 2001a, *The Weekend Australian* 2001b).

Was this an isolated incident committed by deviant individuals? The principal of Trinity Grammar seems to think so. He rejects the suggestion that his school suffers under a 'culture of bullying' and is reported to describe the attacks as the 'isolated incidents' of 'individuals' (ABC 2001b). Indeed, only two individuals are formally charged with 'aggravated indecent assault' with one other boy found guilty of the

lesser charge of 'intimidation' (*The Weekend Australian* 2001a). The victim and the victim's father, however, tell a different story: one of a general and pervasive peer undercurrent of assault and ongoing abuse within which a small band of students reportedly perpetrated more than fifty attacks over three years (ABC 2001b, *The Sunday Telegraph* 2000).

How could these brutal attacks have occurred in a school that does 'not tolerate bullies' and has a 'clear anti-bullying policy' (*The Daily Telegraph* 2000, Cujes 2001)? Why was a culture of 'rumbling and bullying' unnoticed by school officials? Why didn't any of the boys involved speak up (ABC 2001a, ABC 2001b, *The Weekend Australian* 2001b)? On behalf of the staff at Trinity, and in the school's defence, the principal states that they 'were completely unaware anything like this was taking place' (*The Weekend Australian* 2001b). It remains, however, that these 'offences occurred in an environment where the victims were entitled to feel safe and protected', the magistrate presiding in judgment over the case asserted (*The Weekend Australian* 2001a).

Many stories of male violence and abuse have fuelled intense concern over the past decade about the construction of masculinities in Australia. Such concern is amplified by a scan of the recent and all too familiar media reports from the USA such as the 1999 shooting spree at Columbine High School where two young males shot dead thirteen students before taking their own lives, in conjunction with analysis of empirical data in an Australian context. Males overwhelmingly dominate the statistics for youth suicide, injury, death, violence, conflict, petty crime and school suspensions and expulsions (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, Department of Education, Tasmania 1998). Such data have incited widespread debate concerning the issue of 'male identity'. Underpinning this heightened focus is an emerging social anxiety about the impact of boys defining and understanding masculinity along 'essentialist' lines, as synonymous with power, domination and 'non-emotion' (see Connell 1995, Davies 1993, Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997, Martino 1997). Sociological analysis has begun to explore how such understandings are developed, maintained and perpetuated.

Within this analysis of 'male identity', interest in the primacy of peer culture in shaping and regulating 'limited' understandings of masculinity has gained momentum (see Fitzclarence, Hickey and Tinning 1999, Hickey and Fitzclarence 2000) and situates cases such as the opening Trinity vignette as far from uncommon. While the magistrate in this case saw the 'motivation' for these offences as 'obscure' (*The Weekend Australian* 2001a), psychologist Evelyn Field locates the boys' behaviour within the contingency of peer culture. This informal context, she argues, has 'incredible power in shaping behaviour. If the peer group says bullying is in, it's in and if the peer group says it's out, it's out' (ABC 2001a).

The power of peers

Boys' disruption, harassment, hostility and aggression predominantly occur in, and are maintained by, boys' peer cultures (Connell 1995, 1996, 2000, Kenway 1995, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Martino 1999). Peer networks comprise a means through which boys can explore, negotiate and practice a range of social and sexual 'identities'. Within this infrastructure, many boys learn the codes of masculinity and develop the 'social and discursive practices that serve to validate and amplify masculine reputations. Here, young males mark their rite of passage into manhood' (Mac an Ghaill 1994, p. 53).

Masculine power hierarchies within and between peer groups are regulated and maintained through collective oppressive practice (Askew and Ross 1988, Connell 1995, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Martino 1997, Walker 1988). These oppressive behaviours are underpinned by a need for belonging, affiliation and place within the peer group's hierarchy (Connell 1996) and are characterised by boys' attempts to acquire power, mark prestige and validate or prove their own ways of being male (Askew and Ross 1988, Collins et al. 1996, Martino 1997).

'Winning' a place within the masculine 'pecking order' means escaping personal oppression and gaining personal status, thus 'boys invest a lot of energy in maintaining their position within the dominant group' (Martino 1999, p. 253). This often means that boys subordinate other boys who are perceived to fall short of the masculinity considered to be socially and culturally superior. This subordination is invariably achieved by associating the boys who 'don't measure up' with the feminine side of the male–female polarity, and denigrating them as weak and inferior, or as homosexual (Mac an Ghaill 1994, pp. 5–6). To escape this association with femininity and homosexuality, many boys develop convoluted attitudes characterised by a strong need to distinguish or distance oneself from 'weakness' and femininity (Mac an Ghaill 1994). To this end, boys' essentialist peer group understandings are often characterised by investments in 'toughness and confrontation' (Connell 1996).

This paper examines issues of masculinity within the context and contingency of dominant peer culture and is framed within Connell's (2000, p. 162) assertion that 'peer groups, not individuals, are the bearers of gender definitions'. Within this frame of understanding, group belonging and the desire for self-legitimation within peer culture are seen as pivotal in the construction of masculinities (Harris 1998). The paper's focus is on the pervasiveness and potency of this informal and often covert micro-culture in shaping boys' behaviours and understandings within the school environment, and the inadequacies of conventional practices within the school context that individualise particular group behaviours.

Consistent with Hickey and Fitzclarence's (2000) reference to the inadequacies of remedying group practices within a logic of individualism, commentators note that the same boys who engage in violent or risky behaviours in groups, or subordinate and intimidate others in peer group situations, are usually peaceable when interacting with others on an individual basis (Browne 1995a, Clark 1993, Connell 1996, Martino 1997). Boy's disruptive, anti-authority behaviour, however, continues to be individualised in schools by teachers rather than dealt with within this dimension of collective masculinity (Browne 1995b).

Group socialisation theory

> Having, or not having, a group to identify with could make all the difference to a kid who isn't sure what sort of person he is. (Harris 1998, p. 277)

The power of peer culture in shaping behaviour and personality has been illuminated by Judith Rich Harris (1998). Harris disputes many of the assumptions underpinning educational psychology's logic of individualism and argues persuasively that what matters in the determination of a child's personality and behaviour is a child's peer group. She contends that children learn what sort of people they are through identifying with a group 'like them' and adopting the group's attitudes and behaviours. She points out that children willingly engage in acquiring this peer group identity: they don't want to be different, 'oddness is not considered a virtue in the peer group' (1998, p. 341).

Harris affirms that much troublesome or anti-social behaviour occurs in groups and that this behaviour is situational and usually appropriate to the norms of the particular group. She asserts that 'when groupness is salient [individuals] see themselves as members of whichever group is in the spotlight at the moment. When groupness is not salient, [individuals] see themselves as unique' (1998, p. 177). Identification with a group and group solidarity, she submits, explains why children and adolescents sometimes behave in hostile or anti-social ways.

Harris describes the differentiation between groups as 'group contrast effects'. While the commonalities of the group are exaggerated by the influences of group members, the group also works to contrast with, and mark difference from, other groups. This sort of self-identification with, and salience of, groupness 'makes people like their own group best' (1998, p. 242). In this sense, the group often works to recognise and value the commonalities of *their* group and de-value or distance themselves from the commonalities of *other* groups. Harris proposes that these group contrast effects tend to make differences between groups widen and result in an 'us versus them' mentality which can manifest itself in intergroup hostility.

Harris proposes that when other groups are absent, within-group competition increases and this is usually characterised by differentiation and vying for status through attempts at domination. Within-group relations, she proposes, centre on the group's leadership and 'attention structure': to whom does the group pay attention? This structure is described as hierarchical, with a leader usually 'telling the others what to do' (1998, p. 232). Harris asserts that the leaders of peer groups – those positioned 'at the top of the attention ladder' (1998, p. 245) – are afforded many privileges and can impact on the group's attitudes and behaviours, and the group's membership: who is in and who is out. Harris contends that status within a peer group is critical in shaping self-concept and self-esteem.

The study

It is against this backdrop that I present a case study of a young male peer group at a primary school in a large provincial city in Tasmania, Australia (Keddie 2001). 'Banrock Primary School' is situated in a middle-class socioeconomic area with an enrolment of approximately 300 students from a diverse range of familial structures and socioeconomic backgrounds. Based on the central belief that forms of dominant and dominating masculinities are overwhelmingly reinforced in groups, the study oriented around an interrogation of peer group 'meanings' through exploring collective understandings of masculinities within the context of intensive 'affinity group' (Mackay 1993) sessions over a six-month period. This method of grouping individuals of similar interests promoted group cohesion, discussion and the identification of shared and contradicting stories, ideas and meanings. The method was applied to explore the socio-political dynamics of a boys' peer group. Through a variety of age-appropriate prompts (Keddie 2000), twice-weekly sessions foregrounded the dominant and collective dynamics and understandings of a group of young male friends: 'Adam' and 'Matthew' (eight years), 'Justin' (seven years) and 'Jack' (six years). Additionally, to further explore perceptions and understandings of the boys, data were gathered through discussions with a teacher affinity group consisting of the boys' class teacher ('Mrs W') and two of their specialty teachers ('Mr A' and 'Ms C'), and an interview with the school principal ('Mr T'). While not represented in this paper, an affinity group of girls was also consulted.

The study adopted the principles of ethnography drawing on Harris' (1998) group socialisation theory within the theoretical lenses of post-structuralism as core interpretive tools. The key theoretical and methodological foci were directed towards examining language and meaning in the collective production of 'schoolboy masculinities' in relation to how young males subjectify and are subjectified, through power relations embedded in social interactions. It was acknowledged that all social interactions are shaped and governed by dominant understandings enmeshed within particular practices which 'make more possible some ways of being, and not others'

(Davies in MacNaughton 1998, p. 160). To this end, the social beliefs, practices, and emotional and bodily investments underpinning dominant forms of peer group masculinities, which act to govern boys' behaviour and to condition and limit boys' understandings of masculinity, were of key importance.

Socialisation theories are critiqued for their tendency to over-simplify and unify (Connell 1995; Kamler 1999), through 'obscuring our recognition of the complex and contradictory ways in which we are constantly constituting ourselves in the social world' (Davies in Lowe 1998, p. 206). This criticism is accepted. Harris' theory, while acknowledged as a simplistic lens of interpretation, is presented here as a useful and generative starting point for understanding the primacy of self-categorisation and group identification in children 'learning to be'. It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail how the study reconciled the epistemological disparities of group socialisation theory and post-structuralism (see Keddie, in review). Suffice to say however that, through a feminist post-structural engagement with multiple narrative positions (Prain 1997; Lather 1992), Harris' simplistic lens was deployed in a strategic sense as useful in organising the study's data and providing a framework to begin analysis and interpretation. Additionally, this simplistic lens was effective in foregrounding what seemed to be a fixed line of power unifying the boys' dominant and collective masculinities. The post-structural reading, on the other hand, exposed the seeming unity of these dominant understandings as multifaceted, contradictory and unstable. Rather than conceiving of the essentialist reading as a foundational premise within the objectivist–relativist binary from which other positions might be 'objectively' judged (Cherryholmes 1988), the study's post-structural methodology deployed essentialism within Derrida's construction of *difference* (in Adams St Pierre 2000). In this regard, the simplified lens was positioned as one among many contextual, partial and historically contingent truths (Keddie, in review).

The following narrative, fashioned through selections of data I interpreted as 'critical moments' in the boys' negotiations of power in their collective production of meaning, illuminates the dynamics of peer group interaction in shaping behaviour. This narrative was constructed from the boys' affinity group (b.) and teachers' affinity group (t.) transcript data, my own observations and interview data (int.) with the boys' classroom teacher (Mrs W) and the school principal (Mr T). In an attempt to (re)present the complexity of the story, the teachers' voices have been juxtaposed throughout the narrative in the form of text boxes.

'I hate his guts!'
Within the disorder of conflict and argument, the boys would sometimes harmonise their thinking and energies around particular issues. One particular area of harmony and congruence was a passion for hating Brian. 'Beatin' de shit outta Brian' was

actually Adam's obsession rather than the other boys', however Matthew and Justin really hated his guts too. Brian was a 'fishface, dork' who had been Adam's 'enemy' for two years. He showed off and screamed like a girl according to Adam. 'I want to kill him', Adam had told me through gritted teeth. 'Me too', Matthew had agreed (b. 13.08.99). While I was never witness to any violence related to this ongoing conflict there were several particular incidents of violence that were brought to my attention through discussion with the boys. On the first occasion the conflict was discussed within our affinity sessions, Adam commanded the group's attention: 'Guess who I bashed de crap out of?' he asked us as he smugly folded his arms across his chest. 'Ask Matthew. 'E was there', he added (b. 02.11.99).

'He bashed 'is head in,' Matthew agreed, looking at me. 'He punched 'im 'round the face an' all that . . . punched 'im in the jaw.'

> 'I think Adam will be one child who later on if teachers choose to confront him in the yard they'll come off second best because Adam will be the one who will quickly give them a mouthful of abuse and walk off. Someone will wear that aggression shortly', Mr. A remarked.
> 'That's right,' Mrs. W. agreed. 'That's not the tack to take with Adam.'
> 'I agree', Ms. C. interjected, 'and that's why whenever I've needed to talk with him I always find a way of making it very private.'
> 'Yeah and don't make it confrontational', Mrs. W. added.
> (t. 19.11.99)

'I had to go to Mr T's office', Adam remarked and proceeded to explain to us that this incident wasn't 'as serious' as last time: 'Las' time when I went dere it was a lot more serious 'cos it involved blood wiv Brian 'cos I took a big chunk outta 'is back. I bit him an' put a hole frough 'is shirt.' 'Why?' I asked. 'I'm angry, I'm a beast . . . I'd kill 'im', Adam explained. 'I'm just tellin' ya Brian touches me and he won't have a head . . . I hate 'im 'cos he shows off to the girls all the time an' the girls like 'im 'cos he shows off wiv his tricks n'that . . . an' 'e's as weak as water 'cos 'e always acts like a chicken an' um 'e always screams like a girl.'

> 'They seek Adam's approval y'know, Justin and Matthew especially. Matthew just aspires to be like Adam', Mrs. W. noted.
> 'I notice that big time', Ms. C. acknowledged. 'He just follows whatever Adam says.'
> (t. 19.11.99)

Jack and Justin agreed with Adam. 'Yeah, he screams like a girl', they chanted. 'Yeah and for chasies he goes, "Arhhhh arhhhh don't get me I'm running!" Arsehole!' Adam added with a high-pitched shriek. 'He's an arsehole', Justin agreed. 'Yep, he's a bitch', Matthew added. 'Yeah and a bitch', Justin reiterated. 'A son of a bitch. I go "Hey Brian, y'no good arsehole"', Adam retorted. ' . . . And I go, "You're a dickhead"', Justin asserted. 'I hate his guts!'

'He showed all the girls dis big scar because um 'e had to had his intenticles cut out', Adam noted. 'Appendix maybe?' I offered. 'Yeah', Adam confirmed. 'Yuck!' Justin retorted.

'He showed the girls to impress dem', Adam continued. 'Do you think he impressed them?' I asked. 'Well if y'ask me all de boys said "what's he got dat I haven' got?"' Adam replied. 'An' I said "one scar, two dickhead, free dickhead, four dickhead, five dickhead, six dickhead . . ."' 'A million, a million dickheads!' Jack interjected. '. . . seven dickhead, eight dickhead . . .' Adam continued.

'And one bitch', Matthew interrupted. 'Yeah an' one bitch, yeah an' six thousan' dickheads!' exclaimed Justin. 'He's two million dickheads actually', Jack decided. 'Yeah!' Justin agreed. 'He's a dork!' 'He's a really big jerk', Matthew added. 'How 'bout he's a girl or something', Jack offered. 'Yeah, a girl', Justin agreed.

'I hate his guts! 'E better watch out 'cos I go ta boxin'. I know how to hold a punch'. Adam stated. 'Sometimes I just go up and punch 'im in the guts', Matthew asserted. 'I just go punch him in the nuts and punch him in the eyeball', Justin added. 'We hate his guts!'

'It's really sad the influence Adam's had over Matthew this year. Adam has actually knocked Matthew's confidence because Matthew is so keen to please Adam. He's trying to buy his friendship, like bringing things to school. "I'll share this with you" and "I've got sixty cents for another icy pole, you can have it", this sort of thing. Yeah, he doesn't really want to be doing the things that Adam and co. are doing in the yard – going 'round and bullying people and pushing people around. Matthew's not really that sort of kid but because he wants to be popular with the "in" crowd he's doing it. He's following along and it's upsetting him 'cos he doesn't really know how to get out of the situation. And he feels if he's not going around with them he'll be on his own.'
(int. Mrs. W. 01.12.99)

'Well as far as the classroom goes I haven't let them (Justin, Adam and Matthew) work or sit together since the beginning of the year because they all wanted to be the dominant one . . . It's the same with Ms. C. – she doesn't allow them to work together either . . . But as for this incident with Brian – I've banned them from playing together. They are not to be seen together in the playground. I've also said that at staff meetings so if any other staff see them together they are to remind them that they're not to be together.'
(int. Mrs. W. 01.12.99)

A violent incident involving three of the boys in the affinity group occurred a few weeks later. According to Mrs W, another boy in her class, Ben, asked Adam, Matthew and Justin to punch Brian's head in because of something that Brian had done to him a few days prior. 'So when I went out on duty', Mrs W informed me, 'and I saw Adam, Justin and Matthew laying into Brian. So I just sent them straight to the office 'cos anything physical like that they don't even get a warning, just straight into the office' (int. Mrs W 01.12.99).

At our next session, I asked the boys why they would do this to Brian. Adam explained that he had done it as a favour for Ben and to protect Justin: 'Yeah I punched de crap outta him, 'cos 'e had Justin, an' I said you're not my frien' so come an' get me an' I'll show ya who's gonna be hurt' (b. 06.12. 99). Justin giggled when he explained why he did it: 'Gettin' attention.' The other boys laughed when Adam went on to explain that when Mrs W ordered them all to Mr T's office he 'told de bitch ta get stuffed!'

'They're not actually "out of control" kids though', Mrs. W. remarked.
'No, no', Mr. A. and Ms. C. agreed.
'I mean, they're not what I would consider "behaviour problems" . . . Look, they're of the age where you don't need to be too heavy with them . . . I mean they want to please me. I'm their teacher, they're only little kids and they want to please me.'

'You gonna split them up or keep them together next year?' Mr. A. asked Mrs. W.
'I'm splitting them', Mrs. W. replied. 'I'd really like Adam to go into a 3/4. I think he needs to come down a cog or two.'
'Yeah, he needs to be stepped on', Mr. A assented.
(t. 19.11.99)

Interpretation and discussion

Banrock principal Mr. T. discussed the incident involving the boys.

'Okay, well we had a kid who instigated it all and who wasn't game to do his own settling up and those that went to do what they were told to do … the three of them, Adam, Matthew and Justin. Then we had the victim himself who fought back and then we had another one who was in the background just agitating and so on. We started off with the one who was doing the agitating as being the smallest amount so he actually did one recess time in "time out", up to the one who instigated it all but was behind the scenes. He did three lunch hours in "time out". The rest were just ranked in between. It was complicated and so was the list of punishments. It was just, right this was your role and we always make them go through it and my stock phrase to them is "Well, are you guilty? Did you do it?" Yeah, once they've actually verbalised "yes, I did that set of things" you can start talking about suitable consequences as well as giving them advice on what they should have done and what they shouldn't have done. Also, we may run anger management groups and social skills groups to handle these situations. But I don't think that they (Adam, Matthew and Justin) are in the general run of things huge problems.'
(int. Mr. T. 09.12.99)

In making sense of this narrative, I drew on Harris' understandings of groupness. Her conceptions of leadership, attention structure and group contrast effects (formed through group solidarity in alliance against others) were helpful in providing a framework for understanding the boys' behaviour. The following section interprets the narrative thus in relation to examining Adam's positioning at the top of the attention ladder and the group's solidarity in alliance against Brian in the form of

belittlement, mockery and physical violence. My interpretation of the narrative then turns to an analysis of the teachers' and the principal's interventions.

Adam's position at the top of the attention ladder

Aspects of the narrative illuminate the ways in which Adam is positioned as leader and at the top of the attention ladder (Harris 1998). This position affords him immense privileges in shaping the behaviours and understandings of the other boys. This narrative illustrates how the group's dynamics interact to (re)legitimate Adam's subjectivities – his conscious and unconscious thoughts, emotions and desires (Weedon 1999) concerning aggression and violence – through particular language practices. Adam's subjectivities are reified through strategies of self-legitimation manifest in the aggressive, violent and daring nature of his displays of bravado which capture and dominate the boys' attention. Adam's subjectivities are also legitimated through the other boys' willingness to actively position him as leader, apparent in their attention to his stories. In this regard, the group's (re)legitimation of, and alliance with, Adam's subjectivities shape and regulate the boys' understandings.

Group solidarity in alliance against Adam's 'enemy'

Of greater significance, perhaps, is the group's amplification of Adam's dominant subjectivities in alliance against a non-group member. Here we see investments in violence, toughness and confrontation illuminated in group legitimation and solidarity against Adam's 'enemy', Brian. This is consistent with significant work in the area (see Connell 1996, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Martino 1997). The narrative also elucidates the dynamic of this legitimation process. Here I refer to how the boys' practice of 'going one better' against Brian results in the exaggeration of Adam's dominant subjectivities and the escalation of particular behaviours. This practice of 'going one better' seems to be most potent in fuelling the escalation of hostile behaviours. Harris' (1998) concept of 'us versus them' and her notion of intergroup hostility are helpful here. In this regard, the introduction of Adam's 'enemy' Brian, a non-member, into the group's discussion makes 'groupness' salient, resulting in the boys' identifying with their own group and contrasting or differentiating their group against others. Thus, the boys (re)legitimate the status of their own group and gain power and agency through positioning Brian, a non-group member, as inferior.

The beginning of the narrative vivifies Adam's hatred for his enemy Brian. Not only does Adam tell us that he wants 'to kill' Brian and boasts of bashing 'de crap out of' him, but we also learn about Adam's history of conflict with this boy. In this respect, Adam's hostility towards Brian and his emotional investment in differentiating himself from him clearly begins as his issue, rather than that of the other boys in the group. As the narrative develops, however, the other boys' alliance with Adam against Brian becomes apparent in the group's solidarity. This group solidarity manifests itself through the boys' mockery, belittlement and physical violence against Brian.

Group alliance formed through belittlement, mockery and physical violence

Group alliance in the belittlement or mockery of Brian persists as a strong theme throughout the narrative. Early in the narrative, Adam begins to belittle Brian through associating him with girls and 'girl-like' behaviour in an attempt to explain his hostility – a subordinating 'masculine' practice well documented in the literature (see Clark 1993, Connell 1996, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Martino 1997). He impels an 'us versus them'/'strong versus weak' binary when he boasts that Brian couldn't hurt him because ''e's as weak as water'. He continues mocking Brian's 'weakness', through explaining, for example, that Brian, 'always acts like a chicken' and 'screams like a girl'. Indeed, the explicit use of the term 'girl' as a form of belittlement against Brian is subsequently taken up by Jack and Justin at various times throughout the narrative. The group alliance against Brian seems most potent, however, with the boys' 'going one better' supporting commentary which occurs twice within the narrative and serves to exaggerate the boys' hostilities. The first time, Brian seems to graduate from being an 'arsehole', 'bitch' and 'son of a bitch' to a 'no good arsehole . . . and a dickhead', while the second time Brian's perceived attempts at impressing the girls escalate him from being 'two dickhead(s)', 'a million dickheads!' and 'one bitch' to 'six thousan' dickheads!' and finally 'two million dickheads'.

An indication of the beginnings of group alliance in the form of physical violence against Brian emerges early in the narrative with Matthew's admittance that, along with Adam, he too would like to 'kill' Brian. These beginnings then seem to develop with, for example, Adam threatening that Brian had 'better watch out' because he knows how 'ta hold a punch', with Matthew ('Sometimes I just go up and punch 'im in the guts') and Justin ('I just go punch him in the nuts and punch him in the eyeball') following Adam's lead. The three boys' group solidarity in violence against Brian is confirmed later in the narrative with Adam and Justin, in particular, appearing to gain a sense of satisfaction from this act.

Teacher and principal intervention

Inspection of the teachers' comments throughout the research story points to a shared acknowledgment of Adam's aggression and emerging 'anti-school' mentality. There is also agreement that Adam's aggressive behaviour demonstrates the potential to escalate and become increasingly problematic in the future. Additionally, Mrs W and Ms C concur in their acknowledgment of, and concern for, Adam's dominance within the affinity group of boys and his impact on their behaviour. In particular, both teachers illuminate a concern for how Adam seems to shape Matthew's behaviour and self-perception, in particular Matthew's tendency to 'follow whatever Adam says', his 'keenness to please' him and his aspiration 'to be like' him. Further to this, Mrs W

expresses sadness regarding Adam's 'influence' over Matthew in relation to Matthew's reluctant participation and distress at being involved in Adam's 'bullying'. In this regard, Mrs W confirms that Matthew's positioning of Adam as leader and his desire for approval, attention and acceptance from the group are responsible for his attempts to emulate the group's violent subjectivities.

It seems paradoxical that, despite the boys' violence against Brian and concerns about Adam's aggressive behaviour and his impact on others, the principal and teachers do not appear to consider the boys' behaviour to be particularly problematic – neither 'out of control' nor 'in the general run of things huge problems'. The teachers also agree that the boys are 'only little kids and they want to please', therefore they 'don't need to be too heavy with them'. Nevertheless, while the 'cherished' notion of early childhood as 'innocence' (see Alloway 1995, Clark 1993), seems to inform some of their understandings, the teachers and principal have developed distinct ways of managing the boys' behaviour. These are manifest in their clear and seemingly well-established intervention procedures and strategies. These interventions, however, appear to be underpinned by a logic of individualism and in this sense may be seen as only superficially 'managing' the boys' behaviour.

A logic of individualism

The teachers' use of intervention strategies to prevent potential conflict, while acknowledging groupness in terms of Adam's disruptive behaviour as contingent upon his desire for audience attention and approval, seem to be informed by a logic of individualism. For example, the teachers agree that 'non-confrontational' strategies are best when dealing with Adam. They concur that it's not advisable to talk to Adam about his behaviour within his peer context because they see this context as confrontational and as possibly inciting Adam's aggression. The teachers agree that talking to Adam 'privately' is a more favourable strategy. Equally, the teachers' use of the common remedy for preventing disruption – ensuring that the boys do not sit or work together in the classroom; Mrs W's decision to ban the boys from playing with each other after the Brian incident; Mr T's concern with individualised punishments; the use of isolated 'time-out' periods; and the teachers' talk of separating the boys as a more long-term strategy for the following year – suggest that, although they acknowledge the boys' behaviour as situational and contingent, they perceive this behaviour as best dealt with through individual rather than collective means. Thus, these intervention strategies, while effective in dissolving problematic behaviour in the short term through removing Adam and/or the other boys from the context of enactment, may be seen as ineffective in the longer term *because* they remove the boys from the context of enactment. In this regard, the boys cannot develop personal resources upon which to draw to position themselves in alternative ways because the behaviour of Adam and the other boys is isolated and individualised. The peer context of enactment is thus ignored as the source of the problematic behaviour.

A way forward: a warrant for working with peers

> It is through people's actions in micro-political contexts and in both individual and collective ways that general structures are reproduced or transformed. In this sense, among others, the personal is indeed the political. (Epstein and Johnson 1994, p. 225)

The study conceptualises the peer group's disciplining force as not only self-limiting and productive of hierarchies but also as enabling and productive of social collectivities, moral bonds and political agency (Seidman 1993). In this regard, one can view this context as a generative space for identifying and exploring affirmative alternatives to dominant modes of being masculine. As Browne (1995a, p. 181) asserts, 'because such unacceptable behaviours are learned in groups or, at the very least, maintained and refined in groups, it is important that they are unlearned in groups'.

Hickey and Fitzclarence (2000) emphasise the need for engagement *with* collective masculinities in contemplating how teacher pedagogies and practices might be re-thought to facilitate generative dialogue with young males. In light of the potency of peer investments, teacher practices which individualise and pathologise behaviour, such as those typically used by teachers to sanction boys' behaviour, are clearly inadequate (Browne 1995a, Hickey & Fitzclarence 2000). Common interventions used to dispel and punish group conflict such as banning particular alliances and 'time-out' isolation periods, while having the 'advantage of making the individual responsible for his own behaviour' (Browne 1995a, p. 179), can only superficially 'manage' behaviour. This is because these strategies fail to deal with boys' investments in perpetuating such behaviours or the situational and contingent nature of their behaviour (Browne 1995a; Hickey and Fitzclarence 2000). As the narrative illuminates, peer culture often supports and rewards these very same behaviours (Browne 1995b). Furthermore, these interventions may also be seen as inadequate because they apply 'rational' and systematic sanctions and remedies to 'non-rational' and highly emotive situations (Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997, Fitzclarence 2000).

In exploring masculinity, violence and schooling, Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997) and Fitzclarence (2000) describe 'emotional neutrality' and 'hyper-rationality' as 'core structuring values of school cultures and education systems' (Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997, p. 125) and delineate the limitations inherent in the school's application of these values. They explain that this framework of understanding, grounded in traditional and conservative assumptions about child development, employs hyper-rationalistic solutions (such as strict codes of behaviour and regimes of discipline and control) to deeply emotive issues (such as aggression and violence). Fitzclarence asserts that these 'solutions' or strategies are often inadequate because

they are one-dimensional and 'fail to account for the multiplicity and complexity of human behaviour. As such rational inquiry becomes an ideology that fails to acknowledge that human behaviour does not always follow a rational and predictable path' (2000, p. 151).

Further, it is argued that pedagogies of rationality, specifically the privileging of the rational and instrumental over the relational and affective, may perpetuate violent cultures through ignoring or devaluing the world of emotions and feelings and actively denying irrational experiences as aberrational (Fitzclarence 2000, Fitzclarence and Kenway 1997). Rationalising behaviour through individualising, pathologising and controlling through repressive measures, they argue, defines students' identities clinically within conservative, narrow and incomplete paradigms.

When considering the principal's commentary in the narrative, one can see his application of seemingly 'rational' solutions within a framework of emotional neutrality in terms of his primary concern with 'objectively' determining varying degrees of guilt so that he could individually and hierarchically rank the behaviour of the boys involved in the violence against Brian in order to decide the level of appropriate punishment. There is no attempt here to understand the boys' behaviour as socially and emotionally connected to the peer context. Also, in relation to constructing the boys' identities clinically within the incomplete paradigm of emotional neutrality, the teachers' and principal's actions may be seen as implicated in perpetuating the boys' violence because the boys' emotions and feelings do not figure in their intervention strategies. They are thus ignored and by implication also devalued. Indeed, the principal seems to be quite explicit in this regard in terms of his opinion that the school's social skills or anger management sessions are not necessary for the boys. Consistent with the arguments of Fitzclarence and Kenway, the point here is not to discard rational strategies nor to privilege the irrational within a rational–irrational binary but to foreground the limitations and inadequacies of rational pathways in terms of their failure 'to account for the multiplicity and complexity of human behaviour' (Fitzclarence 2000, p.151). Within this frame of understanding, Kenway and Fitzclarence offer an alternative to strategies of rationality and control in their illumination of the significance of developing a 'pedagogy of emotions' so that teachers might facilitate students' exploration and understanding of powerful feelings such as suffering, anger, humiliation, revenge and remorse, as well as joy and pleasure, as implicated in their dominant storylines and gender(ed) subjectivities.

In examining alternative ways of working with (rather than in opposition to) young males, a broader range of teacher interventionary strategies underpinned by a greater understanding of boys' emotional investments in peer group masculinities would

seem critical (Browne 1995b, Davies 1993, Hickey and Fitzclarence 2000). It is within the affinity context that educators can help facilitate the development of personal resources that young males may draw on to position themselves in ways that explore alternatives to dominance through providing the necessary framework for identifying, deconstructing and rebuilding the meanings and commitments young males attach to dominant storylines and particular ways of being.

Davies' (1989, 1993) work with young children on the critical analysis of dominant storylines offers valuable insight into the ways children can disrupt and rework restrictive ways of being. Davies advocates making the skills of critical deconstruction within a feminist post-structural framework accessible to children through links to their lived and imagined experiences. By engaging with these skills, she argues, children can recognise the historical and cultural specificities of language and meaning and thus make visible the 'constitutive force of what is said and what might be' (1993, p. 200). Through catching 'discourse in the act of shaping subjectivities', she believes that children can identify the constructed nature of cultural patterns and engage in 'a collective process of re-naming, re-writing [and] re-positioning themselves in relation to coercive structures' (1993, p. 200).

It is the facilitation of these skills of deconstruction, through exploring the illegitimacies of discourse, that this paper posits as central as boys learn to come to terms with the potent and often destructive nature of peer group relations. Learning these skills and drawing on these resources within the context of the peer group (Browne 1995b; Hickey and Fitzclarence 2000) will enable boys to position themselves within alternative and empowering discourses and storylines (Davies 1993).

Davies' research offers generative possibilities for working with dominant peer masculinities, particularly in early childhood where these group positionings are relatively fluid. This fluidity, as well as the contingent nature of the boys' peer group subjectivities, constitutes the possibility to expose, call into question and (re)work taken-for-granted gendered assumptions. Central to the 'opening up of a different kind of agency' (Davies 1993, p. 199), the narrative illuminates the boys' willingness to discuss their pleasures, emotions, 'irrationalities', investments and competencies within their social worlds. Within such discussion discursive and affirmative spaces from which to begin such questionings and 'invent what might be' (1993, p. 200) can be identified in relation to the recognition of multiple perspectives within the group.

In facilitating this analysis of how different perspectives and interpretations create a proliferation of meanings and position individuals in hierarchical ways, the socio-political power framing particular discourses may be revealed (Davies 1993). As Reid

(1999, p. 170) argues, the 'poststructuralist recognition of different standpoints and different ways of seeing increases the potential for different ways of enacting'. The identification of multiple perspectives within the boys' peer group may be seen as a generative and legitimate way through which to identify investments in particular ways of being and explore how these investments might marginalise others. In exploring marginalisation and difference a framework can be constructed to facilitate discussion of alternatives to a revered masculinity built on brute physical strength and combative violence. In this regard, the exploration of alternative and less oppressive ways of being stem from different interpretations *within* the group and are thus relevant to the boys. As Davies (1993) notes, identification and legitimation of convincing alternative subject positions are critical in encouraging boys to resist familiar, and perhaps more convincing, dominant and dominating modes of being.

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