

Masculinities and Resistance: High School Boys (Un)doing Boy

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In Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom there has been a resurgence in attention directed at boys and schooling. The media and public discourse describes it as a burgeoning moral panic. Mainly grounded in public concerns about achievement levels and violence in schools, the response has been to develop quick fix and visible approaches. Such approaches however fail to critique traditional understandings of gender and particularly masculinity (see Epstein et al, 1998; Skelton, 2001; Frank et al, 2003; Lingard & Douglas; 1999). Very little attention has gone into actually understanding or examining the practises of masculinities and how these are negotiated within school settings. For example, What does it mean to “do” boy and “undo” boys in this context? How do men challenge heteronormative masculinities? Are boys willing and able to unsettle masculinities from among their male counterparts? What are the costs for resisting dominant constructions of masculinity? The failure to question how gender is implicated in schools significantly impacts how and to what extent educators can respond to the above mentioned concerns. This paper explores the ways in which four high school young men unsettle dominant heteronormative constructions of masculinities through counter hegemonic practices. By building on past discussions that re-envision men as social allies I further an argument for re-envisioning high school men as agents for social change.

Though largely overlooked in past gender and education research, young men invested in profeminist principles provide a powerful starting point for challenging sexism and homophobia from within schools differently than past top-down approaches that relied on administrative directives (see Coulter, 2003; Connell, 1996; Gutterman, 1994; Imms, 2000; Kimmel, 1994; Messner, 1997). I begin by considering current theories within men’s studies and the kind of practical and theoretical import these carry for better understanding that “masculinity is not fixed but rather constituted and reconstituted over negotiated circumstances and time,

consuming a great deal of thought and energy” (Frank, 1996, p. 115). I follow up by exploring specific bodily practices in a high school to illuminate both the context and the process by which some men opt out of heteronormativity. The final section of this paper focuses on the resistance young men face when they challenge heteronormative masculinity. I conclude by arguing that though the actions and words of these young men are rarely observed and/or reported compared to the studies of sexism, homophobia, and misogyny, their ways of doing masculinity nonetheless highlights a potentially powerful counter-current within a high school context.

Theoretical Perspectives: The Messiness of Being a Boy

A growing number of studies in gender and education research has begun challenging previous assumptions about masculinities and schooling (see Connell, 1989, 1981; Frank et al, 2003; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Lesko, 2000; Kessler et al, 1985; Martino & Meyenn, 2001; Messner, 1997; Skelton, 2001; Thorne, 1993). Moving away from an unexamined and largely accepted view of masculinity as unproblematic and static, research within men’s studies in particular has broadened the theoretical landscape from whence to view a plurality of masculinities. These arguments move beyond essentialist theories and underlying assumptions that *all* boys embrace and enact a singular, cohesive masculinity. They also reject past determinist analyses that have produced a view of young men as passive recipients of a monolithic social system through a process that is mechanical and consensual (Connell, 1995). Both theoretically and methodologically then there has been a significant shift in the study of gender in education, namely the theorizing of gender as a permeable and social construct held together through elements of discourse (see Coleman, 1990; Francis & Skelton, 2001; Kehler, 2000; Lesko, 2000; Mac An Ghail, 1996; Thorne, 1993).

Masculinities thus are both conceptually and practically messier than was once understood to be the case. Imms (2000) draws attention to a growing re-theorizing of masculinity in the academy, one that recognizes and acknowledges the complexity of being a boy. This research acknowledges human agency and the competing choices connected to various understandings about what it means to be a man in addition to how that gets publicly demonstrated (see Cameron, 1997; Connell et al, 1982; Frank, 1996; Haywood, 1996; Martino, 2000; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Ashcroft (2003) recently added to this discussion by arguing for a closer examination of the relationship between curriculum, popular culture and adolescent masculinities (also see Epstein, 2001). The argument through out this work centres on a more nuanced and textured analysis of gender identities and specifically masculinities and schooling.

The routine and taken for granted ways of being men in high school highlights how seamless and almost “natural” the doing of masculinity appears. But as I argue in this paper, there is nothing “natural” about being a man. Raging hormones and

boys will be boys are simplistic and inadequate catchall phrases for dismissing the complex kind of gender work occurring in schools. Gender identities are “reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing particular acts in accordance with the cultural norms (themselves historically and socially constructed, and consequently variable) which define masculinity and femininity” (Cameron, 1997, p. 49). The raced, classed, and gendered school lives of young men offer powerful insight into how boys/men “do” masculinity (see Coleman, 1990; Frank, 1996; Kehler, 2000; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Price, 2000; Thorne, 1994; Weis, 1990; Willis, 1977).

Connell (1995) among others (see Kimmel, 1994; Messner, 1997) has argued for a fluid and more dynamic conceptualization of masculinity. In this sense masculinity is less fixed, static, and unidimensional than was previously understood. As the data in following study reflects masculinity is shifting, contingent, and uncertain. Drawing on Butler (1999) I provide school moments and conversations among men to illuminate the repetition of gender acts to highlight some tensions, contradictions, and confusion involved when young men resist or undo masculinity through counter-hegemonic practices. As Butler (1999) points out “the stylization of the body is the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (p. 179). The men in the following study provide a closer look at the tensions and struggles involved when they attempt to renegotiate social identities that appear coherent and whole but are in fact are fractured and only partial constructions.

The manufactured and performative self is examined through the actions and conversations of boys who have unsettled and resisted heteronormative masculine practices. They illustrate a negotiation of meanings and ways for doing masculinity in light of what has been an ongoing “reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (Butler, 1999, p. 178). This research adds to understandings of how and when high school men engage in both the *doing* and *undoing* of masculinity and, most importantly, the significance of maintaining and managing a heteronormative masculinity that is routinely scrutinized or policed. This is particularly relevant in present times when high school men are struggling with a shift and relaxation of normative rules of masculinity that have historically been more rigid and less forgiving.

About the Study

During the six months at Central High I conducted ethnographic research which allowed me to observe and record the interactions and conversations of four high school young men in their final academic year. The data was analysed on the basis of recurring themes and patterns. In addition to the daily observations I recorded, both formal and informal interviews were audio-taped. Specific vignettes taken from daily interactions were later re-visited for clarification and elaboration during the formal interviews. A portion of these conversations and situations are included in this paper.

As part of a purposeful sampling I shadowed four high school young men and became what Wolcott (1988) describes as an “active participant.” As a researcher I intentionally “move[d] from the status of stranger to friend and [was] able to gather personal knowledge from subjects more easily” (Lather, 1991, p. 57). And while I admit, like previous researchers (see Mac An Ghail, 1994; MacLeod, 1987; Thorne, 1993), that this form of inquiry is complicated and potentially messy, the shift in relationships allowed me to better hear, see, and describe the emergent (re)constructions of gendered identities.

The data were collected using structured and unstructured interviews. These were conducted twice during the course of the study. The primary aim of the initial interview was to develop a picture of the young men’s beliefs and views that informed their daily interaction. The latter interview was an opportunity to reflect back upon several vignettes recorded during field observations. This was a chance for the participants to provide a reflective and insightful commentary on their school experiences. As a researcher I purposively engaged the participants in a process that attempted to avoid “impos[ing] meanings on situations . . .” and instead sought to “construct meaning through negotiation with the participants” (Lather, 1991, p. 59). This research centred on an emancipatory research methodology and relied heavily on the participant’s accounts of events as a window for understanding schooling and the ways that masculinities were negotiated.

The participants, David, Philip, Hunter, and Thurston, were suggested to me by senior teachers. The students knew each other but for the most part only had minimal contact. While describing David one teacher reflected on her observations of him as the co-captain of the school hockey team. She pointed out that he had a gentle, sportsmanlike manner. She mused that during a recent hockey game “David actually helped an opponent to his feet, minutes after checking him!” Philip, who played American high school football in his junior years, later turned toward theatre in his senior years. He was seen as being open, caring, and understanding. Hunter was not active in clubs but rather had the position as Student Council President. He was expressive and sensitive. Thurston, similar to the others, was described as very articulate but more involved in music and poetry events in the school. These young men routinely conducted themselves in ways that their teachers acknowledged as being unlike what they typically witnessed from most high school young men. These young men were involved in the school and admittedly had varying degrees of status and privilege because of how they positioned themselves and were positioned by others. In the following section I describe various interactions and conversations through which the participants (re)negotiated their gender identities as men.

Images of Masculinity: The Bodily Text Unfold

Masculinities are spoken and written into existence. Through daily conversations, young men actively negotiate social identities that are both historically and

socially embedded. Definitions and understandings of masculinity preceded the conversations that follow. In the following conversations each of the men provide insight into what they understood about doing masculinity. Their lived experiences in school draw attention to underlying questions including: What does it mean to be a man? And How is masculinity mirrored in the conversations and surroundings of high school men? A constant theme across the interviews and daily observations was the degree to which media images of masculinity provided a particular definition of appropriate masculine behaviours and attitudes. Thurston explains that

The typical male, like what they've seen since they've been growing up of what guys are supposed to be like. You see guys on t.v. who are afraid to express their feelings. So they sort of are afraid to break from that. Like, they feel the need to be normal. And I think they are just afraid to because they might be ostracized from some sort of community of friends. (Thurston from Kehler, 2000)

Young men can be paralyzed by media images that define a particularly narrow and rigid version of masculinity. In this conversation Thurston describes the extent to which media images have become a textual representation of desirable and acceptable forms of masculinity. He explains that masculinities are contextually and historically located and connected to the media. The inability to express feelings among men is framed by a need to be normal and accepted by a community of friends. Acceptance and membership within groups of boys is grounded in fitting within a heteronormative image of masculinity that young men grow up with on television. The influence these images have for how young men make sense of their own identities is significant.

Driven by elements of fear then there is little resistance or questioning of what it means to be a man among men. Any kind of interrogation of masculine practices is rare largely because of the costs involved for young men. Rather than unsettle and undo masculinity, men are more concerned with proving themselves to be manly men and more pointedly, heterosexual men. Martino (1995) describes the potential that an English classroom has as a context for reconstituting alternative subject positions for students, but he also acknowledges the need for high school men in particular to be a part of and to be accepted in order to avoid the kind of bullying, harassment, and abusive practices that typically operate to regulate and monitor hegemonic masculinity.

The careful representation or fashioning of the masculine body among high school young men is striking. Prevailing images of muscularity, physicality, and bodily deportment are implicated in the broader social-cultural regimes of normative heterosexual masculinity (Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2003). The jockeying for positions among men becomes a highly charged context for sorting out who the "real men" are. "The way a young man styles his body through gestures and actions is central to the performance of masculinity, where there is always the threat of being labelled gay" (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p. 216).

Hallway interactions commonly reflected a fashioning and refashioning of the

body. At a time when rigid codes of masculinity appear to be losing ground, the terrain in which boys *do* boy is increasingly unstable. The following observations reveal an emerging uncertainty and lack of clarity in social practices among boys. It also reveals how social practices are being read and mis-read.

David was walking to class when he noticed a friend leaning against the wall. He walked toward his friend. Each of the men extended their hands to greet one another. David proceeded by placing his hands on the other boy's waist. His friend meanwhile raised his hands over his heads in the motion of a high-five greeting. Clumsily their bodies fell into one another as each stepped back with a kind of nervous laughter. Philip similarly describes a reading and misreading of bodily practices that was common across the participants.

I mean I don't always know. Sometimes I mis-read it. There are times when I go to shake their hands and they want a hug or I go to hug somebody and they walk away. I know there have been times when I have gone to slap high-fives and he's gone, 'Come here.' I guess there are times when I just know.

During our interview Philip elaborates on the messiness and confusion surrounding how his behaviour is interpreted with regard to hegemonic masculinities.

... A lot of people that I know take a hug as a homosexual gesture. There are some people I know that I would go to hug and they'd be like, 'What the hell are you doing? Get away from me you freak.' (Philip from Kehler, 2000)

At issue are both the visual images representative of hegemonic masculinity and the competing realities of these young men's daily lives. Traditional codes of masculinity and the various past rules of engagement are gradually being unsettled. And while a dominant discourse of masculinity still operates, these men repeatedly demonstrate that there is room for reconfiguring certain social practices among men.

These young men repeatedly demonstrated an awareness and understanding of specific norms of masculinity that operated at their school. During an interview Philip describes a tension underlying his embodiment of particular versions of masculinity and how they were at odds with one another in a way that made them appear mutually exclusive. His experiences reveal how the doing of masculinity is heavily context specific and moreover, polarized and codified on the basis of masculine and feminine characteristics.

Like, sometimes when I played football I felt like I had to project this image of myself, at least while I was on the field. But in the arts I can be who I am, I can do what I want and not feel like I have to answer to anybody. I can just be me. (Philip from Kehler, 2000)

There were competing contexts in which Philip found himself managing the particular ways he did masculinity. The football field was a much more public and visible arena for performing an athletic masculinity while the arts arena, namely the music room or art room, was contained and localized, thus limiting the kinds of

surveillance and monitoring that occurred. This kind of tension between locations of obvious curricular significance and meaning highlights the curricular polarity between soft feminine and hard masculine topics and activities. As these boys pointed out “swimming is looked down upon. ...swimming is not, like, as physical in the sense of contact.” Hunter explains however that, “football is supposedly the masculine sport.” For those not involved in sport such as football and hockey they are usually associated with being less of a man.

David adds to this picture of masculinities as overlapping and competing with an image of muscularity, popularity, and competitiveness. By being tightly bound together David explains how the physical sculpting of the body operates in a public way to message others that they are indeed dominant and physically superior.

Not being huge but being bigger would be encouraged, just by what's attractive. I think it's just the way guys compare one another against each other. It's like, how much they can bench press. It's different ways of sizing people up. (David from Kehler, 2000)

Echoing Connell et al (1982) in which they argued schools support and perpetuate a “hierarchy of forms of masculinity” (p.96), David highlights muscularity and size as significant elements of being a man. These young men are aware of how particular discourses of masculinity are imbued with status and privilege. And though David does not willingly draw on the bodily privilege he describes, he nonetheless understands a code of masculinity wherein “being bigger” at the expense of and indeed “against each other” is saturated with degrees of power and status. The body becomes a publicly written text onto which various virtues of masculinity are inscribed and re-inscribed. On numerous other occasions during this study there was a clear and consistent preoccupation if not fixation among the boys with muscle magazines, penises and “pythons” or muscles. This was but one element of the physical body as a vehicle for defining masculinity at Central High. Toughness, fighting, and sexual talk, as I will describe later, were also common means for defining what it meant to be a man. High school masculinities thus emerged from what these men saw and knew of the rules of masculinity. As Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) argue

To construct and maintain a sense of who they are, boys must draw on the available terms, categories and ways of thinking, acting, and interacting which these various contexts provide, including the specific forms of masculinity associated with them. (p. 51)

In this study, what underscored a prevailing definition of masculinity was a focus on comparison and proving oneself in relation to other men. These men highlight the way competitive power is operationalized purposefully and intentionally to demonstrate degrees of manliness. Being a man was an active process supported by institutional as well as other broader images of masculinity.

By not living up to and displaying sex-appropriate behaviours for boys/men,

the participants paid a price via numerous verbal assaults, backhanded comments, and questions regarding their sexuality. While they had social privilege and power related to how they were positioned within the school, they nonetheless were differently located among their counterparts who valued a more sexually, physically, and visually aggressive masculinity.

Unlike hanging out with “the boys” where they acknowledged the rules for making what Kaufman (1994) describes as “the masculine grade,” interactions with certain girls allowed for a temporary relaxation of the rules of masculinity. On these occasions these young men could swim against mainstream masculinity. Philip, Thurston, and Hunter comment on daily relationships with girls.

I showed up and I was the only guy... I spent the whole night with girls. Women give you a different perspective. I feel I can totally be myself around them. (Philip from Kehler, 2000)

I might also be able to understand their points of view on things better... By hanging out with girls I can also see what their views are... (Thurston from Kehler, 2000)

Like, for me, my best friends have always been girls. I have always just found it easier to talk to girls before like, guys. (Hunter from Kehler, 2000)

Their insight into how these exchanges informed their ways of being young men is significant. Being among girls allowed these boys to find a particular comfort, perspective, and ease they rarely had among their male counterparts. For many high school men working with or talking with girls is typically an opportunity to confirm their own masculinity. These are contexts in which men busily do the kind of identity work either in relation to women and/or other men that allows them to constitute themselves as men and most significantly heterosexual men. Thurston highlights the tensions and underlying significance of gender relations in school.

We can really talk and nobody is afraid of talking... and they can all throw out ideas. So it's easier like, to get along with girls. And I can feel comfortable talking with them and I don't feel as comfortable talking with a bunch of guys... They just don't seem as like, honest. They seem like they're really trying to act cool... in a group they'll all try to act tough and act cool.

Hunter captures this posturing that occurs among high school men trying “to act cool” when he described hugging a male peer.

Sometimes you are really happy and you want to give a good hug. People like Jason, you can't hug. He has to be big, rough and tough, like he's a man... they're trying to be all rough and tough.

The drive for men to present themselves as masculine in the eyes of their peers is unquestionable. Most young men actively construct a version of masculinity that sets them apart from anything remotely feminine. As Kimmel (1994) points out, “we come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions

in opposition to a set of others” (p. 120). The daily interactions, conversations, and the very way high school young men manage their bodies as texts is central to understanding how masculinity is formed but also how it may potentially be transformed in schools.

Intimacy and the Façade of Impenetrability

People like Jason are sensitive but they try not to be. They try to build up a wall. (Hunter from Kehler, 2000)

Sometimes, like being reassuring and hugging guys that way can mean so much more than what I can ever say. I am saying ‘I am here for you’ and it’s just like, that hug helps them feel that. (David from Kehler, 2000)

I seem like, to have more in common, like personality with girls. . . and like, my ideas are a little different than what they [boys] usually think of. So they’d probably look at me weird. (Thurston from Kehler, 2000)

Hunter, David, and Thurston illustrate the degree to which young men draw on a repertoire of ways for communicating with others but particularly men. Each of them reveals that there are a range of ways for expressing feelings, emotions, and ideas. They also highlight a reluctance among men to do so. There are constraints on how men relate with other men. These constraints are evident in the way that identities are constructed and reconstructed through physical, verbal, and unwritten codes of masculinity. Hunter makes it clear that some men actively build a wall. They are resistant to and even defensive about revealing themselves in ways that make them vulnerable or weaker thus making them appear less than a man.

Fear of what other men think or how they might interpret what one says is a dominant theme underlying the ways high school men attempt to protect and deflect questions that potentially question one’s masculinity (see Cameron, 1997; Haywood, 1996). Terms of homophobic abuse and joking, for example, become a means by which men regulate masculinities through the policing of sexuality and further consolidate masculine identities and make alternative/contradictory masculinities problematic (see Haywood & Mac An Ghail, 1996; Lyman, 1987). Rather than admit a fear or acknowledge a vulnerability, young men shield themselves. They create a facade of impenetrability. For many young men, this means adhering to regulatory-type rules to define masculinity. Martino (2000), for example, clearly delineates the rules for being cool. “Boys are enmeshed in a regime of self-surveillance” (p.105) that promotes an image of being cool which, as David commented earlier, means “saying and doing the right things and not goofing off.” Canaan (1991) likewise illustrates the multifaceted nature of masculinity particularly for working-class young men whose masculinity “is constituted and affirmed in and through their relations with young women” (p.114) (see also Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Young men thus oftentimes, though not exclusively, are responding

to pressures exerted from other men as well as women, to uphold heteronormativity. In many instances being a man means performing a hyper masculinity for the rest of “the boys.”

Tensions between competing versions of masculinities surface in situations that raise questions about appropriateness. As Martino (2000) and others (see Frank, 1996; Haywood, 1996; Nayak & Kehily, 1996) have found, there are certain rules boys must never break. The most frequent and perhaps most potent reminder of the rules in place for young men is the questioning of one’s sexuality. David commented, “calling a guy a ‘fag’ is like an automatic button you can push”. Masculinity is guarded on several levels. “Peers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us as feminine, as sissies” (Kimmel, 1994, p. 132). These threats operate in subtle and not so subtle ways.

Homophobia, a central component of heterosexism, is a weapon of sexism in that heterosexism creates a climate for homophobia with its assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual... Heterosexism and homophobia work together to enforce compulsory heterosexuality. (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000, p. 78)

Thus while some young men, like David, Philip, Thurston, and Hunter, generally reject the offer of a heteronormative masculinity, the majority of high school young men adhere to more traditional rules of masculinity. In large part, high school men go with the flow, accepting and upholding these rules because, as Hunter pointed out:

They are afraid from different angles. I think they’re afraid that they’ll get rejected or the girl won’t think they’re a man... all the way to their friends making fun of them... [to being] afraid kind of whether he is saying the wrong things or just doesn’t know what to say... And if he keeps his distance then it doesn’t really matter because... he doesn’t have to expose himself so he doesn’t get hurt or lose anything.

Intimacy among young men thus is bound by conventions that consider it taboo and more in keeping with being feminine. The fears that Hunter describes are deeply embedded and traced to “an antifeminine norm [that] strongly defines male behaviour” (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000, p. 87). However, as these boys demonstrate, being intimate and crossing gender boundaries is possible, though admittedly risky business.

The fears of being rejected, ostracized or laughed at effectively constrain how men conduct themselves as men (see also Haywood, 1996; Lyman, 1987; Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000). In the following however, the participants recalled situations when their male counterparts let down their guard. They stepped over the gender boundary and behaved in ways that are more typically associated with the opposite gender (see Cameron, 1997; Thorne, 1993).

When I am around Chris, for example, he acts differently. He has a more sensitive, caring side around me. (David from Kehler, 2000)

Like my friendship with Doug differs from Kevin, just because Kevin doesn't like to talk about certain stuff and kind of keeps stuff secret. He just kind of doesn't like to talk about mushy stuff so much and how he really feels. Doug and I can pretty much talk about anything. (Hunter from Kehler, 2000)

David and Hunter draw attention to two factors surrounding a man's willingness to let his guard down without fear of reprisal for not adhering to heteronormative masculinity. The need for a private space for honest conversations to occur among men is evident here and further supported in the next section. Secondly, Hunter suggests that there are differences between the types of friendships that allow for certain conversations to occur among men. As he points out, some men are more inclined to be secretive and not talk about the mushy stuff. They do not openly share how they feel with other young men. Similarly David commented about one friend who, according to him, "No matter what's wrong, he would never tell you anything is wrong." Men/boys regulate themselves and the kind of relationships they have with other men by stifling or eliminating any emotional expression or overt affection as being sex inappropriate (Martino, 2001). Interestingly however, Lyman (1987) found in a study of fraternity boys that intimacy was frequently couched in joking relationships. This allowed for the negotiation between a need for intimacy with other men and the rules of masculinity that informed their social interactions. In contrast David expressed concerns about the social practice of using sexist jokes as a vehicle for developing camaraderie and a shared bond among men. He explains that it is this kind of taken for granted behaviour among men that upholds and legitimates sexist beliefs and attitudes. In his words "when you laugh at jokes you have to be careful of what you're supporting. . .this is when you have to use judgement."

Young men are guided and supported through various social practices that, as Walker (1998) argues, "ritually affirm heterosexuality among men whose social circumstances create a level of physical and emotional intimacy culturally regarded as unmasculine" (p, 230). For most high school men, such as the ones described in this paper, intimate physical contact including gentle touching or supportive caressing of the back is taboo. The "ways of being a boy" or a man are contextually complicated as a result of rules and norms that operate in different spaces. In large part these men illustrate the ways that restrictive norms of heteronormativity operate to define and delineate boundaries between competing versions of masculinity.

Resisting Heteronormativity: Why Bother?

There is little doubt that for those men willing to unmask masculinity by unsettling what it means to be a man, there are consequences. The question remains then: Why should high school men bother resisting heteronormativity? To some extent it is safer for young men to operate under the cloak of heteronormativity rather

than challenge it. There is a certain comfort and safety in being one of the boys. Being a man has always meant not being a woman (Kimmel, 1994). It comes as no surprise then that men are more likely to be ridiculed for transgressing the boundaries that delineate masculinities rather than supported. As Mills (2001) points out, the response to these kinds of transgressions are putative and tend to strip men of their “mantle of masculinity” (p.62).

The research in this article highlights the fact that some boys are beginning to broaden and expand the repertoire of ways they embrace and enact counter-hegemonic practices in school. At the same time that they are challenging the ways they perform masculinity, they are also being met by resistance from those struggling to hold onto a heteronormative masculinity. As Davison (2000) rightly argues “the discourse of resistance is not a simple act in which one rejects and reconstructs” (p. 45). The renegotiation of gender identities is far more complex involving both those who support and those who reject dominant constructions of masculinity. And as Kimmel (1994) reminds us, “masculinity has become a relentless test by which we prove to other men, to women, and ultimately to ourselves, that we have successfully mastered the part” (p. 138). This is clearly an uneasy and unsettling relationship being renegotiated between those privileged males who are and are not committed to social justice.

Hunter describes a curious tension between the policing of gender performances and the subversive performances that prompt certain reactions. He explains a messiness and uncertainty involved when men try to make sense of alternative versions of masculinity. For many high school boys they differentiate themselves from other boys through techniques that denigrate and belittle others. The process of “othering” through derisive labels ensures men a place in a hierarchy of masculinities that creates distances and differences among men. Hunter explains

Like today, Dennis wrote HUNTER LOVES MEN and you know, it's like, 'Oh shut up', but it's nothing and of course, it's not true. . . . So if anyone really calls me gay it's just kind of like 'Okay, whatever'. I think most of it is like what goes around. It's like gayboy. You know, it's kind of taken over like, 'retard.' (Hunter from Kehler, 2000)

Hunter highlights how verbal abuse is operationalised and with what affect. He makes the connection between loving men and sexual orientation. This connection is not unintentional. The verbal abuse is traced to past derisive language that “othered” people with mental disabilities. Through various strategies men either position themselves or get positioned by more dominant men. Hunter attempts to discount the kind of power or impact these remarks have on policing his masculinity and the ways men position one another.

Actually I don't care much. At times it will bug me. . . Like just sometimes people say it and it sounds like they mean it. . . he knows I am not gay but maybe he was a little frustrated with me or mad at me or maybe he thought it was funny, like a joke.

He might say it was a joke and really, maybe he was mad at me and he was like, 'that is how I can get him back, to say he's gay'. I think that because we all know we're straight then you know that like, they might try to defend themselves. (Hunter from Kehler, 2000)

Putdowns and abusive practices further legitimate a hegemonic form of masculinity. In the above situation Hunter describes the embeddedness of meanings in what is said among men. The suggestion that Hunter is gay is both regarded and disregarded. According to Hunter, the impact of these remarks is connected to *how* they are said and the meaning in *what* is said. The comments are also related to heterosexual identities and the absolute truths these men attempt to embody. Notions of masculinity are underscored by a homo/hetero discourse that divides men and allows them to locate each other because "he knows I am not gay" and "we all know we're straight."

Discursive terms such as fag, queer, and freak are frequently used in the acting out of homophobia and heterosexualised relationships within schools. This kind of ridicule and verbally derisive comment among men is a strategy used to sort out one another and get back at each other. There is a real tension that cuts through the conversations between these boys and how they reflect on their friendships. In the above situation sexualized identities are interwoven with strategies for venting anger and frustration among boys.

Gender is connected to sexuality. The following incident highlights how the understandings of masculinity and sexuality are woven together to monitor and regulate bodily practices. The level of physical closeness and affection between boys who are friends, (not boyfriends!) is monitored even when people are not present to do it. In other words men *always* need to be on their guard. As I stood waiting for David in the music room I noticed an array of pictures posted from a recent choir trip to Chicago. David was pictured lying on a bed alongside a classmate. The caption under this picture "Things that make you go mmmmmmmmmmm." Paul, who is pictured with David, comes up along side me. He remarks "You can say what you want, I don't mind. "Pardon," I say. He explains "Actually David doesn't have to worry, he has a girlfriend. He doesn't have to defend himself." In a follow up email Paul writes

David and I are uncommonly affectionate. . . . it is possible that people who would see that picture would put two and two together, but they would not get four if you know what I am saying. But they would think possibly we are gay and David, having a girlfriend, would quell some suspicion. However, I don't have a girlfriend so it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that I am gay, so I would have to defend my heterosexuality. (Paul from Kehler, 2000)

Masculinity is connected to heterosexualized identities that limit and restrict even the most innocent of relations. The picture becomes a text for understanding how pervasive and unrelenting the surveillance of masculinities can be. Paul can not help but monitor the bodily text. He gives me permission to speak, to interpret, to

say what I like. There is a sense that not only does he know the possible interpretations one might make of this picture, but that he is prepared to accept them. He knows how heteronormativity operates and the restrictive lens many will use to make sense of the picture. Paul is caught up in the normalizing practices of other boys. He is bound by the rules of others where no defense is necessary if one's sexualized identity is heterosexual. He is unmoved by how a hetero/homo divide that dichotomizes and simplifies complex relationships will undoubtedly inform people's responses to this picture. The lines that divide yet attract these two men revolve around norms of male-male interaction. While the "uncommon affection" they hold for one another is a strength in their relationship, it is at the same time taken up by other men as a vulnerability. Paul is aware of the power of heterosexualized identities and the visible ways that they publicly quell suspicions and operate as defense mechanisms.

The normative behaviors of men are intricately and elaborately expressed and endlessly monitored. Under the critical gaze of their anonymous but ever present peers, David and Paul become the subjects of interrogation. Two men, together, physically and affectionately intimate as it were, and the conclusion is searing and public. In their physical absence the normalizing gaze of their peers renders a verdict where no verdict was sought. Inscribed under the picture.

Sick, sick, sick, Faggoty.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have described the school lives of young men negotiating between dominant and dominating modes of masculinity in relation to alternative versions of masculinity. The research I provide highlights the kind of slippage and shifting in how students enact and embody masculinities. In the current school climate there is an obvious messiness in how high school men go about *doing* masculinity. At the same time, the kind of gender work Philip, Thurston, David, and Hunter are doing reveals the struggle and challenges for young men willing though albeit to varying degrees, to alter, negotiate, and reconfigure how they perform and enact masculinities.

Human agency and the plurality of masculinities are central to acknowledging the complex lives of high school young men and the choices they make about being men. The possibilities for interrogating masculinities from among boys has been largely overlooked in past efforts to promote equity and social justice. There are an increasing number of studies however to illustrate that young men are not only capable, but indeed willing to engage in self-problematizing practices that unsettle, challenge, and disrupt normative masculinities in high school (see Connell, 1996; Frank, 1996; Frank et al, 2003; Kehler, 2000; Martino, 2000; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Mills, 2001).

High school young men such as those in the above study demonstrate the possibilities as well as the restrictions and limitations for expressing alternative versions of masculinity. They provide a window on men doing and undoing masculinities in ways that few are willing to. If these young men are any indication of the possibilities that exist among men for reconfiguring the gendered landscape and particularly masculinities in schools, then it is worth supporting and encouraging high school boys to transgress and transform hegemonic masculinities.

It is clear that the cultural landscape of schools is complicated. It is also clear that men need to overcome a “fear” within and across masculinities that keeps them from speaking out, acting out, and coming out, as it were, to challenge sexism and homophobia. The counter narratives of the young men in this study highlight the possibilities but also the limitations in the degrees to which men can promote social change through bodily practices and social identities. These young men have made visible how their gendered identities and specifically their bodies and voices are differently located within a school setting.

The pervasive and unrelenting gender work of others, both men and women, to maintain and affirm heteronormative masculinity serves as a backdrop to the more nuanced ways that these young men chose to unsettle and undo masculinity. While often unheard and unseen these young men nonetheless are “exposing, confronting, opposing and transforming the sexism of their male peers” (hooks, 1994, p. 587). They are willing to undo boys and the social practices that protect and defend a terrain of heteronormativity, but it is also clear that the root of fear for and from other young men is deep. At this juncture in their school careers high school boys need to understand that by traversing these boundaries and publicly embodying alternative masculinities they are not any less of a man, just a different kind of man, a man invested in gender equity and social justice for *all*. As an educator it is important that the voices of these young men are heard, their actions are acknowledged, and their ways of doing boy and undoing others is valued in the wider school culture.

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