Understanding boys': Thinking through boys, masculinity and suicide

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A B S T R A C T

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 men and women. Second, we argue that approaches to understanding boys' behaviours are simplistically grafting masculinity as a conceptual frame onto boys' 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.

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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
provides an excellent insight into the dynamics of masculinity located within the masculinity continuum. Much of this work normative parameters through which males undertake destructive vulnerability and risk. For example, as Miller and Bell (1996: 318) point out: ‘...like has only to identify with like and acknowledging difference means respecting the boundary between what one is and what one cannot be’. 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 this 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.
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