A Struggle to be Human

Greer White and Gayle Spry, Australian Catholic University
Abstract: This paper draws on doctoral research that explores boys’ understandings of masculinity. It reports on a doctoral study conducted in an all boys’ Australian secondary college with almost 300 Year 12 students. This paper presents boys’ descriptions of the qualities they consider make for masculinity and the processes involved in becoming masculine. It highlights the dichotomy experienced by some of these boys between ideal expressions of masculinity and humanity. This research has implications for gender education within schools. It illustrates that boys’ life education into masculinity is limited. This is a work in progress.

Introduction

The interest in boys’ education has grown notably over the past ten years as is evident in the commentary that can be located on the topic. This commentary includes media reports, (Jones, 2000; Legge, 1995), popular psychology texts (Biddulph, 1997, 1994; Gurian, 1998, Kindlon & Thompson, 1999), education reports (NSW Government Advisory Committee on Education, Training and Tourism, 1994; Management Committee for the National School English Literacy Survey, 1996 & Gender Equity Taskforce, 1997), a Senate Enquiry (House of Representatives, Standing Committed on Education and Training, 2002), and scholarly writing (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Hickey, Fitz Clarence & Matthews 2000; Mills & Lingard, 1997). Academic research that aims to discover what is happening for boys in education is less prolific although it does include work of both Australian (Connell, 2000: Martino, 1998, Mills, 1998) and international researchers (Epstein, 1997; Mac An Ghial, 1994; Kehler, 2000). Central to this commentary on boys’ education is the concept of masculinity (Blackmore, 2000; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Martino & Meyenn, 2001).

This paper draws on the insights arising out of a research study conducted in an all boys’ Australian, Catholic secondary school. The purpose of this study was to understand boys’ perceptions of their masculine experience within one school site in order to highlight both the consensus and the multiple perceptions that boys have of their experience. The study aimed to bring into juxtaposition in a dialectical context all meanings in order that the content of these meanings would become clear. In this way the study sought to produce a more informed and sophisticated construction of what was happening for boys in the school site.

The design of the research study was informed by a constructivist epistemology (Burbules, 2000; Phillips, 2000; Schwandt, 2000). Consistent with this epistemology it was conducted according to the principles of ‘symbolic interactionism’ (Charon, 2001; McCarthy & Schwandt, 2000). Furthermore, this research took a case study approach and employed a two-stage research design of exploration and inspection. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis were employed. Data was collected in the exploration stage of the research using a survey of almost 300 Year 12 students and in the inspection stage through one to one interviews and focus
group discussions. This paper reports on one aspect of this research, how boys’ understand masculinity.\(^1\)

### Research Data

The research indicates that participants do not have a conceptual understanding of masculinity. Rather they describe masculinity by naming a number of qualities. Their understanding associates masculinity with a relatively broad and somewhat complex array of qualities. This is illustrated in Table 1. Here the 34 desirable and undesirable masculine qualities named by participants in the exploration stage of the study are reduced to a 13 factor solution.

Table 1: Factor Loadings of 34 Desirable and Undesirable Masculine Qualities on 13 Factors

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\(^1\) This study also explores from the students’ perspective, the school’s gender regime and the implications of this gender regime.

\(^2\) Qualities marked with* represent the qualities that were identified as negative by participants.
The research further reveals that the named qualities can be categorized within four themes:

- The possession of certain biological attributes;
- The exhibiting of certain personality traits;
- The performance of certain activities and roles and behaviours; and,
- The possession of moral goodness.

**The possession of certain biological attributes**

For the majority of the boys (66%) masculinity is understood to be determined by the fact that men possess certain biological attributes. Many associate masculinity simply with being male as opposed to being female. Some note that it is the male biological characteristics such as the male sexual organs and the hormone testosterone that make the masculine. For example, “Masculinity is being a man through having male sexuality” (Survey 125) and “Masculinity is having a testosterone level in males” (Survey 143). It would seem that there is no difference in the minds of these participants between sex and gender. Other participants understand that to be masculine it is necessary to be large, physically fit and strong. “Someone who works out a lot to improve their physical looks and strength is masculine” (Survey 115). There is also a recognition that masculinity is attained through a developmental process as males grow into adulthood. “Masculinity is the steps towards becoming a man” (Survey 105).

**The exhibiting of certain personality traits.**

Fewer participants (13%) indicate that it is personality traits that identify the masculine. The traits named are concerned with dominance, strength, the exercise of power and taking responsibility. “Masculinity involves thinking in a more ‘hard-core’ way to express or show others their dominance” (Survey 185). My understanding of masculinity relates to a person’s power within society” (Survey 221). There is a close association in the minds of many boys with the physical size of a man and his ability to be strong and dominant.

**The performance of certain activities, roles and behaviours.**

The same number of participants (13%) clearly understood that masculinity is concerned with behaviour. They note that there are certain activities that men engage in and certain roles that men take on that define what is masculine. For example, “Masculinity is about the ways and processes of how boys/men behave and act and what we do that makes us men” (Survey 95), and “Masculinity is the qualities/attributes of a man – i.e. dress, speech, hobbies etc.” (Survey 169). The detail provided by participants on what behaviour is appropriate for the masculine is confined on the whole to a traditional view of men in society. Three participants (Surveys 12, 129 & 163) refer to the restrictive nature of some of the behaviour that is demanded in expressing the masculine. This is represented by the following comment, “Masculinity is the stereotype in which males are forced to act upon through pressure from society” (Survey 129). In
addition two participants note that behaviour relating to the expression of emotion had changed. “To be masculine means that now you are able to express our feelings without feeling out of place” (Survey 246). For these participants there is some understanding that masculine roles can be changed and widened.

*The possession of moral goodness.*

This theme is identified by only a small number of participants. For this group masculinity is about possessing the qualities of a morally good human. The qualities named include, being ethical, Christian, honest, good, faithful, trustworthy, kind, just and so on. “Masculinity is being a good man who is faithful, trustworthy and kind” (Survey 145) and “Masculinity is the ability to act like a true, honest, just and wise man” (Survey 74). These participants are not limited by traditional ways of understanding masculinity.

Interestingly, however, while acknowledging that the masculine could embody these qualities these participants reject that these are found naturally in the masculine. They uphold that these are the qualities that belong to the human person. For these participants being a “good man” had little to do with being masculine. The qualities that they associate with masculinity for example “toughness, never backing down from a challenge and strength” (Participant 9) are not the qualities of “a good human person” (Participant 12). The “good human” qualities of being “caring, loving, friendly, reliable, being open, honest and truthful” (Participant 4) are seen by these participants as contradicting “the dominance, aggression and emotional restriction” (Participant 4) that is required of the ideal man. One participant made sense of the tension he experienced by referring to masculinity as an illusion.

Masculinity is an illusion that has been instilled in us by a patriarchal society. If you mean what is my understanding of what being a person is, then it is to have free will and free choice over your own self. To be independent and to have knowledge (Survey 82).

Another participant stated that the qualities of the ideal human best fit the ideal woman not the ideal man.

I would say that being an ideal woman would be an ideal human. They sort of link together but the man is out by himself in a way. I’m not sure how that works. Maybe it is the mothering qualities of a woman that gives them that attribute. … I just thought about war. The human thing is war is bad. But for a man war means I could be a hero. That is the truly masculine picture that I get and you never really see women carrying guns. The whole idea of killing really contradicts the human image and the woman image but with the male image you think oh yes it’s possible (Participant 4).

There is evidence of an actual dichotomy in classification between masculinity and humanity for this small group of participants.
Working for ideal masculine expressions

Central to all four ways of understanding masculinity, identified by participants in this study, are two concepts. Firstly, participants understand that masculinity has limited 'true', 'real' or 'ideal' expressions and secondly these expressions can only be attained through hard work. Participants perceive themselves and one another as being successful or not successful at being masculine. For example: “Masculinity is if you are a real man or not” (Survey 103), “Masculinity is being a true man” (Survey 233), it is “the conquest of becoming a man” (Survey 46) and “You have to work at becoming masculine” (Survey 125). Participants demonstrate that they actively engage in judging their own and others' masculinity attainment. For some participants this leads to a favourable judgment while for others a less than favourable result is recorded. One participant spoke of the regret he felt in putting his efforts into academic excellence rather than into attaining ideal masculinity.

I guess I'd like to be a rugby player, strong, good looking. It's a bit hypocritical and contradictory because I know that I would never be able to achieve that model and a lot of people wouldn't be able to achieve that model. I put my effort into achieving academically. Maybe I need to put a bit more emphasis on social stuff and sporting stuff. I think the whole thing is really that I would like to be popular. Although I may have a little bit of popularity I would like to be seen as the most popular (Participant 4).

There is a deep recognition in this participant of his inadequacies as a man. In spite of his own outstanding qualities he still yearns for what he calls “the traditional” qualities of a man. Participant 11 acknowledges that ideal masculine expressions were rarely attained despite the effort exerted. “I think it is important to make a distinction between what is ideal and what is realistic. The majority of College students do not really attain the ideal masculinity despite the fact that they try to” (Participant 11).

Part of the effort put into attaining ideal forms of masculinity seems to involve ongoing processes of evaluation and comparison. Participants compare themselves with one another and with society’s approved masculine expressions. It is noted that Participant 4 did not achieve what he understood to be an ideal masculine expression. Participant 2 on the other hand claimed success. “I don’t mean to big note myself but I think I rate pretty close to ideal masculinity. I get involved. I’m an athlete. I’m friendly” (Participant 2). One participant makes the claim that he has ‘enough’ of what it takes to claim he is masculine. “Appearance is everything. I don’t care what anyone says in response to that. I believe I am ‘masculine’ enough, as I am not paid out or ridiculed for my appearance” (Survey 100). An identification of this dynamic amongst these participants gives an indication of how they set up and maintain their power relationships amongst one another.
Discussion of Findings

The study identifies that within the broad spectrum of qualities that participants associate with the masculine some are given legitimacy. These qualities are associated with a traditional understanding of masculinity. In addition some participants suggest that they hold to the possibility of a fuller masculine expression.

Masculinity – a Traditional Understanding

Participants' traditional understanding of masculinity is associated with certain biological attributes, personality traits and behaviours. The biological attributes are those concerned with the size and strength of a man, the personality traits are those associated with dominance, strength and the exercise of power in a man and the behaviours are those associated with the traditional role of a man, namely, playing sport, being in a leadership position, being with women and drinking. Participants are particularly familiar with the existence of male hormones, especially testosterone. These hormones they claim make the masculine by producing the large strong body of the male and the desire for psychological strength and dominance in the male. The participants perceive that these attributes, traits and behaviours are associated with men who have position and power.

This traditional understanding of masculinity is found within two theories of gender, biological and sex role socialization theories. Biological theories of masculinity hold that masculinity is a natural occurring reality brought about through biological factors such as sex hormones (Marsh, 1993; Semple, 1993; Vines, 1993), brain lateralisation (Bennett & Shaywitz, 1995; Moir & Jessel, 1989) and chromosomal composition (Imperato-McGuinley, 1979; Nielsen, 1991). Sex role socialization theories hold that society assigns certain sets of actions or roles as appropriate to the masculine (Nielsen, 1991; Wood, 1994). These sex role socialization theories rely upon biological sex differences to provide the explanatory basis for a range of gender roles (Connell, 1987; Haralambos, van Krieken, Smith, & Holborn, et al, 1996). Biological and sex role socialization theories perceive masculinity as a natural duality where masculinity is opposite to femininity and where masculinity and femininity rely on one another for their interpretation (Davies, 1989). The literature also notes that within this duality the characteristics and behaviours associated with the masculine are more highly valued in most societies than the characteristics and behaviours most associated with the feminine. This dynamic maintains and reflects the power relationships between men and women and between men and men in society (Davies, 1989; Scraton, 1990).

In line with biological and sex role socialization theory literature participants indicate that they hold to tightly restrictive masculine gender roles. There is a close association in the responses of most participants between the biological characteristics of masculinity and the sets of actions or roles that are appropriate to the masculine expression. A few participants note that there has been some change and widening of the gender roles. In addition participants in their traditional understanding of masculinity perceive the male sex and the masculine gender as one and the same phenomenon, and as being
different from the female sex and the feminine gender. The majority of participants has an understanding of masculinity as being equivalent to male sexuality. Masculinity is one half of a natural duality with the other half of this natural duality resting in the feminine. If the masculine is characterised by being large, muscular, dominant, powerful and engaging in ‘manly’ activities then the feminine is associated with being small, soft, weak and engaging in other ‘feminine’ activities. Participants demonstrate that on the whole they hold to the assumption that to be masculine is of more value than to be feminine. Characteristics that they associate with the opposite half of the gender duality they name as undesirable masculine qualities. These include emotional and physical weakness, softness and dependence. It was also noted that for many participants, homosexuality is an undesirable masculine quality and consequently associated more with the feminine half of the natural duality.

In addition participants identify in both the exploration and inspection stages of the research that those qualities of the masculine that are given legitimacy can only be obtained through hard work. Boys can fall short of ‘true’, ‘real’ or ‘ideal’ forms of masculine expression. Participants demonstrate that they actively engage in a dynamic of judging their own and others’ masculinity attainment and perceive themselves and one another as being successful or not successful at being masculine. For some participants this leads to favourable judgments while for others less than favourable results are recorded. The judging of one another’s masculine attainment sets up and maintains the power relationships within the peer group. The dynamic of working hard towards an ideal masculine expression suggests that a contradiction in thinking exists in many participants’ understanding of masculinity. Although many participants hold that masculinity is biologically determined they indicate that they spent a great deal of effort in attaining it.

The literature that outlines biological and sex role socialization theories of masculinity does not help to make sense of this contradiction in thinking about masculinity. Literature from a social construction theory of masculinity must be drawn upon. This literature claims that boys and men do masculinity in an active and dynamic process (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1996; West & Zimmerman, 1991). It also claims that expressions of masculinity are multiple and form in relationship to all gendered expressions with some masculine forms claiming hegemony (Connell, 2000; Epstein, 1997b; Kenway, 1997). It appears that a social construction analysis of masculinity can help to explain some of the participants’ observations about masculinity making. A sample of these observations together with a social construction analysis of masculinity making are offered in Table 2.
Table 2 Participants’ observations on masculinity together with a social construction analysis of these observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ observation about masculinity</th>
<th>Participant meaning making</th>
<th>Social Construction analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You have to work at becoming masculine&quot;</td>
<td>Boys put a bt of effort into being masculine.</td>
<td>Men and boys ‘do’ masculinity (Connell, 1989). A lot of people are working very hard in an active and dynamic process in order to produce what they believe to be appropriate masculinities (Connell, 1996).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I guess I’d like to be a Rugby player, strong, good looking. I put my effort into achieving academically. Maybe I need to put a bit more emphasis on social stuff and sporting stuff. I think the whole thing is really that I would like to be popular.&quot;</td>
<td>Some forms of masculine expression, for example playing football are morehonoured masculine expressions than others.</td>
<td>There are multiple expressions of masculinity yet some expressions are generally regarded as being more honoured. These forms of masculinity are referred to as hegemonic (Connell, 1995). They are the expressions that have the highest status and exercise the greatest influence in a society (Kenway &amp; Fitzclarencce, 1997).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The College is sport, sport, sport. If you don’t play you are not cool and not welcome. It’s crap.&quot;</td>
<td>Boys who do not engage in the honoured forms of masculine expression are socially inferior to those who do.</td>
<td>Masculinities exist side by side in direct relationship with one another. This relationship is a structured hierarchy with each expression taking a complicitous, subordinate or marginal position in relationship to the dominant form (Connell, 1995).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I wouldn’t tell my mates that I’m working with a counsellor tying to repair my relationship with my mother&quot;</td>
<td>Less acceptable masculine expressions are hidden under more acceptable expressions.</td>
<td>Hegemonic masculinity is the standard by which many men and boys live. Yet there are contradictory desires and logics within men and boys and consequently expressions of masculinity are layered with more dominant expressions uppermost (Connell, 1996).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Masculinity – a fuller expression*

While data, in this study, suggests that most students hold a traditional understanding of masculinity, the responses from some students does suggest the possibility of a fuller expression. These participants name, in both the exploratory and inspection stages of the research, a set of characteristics that go beyond being large, muscular, dominant, powerful and engaging in ‘manly’ activities. These qualities include being helpful loyal, faithful, trustworthy, kind, just, honest, respectful and exhibiting ethical action and displaying Christian values. Participants who acknowledge that the masculine could embody these qualities reject that these are found naturally in the masculine. They uphold that these qualities belong to the human person. There is evidence of a dichotomy in classification between masculinity and humanity for them. Amongst these participants one made sense of this dichotomy by claiming that the feminine was more closely related to the human than was the masculine. Participants with this broader perception of masculinity move outside of the majority view of the traditional understanding of masculinity in order to allow for a fuller masculine expression. It would
appear that although they are moving beyond the limitations placed on the masculine by
dualistic thinking they still remain restricted conceptually. If it is not ‘natural’ for the
masculine to express itself as helpful, loyal, faithful, trustworthy, kind and just, then in
students’ perception they remove themselves from the masculine at least in order to
express these identifiable ‘human’ qualities. This removal from the masculine in a
society that actively engages in the dynamic of judging masculinity attainment could
mean that these young men can never claim real and lasting success as males. It would
seem that these participants have not been exposed to any theory of masculinity that
would allow them to make sense of a fuller expression of masculinity. As the literature
suggests, a social construction theory of masculinity could prove helpful in
conceptualizing masculinity more fully. For as noted previously this theory holds that
there is not just one way of being male (Connell, 2000; Epstein, 1997; Kenway, 1997).
Men and boys can be kind and loyal to their friends, be trustworthy and just in their
relationships with others and be leaders of important enterprises.

Conclusion

This study concludes that participants in this study, for the most part hold to a traditional
definition of masculinity with understanding being built on biological and sex role
theories of gender. These theories are inadequate for participants in explaining
masculinity making processes and create a dichotomy of thinking in boys’ minds
between masculinity and humanity. Boys judge themselves and others as less than
masculine when they express themselves in ‘good’ human ways, for example by acting
justly, with kindness or with respect. The school that these participants attend is one of
the institutions that is supporting students’ traditional understanding of masculinity. It is
not providing participants with the tools necessary to understand what is happening in
the construction of masculinity. Given the dichotomy of thinking between masculinity
and humanity there is a mismatch between the education the College is offering and the
College’s proclaimed mission to develop “the whole person” (College Mission
Statement). This mission is supported by The Catholic school on the threshold of the
third millennium (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997) in its directive that Catholic
education must be wholly involved with and at the service of society in its promotion of
“the human person” (para. 9).

It is recommended that a gender education program be developed and introduced as a
vital part of student formation. This programme needs to address the needs of all
students across all grade levels and provide a comprehensive exploration into the
meaning of gender and in particular the meaning of masculinity. Students need to be
taught the fundamentals of all gender theories. Here they need to analyse the limitations
of each theory and to reflect upon how they are living out the masculine constructs in
their own lives and in the life of the school. They also need to be challenged in their
perception that there is a dichotomy between that which is human and that which is
masculine. The school needs to explore programmes and processes that would assist
in the introducing of gender education into the curriculum. This process of exploration
must critically analyse available programmes in order that the gender theories upon
which the programme is based can be revealed. Programmes suitable for a
comprehensive education into gender need to be purchased and used as a resource to develop the school’s gender education curriculum. In addition schools need to provide education and training opportunities for teachers who will be responsible for the teaching of the gender education programme.

REFERENCES


