Chapter 4
The Modern Passage from Boyhood to Manhood and Its Relationship to Bullying and Harassment

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Gender looms large in school-based harassment and bullying among both boys and girls. This chapter takes a closer look at boys' experiences. Findings from my own research and from the literature are used to provide greater insights into the relationships between manhood and conflict. Grounded in deep social obligations and taboos, gender is positioned as a premiere means of elevating the status of some boys while simultaneously offering a potent weapon against rivals and outcasts. Moreover, gender taboos gain particular prominence when overlaid onto the journey from childhood to manhood. This passage has long been recognized as the site for the social engineering of boys into men – a period when 'real men' are made. While traditional societies typically orchestrated this transition through the ritualized mentoring of young males by older men, modern society has handed much of this responsibility to the modern education system. For a number of reasons, a key difference in the modern transition is a progressive reduction of the role that adult males play in the process. However, the passage to manhood remains as important as ever and in the absence of older mentors, boys are resorting to alternative ways to collectively navigate this complex, high-pressure period. A consequence is that modern passage often has considerable autonomy from the adult world: much of the boys gendered learning plays out in the school ground and on the streets, at arms length from adults and with peer groups themselves adjudicating and policing their own 'in-house' standards of masculinity. Moreover, these peer-based codes of conduct in addition to having considerable autonomy are relayed to younger generations in the school ground, again often at arms length from adults and while there is considerable class and cultural variation, there are also overarching codes that are widely shared. These arrangements can be both positive and negative. On the one

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hand, greater latitude is possible as boys re-work traditional masculinities into new forms. However, driven by masculine obligations and taboos, boys can also act-out masculinity in extreme ways and punish transgressions severely, often using homophobia as the gender weapon-of-choice. At their most extreme, peer groups can spill onto the streets and become gangs.

Traditional Passages to Manhood

The journey from childhood to adulthood has long attracted the interest of educators and social researchers. In his seminal ethnographic work, *The Rites of Passage* (1960), first published in 1908, Arnold Van Gennep documented a wide variety of rituals and ceremonies that accompanied some of life's most important transitions including birth, death, puberty and coming-of-age in a diverse range of cultures. In that work, Van Gennep describes a change in social status or 'passage' as having three main stages, namely, *separation*, *transition* and *re-incorporation*. *Separation* occurs when the participants commence a journey from their original status towards a new one (such as leaving childhood behind); *transition* entails being in an intermediate or 'liminal' state between the starting point and the destination (on the way to being a man; sometimes called adolescence); and *re-incorporation* entails re-joining society with the new status (officially now a man).

In traditional settings, it was usual for boys to be *initiated* into manhood under the mentorship of older males from the same clan. It was also notable that the rites of initiation often involved a *ritualised challenge* which, depending on the culture, could be difficult, painful and sometimes even dangerous. Rites of passage provide a framework for the transition in order to navigate major changes in social status; the rites were often elaborate, carefully orchestrated and rich in symbolism. Van Gennep recognised that these rites related to major life events that most humans experience, however, the rituals and ceremonies that accompanied these events varied considerably, across different cultures, locations and historical periods.

Having wide cultural, historical and contextual variability in relation to events that are near-universal in human experience is an important finding. This variability indicates that the ritual responses are not likely to be 'hard-wired'. Despite the biological foundations of events like birth, death and puberty, these events are accompanied by an elaborate cultural overlay concerning how they are understood and how they play out. In the same way, we can draw a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender', where on the one hand, 'sex' is biologically based, while on the other 'gender' is socially constructed (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1999). The importance of such a distinction is that it offers possibilities for understanding how gender conventions might (and do) shift over time. Identifying the socially constructed elements opens the way to developing strategies for change, for example, for improving gender relations and counteracting harmful gender-based practices, such as gender-based violence.

In the case of the passage to manhood, studying this transition gives powerful insights into the progressive construction of manhood as boys approach maturity. Not only is the socially constructed nature of gender identity apparent in its cultural and historical variability but also in the ways that contemporary manhood is transmitted and enforced. The socially constructed nature of becoming a man was captured by Gilmore, when he said:

> *boys have to be encouraged, sometimes actually forced, by social sanctions to undertake efforts toward a culturally defined manhood, which by themselves they might not do.* (Gilmore, 1990, p. 25)

Modern Passages to Manhood

Many of the traditional rites of passage described by Van Gennep, may not seem particularly relevant to modern, globalised societies, where gender roles have undergone major shifts, and continue to do so. However, while modern gender roles and identities differ from those of the past, it is also the case that gender has not simply ceased to exist. Developing a socially acceptable gender-identity – including the expectation that boys should become men – is arguably as important as ever (Plummer, 2020). Thus, while it is not all that uncommon for people to struggle with their gender identity or to want to change to the 'opposite' sex, it is virtually impossible to imagine anyone who does not have a gender identity at all. Indeed, struggling with identity and/or wishing to change underlines how entrenched gender continues to be.

This brings us to contemporary passages to manhood. With globalisation and the steady disappearance of traditional societies, but with the obligations of manhood still weighing heavily on all boys, then how do the passages to manhood occur in a modern world? In the search for answers, let us turn to the research.

My main research has been in two very different settings: Australia and the anglophone countries of the Caribbean (also known as the West Indies). In the *Caribbean Masculinities Project* (see Plummer, 2020), data was collected in seven countries and one territory: Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Kitts & Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent & the Grenadines, Trinidad & Tobago and the British Territory of Anguilla. Using purposive sampling, a diverse sample of 138 participants was recruited, which incorporated a range of variables, including:

- race (principally mixed race, African and East Indian descendants);
- socioeconomic background; geographic location (garrison communities, rural and urban, seven countries and one territory);
- religion (Catholic, Protestant, Hindu and Moslem);
- and academic background (early school leavers, school completers and tertiary educated).

Highly detailed face-to-face interviews were conducted with these 138 participants. Further, as well as describing their own experiences, participants also

acted as lay field observers in order to provide data on complex social systems in diverse settings, thus extending the database to many additional participants (such as, in villages, communities, schools and peer groups and so on). To analyse the data, a modified grounded theory approach was taken in order to gain deeper insights into gender dynamics in the Caribbean. For further details of methods and results, please see Plummer (1999, 2020).

In the current paper I will use extracts from the above research together with insights from the work of other prominent Caribbean researchers to develop the arguments and explanations being advanced here. In both the Caribbean and the Australian research, the findings suggest that, with the advent of modern education, much of the work of traditional passage to manhood has been subsumed into schooling. In Van Gennep's terms, modern passage can be re-cast as: *separation* from infancy when the child commences school; *transition* during the school years in a protracted liminal state more-or-less equivalent to adolescence; and *re-incorporation* into the adult world on leaving school and entering the workforce. This passage, too, contains formal and informal ritualised elements such as: separation anxiety, tearful farewells and a fresh start on the *first day at school*; formal hurdles and informal challenges required in order to progress through schooling; and ceremonies such as graduation, which mark 'coming of age' and the completion of passage.

The advent of modern education offered a new arena for boys to prove themselves and thereby to hone and project their developing masculinity, however, over the passage of time further social change has intervened and the role that schools play as a primary arena for hosting the journey to manhood has become increasingly problematic. One such change is a progressive reduction of opportunities for mentoring by adults in the passage to manhood, particularly reducing the role of more senior men (Lewis, 2008). With growing urbanisation, with parent(s) and guardians working, and with congested commuting and long working hours, the traditional systems of boys being mentored by older men in the village and clan have progressively declined. Likewise, fewer men became teachers, and this further reduced the availability of older male role-models able to mentor boys at school and thus the school's utility in navigating the passage to manhood. In some countries, such as Trinidad and Tobago, 'shift schooling' – teaching half of the students in the morning and the other half in the afternoon – was introduced to give young people universal access to education. However, in the context of increasing urbanisation and changing work patterns, this effectively left many young people to 'fend for themselves' for half of each day while parents and guardians were at work.

Social change also resulted in shifts in the ratios of boys to girls attending school and completing higher education. For example, in the Anglophone countries of the West Indies, it was found that the proportion of women completing school and attending university steadily grew. Of course, universal education and greater opportunities for girls is very welcome, however it was also clear that boys' participation was progressively declining to a point well below parity (Figueroa, 2004; Reddock, 2004). During the period from 1948 to 2010, the proportion of male enrolments in the regional keystone university, the University of West Indies, declined year-on-year from a high of 70% in 1948 to 33% in 2010 and women

became the majority of students in all faculties, including in traditionally male disciplines, with the exception of engineering. This decline in boys' education and a parallel decline in males working as teachers was a cause for concern by many commentators (Miller, 1986; Figueroa, 2004). Some criticised what they called the 'feminisation' of education, which they argued was alienating boys and placing them at a serious disadvantage.

Unfortunately, the term 'feminisation' suggests that females were to blame for the problems boys were experiencing and that the system was biased to favour women and girls both as students and teachers. There are, however, alternative explanations. According to my own research (2020), boys are indeed finding classroom education less compelling, but this is because, unlike schooling in the past, the changes outlined above meant that academic pursuits no longer provided an arena where boys could readily differentiate their masculine identity. In other words, rather than the classroom being *feminised*, opportunities for intellectual and academic development had been *equalised*. The school - most notably the classroom and academic achievement – ceased to offer as many opportunities as it did in the past for boys to advance their masculine status because educational opportunity was becoming increasingly gender-neutral. Boys needed to look elsewhere to navigate the journey to manhood.

Here are insights from prominent Jamaican academic, Mark Figueroa:

> *… there is evidence that boys actually actively assert their maleness by resisting school [and that] male-child subculture… exerts considerable peer pressure on boys to be disruptive in school.* (Figueroa, 2004, p. 152)

Interestingly, similar phenomena have been seen in Europe and elsewhere. For example, Elina Lahelma writes of the politically-driven 'boy discourse' in which boys' underperformance in school is presented as 'an argument to counter feminism [where] the interests of the girls are regarded as if they are in opposition to the interests of the boys' (Lahelma, 2014).

Peer Pressure and Horizontal Mentoring

A raft of social changes – globalisation, urbanisation, work and economic pressures, education policy, family structures, and community organisation – have introduced significant challenges for boys and girls when navigating the journey to adulthood. Moreover, the rites and ceremonies which were traditionally used to orchestrate boys' passage to manhood along with the accompanying systems of mentoring by senior men have largely been superseded with many traditions being little more than historical curiosities. Yet the social pressures to become a man still weigh heavily on all boys and the journey continues to be complex, difficult and sometimes hazardous.

The decline of traditional systems for the passage to manhood has forced boys to seek alternative ways to navigate the transition. Two elements are particularly relevant here: first, to find alternative mentoring and role models for guidance and

support during the journey; and second, to find ways of internalising the conventions and benchmarks for what manhood is.

In the case of finding alternative role models and mentors, DuBois and Karcher (2005) describe a contemporary shift of focus from 'vertical' mentoring of boys by elders in the clan towards 'horizontal' mentoring of boys by other boys. In other words, boys are increasingly relying on peers for guidance and peer groups have gained in influence as a consequence. In effect, the decline in alternatives has created a power vacuum, and boys have turned to each other to fill this vacuum and to navigate the journey collectively. While greater reliance on peer groups may lead to some very good outcomes, a boy's fortunes can depend heavily on the sort of peers he has.

The equalisation of educational opportunity for boys and girls – itself a very good thing - has had an unintended consequence, namely, that intellectual pursuits and academic prowess, being equally available to both sexes, no longer have the same utility for defining, honing and projecting manhood. Indeed, the rising importance of peer groups in the passage to manhood has, in effect, displaced the drama of becoming a man from inside the classroom to outside – to the school ground, streets, malls and cyberspace. Here, for example, are the findings of Bailey and colleagues:

> *Street influences were particularly telling in that transition period to adulthood… Many of the styles on the street were accentuated as the basis for securing what was imagined to be an adult masculine identity. The street was trouble, yet it was where a man was made.* (Bailey et al., 1998, p. 55)

In the face of changing social conventions, it is also understandable that boys might fall back on what they see as stable and tangible characteristics in order to make manhood meaningful. Principal among those characteristics are the physical changes of maturation: physical development and appearance, physical performance and how the physical body is used, both individually and collectively (Butler, 1999; Andreasson & Johansson, 2016; Johansson et al., 2017). Elsewhere I refer to this shift in focus as a 'retreat to the body', where physicality provides important reference points for defining and triangulating the purpose of manhood, especially when other social cues are in flux.

You will recall that, unlike the 'sex' of a person, gender is a set of socially constructed conventions and as such can change. It is perhaps this changeable nature of gender that explains past heavy reliance on ceremonies, rites of passage and mentoring, which can help to preserve social continuity. Changing gender conventions are relevant here given that peer groups are playing an increasingly important role in arbitrating and enforcing those standards and can therefore play an important role in both continuity and change. Of course, parents, teachers and the wider culture are important sources of gender expectations, but peer groups themselves are custodians of gender knowledge and generate and transmit their own notions of manhood too (Mac an Ghaill, 1994, p. 53). Thus, while peer groups are generally restrained by adult supervision in the classroom, they enjoy considerable autonomy, power and influence outside the classroom at distance from adult

scrutiny - in the school ground, change rooms, playing fields, streets, lanes and shopping malls. Indeed, in these settings, a range of gender practices and conventions are passed between successive waves of older to younger boys without the need for direct involvement of adults or of the wider culture. Elsewhere, I refer to this process as 'rolling peer pressure' and argue that it enables the transmission of rich and complex (gendered) cultural forms down successive generations of youth, typically unmediated by, and beyond the awareness of adults (see Plummer, 1999). Indeed, this peer-based youth culture can exist in parallel and can act separately and sometimes even in deliberate opposition to wider society: to the point of contradicting and overriding wider cultural norms (Messerschmidt, 1994).

Policing Manhood

From the analysis so far, two factors have emerged as being important features of contemporary passages to manhood: first is a greater role for peer groups in mediating gender conventions (horizontal mentoring); and second, is a renewed emphasis on physical development as providing a tangible basis for understanding manhood (a retreat to the body). Of course, not only is manhood in a state of transition, but there is also no singular version of masculinity – even though certain stereotypes might be prevalent. On the contrary, peer groups themselves draw identity and cohesion from fashioning their own particular styles of masculinity, albeit, while still somewhat constrained by prevailing gender taboos, which are also changing.

The increased emphasis of physicality as being a more tangible basis for manhood has important binary consequences. On the one side, is a reification of male physicality; on the other, a relative reduction in the importance of intellectual and academic achievement. In the Caribbean research, evidence in support of the deprecation of academic achievement includes: the pronounced decline in school completion and higher educational enrolment by boys; and multi-country explanatory research that revealed that boys who are keen in class, who speak 'proper' English and/or who do well in exams are vulnerable to being targeted with homophobia and misogyny (Plummer, 2020; Reddock, 2004). The data also identified boys who would deliberately try not to score too highly in exams, to restrain their classroom participation and to hide their academic achievement, in order to avoid being targeted. Take for example the account of a young man from Trinidad (from Plummer, 2013):

> *… you never really associate cool with being smart. It was always something physical or some material possession… Expensive sneakers, latest football gears, the latest haircut. For us it was young men who has a beard.*
>
> (Participant TNT09; Country: Trinidad; Male; Age 28; Christian; African descent; at least some university education)

Masculine status is also denominated through physical development (Plummer, 1999, 2020; Andreasson & Johansson, 2016; Johansson et al., 2017). Boys who

were late to develop and who show fewer secondary sexual characteristics (less developed stature, musculature, facial structure, body hair, genital development) were also vulnerable to targeting, often once again with misogynistic and homophobic innuendo and harassment. Status was also extrapolated to how physicality is used: boys who were strong, aggressive, good at sport and showed physical prowess were generally afforded higher status. Those who were gentle, deferential or who preferred non-physical pursuits were vulnerable to homophobic and misogynistic criticism.

> *… you had to play sports, and be into sports… You wouldn't sit down and read a novel openly in school and many you wouldn't study in front of people because it wasn't too cool to be seen studying… definitely peer pressure, although it might not be vocalized in so many words, but it was in the air, it was something nobody had to say, it was just in the air that, 'OK, we have free time you should be more into sweating, build a sweat, build you muscles rather than enjoying a good novel or a good book'. That's just a little too prissy and bright and girly and therefore suspect.*
>
> (Participant TNT09; Country: Trinidad; Male; Age 28; Christian; African descent; at least some university education)

Importantly, in all of the situations described above, the homophobia and misogyny were usually agnostic as to whether the boy was *actually* gay, even though suggestions that he might be gay could be part of the innuendo. Typically, the targeting arose when boys showed characteristics that other boys considered to be *insufficiently masculine*. In other words, the transgression was not predicated on sexual practice nor, strictly speaking, on his femininity: the transgression was considered to indicate a *lack of masculinity* (a betrayal or 'crime' against manhood, see Plummer 2005). Here is an account of an attack in Guyana against a young man who was not stereotypically masculine (from Plummer, 2013):

> *… at that time my hair was not in braids, but it was in the funky dread, so I felt it [the liquid], and right away I leaned, and my mind said to me: this is acid. So, there I am leaning, looking on the ground, looking to see if pieces of flesh would have been dropping there. I was hospitalised… for two months and a week… nursing my acid wounds.*
>
> (Participant GUY13; Country: Guyana; Male; Age 29; Christian; working class; mixed race; at least some secondary school)

Personal reputation is important for boys and exhibiting appropriate levels of manhood is integral to maintaining an intact reputation. But as we noted, gender consists of a complex web of social conventions and reputation is cultivated by projecting an image that conforms to, and celebrates, those conventions, as well as carefully avoiding evidence that could be construed as gender transgression. Adopting a socially endorsed version of manhood and building a reputation is done for the satisfaction of receiving social endorsement. Reputation building should therefore be considered as being akin to a public performance that is designed to sway the opinion of onlookers (Butler, 1999). If so, then it helps to ask who the intended audience is and who sets the standards?

> *… the man had the gun by my head and his hand actually sweating, sweating on me, so like this man he is probably doing this just to prove a point to the whole gang nah, just to show he is capable…*

(Participant JL; aged 22; office assistant; from Plummer & Geofroy, 2010)

Of course, general social approval might be a motivating factor for building a reputation, but with peers and peer groups playing a very immediate and pre-eminent role in many boys' lives during the passage to manhood, then peer group standards and peer approval emerge as especially influential. In fact, peer groups play a central role in setting modern gender benchmarks and in policing them (Martino, 2000; Odenbring, 2019; Plummer, 2001; Pascoe, 2013; Rofes, 1995; Rawlings, 2017).

The following excerpt is an example of peer-group policing from the island country of St Vincent and The Grenadines (from Plummer, 2013) Note here that 'chi-chi man' is a Caribbean term for an effeminate/gay man, so 'burn up chi-chi man' is to set a gay man on fire; 'battiboy' is also a reference to a (usually younger) gay man, so 'shot a battiboy' is to shoot a gay boy:

> *… they will use certain lyrics and you will have to respond by raising your hand. So… they will ask you if you love woman, put yuh two hands in the air and you will have to put up the two hands; if you want to 'burn up chi-chi man', you will put your hand as if it were around a lighter and you are lighting a fire; or they will say 'shot the battiboy' and you will have your hand shaped like a gun and moving it up and down as if you were shooting something in the air. So those were really used as a measuring stick, and if you didn't do it then there will be confrontation and harassment after… so if you didn't burn up chi-chi man: you are gay; if you didn't put up your hands when they said if you love woman: then you are gay; if you didn't light the fire: you are gay…*
>
> (Participant SVG02; Country: Saint Vincent; Male; Age 21; Christian; working/middle class; mixed race; at least some secondary school)

Physical and aggressive expressions of masculinity can be used as leverage in the group pecking order and set the stage for friction between competing peer groups. Homophobia and misogyny are powerful weapons in peer group politics; both are deployed to enforce loyalty and to justify punishment for failure (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016; Johansson et al., 2017). In essence these tactics rely on humiliating the target by casting suspicion on a boy's manhood; a tactic that can be powerful even before a boy reaches puberty, before he forms his sexual identity and even if he is not gay. Homophobic and misogynistic accusations are especially powerful because they have the capacity to inactivate 'circuit-breakers' when tensions arise. That is to say, anyone who chooses to side with the victim and attempts to defend such highly taboo behaviour runs the risk of being targeted too. The dual dynamics of being seen to disavow masculine taboos and to valorise masculine obligations both put pressure on boys to 'act-out' in hyper-masculine ways and this can lead to an escalation of conflict. Acting out in masculine and hyper-masculine ways helps to build a reputation among the audience who matters most – the peer group. Such actions include the public rejection of taboo behaviours such as softness, weakness and lack of courage. These gestures can also demonstrate support for the ideology and solidarity of the group in opposition to others and to consolidate a boy's position in the pecking order. It is not uncommon for modern peer groups to have their own "in-house" initiation rites which test prospective group members by putting a price on membership. These tests can involve ritual humiliation and dangerous

challenges, including committing a serious crime as evidence of masculine bravery, nerve, aggression and loyalty to the group (Messerschmidt, 1994; Plummer & Geofroy, 2010). Failure to measure up to expectations can be viewed as a form of betrayal of peer group solidarity and entail consequences ranging from harassment, to rejection, to assault and at the extreme, death (Martino, 2000; Plummer, 2001, 2005; Rawlings, 2017). Here is an example from Trinidad (from Plummer & Geofroy, 2010):

> *… fights, we were just trying to impress, or it was a "ranking thing" because… you trying to show you is not a softie nah! I can't remember what they were about, but I remember I used to fight a lot. Probably if someone call me a name I mighta cuffed them up. I used to fight to gain respect.*
>
> (Participant JD; Country: Trinidad; Male; Aged 24; Secondary school teacher)

As we noted earlier, the standards of manhood embraced by peer groups can vary markedly from what would be considered acceptable in wider society. Indeed, wider society would and does consider some of the activities that peer groups engage in as being highly antisocial. But to the group members themselves, those same activities are intensely *pro-social*: members are vying for the approval of those most important to them, their peers. Members act out their masculinity for audience approval. Being a group member potentially places boys in opposition to non-members. This oppositional relationship can readily be extended to teachers, parents and those in authority, who themselves can become embroiled in a tug-of-war of defiance and hyper-masculine acting-out (Plummer, 2020). The tug-of-war between parents and peer group is captured nicely in the words of the late great Caribbean academic Barry Chevannes:

> *… it is the peer group that will put the final touches, so to speak, to the construction of his male identity – his anti-homosexual heterosexuality, power and control over women… The peer group virtually replaces mother and father as the controlling agents or, if not entirely a substitute, a countervailing force…* (Chevannes 1999, p. 30)

This chapter was charged with discussing the relationship between the passage to manhood and conflict, bullying and harassment, however, it is important not to paint a bleak overly-simplistic monochrome picture. Peer groups can be extraordinarily productive and provide a vital support system during a complicated transition. Peer groups also generate and perpetuate unique youth sub-cultures, which are influential sources of social innovation including in music, fashion, technology and design. Through the mechanism of 'rolling peer pressure' youth sub-cultures gain considerable autonomy from wider culture because group codes and conventions are passed down and remodelled by successive generations of young people at arms length from adults in locations such as: the school ground, public transport, the internet and the streets. Ironically, through the mechanisms described here, young people can set the tone for important social trends, including shifting gender conventions, particularly because the standards they adopt during their passage to adulthood will soon become the adult standards of future societies. In other words, we see a dual paradox which differs from the conventional 'top down' view of education and community development: first, young people taking over mentoring roles that were

previously performed by older men and shaping the development of other young people themselves; and young people's culture actively fashioning future society rather than society solely fashioning them.

There is also extensive cultural and class variation to some of the general observations outlined above despite there being many shared elements, presumably through colonialism, globalisation, mass media and given that the biology provides some common ground. In both the Caribbean and Australia, I found that while boys had a shared understanding of the basis for manhood, much of the finer detail of embodiment and enactment varied considerably. For example, in the Caribbean boys in poorer communities had much less personal space at home and they spent considerable time growing up on the streets. Thus, their development was more likely to occur with the oversight of peers - subject to their scrutiny, conforming to their expectations and regulated by intense peer group policing. On the other hand, boys from more affluent settings had more private space to escape the scrutiny of peers. Thus, they were more able to 'let their guard down', be more individualistic and find space to study (surreptitiously, if necessarily).

Revisiting Manhood

We are in an era of unprecedented social change. Amid that change, the raft of social conventions that we call gender is changing too, but despite continual change, gender remains as influential as ever.

At the heart of gender is the binary between masculine and feminine. This gender binary structures the entire system, yet as simple as it might appear, the gender binary is the source of extraordinary complexity. One reason for this complexity is that gender is socially constructed. In other words, the elements considered masculine and feminine have essentially arisen historically as the result of social convention. What is considered masculine, feminine *or neither* can, and does, change – albeit, not always without resistance. Earlier we saw evidence of change in the shifting demographics of boys' education in the Caribbean.

From my Caribbean research (summarised in Plummer, 2020), two powerful dynamics structure and restrain change, namely, *gender taboos* and the *mutually exclusive nature of the gender binary* (mutually exclusive, meaning that anything considered feminine in a given context, cannot ordinarily also be considered masculine and vice versa). Gender taboos are powerfully evident throughout society, including in the school ground. For example, while there is considerable latitude in the clothing-styles for boys, there is very limited tolerance of boys wearing attire that, depending on cultural context, can be considered to be 'girls' clothes'. Take for example the following quote from the work of the prominent Canadian/Trinidadian academic, Wesley Crichlow:

> *…a [Trinidadian] male's sexual identity would be interrogated if he wore the wrong clothes or colors, failed to participate in particular sports, or did not protect his female partner or show an interest in events constructed as 'boyish' or 'mannish'.* (Crichlow 2004)

The mutually exclusive nature of gender binaries gives binaries the ability to imply meaning without it needing to be stated. Likewise, taboos specify what is unacceptable and in so doing they simultaneously imply what is acceptable. The meanings *implied* by binaries and taboos operate in a multitude of complex ways and can affect appearance, gestures, speech patterns, dress codes, friendship networks, career choices and much more. In this way, by implication, masculine stereotypes can be widely prevalent and yet never exist in their absolute form and can be highly influential even when they are left unspoken. Likewise, multiple masculinities can co-exist within an 'authorised cultural space' ring-fenced by taboos and binaries. Transgressing the boundaries of this authorised space is risky and should be approached with considerable caution (unless, of course, social change shifts the boundaries first). This authorised space accommodates diverse masculinities, which generally respect gender taboos and are not considered gender transgressive, despite their other differences, and even though they may violate other social taboos (such as violence, aggression, sexual misconduct and so on). On the contrary, deliberately breaching these latter taboos may, on occasion, be used to enhance masculine status. The present research supports Connell's (1995, 2005) influential idea of *hegemonic masculinity* as being, in effect, a virtual concept, not realised anywhere in an absolute form but widely apparent, never-the-less, by virtue of being implied by taboos and mutually exclusive gender binaries, both of which define an 'authorised cultural space' in which diverse masculinities can be performed with little risk to reputation. This idea is reminiscent of Goffman in his book *Stigma* when he says that the identity-values of society:

> *…may be fully entrenched nowhere, and yet they can cast some kind of shadow on the encounters… everywhere in daily living*. (Goffman, 1963, P. 29)

More recently there has been a growth in research (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012) which shows, at least in some contexts, that masculinities can become more inclusive and incorporate characteristics and ideologies that were previously considered to be un-masculine and indeed were once deeply taboo (such as support for displays of affection between men and greater acceptance of homosexuality). Of course, as we have already seen, gender conventions can change: historically, cross-culturally and contextually. Moreover, there is extensive work to show that in many traditional societies, such as those of Papua New Guinea, ritualised homosexuality and masculinity are not at all incompatible – at least not until church missionaries arrived (Herdt, 1993). Perhaps then, it is not so surprising that similar shifts have recently been detected in contemporary Euro-centric cultures and that as gender roles and taboos change, so too does the 'authorised cultural space' in which masculinities operate. However, while researchers have lately noted reductions, others continue to observe severe and growing homophobia and misogyny among boys. In my own research, the findings are mixed and are heavily dependent on context: there are certainly pockets where 'hard' masculinity dominates and where savage harassment and bullying occurs. The presence of adults tends to moderate the severity of such activities whereas in locations at arms length from adults homophobic and misogynistic harassment can escalate. For some boys, the bathrooms, school

ground, and sports field continue to be dangerous places (Odenbring, 2019; Pascoe, 2013; Plummer, 1999, 2020).

Conclusion

Using data from my own work and from other researchers in the Anglophone Caribbean, this paper argues that the shifts in the education of boys is explained at least in part because boys are searching for alternative ways to make the journey to manhood more meaningful. Here then are clues as to how social change interacts with gender: education, which was previously a male domain, is now much more gender neutral – indeed, in many parts of the world, girls are doing better than boys. Thus, instead of defining and honing their masculinity through intellectual prowess under the tutelage of senior mentors, physicality and peer groups have gained in importance during the passage to manhood. This development can underwrite some very positive outcomes including rich developments in youth sub-cultures and new, more inclusive versions of masculinity. However, the reliance on other peers and a growing focus on physicality at the expense of education can also be problematic. Left to their own devices, peer groups can impose dangerous expectations on members and exert savage punishment for betrayal (Plummer, 2005; Plummer & Geofroy, 2010). At their most extreme, peer group politics can spill onto the streets and become violent. Indeed, the difference between a peer group and a gang is often only a matter of degree. There are also social consequences of widening inequality - potentially including violence - if women are becoming better educated than men, and men are increasingly expressing themselves through their physicality.

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