

Degrees of gendered distinction: Working class male under/graduates and their complex negotiations of masculinity (0265)

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Background

Thinking about the crisis of masculinity

Popular discourse has long claimed a crisis of masculinity, both epitomised by and created through social changes since the last quarter of the 20th Century, in particular the decline of 'traditional' heavy industrial jobs and what Giles Fraser (2013) called the 'thick' heterogeneous communities founded upon them. In British popular culture examples of this would include the 1982 Liverpool based TV series *Boys from the Blackstuff*, and later films such as *The Full Monty* (1997), and *Billy Elliot* (2000), set in the silent but once thriving steel works of South Yorkshire and the strike-ridden coal fields of Durham respectively. For instance, Malin (2003: 241) refers to this as the 'gender and identity disruption that characterised the late 1990s', whilst the ideas of reflexive modernity from Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) also resonate here.

There is a common perception that masculine identities have been in flux, and this is related to the dismantling of previously bonding social structures such as those linked to employment within former industrialised spaces. The perceived crisis of masculinity is therefore inextricably linked to unemployment and the consequential challenge to patriarchy or dominance founded upon economic power. The *Lads* of Willis's 1977 iconic *Learning to Labour* study are quite likely to be unemployed now, or certainly their sons will be today if they too left school without a qualification to their name. In a manner akin to an inversion of Willmott and Young's (1973) principal of 'stratified diffusion', this 'crisis' which began with the working class young men has now spread upwards in terms of social hierarchies into more traditionally middle class arenas, notably amongst university graduates now facing higher than ever rates of joblessness and/or under-employment.

Theoretical underpinnings

The project generally draws heavily upon the theories of Bourdieu, especially his notion of capitals (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986), and in the project we were concerned at how the students acquired and mobilised their economic, social, and cultural capital, as they moved through university and into the workplace.

This paper outlines contemporary representations of masculinity theories of masculinity, including from popular culture, and discusses the notion of a crisis of contemporary masculinity. It engages with current theories of masculinity including Connell's (1995; 2000; Connell and Messerschmidt (2005)) *hegemonic masculinity* and the *inclusive masculinity thesis* (e.g. Anderson (2009) and McCormack (2014)).

Methodology

The data used here comes from a three year study of the impact of students' backgrounds upon their experiences studying the same undergraduate courses at the two universities in Bristol, the *Paired Peers* project. Although gender was not the wider study's primary focus, it was an aspect explored extensively during the project. In addition to the repeated one-to-one interviews across the three year period, there were a small number of male student focus groups undertaken, facilitated by the authors here, and most of the data presented come from those. All participants in the wider study were assigned either working or middle class status on the basis of their responses to a number of questions, including parental occupations, type of school attended, whether they were in the first generation of their family to go to university, and whether most of their peers from school had gone.

Those involved in both the working- and middle class men's focus groups were asked to bring some images of men they felt best represented idealised contemporary masculinities. They were not asked to bring photographs of role models, though that is how some of the participants apparently interpreted the task. The images were then used as prompts in a discussion of masculinity for the 19-21 year old male participants. The usual ethical protocols including confidentiality and anonymity were observed, and all names used here are pseudonyms.

The data employed comes from focus group and one-to-one interviews on a Leverhulme Trust-funded longitudinal study of working- and middle-class undergraduates at Bristol's two universities (the *Paired Peers* study), which is following the same cohort of young people from when they entered university in 2010 until 2017.

Implications

These findings have implications for social theory in terms of an understanding of the motivations of male students and the influence of their personal backgrounds to inform their experience of higher education study and to enhance or limit personal career aspirations within the wider neoliberal economy.

It also has implications for policy and practice, including at an institutional level around information, advice and guidance before and during higher education, for university admissions, and for the provision of student support services.

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