Self-Made Men

Widening Participation, Selfhood and First-in-Family Males

Garth Stahl

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"With a focus on the Australian context, Garth Stahl offers a glimpse into the world of working-class masculinities and the blurring of social class lines. As rigid social class barriers inform the 'becoming' and 'being' of educated men in diverse—and indeed contradictory ways—Stahl illustrates how working-class masculinities manage to traverse the ivory gates of universities. The result is an important foray examining masculinities and academic achievement with a compelling focus into the world of the under-represented university males who are 'first-in-family' to attend university. As a deep dive into the higher education experience, this book provokes a rethink of the working-class masculinities that we thought we all knew and understood. Our assumptions are challenged as we see the 'identities in transition' of upwardly working-class men who navigate higher education, namely universities designed for the upper classes, while finding their own successes in rich and emerging forms of selfhood that challenge our perceptions of the social exclusion typically assigned to upper class institutions such as universities."

—Michael Kehler, *Research Professor of Masculinities Studies in Education, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Canada*

"Garth Stahl's book highlights the ongoing reality and complexity of structural inequity in, and beyond, higher education. This is a rich exploration of masculinities, through a study of young men who were 'first in family' to attend university. Adopting a longitudinal approach, Stahl captures how identities are developed and influenced by class and context over time. Despite widening participation efforts, universities remain reflective of middle class values and can be uncomfortable and challenging places. Importantly, Stahl highlights the centrality of identity and 'self-crafting' to men's aspirations, achievement, and persistence. In doing so, he provides important lessons for universities on how to increase their student success, diversity, and belonging."

—Andrew Harvey, *Program Director, Pathways in Place, Griffith University, Australia*

"Anyone looking to build pathways to success for first-generation students in general, and first-generation males in particular should read this book. Garth Stahl implements a longitudinal study that powerfully illuminates the lived experiences of first-in-family males against the backdrop of the contemporary

neoliberal university. This book, moreover, insightfully explores "self-crafting" that results as participants enter the socially and economically stratified stage of higher education and negotiate gendered and other subjectivities. Recommendations offered provide a map for implementing policy, programmatic, and pedagogical strategies that can enhance both student retention and success."

—Tracy Davis, *Professor & Coordinator of the CSP Higher Education, Western Illinois University, USA*

"Garth Stahl has gifted the higher education and masculinity studies communities with a nuanced examination of the lives of young men transitioning from secondary school into the complex world of universities, where none in their families have gone before. The dynamics of masculinity and class have changed, Stahl deftly shows, and working-class men trying to make their way up the social ladder through higher education now contend with shifting their identities to neoliberal entrepreneurial selves. Weaving together key social theory with the voices of the participants in the First-in-Family Males Project, their teachers, and their families, *Self-Made Men* powerfully shows how diverse men come to form their subjectivities in a brave new world of higher education where they struggle to juggle ambition, difficult academics, community connection, peer relations, and a concern for fulfilment. The voices of these young men are sure to ring in my ears for some time to come, and I urge everyone invested in widening participation and success in higher education to listen to them, too."

—Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower, *Professor of Educational Foundations, School of Education, Virginia Tech, USA*

"Drawing on extensive empirical data, Garth Stahl has produced a rigorous and theoretically informed text that interrogates the intersection between class and gender. Written throughout in an accessible style, Stahl's contribution to the field of young masculinities studies will be attractive to a wide audience of scholars and students. Readers interested in how young working-class males navigate their way through the often-perilous transition from school to university in neoliberal contemporary society will find the book to be of significant value."

—Andy Harvey, *Swansea University, Lecturer in Sports and Exercise Sciences, UK*

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Foreword

This book analyses the collected experiences of working-class male students who are transitioning into university studies in Australia. It explores the ways in which young men's identities are defined by their social and cultural locations, and are multi-dimensional, as well as how their identities intersect and overlap with several categories of difference in daily interactions such as social class, ethnicity, gender, language and religion.

For the young working-class men in this study, the idea of educational success was both important and problematic. Education involved negotiating a balance between private, public, secular, religious, individual and community expectations in a complex multi-layered world where personal agency and individualism had to be understood against a complex array of interacting structural inequalities. In particular, the book explores how the young men have made sense of their experiences and academic achievements and aspirations and the changes in their masculine performances/subjectivities this required. A main strength of the book is how it bridges different fields and sub-fields of educational research (such as widening participation, working-class disadvantage, social class and upwardly mobile masculinities) in researching how 'first-in-family males' adapt to university contexts.

The analyses of these issues will be particularly helpful for schools and universities as they struggle to identify ways in which they can better support young men from disadvantaged backgrounds when they negotiate

educational opportunities and alternatives. It adds new knowledge to previous research by considering the importance of socio-cultural resources and the uneven distribution of educational choices, and the influence of variables such as place of domicile, class, gender and ethnic background on students' higher education choices.

Young people are expected to embody the values of competitiveness, being strategic, and showing drive or grit, and this becomes increasingly pronounced as students approach their adult lives. The book identifies why by addressing the motives behind educational choices and what consequences can ensue for the young men who make them. The choices are shown to be contingent processes of selection by knowledgeable and reflexive agents, but they are carried out in circumstances in which the agents rarely had full control or a good overview.

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1

Introduction

I first met Campbell in the western suburbs of Sydney when he was 17 years old. He is of Mauritian Chinese descent and described his local community as 'close to my heart', where he knew everyone and where holidays were often celebrated together on his street. Reflecting back on his childhood, he remarked, 'If I had to pick one thing that I liked the most it would probably be how it's such an inclusive community.' The community, which has historically been shaped by poverty and subject to pathologization, has been buoyed by Australia's economic growth and a Sydney property boom. As a result, many community members find themselves in a better financial position than the previous generation. There is a diversity of schools available (e.g. faith-based, state, independent) and Campbell was enrolled in a low fee-paying all-boys Catholic school. During the last two years of secondary school Campbell was working approximately twenty-five hours a week at a local store. He took employment seriously, mentioning numerous times that he wanted to 'make his own way'. When he was not working or studying, he spent time with his family and looking after his little brothers. As Campbell balanced his familial commitments and various work responsibilities, he still made time for friends, describing himself as a 'person who will talk to anyone'. As he began to think about his future, his aspirations were informed by his fascination with business. In recounting his work

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schedule a few weeks before his national exams at the end of Year 12, Campbell noted:

> So I usually get—I usually work all Sunday, so that's about 10 hours. I usually work Friday, Saturday night, which is 20, and then my boss will give me one shift during the week at night, which is 4 hours—4 to 5 hours depending. I balance that out by studying after school, on—during the week. So pump that out during the week and then on the weekend after work because I'm—I don't—I go to sleep really late and I wake up really early.

Campbell did not have a lot of spare time, nor did he seem to desire it. Instead, Campbell enjoyed pushing himself—or what he called 'pumping it out'. Campbell described how he began working from a young age in various family-owned businesses (mainly small shops) and saved money to buy his own car. Furthermore, he spoke about how on his school holidays he would often go to work with either one of his parents, who are employed in the insurance and superannuation sector where—in his words—he would learn about 'logistics' and 'leadership'. Campbell typically finished work around 10.30 pm, long after his parents were asleep, and he enjoyed staying out late where he had the freedom that came with having his licence and his own car. Campbell's independence was very important to him.

As his Year 12 exams finished, Campbell had picked up a second job working in a restaurant where he desired to attain a better position:

> hopefully [the boss] sees that I'm putting in a lot of effort and is willing to promote me to head—head of front of house, so that would be really good because that will look good on my resume. So I'm taking a lot of pride in my work right now. I'm presenting myself and working a lot harder.

He felt that working long hours over the summer would place him in an advantageous position to attend university the following year to study business management. Taking on two jobs, Campbell planned to accrue a good amount of money and, depending on the flexibility of his two employers in accommodating his university schedule, he wanted to keep

one of the jobs while he studied. The hours on his feet were gruelling and Campbell talked openly about the time he was losing with his family: 'I'm not seeing a lot of my little brothers who are growing up and I'm not seeing much of my mum and dad which they've told me, they miss me, so yeah.' Yet, he was determined to stay focused and to make sacrifices to accomplish his goals: 'I like to keep myself busy. I like always doing something. I hate just being at home and just be, like, doing nothing. I always like to keep myself occupied with something.'

While he described himself as focused on his studies, the extent of this focus remained a fragmented picture. Campbell did express concern about his grades and class rank which, given his busy lifestyle, he accepted are 'not going to be very good'. Rather than target a prestigious university, he applied to universities with lower entrance scores. Campbell emphasized the importance of attending university and not letting his family down, particularly his grandfather:

> Yeah, not only that but I'm the very first person in my whole family to go to uni. Not just my brother and sisters, my mum and dad didn't go to university, none of their brothers went to university. So yeah, it's a pretty big stepping stone because Gramps wants to see me go.

Campbell could have attended a university closer to his home and avoided the hour commute; however, with the bonus points that were added to his Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR),[1] he instead chose a university located in Sydney's central business district as he felt the location of this university would offer more opportunities for internships and the Catholic ethos resonated with him. Considering Campbell's positive attitude, as he concluded Year 12, he seemed primed for university life. He spoke at length about it being a good opportunity for him and for his family.

[1] The ATAR is composed through mapping the student's aggregate score to the national averages and is the primary criterion for entry into most undergraduate-entry university programs in Australia. The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education in Australia has shown that low socio-economic students are disadvantaged by a university application process which is dependent on appropriate school guidance and resourcing (Cardak et al., 2015). This inequality significantly correlates with academic attainment and ATAR scores, and thus potential university participation, though this remains a fragmented picture (Tranter, 2011; Harvey, 2014).

When I met up with Campbell the following year he had completed one semester at university of basic accounting. He claimed: 'It's hard, but it's breezy at the same time. Like, if you pace yourself, you can do it.' While he had made friends and appeared to settle in well to university life and the substantial commute, he was keeping his eye on other opportunities. In fact, on the day I saw him he had received a call-back interview for work in a call centre for a superannuation scheme. Given his parents' occupations, he was familiar with this line of work and, while the job was not locked in, he was thinking about how he could possibly commit to the job and shift his university studies online. When I asked Campbell what appealed to him about the job, Campbell reflected a level of ambition but also calculation:

> Well, we were doing this new topic called financial accounting, and in the introductory lecture, he was telling us about job prospects and how important experience is, and when you're going for experience after the—so, when I finish my degree, I'll be twenty-one. I'll need to have, like, at least a good three, five years' experience to get, like a job that would pay six figures. Well, I thought of it as, hypothetically, if I do the trimester at [university], two years, while doing that online and while working full-time, by the time I'm twenty-one, I can already earn that kind of money, instead of waiting that extra three-year, five-year period.

Campbell expressed excitement about the prospect of becoming a full-time call centre worker and gaining a foothold in the white-collar sector. Though he admitted he needed to work through the practical details to ensure the risk was not too severe—and assure his parents and grandparents he would gain a university qualification—throughout our chat he remained upbeat and positive.

Six months later, I reached out to Campbell, unsure of what he would be doing or where he could be. When he texted me back he requested we meet at the university, saying there had been a lot of changes but that, ultimately, he was in a good place. Campbell had ended up deferring his university degree for six months in order to take on the role working in superannuation full-time. According to Campbell, he has 'exceled' in the call centre position where, out of 'the CSOs they've trained recently, I've

shown the best stats, I've shown the most growth and every[one]—all my managers and stuff—they're just praising me for that so I am feeling proud of myself for doing that.' In fact, Campbell had performed so well that his employers had offered him a part-time position so he could return to university full time. Recognizing the risks he had taken, Campbell expressed multiple times throughout our conversation that 'it's worked out really well', citing how his experience with the call centre and the people he met inspired him to change his degree from accounting to a Bachelor of Commerce majoring in Management, 'because the role that I've been given, I know what I want to do now, so yeah'. While I felt I understood Campbell's initial motivations for going to university, his experience begged the question of what his motivations were for returning to university. In response to this question, Campbell pondered for a bit:

> I want to get a degree. I want to eventually be up high in management, I want to be able to have an influence and a voice and I want my opinion to matter. I'm not saying it doesn't now, but to matter a lot to a lot of people. So, yeah, that's why I'm here. I want to get my management degree. I'm hoping that the degree plus the experience that I have in leadership and so forth and that I will get over the three years in this [part-time] job will pay off.

Campbell seemed changed by his rapid trajectory. He now appeared equipped with a clearer focus. Spending most of his waking moments in Sydney's CBD, he no longer spoke much about his local community or familial responsibilities. Instead, our conversations now focused on things that were important to him at the time—specifically, a focus on the white-collar atmosphere where he spoke of networking ('chats with upper management') and how he considered these relationships essential to his progression: 'I think networking is very important, especially in the role that I want to pursue.' Interestingly, while these changes, amongst others, were noticeable, Campbell did not see himself as changed. As he made the jump from secondary school to university, to the white-collar corporate world and back to university, he insisted: 'my priorities and morals

are still there. I still keep in touch with God, I still have—I'm still focused, I'm still driven and I know what I want and I want to get it, sort of thing. So yeah, in terms of my priorities, they're still the same.'

* * *

In Campbell's journey from secondary school to becoming the first in family to attend university several factors are immediately evident. Prior to attending university, he was exposed to different types of employment from working-class to white collar, which structured his subjectivity, his sense of self and his focus on using all his time to develop himself and progress his goals ('I always like to keep myself occupied with something'). His six months of full-time work in the corporate world, albeit at a low level, led to a certain sense of entitlement beginning to develop ('want my opinion to matter', 'I know what I want and I want to get it') which contrasts with the traditional working-class values of the community where Campbell grew up.

Campbell's story reveals that place—and the movement between places—became an important part of his identity formation. While Campbell could have attended a university located twenty minutes from where he lived, he wanted to soak up the opportunities of attending university with a very different social mix than he had experienced before. As Campbell spent more time in the city, he came to see the feasibility of pursuing the superannuation call centre work located in the city centre. While Campbell had significant and diverse work experience (compared to other young people his age), he was aware that it was not the white-collar work experience that, he believed, would be integral to his employment progression. So, is university important? Through Campbell's university learning experience, he gained ideas about how to make himself a more valuable candidate on the job market.

It is also evident that Campbell was interested in 'making his own way' and through his notions of risk, cost and benefit he was focused on making the system work for him as opposed to him working for the system. As he navigated his way through these various institutions (largely it would appear independently from his family), Campbell's journey raises

an issue that was common to the majority of the first-in-family boys in the study, namely that their time spent at university is, in their eyes, largely transactional—a means to an end. After all, nearly all of the participants in the *First-in-Family Males Project* spent a significant part of their daily lives in service-sector workplaces far removed from campus life. As Campbell deliberated about whether to pursue the call centre job or university—and tried to figure out a practical way to balance both—he did not consider how online learning might reduce potentially important social capital tied to the university. While online learning offers possibilities (especially for people living remotely in Australia or who have significant familial commitments), it can also restrict one's access to social capital present at the university as well as the knowledge of social currencies which are valuable. However, not all social capital is the same. In sacrificing the social capital of the university for the social capital of the workplace, it would appear that Campbell is now in a stronger position to accomplish his goals.

In Campbell's journey we also see Australia's class picture where the line between working class and middle class is often blurred. While Campbell was clearly first-in-family, which typically denotes a level of socioeconomic disadvantage, his parents had progressed their own careers into secure positions within the white-collar sector and managed to send their children to a low fee-paying private school. Therefore, in thinking critically regarding Campbell's biography, opportunity and journey, it is difficult to make straightforward assertions concerning the classed nature of Campbell's journey as he pursued his aspirations. Furthermore, in considering Campbell's journey in relation to the wider cohort of first-in-family boys, we see how *becoming* and *being* a university student is just one facet of their identity and—as we will see—these young men come to learn about themselves in a variety of spaces. Furthermore, through these moments of learning, their aspirations are structured in diverse—and sometimes paradoxical—ways. After all, Campbell ended up working in a superannuation call centre and planned to stay in the field of superannuation, the exact job his parents had—thus, at this stage he arguably becomes a story of social reproduction rather than social mobility.

* * *

In considering working-class men's search for validation in a post-industrial knowledge economy, *Self-made Men: Widening participation, selfhood and first-in-family males* problematizes the notions that socioeconomic mobility can be easily achieved and that school will enable financially disadvantaged students to attain a desirable socioeconomic future. Focusing on upwardly mobile working-class masculinities, Sennett and Cobb (1972) write of freedom and dignity, where:

> Class is a system of limiting freedom: it limits the freedom of the powerful in dealing with other people, because the strong are constricted within the circle of action that maintains their power; class constricts the weak more obviously in that they must obey commands. What happens to dignity men see in themselves and each other, when their freedom is checked by class? (p. 28)

People, regardless of their circumstances, are increasingly expected to validate and legitimate themselves as individuals who have the capacity, resources and drive to accrue value—to perform a neoliberal subjectivity. In becoming active citizens they are compelled to position themselves advantageously in discourses of 'success' and 'failure'. Enmeshed in this game of capital accrual, people from marginalized backgrounds contest, critique or subvert neoliberal regimes as they come to constitute themselves as 'valuable'. The experiences of these young men in this study are influenced by a neoliberal restructuring of university life into what Blackmore (1997, p. 92) calls 'lean-and-mean' pedagogies of fewer contact hours, a rise in online teaching and large class sizes. The modern university experience limits their opportunities to craft themselves. With this in mind, I highlight Browman et al.'s (2017) research which explores how low-socioeconomic-status students perceive their mobility and how this perception influences their academic persistence at university (however 'lean' the offering may be).

This book explores the social mobility journey focusing on a liminal time in the lives of these young men as they transition into university. Miles et al. (2011) note, that 'we know little about how the upwardly mobile understand their life trajectories' (p. 419). While this book focuses on 'masculinities in the margins', which suggests a certain degree of inequality and marginalization, marginalization is not experienced

equally by the boys in the study, who are deeply impacted by access to cultural capital via their families (both immediate and extended), the school environment and social connections. Research in Australian has noted the massive decline in full-time male working-class jobs, which has undermined the social dignity of working-class men 'through the obsolescence of their traditional hard, physical, manual labour power—through which they could at least produce a satisfying masculine identity' (Walker, 2003, p. 67; see also Kenway et al., 2006). Some of the participants fall into what Willis (1977) called the 'ear'oles', the working-class boys who construct their identities in contrast to 'laddish' forms of working-class masculinity and, in terms of their academic pursuits, just got on with it. The work seeks to explore how young men 'negotiate their own meanings, lives and futures, in the context of specific sociocultural, political and economic circumstances' (Hattam & Smyth, 2003, p. 381).

Class and Higher Education

Individuals who are not successful in accumulating capital (economic, cultural and social) are vulnerable to feelings of inferiority, to varying degrees, which potentially has longstanding emotional effects. Class differences, widening participation and social mobility remain areas of fascination for sociologists though, as Morgan (2005) astutely notes, the intersection of masculinity, social class and lived experience remains largely underdeveloped. Debates concerning how class is realized in education, specifically higher education, have focused on many different areas from social stratification, the effects of poverty, acclimatization to different learning environments, first-in-family/'first gen' status, government efforts to widen participation, resilience, competition and intergenerational histories. What is clear is that 'families with prior social advantages are best placed to compete for scarce places or pathways that confer the greatest positional advantages' (Marginson, 2016, p. 423).

According to Egerton and Halsey (1993) three significant areas shape conversations regarding access to higher education over the twentieth century. These are, first, a period of significant expansion, second, a reduction in gender inequality and, third, little to no reduction in relative

social class inequality. There exist great disparities for those entering higher education, which both highlights pervasive inequality and shows the power of class to influence opportunity and life chances. Addressing rampant inequality and enhancing social mobility requires careful attention to how individuals understand themselves and their aspirations within an alleged meritocratic system. This continuing inequality now co-exists with a higher education sector that has been re-imagined through a rise in neoliberalism and neoconservatism with its standards-driven policy reforms. Zajda (2020) calls our attention to the 'commodification of higher education, with its focus on value-added education and labour market prospects for highly skilled and competent graduates' (p. 55). Through positioning people in a permanent state of competition with each other, meritocracy 'offers a ladder system of social mobility, promoting a socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest which both legitimises inequality and damages community' (Littler, 2018, p. 3).

Access to higher education for all is a matter of global importance and, despite strides in the right direction, higher education is not as diverse as it could be. Concerted recent efforts in OECD countries to widen university options have been and continue to be largely driven by a global need to boost economic and global competitiveness. Internationally, a high standard of 'formal education [is] increasingly seen as essential in any aspect of post-industrial life' and, despite barriers, working-class youth continue to pursue this goal (Lehmann, 2009, p. 137). Lehmann further notes that the lives of those who do not pursue higher education are shaped by unique, class-specific challenges, evident in higher levels of uncertainty (Lehmann, 2004, 2007). In Australia today, socioeconomic background continues to be a strong predictor of academic success, from readiness for school to entry to university (Lamb et al., 2015; Down et al., 2018).

The research presented in this book examines how young men from working-class backgrounds—who are first in their family—come to understand themselves as meritocratic subjects and how they come to be socially mobile. Typically, first-in-family students are defined as 'no one in the immediate family of origin, including siblings or parents, having previously attended a higher education institution or having completed a university degree' (O'Shea et al., 2017, p. vii), though this definition is,

of course, subject to contestation. Scholarship has drawn attention to how males, especially young men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, resist the neoliberal 'four Cs—change, choice, chances, and competition' (Phoenix, 2004, p. 229) as they struggle to find the discursive space in which various forms of working-class masculinity are acceptable and validated (Stahl, 2015). Noting the conflicted nature of social mobility, this book serves as an investigation of upwardly mobile working-class masculinities.

Australian Higher Education

The Australian higher education system has experienced decades of reform. One of the key drivers of reform has been widening participation to enable the country to experience the social and economic benefits of a more highly educated population. In 1990, *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990) was conceived within the broader Dawkins recommendations which aimed to radically change the student population and set the stage for success; it was 'focused explicitly on access and representation, advocating the need for composition of the student population to reflect the broader population' (Harvey, Burnheim et al., 2016, p. 6). The Bradley Review report argued that it was economically imperative to widen the participation of under-represented groups (Bradley et al., 2008). Pledging that, by 2020, 20% of undergraduate students should be from low socioeconomic backgrounds, the Australian Government also asserted that students from such backgrounds required higher levels of support, including financial assistance and greater academic support, mentoring and counselling services. So, while policies may be designed to enhance equity 'to modify the extent to which these forms of stratification reproduce each other', there is only increased 'potential for upward social mobility' as opposed to social mobility itself (Marginson, 2016, p. 421). Nuancing this point further, Marginson (2016) asserts that 'not just schooling and higher education but prior social inequalities determine whether people from low-income families, remote locations or excluded minorities improve their social circumstances' and he further asserts that 'not all participation in HPS [high participation systems] is of equal value' (p. 421). This

echoes conceptual work where Davies and Hammack (2005) call attention to transitions in the international field of higher education which have significant implications for staff and students.

> In past decades when most of the populace regarded college or university placement to be relatively exclusive, competition centered largely on whether one was included in higher education. However, since expansion has transformed the system into a mass (and increasingly universal) enterprise, higher education has become much larger, less exclusive, and importantly, more differentiated and internally stratified. (p. 99)

It is important here to note that as these institutions struggle to adapt to the 'more differentiated and internally stratified' higher education environment, while more people from non-traditional backgrounds may be at university this does not mean all their experiences are equal. Furthermore, from a feminist perspective, 'white middle class male privilege remains entrenched in complex ways in new forms of higher education' (David, 2021, p. xx) which, in turn, influences the student experience, serving to normalize what is possible (Pötschulat et al., 2021) as students struggle *with* and *against* the norms and expectations of contemporary studenthood. In terms of gender composition, in Australia today, higher education is female dominated; males, in fact, only dominate two fields: IT and engineering (Larkins, 2018).

We know that first-in-family males—as an equity group—remain severely under-represented in Australian higher education (Lamb et al., 2015) but we know very little about the select few that make it to university and the strategies they employ to make university work for them. Internationally, the common reasons used to explain a lack of participation at university include lack of interest, the perception that university is boring and an extension of school, parental expectations, limited course offerings, lack of personal connections, social and cultural capital, 'hot' knowledge (Reay et al., 2005, p. 113), and a desire to pursue full-time employment (Harvey, Burnheim et al., 2016). As undergraduates, students of first-in-family status are not only likely to be less primed to take advantage of university resources but also their geographical location and financial resources can constrain their participation in university life

(O'Shea et al., 2017). This may limit their acquisition of social and cultural capital, which can have lifelong consequences regarding family formation, job acquisition and network development. Low-socioeconomic-background students often experience education with low levels of 'material and cultural resources that aid educational success' (Reay et al., 2005, p. 24). We also know many working-class parents advocate for their children to 'do better' and achieve social mobility so they do not need to suffer the same hardships they endured (Harden et al., 2012). Researching how aspirations interact with socioeconomic status in reference to occupational certainty, prestige, choice and justification, Gore et al. (2015) have demonstrated that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have stronger financial motivation, indicating the aspire to occupational futures that provide financial security.

The *First-in-Family Males Project*

In the majority of member nations within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), fewer men than women enrol in tertiary education. As Stoet and Geary (2020) assert, prior to the 1990s, 'men were overrepresented in tertiary education in most OECD nations, but the gap closed and then reversed' (p. 14073). Research suggests that male students are not only less likely to enrol in post-secondary education (Hillman & Robinson, 2016) but they also endure significant struggles academically compared to their female counterparts (Schwab & Dupuis, 2020). Furthermore, males from disadvantaged backgrounds are the least likely to attend higher education and more likely to suffer when they get there.

There exists a complex relationship between social class, masculinities and the motivation for academic achievement (Whitehead, 2003). Boys from all socioeconomic backgrounds struggle with becoming academically successful as it is often associated with femininity and thus weakness which conflicts with societal messages around masculinity and strength, resilience and toughness. Furthermore, we know that in Australia today boys will struggle significantly with their literacy (Scholes, 2019;

McDonald, 2019). In his critique of NAPLAN,[2] which he states is hardly a fair form of assessment and more of a blunt tool for documenting formal literacy and numeracy competencies, Thomas (2019) notes how boys lag behind girls at nearly every stage but how the lag becomes more significant as they proceed into middle school: 'by Year 5, the average male student is a full year behind the year level standard' (p. 788). This 'crisis' over the underperformance of young men—specifically in regard to their literacy acquisition and engagement—has led to various for-profit gurus pontificating about various solutions (see McDonald, 2019).

Additionally, recent research would suggest that young men in Australia are experiencing significant and complex barriers to their emotional wellbeing. One of these barriers is the archetype of the 'Aussie bloke' which is often associated with physical strength, rurality, larrikinism and excessive alcohol consumption (see Whitman, 2013; Crotty, 2001). Integral to the construction of this figure is stoicism, as Australian 'masculinity is commonly understood as inherently unemotional' (Pini & Mayes, 2012, p. 74). We know that men and boys may struggle to express their emotions and connect with others (Franklin & Tranter, 2008) and that this can have detrimental effects, especially for marginalized young men, who are 'prone to protracted and serious episodes of loneliness' (Franklin et al., 2018, p. 124). Studies in the field of public health continue to document how traditional gender norms impede promotion of more effective mental and physical health strategies (see Smith, 2007).

In Australia today, young people entering their post-compulsory schooling year can chose between a variety of pathways. They can secure employment or an apprenticeship/traineeship, join the defence force, attend a private college, attend Technical and Further Education (TAFE), enter a university entry pathway program to improve their foundational skills, or apply and enter university itself. These remain highly gendered options. Australian working-class young men often feel the lure of apprenticeships and trade work which can equate to enhanced financial security at a younger age.

Expanding this point further, young men and women living in Australia who are first in family must negotiate both gendered and classed

[2] Australia's national standard assessment of literacy and numeracy taken in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

discourses which contribute to the formation of their aspirations (Stahl & McDonald, 2022). A Longitudinal Study of Australian Children annual statistical report (Baxter, 2017) from the Australian Institute for Family Studies found considerable evidence that from a young age the occupational aspirations of boys and girls are quite different, such that, at adolescence, each tends to aspire to gender-traditional occupations. Boys preferred jobs in engineering, transport and information and communication technologies, or technician and trade jobs (e.g. automotive trades), and sports jobs also featured prominently (e.g., personal trainer). Furthermore, according to the report boys were more likely to know their intended occupation than girls. The top three professions of boys who were from low socioeconomic backgrounds were automotive and engineering, construction, and engineering and transport professional, and for girls they were personal service, education professional, and doctor, dentist or other health professional.

This book presents findings from the *First-in-Family Males Project* (Australian Research Council Grant Number: DE170100510), a longitudinal investigation of 42 'first-in-family' males as they *transitioned to* and *experienced* Australian university study in different locales and institutions with a focus on the identity practices which centred around economic, social and cultural capital deficits (Stahl & Young, 2019; Stahl & McDonald, 2019; Stahl & Mac an Ghaill, 2021; Stahl, 2021). The study was designed to document the diversity of experiences of first-in-family males from a wide range of backgrounds, geographical locations and school sites. It is a study of what Brown (1987) refers to as the 'invisible majority' of 'ordinary' working-class males who are able to navigate the effects of class disadvantage and who just get on with their learning. While the invisible majority exist, they are rarely studied. And it is important to note that, while they are able to navigate the debilitating effects and ensure some level of academic success, this does not mean their stories are not ones of envy, deference, shame and pride. After all, as Kenway (2013) notes, in Australia those attending advantaged schools 'when left to their own devices, perform no better and often less well than their comparable government schools peers' (p. 305).

With its focus on gender/masculinities and the transition to university, this project differs from other work in Australia on first-in-family

students, which has focused specifically on mature first-in-family students (O'Shea et al., 2017; Stahl & Loeser, 2018), those at the secondary school level intending to go to university (Patfield et al., 2020) and large-scale survey-based research (King et al., 2019). Two low socioeconomic urban regions were selected for this study—the northern suburbs of Adelaide and the western suburbs of Sydney—enabling the research to account for the different demographic, cultural, curricular and educational histories. The two areas are very different in terms of cultural diversity, population density and economic opportunities but they share similarities in poverty indexes and proximity to university campuses. While the study participants attended a range of schools—religious, independent and state—all of the schools would be classified as what Beach and Sernhede (2011) call 'schooling on the margins'. Furthermore, both areas where the students resided are pathologized and often associated with class pathologizations, with words like 'bogan' and 'feral'. Furthermore, both areas have significant percentages of new immigrants (Chinese, Pasifika) and those from refugee backgrounds (Sudanese, Somali, Afghani).

All of the participants aimed to attend university but not all were able to make university life work for them. Therefore, the book captures the successful transitions, the fragmented starts as well as those who struggled and eventually found a different path, though, for the most part, the focus is on the ones who were able to make university work for them. Regardless of whether they went to university or not, over the three years I followed up each participant. In following up the entire cohort, the aim was to document the experiences which either kept them away from university or incited them to enter university at a later date. O'Shea et al. (2017) write of an epiphany moment that occurs for men in their late 20s and 30s as they decide 'not only to fulfil their own potential but also to explore their interests toward a more satisfying career' (p. 183). Many of the boys who were recruited were the oldest in their family. They encompassed a diversity of masculinities, even when accounting for socioeconomic background: some boys were sporty, some boys were geeky—and some were both.

Integral to their motivation to pursue university was the mentorship from secondary school teachers, their passion for study, cultural pride, and parental and cultural expectations. Integral to their success at

university was their relationships with peers and family, which not only enabled them to see themselves as a certain type of learner but to maintain that view when they encountered barriers. Research continues to emphasize that familial support is integral to academic success where first-generation students come to see themselves as role models but also able to positively access both what the university has to offer and their working-class home lives (Capannola & Johnson, 2020; King et al., 2019). According to Patfield et al. (2020) there are 'degrees of being first', where being first-in-family is not 'a homogeneous, static equity category, but … comprised of students with a wide range of capital reserves who are differently positioned in social space and whose status may change over time' (p. 15). Overall, the participants' stories are tales of resilience and coping, demystification, the development of the self and personal fulfilment.

Studying the boys longitudinally allowed for a consideration of how their aspirations were 'cooling out, warming up, and holding steady' (Alexander et al., 2008, p. 375) as they navigated the university space. In addition to tracking and interviewing the young men, I also spoke with secondary school teachers and members of school leadership teams, leaders of equity programs at two universities as well as a handful of parents. Analysing the experiences of first-in-family men in Australia provides a glimpse of the fluctuating attitudes that indicate the imbrication between meritocracy as an ideological discourse and the wider structural constraints. Alexander et al. (2008), extending the wording of Clark (1960), draw attention to how post-secondary experiences dampen the unrealistic optimistic expectations of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Researching identities *in transition* longitudinally allows for an exploration of identities as both fluid and constrained, where individuals come to occupy different social categories.

Many studies of working-class men entering higher education remain informative but not necessarily transferrable. For example, in contrast to American contexts Australia has no fraternities and sororities and examples of living on campus are rare; this reduces the discursive space and contributes to the social construction of gender norms (see Harper et al., 2005). Most students in Australia regardless of socioeconomic background attend the university closest to their home and tend to live at home, leading to prolonged contact with the familial unit (see Stahl &

McDonald, 2022; Edwards & van der Brugge, 2012). None of the students in the *First-in-Family Males Project* lived in student shared accommodation; one lived on campus and one lived across the street from his parents but both eventually moved back home. As a result, arguably, university felt for some like attending a new secondary school rather than the complete change of lifestyle seen in other studies of higher education. Furthermore, the university experience is always in tension with part-time employment and the lure of full-time employment pulls many away from the extracurricular activities of university life (Stahl & McDonald, 2019, 2022). With this in mind, as young working-class men decide if university is a part of their future, it is important to note that in Australia today trade work (construction, electrical, etc.) is in the third highest salary bracket. Arguably, it is more stable and profitable to secure this line of work than to take the risk of a HECS university loan.

I acknowledge the importance of researchers balancing objective measures with subjective measures when researching class experiences in order to 'provide a more nuanced, articulated, and comprehensive assessment of these complex, context-dependent variables' (Rubin et al., 2014, p. 199). For this study I primarily used semi-structured interviews to generate rich data; however, as a counterweight the participants engaged with the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale upon every meeting to track their resilience over time. Recognizing that the factors that inform one's aspirations are multi-faceted and complex, I did not just focus on the boys' aspirations for their education and future employment. Instead, we spoke about their lifeworlds, their values, their interests and hobbies, as well as their peers, romantic relationships and familial responsibilities. I analysed the data using NVivo coding. As the research was longitudinal, I made efforts to build relationships with the participants both to keep them invested in the study as well as to yield richer data.

Structure of *Self-Made Men*

The research and conceptual work presented in this book contribute to three main areas of academic scholarship: (1) international studies of widening participation; (2) research in the sociology of education

investigating social mobility/aspirations; and (3) critical studies of men and masculinities specifically in regard to (classed) masculinities, identity transitions and societal change. The data and analysis speak to key areas of interest for those interested in widening participation, specifically: the transition from secondary school; the first-year experience; access to formal and informal support; representation of non-traditional groups in education; and gendered and cultural experiences of higher education. What aligns the analysis throughout the text is how the moral and affective dimension of class (Sayer, 2005) inform the production of selfhood and how masculine subjectivities become affectively embodied, maintained and regulated (see Allan, 2018; Reeser & Gottzén, 2018). My interest is in not simply how one comes to aspire but how aspirations are maintained in relation to the act of self-making—or self-crafting—as the participants take their first steps to becoming socially mobile.

* * *

Chapter 1 sets the stage with a genealogy of working-class masculinities, education and social mobility, addressing the substantial history of working-class masculinities in education and highlighting where there have been certain theoretical blind spots. Echoing other scholarship, I contend there has been an overemphasis on a singular and narrow version of 'working-class masculinity' rather than attention to the variety of ways working-class masculinities respond to and experience various elements of institutional and social change. Setting the foundation for the analysis to follow, I address theorizations of working-class masculinities within the last ten years which draw upon a more intersectional approach, which nuance the identity dynamics of everyday life and consider the influence of neoliberalism on masculinities.

In Chap. 2, I discuss the Australian higher education context and the nature of inequality. While inequality persists, I recount substantial efforts to widen participation and some recent equity policies initiated by the Bradley Review in 2008. To illustrate efforts to increase the representation of traditionally under-represented groups in higher education, this chapter concludes with a consideration of meritocracy, masculinity and

the Australian 'fair go' grounded in 'civic virtues such as fairness, openness and egalitarianism' (Plage et al., 2017, p. 318). As I am interested in the subjectivities my participants present, an analysis of discourses of class and equality in Australia is an essential underpinning.

Chapter 3 presents a foundation for exploring social mobility, masculinities and the first-in-family experience through contemporary research on social class, affect and social mobility. Many of these approaches, which gained popularity over the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, were strongly influenced by Bourdieusian concepts, specifically the acquiring (and maintaining) of capitals, symbolic violence and the internalization of class. In the second part of this chapter, I build on theories of class and affect, drawing on recent feminist research theorizing class as formed *in* and *through* identities, agentic practices as well as historic discourses, rather than a simple reflection of present financial capital and occupations. I draw on conceptual work which considers how identities are worked on and embodied, and subjects come to inhabit them, often in relation to feelings of self-worth, injustice and moral evaluation. I contend that attending university is an affective experience for first-in-family males which involves changing the self. This chapter concludes by presenting the theoretical framework regarding self-crafting to critically consider how they become self-made men. My interest is in how they engage in *self-crafting* and how they adapt and perform identities in relation to their capital(s). I present self-crafting as a practice informed by many aspects of sociological theory and demonstrate how both conceptual work on social class and studies of masculinities have informed its development.

* * *

Part II of the book presents the findings from the *First-in-Family Males Project* using the concept of self-crafting to interrogate empirical data regarding the participants' transition to university. Studies of widening participation tend to focus on key barriers (money, geography, time) and enabling factors (e.g. peer/parent/teacher influence) which determine the success of certain equity groups. Approaching the data thematically, the participants' 'identity work' concerning their selfhood and sense of value remain the central focus as I consider how these young men transition to

university life and/or their various forms of employment. Chapter 4 focuses on the transition to university where the boys experience dissonance and validation as they begin to produce new forms of selfhood. People, regardless of their circumstances, are increasingly expected to validate and legitimate themselves as 'subjects of value' (Skeggs, 2004) who have both the capacity and resources to accrue value in order to become active citizens within the discourses of 'success' and 'failure'. The 'subject of value' is always constructed through a process of symbolic legitimation, as the 'educated person' is culturally constructed within, outside and against dominant institutions (Levinson & Holland, 1996).

Chapter 5 concerns how the boys perform the entrepreneurial self, a form of selfhood privileged in the university space. The entrepreneurial self is a common term in scholarship on neoliberal subjectivities where the self—in order to be respected—must commit to an existence focused on capitalization through calculated acts and investments (du Gay, 1996; Davies & Bansel, 2007). Working-class men grapple with the complexities of performing the active entrepreneur of the self, which contrasts greatly with traditional working-class values (Reay, 2002; Stahl, 2015). Performing new forms of selfhood often requires a disassociation from working-class identities of solidarity and egalitarianism.

Adding a layer of complexity, Chap. 6 focuses on how the boys present subjectivities of value and fulfilment in relation to their experience with education. Fulfilment and empowerment, as affective processes, inform the boys' sense of self and the subjectivities they present. While they certainly experience genuine moments of fulfilment in their acclimatization to university life, I consider how this sense of empowerment may be false—or fragile—and, therefore, not durable at this stage in their education. Chapter 7 is the final empirical chapter where I consider the participants' change in identity alongside the shifting dynamics between the two primary social groups informing their sense of self: the peer group and the family. How the boys see themselves and their aspirations in relation to these groups provides a deeper understanding of how first-in-family males transition to university, a process which occurs in tandem with the shift from boyhood to manhood.

* * *

Engaging working-class males in their education, specifically higher education, remains a matter of international concern. Many studies of men from non-traditional backgrounds cite that they are often academically unprepared for the demands of university (García-Louis et al., 2020) and they may grapple with feelings of isolation despite receiving constructive support (see Stahl et al., 2020; Reay et al., 2005). Part III of the book serves as a synthesis where, looking across the *First-in-Family Males Project* and considering the boys who were able to make university work for them, I propose some policy considerations for improving the experience of working-class males entering higher education. My analysis and recommendations centre on what—in light of the empirical data—gives these boys traction in the higher education space and complements work on enabling pathways programs for non-traditional students (Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Harvey, Andrewartha et al., 2016; Pitman et al., 2016).

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Part I

Masculinities, Class, Education

2

Upwardly Mobile Working-Class Masculinities

Setting the Stage

A study of how first-in-family young men, often from working-class and working-poor backgrounds, negotiate their transition to university requires a careful consideration of how working-class masculinities have always struggled with education as a pathway to advancement. I am interested in the barriers young men encounter, the capital they come to embody and the ways in which they perform new identities to ensure their success. As these young men leave secondary school and enter the world of work and study, they exist in a liminal time between boyhood and manhood where they experience increased levels of independence and responsibility. To address the identity and equity issues informing the *First-in-Family Males Project*, this chapter recounts a brief history of working-class masculinities in education and current theorizations which seek to delineate important shifts in working-class masculinities specifically in relation to *upwardly mobile* working-class masculinities. The second half of the chapter focuses on recent developments in Australian higher education as well as how notions of egalitarianism structure discourses in Australian society.

Research on upwardly mobile masculinities has drawn attention to the difficult balancing act associated with becoming upwardly mobile (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame, 1997; Giazitzoglu, 2014; Ackers, 2020). For example,

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Ackers (2020) focused on working-class men's life stories in the wake of deindustrialization and problematized existing sociological research. Ackers (2020) argues that the tensions that men experienced were not exclusively the consequence of 'habitus clivé'; instead the main tension was the generational pressure from their fathers to improve their position in society through employment. Many fathers communicated '"double messages" to their sons that suggested they should move up without forgetting the values of their working-class backgrounds' (p. 892). A significant dimension of upwardly mobile masculinities is the othering of those from similar backgrounds who did not capitalize on the opportunities available to them (see Giazitzoglu, 2014). This highlights that the construction of the active 'entrepreneur of the self' (Du Gay, 1996) is formed relationally—where upwardly mobile masculinities are seen as active in contrast to what is perceived as stagnant (Stahl & Zhao, 2022).

Morgan (2005, p. 171) writes that 'one of the key features of a class system, as opposed to feudalism or a caste system, is its relative openness and the degree of mobility, both social and geographical, that is allowed'. Along with this, there is not only a perception of openness but also an expectation to become mobile. Morgan notes that historically clerical workers and bank clerks 'initially were associated with "respectable" men until these occupations became feminized' (pp. 168–169). This is important because the notion of the breadwinner—the so-called provider who was in the public sphere—is ever salient to the production of masculinities (Whitehead, 2003; O'Shea et al., 2017). Considering our increasingly globalized world where the class parameters are murky, Morgan (2005) extends his point further by asserting that 'Even where a man may feel that he has fallen short of his responsibilities as a man (reflected, perhaps, in notions of dishonor or unmanliness), the standard by which he is seen to have fallen short remains relatively clear' (pp. 175–176).

Many social theories have been used to investigate men and masculinities (see Hearn & Morgan, 2014). Recently attention has focused on post-structuralist theories which seek to de-couple gender and bodies. Holter's (2005) conceptual work posits that gender research and theory creation must 'go beyond a static structure–actor division' and find ways to connect society to the individual or, more specifically, illustrate how society and the individual exist in a dialectic (p. 16). Gender

performances and identity work are positioned in relation to social practice, where it is common to refer to the patterning in social relations as structure. Though, as Connell (2000, p. 24) notes, 'as one looks at the detail of interactions and institutions, it is clear that gender is not just one structure. For instance, different patterns emerge in emotional relationships from those that can be seen in economic relationships.'

In this book I am selective in my approach to gender theory. The analysis does not engage much with some of the commonalities in research on masculinities. For example, there is very little consideration of hegemonic masculinities, subordinate masculinities or masculine hierarchies (Connell, 2000), though I accept such social constructions become the socializing agents shaping young men's sense of self and identity. Hegemonic notions of masculinity are subject to change (Adegbosin et al., 2019), though the extent of the change remains a fragmented picture (Stahl, 2017b). Instead, what is privileged throughout the analysis is how class and gender work in a dialectic, mutually informing way.

To conclude, I again draw on the work of Morgan (2005) on class and masculinity where he asserts 'class contributed to both a unified sense of masculinity and more diffused, perhaps more conflictual, models of masculinities' (p. 169) and that 'class experiences and practices pointed to different ways of being men, different ways of being constituted as effective social actors' (p. 172). For Morgan, this informs the continual efforts in masculinity studies to 'pluralize "masculinities" [recognizing] that ways of doing masculinity are always mediated through other social divisions, of which class remains one of the most important' (p. 172). With this in mind, the social exclusion of working-class men should not be considered 'a simple one-dimensional product of these young men's cultural context' as it must 'capture the complex interweaving of multiple categories of being' (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2013, p. 33). I contend that analysing upwardly mobile working-class masculinities involves a consideration of the internal contradictions (the conflictual) and the plural (mediated by social divisions). As Collinson and Hearn (2005) write:

> Masculinities (for example, white, gay masculinities or black, middle-class masculinities) can carry internal contradictions between elements confirming or undermining power and identity. Indeed, it may be difficult

> to address these contrary processes through the notion of 'hegemonic masculinities.' Other concepts, such as manliness, maleness, and manhood, may be more appropriate in different historical and cultural contexts. (p. 302)

Social theorists understand this and have endeavoured to document the complexities. It is my hope this book both complements and extends this important work. Furthermore, as educational policy appears staunch in its refusal to recognize the diversity of masculinities (instead they are presented as a homogenous mass; see Mills et al., 2007; Kehler & Martino, 2007), it is also my hope the work serves as an important counterpoint to policies which are reductive in nature.

Working-Class Masculinities, Education and Social Mobility: A Brief Genealogy

As students move through their educational contexts, intersectional identity vectors (class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality) widen and deepen as they encounter new experiences. These transitory experiences compel young people to be reflexive, perform subjectivities and construct new narratives of selfhood. This chapter presents a genealogy of working-class masculinities in relation to their experiences with education. While the middle class[1] tends to enjoy a greater synergy between their own lifeworlds and those of dominant societal institutions and structures, and hence benefits from a privileged ability to know, understand and play the 'game', working-class men have their experience shaped by a lack of synergy as well as certain persistent gender norms (e.g. the 'macho' male, the breadwinner). Furthermore, while the expectation of social mobility today is increasingly grounded in pervasive neoliberal discourses, working-class men grapple with the complexities of performing the 'active entrepreneur of the self' (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 252; see also Du Gay, 1996)

[1] For the purposes of this text, class is mainly theorized as heterogenous (e.g. a diverse middle, working or lower classes). Occasionally, for analytical purposes, it is important to speak about a singular class category, which was more common particularly in research on class from the 1960s and 1970s.

which contrasts greatly with traditional working-class values (Stahl, 2015; Skeggs, 2011).

Sociological investigations of higher education have been dominated by Bourdieu's concept of capital, particularly habitus and social capital, which has highlighted the role of immediate social networks (families and peers) on students' decision-making and achievement. However, this traditional view is currently being challenged in youth studies by attention to the significant changes in the informational and social landscape which young people experience. The analysis that will inform later chapters is grounded in scholarship that highlights that inequalities are not only reproduced through material differences but are also produced at the lived, embodied and emotional levels of subjective and affective experience (Skeggs, 2002). While class-based analysis and recognition of the importance of social networks remains robust in the field of widening participation, this view of youth networks is currently being challenged and extended by changes in both the informational and social landscape of youth. Young people today, arguably, are negotiating many different and conflicting sources of influence, from those close to home to digital 'influencers' in the social media sphere (Abidin & Gwynne, 2017), which has significant implications for the formation of their identities and aspirations.

'Hooligans', 'Rebels' and Silences

Working-class masculinities have always been associated with notions of rebellion against institutions of social control and conformity; furthermore, they are often defined in reference to violence, hedonism, hooliganism, machismo/laddish behaviour as well as the rejection of authority (Hayward & Yar, 2006). Interrelated with this, as Morgan (2005) notes, class struggle and conflict have always been informed by an iconography of traditionally masculine imagery and masculine symbols.

Writing of working-class boyhood during the years 1889 to 1939 in England, Humphries (1981) sought to personalize the often 'depersonalizing imagery' of the working class as living an impoverished lifestyle, engaging in gang activity, 'larking about', etc. As working-class young

men construct their identities against the various forms of social control (policing, schooling, reformatories), Humphries (1981) emphasizes there exists a longstanding 'ideological assault upon working-class youth culture that sought to reproduce and reinvigorate capitalist society by instilling habits of regularity and conformity and by inculcating attitudes of dependence on, and deference towards, middle-class adults' (p. 239). Such depictions, often stemming from a Marxist analytical approach, are linked to an often-romanticized form of heroic resistance against class control. Furthermore, these acts of rebellion are often characterized as having a certain anti-intellectual flavour where working-class males are depicted in an ongoing struggle with their education with a keen interest in embracing manual labour over mental labour. Sennett and Cobb (1972) have also documented that there are working-class young men who seek to become socially mobile and how their climb can often cause ambivalence and anxiety as they reflect upon their distancing of themselves from their working-class background.

Many theorists have called attention to the fact that young men who fail at school become deprived of a certain power and status and take up alternative resources to validate their masculine identities. This is perhaps best seen in Willis's (1977) landmark study, *Learning to labor*, which contends that a generational industrial employment history makes education, in the minds of his white working-class male participants, rather inconsequential. Central to their meaning making, positionality and relationships, Willis's lads focus on the social aspects of physicality/practicality, toughness, collectivism, hedonism and opposition to authority. Reflecting back on this work, Willis (2004) writes:

> Through the mediations of the counterschool culture, 'the lads' of *Learning to Labor*, for instance, *penetrate* the individualism and meritocracy of the school with a group logic that shows that certification and testing will never shift the whole working-class, only inflate the currency of qualifications and legitimize middle-class privilege. (p. 173)

In Willis's (1977) study the working-class boys who conform and do well academically, what he calls the 'ear'oles', receive limited attention. These young men resist their class background—as well as the dominant

masculinity structure of the school—and are able to cast themselves in a different light. Willis himself problematically associates them with passivity and conformity. This work draws our attention to the fact that not all working-class boys disengage from their education as they negotiate a wider spectrum of subjectivities. Or, as Connell (2000) asserts, 'Some masculinities are formed by battering against the school's authority structure, others by smooth insertion into its academic pathways' (p. 300).

In Nayak's (2003) scholarship on post-industrial white working-class masculinities in the north-east of England, he emphasizes that the 'Real Geordies' resist global change by accentuating pride of place and securing scarce manual labour as they navigate a changing economic landscape. Similar to Willis, Nayak highlights the generational histories of the young men in his study and, as the employment of their fathers dwindles, they look for other forms of masculine validation, particularly on the football field.

Writing in the US, MacLeod (2009) describes two sets of boys from working-class backgrounds, his mainly African-American 'brothers' and his (mostly) white 'Hallway Hangers', as they experience the end of their schooling and the beginning of their post-school lives. Interestingly, the 'brothers' see their failures as the result of their inability to see that meritocracy is a myth and, as a result, they simply blame themselves when they do not achieve. This contrasts with the identity work of the 'Hallway Hangers' who locate their failure in a complex amalgam of agency and unequal societal structures, where they feel they are denied the American dream. As MacLeod's young men 'negotiate and are formed in the intersection of local and global contexts' (2009, p. 270), he calls our attention to the gendered, classed and ethnic identity work surrounding (dis) engagement with education in line with the boys' lived experience in the context of a restricted labour market.

In this section I do not seek to provide a definitive account of historic analyses of working-class masculinity but instead to highlights some salient aspects. Clearly, there has been an overemphasis on working-class lads, rebellion, and anti-school and anti-social masculinities—what Delamont (2000, p. 96) calls 'anomalous beasts' rendered through 'celebratory' accounts of their strength and defiance (Skeggs, 1992). Furthermore, neoliberal policy enactments and political discourses of

'failing boys' have worked to reframe 'the aesthetics of working-class masculinity [which] have thus become rearticulated as an educational politics of increasing the possibility of surplus value' (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2013, p. 32). To address how first-in-family young men negotiate both academic and gender performativity in their transition to university in Australia today, I now focus on contemporary theorizations of working-class masculinity, which have focused more on understandings of social change and intersectionality.

Contemporary Theorizations of Working-Class Masculinities

There exists a long fascination with working-class masculinities and disadvantage spanning a wide variety of fields from sociology, sociology of education, geography, to critical studies of men and masculinities. Each field has seen a variety of theoretical approaches. Compared to Marxist scholarship on working-class boys (Willis, 1977; Humphries, 1981) researchers today have sought to broaden the use of theory to show that working-class masculinities are fragmented and complex (Jeffrey & McDowell, 2004; Kenway et al., 2006; McDowell, 2012). Current studies of working-class masculinities, particularly in relation to higher education, have adopted a more post-structuralist and intersectional approach to understanding how masculinities are realized in relation to leisure, labour and educational contexts (Woodin & Burke, 2007; Burke, 2009; Warin & Dempster, 2007). As social spaces and social conditions continue to change, this can have significant consequences for how men learn to *become* or *be* men.

However, while scholars have sought to document these changes, they have also highlighted that certain attachments persist. For example, it appears that, regardless of socioeconomic status, cultural background or country of origin, the role of the masculine 'breadwinner' continues to have tremendous salience for the identity construction of boys and young men (Weaver-Hightower, 2003; McDowell, 2004). There exist pervasive notions in society of what it means to be a man and embodying masculinity as masculine power 'is largely exercised through self-regulation and

self-discipline—a process of "identity work"' (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001, p. 17). And by conducting themselves in reference to these gender norms, male domination and power differentials are reproduced. Kimmel (2008) writes that young men 'hear the voices of the men in their lives—fathers, coaches, brothers, grandfathers, uncles, priests—to inform their ideas of masculinity' and that they ascribe to these ideals because they want to be validated by other men (p. 47). Adams and Coltrane (2005) describe how boys become men through 'incorporating ideals of dominant masculinity into their own gender schema' (p. 232) where certain conceptions of selfhood become reaffirmed, rebuffed and rescinded.

Finally, in a study of what it means to be considered a 'real man' in contemporary Australia, Adegbosin et al. (2019) draw on a large data set of men from a variety of backgrounds living in Queensland and conclude that a prominent feature of masculinity is a 'sense of *coherence* between how someone looks, how they think and how they act' (p. 566). While they did not explicitly consider notions of social change, Adegbosin et al. (2019, p. 559) document the strong feelings men have about responsibility for their family and the importance of leading ('setting an example') and being an economic provider ('managing finances').

Anderson (2012) and Christensen and Jensen (2014) have argued that the field of masculinities requires new tools to explore how social change and its consequences are experienced. Understanding the overlapping economic, social and cultural shifts is paramount. In the contemporary post-Fordist economy, working-class young people experience significant challenges in terms of what can be realistically obtained. The current hegemonic neoliberal discourse, which prioritizes a view of aspirations that is competitive, economic and status based, shapes the subjectivities of young people. Such negative descriptions construct subjectivities but also, simultaneously, compel working-class young people to draw on historical assemblages of historic working-class dispositions, what I have referred to as efforts to 'reconstitute, reaffirm and (re)traditionalize' identities (Stahl, 2017b). These dispositions, arguably, have been reconceptualized in the post-industrial, post-austerity landscape, though this remains largely disparate. While pluralities of masculinity may exist (Aboim, 2016)—intertwined with ongoing social change—these pluralities exist alongside the policing of normative boundaries (see Harper, 2004; Stahl, 2016, 2017b).

In reflecting on how performances of masculine subjectivities are formed in relation to social change, McDowell (2020) describes severely disadvantaged young working-class men as embodying 'the characteristics and attitudes perceived as appropriate in the interactive service sector in which deference, self-presentation and the performance of servility and civility are prized' (p. 975). Placed at a disadvantage in attaining the breadwinner role, McDowell (2020) writes, '[w]ith nothing to lose, young men may exaggerate the attributes that exclude them and resist the label of failure' (p. 977). Furthermore, my previous work (Stahl, 2015) has documented a serendipitist disposition in working-class young men (e.g., 'what will be, will be', 'making do', or 'waiting and seeing') where teachers and school administrators continually expressed frustration at what they perceived as apathy toward education. My argument is this is not apathy per se but a complex intermeshing of a class-based 'fear of success' or 'fear of failure' overlaid on the figure of the reluctant schoolboy.

Finally, in his ethnographic work with low-socioeconomic-status boys in the Bronx, Alexander (2017, 2019) proposes that a 'future neoliberal masculinity' grounded in the accrual of financial and symbolic capital will speak to boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds whose 'partial and multiple narratives of future selves' will be informed by a masculine neoliberal self (2019, p. 40). Alexander highlights that young disadvantaged men are strategic—operating often with limited capitals—in their performance of a version of neoliberal selfhood that often masks the internal struggle. Those who are struggling in such a performance are adept at giving the appearance of the successful neoliberal subject. As some of the young men in Alexander's study did advance themselves through their education, they rationalized their guilt about leaving their local communities through a sense of wanting to do well, to give back to the Bronx once they have achieved success.

Masculinities, Neoliberalism and Schooling

In the last five years, there has been a budding interest in the relationship between masculinities and neoliberalism (Cornwall et al., 2016; Stahl et al., 2017; Francis, 2006). Embedded in neoliberalism are the tenets of competition and risk that require agents to perform their individuality in

order to become neoliberal subjects. We know that within current neoliberal regimes, which promote a 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), the aspirational self is oriented toward the enterprising and self-regulating individual who can adeptly navigate various hazards and insecurities. As an extension of human capital theory, neoliberalism functions as a political, economic and ideological system which foregrounds the market as the most efficient mechanism for distributing resources. It sets up a macro-level structural framework the emphasizes individual duty over government responsibility (Reay et al., 2005; Weis & Fine, 2012). The neoliberal discourse sees each individual as malleable, constantly made and re-made to position oneself more advantageously. We are all in a process of self-making, a management of the self.

As we are all expected to become 'entrepreneurs of the self' (Du Gay, 1996)—independent consumers of the market—we must grapple with exchange value, striving to find and increase our value in whatever field (Skeggs, 2011, p. 508). Neoliberalism privileges the theory of reflexive modernization in which traditional conventions of femininity and masculinity can be reinscribed in new ways (see Adkins, 2000; Kenway & Kelly, 2000) and where historic gender-based inequalities exist *simultaneously* with changing expectations (Adkins, 1999, 2000). How gender theory speaks to and is informed by sociological work on individualization remains uncertain (Francis & Skelton, 2008). McLeod (2002, p. 212) describes 'contemporary gender identities and relations becom(ing) emblematic, representing in a kind of idealised form the possibilities of a self cut loose from tradition and required to make itself anew'. While we have seen remarkable change in gendered forms of selfhood and there certainly is an expectation to 'cut loose', there are notable limitations: while agents may be engaged in efforts to individualize, it may never be fully realized. This has a particular salience when considering how certain normative aspects of working-class boyhood and girlhood require continual reflection, especially for those young people who seek to become socially mobile. Arguably, the subjectivities of young men living within this neoliberal moral system are in a 'process of becoming' as their notions of success are contested. As Skeggs (2011) asserts, 'working-class research respondents re-legitimate value practices that have been de-legitimated' (p. 507).

Ball (2006) draws our attention to the ways in which neoliberalism compels us, as subject citizens, to perform. According to Ball we are all caught in a web of 'measures of productivity or output, or displays of "quality," or "moments" of promotion or inspection' which influence our sense of 'the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement' (p. 692). Within an era of neoliberal governance, new social identities are created according to new logics of what is valued; many of these identities are fabrications, Ball (2006) notes, as we are caught up in the game. A neoliberal prerogative is the erasure of social identities. Instead it positions agents as equal players who come to understand themselves as subjects who are responsible for the production of a self. Those who fail to manage risk are held solely responsible for their life 'choices' and trajectories. In a neoliberal era, agents are required 'to invest in an affective orientation towards the future that is self-reliant, competitive and entrepreneurial: they must propel their own social mobility for the good of themselves, their families and nation' (Bennett & Southgate, 2014, p. 38).

Another aspect of neoliberalism is the expectation that everyone should capitalize on whatever capitals they have, however meagre, in order to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. One end result of this is that working-class young people buy heavily into neoliberal meritocratic notions of success. As a result, they also buy into the expectation that they will attend university when university may not be the most appropriate place for them or even necessary to their future goals. Furthermore, many working-class students who are unaware of the nuances of Australian higher education may drop out after the census date[2] only to accrue debt, thus being charged for their 'failure'. In considering how men buy into these meritocratic notions, I want to reassert the connection here between neoliberalism and the role of 'the breadwinner' which remains integral to Australian society despite post-industrial change (see Kenway et al., 2006; O'Shea et al., 2017). After all, in our society today, universities trade on the promise of employability.

[2] The census date marks the point in a study period that students become financially liable (responsible for the fees) for the course they are taking.

Becoming Men in Times of 'Crisis'

Philosopher Harry Brod (1987) in *The Making of Masculinities* laid a foundation for theorizing masculinity as a product of social norms and values which, naturally, change over time. In the period that followed this, scholars like Connell, Kimmel and Hearn promoted the view that masculinity is 'a social construction that is a product of social forces, with specific forms of masculinity being idealized to the extent that they serve to support social order' (Heasley, 2011, p. 238). Such an approach foregrounds a consideration of how masculinities are actively constructed and accomplished in everyday actions and practices within institutions such as families, sports, schools and employment (Connell, 2005b; Kimmel & Davis, 2011). Kimmel and Davis (2011) argue that the construction of masculinity is structured by rituals, ceremonies and practices.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the field of studies of masculinities has sought to document significant societal shifts in economic and gender relations which have resulted in fragmented rites of passage (employment, marriage) and which have, arguably, placed the working-class male in a position of confusion that has been conflated with the alleged 'crisis of masculinity' (Faludi, 1999). A central feature in this 'crisis' rhetoric is the 'loss of essential male' or 'loss of manhood' which has led theorists to express concern that some scholars are using a rhetoric of loss to justify, rather than to explain, certain contemporary masculinity identity practices (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Kimmel and Davis (2011, p. 13) assert that 'young men are coming of age in an era with no road maps, no blueprints, and no primers to tell them what a man is or how to become one'. Where during industrial times a working-class male's trajectory was often predictable and expected (Willis, 1977), today this is less true. As traditional social structures have disappeared, particularly for young men from working-class and disadvantaged backgrounds, they are required to negotiate new gendered patterns within rapidly changing discourses of aspiration and masculinity (Mac an Ghaill, 1994, 2000; Weis, 1990, 2004; Nayak, 2003, 2006). Gilbert and Gilbert (1998, p. 46) assert that:

> Becoming a man is a matter of constructing oneself in and being constructed by the available ways of being male in a particular society. It is a matter of negotiating the various discourses of femininity and masculinity available in our culture, those powerful sets of meaning and practices which we must draw on to participate in our culture and to establish who we are.

Considering the formation of masculinities during a liminal time of adolescence in relation to certain social spaces and social conditions remains an ongoing and important project. We know males often draw on certain historically validated dispositions, such as social solidarity, in the production of their gendered, classed and ethnic subjectivities inside and outside of schooling (Stenning, 2005; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Pye et al., 1996). While masculinities, as a topic of scrutiny, remains salient there has been less of a focus on how men realize their masculinity in relation to their educational trajectories. Education—particularly post-compulsory education—in western societies has become increasingly infused with notions of self-improvement and furthering oneself, and there exists a pervasive expectation that young people *consume* education to expand their opportunities.

However, before addressing the relationship between working-class males and education, it is first important to discuss the moral panic concerning boys' 'underachievement' in schooling (Griffin, 2000; Smith, 2003) and the debates which continue over the figure of the so-called 'failing boy'. In his analysis of the 'boy turn' in education, Weaver-Hightower (2003) argues that there have been four main strands to the debate on boys' education: popular-rhetorical, theoretically oriented, practice oriented, and the feminist and pro-feminist. Epstein et al. (1998) identified separate discourses used in the popular and academic press to explain boys' educational underperformance: 'poor boys', 'boys will be boys', 'at risk boys', and 'problem boys'. These discourses have framed key debates in gender theory concerning boys, leading to certain policy initiatives focused on boys as an equity group as part of a 'recuperative masculinity politics' committed to addressing the perceived feminization of schooling and its alleged detrimental effect on boys, or what Epstein et al. (1998) call schooling 'smothered in matriarchal values' (p. 7). To counteract the decline in boys' academic attainment, the Australian

Government proposed a number of initiatives, of which the most significant was *Boys: Getting it right* (*House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training,* 2002). This key policy document contended that boys' engagement in schools would be improved through an increased focus on 'boys' learning styles'. This report has been heavily critiqued for its generalized solutions for all boys rather than understanding how boys' educational experiences are shaped by school quality, locality, relationships with parents, capitals, ethnic identity, sexuality and so on (Mills et al., 2007). This was followed by initiatives such as the Department of Education, Science and Training's $8 m *Boys Education Lighthouse Schools* project (2003–2005), and their $19 m *Success for Boys* program (2006–2007).

Research has indicated that another consequence of the so-called 'crisis of masculinity' has been a lack of focus in many schools on encouraging young men to develop a broader definition of what it means to be male. Schools may promote a narrow and often problematic version of masculinity, both explicitly and implicitly (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003), which can negatively influence how boys come to understand themselves as learners. It is widely acknowledged that boys' experience at schooling is greatly improved when schools are inclusive of a wide variety of masculine identity performances. Imms (2007) highlights how the school curriculum and organizational structure contribute to notions of boyhood (e.g. 'all-rounder', 'jock') which are confining and problematic, though his research also highlights the dexterity of young men to adapt, albeit within the constraints of their aptitudes. When policies shift from 'learning styles' toward pedagogies which seek to inspire young men to problematize conceptions of masculinity, men are encouraged to verbalize emotions that are more aligned with traditional femininity (e.g. empathy, care) and critique notions of 'toxic masculinity'. Interestingly, in the USA, the American Psychological Association has recently published new Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men which aim to 'help boys overcome school-related challenges' through challenging and transforming 'constricted notions of masculinity'.

In focusing on the uneasy relationship between working-class males and education, it is important to acknowledge that the conceptual work on working-class masculinities today has also sought to problematize a

narrow version of 'working-class masculinity'. For example, in Australia, recent scholarship has questioned how contemporary working-class masculinities respond to and experience social change (Adegbosin et al., 2019). Intertwined with this agenda, there is a strong intersectional research imperative to consider identity vectors that significantly contribute to how working-class boys come to understand themselves as learners and as aspirational subjects (Archer et al., 2007; Blake et al., 2015). The identity work of working-class young men does not exist in a vacuum and is significantly influenced by the immediate and shifting social milieu. Archer and Yamashita's (2003, p. 120) study of inner-city masculinities shows how boys' dialogues:

> combined globalized and localized discourses that cross-cut ethnic and national groupings … [where] identity constructions combine traces of various social, historical, geographical, and cultural elements, and indicate the shifting nature of masculinities, which are created and recreated across time and context.

Given the attention to social change and the importance of intersectionality, in this chapter I seek to move beyond understanding classed masculinities as what Morgan (2005) has labelled the 'masculinities of class' or 'the class of masculinity'. Instead, in considering a genealogy of working-class masculinities in relation to boys' experiences with education, I now briefly explore historic representations of working-class masculinity, the so-called 'rebel' and how this has contributed to contemporary scholarship. The overemphasis on rebellion has arguably led to certain silences—a narrow ontology for how we understand the diversity of working-class masculinities.

'Doing Boy': Schooling and the Production of Masculine Subjectivities

Connell (2005a) speaks of adolescence as filled with 'contradiction, distancing, negotiation, and sometimes rejection of old patterns, which allows new historical possibilities to emerge' (p. 24). Much of these

negotiations, affirmations and rejections occur in relation to the school, where young men spend most of their time. Heward (1988, p. 39), a historian, describes early twentieth-century schools as a 'masculinity factory' where boys were socialized in accordance with competing ways of being a boy. According to Whitehead (2003) the school setting is both a conduit for dominant discourses and a vehicle for the validation of a particular form of masculinity, where, as Connell (2000) notes, the curriculum and school practices produce a gendered regime and the patterning of gender relations. Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2013) write:

> Particular spaces in which schooling acts as a masculinizing agency can be identified. These include processes and practices in the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment technologies shaped by patriarchal power relations, the occupation of geographical space, teacher ideologies and representations within the labour process of teaching, and student peer group cultures of accommodation and resistance. These processes and practices are played out in relation to interconnecting identity positions of class, ethnicity and religion. (p. 8)

A longstanding body of research in Australia on the production of masculinities has identified a conflation between effeminacy, masculinity and academic achievement (Whitehead, 2003), which results in what is called a 'homophobic construction of academic achievement' (Plummer, 2001, p. 65). As Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997, p. 122) point out, an 'academically-oriented masculinity' is denigrated. Recent contemporary conceptual work has focused on feminization in schooling. Swain (2005) argues that researchers should 'explore how masculinities suffuse school regimes and recognize how schooling not only *reproduces* but also *produces* gender identities, although not always in ways that are either straightforward or transparent' (p. 214). More recent research by Lusher (2011) contends that the social status of boys and peer validation is not necessarily at odds with academic achievement and boys may often choose to associate themselves with friends 'of similar levels of academic application to themselves' (p. 670). According to Swain (2005):

> Boys negotiate and perform different versions of masculinity in a range of social and cultural situations, such as families, neighborhoods, schools, sport, popular media and culture, commodified style cultures, labor markets, and so on, and each of these sites offers boys ways of constructing appropriate ways of being male and possibilities for forming views of themselves and relations with others. The meanings, ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that are generated in each area interrelate and are carried over to the others, but this chapter sets out to consider the education system and, in particular, how school processes and the meanings and practices found within the school setting contribute to, and help form, young boys' masculinities. (p. 213)

Drawing on post-structuralist and postmodernist approaches to examining schoolboy masculinities, Mac an Ghaill (1994) identified two categories of upwardly mobile working-class boys: the 'Academic Achievers' who engaged positively with their education in an effort to ensure their upward mobility and the 'New Entrepreneurs', who identified strongly with technology developments. The 'Academic Achievers' were not consistent in being 'unambiguously pro-school' and instead they were focused on 'the projected future of a professional career' (pp. 59, 63). In contrast, the 'New Entrepreneurs', who were focused on the high-status capital of technology work, invested in 'a new mode of school student masculinity with its values of rationality, instrumentalism, forward planning and careerism' (p. 63).

Theorizing how masculinities alter in relation to wider social change and specifically in reference to place, Hopkins and Noble (2009) write of

> shades of masculinity—sacrosanct, subversive and scorned—in which questions of the spatial embeddedness of male practices in local places, processes of cultural endorsement, intergenerational change (especially between fathers and sons) and patterns of leisure and consumption produce diverse masculine hues. (p. 815)

Adding another dimension to the investigation of schoolboy identities, Reay's (2006) research in a working-class London primary school documents how 'cleverness marginalizes students within the male peer group', where hard-working academically inclined working-class boys—who are

labelled the geeks—are socially excluded (p. 344). As boys engage in classroom life, they become embedded in social hierarchies that are often closely linked to curriculum domains and their academic achievement. At the top of these hierarchies is what Skelton and Francis (2012) call the 'all-rounder', the high-attaining, popular boy who is more comfortable publicly displaying his enjoyment of feminized subjects (e.g. literacy) but only if 'their "masculine credentials" is clearly established (p. 447; see also Scholes, 2019). Such a subject positioning of masculinity, according to Skelton and Francis (2012) facilitates the production of 'boys' behaviours as masculine, in spite of their simultaneous performance of aspects of subjectivity which might otherwise be read as "feminine" (e.g. their compliance and engagement with pedagogy, high achievement—and indeed, their enjoyment of English)' (pp. 449–450).

This raises the issue that there exist many ways of *doing boy* but also, simultaneously, restrictions around the identity performances which are acceptable. Swain (2005, p. 215) contends that there are 'different options and opportunities to perform different types of masculinity in each school; in other words, there are different alternatives, or possibilities, of doing boy that are contingent to each school setting, using the meanings and practices available'. The most obvious difference due to the school setting is that boys in single-sex schools may have a significantly different frame of reference than those attending co-educational establishments. Running concurrently alongside these institutionally validated ideals is what Swain (2005) describes as the 'most urgent dimension of school life' for young men, namely gaining popularity, where 'the search to achieve status is also the search to achieve an acceptable form of masculinity' (p. 218). With this in mind, Swain is clear that academic success for boys involves 'management' of what he sees as 'fundamentally incompatible' sides of the spectrum, where they negotiate a 'cool cleverness' that allows them to vacillate between academic labour and being teased or mistreated (p. 219).

Recent research by Scholes (2019) on boyhood and literacy highlights the complexity in working-class boys establishing and maintaining a learner identity. Becoming a reader at school, according to Scholes (2019), 'is not a pre-determined' and instead involves 'interacting and negotiating within the boundaries of gender norms embedded within

institutional arrangements, influenced by the immediate and broader social relations in which individuals and groups function' (p. 347). Drawing on the words of the boys in her study, she illustrates the power of the peer group, the parents, the school culture and the teachers to influence working-class boys' acquisition of literacy. Furthermore, how working-class boys become literate directly influences their aspirations, highlighting that they are able to make acute connections between their learner identities and their futures.

Whitehead's (2003) research calls attention to how both working-class and middle-class boys struggle with being perceived as intelligent, although the reasons for this could come from wider societal discourses as well as school cultures. However, working-class boys do 'move away from the classic "macho" mode of working-class masculinity towards a more middle-class notion of masculinity centred on competitive achievement' and it is entirely possible schooling may 'modify working-class "anti-intellectual" notions of masculinity' (Whitehead, 2003, pp. 290, 304). As I have noted in previous scholarship, working-class schoolboy subjectivities are caught up in this phenomenon as well:

> I would argue shame and fear are intertwined, but there also exist two opposing manifestations. First, the boys clearly have a fear of academic failure and, given their deprived school contexts, their fear is a very rationale one. Second, grounded in their social class identity, they also have a fear of academic success. (Stahl, 2015, p. 167)

Neoliberalism, Class and Gender Subjectivities in Schooling

As the conception of education continues to change, schools are now compelled to reorganize themselves into 'a new ensemble, based on institutional self-interest, pragmatics and performative worth' (Ball, 2003, p. 218). Policy technologies inform how schools conduct themselves, as their organizational culture is increasingly centred upon various forms of commodification, performativity and economization, emulating private-sector management (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Stahl, 2017a). The main

effect here is a school-wide investment in learners who are seen as 'high-achieving' (Wilkins, 2012) or a 'good student' (Archer & Francis, 2007); this is the ideal clientele which can, in some instances, have consequences in terms of funding. Furthermore, many scholars—Connell, Ball, Lingard, etc.—have documented how teachers and school leaders' subjectivities are discursively bound to systems of quantified data. These systems are central to the culture of accountability and inform how schools understand and produce the 'right' sort of citizens.

Schools, as sites of masculinities and femininities, are deeply influenced by neoliberal agendas of choice, which resonate with students who desire 'to shape themselves as cosmopolitan and multiply accomplished' (Skelton & Francis, 2012, p. 454). The rise of testing, big data and accountability has led to powerful changes in how education is structured and delivered. Accountability structures have led to pedagogic shifts inside the classroom, where school processes have become increasingly neoliberal and standardized which, in turn, influences how learner identities are formed (Francis, 2006; Wilkins, 2011; Stahl, 2015; Scholes, 2019). As the 'active entrepreneur of the self' (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 252) is held up as the only acceptable aspirational trajectory in global educational policy today (Spohrer et al., 2018), we are just beginning to learn about the ways in which masculinities interact with such a powerful discourse. Within widening participation policies, 'Aspiration is a neoliberal form of hope', where neoliberalism sets the agenda for what needs to be aspired to and the proper forms of selfhood (Bennett & Southgate, 2014, p. 38). Furthermore, the neoliberal restructuring of employment influences the precarity and scarcity of work, making the masculine 'breadwinner' increasingly rare despite the concept's continued salience for the identity construction of young men entering adulthood (McDowell, 2004).

To nuance neoliberalism, I again draw on Morgan's (2005) theorizing of masculinities and social class. Class carries with it an expectation that one will do the best one can do with the capitals available, where failure to operationalize such capitals appropriately carries with it a sense of shame and risk of failure. This can, depending on circumstance, become gendered: Morgan (2005) writes of the '"failed" masculinity of the downwardly mobile individual whose failure in class terms may be read as an

indication of a weakness of character' (p. 171). Certainly, when the role of the breadwinner is unachievable for whatever reasons this can cause significant issues for men's understanding of themselves as men (see Arnot, 2004; Kenway & Kraack, 2004). Walkerdine (2011, p. 256) extends this point further, contending that working-class men find the aspiration 'to better oneself' as 'antithetical to mutuality and solidarity'—both of which are key dispositions of working-class culture.

While neoliberalism reshapes our sense of self and the economic climate, it is also powerful in shaping education. Anxieties regarding academic performance in schooling—structured by neoliberal accountability measures—may lead to boys engaging in what is called 'effortless achievement' (Francis et al., 2010) and 'self-worth protection strategies' (Jackson, 2002). Neoliberalism privileges a narrow conception of acceptable and valued selfhood, though, admittedly, it potentially opens the way for doxic definitions of success to be resisted, contested and subverted (Stahl, 2015). As boys experience the neoliberal, often individualistic, discourses which permeate higher education there are, arguably, more limited discursive spaces in which diverse forms of masculinity are acceptable (Alexander, 2017, 2019; Stahl & McDonald, 2019; Stahl & McDonald, 2022; Scholes, 2019). Perhaps interrelated to this is boys presenting a subjectivity aligned with a 'middle position for themselves in which they could manage what they saw as the demands of masculinities, while still getting some schoolwork done' (Phoenix, 2004, p. 234). In previous scholarship (Stahl, 2015), I have demonstrated how white working-class boys internalize their own feelings of educational failure, adopting a strategy of middling, which I argue is a result of being caught between *fear of success* and *fear of failure*, which can, at times, be paralyzing.

'Raising Aspirations' and Working-Class Youth

Research regarding what upward mobility means for working-class youth continues to draw attention to how their experiences of formal schooling are shaped by feelings of educational 'worthlessness' (Reay, 2001). As working-class youth navigate pathologizing discourses in society, while they are simultaneously expected to adopt the middle-class aspirations

that are pervasive in their schooling (see Spohrer, 2011), it can often be difficult to construct identities that are upwardly mobile. Reay (2013) describes upward mobility as a 'wrenching process':

> It rips working-class young people out of communities that need to hold on to them, and it rips valuable aspects of self out of the socially mobile themselves as they are forced to discard qualities and dispositions that do not accord with the dominant middle-class culture that is increasingly characterized by selfish individualism and hyper-competition. (p. 667)

Exploring the lack of compatibility between educational success and working-class values, Archer et al. (2007) found that working-class young people developed strategies to avoid being negatively labelled for their class background in their schooling—finding ways 'to distance themselves from "poor" identities' (p. 227). As they 'generated value' through an emphasis on fashion and style (Archer et al., 2007, p. 233), these performances could often bring these young people into conflict with their schooling, contributing to the construction of identities and aspirations in reference to higher education.

On a structural level, working-class young people have historically had access to underfunded and Dickensian forms of schooling (McCulloch, 1998; Connell, 1982) which have contributed to generational narratives concerning what school means within working-class culture. These narratives inform the present day where, it is argued, working-class boys often find it difficult to reconcile a working-class identity with educational success (Reay, 2002; Stahl, 2015). Working-class masculinities are culturally constructed and deeply contextual, and 'class remains an ever-present arbiter—if unacknowledged signifier—structuring young lives' (Nayak, 2006, p. 825). Many scholars have called attention to the fact that university students from working-class backgrounds have identities which are devalued in a university setting in comparison to their middle- and upper-class peers (Reay, 2001; Ball et al., 2002). This can lead them to seek what Ramburuth and Härtel (2010) refer to as 'identity-safe' environments where they feel welcomed and supported.

In the United States there has been increased attention to raising aspirations in order to get boys from disadvantaged backgrounds—particularly

African-American and Latino boys—into higher education (Ingram & Coaxum, 2018; Kimmel & Davis, 2011; Nelson, 2016). Ferguson (2016) describes the predicament confronting young men, particularly young men of colour from disadvantaged backgrounds, as 'a tangled web of home, school, peer-group, and societal factors that place BYMOC[3] from every socioeconomic level at risk for underperformance in school and life' (p. 1). Much of this work has highlighted the importance of strategies such as multiple pathways, guidance counselling, and 'college readiness' and 'college match' programs. These strategies often sit alongside arguments concerning the importance of harnessing the collective energy of boys in the realization of identity, recognizing that young men require spaces where they can be vulnerable and open with each other as well as paying attention to the diversity of their experiences (Harper & Nichols, 2009). A prominent theme in the literature is the importance of peer interactions in high school where, as Harris and Harper (2015) note, peers can validate 'expressions and behaviors … consistent with traditional (and arguably narrow) notions of masculinity' (p. 59).

As men transition to university, these expressions of behaviour as practices of masculinity may shift dramatically, causing boys from disadvantaged backgrounds to feel a sense of shock. Exploring how the construction of masculinity is structured by rituals, ceremonies and practices, Kimmel and Davis (2011, p. 11) demonstrate the ways in which young men can be 'outcast, marginalized, or shunned' and how this can lead to silences which, in turn, can lead to destructive behaviour. Therefore, in analysing *upwardly mobile* working-class masculinities, attention to how masculinities are collectively realized remains of particular importance, but so too does attention to feelings of isolation.

Masculinities in Higher Education

The study of masculinities in higher education is a study of institutionalized spaces which foster discursive practices, contributing to how subjectivities are positioned and performed (Archer & Yamashita, 2003). Burke

[3] Boys and young men of colour.

(2009) writes that an 'analysis of men's participation in HE must take into account the differences between boys and men in terms of complex power relations, inequalities and misrecognitions' (p. 81). Scholarship must continue to highlight connections between participants' emotional lifeworlds and the wider societal discourses and institutional structures contributing to their everyday experience.

In the study of masculinities in higher education, there appears to be an overemphasis on research which has focused on how males engage in misbehaviour at university and how they can be fixed (Laker & Davis, 2011; Phipps, 2017). In Kimmel's *Guyland* (2008), describing a liminal time which 'rests on a bed of middle-class entitlement' (p. 10), he presents an argument which centres around the man/boy or the 'lost boy' who finds ways to not take responsibility, a 'topsy-turvy, Peter-Pan mindset [where] young men shirk the responsibilities of adulthood and remain fixated on the trappings of boyhood, while the boys they still are struggle heroically to prove that they are real men despite all evidence to the contrary' (p. 4). Kimmel describes 'Guyland' as a temporal space, uncorrupted by the responsibilities of adulthood, though inhabited by boys who are highly aware of the expectations of adulthood. In his critique, Karioris (2014, p. 227) writes:

> What is left unanalysed within *Guyland* is the ability for men in this university context to feel utterly powerless and trapped within relations and identities which they have no control over, while simultaneously, as (mostly) white college males, having a vast amount of social and symbolic capital. In leaving this undiscussed, it creates a lacuna about the ways that one can look at power and privilege, as well as further sublimating a vision of men's relations untheorized in a broader context. (i.e. race, class, sexuality, etc.)

Connell (2000) emphasizes that masculinities come into existence through people's actions, where masculinities 'are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given social setting' (p. 12). Such a process of production involves negotiation with various societal discourses concerning gender. Furthermore, these productions exist within constraints and normative policing which—for upwardly mobile working-class young men—can lead to internal complexities and contradictions.

Harris and Harper (2015) contend that studies of masculinities in higher education need to pay more attention to the masculine identities and ideals about manhood that inform the learner identities of young men. Drawing on a sample of 68 undergraduate men representing a range of backgrounds and subgroups, Harris and Harper (2015) found that parental influences, interactions with same-sex peers, and involvement in sports were socializing factors informing ideas about masculinity that students brought with them to college. Actually, participation in sports during the precollege years was noted by participants as increasing self-confidence and social acceptance. Amongst their findings, the notion of conformity was foundational to the peer group, as the participants 'spoke of surrounding themselves with like-minded peers who shared their beliefs about the behaviors and attitudes that constituted appropriate, less problematic male behaviors' (Harris & Harper, 2015, p. 57). There were echoes here of the university as a space separate from the gendered pressures of the peer groups present in high school where young men could forge a new identity, but such an endeavour was still aligned closely with masculine norms (e.g. athletic prowess, the breadwinner).

In more recent work from America, Schwab and Dupuis (2020) document the academic struggles of male university students with a specific focus on how hegemonic norms contribute to a culture of silence. According to them, the participants 'had difficulty identifying their own emotions, not wanting to tell others about their academic struggles, and assuming that others did not want to hear about it' (p. 1). Their research captures the complexity of the public and private spheres for young men as they negotiate their identities as learners in a higher educational context. When men reject emotions associated with vulnerability in order to live up to the stoic stereotype, they may suffer from feeling like outsiders as well as endure a variety of negative psychosocial outcomes (Way, 2011; Addis et al., 2016). Furthermore, Schwab and Dupuis (2020), drawing on the work of Bordo (1999) and Norman (2011) regarding the double bind of masculinity, found that young men simultaneously adhere to hegemonic ideals while also expressing a knowledge of how they restrict their choices.

In the last twenty years or so we have also seen increasing attention to the role that ethnic and cultural identities play in shaping the attitudes of young men—especially those who are referred to as boys and young men

of colour (BYMOC)—toward higher education. Research by García-Louis et al. (2020) captures how Latino men not only confront microaggressions in their schooling but also still contend with deficit views regarding their capacity to achieve once they enter higher education, which informs 'the way Latino men saw themselves in relation to education' (p. 3). Administrators believe Latino males' 'machismo' and cultural values around strength and resilience serve as a barrier to seeking help. Harper (2004) studied conceptualizations of masculinity among African-American men on university campuses at six predominantly white research universities. As an ethnic group, statistically two thirds of African Americans who enrol at university do not complete their degrees. He documented not only a diversity of masculine identities but a respect and acceptance among men regarding different identity practices, thus problematizing previously held notions that upwardly mobile men must choose between school achievement and peer acceptance (at least at the higher education level). This suggests that males who were high achievers could co-exist in a mutual discursive space with less high achieving males, emphasizing the differences within ethnic cohorts.

In Australia, O'Shea et al.'s (2017) research on first-in-family mature age students found that those participants who were on the younger side were often attracted to traditionally masculine degrees. They document four main motivations for the younger group—whom they call 'the sons'—who, in applying for university, seek 'direct guidance from their parents; personal ambitions; direct school-based encouragement; and to a lesser extent, the influence of friends' (p. 185). Based on the words of O'Shea et al.'s (2017) participants, their rationales centred around university offering expanded opportunities and an increased likelihood of secure employment.

Delineating the Boundaries of Working-Class and Middle-Class Masculinity

Zweig (2000) argues that class is 'not a box that we "fit" into, but rather it is something reflected in the role we play, as it relates to what others do' (p. 11). The study of upwardly mobile working-class masculinity requires

a consideration of how we have come to understand middle-class masculinity. Delineating between the two requires a social constructionist perspective where masculinities exist in tension with institutions, economics and symbols (see Adams & Coltrane, 2005). As we seek to clarity this demarcation, arguably, the old binary distinctions between a cerebral, rational middle-class masculinity and working-class, hard, manual masculinity are increasingly blurred. For example, we also see evidence of middle-class men performing working-class masculinities (Brewis & Gavin, 2010), though little evidence of the reverse; in contrast, there are several documented examples of working-class women performing middle-class femininities (see Skeggs, 2002; Walkerdine, 2011), highlighting that class may play out differently depending on one's gender identification.

The middle-class self is economically comfortable, fluid within many fields and able to navigate different discourse communities through adopting new selves (Lawler, 1999; Power & Whitty, 2006). Middle-class masculinity has historically remained orientated towards the culture of the school (Tolson, 1977); in contrast it is well documented that working-class masculinities have found their educational experiences to be an uncomfortable fit. Working-class masculinities are established in relation to a middle-class masculinity, where middle-class men conflate masculinity and personal achievement in order to secure a high-status career which requires traits of leadership and competition (Whitehead, 2003). Upwardly mobile masculinities are increasingly evident as advanced industrial societies undergo a transformation into knowledge-intensive societies where 'ever-increasing levels of formal education are considered the necessary foundation for career and life-course success' (Lehmann, 2009, p. 143).

In *The Men and the Boys*, Connell (2000) notes that middle-class men tend to constitute their masculinities through performing identities aligned with rationality and responsibility, whereas working-class young men, who may have struggled at school, often invest heavily in sport and sexual conquests. According to Whitehead (2003, p. 289):

> Middle-class men pursue masculinity in the overriding commitment to work and personal achievement; a high-status career within the professions

> and recognition of their achievements by the community being the ultimate aim. In order to succeed the male will need many of the traits associated with stereotypical masculine, he will need to be logical, rational, decisive, ambitious, competitive, independent, dominant, adventurous and capable of acting as leader.

Goldthorpe (1987), and others, have documented upwardly mobile men attributing their success to their own efforts where 'the dominant reality for these upwardly mobile men … is that of the careers that they had "made for themselves", in their present professional, administrative and managerial occupations' (p. 234). This sits in tension with other work by Miles et al. (2011) which shows how upwardly mobile men—reflecting back on their life course—do recognize their 'success' but take great care to represent themselves as modest (p. 420). This is echoed in work by Walkerdine (2011) on the post-industrial community of Steeltown, which found that working-class men who aspired beyond their present circumstances experienced a 'disloyalty to the traditions of masculinity and also … were shamed for taking work which was embarrassing or feminine' (p. 265).

In more recent research, Giazitzoglu (2014, 2018) documented how, over a five-year period, upwardly mobile men in the north of England embraced new forms of selfhood (see also Giazitzoglu & Muzio, 2020). These working-class men, whom he called 'The Changers', adopt codes of '"corporate" masculinity associated with middle-class, well-educated men' as they learn to play the game, consuming expensive commodities in an effort to perform middle-classness. Giazitzoglu and Muzio (2020) argue that their participants have come to 'accept corporate masculinity as a "doxa"—a taken-for-granted reality—of the firm, and learned to develop appropriate forms of symbolic cultural capital as part of their learning process' (p. 2). Similar to work on working-class women (see Skeggs, 2002), they document the class pathologization experienced by their participants and highlight their resourcefulness as they find ways to position themselves advantageously in the white-collar sector. Some men change their dress or adjust their accent to fit in and many internalize the judgements of middle-class men and come to 'look down on features of their own social class of origin' (p. 15). Giazitzoglu (2014) frames his

conceptual work around upwardly mobile males and their search for 'acceptance, belonging and legitimacy' and the implications of this for their well-being (para 2.5), as they disassociate themselves from their disadvantaged backgrounds (often through pathologizing) and experience prolonged periods of inauthenticity.

On a final point in delineating the boundaries of working-class and middle-class masculinity, education remains a powerful site of identity production where there is an expectation for boys to be academically successful. Schools, as institutions, define the contours of success and failure through the promotion of a form of selfhood, and boys respond by adopting different models of masculinity to suit the place allocated to them in the school's academic hierarchy (Connell, 1989). Or, more specifically, 'the dynamics of masculinity formation become more situational, as local schooling processes and practices institutionalise legitimate masculine values' (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2013, p. 20). Adding another layer of complexity, males carry with them to school certain views about masculinity which significantly influence how they come to engage with the education system. In more recent work, scholars have called attention to how young men—specifically working-class young men—are pathologized from an early age (Entwisle et al., 2007).

Conclusion

Working across a wide spectrum of fields and sub-fields—from schoolboy subjectivities, to educational policy, to working-class masculinities—this chapter has illustrated some of the foundational underpinnings which have shaped the academic narrative and research agenda. Common themes include the importance of the peer group, the 'raising aspirations' agenda, the importance of feeling valued, and how class and masculinity can work as 'compounding inequalities' (Reay, 2006). How working-class masculinities *come to be* in our society is reflective of a wider sociocultural history around the management and disciplining of working-class boys. As disadvantaged young men come to interact with societal institutions, specifically educational institutions which are middle class by nature, they enter into a period of self-reflection concerning what is

expected of them and how they can measure up. In order to properly address how first-in-family males transition to university, the next two chapters focus on the Australian higher education context and consider the role of social class in structuring their sense of selfhood.

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3

The Australian Higher Education Context

Reflecting on increased participation in higher education, Marginson (2018) writes: 'competition between institutions and within disciplinary communities is fundamentally driven by status (prestige) rather than revenues or profitability even though revenues are in important secondary objective as a means to the realization of mission' (p. 269). As in other western countries, the university, as a figure in society, is expected to produce a continual social good. Today there is an increasing expectation that these institutions will have a global presence and actively recruit students from overseas who are charged substantially more. As future-oriented spaces, universities are places where individuals can advance their knowledge and where scholars can research important issues shaping the nation. In Australian higher education, most students are enrolled in degree programs that run for three or more years. The private higher education sector is small and the majority of students attend state-run institutions.

At all levels of the Australian education system there exists increasing evidence of stratification within the Australian population (Whiteford, 2014); the gap between rich and poor is widening (Kenway, 2013). Decisions based on economics now dominate most policies. This is reflected in the 'user-pays approach' to policy decisions, which has fostered a rapid growth in the private schooling sector. The inequalities in schooling influence the curriculum which, in turn, influences aspirations. Students who are fed a diet of a restricted curriculum may opt for

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lower-status courses (see Teese & Walstab, 2009). The reality is that social mobility is not attainable for the current generation of Australian youth (Wyn, 2009) and class remains particularly salient in structuring the lives of young people who are navigating their futures.

Pitman (2020, p. 14) explains that Australian higher education is modelled on the medieval European university, and originally served as 'a finishing school for the elite' before eventually arriving at what is considered a more enlightened and holistic model of higher education that we know today. From an early stage the egalitarian principles of Australian society were clearly present in the formation of the university, including 'the notion that men and women of all classes could enter through their gates', provided they met certain standards (Pitman, 2020, p. 15). Since the 1980s Australia has experienced an 'ascent of a neo-liberal and neo-conservative higher education policy, which has redefined education and training as an investment in human capital and human resource development' (Zajda, 2020, p. 48). The university model is now tied to the market-driven imperatives of economic globalization and profit-driven management. This is, according to Zajda (2010), done at the expense of a humanistic education.

Furthermore, while policy promotes widening participation, Bennett and Southgate (2014), among others, note that how students are positioned in these policy documents is problematic and not socially just. Noting two subject positions—the cap(able) individual and the proper aspirant—Bennett and Southgate (2014) make an argument that these represent a 'neo-liberal subject who possesses "natural" ability, hope for social mobility and has a highly individualised and entrepreneurial disposition' (p. 22). Such policy language and framing simply 'reinforces older meritocratic discourses about who deserves to go to university' in which 'educ-able-ness is posed against an absent, abject Other who lacks the higher educ-able-ness' (Bennett & Southgate, 2014, pp. 29, 32).

In order to understand how first-in-family males become socially mobile through their education, I will recount some of the key trends and policy drivers in the Australian education system. Many higher education spaces are now governed by neoliberal agendas (marketization, revenue accrual), and the Australian university sector is no exception. However, there have been substantial efforts to widen participation. I will recount some recent equity policies initiated by the Bradley Review in 2008.

Snowden and Lewis (2015, p. 587) highlight that the 'marketing and mediatisation of higher education contribute significantly to decision-making about higher education participation'. Arguably, the first-in-family students who were a part of this study acclimatized to university life in a 'mixed message' higher education context where it was often assumed that 'students from low income families don't value or attend university, but go to TAFE in order to get a job' (Snowden & Lewis, 2015, p. 591). With the onset of massification of higher education, one could argue that university prestige is becoming a key factor in distinguishing between graduates, with significant implications for employability (see Chesters, 2015). The analysis presented in this book carefully considers what the modern university experience looks like with specific attention to online learning, large cohorts, etc. The onset of online learning allows first-in-family students to work longer hours and take more ownership of their learning, which is advantageous in the short-term but also involves sacrificing making the long-term social connections—or social capital—necessary to secure the long-term employment they desire.

Recent Equity Policies in Australian Higher Education

Drawing on Bourdieu, individual trajectories are not random. Instead Bourdieu (1984) emphasized that pathways are influenced by capitals, dispositions and opportunities:

> To a given volume of inherited capital there corresponds a band of more or less equally probable trajectories leading to more or less equivalent positions … and the shift from one trajectory to another often depends on collective events—wars, crises etc.—or individual events—encounters, affairs, benefactors etc. (p. 110)

In considering the relationship between collective events and social mobility, Kupfer (2015, p. 5) calls attention to factors which enable social mobility, namely individual motives, educational systems and societal structures, with each needing to work in tandem. Researching, education, identities and upward mobility, Kupfer contends that 'upward mobility is

a phenomenon of social change' and 'it is itself a social change because individuals leave their original milieu and enter new ones' (p. 56). Echoing Bourdieu, her argument is that specific social conditions influenced her participants' aspirations and presented opportunities which allowed them to become socially mobile. This is directly relevant to the widening participation agenda in Australian higher education over the last twenty years.

Basically, reforms in Australian higher education in the late 1980s sought to open up tertiary-level education to a larger and more diverse section of the population. Policy initiatives have been structured around certain indicators of success such as access, participation and retention. Coates and Krause (2005) point out that six equity groups identified in 1990 remain the target of performance monitoring and university equity programs. These include people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, people from rural/remote areas, people with a disability, people from a non-English-speaking background, women, and Indigenous people (p. 36). Lately, these equity groups have been subject to critique for obscuring the intersectional and compounded elements of disadvantage.

A Fair Chance for All?

Schooling in Australia is highly segregated along social, ethnic and racial lines (Gale & Parker, 2013a, b; Lamb et al., 2015). Also, according to the Gonski Review on school funding, the quality of schooling available is distorted by severely inequitable funding structures (Kenway, 2013). This is confirmed in recent analysis of Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) data, which indicates that school attributes (i.e. school type and student diversity) are responsible for almost 20% of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) variation between students (Gemici et al., 2013).[1] The participants in the *First-in-Family Males*

[1] The ATAR has been widely critiqued for its inconsistency (Guest, 2016). For example in 2017 it was reported Australian universities admitted 56 per cent of students without relying on their ATAR (Singhal, 2017). However, while it is clearly problematic, every boy in the study believed from the outset they had to secure the necessary score to get into their university and program of choice. Some were only later made aware that the university would assign them bonus points, thus securing their entry.

Project came from a variety of schooling contexts, which were variable in terms of quality, though all participants received very little career counselling, which had implications for their trajectories.

In providing a historical account of widening participation and changing conceptions and practices of social justice in Australian higher education policy, Gale and Tranter (2011) document the shift from elite to mass education, highlighting the Whitlam government's public investment in higher education and the Dawkins (1988) White Paper, which amalgamated universities into 37 mostly large and diverse institutions. The number of Australians who desire to attend university has ebbed and flowed over time with a particular downturn in the 1970s (Marginson, 2018). However, from the 1990, *A Fair Chance for All* was conceived within the broader Dawkins recommendations, which aimed to radically change the undergraduate experience; it was 'focused explicitly on access and representation, advocating the need for composition of the student population to reflect the broader population' (Harvey et al., 2016, p. 6). This substantial emphasis on widening participation has continued to the present, altering what university has come to mean in Australia today.

Gale and Tranter (2011) argue that *A Fair Chance for All* provides the foundation for the policy framework for student equity in Australian higher education today; however, it has also promoted the adoption of a 'more pervasive economic rationalist, or neo-liberal, understanding of equity and higher education' (p. 38). While a user-pays ideology still exists, in the continuing national debates over equity and how best to widen participation, there has been discussion of lowering admission scores for some courses as well as modifying the repayment threshold to make university a more appealing option. What has been side-lined are issues of quality pedagogic instruction and strategic governance. The end result is, however, a more diverse student body which, according to Pitman (2020) and many others, 'has challenged understandings of what knowledge is, how it is constructed, and whether these new forms of knowledge are to be embraced by universities as an opportunity, or resisted as a challenge to their authority' (pp. 14–15).

Equity Groups, the Bradley Review and Marketization

The final report of the Bradley Review of the university sector, commissioned by the Australian Government, argued that it was economically imperative to widen the participation of under-represented groups in higher education (Bradley et al., 2008). Pledging that, by 2020, 20% of undergraduate students should be from low socioeconomic backgrounds, the Australian Government also asserted that students from such backgrounds require higher levels of support, including financial assistance and greater academic support, mentoring and counselling services, in order to succeed (Cocks & Stokes, 2013). In 2013, the Australian Government announced the discontinuation of a flat-rate distribution of funds to universities. Instead, from 2014, $36.5 million would be allocated to universities and proportionally distributed on the basis of their share of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Gale & Parker, 2013a, b).

Widening participation in Australia remains a fragmented picture where there exists 'differential levels of access and participation by the type of institution (first tier/elite versus other) and degree (prestigious degrees such as medicine versus lower status/social mobility degrees such as nursing or teaching)' (Bennett & Southgate, 2014, p. 23). Zajda (2008) identifies an overemphasis on a human capital approach to higher education, which focuses on 'the productive capacities of human beings as income producing agents in the economy' (p. 45). Describing how the university itself has become a neoliberal space, Zajda (2020) draws attention to the consumer model with a 'focus on accountability, efficiency and ongoing performance surveillance of learning, teaching and research' where 'evaluation of teaching is compulsory for all teaching staff, and is administered in the online mode' (p. 53).

However, despite the push to widen participation, there exist certain silences regarding how these disadvantaged populations experience university life. For example, while there has been a growth in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, it has primarily been in second-tier universities. Researchers have sought to document robust equity and Foundational Studies programs which take place on university campuses

and adopt various strategies to support students academically and socially so they are prepared to enter a degree program. Cocks and Stokes (2013) explain that enabling programs are highly diverse and include 'early school leavers, students with disabilities, refugees on permanent or short-term humanitarian visas, mature age students, students who attained low tertiary entrance scores, students from regional and remote areas, and students from low-SES backgrounds' (p. 25). Sometimes these programs work in conjunction with other equity-based initiatives which focus on certain ethnic groups who are under-represented in higher education such as Indigenous/Aboriginal (see Price, 2012) and Pacific Islander students (see Blake et al., 2015).

Marketing, Branding and Commodification

Since the Whitlam government, universities in Australia have increasingly been part of a market system that rations education through mechanisms of competition (Gale & Tranter, 2011; Connell, 2013). As a result, universities now brand themselves and advertise aggressively to bring in the largest number of students possible. According to Zajda (2020) the higher education sector in Australia has responded in four ways to market forces: accountability, quality of education and training, labour market prospects and global competitiveness, all contributing to a specific atmosphere around teaching and learning. The end result of this neoliberal restructuring is a demand for money. Which can often only be secured through increased student numbers.

Regardless of the university's status or symbolic capital (e.g. membership of the prestigious 'Group of Eight'), these advertisements often privilege a meritocratic vision of selfhood and powerfully influence how individuals come to understand themselves as subjects of value in relation to discourses of employability. This branding can be off-putting to working-class students who do not desire to be the 'best of the best' but instead look for a sense of personal fulfilment through their education. These advertisements present a narrow conception of what learning is and what learning can be. Specifically, learning is always depicted as an investment in oneself and one's future employability; therefore, a failure to learn—to keep up

with the rigour of learning—is a disinvestment in one's future. How universities market themselves can influence how individuals come to understand themselves and what university could mean for their educational biographies. Recognizing that the marketing efforts of institutions have escalated in recent years and that they are now considered essential to secure student enrolment, Snowden and Lewis (2015) note that universities' central message is 'University study leads to good jobs and better pay' (p. 593). This advertising approach, they note, is 'expected to "connect" with the low socio-economic cohorts of potential students, their peers and families and influence decision-making about educational pathways and choices' (p. 595).

Research in Australia on access to universities has provided evidence of substantial differences in higher education participation in different types of universities, specifically for people from working-class backgrounds (Gale & Parker, 2013a, b). Such students are less likely to have the resources, opportunities or networks of people to support their aspirations and 'navigational capacities' (see Appadurai, 2004). Furthermore, despite discourses of 'equity' and 'fairness', scholars contend that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have what Appadurai (2004) describes as 'brittle aspirations' with sparse nodes of experience, social networks, reflexivity and awareness to realize their aspirational journey.

Meritocracy, Masculinity and the Australian 'Fair Go'

In Australia today, there exists a notion of equity, a 'fair go' where, arguably, 'Australianness' is grounded in 'civic virtues such as fairness, openness and egalitarianism' (Plage et al., 2017, p. 318). Indeed, 91% of Australians agree that the notion of the 'fair go', the opportunity to improve one's life through ability and determination, is a core aspect of the Australian value system (Herscovitch, 2013, p. 3). I am interested in how the subjectivities of the participants in the *First-in-Family Males Project* are produced and presented in reference to discourses of meritocracy and the Australian 'fair go'. According to Kapferer's (1988) work on

national identity, Australian egalitarianism defines individual and group differences and is founded on various assumptions about equality. Within Kapferer's conception, the notion that some may be more fortunate than others is taken to be 'natural' and they are seen as more deserving of financial reward or social esteem than those who have 'artificially' achieved economic or social success. However, Kapferer (1988) acknowledges that a significant part of egalitarianism is built on othering, where those not identical in nature—women, Aborigines, Asians, for example—are not conceived as equals and indeed are often thought of as 'naturally' inferior. Therefore, Australian egalitarianism, historically, is skewed in ways which are frequently the very antithesis of egalitarian ideals (Kapferer & Morris, 2003).

Class Discourses and Masculine Subjectivities in Australia

According to Connell (2003), Australian masculinities are associated with 'the convict shaking his shackled first; the heroic explorer facing inland; the bushman plodding down a dusty track; the digger scrambling the slops at Gallipoli' (p. 9). The patterns and practices of so-called 'Australian masculinities' do 'not make much sense until it is seen as part of the history of settler colonialism, dependent on industrialisation, and contemporary globalisation' (Connell, 2003, p. 19). It is difficult and problematic to speak of an 'Australian masculinity', but many would suggest there is a national character that informs gender relations and gender practices. Nile (2000, p. 2) notes that an Australian masculinity is typically thought of as an 'able-bodied white male with very few personal attachments who ekes out a modest existence with honest work'. From a historical perspective, toughness and an anti-intellectualism have longstanding associations with Australian masculinity (see Crotty, 2001). In critiquing what he sees as an overemphasis on working-class masculinity in Australian studies, Crotty (2001) implores researchers to explore other forms of masculinity than the 'convicts, diggers, bushmen, larrikins' (p. 3). In contemporary times, Whitman (2013, p. 52) has argued that notions of egalitarianism overlap with a 'normative averageness' which has been identified as a central

characteristic of representations of Australian masculinity. Whitman refers to the adoption of working-class masculinities, such as the amiable and easy-going 'Aussie "bloke" identity', as 'aspirational markers of doing manhood' (2013, p. 61). Furthermore, Whitman adds an important dimension to how we view the nexus of class and masculinity by contending that the qualities associated with working-class masculinity—the so-called 'bloke'—have been mainstreamed and taken up more generally as legitimating strategies for masculinity.

Studies of masculinity continue to focus on the ways in which 'men's character structures [are] internally divided—even contradictory', highlighted that everyday practices were 'the product of psychological compromises, which were often unstable' (Connell, 2003, p. 12). Collinson and Hearn (2005) refer to the 'unresolved tension' in critical studies on men and masculinities between 'multiplicity and diversity' and 'men's structured domination, their shared economic and symbolic vested interests and sense of unity' (p. 300). In examining the patterns and practices of Australian masculinities, I draw on the work of Walker (2003) which supplies an excellent example which illustrates how wider histories have influenced working-class masculinities. Focusing on working-class boys living in the western suburbs of Sydney and their affinity for cars, Walker (2003) documents how with the decline of manufacturing—which reshaped their relationship to generational employment and their fathers—the young men turned to cars as a way to perform their masculinity, a process of seeking validation. Walker (2003) writes: 'Economic rationalist policies, and the associated de-skilling, have deprived a significant proportion of working-class youth of even more of their already limited resources for consumption, and have devalued their labour power further' (p. 49).

In Australia, the rise of post-industrialization occurred simultaneously with an emphasis on the knowledge economy. Social dignity, which was once integral to how working-class men came to understand themselves and each other in the manufacturing industry, had to be reinterpreted and, as Walker writes, car culture—a 'hydraulic masculinity' (Walker et al., 2000)—was 'an attempt to overcome the injustices and indignities of a social structure that values mental over physical labour' (Walker, 2003, p. 67).

Linking back to the 'fair go', Nichols and Stahl's (2017) research with young men in Australia during the post-school year found the transition from high school into university involves what they call a 'renovation of learner identity' in order to belong, as an 'easy-going' and 'laidback' masculinity becomes less salient in competitive university contexts which emphasize individual responsibility. They documented gender performativities that involved an 'easy-going' subjectivity—a going with the flow, being open, waiting to see what happens, not stressing about it, and not comparing oneself with others who take things more seriously. Arguing that such an attraction to presenting an 'easy-going' identity has consequences for their transition to higher education, this scholarship highlights how gender is performed in relation to culture and, arguably, national cultures. Understanding how subjectivities are produced, as a discursive category, involves a consideration of 'the personal enactment of communal methods of self-accounting, vocabularies of motive, culturally recognizable emotional performances and available stories for making sense' (Wetherall & Edley, 1999, p. 337). So, in considering the 'easy-going' identity, Nichols and Stahl (2017) make connections between Australian male students' performances in higher education 'through an overarching discourse of masculine egalitarianism, which necessitates neither rising above, nor falling below, one's male peers' (p. 173).

Conclusion

Connell (1989, p. 292) writes: 'Research on schooling is usually confined to schooling, and thus has difficulty seeing where the school is located in a larger process.' With this in mind, this chapter has laid a foundational understanding of the policy context which fosters social conditions which, in turn, inform aspirations and produce subjectivities around social mobility (see Kupfer, 2015). What this chapter has tried to articulate is that it is difficult to understand the identity processes associated with upwardly mobile working-class masculinities without a consideration of the social and economic change which has reshaped what education has come to mean both in Australian society and globally today. Furthermore, while efforts have been made to document the shifts in

working-class masculinities—how they adapt or '(re)traditionalize' their identities (Stahl, 2017)—it is important to remain cautious about drawing clear distinctions. Informed by social change, historic conventions of femininity and masculinity, after all, are becoming reinscribed in new ways (Adkins, 2000), which are often undocumented. In examining first-in-family working-class young men entering university through a longitudinal approach, I am interested in how their experiences speak to the various contradictions and paradoxes they encounter and what this means for their identity work as they stive to become upwardly mobile.

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4

Theorizing Social Mobility and the First-in-Family Experience

This chapter draws on conceptual work regarding social class and social mobility—specifically pathologization and shame—to highlight that attending university is an affective experience for working-class young men that carries an impetus to change the self. Many of these approaches, which gained popularity over the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, were strongly influenced by Bourdieusian concepts, specifically acquiring and maintaining capitals, symbolic violence and the internalization of class. As first-in-family males transition to university, where there is often a relentless focus on academic achievement, there is the potential to depreciate 'emotional capital while simultaneously augmenting cultural capital' (Reay, 2004a, p. 69), which can generate 'psychic costs' (Reay, 2005), or a loss of quality of life. This may result in guilt, regret, shame and frustration for students from underprivileged backgrounds, particularly for young men facing certain gender pressures (Stahl, 2015; Scholes, 2019).

'Injuries of Class' and Class as Affective

I introduce this section not drawing on sociological theory, but instead a work of literature. In E. M. Forster's fictional novel *Howards End* (1921), he writes of Leonard Bast, a working-class, poorly educated young man who strives to better himself until, through a series of unfortunate events,

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he falls on hard times. Capturing the dynamics of the inferiority of the working class in turn of the century England, Forster describes Bast in this way:

> *But he was inferior to most rich people, there was not the least doubt of it. He was not as courteous as the average rich man, nor as intelligent, nor as healthy, nor as lovable. His mind and body had been alike underfed, because he was poor, and because he was modern they were always craving better food.* (p. 45)

When he encounters the middle-class Schlegel sisters, they comment that Bast's 'brain is filled with the husks of books, culture—horrible; we want to show him how to wash out his brain, and go to the real thing' (p. 152). As a character, Bast's continual trait is that he desires to become cultured through his education, as if education could compensate for his humble working-class origins. And, on an ironic note, he is crushed symbolically beneath a bookcase—killed by the very thing he desired: *knowledge*. Within Forster's prose, we see some of the affective dimensions of social mobility specifically around authenticity and inferiority. Furthermore, within *Howards End*, education and culture are consistently represented as activities of the dominant class and carry with them the connotation of fulfilment.

Returning to sociological research, in their definitive scholarship on the working-class struggle, Sennett and Cobb (1972) address the 'injuries of class' in which betrayal is often a part of social mobility. Sennett and Cobb (1972) highlight that working-class men feel caught between two worlds; they learn the social milieu, but they take great care with how they portray their background, often alluding to both pride and shame simultaneously. Highlighting that social mobility is an affective process, they write: 'A poor man, therefore, has to want upward mobility in order to establish dignity in his own life, and dignity means, specifically, moving toward a position in which he deals with the world in some controlled, emotionally restrained way' (Sennett & Cobb, 1972, p. 22). Furthermore, as the men they researched navigated the working-class and middle-class borderlands, they both placed wealthier people on a pedestal and simultaneously saw their own cultural practices as ordinary. Focusing

on one individual, called Frank Rissarro, who had married well and had been fortunate in his employment, Sennett and Cobb (1972) refer to him as 'an emissary from a different way of life' who feels he has done 'a good job' and achieved better than his humble working-class beginnings (p. 24). However, while he felt pride there was also a fear of judgement:

> Rissarro believes people of a higher class have a power to judge him because they seem internally more developed human beings; and he is afraid, because they are better armed, that they will not respect him. He feels compelled to justify his position, and in his life he has felt compelled to put himself up on their level in order to earn respect. (p. 25)

Here, Sennett and Cobb capture the complexity of upward mobility in which socially mobile individuals often feel a need to justify themselves as they propel themselves from one class position to another, never feeling fully secure in either—experiencing an imposter syndrome. Furthermore, this sense of unbelonging—this hidden injury—contributes to a continual search for respect and validation. Arguably, a lot of work in the area of social mobility, including my own, is a recasting of Sennett and Cobb's theories in light of neoliberalism. The historic 'neoliberal revolution' has influenced how ideas are 'trans-coded', although such 'ideas have long been inscribed in social practices and institutions and sedimented into the "habitus" of everyday life, common sense and popular consciousness' (Hall, 2011, p. 711).

Extending Sennett and Cobb's seminal scholarship, studies of social mobility have sought to document not only the injuries of class but the gradations of social class, especially between the working-class and middle-class. This scholarship speaks to the conflicted nature of class. In capturing the working-class experience in higher education, Reay (2001) writes:

> Finding yourself within education, no less than losing yourself, is a problematic enterprise for the working-class individual. Finding yourself is all too often simultaneously a process of being found out. And the risks of finding you have very little value are disproportionately high. (p. 343)

Writing in the field of widening participation, Loveday (2015) critiques education as an emancipatory project for the working class, documenting how upward mobility can be a complicated picture for members of the working class as they negotiate a dominant expectation to buy into middle-class aspirations. Lehmann (2009a) asserts that students draw on working-class dispositions to 'assert their middle-class values', which 'not only highlights the continued salience of class analysis in studying educational processes, but also the need to recognize a complexity in class relations that extends beyond traditional class dichotomies' (p. 644).

In the sociology of education, scholars have sought to nuance the injuries of social class. Researching twenty-one working-class students in the US, Hurst (2010) found her participants fell into three main groups: the *Loyalists*, who struggled to fit in with a competitive individualism; the *Renegades* who experienced prolonged feelings of shame and embarrassment when identified according to their backgrounds; and finally, the *Double Agents*, who developed strategies to navigate between the two poles. In an attempt to delineate the severity of class injuries and how they contribute to the lived experience of class, Rollock et al. (2013) researched families with a Black Caribbean heritage who were in professional or managerial occupations. They uncovered five distinct groupings: 'comfortably middle class', 'middle-class ambivalent', 'working class with qualification', 'working class' and the 'interrogators', highlighting that their participants were oftentimes uncertain in regard to inhabiting their class status.

I have written before (Stahl, 2021) about how the critical moments in the lives of upwardly mobile working-class men represent the psychic injuries of class. Arguably, these moments bring to the fore 'feelings of inferiority, their own potential, and their sense of resilience and confidence' (Stahl, 2021, p. 147). However, documenting the injuries and gradations of class has historically underpinned studies of class. For example, Jackson and Marsden (1966) wrote of ambitious, supportive parents who were from working-class families who wanted their children to be educationally successful. They demonstrated how the educationally upwardly mobile child bought into the school's meritocratic values and, depending on the individual, often rejected their own social origins.

Foundational to the affective injuries of class is the moral dimension, the notion that one's moral worth is tied to one's social status (Sayer, 2005). I now draw attention to Skeggs' (2011) conceptualization of personhood[1] as 'social and moral states produced through encounters with others located within relations of production and reproduction' (p. 508) where personhood is produced through the fields that individuals encounter as well as in reference to socio-cultural historical narratives. Linking back to the arguments made by Sennett and Cobb concerning the continual search for respect and validation in one's social mobility journey, Skeggs (2002, p. 1) contends respectability is one of the most 'ubiquitous signifiers of class', and that it is a central way in which subjects are pathologized, informing 'how we know who we are (or are not)'. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) note, the university sector, more than any other educational sector, epitomizes middle-class values. As the boys in the *First-in-Family Males Project* moved into university life they were compelled not only to reflect on their own class background as they encountered those different to them, but to take onboard different aspects of self-hood.

Bourdieu, Habitus and Disjuncture

Bourdieu's theoretical tools supply productive avenues to explore the constitution of selfhood, especially in reference to social mobility. Investigating how agents form their dispositions within the habitus requires researchers to pay attention to the complexity of the habitus, which can be both limiting and generative. As agents become socially mobile, as they seek to go against the grain, they must renegotiate the habitus. As the habitus encounters the field, it carries with it dispositions

[1] Skeggs (2011) uses the term 'personhood' as opposed to selfhood in an effort to avoid 'etymological traps of the terms self and individual' (p. 497). She contends that ideas associated with the self can 'produce singular, contained, individualized models of the social subject, whereas the point of this paper is to suggest a different relationality, a different sociality' (p. 497). The key point is that Skeggs (2011) wants to remind sociologists that there exists forms of person/selfhood that exist beyond those aligned with neoliberal governance and researchers need to 'reconsider the limits of our theoretical imaginaries for understanding the value production necessary to the performance of personhood' (p. 496).

which allow individuals to challenge, resist and possibly overcome social and economic conditions (Bourdieu et al., 1993). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) writes:

> The statistical character of the relationship between initial capital and present capital explains why practices cannot be completely accounted for solely in terms of the properties defining the position occupied in social space at a given moment. To say that the members of a class initially possessing a certain economic and cultural capital are destined, with a given probability, to an educational and social trajectory leading to a given position means in fact that a fraction of the class (which cannot be determined a priori within the limits of this explanatory system) will deviate from the trajectory most common for the class as a whole and follow the (higher or lower) trajectory which was most probable for members of another class. (p. 456)

Bourdieu (1984) here highlights the exceptions that prove the rule. He goes on to further acknowledge 'the inculcation effect directly exerted by the family or the original conditions of existence' as well as:

> the specific effect of social trajectory, that is, the effects of social rise or decline on dispositions and opinions, position of origin being, in this logic, merely the starting point of a trajectory, the reference whereby the slope of the social career is defined. (p. 456)

As individuals come to embark on their slope, and establish themselves away from their class faction, they often find themselves in a double bind which 'they owe to divergent individual trajectories, having, for example, succeeded or failed in the reconversion strategies necessary to escape the collective decline of their class' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 456).

To nuance this further, for Bourdieu, agents are cast as players in the game of value accrual. Here agents reflexively assess the hand they have been dealt and consider how to play their cards to their own advantage. After all, individuals, as card players, are dealt their cards and:

> do not move about in social space in a random way, partly because they are subject to the forces which structure this space (e.g., through the objective mechanisms of elimination and channelling), and partly because they resist

> the forces of the field with their specific inertia, that is, their properties, which may exist in embodied form, as dispositions, or in objectified form, in goods, qualifications etc. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 111)

Furthermore, as agents are presented with opportunities, there is a process of sense making within the habitus, a process of both amelioration and compromise, where the habitus seeks to constitute itself as valuable in moments of crisis. At this point individuals may experience disjunctures and feel like a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). During this time of adjustment, Bourdieu articulates, there can be resistance, though the effectiveness of forms of resistance is dependent on circumstance:

> The logic of adjustment of dispositions to position allows us to understand how the dominated can exhibit more submission (and less resistance and subversion) than those who see them through the eyes, i.e., the habitus, of the dominant or the dominated dominant, that is, less than intellectuals would envision. Having said this, there is no denying that there exist dispositions to resist; and one of the tasks of sociology is precisely to examine under what conditions these dispositions are socially constituted, effectively triggered, and rendered politically efficient. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 81)

In these moments of disjuncture, the habitus is no longer able to easily produce meaningful or reasonable practices, creating the conditions for reflexivity where agents 'often have difficulty in holding together the dispositions associated with the different stages of the given field, and in adjusting to the newly established order' (Yang, 2013, p. 9). In considering how agents become socially mobile, Bourdieu writes of the 'broken trajectory' and what this means for the formation of dispositions in the habitus:

> When this 'broken trajectory' effect occurs—for example, in the case of a man whose father and grandfather were *polytechniciens* and who becomes a sales engineer or a psychologist, or in the case of a law graduate who, for lack of social capital, becomes a community cultural worker—the agent's aspirations, flying on above his real trajectory like a projectile carried on by

> its own inertia, describe an ideal trajectory that is no less real, or is at any rate in no way imaginary in the ordinary sense of the word. This impossible objective potentiality, [is] inscribed at the deepest level of their dispositions as a sort of blighted hope or frustrated promise. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 150)

A habitus in tension, as a conceptual tool and the topic of study (see Reay, 2004b), has the capacity to foreground affective dissonance for those who are experiencing social mobility and the injuries of class associated with it. In considering what this may mean for the journeys of upwardly mobile masculinities, in a study of four generations of French men, Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame (1997) found that fathers communicated 'double messages' to their children about social mobility, reflecting contrary beliefs, which led to a 'dual tension' in the habitus. Specifically, the young men were expected to aspire highly to positions of prestige but, simultaneously, they were aware of their fathers' dislike for those in prestigious positions (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame, 1997). In more recent work, Ackers (2020, p. 907) too calls attention to the importance of intergenerational dialogues to 'authenticate' the pathways of working-class men. Furthermore, in considering the injuries of class endured, Ackers contends that, to mitigate some of the injuries associated with becoming socially mobile, working-class men often adopt a 'getting-on outlook' (p. 892), as a subjectivity, which allows them to justify their trajectories as individualistic pursuits.

Keeping habitus disjuncture in mind, the first-in-family experience by its very nature carries with it the implication of struggle, where students have significant gaps in their knowledge about what to expect in higher education (Lehmann, 2009a, 2009b; O'Shea et al., 2017; Patfield et al., 2020). Furthermore, as they embark on non-traditional pathways, validation from their families and communities is integral to their success. Limitations in knowledge and experience contribute to fragmented experiences at university. As a result what we see is not one standard pathway. As Lehmann (2009b) astutely notes, it is problematic to 'assume that working-class students have a single habitus, nor should we insist on a hegemonic middle-class culture at university and the unavoidable alienation of working-class students in it' (p. 146). Delineating his argument

further, Lehmann documents that first-in-family students often see university as a means to an end, adopting an instrumental disposition to gaining their university credential. To them, a qualification is a necessary step to future employment where, in contrast, for middle-class and upper-class students the university experience is more around maintaining their class position.

Becoming Socially Mobile

Destabilized Identities and Upward Mobility

Sociological, psychological and psycho-social research on social mobility continues to focus on the ways that becoming socially mobile can 'destabilize people's identities as they navigate new social contexts and possibilities' (Destin & Debrosse, 2017, p. 99). Becoming socially mobile, by its very definition, is a recapitulation and re-orientation of one's status, which can generate 'psychic costs' (Reay, 2005). There exists a wide array of research documenting how working-class students struggle to 'fit in' or to participate fully in university life (Lehmann, 2007; O'Shea et al., 2017; Reay, 2001; Reay et al., 2009). The process of acclimatization itself is not one moment in time, but rather dispersed. As this process occurs, their hopes and dreams are realized in relation to their working-class habitus. Lehmann (2009b) notes that the decisions of working-class young people at university are imbued with hope to 'do better' than their parents, and that their journeys 'are still profoundly rooted in class habitus' (p. 141).

Upward mobility necessitates a consideration of middle-class selfhood. For Skeggs (2004a) the 'subject of value' carries with it a middle-class connotation, individualized and always 'accruing through exchange and investment in order to enhance futures' (p. 503). Such a version of selfhood succeeds in appropriating capitals and enters fields with ease and a sense of entitlement, knowing that their cards serve them well. As middle-class young people aim for high-status employment aided by their ability to 'construct and market a new version of an individualised

and reflexive identity', young working-class men struggle with new narratives of performativity, power and value (McDowell, 2012, p. 577). For working-class and non-traditional students, who might not see higher education as a natural part of their journey to adulthood, their sense of success is interwoven with a constant fashioning and re-fashioning of their sense of self in order to 'fit in' or 'stand out' (Reay et al., 2009). Such a process of destabilization—of a habitus in tension—involves a negotiation between 'finding' and 'losing' oneself, or aspects of oneself (Reay, 2001). Therefore, it can be argued that, while academic success requires aligning oneself closely to the embedded practices, values and norms of the university, it is also fundamentally, according to Reay (2001), about the 'erasure' of 'working classness' (p. 334).

Research continues to highlight the importance of social integration for working-class students, where a low degree of social integration at university can lead to low academic outcomes and poor mental health (Rubin et al., 2019). In considering working-class experience, Somers (1992) calls for concepts that 'enable us to plot over time and space the ontological narratives' individuals confront as they come to identify with their class position which is, in turn, integral to their sense of social action (p. 608). Psychologists Browman et al. (2017) focus on how students from low socioeconomic backgrounds perceive mobility and how this may influence their academic persistence. They emphasize that these students often perceive education to be connected to reaching 'a desirable future, characterized by stable employment and a respectable income' (p. 45). Working-class students often struggle to access that sense of belonging which comes more naturally to their middle-class counterparts. Struggling to belong and to maintain social connections can have detrimental effects, as first-in-family students rely on the networks they make at university to counteract the limitations in their knowledge (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Lehmann, 2009a, 2009b).

In reflecting on what sociological research must do, Somers (1992) calls for an increased focus on how social practices are produced through social forces—market patterns, institutions, organizational constraints—as well as wider narratives of the nation-state. In considering how individuals become socially mobile, I draw on the work of Kupfer (2015)

which outlines the dimensions which are critical for generating upward social mobility, specifically individual motives, educational systems and societal structures. These all need to work in tandem for social mobility to occur. Drawing on social theory, Lawler (1999) writes of how socially mobile women seek to 'de-stabilize' their working-class identities acquired in their origins in order to adopt a middle-class identity which, of course, still carries the 'sedimentations of an earlier habitus' (p. 17). On a more psycho-social level, Destin and Debrosse (2017) propose that a change in one's identity is composed of change in three overlapping areas: narrative identity (cohesive sense of purpose, coherent themes); social identity (meaningful association to valued group); and future identity (what they want to be or not be). A narrative identity is one of coherence; social identities are grounded in validation; future identities include the 'images of who people want to become in addition to who they want to avoid becoming' (p. 101). I have written before that, for working-class young men, cohesiveness during transition can be powerful in terms of reaffirming their aspiration to become socially mobile (see Stahl, 2021).

Destabilizing Masculinity

Grounded in a feminist analysis of gender, the research presented in this book focuses on the gendering of social relations and how identities are managed in relation to the structuring of power relations. I am particularly interested in the culturally infused 'patterns and practices of *masculinities* where … one can point to situations where masculinities are indeed unstable or in tension' (Connell, 2003, p. 18). Research and conceptual work in masculinity studies suggests there is evidence of masculinities adapting in response to social change. Masculinity may undergo 'slippages' (Beasley, 2008) or 'hybridisation' (Demetriou, 2001) or be 'softened' (McCormack & Anderson, 2010) as well as reaffirmations of traditional working-class masculine identities (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016). Frank et al. (2003) have documented how white, middle-class men at secondary school, working from a privileged position, are able to intentionally engage in practices that 'define and redefine masculinities

through various counter hegemonic practices' (p. 123), demonstrating that performances are negotiated. For boys from less privileged backgrounds, this adept versatility in identity construction is less apparent.

Investigations into marginalized forms of masculinity and social mobility is not new. In 1928, Park introduced the marginal man theory which concerned men in a 'period of crisis [that] is relatively permanent' (1928, p. 893).[2] Park (1928) and Stonequist (1935) call attention to important aspects of what it means to be a marginal man: such individuals may not be able to rise beyond their marginalization and, if they do, they may become leaders to their group of origin. They may also be rejected by both the dominant and the marginalized group. As the marginal man shares intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples, he may also feel a divided loyalty. Or, more specifically, as Stonequist asserts, 'his ambitions run counter to his feelings of self-respect: he would prefer recognition by the dominant race, but he resents its arrogance' and '[p]ride and shame, love and hate, and other contradictory sentiments, mingle uneasily in his nature' (p. 6). Furthermore, in extending the 'marginal man' thesis, Stonequist (1935) writes that an 'individual's life-organization is seriously disturbed. Confusion, even shock, restlessness, disillusionment, and estrangement may result; a new self-consciousness develops to mirror the newly realized situation' (pp. 10–11). Extending from Park's work, Goldberg (1941) describes the marginal man as 'possessed of characteristic feelings and attitudes of insecurity, ambivalence excessive self-consciousness, and chronic nervous strain' (p. 53).

In 'The birth of the self-made man', Kimmel (2002) writes that part of being a self-made man in 1840s and 1850s America was proving oneself in a public arena, highlighting the continual importance of validation. Kimmel (2002) clearly captures how an integral part of being a self-made man, founded on autonomy and self-control, is proving oneself in a 'public sphere, specifically the workplace … If manhood could be proved, it has to be proved in the eyes of other men' (p. 141). Furthermore, delineating some of the key dimensions of the self-made man, Kimmel (2002)

[2] I note here that the core scholarship on the 'marginal man' thesis contains problematic treatments of race and ethnicity.

asserts there is a shift 'From a doctrine of "usefulness" and "service" to the preoccupation with the "self"' (p. 138). Therefore, when a masculinity comes to engage in processes of self-crafting it is often around a sense of individualism.

In more contemporary research on upward mobility of working-class men, Giazitzoglu and Muzio (2020, p. 2) describe the codes of '"corporate" masculinity associated with middle-class, well-educated men', calling attention to how some change their dress or adjust their accent to fit in and many internalize the judgements of middle-class men and come to 'look down on features of their own social class of origin' (p. 15). This contrasts with previous work which documented how British working-class men in the 1980s and 1990s actively resisted the idea of a career, which was perceived as a loss of control over one's destiny (see Halford et al., 1997; Savage, 2000). In later research, Miles et al. (2011, p. 420) nuance this work, showing that working-class men forging careers in the 1960s demonstrated an 'awareness of their need to establish their own individuality through repudiating the social trope of the instrumental careerist'. They contend that career identities exist in relation to a conflicted sense of selfhood.

Gender, or the performance and embodiment of gender, is an essential part of self-crafting, which can be partially imagined and linked both to the immediate lifeworld as well as the project of the future self. Building on Wetherell and Edley (1999), Connell (2005, p. 24) draws attention to how 'imaginary masculinities are part of the routine enactment of gender', where such imaginaries—which are bound to a sense of normativity—are either embraced or rejected depending on circumstances. Therefore, gender performances exist in tandem with class performances, mutually informing a sense of self. In considering the borderline between working-class and middle-class masculinities, Morgan (2005) draws our attention to the pluralization of masculinities in relation to class and urges scholars to go beyond 'them' and 'us' with a focus on 'a range of finer distinctions, such as those between "mental" and "manual," "skilled" and "unskilled," or even workers in different departments or offices' (pp. 169–170).

Theorizing Class: Pathologization, Shame and the Lived Experience

Scholars interested in social mobility have sought to capture the lived experience of class morality and class normativity (Reay, 2005; Sayer, 2002, 2005), shedding light on how class profoundly shapes individuals' lives. Sociological research on class and education continues to document the differences between working- and middle-class young people, not in terms of ability but in terms of confidence, resources and the support they call upon to ensure their success (see Walkerdine, 2011). While working-class students' experiences with education often involve feelings of educational 'worthlessness' (Reay, 2001) and/or habitus disjunctures, it is important to acknowledge that the habitus can also be used to construct narratives that ameliorate the 'injuries of class' (Bottero, 2009). We know not all young people possess the resources they need to pursue meaningful opportunities in work or education (Hattam & Smyth, 2003), though they are often compelled to be adept self-managers, which can bring about feelings of suffering and inferiority.

Within the field of psychology, social mobility can lead to what those in masculinities and public health call 'John Henryism', where prolonged exposure to stress and sustaining high levels of effort can have physiological costs. John Henry was a fabled Black steel worker, who, according to folklore, won a competition due to his physical strength but soon died due to overwhelming stress and fatigue. Studying the presence of John Henryism in African-American men of high socioeconomic status, Bonham et al. (2004) document that their research subjects had come to 'believe that just about any obstacle can be overcome through hard work and a strong determination to succeed', though such a belief led to significant health problems as the men suffered from hypertension and various other health issues related to long-term stress (p. 737). This raises the significant issue that performing and maintaining an identity associated with strength and tenacity can actually have negative effects.

Aspirations, Value and Social Class

Drawing on a largely feminist approach, the aim of this book is to decipher how young working-class men constitute themselves as valuable and how selfhood is performed as agents move through overlapping and conflicting 'regimes of value' within 'circuits of power' (Skeggs, 2011, pp. 497–507). Aspirations, as MacLeod (2009) note, provide a 'conceptual link between structure and agency in that they are rooted firmly in individual proclivity (agency) but also are acutely sensitive to perceived societal constraints' (p. 139). As individuals construct a neoliberal selfhood as they attempt to become a 'subject of value', they must engage in a process of symbolic legitimation in relation to the dominant (see Skeggs, 2004a).

Social mobility reveals that a 'person's socioeconomic circumstances relate to various aspects of this person's broader sense of self' (Destin & Debrosse, 2017, p. 99). Describing how agents look for coherency, the experience of becoming socially mobile—or upwardly mobile—contributes to a growing sense of uncertainty about their own socioeconomic status and can have implications for one's self-confidence and future direction. Destin and Debrosse (2017) highlight how 'the socioeconomic circumstances and resources that surround people as they navigate different phases of life become inherently connected to their sense of self' (p. 100). Lehmann's (2009a) research on first-in-family students found that his participants constructed themselves relationally to their middle- and upper-class counterparts. Specifically, their sense of self was 'reflected in their beliefs that they possessed a stronger work ethic, higher levels of maturity, responsibility, and independence, and first-hand experiences in the "real world of work"' (p. 639). Furthermore, Lehmann shows how his participants' moral boundaries were intertwined with gaining recognition or justifying their right to be at university.

Ulrich Beck (1992) writes of the 'self' as reflexive, as a project which is always in a state of becoming; Du Gay (1996) extends this point, positioning individuals as engaged in practices of individualization, as 'entrepreneurs of the self'. While the field of sociology has witnessed a conceptual shift as traditional cultural patterns unravel with the onset of

modernization with an increased focus on individuality (see Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992), class remains ever salient, a powerful structuring force in society influencing our subjectivities. Subjectivity here, it should be noted, is always *in process*, not merely accepting the dominant discourses but rather in continual tension (see McLeod, 2000). In considering how aspirations are realized, I do not seek to set up a false binary between individualization on one side and class—as collective practices—on the other. Instead, there exists a substantial intermeshing and muddled picture, which agents must navigate. Regardless of one's class background, the 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991, p. 28) structures dominant discourses, contributing to the frames of reference we use to understand selfhood.

Class is now commonly theorized as formed *in* and *through* identities, agentic practices as well as historic discourses rather than a simple reflection of present financial capital and occupations. Contemporary theorizing of class identities focuses on how such identities are worked on and embodied and subjects come to inhabit them. The analysis presented in this book foregrounds class as an affective process, as agents move within hierarchical social spaces shaped by unequal recognition and various degrees of exploitation. As working-class young people come to occupy hierarchical social spaces which are, in turn, shaped by unequal recognition and various degrees of exploitation, they suffer 'psychic costs' (Reay, 2005). Class difference, therefore, is often explored in reference to the affective dimension where such identity practices can involve ignoring or rejecting wider repertoires of classed hierarchies in order to construct oneself as a person of value (Skeggs, 2002). Reay et al. (2005) write:

> Working class acquiescence, a propensity to accept exclusion or exclude oneself rather than attempt to achieve what is already denied, arises because the dispositions which make up habitus are the products of opportunities and constraints framing the individual's earlier life experiences. (p. 24)

As a result of this process, working-class students adopt certain strategies and identity practices in order to maintain their sense of value (Stahl, 2015). Researching social class requires sensitivity, as language may give rise to emotions of shame as well as feelings of self-worth, injustice and

moral evaluation. In highlighting the importance of class, Sayer (2005) highlight that inequalities are not simply 'mere facts about people; they clearly matter to them a great deal. They are things that they care about, and which make a difference to their well-being, indeed they are crucial to their identity or self-hood' (p. 2).

Investing in the Self: The Practice of Self-Crafting

Returning to Kimmel's (2002) discussion of the 'birth' of the self-made man, he positions this man as a hegemonic figure born in relation to the American revolution, complementing a wider societal narrative which emphasized autonomy and self-control. By the 1840s and 1850s, according to Kimmel, there was a culture of the self-made man in popular biographies and other cultural artefacts reflecting not only the changing times but the expectations around masculinities. Highlighting economic changes in American society after the revolution, Kimmel presents an argument that the self-made man is 'uncomfortably linked to the volatile marketplace, and he depends upon continued mobility'; the self-made man, as an idealized figure, is 'temperamentally restless, chronically insecure, and desperate to achieve a solid grounding for a masculine identity' (p. 137).

In considering the aspirational trajectories of the young men in the *First-in-Family Males Project*, I am interested in how their tales of social mobility reflect societal expectations to capitalize on opportunities but how the practices they engage in sit alongside their gender identity. As I document the identity shifts of working-class boys growing up in urban poverty then transitioning to university, their journeys highlight how they *self-craft* themselves through accessing, accruing and mobilizing their various forms of capital in order to position themselves advantageously and ensure their success in higher education. Foundational to our understanding of how one self-crafts is a liberal model of selfhood, a subject expected—or perhaps compelled—to be successful as an entrepreneurial project of the state (see Feher, 2009; Francis & Skelton, 2008).

As Giddens (1991) astutely notes, the self is something we make of ourselves. In researching student identities in higher education, Keddie et al. (2020) note that growing up during an era of neoliberal reform has produced 'a generation who are crafting their identities and making sense of their educational and employment experiences and choices within the context of neoliberal imperatives' (p. 99). Young people are expected to embody the values of competitive spirit, strategy and drive/grit and, while this is expected at all levels of the education system, it becomes increasingly pronounced as students approach their adult lives. Powerful discourses of employability and 'value for money' significantly influence the discursive future-oriented space of university. These discourses contribute significantly to 'technologies of the self', as selfhood is produced through technologies of power (Foucault, 2000).

Neoliberal performances of selfhood sit uncomfortably with traditional working-class values of authenticity and solidarity (Walkerdine, 2011). Furthermore, while self-crafting may have an agentic connotation, the crafting of the self occurs in relation to gendered norms as gendered subjectivities are policed (Martino, 1999; McLeod, 2000; Paechter, 2006). Connell (2003) writes that masculinities 'are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available' (p. 16). And while there is agency, the process of self-crafting is deeply influenced by the notion of an 'ideal student', which Wong et al. (2021) define as a multidimensional conception which 'constitutes the aspirations and imaginations of desirable student characteristics, which may not exist in reality, particularly as one individual' (p. 2). This also foregrounds the affective aspect of self-crafting (e.g. shame, pride), as young people craft in ways that embody such an ideal and find ways to conceal their deficiencies in relation to this ideal. Therefore, I contend that self-crafting is performed in relation to the wider social milieu as well as institutional contexts but also happens in isolation—therefore it is both a highly social and deeply private endeavour.

We exist in an era not simply of personal branding but of an expectation to self-market (Vallas & Christin, 2018). Focusing on how young people gain access to university, Shuker (2014) documents strategies of self-marketing as the 'process of creating professional projections of an ideal self, which constitute a technology of career progression for the

individual and are associated with some form of exchange' (p. 228). Self-crafting concerns how and in what ways individuals construct themselves advantageously, which requires them to be attune to various currencies. This raises the distinction between skilled crafting vs unskilled crafting, where not every effort made to self-craft rings true. Self-crafting, therefore, concerns the accrual and operationalization of capital but it is also—in and of itself—a capital, especially as working-class men come to navigate new spaces (see Stahl & McDonald, 2019). Furthermore, self-crafting is, arguably, easier for those with a middle-class habitus bolstered by a portfolio of economic, cultural and symbolic capital who are able to navigate diverse spaces effortlessly, with what Bourdieu (1984) calls 'ease'. How the young first-in-family men in this study craft their identities—how they invest in becoming self-made men through their university experiences—involves a continual process of identity negotiation. In this negotiation there can be a loss of a previous self, which can feel debilitating, though this is not always the case.

The school, as an authority structure that distributes social power by authorizing access to higher education, and thus entry into professions (Connell, 2000), contributes to how young people learn what it is to self-craft. On a skills and curriculum level, the intention of school is to make the student body independent and employable. And where there is authority, there is complicity, as a critical mass of young people learn a willingness to play the game which has implications for both selfhood and, by proxy, studenthood. Critiquing the neoliberalization of selfhood and aspirations—the so-called modern biographical project (Rose, 1996)—Walkerdine (2011, p. 256) shifts attention to the power of fantasy and imagination over a rationalistic and overly logical form of aspiration. The capacity to imagine oneself differently directly informs how one comes to craft new identities. There are echoes here of the 'narratives of the self' described by Giddens (1991), which are 'stories by means of which self-identity is reflexively understood, both by the individual concerned and by others' (p. 243).

Based on an amalgamation of conceptual work on gender, class and the self, I theorize self-crafting for young working-class men as primarily composed of these overlapping components:

- Drawing on what Skeggs (2004b) refers to as the 'techniques of self-production' required by the dominant symbolic, self-crafting requires self-management and recognition by a dominant authority. This highlights the importance of recognition (and misrecognition) (Mead, 2021).[3]
- Upward mobility as untangling oneself from a working-class background—a process which is never fully realized and has a strong connection to individualism (Sennett & Cobb, 1972)—and becoming an 'entrepreneur of the self' (Du Gay, 1996) involves self-crafting as part of the tension between working class and middle class.
- Self-crafting involves a striving for autonomy and self-control aligned with masculine norms (Kimmel, 2002), and is a process of social validation.
- Self-crafting, as a relational and a discursive practice, occurs within and in relation to the spaces encountered. In this case, the space of the university compels individuals to embody the 'ideal student' (Wong et al., 2021).
- Self-crafting is integral to establishing and maintaining a feeling of belonging, and a failure to self-craft can lead to feeling inferiority and shame.

Just as there are limits of the totalizing effects of neoliberalism in education, there are also limits to *how* and *when* self-crafting is required. Given the emphasis on widening participation in Australia, often university is more accessible than we see in other parts of the world. The boys in this study did not engage in a formal self-crafting process to secure their place at university through sophisticated personal statements, comprehensive resumes or interviews (see Shuker, 2014). Instead, their application process involved selecting six preferences and being strategic about the order of the six preferences in relation to their predicted ATAR, which is a result of a combination of coursework and standardized assessment.

[3] Mead presents an argument that the Bourdieusian approach to 'personhood' (borrowing from Skeggs' (2011) wording) is also largely dependent on how those around him or her recognize or misrecognize certain dispositions and capitals. Here, Mead provokes debate regarding whether Bourdieu's approach to personhood really aligns with liberal contract theory, though personhood is widely accepted in Bourdieu's oeuvre and Bourdieu-inspired scholarship.

Therefore, entry into university is not necessarily associated with the competitive edge of self-marketing, though university in and of itself was perceived by the participants as a training ground to secure better forms of employment. This is important as the boys began to engage in these self-crafting techniques upon their transition to university, where they needed to renovate their identities quickly within what, for many, was a completely foreign environment.

Conclusion

Aspirations, interwoven with identity work, are affective and relational; furthermore, they are also formed on the axis of what society deems worth aspiring toward. Internationally we have seen increased attention to a raising aspirations agenda for disadvantaged young people, which is problematic considering the gross barriers working-class young people experience in accessing and succeeding in their education. What often gets ignored in this agenda is the considerable sacrifices involved for those disadvantaged young people who do seek to aspire beyond their present circumstances. The policy rhetoric is one of opening opportunities ('pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps') through education, but the academic capital gained through schooling now only counts for so much within a wider game of self-crafting. In critiquing the widening participation agenda, Brown (2011) writes:

> There is undoubtedly emotional risk involved in such work, and a danger that unless WP initiatives attend to the broader emotional geographies of the young people they engage with, they could be setting them up either to failure or to alienation from the people and places that provide them with emotional security. (p. 20)

While the national and international emphasis on widening participation is relatively new, 'emotional risks' and 'emotional geographies' have historically been central to narratives of social mobility (see Reay et al., 2009; Sennett & Cobb, 1972). How socially mobile working-class young people navigate such risks varies greatly, but what is clear is their upward trajectory is not an easy road.

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Part II

Findings

5

The Transition to University: Dissonance, Validation and Meritocratic Subjectivities

Drawing on a feminist approach to the study of gender, the *First-in-Family Males Project* addresses some of the ways in which social relations and practices are gendered as the identities of young men are managed in relation to the structuring of power relations. The focus is on how working-class masculinities are in a *process of becoming* in relation to restricted resources and problematic experiences in their secondary school, which compound class disadvantage (see Down et al., 2018). Exploring patterns and practices of masculinities for a diverse group of first-in-family males, I am interested in how masculine subjectivities are formed in relation to experiences in the new institutions they encounter. Connell (2003a) describes how '[w]ithin the one school, or workplace or neighborhood, there will be different ways of enacting manhood, different ways of learning to be a man, different conceptions of the self and different ways of using a male body' (p. 14). As the study participants transitioned to higher education, we see how their *process of becoming* was influenced by a feeling of dissonance and a search for validation, contributing to how their subjectivities were produced.

The analysis foregrounds aspirations as changing, reforming and emerging, showing how the participants drew on various capitals to ensure their success as they attempted to craft identities which had the right currency. Approaching the data thematically, the intention is to decipher the identity work concerning selfhood as subjectivities are

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realized in relation to enabling factors (e.g. belonging, mentorship, inspiration) and barriers (e.g. money, geography, time). While the focus is on how the boys engaged in self-crafting and changed their subjectivities, I want to begin by capturing some of the context through the lens of their secondary school teachers as well as their parents, both significant determiners of their transition into higher education. One teacher I spoke with, Robert, defined the experience of boys in his school as shaped by a disconnection with their lifeworlds:

> because I think there's just that disconnect between school and what their lives are going to be like. How is doing well in this particular task going to help me later on? They've got a lot going on in their lives as well and they'll take short cuts where they can … we've got a lot of students at this school that their parents are not that supportive, maybe they work night shift and they can't see them when they come home and—or when they leave to come to school and then there's—there's lateness, there's a lot of unexplained absenteeism and a lot of things like that.

Robert here captured some of the class constraints shaping the school culture. School cultures are also highly gendered or, more specifically, the gender constructions embedded in school cultures heavily influence subjectivities (see Frank et al., 2003; Youdell & Armstrong, 2011; Skelton, 1997). In my discussion with another teacher, Mark, he described the ideal male student at the low fee-paying school where he taught as someone who 'is academic and if he's got some sporting background that's even better'. When our discussion turned to gauging how well he predicted the boys in the study would do at university, Mark said:

> Yeah, I think so, they'll be some [of] that, some that'll want to go there and will probably not be successful—will sort of probably have enough of it after six months and move out, but that's not uncommon to most schools.

The young men who volunteered their time and committed to the *First-in-Family Males Project* were largely cast by their teachers as pro-school young men who often had close and inspiring relationships with teachers (see Stahl 2021a, 2021b), in contrast to other students in their

classes. As the majority of students from the high schools the participants attended did not attend university—instead pursuing trade work, service work or TAFE (or a combination of all three) in the years following Year 12—the boys in the *First-in-Family Males Project* represent a chosen minority. Connell (2003a) writes that '[d]ifferent masculinities do not sit side by side like dishes on a smorgasbord. There are definite social relations between them. Especially, there are relations of hierarchy, for some masculinities are dominant while others are marginalised or discredited' (p. 14). As masculinities are socially constructed, they are actively produced in relation often in relation to the ideals of local contexts. At the school where Mark taught, as well as other schools in the study, the staff actively worked with the Year 10 boys to secure them apprenticeships at local colleges:

> 'Cos basically most of them have got to start Year 11 unless they're apprenticed, unless they do full-time TAFE or they get that 30 hours a week full-time job, that's the only reason they're allowed to leave school before they turn 17 these days … Mind you I don't think the Education Department or anybody else follows it up, but –

The result is the cohorts of boys I recruited from often, depending on the school, had spent nearly half their final two years of schooling surrounded by other like-minded young men who may or may not have had similar aspirations, but who certainly valued completing Year 12. Reflecting scholarship that documents the policing and norming of masculinities in schooling (see Martino, 1999; Connell, 1989; Kehler & Martino, 2007) and how masculinities are formed relationally, arguably the absence of more traditional forms of working-class masculinities contributed to how the participants saw themselves, their aspirations and how they crafted themselves as learners.

For those young men who intended to go to university, some teachers lamented that career counselling was lacking, reinforcing the findings of other studies on working-class disadvantage in Australia (Down et al., 2018). In what would have been considered the best school in the study, the boys only had one twenty-minute one-to-one session with a staff member. As a result, I found that students relied heavily on the

information available on university websites, though they did not always have the frame of reference to fully appreciate the nuances and requirements of their intended course. Documenting the experience of working-class young people at university, Lehmann (2009b) writes: 'The pragmatism of their choice to attend university is in the hope for upward mobility. The incompleteness of their information is reflected in the uncritical acceptance of the knowledge-economy discourse and how they discredit alternative post-secondary choices' (p. 141). While the boys were not uncritical, their pathways suggest a certain pragmatism where their chosen courses of study reflected their perceived strengths. Reflecting on what was available in terms of career counselling, and what historically has been available, Robert, a teacher and former working-class boy himself, recounted his own experience:

> I went to a public school and I don't remember any form of careers counselling at all. I just went to university to pick the subjects that I did relatively well at in high school and I just remember—the words that I remember or the message I remember was just get in and once you're in, you're good … once you're in your course no worries. And then I really struggled in my—second year, I think, just because it was actually quite difficult and I needed to really apply myself and that was something that I wasn't really used to doing. So, I don't know if some of these guys will be—I mean, I know that some of them will be in the same boat and I feel like we probably—like I said earlier, maybe we help them a little bit too much.

When I asked Robert to expand on the support structures in place, he launched into a diatribe regarding how the school culture fostered dependence and how this was symptomatic of wider movements in Australian schooling:

> The policy that we … offer in terms of submission of work is give them another crack if they don't meet their deadlines and we're not really setting them up for success in that sense but … Every school does that, public, private and everything in between just playing that game around learning.

Robert's discussion of the 'game around learning' is important here if we are to critically consider the boys as socially mobile. I draw here on the

work of Kupfer (2015) who argues that social mobility—even at a granular level—requires individual motives, educational systems and societal structures to work in tandem. Given the pressures schools are placed under, there is evidence that the young men I spoke with were being pushed through their schooling rather than developing a sense of ownership of their own learning.

Seen as adept students within their school context, the learner identities of the young men were framed by an expectation to 'do well', leading many to feel an obligation to go to university and capitalize on their experience, given how much effort their teachers had put into seeing them do well (see Stahl, 2021a). Loeser (2014) highlights how techniques of selfhood are deployed by young men, as certain modes of subjectivity are embraced, mediated and refuted. Through this process, Loeser (2014) notes how subjectivities 'can successfully be interpellated into the expectations that structure this particular subject positioning' (p. 202). This subject positioning is, of course, performed in relation to *social* and *institutional* patterns, which are developing as well. As individual motives, educational systems and wider societal structures work in tandem (see Kupfer, 2015), the young men come to be produced in certain ways. In speaking about the efforts to widen university participation in Australia, Robert was forthcoming about the ethical tension he encountered as an educator:

> What drives them to university? I mean *we're driving them to university*. That's what we're pushing towards and, unless they've got other people that are telling them to do otherwise, whether they've got family members or whatever say, yep, we'll focus on a trade and if they feel like, okay school is not for me—there's a lot of students here that are just continuing on [into university] even though I personally don't think it's probably the best pathway for them because they might not be suited to it. But they just keep doing it because that's what their parents tell them to do … and yeah I think it's just maybe—just that—not quite sure which direction to take so we'll just kind of keep going with where we're being pushed towards which is university. And I just—I hope that some of these boys don't—I mean I know that they will, they'll go there and just think, 'Oh, this isn't for me.'

At this point, I do not seek to malign the complex work of educators, especially those who work to raise the aspirations of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds; instead my focus here is on how the boys are positioned in reference to a wider policy remit and how they engage in the production of subjectivities aligned with institutional ideals, regardless of what the 'best pathway' may be for them, which is, in and of itself, a shifting and uncertain picture.

Drawing on international research across a wide variety of fields, Connell (2003a) concludes: 'There is every reason to think men's gender identities and practices are likely to be internally divided' and research continues to highlight how masculinities—as social practices and performances—are 'able to change' (pp. 16, 17). Given the longitudinal research design of this study, I was able to glimpse some of the ways the young men changed and also how they engaged in practices which resisted change, reaffirming the identities which had a certain currency in their secondary school contexts. Negotiating feelings of internal division, the boys had to reconcile discourses of individualization with their identities, which were often informed both by the working-class cultural values present in their neighbourhoods and the middle-class aspirations which were fostered by their schooling, nuclear families and extended families. Their transition into university became a process of engaging with networks and boundaries of class (Beck, 1992) as well as reimagining gender identities in reference to new discourse communities. Sociological research has documented a distinct working-class moral code which is historically embedded and focuses on personal integrity and the quality of interpersonal relationships (Lamont, 2000; Charlesworth, 2000). This working-class culture sits uncomfortably with the neoliberal agenda of the school which shaped the aspirations of not only the participants but also their families.

In my dialogues with Melissa, the mother of one participant, Colton, she discussed feeling a sense of anxiety regarding her son's future. She worked as an accounts administrator, while her husband was a small business owner, managing other tradespeople. They were notably more affluent than the other families in the cohort, having benefited from the Sydney housing boom. While she did not want to pressure Colton, who was her eldest son, her words showed that she wanted the best for him:

> You know, we don't want [Colton] to waste these years. You know, I said to him, 'Don't stay at school if you're there just to socialize. You've got to think about what you want to do long term.' Cos it's going to be hard for them, this, these generations going through, it's going to be tough, I think work wise, trying to find a, being able to afford to buy a home, just stuff like, it's hard.

While Colton was often taciturn, in my dialogues with him I did learn he had steadily worked the night shift at McDonald's from the age of fourteen, while earning his retail certificate. Speaking to him at the end of Year 12, when his exams were quickly approaching, Colton described himself as keeping to himself as a strategy to cope with the stress: 'My parents can tell I'm nervous and they try to help but, yeah, I'm really closed off.' As Year 12 draws to a close, the demands placed on families can be stressful and Melissa recounted this story:

> He doesn't have a lot of self-confidence; he has a lot of self-doubt … he came and said, 'I'm finished, I'm done, I'm not, I don't want to stay anymore, I'm leaving.' And I said, 'Well why, what's going on?' He goes, 'I just can't do it.' He goes, 'The pressure is too much.' And we said, 'Like, you know, you just take a step back.' Like, I think he, you know, we don't have expectations of saying, 'Oh you have to go to uni. This is what you have to do.' I mean, I want my kids to be happy. If they're not happy in a job that they love they're not going to enjoy life.

Through longstanding exclusion, working-class values have developed within different 'circuits of value to that of the dominant symbolic', which deeply influences how young people become subjects of value (Skeggs, 2011, p. 507). Here I draw on conceptual work from the UK in which Reay et al. (2011, p. 12) define middle-classness as 'embedded in a range of virtues and positive attributes such as ambition, sense of entitlement, educational excellence, confidence, competitiveness, hard work and deferred gratification'. Connell (2003b) describes how globalization has resulted in an increased diversity of working-class lifestyles in Australia. In the fragmentation, there are working-class parents who are actively involved in their children's education but these parents can often

be wary of pushing as they do not want to run the risk of causing 'emotional rupture' (Connell, 2003b, p. 241). Drawing clear delineations between the working class and middle class remains a challenge interrelated with the fact that each have their own heterogeneity.

The difficulty of demarcating these class boundaries is especially important to consider in reference to becoming socially mobile (see Chap. 3). Melissa's words do not necessarily reflect middle-class values, but instead she seems to straddle both working-class and middle-class subjectivities. It is important to note here that not all the participants grew up in poverty, though the majority resided in or attended schools in statistically the two lowest socioeconomic urban regions in Australia. Those whose parents owned small businesses related to trade work had done well for themselves and were able to get on the property ladder, albeit on the outskirts of the cities they lived in.

Kathryn, the mother of twin boys who were both prefects, who insisted her sons leaving school in Year 10 was 'not an option', felt strongly about encouraging her children to attend university:

> And I wished I had [gone to university] so I really want to encourage them to go on that path and see where they can go … Doesn't matter if it doesn't work, but I'd like them to have that experience and as a career you can probably go a bit further having that piece of paper, if that's what they want. I'm not saying you have to have it or don't have to have it, but I'd like them to have their options open and not say, 'I wish I had.'

Kathryn, a proactive parent, had attended most of the university open days with her sons. She saw university as about positioning them advantageously and keeping their options open, 'You have to get that score or doors are shut in your face quite quickly.'

Drawing attention to the importance of academics, in this instance ATAR, Kathryn was quick to note one of her sons, Levi, was 'sitting seventh in the year for math, he's actually alright. Maybe his mark isn't where it needs to be … but they tell me their ranking is important, so his rank's okay.' Our conversation eventually led to her reflecting on her approach to parenting:

> You've got to lead them on a path and try and encourage them because if no one encourages you to do anything you can get quite complacent and go, oh, whatever, and then you pay the—disappointed at the end of it, so yeah.

Reinforcing the intention to instil a strong work ethic in her children and find ways to increase their employability, Kathryn spoke proudly about how both her sons had part-time jobs. She and her husband felt it was 'important for them to leave school and have a part time job. You can't just sit around and do nothing and it's harder to be employed the longer you leave it too, I think.'

Education as a Value-Constituting Practice

To say education is a practice of constituting one's value fails to capture the complexity. Where someone is educated, how someone is educated, and with whom someone is educated all remain important contributing factors as 'value' and 'education' increasingly become conflated in society. In addressing how education is integral to social mobility—and historically has always played this important role—it is also essential to note that education has always held a redemptive, emancipatory quality for the working class (Lauder et al., 2010). Education, as an institutionalized practice of academic and cultural capital, is how we measure others and how we measure ourselves; furthermore, the resilience and perseverance required to learn suggest that a strong affective element is foundational to what drives us to attain a qualification.

In research on working-class men engaged in the pursuit of social mobility, Sennett and Cobb (1972) assert that their participants felt constrained by their class position and their pursuit of social mobility was really a pursuit of 'freedom' and to a lesser extent 'dignity'. They focus on the men who, in leaving their working-class upbringing behind, lost their direction, 'men whose struggle, while successful on the surface, is eroding their confidence in themselves' (p. 30). What is foundational here is not only the various complexities of both class and identity but how working-class men's journeys via their education become a process of

individualization—and inversion of working-class norms of collectivism and solidarity. This required the men Sennett and Cobb studied to invest their energies in justifying themselves to guard against feelings of shame and self-doubt.

Skipping ahead to contemporary times, education remains a competitive endeavour, which has implications for social mobility. Brown (2013) notes that there is an 'opportunity bargain' between one's classed aspirations and 'labour-market crowding, along with wider congestion problems, as people seek to use the education system to "stand out from the crowd"' (p. 683). This produces what he calls 'social congestion'. Directly related to social mobility and self-crafting, individuals must pursue strategies that give them a positional advantage over others in the labour market because job opportunities have failed to keep pace not only with increased participation in education but also with the expanded middle class. Brown (2013) and many others have documented an important shift in performative identities 'based on a market ideology where it is a winning performance that counts' both in credentials and in what is put on the resume (p. 687; see also Shuker, 2014). If we imagine the social mobility journeys of the men Sennett and Cobb studied in contemporary times, not only would they have to guard against feelings of shame and self-doubt, they additionally would have to craft themselves to produce a selfhood of individualization evidenced by individual accomplishments.

Therefore, in considering the first-in-family experience, we cannot ignore the says in which the educational landscape is becoming increasingly neoliberal, compelling a certain sense of self. The analysis presented in this book works from an understanding that education is a site of value constitution aligned closely with neo-conservative times with directives of accountability, efficiency, profit, etc. The participants in my study, to varying extents, affectively experienced and negotiated these directives. As Ball (2006) writes, 'ratings and rankings, set within competition between groups within institutions, can engender individual feelings of pride, guilt, shame and envy—they have an emotional (status) dimension, as well as the appearance of rationality and objectivity' (p. 694). Directly related to their understanding of themselves as subjects of value, the boys in this study recognized that the scores they attained in secondary school would be a significant determiner of their post-school lives.

Theo, who attended a low-fee-paying school and described himself as ambitious, reflected on the relationship between academic capital and his future aspirations:

> Like my study, I know it pertains to something, I know that my grades are going to go to my SACE and my exams are going to go to my ATAR, I know that that's going to, it's sort of like the process of getting the key to unlock the lock, to get further ahead in life. I mean, you could consider it a sacrifice, but I see it more of like a, you know, like a journey or a path to the end, except the end isn't necessarily the end but rather it's just another level. (Theo)

Theo's words suggest an understanding of how education can open up opportunity ('unlock the lock') in order to become socially mobile ('to get further ahead in life'). However, while the pervasiveness of these neoliberal manifestations are worrisome (see Connell, 2019 for a full critique), the data from the *First-in-Family Males Project* however suggests the performative self is not all encompassing and, while education may be seen as a means to an end, there is also a clear expectation of fulfilment from the experience, as noted in other work on students from first-in-family backgrounds (see O'Shea et al., 2017), though this was not always consistent over the course of the study.

> I'm doing a field that I love studying and at the end of the day, I don't get much money for it [Youth Allowance]. I'm not fussed about the money, it's the experience that I'm more into, it's just being there firsthand, animals and plants and that kind of life, it's fascinating to me, so no money in the world could take away that experience. (Logan)

Many of the participants saw the university as a site of capital accrual both in terms of academic knowledge but also in terms of capitalizing on what they were passionate about, highlighting a dimension of value constitution. They felt a sense of accomplishment in entering university:

> I think—how should I put it? This—it—when I—whenever I like—I go to [the] law school it just kicks in like, 'Oh, wow, I'm actually here.' This is the next step [of] what I've been in—the beginning of the rest of my life. (Jacob)

Universities, as future-oriented spaces, also contribute to the notion that students are setting themselves up for their future employment, 'Yeah, so the reason why I chose [this university] is because it's got a 95% employment rate for the business school' (Campbell). Oftentimes the participants compared their pathway into university and the pathway of their friends into vocational apprenticeships. Beyond the obvious demarcation between manual labour over mental labour, education seemed to offer something in terms of fulfilment:

> Probably if I just went into a trade and just did the trade for the rest of my life, I'd probably be not so fulfilled. I reckon my—in doing—being more fulfilled mentally as well as physically, sort of thing. (Tobias)

However, as time went on they mentioned fulfilment less as the expectation of employment came to the fore. While they certainly conceived of university as a space where they could be with like-minded people and a place that was 'fun' and 'relaxed', prolonged exposure to the university space led to an expectation that they should craft themselves accordingly. However, before I discuss this in more detail, I will focus the boys' many false and problematic ideas about what university actually entailed. Therefore, part of the transition to university for many was a process of undoing the 'myth making' they had been exposed to prior to the start of the university. This is because in Australian secondary schools university is often portrayed as a place where one has to be independent and where there is an unsupportive atmosphere.

> In high school, I was actually scared to go to university because I always looked at it as some scary-looking place where you have to meet new people. It's like starting primary school again when you see everyone. (Manny)

> Yeah, yeah, I reckon in high school, like it felt like something scary, in a way. Like it was something that was going to overwhelm me straight up. (Oliver)

> I think it was because of the nerves, the nerves of not knowing what to expect and me not ever been to university before, I wanted to be prepared for it and prepared for what's going to come, and stuff like that. Whereas

> in high school, I'd been there for five years, so I was think it's alright, I know what's going to happen. Even though I was doing well, I kind of regret that kind of attitude, because I think I shouldn't have been as relaxed at school as what I was. Even though I did enjoy school, and I did do well, I think I should have been more onto things [so] that I was more prepared for university. (Logan)

While the support services available in higher education vary from university to university—and clearly more autonomy is expected from the students—the portrayal of universities at the secondary school level is problematic and, in some cases, causes undue harm. In order to understand how working-class young men transition to university, we need to first understand the significant changes in secondary school education where, increasingly, teachers are under pressure to ensure their students attain their high school certification, and completion rates are publicly available on the MySchool[1] website. Not only do the expectations for institutions to perform trickle down into how people produce their subjectivities, but the pressure to get as many students through their certifications as possible compromises teaching and learning practices.

School Performativity, Spoon Feeding and the 'Rough Ride'

A weakness of much academic research is various forms of occupational blindness; in order to understand the experience of first-in-family males in Australia we need to work across different domains in order to consider their trajectories in relation to both societal and institutional change. Scholarship on widening participation and student experiences at secondary school are rarely in conversation. As previously noted, Australia's widening participation agenda—while not without critique—has been robust. More than any other time in Australian history, non-traditional

[1] The My School website provides information that supports national transparency and accountability of Australia's school education system. Adding some complexity, not every student who earns a certificate gets an ATAR. Furthermore, certain subjects do not count towards the ATAR but are still taught in schools.

students are attending university. However, evidence would suggest that, once they get to university, they are largely unsupported by the institutions and struggle to socially integrate (King et al., 2019). After conducting cross-national social mobility comparisons, Kupfer (2015) calls attention to the factors which enable social mobility, namely individual motives, educational systems and societal structures. While I do not dispute the importance of enabling structures, or the positive work done in the widening participation space in Australia and internationally, this section considers how—in some instances—the participants were set up to fail. In the *First-in-Family Males Project*, many in the cohort experienced a 'rough ride' in their transition to university, an experience which informed their sense of self. As we saw in the previous section, they experienced inadequate careers counselling and, furthermore, many of the boys received bonus points—or adjustment factors—to extend their ATAR. While bonus points are different depending on the state or territory, they are given by the higher education institution and are generally intended to compensate for social disadvantage.[2] This effort to widen participation—and to compensate for the severely flawed ATAR system—runs the risk of having students who are academically underprepared at university.

Due to a variety of factors, Australian schools have seen a rise in what is referred to as 'mollycoddling', 'spoon feeding' or excessive scaffolding. Dehler and Welsh (2014) argue that spoon feeding can leave students unprepared 'for challenge and experience of sensemaking to create their own ideas demonstrated by contextualized knowledge' (p. 887). Spoon feeding is difficult to document and, when considered in relation to the neoliberal pressures schools face, seems to be aligned with a 'dumbing down' of the curriculum—a sense of paternalism—and a shift in ownership, where the teacher takes the lead on the work as opposed to the student. Not only does spoon feeding lead to dependency, it carries a connotation of performativity—of jumping through hoops—rather than deep and authentic learning and acquisition of skills.[3]

[2] Some bonus points are awarded under the equity schemes and some are awarded to encourage students who have studied certain English and Maths subjects.

[3] It should be noted that scholarship on spoon feeding is sparse and what does exist is mainly focused on spoon feeding in the higher education sector as opposed to the secondary school sector.

In exploring the cohort's experiences, my aim here is to emphasize that the remit of education these young men experience is not abstract, but rather integral to their journeys, their sense of self and their understanding of what is possible. Eliya, a teacher who taught in an oversubscribed state school in Sydney, spoke of the tensions involved in working with students living in abject poverty:

Eliya: We're very caring because they need that…And we help them regardless, they turn up to exams without a pen, so they know that Miss will have a pen for me. They are basically just, we hold their hand throughout.

Garth: Mollycoddling?

Eliya: Yes, and it is, the positives and negatives. Positives are because of that they turn up, because it, sometimes it's the only stable place in their lives, the only stability that's there. So they turn up and they know that there are people here who care. On the other hand, I think we disadvantage them because we're not preparing them for the world, our world out there because we do carry their, hold their hands all the way till the end. And then they graduate and we say, yes they've got their HSC but then what happens beyond that? Because they're so, so, so used to being protected and guided and led—they go out there and they are lost. And so that's the disadvantage but then if we try and leave their hand they won't even get there, they won't get their HSC –

In reflecting on widening participation, Eliya's words demonstrate that individual motives and the priorities of educational systems are mutually informing (Kupfer, 2015). To be clear, while the focus of this study is on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, spoon feeding occurs across all forms of schooling (see Kenway, 2013). Furthermore, while practices which would constitute spoon feeding were in full effect, according to the educators I spoke with, part of what informed such an approach was the societal figure of the 'lazy schoolboy' (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Tracey, a teacher I spoke with who taught at an all-boys school, drew on a gender essentialist-approach that holds students in deficit (Down et al., 2018).

> And that they don't—they don't have to go and find things for themselves. We do look after them because they're boys. It's the nature of who they are.

> They won't go outside—'Did you have a mum look or did you have a boy look?' 'Yeah, boy look.' 'Yeah, well you better have another look before I come over there because if I find it –' And it's that sort of thing, for example, they'd be reading something and, 'Miss, the answer's not in here.' 'Would I have given you that if the answer's not in there? If I come over there and I find it –', 'Oh, it's alright, it's alright.' That sort of thing. They're too lazy to read it.

In critiquing the neoliberal assault, Ball (2003) describes how schools have become 'a new ensemble, based on institutional self-interest, pragmatics and performative worth' (p. 218) where the effects of neoliberalism are complex and far-reaching. The end result for the participants is that their transition to university was rough, and a disposition toward dependency became a liability. In the passages below the boys spoke openly about struggling to adapt not simply to the academic demands but how to do things for themselves at university:

> Really overwhelming, like I can't stress that enough. Like I've turned up at classes not knowing what to do, like people have got all these books prepared and I'm like, well how did you know that, and blah-blah-blah, and you know … (Levi)

> I think it would have made a bit of a difference, only because at … they sort of, I don't know, it's like they almost baby you, to the fact that they'll provide extensions, they'll do all this. I mean you can get extensions at uni but you have to ask like weeks in advance, and yeah, it's really only for like if there's a death or there's something major in your family going on. It's not like, 'Oh, I was away because I didn't want to come to school, I get an extension'—it's real reasons. So, I think that's probably one reason. And I think, yeah, a lot of the teachers sort of almost did the work for you at high school. (Isaac)

> I've taken for granted how much high school nurtures you, takes care of you. So I think that's the only things that's really changed, like my perspective, my mind set. You think it's annoying to have all these teachers on your back. At the end of the day that's what—that's what I feel like would help me right now, to have just a reminder, teachers telling you this needs to be done or you should do it like this. The—I'm not saying that there isn't a lot

> of resources in university because there's plenty of resources, lots of staff, faculty, second-year students that I could talk to and what to do, how to do things. But just that someone telling you what to do is helpful. (Jacob)

The contrast between the discursive place of their secondary school and the discursive place of higher education appears palpable. These institutions—each with their own agenda—compel different subjectivities and performances. Masculinities and femininities, as discursive practices, are not fixed but instead evolving based on experience and institutional context. As young working-class men enter the world of higher education, their participation occurs in 'relation to shifting, discursive and intersecting masculine subjectivities' (Burke, 2009, p. 82).

> Probably getting used to actually motivating yourself was probably the most confusing bit because usually you have your teachers nagging but then no one's nagging you other than yourself. (Manny)

> Because unlike high school, they don't really chase you up here. At high school you come in late and they'll be, where is the work, but here it's like, next thing, they move on. So that's when you really get—actually start—have to try yourself to get what you want, which that's around big change … (Elim)

> Yes, actually I think it's—with the content though, like just the surroundings, you'll see like, the style of teaching, stuff like that—it's very, it's very focused on independent-based learning and like do it in your own time. Like I even realized like with the scheduling of classes and stuff like that. It's something even from school, you'd expected to be done for yourself but you have to do it, like you have to do it yourself for it, so you get it done for you and stuff like that. (Tobias)

Elim extended this point further, capturing what he perceived as the difference between his secondary school and his university:

> I think, yeah, in terms of the way you view things or in terms of the way you think, it has changed because the [university lecturers] see it like, one thing I realize…they don't really give you the answers, they—because one of my teachers, you could ask even the simplest question, she would not

> even give you the straight answer. She will go around it only to make it so you can actually be able to think of the answer yourself. So it changes the way you think, which is pretty good. (Elim)

Highlighting a sense of change, Elim's words suggest he found university more fulfilling because the pedagogic aims were more focused around critical thinking. This is not to say Elim did not engage in critical thinking at the secondary level, but his perception of university was that it is a space that will not 'give you the answers' and where people are required to 'think of the answer' themselves. Jacob too echoed Elim's sentiment around a lack of critical thinking at the secondary level:

> Mainly in high school everyone is just there because they kind of have to be there. People doing law in the course are like very keen, very interested. Like, people are asking questions. I remember back in my class in law, legal studies, I don't think that many questions have ever been … we just did the work that we had to do. (Jacob)

While the words of the boys suggest a lack of preparation and a rough start, on a more practical level, many of the boys struggled to adjust to the technological demands. Some did not have internet in their home, placing them at a disadvantage. Mason, who was pursuing a degree in education, described his transition to university as 'being hit by a metaphorical curve ball'. When asked to explain further, Mason called attention to his lack of proactiveness:

> This was partially own fault but I didn't look at the course outlines due dates too much. Initially mostly I printed out the course outlines. I am like, too much to read—still need to do all this other stuff first—I will look at it later. And I ended up being completely blindsided by a Learning Cognition [course] due date—still got it done on time because it wasn't actually that long an assignment but it's just when I get hit by things that I am either (a) didn't think about beforehand or (b) it was my own fault for not looking at is when I think I have a problem. (Mason)

Mason described himself as 'blindsided' with 'too much to read' and absorb. In their research on Latino males, García-Louis et al. (2020)

argue that educators 'must understand that one negative encounter can mean the difference between Latino men's persistence or attrition' (p. 21), highlighting the fragility of their journey. Mason's rough ride did not result in him leaving university, but it did influence how he perceived himself as a university student and his journey as a learner. In documenting the shock felt by first-in-family males, O'Shea et al. (2017) write of the 'assumption that its students are in possession of the requisite knowledge and language to negotiate the systems, processes and content of academic life' (pp. 198–199). Mason's affective experiences of shame and guilt foreground that, as Walkerdine (2011, p. 258) notes, '[c]lassed experience in these terms is deeply embodied, affectively lived and performed within specific practices. Making the transition to higher education is about these issues rather than aspiration.' As a result, he came to see himself in a certain way in relation to the ideals of the university.

Academically Underprepared

There are clear problems with schools feeling compelled to engage in strategies to get students into university regardless of their readiness to undertake such a task. Not only do we see evidence of spoon feeding, the quality of educational course offerings at the secondary level is significantly influenced by social class (Kenway, 2013). Lehmann (2009a) contends that working-class students 'enter a world in which they don't fully understand the norms and expectations and, moreover, in which social class can become a new and perhaps unanticipated experience for many' (p. 638). Many of the boys are unaware of how disadvantaged they are and the transition to university, as a result, becomes insurmountable. Furthermore, as men there is always an underlying societal expectation around independence, resourcefulness and not relying on others; when they encounter significant barriers to their learning they can often self-isolate, exacerbating the issues rather than proactively solving them.

Tranter (2011), building on Teese's important work (2000/2013), documents the stratification of curriculum opportunities in Australian schooling and demonstrates how university selection processes and curriculum offerings in Australia are heavily biased against students from

low socioeconomic backgrounds. Highlighting one dimension of the conflicted relationship between secondary schools and the widening participation agenda, Tranter (2011) writes:

> Despite a long-standing, and newly affirmed, national commitment to increasing the higher education participation of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, the school curriculum continues to entrench social reproduction through a sorting and selecting process that directs post-school opportunities along class lines. (p. 915)

This curriculum reductionism has been noted in other work by scholars (see Siraj & Mayo, 2014) and, while it an impediment, it does not necessarily block the opportunity to go against the grain. Here I want to focus on how some of the first-in-family males experienced these institutional inequities.

> Oh, no, because some of the stuff they did was a bit of the chemistry side, and I have no chemistry knowledge at all, so I was like, oh, what's he talking about? Because the first lecture confused the heck out of me, because I was like, I don't have a clue what he's saying, but I'm just going to nod my head and say yes. (Manny)

Manny, who was studying engineering at university without any chemistry knowledge, really struggled with the academic expectations and should have taken classes at the secondary level to better prepare him. Manny's story—for a detailed account see Stahl (2021b)—is a powerful one. As the eldest son in a Pacific Islander family, Manny beamed with pride upon being accepted to university in the subject area of his choice but found the academic demands too rigorous. He failed some courses, which undermined his confidence, and he eventually switched to an education degree. Manny's experiences compel us to consider how aspirations may be 'cooling out, warming up, and holding steady' (Alexander et al., 2008, p. 375) as working-class young people navigate the university space. Other participants openly discussed feeling out of their depth due to the academic expectations:

> There's also introduction to chemistry and essential chemistry, so I'm in introduction to chemistry, but they haven't split the classes because there's not enough people, so they've sort of skipped that introduction, and it's making my life a bit harder, and I've sort of got to go, alright, so do all that myself. (Levi)

> The biggest shock, oh, probably like, I say the independence. The work is hard—I mean that's because I am doing anatomy and physiology at the same time but it's just—it's up to you to do it. It's not up to anyone else—teachers aren't going to say, hey where's your one-page summary, but if you don't do it you don't do it—that's up to you. (Isaac)

> I found that, on the first day, I found very daunting because I didn't do biology [at secondary school] and my first two subjects is anatomy and physiology and straight to biology I'm just like, 'Oh okay, this is fun …' (Tobias)

Neither Levi, Isaac or Tobias changed courses, though Tobias did end up taking a semester off and returning to his university study which assisted him to gain perspective. The boys drew attention to how unprepared they were for the requirements of their courses but, more importantly, and perhaps influenced by the culture of independence they experienced at university, they placed the onus on themselves to catch up with other more advantaged students in their cohort. Logan, who attended an elite university, saw his rough ride as a constructive learning curve, reflecting his positive disposition to most experiences in life:

> The first semester, it was a little bit tricky, just warming up to it, because there was a lot of concepts that I hadn't previously known, and just trying to learn them, do a little bit extra research to figure out what those concepts were. Yeah, the first three weeks it was just a little bit tricky trying to warm up to it, and find out this new information that we didn't quite learn in Year 12. And then eventually once I got into, like, a pattern of researching more stuff that I didn't know and asking a few more questions about it, I eventually managed to fit in fine and yeah, been happy … first semester, happy with the grades I got. (Logan)

And, while many were able to make university work for them, nearly all the participants noted that time was a crucial element; they had to find ways to carve extra time from their already busy schedules. As is common in the lives of working-class young people (Beach & Sernhede, 2011), many spent the majority of their time working in various service sector positions. Reflecting on another dimension of time and a contrast from his secondary school, Isaac struggled with the rapid pace and level of memorization involved with the subject matter:

> Yeah, a lot of kids have dropped out because of that. Because it's like yes, you do PE Year 12, but then you come here and you do physiology and anatomy and you learn all the bones, all the muscles, all the nerves in the lower limb. That's what we just did in the first five weeks and then physiology is like, we've gone through two body systems already—almost three—so it's just flat out. (Isaac)

Living in working-class communities and attending predominantly working-class schools, the boys remained largely unprepared. Their habitus contributed to their 'categories of perceptions' (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 86) which were integral to how they saw themselves as learners, as individuals with aspirations, and as different than their working-class peers. While their 'rough ride' did not always mean they left university, it did lead to unpleasant experiences, which lead them to reflect on themselves as learners and the viability of their aspirations. Influenced primarily by parents and teachers during their time at secondary school, their dispositions were honed to see themselves as more advanced than those around them and, as they sat alongside more advantaged students at university, they became aware this was not the case.

Bourdieu (1993) writes of 'the feelings of being torn that come from experiencing success as failure, or, better still, as transgression' (p. 510). As the participants experienced the first steps of social mobility, the rough ride contributed not only to them feeling failure, but to bringing their habitus into disjuncture. The participants' experience of feeling academically underprepared also made me think of E. M. Forster's (1921) fictional character Leonard Bast, who strives to better himself, *'His mind and body had been alike underfed, because he was poor …' (p. 46)*. While he

suffers, Bast does adapt during his pursuit of a better life through work as a low-paid clerk—though it is always his impoverished background that determines what is possible for him. In reflecting on how he adapted in his transition to university, Samuel asserted:

> It's definitely more—it's going to make more like, in charge of my own work and make me more responsible for what I am studying and doing, because they use the analogy that our teachers held our hands back in high school, but here everything—you have to make sure that you are on top of your work and that you are handing in assignments on time and that you are checking that there are tests … and stuff because teachers actually don't give you reminders. They don't give you reminders or they don't tell you things sometimes that high school teachers would. (Samuel)

We know hegemonic forms of masculinity are frequently aligned with an expectation of resourcefulness and independence (Mac an Ghaill, 1996). Research has documented that working-class masculinities as formed around loyalty to self (Stahl, 2014), collectivism (Crotty, 2001; Nayak, 2003; Morgan, 2005), and social validation (Walker, 2003). Though the boys did not express it in these terms, the rough ride in transitioning to university is, in many ways, emasculating. They were expected to be proactive 'entrepreneurs of the self' (Du Gay, 1996), which required significant adjustment as they came to craft new learner identities. Furthermore, their experiences reflect the injuries of class (Sennett & Cobb, 1972), including being 'underfed'—or at least underprepared—in their secondary school contexts. So, not only did the boys feel caught between two worlds, they had to come to grips with a new conception of studenthood. Their identities as learners in the secondary school environment—where they stood out for their proactive spirit—no longer had the same currency in higher education and their journeys were framed by the discrepancy between what was expected of them and their present reality. Or, as Bourdieu writes:

> The strategies agents use to avoid the devaluation of their diplomas are grounded in the discrepancy between opportunities objectively available at any given moment and aspirations based on an earlier structure of objective opportunities. This discrepancy, which is particularly acute at certain

> moments and in certain social positions, generally reflects a failure to achieve the individual or collective occupational trajectory which was inscribed as an objective potentiality in the former position and in the trajectory leading to it. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 150)

Of course, it is not just first-in-family males transitioning from secondary school to university who find it a confounding experience informed by significant gaps in their knowledge. For example, O'Shea et al. (2017) also note mature-age male students found it equally daunting and many of their words chimed with most of the words of my participants. The key difference here is that the participants in the *First-in-Family Males Study* entered university with a different frame of reference and less life experience. During the transition, as they experienced a sense of identity dissonance, they did not have their secondary school teachers as key supporters to look after both the affective and social dimension (see Stahl, 2021a). Their families and peers were present, but what they offered in terms of support structures had certain limitations given their scant experience with university. All these factors culminated in a powerful affective experience in which they came to re-evaluate themselves as well as their aspirations.

Acclimatizing to University Life

Fields, according to Bourdieu, are a '*space of conflict and competition*', a battlefield where there exists a 'structure of probabilities' in which individuals compete for various rewards and gains (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 17, emphasis in original). As the boys in the *First-in-Family Males Project* transitioned to university their working-class masculinities came into contact with middle-class masculinities which were more focused on personal achievement, and careers where the traits required are leadership and competition (Whitehead, 2003; Connell, 2000). For each student the 'rough ride' was different and, therefore, so was the acclimatization to university or life or, in some cases, the choice to embark on an entirely different pathway. For some the liminal time of acclimatization lasted for the majority of the first semester; for others it was just

the first few weeks. Siraj and Mayo (2014) write about academic resiliency, adopting the definition that resilience is continually formed in the face of adversity, and involves 'the capacity to cope with life's setbacks and challenges' (p. 6). They explain that resilience develops 'when the cumulative effects of "protective" factors in the child, and in the life and environment in which the child develops, outweigh the negative effects of "risk" factors in that child or in their socio-cultural context' (p. 6). Resilience is also influenced by access to and operationalization of capital and can be fostered relationally. There were many instances when the participants found like-minded friends, which did positively influence their engagement with their university studies and how they came to see themselves. Though, at the same time, while the development of new social connections assisted with the acclimatization to university life, it was still a significant period of adjustment for many.

> I do see uni differently to what I did in high school. I'm not as scared of it as I what I originally was and it's becoming more of a known place to me now. So, some of the experiences that I do day to day, like going to classes and stuff, that's becoming natural, something that I'm not frightened of or nervous about anymore. And I still get excited for every class that I'm doing, because I love the content in it, but yeah, just those nerves. (Logan)

> I think it was alright after a couple of assignments got finished, just got into the swing of it pretty quickly. (Manny)

> I do think about it sometimes, when I was in high school and I looked at university students thinking they were all high and mighty, but [my life] hasn't changed much really for me. Like I'm just still doing the same thing, studying hard and working hard and doing what I can do to improve. So, there is not much to change. It's just more flexibility in what I want to do—enjoying my own life and being an actual adult—not having to rely on parents to pay for things and do anything like that. (Dominic)

While some were able to acclimatize quickly, for some students untangling themselves from the learner identity in their secondary schools took significantly longer. To conclude this section, I share a story of Osman, who attended a private Islamic school in the western suburbs of Sydney, and who struggled with the broad first year courses at university. While

academically capable, he struggled specifically with motivation as he saw the courses as not relevant to his intended profession of airline pilot. While technically first-in-family, Osman did have aspects of cultural capital in the home. While his parents worked in service sector jobs, they had secured degrees in Afghanistan prior to immigrating to Australia, and Osman's cousins all attended various universities around Sydney. They had high expectations for Osman and we can assume were able to support him. Statistically, in Australia, those from Muslim backgrounds on a whole are slightly more likely than other ethnic groups to obtain a tertiary qualification (Peucker et al., 2014, p. 297); however, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' SEIFA rankings within the area Osman grew up in, 22% of the population had a university qualification whilst 5% were currently attending university.

When I met up with Osman at the university library midway through his first year, he was forthcoming about his current motivations and his wider journey as a learner. While not all the boys were willing to speak openly about academic failure, Osman openly shared a particular moment during his first year which informed his sense of self:

Osman: Oh well, there was one moment I felt it was a nightmare. I remember last semester if I, if I can remember, I had my final exams for one of my units for biology. Halfway through the semester I gave up on that subject, I lost interest. So, I never, I don't attend any lectures, I, I just gave up on it because it was too, I was too frustrated with it, with the content, the words are so complicated to remember. So, the final exam came up and I was 20 chapters behind, I don't remember, 20 chapters behind or something. And I needed, and I needed 50% to pass the unit and if I failed my unit I would've gotten, I would've, my life would have been in a very miserable … but luckily I have faith in God, I have faith in myself, I have, I only had two nights to study for the exam. So, I had to go through 30 chapters in two nights.

Garth: Oh, my God.

Osman: And that's when I realized that I shouldn't leave it to the last, to the last minute, I was really good with my other units, I was, I done pretty well in the other units, I got distinction average, but, but for this particular unit I was very nervous if I would pass or not. In the exam, when the final exam came I

didn't know, I had no hope that I would even pass the unit there was 100, 100 multiple choice in 2 hours and there was 5 options from A to E. So that made it even more harder, more tougher.

Garth: That would make it harder.

Osman: And studying two nights before, 30 chapters, I don't think that's a good approach to, to do it, two nights before your exam. So, when the exam came I just blame, I just guess, I just guess the whole exam.

Garth: And how did it work out?

Osman: And then the day of my result at night I checked my email, I was, I had goose bumps as well because if I failed the unit—my, my GPA, the GPA that if you fail one unit you had to repeat it next year as well and your GPA will and that taken your grade down. So I worried about that and you have to pay again if you fail the unit. So it doesn't matter if you fail by 1 or by 2, if you don't get above 50 it's a, it's fail so.

Garth: So it's scary?

Osman: So I was like, I was like probably my worst nightmare. I had no faith, I just know, so I knew that I failed. But when I click on the mark my first result I saw physics distinction average, my other unit 84. That, those, that, it was this one, that one unit when I checked it was 50 on the dot … And I was like, I didn't know what to say to myself, I am guessing the whole 100 multiple choice, just guessing everything the question and, and 50 over 100 it's a pass, that's all I needed, I wanted a pass, my friends got 48, 49 in chemistry and they failed.

Garth: Wow.

Osman: But I was just very lucky that, I was very lucky that I got 50 on the dot.

Garth: 50 on the dot. So you don't have to retake that class?

Osman: No, no, thank, thank God, I don't have to and I never will.

Garth: That is quite a story. That is quite a story, thank you for sharing that … Now that you're starting your 2nd semester and not 1st?

Osman: Now I'm, now I'm more focused. I get, I get every single, I make sure I get everything done on time. Now I'm on, I'm on, I'm on top of things. So hopefully my result will be much better, I believe my result will be much better than last semester.

Drawing on the concept of *narrativity*, Somers (1992) highlights how singular events are woven into a wider understanding as we seek to connect moments in time to a wider cohesive configuration. Osman's journey to university was framed largely by the support of his immediate and extended family, and he felt a responsibility to make them proud (see Stahl & Mac an Ghaill, 2021). Highlighting the high-stakes nature of university study, he described his brush with failure as having 'no hope' and 'probably my worst nightmare'. While clearly Osman's attempt to cram for the exam paid off, the deeply affective experience—where his aspirations were in jeopardy—informed his sense of self. Furthermore, while Osman often described himself as an open person—and for the most part he was more comfortable displaying vulnerability than many of the other participants in the study—nearly failing a course was a private matter and he did not disclose this to his parents or extended family. This suggests hegemonic forms of masculinity informed both his sense of self and how he navigated university life.

Hard Work and Meritocratic Subjectivities

In their work on the hidden injuries of class, Sennett and Cobb (1972) describe one working-class man named James whose father identified strongly with the American dream of a university education for his children. James, who vacillated between becoming an 'educated man' or a 'craftsman', was conflicted where he 'knows what leaving school would mean materially: a loss of security, status jobs, money' and he decided to stay in school 'because he feels compelled by these material considerations even as he disrespects them on their own' (p. 27). A continual theme running through Sennett and Cobb's (1972) work is the internal conflicts of working-class men who are becoming socially mobile. In more recent times, sociologists have continued this endeavour, where class and movement across class boundaries is now considered to have a strong affective dimension and a moral significance (Sayer, 2005). Furthermore, since Sennett and Cobb (1972), research continues to capture how academic persistence among lower-socioeconomic-status

students is contingent on their beliefs about whether or not socioeconomic mobility is achievable (see Browman et al., 2017; Gore et al., 2015).

Arguably, during this period of the 'rough ride', the young men, regardless of their circumstances, were expected to perform and craft new versions of selfhood. They were expected to accrue value within the discourses of 'success' and 'failure'. The transition to university involves a privileging of agency that is largely divorced from social structures; it is an individualizing process. We are reminded here of how '[s]ocial structures and cognitive structures are recursively and structurally linked' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 14) and how idealized forms of selfhood are promoted and anointed by institutions. With this in mind, a 'subject of value' (Skeggs, 2004) always emerges through a process of symbolic legitimation; individuals enter into a process of self-making—of management of the self—around being industrious.

> You've got to work hard. Like … I'm not a huge fan of people saying, 'Oh, it's just going to come.' I think very much, you've got to go looking for … Not so much looking, but you've got to work for it. (Levi)

> If I make it—it's like make or break here, basically to do what I want to do when I'm older. So there's that kind of—not really pain, but just that anxiety. Like, if you don't make it now, what's the next step? What do you do if you fail here? (Jacob)

> Yeah, I feel like I can't stagnate as a person. Because I feel like once you start stagnating then you've kind of reached your limit and you can't go any further than that. And then I am like, is my limit really just the first semester of first year university? Can I not go beyond this? So that's the type of mentality I take whenever I try to adapt and change myself to hopefully be better at doing whatever I want to do. (Vuong)

The words of Levi, Jacob and Vuong highlight a desire to be proactive—and to be seen as proactive—in working for their achievements. Furthermore, their journeys may also reflect their class disadvantage. In their study of social stratification in the French higher education system in the 1960s, Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) note how lower-class students were constructed as hardworking 'grinds' or 'merely serious', in

contrast to the inheritors who were perceived as 'naturally gifted', mainly due to their middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. In considering how working-class young people become socially mobile today, Lehmann (2009b) notes that the aspirations of his participants were informed by many factors, contributing to the formation of 'powerful dispositions about careers that are outside the transition paths to which a structural-determinist viewpoint would relegate them' (p. 146). For the participants who were making university work for them, their habitus was undergoing change, aligning with the institutional ideals.

Furthermore, as the young men came to craft themselves as 'subjects of value' they had to continually 'buy in' to the doxic. Bourdieu's (1997) notion of illusio, as an investment in the game, is important here, as it is

> what gives 'sense' (both meaning and direction) to existence by leading one to invest in a game and its forth-coming [*son à venir*], in the *lusiones*, the chances, that it offers to those caught up in the game and who expect something from it. (p. 207, emphasis in original)

The participants' words suggest that they renovated their learner identities through the performance of a meritocratic subjectivity. This suggests a closer alignment with neoliberal selfhood though, arguably, early research on upwardly mobile working-class children also demonstrated that they bought into the school's meritocratic values (see Jackson & Marsden, 1966). Foundational to the neoliberal state is the transference of responsibility for 'failure' from the state to the individual, where the state, in essence, absolves itself of responsibility (see Davies & Bansel, 2007). With this in mind, arguably the boys came to falsely 'see themselves as individuals in a meritocratic society, not as classed or gendered members of an unequal society' (Ball et al., 2000, p. 4) and they self-crafted accordingly. Also, part of what contributes to the production of a meritocratic subjectivity is the notion of what an ideal university learner should be (Wong et al., 2021).

Samuel, who was working two jobs while attending university, consistently presented a meritocratic subjectivity; he seemed to believe anyone could do what he was doing, 'If you're motivated and you're willing to put in the work, I think you can have the same opportunities as everyone

else.'. As Byrom and Lightfoot (2013) note, working-class students can 'get caught up in discourses that present education as an equal playing field where decisions, choices and outcomes are influenced by the individual' (p. 818). Furthermore, they may buy into the false belief that the sacrifices they make are normative, 'I have to do forty hours of contact hours, classes or something, I think that's what the person said in the class. But I will find a way. All-nighters and coffee will keep me awake' (Manny).

Manny here highlighted balancing his academic studies with long hours spent in restaurant work. Given that the young men in the *First-in-Family Males Project* aspired to different trajectories than their parents, notions of 'seizing opportunity' and 'exceeding expectations' came to mean something powerful to them, as did the notion of choice: 'Yeah, like that's your choice of whether or not you're going to have the same opportunities as someone else or not' (Oliver).

Furthermore, as working-class men experience various failures and successes, the meritocratic ideology, interrelated with illusion, can become a source of comfort, integral to how they construct themselves as people they are not (see Giazitzoglu, 2014).

> Unfortunately, there's people that just get money from Centrelink. That's the unfortunate thing, is that taxpayers like myself and you, we're paying for those people to sit at home and do nothing all day. Which is upsetting, because there are opportunities that they could take. All it takes is a bit of preparation and putting your resume out to 50 businesses, and I'm sure one will come back. But yeah, as I said, people just got to have that strive to be able to take that opportunity, but not everyone's going to be like us, like the next person, you know? (Fred)

In Lehmann's (2009a) research on first-in-family students, he notes how his participants constructed themselves relationally to their middle- and upper-class counterparts, where their subjectivities, discursively produced, called attention to their 'stronger work ethic, higher levels of maturity, responsibility, and independence' (p. 639). While the boys constructed themselves mainly as hard workers, there was little evidence that

they compared themselves to those from move privileged backgrounds.[4] Some participants highlighted that HECS fostered a more equitable system, or at least more equitable opportunities.[5]

> I mean it's good that we have a HECS debt and all that so people can come to the university. I think a lot of people wouldn't come if you had to pay up front. I don't think I would have enough. But I feel like people do have an opportunity to progress or advance themselves. I guess I have a lot more opportunity in Australia than I guess other countries, but there might be some instances where people don't have enough money. (Adam)

> Yeah, definitely. I think because obviously, uni, you can go and you pay a HECS debt at the end, which is fair enough too because of the courses and stuff, but you don't have to pay anything up front. Anyone from any way could, if they really wanted to put the effort in and do the best job they want. I don't think it's … Anyone could probably come if they wanted to because there's really a lot of pathways from … There is a lot of support if you do look for it. It's just, if you don't look for it, you don't get it. You know what I mean? (Isaac)

In considering working-class experience, Somers (1992) employs the concepts of *narrative* and *narrativity* in social theory to understand how individuals come to identify with their class position, which is, in turn, integral to their sense of social practice. Somers highlights how personal narratives come to be aligned with wider socio-historical narratives—or master narratives—often tied closely to the nation-state. We are reminded here of the discourse around Australia's national character concerning the 'fair go' and egalitarianism (see Chap. 2). It is through narratives 'that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identity' (Somers, 1992, p. 600). Furthermore, in informing one's sense of the social world, they inform how one crafts oneself in the social world.

[4] For those who continued to attend university after the first year, the data suggests they began to form more of a sense of their own positionality in relation to social class.

[5] Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned that for their parents' generation university was free.

Lucas, whose father was a self-employed concreter and whose mother worked as a part-time secretary, was admitted to an elite university, and for the most part did not consider himself an outsider. His journey seemed to reaffirm his commitment to meritocracy:

> I've had a lot of events on … and I've gone to a lot of things … and the first question's always 'Where are you from?' And so I'm like, 'I'm out west and I'm from [western suburbs].' And they're like, 'What?' And it's so, 'What did you get?' And I tell them my ATAR and they're, 'Oh wow, you must be really smart.' And I'm like, 'Well yeah, you just try your hardest.' It doesn't matter where you come from, as long as you put in the effort you're going to succeed. (Lucas)

Lucas's words reflect the 'very old class processes of exclusivity and exclusion (that) are played out in the educational context of markets and choice' (Reay, 2004, p. 1006). Such processes informed how Lucas crafted a model of self which gave him currency in the institutional culture; furthermore, he knew how his narrative was positioned in relation to other students at the elite institution:

> it's because [the university] doesn't lower their ATAR scores, whereas once you initial get the ATAR a lot of unis will change it based on how the whole cohort performs, but [the university] keeps to the very strict rule of not making any adjustments, so if it says you need a ninety ATAR unless you got a disadvantage, you've applied for a certain program or something, that's the only way to reduce the ATAR that you need. So yeah, it's a very no budge system, you're either in or you're out. (Lucas)

While Reay (2001) writes of the shame of being working-class and educationally successful—where there is always a fear of being 'found out' (p. 343)—Lucas seems to be able to treat it as a badge of honour (see Stahl, 2021b). It is important to note here that Lucas was consistently vocal regarding his right-wing beliefs (see Stahl & McDonald, 2021). Within these elite spaces, there is always the expectation that those less fortunate will not only desire to be included but will be able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, disregarding the complexities and psychic costs involved (Reay, 2005, 2013). Another participant in an elite space,

Vuong, did not engage in the same modes of self-crafting as Lucas, but his experiences did compel him to reflect on his sense of self:

> Vuong: because I came from a public school that was in the northern suburbs where the—not exactly the brightest minds ever, come from that suburb. It's pretty rare to find someone who's extremely academically talented, had the same type of skill sets as me. And if I think about it now, I feel a greater deal of respect that if I'm at the same point as these other students, the same type of level as these other students who've got pretty much a lot more resources and had a lot more time to develop their skills because they had perhaps better maths teachers or just better facilities, for example. And I feel like if I manage to get to that same point as these people, I feel a lot more respect that I actually did this well in schooling when I was in Year 12.
> Garth: Like respect for yourself?
> Vuong: Yes, respect for myself.

Keeping in mind the psychic costs involved in becoming socially mobile, in previous scholarship I have demonstrated how young working-class boys at the secondary level can ascribe to an egalitarian disposition where they try to contest or overlook inequalities in recognition and distribution (Stahl, 2015a, 2015b). With this in mind, the performance of a meritocratic subjectivity was fragmented and the boys could be conflicted about their own trajectories. Miles et al. (2011, p. 420) demonstrate how working-class men, when they reflect back on their upward mobility, are aware of their own individuality and they contend that career identities exist in relation to a conflicted sense of selfhood.

> I wish more people did go to university but then I also know that if more people go to the university that just also mean there'll be more fodder at university and then they'll drop out eventually anyway. So, I guess it balances out, the people who are ambitious enough to try and get into university and to be successful at it. (Vuong)

Vuong' words suggest a level of disharmony, highlighting the conflicted nature of class and the internal struggle of these young men. This shows how the neoliberal discourse of 'success' and 'failure' becomes 'inscribed in social practices and institutions and sedimented into the "habitus" of

everyday life' (Hall, 2011, p. 711). This challenges working-class young people's sense of self. Lucas and Vuong were among the select few who gained access to an elite higher education space. Their journeys were different from those boys who transitioned into universities that are considered second tier and that had more of an emphasis around around widening participation. Furthermore, Lucas's and Vuong' accounts of self-crafting reflect some of the patterns noted in recent research by Giazitzoglu (2014) on upwardly mobile working-class masculinities. His participants constructed themselves as educated and cultured in contrast to other working-class men, whom they considered to be poor, ignorant and lacking ambition—who were 'getting it wrong' (para 8.5). While Lucas and Vuong did not engage in this form of class pathologization, they did see themselves as other—as different—and perhaps even as exceptional.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the forms of selfhood performed as first-in-family males acclimatize to university, highlighting some of the dimensions of their journey as learners as they take the first steps to becoming socially mobile. We get the sense the young men were untangling themselves from the structures of secondary school and performing learner identities that differed in many ways from the learner identities apparent in secondary schools. In his research with upwardly mobile young men in the Bronx, Alexander (2019) writes that 'imaginings of future gendered selves become intertwined with discourses of neoliberalism' and to become 'constructions of future adult masculinity' (p. 40). As the participants transitioned to university, the forms of selfhood they adopted were aligned with their perception of what was valued by both the institution and the social milieu. Echoing other work on masculinities in higher education, there was a continual focus on searching for a feeling of personal authenticity or 'adherence to an ethic of authenticity' while also searching for social validation, 'to "act", "perform", put on a "front" or adopt a "persona"' (Warin & Dempster 2007, p. 897). During the process of adaptation, we know significant emotional labour was involved as

their habitus sought coherence in order to maintain a feeling of authenticity. It is important not to discount the important identity work these young men underwent as they entered into a search for validation. To conclude, the transition to university was a rough ride for the majority and their experiences worked to foster a stronger attachment to meritocracy. As the boys invested time and made sacrifices in order to catch up and keep their head above water, their words suggest they came to expect the same of others, and that they increasingly identified with forms of neoliberal selfhood.

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6

Performing the Entrepreneurial Self

Marginson (2016, p. 420) describes how higher education 'offers students prospects of self-formation … and self-actualisation'; however, many students from working-class backgrounds struggle with the identity demands of the higher education context (Archer et al., 2007; Reay et al., 2005). Directly related to notions of selfhood, studenthood and how students come to craft their identities, the space of higher education is increasingly about 'creating professional projections of an ideal self, which constitute a technology of career progression for the individual and are associated with some form of exchange' (Shuker, 2014, p. 228). In considering self-crafting, it is important to keep in mind that our current generation of young people arguably are forming their lives in an era of heightened neoliberalism, 'crafting their identities and making sense of their educational and employment experiences and choices within the context of neoliberal imperatives' (Keddie et al., 2020, p. 99; see also Bessant et al., 2017).

Research indicates that working-class men grapple with the complexities of performing what Du Gay (1996) refers to as the 'entrepreneur of the self', which contrasts greatly with traditional working-class values (Reay, 2002; Phoenix, 2004; Stahl, 2015). However, arguably, working-class boys, according to Whitehead (2003), have begun to 'move towards a more middle-class notion of masculinity centred on competitive achievement' (p. 290). This highlights that the production of the

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'educated person' is always subject to negotiation, though heavily informed by dominant institutions (Levinson & Holland, 1996) as well as social change. As young men transition to higher education they both invest in new forms of selfhood, adopting new selves, while simultaneously renegotiating aspects of their identity tied closely to their working-class families and peer groups (Stahl & Zhao, 2021). This chapter focuses on how performing middle-class selfhood *comes to be* and where there is engagement and resistance. While urging sociologists to be critical of treating the middle class as an undifferentiated mass, Power and Whitty (2006) point out that 'the middle class is seen to be strategic and calculating' (p. 451). As the participants in the *First-in-Family Males Project* encountered new forms of identity and new institutional cultures, they entered into a process of calibrating and regulating their identities.

In their research on masculinities in higher education, Archer and Yamashita (2003) found that the young men they interviewed 'did not construct "fixed" or consistent masculinities; they shifted between alternative identity positions' and they spoke 'about trying to "leave" some identities' (p. 127). We must understand the self as not a 'coherent and fixed personality', but rather *positioned by* and *produced through* powerful gender, classed and ethnic discourses (Francis, 2000, p. 19). In short, identities and gender subjectivities are discursively produced. We come to understand the self by looking at how a sense of belonging is experienced (Hall, 1996) and—with this in mind—the tensions between 'leaving' and 'holding on' has been recognized in many studies of the working class in education (Skeggs, 2002; Reay et al., 2005).

The 'entrepreneurial self' refers to how neoliberal subjectivities are produced, where the self—in order to be respected and validated—must commit to an existence focused on capitalization through calculated acts and investments. First-in-family males who are more adaptable to the demands of higher education often will, as we will see, invest in forms of selfhood aligned with neoliberal prerogatives. In his study of African-American men in predominantly white higher education institutions, Harper (2004) documents a diversity of identity practices and different modes of masculinity but a consistent respect and admiration for the high-achieving males who were focused on 'taking care of business' (p. 98). Therefore, while there are different masculine subjectivities at

play, what the institution itself holds in esteem becomes important social currency. Those who are not able to access whatever the currency is are placed in a marginalized position. Echoing work on class disadvantage in higher education (Jack, 2014; Sellar & Gale, 2011), many of the participants in this study spoke about their isolation at university and the tenuous associations formed rather than authentic friendships:

> And I feel like there's no close groups … so while I, in high school … I came from a different school, so everyone already had their friendships groups and you had to try and find some. Yeah. it's just different. (Adam)

> generally speaking, you're going to be [on your] own anyway because you don't have past [secondary school] classmates that you come up with so you can be quite lonely at times. (Avery)

Adam and Avery here highlighted that the university space is dominated by middle-class and elite students, many of whom are funnelled through independent schools into higher education. As one of the select few to attend university from their secondary school, they were at an extreme social disadvantage from the outset. In surveying the data, I noticed that the mention of loneliness was generally coupled with a strong attempt to make new friends at university:

> It can be lonely, if you make it, if you make it lonely. In my first week I was … lonely walking around by myself. I was too shy to ask the people around me where my classes were. So I had to go to security and ask them, which was a bit awkward but, but making, just making new friends and getting used to the environment, I guess, it just makes the whole process easier. (Osman)

> a lot of people I know sit, I see just sit in there by themselves all the time doing nothing or sitting in there in the lectures by themselves. It's a bit hard but at least, at least I try to find some friends or not, they might not be your best mates but at least you know them and it's good for you mentally, thinking, oh I don't want to go today there's no one there, don't have any friends there. Or at least just go sit next to someone and then get to know them a bit and make you feel a bit better I suppose. (Isaac)

Furthermore, and related to my aim of understanding how they come to perform new forms of selfhood, the associations formed with others at university served as another entry point to understanding the expectations of higher education which, according to the participants, contrasted greatly with the culture of their secondary schools. When discussing his perception of what it takes to be successful at university, Vuong noted:

> I think of more of as a type of, whoever could forage for the most resources will eventually win. That type of thing. And it's not, and it's not a disadvantage … because it's on you. Rather than everyone else pushing you. That type of thing. (Vuong)

His words emphasize how the university—as a future-oriented space—places onus and responsibility on the student. In their analysis of neoliberal policies and widening participation, Bennett and Southgate (2014) assert there are two subject positions within Australian widening participation higher education policy: 'the cap(able) individual and the proper aspirant' (p. 22). Both positions, they argue, problematically privilege a narrow conception of an aspirational subject which echoes neoliberal prerogatives. Vuong, who attended an elite institution and performed the subjectivity of a 'proper aspirant', described university as a competitive space:

> Yeah, at uni it's a bit more of a different culture. I mean, and there's always—you're always working together with other people for assignments and all of that, but there's still this, for me anyway, there's still this underlying aspect that out of uni we're still going to be competing for a job, like these are the type of people who are in the running alongside me, to get an employer's attention and all that, so there's still this underlying aspect that we might be friends and all that and work together today, but in the real world we might be not enemies per se, but just competing over how are we going to get an employer's attention, and that type of thing. (Vuong)

No longer in their close-knit secondary schools nestled in the working-class suburbs, the university was a space where the end goal was gaining full employment. Also, it was a space where the participants were

compelled to invest in forms of selfhood necessary for competition, to craft themselves accordingly.

> Because it's very, I don't know, it's completely different, because you know everyone wants to be the best, that's why are they are there. They're going to the same career and all that stuff, so you know that one day they're going … you're going to bump into them again [in employment]. (Dominic)

> Everyone's—everyone works together, there's always study groups, people meeting up with each other. But at the end of the day—they're trying to get there for themselves. (Jacob)

Jacob's words suggest that the atmosphere was hospitable but there always existed an underlying tension which required him to be guarded. We are reminded here of the field of higher education as a '*space of conflict and competition*', in which individuals compete for various rewards and gains (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 17, emphasis in original). Given the significant risk the boys in the study took in entering higher education and going against the grain, the desired end result of employability seemed high stakes; perhaps different to more affluent fellow students, employment carried with it the potential to validate their pathway. Having just had their pathways determined by their ATAR, the notion of being judged on institutional scores resonated with the boys as they considered the ways in which their credentials could determine their opportunities.

> if you put in the work and have a fairly high GPA, so you work in a six GPA,[1] then you have a good chance of succeeding. But if you're rocking just like a stock standard five or four point five—which, five is okay … But just say you get a four point five and know someone or [inaudible] someone, you're more chance of getting in than the bloke that's worked hard and got a six GPA, if that makes sense sort of thing. (Tobias)

Grades, especially the grades secured in the first semester, were particularly important in validating their pathways. Vuong, who held high

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[1] A Grade Point Average (GPA) is the average result of all grades and is calculated in Australia on a 7-point grading scale. 7 is the highest (HD), and 0 is the lowest (fail).

standards for himself, often reflected on his perceived underperformance at multiple points during his course of study:

> It's not shameful, it's not like a fail. But it's not what I know that I can achieve. So that's why I am beating myself most of the time. Because I am being, I'm not even doing what I want to do. I want to succeed properly. Properly succeed. Not just go about passing. (Vuong)

Self-crafting is deeply influenced by the notion of an 'ideal student', what Wong et al. (2021) describe as 'desirable student characteristics, which may not exist in reality, particularly as one individual' (p. 2). Vuong, who was highly motivated and who was one of the few boys in the study to secure a place in an elite university, had a clear idea of what an ideal university student needed to be. His words suggest his frustration about not meeting this expectation and a desire not just to pass but to 'properly succeed', perhaps influenced by his awareness of being one of the only students in his course from a disadvantaged background.

One student, Robbie, despite receiving what seemed to be constructive and personalized support (see Stahl et al., 2020), struggled to ever fully become a 'proper aspirant' (Bennett & Southgate, 2014, p. 22). For Robbie—who did fail a course—his sense of success was more aligned with resilience and simply not giving up. His experience with failure dramatically impacted his sense of self and what he thought he was capable of achieving:

> It depends what you count as success. I count success as while I'm still here and I'm still going. Some might say it's resilience but resilience is also a—kind of a form of success because you successfully fulfilled resilience in order to stay in uni. (Robbie)

Mallman (2017) writes: 'working-class university students bear the emotional weight of the separation of ability from resources as a personal hidden defect. The kind of person they want to be is one they fear they are not: intellectually capable' (p. 238). Both Robbie and Vuong suffered under an expectation that they would really capitalize on opportunity and make their families proud. Returning to Vuong and his experiences

at university, his sense of his own intellectual capability was also shaped by no longer being one of the few academically inclined students in his education context:

> Yeah, exactly, the big fish in the small pond. So, now I'm still that same size fish, but in a much more larger pond, and yeah, so the environment is a bit different at uni and I feel like I'm expected to maintain a really high performance rating over my entire time at uni, so from first year to third year. So, that's a bit of stressor-ish. I'm trying to manage it, that along all the time, and all that. (Vuong)

Vuong' words suggest a struggle with both the academic work and his own sense of self in relation to his peers (see Stahl & Zhao, 2021 for more detail). The fast-paced, competitive university climate seemed to demand a lot of Vuong, reminiscent of Bonham et al.'s (2004) work on upwardly mobile African-American men who found their commitment to hard work resulted in various health issues related to long-term stress. Vuong spoke often of all-nighters and putting his body under duress in order to be competitive:

> because everyone in my class is extremely good at maths, because you know, in the advanced class you have to be good at maths to be in that class. So, I don't feel—I feel a more laid back in regards to how I talk to my friends and all that from school, because you know, it's not like, there wasn't this sense of rivalry. But in uni it's a bit more now, because virtually everyone here in my class is a peer, like they can do the same things I can do, or better, and there's a little bit of pressure from that, but it's like a self-conscious thing, but I'm trying to work with it, just going, well, just because they're better than me at this aspect doesn't mean that I'm not better than them in some other aspect. (Vuong)

Not only do Vuong words highlight that he felt he needed to be on guard at university, we also see him moderating his sense of self through measuring his own strengths and weaknesses against the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the rest of the cohort. This reflects difficult identity work. Alexander's (2017, 2019) work on boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds highlights the ways in which disadvantaged young men

strategically perform a version of neoliberal selfhood that often masks their internal struggle, where 'the line between performance and enactment was potentially blurry' (Alexander, 2019, p. 59). Vuong' words, arguably, provide us with a glimpse behind the mask of such a performance. While he was adept at maintaining the appearance of the successful neoliberal subject, there was internal struggle just below the surface. In considering how agents become socially mobile, Bourdieu (1984) writes of the 'broken trajectory' and 'impossible objective potentiality, inscribed at the deepest level of their dispositions as a sort of blighted hope or frustrated promise' (p. 150). Vuong, and others, had to come to terms with feelings of inferiority and—by proxy—inauthenticity. Destin and Debrosse (2017, p. 102) note: 'As they work to reach academic goals that redefine their lives … students must simultaneously work to maintain a coherent sense of status-based identity and its shifting components' (p. 101). Certainly, as Vuong' words suggest, his self-crafting was informed by how he perceived himself in reference to others, complementing research on how upwardly mobile males search for 'acceptance, belonging and legitimacy' and how they experience prolonged feelings of inauthenticity (Giazitzoglu, 2014, para 2.5). The next section seeks to outline some of dimensions of this internal struggle: how they *calibrate* and *regulate* the self.

Calibrating and Regulating New Forms of Selfhood

In his work on neoliberalism and subjectivity, Ball (2006) calls attention to how '[w]e work on ourselves and each other, through the micro practices of representation/fabrication, judgement and comparison' (p. 699). Identities are never complete but in formation, actively worked upon and produced through institutions. As the habitus enters into a negotiation with field and capital, students begin to internalize possibilities, engaging in a simultaneous process of resistance and acceptance. A divided habitus is in continual negotiation with itself, which produces a double perception of the self (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 511). According to Christie (2009,

p. 131) the working class is more likely to experience university as 'the process of identity formation [as a student] as one of emotional disorder and insecurity'. This is what Reay (2001, p. 339) calls 'the difficult uncomfortable configuration of working classness with academic success'. Vuong described this: 'I'm not that worried and not that stressed and all that, but there's like this apprehensive type feeling in my head that I'm like, I think I'm not doing enough, or maybe I should try harder.' Many of the participants reflected on their progress in relation to others and their perception of their future. In his work on the 'reflexive project of the self', Giddens (1991, p. 28) describes how self-narratives are formed through experiences as we seek to measure ourselves against socially constructed proxies. Selfhood is not simply realized, it always emerges through a process of symbolic legitimation (see Skeggs, 2004). With this in mind, this section focuses on how forms of selfhood are *calibrated* and *regulated* over time.

One facet of calibrating and regulating their identities was the boys finding ways to exorcise their own perception of laziness. In a previous project, *Life After School*, which focused on boys' transition to the post-school year, we found the participants often 'described themselves as "lazy" and "slack" with no evident sense that these were pejorative expressions' (Nichols & Stahl, 2017, p. 173). Furthermore, the boys often presented an 'easy-going' social identity to mitigate against being seen as an outlier. The findings suggested that presenting this relaxed subjectivity carried a certain social currency among other males and that being viewed as working too hard was not seen as respectable or appropriately masculine. Similarly, many of the participants in the *First-in-Family Males Project* commented on frustrations with their own lack of motivation:

> They kind of go on and off. My … my laziness sets in and it's like, I don't want to do this anymore and stuff. I have less time, can't play games and stuff, stuff like that. But I worked too hard to get here so I'm not giving it up and stuff like that. (Robbie)

> I've got to stay on top of uni, so if I fall behind, well then, because I don't have much time, I'm in big trouble. So I can't be lazy, which is a barrier. (Levi)

> I think it's just because, laziness is a factor. But I also think that without some sort of driving force to push me along that's not self-driving. Then it becomes really, really tough to actually push yourself. Because I mean, in school I had teachers who always pushed me along and all that. And then come uni, it's just me; it's just me trying to push myself along. (Vuong)

Vuong here implied that his laziness was inculcated in his secondary school, suggesting he was not prepared well for university and that his previous experiences made the acclimatization to university life all the more challenging. Mason struggled with his motivation, but did not seem overly concerned about this:

> I mean I don't stress out too much with the work. I generally get along okay. Like I am not prodigy or anything but satisfactory at least from my point of view. So as I said the problem isn't if I can do it. I am pretty confident I can do it and most of the time I can, it's just actually go and do it at some point. (Mason)

Interwoven with laziness were struggles with procrastination and leaving work to the last minute. It is important to note here that, while many did leave the academic work too late, there were also examples of participants choosing between picking up an extra shift at work and investing the necessary time into university studies. The importance of money, therefore, did shape some of their decisions.

> Sometimes. I usually—usually if I do it the day before, I usually get high-ish grades, like [distinctions] maybe, but then, I don't know, I usually never do it early because I usually just say, yeah, I'll get to it and then I won't get to it and then I get to it like the night or a couple of days before, but I will. (Manny)

> Yeah, I think time management is the trigger of the other thing, bad study habits as a result of that, giving adequate time to my subjects, distractions, procrastination, etc. Things like that branch off from that. (Rashid)

Compounding the laziness and procrastination, it is important to consider the points raised in Chap. 4 concerning spoon feeding. Toward the

end of the first year Isaac reflected back on how poorly prepared he was for university life in terms of being able to organize his time:

> Well, I've had to be more independent again just because they don't, the teachers don't actually, the lecturers and stuff don't actually do it for you. They don't tell you to hand up your assignments. They don't remind you. This is just all about you and making sure you know when it's due and stuff. (Isaac)

In their analysis of social mobility, Byrom and Lightfoot (2013, p. 816) posit that a 'habitus in tension' results when students' trajectories differ substantially from that of their parents. Students feel they cannot go back, but going forward presented its own challenges. The boys in the *First-in-Family Males Project* all faced certain pressures, and how they responded to such pressures differed, showing a range of processes in and around acclimatizing to university life (Stahl & McDonald, 2022). Their self-crafting was informed by both their present realities as well as their sense of their futures, a process of calibration. Tobias, who was studying human movement, described his development as a learner primarily in reference to his time management skills:

> Yeah. I feel like probably, I'm a bit more on-task, sort of thing. A bit more focus towards doing—so, my time management's probably improved a lot, because especially coming to the back end of that last semester that with assignments the—a couple of assignments that were due, having to get that done and having to revise for all the four subjects. So, I think that it's got me a bit more prepared for the years ahead, sort of thing, kind of helped me with time management of—oh, I have to do this and this. And coming to this semester, it's probably a bit easier, if that makes any sense. Yeah, that's what I reckon. (Tobias)

Tobias highlighted that he was able to acquire this skill and that he saw the acquisition as an integral skill for his future as a university student. The sense of a future self has thus informed how he calibrated, or crafted, his identity in the present. Giddens (1991) notes the self is something we make of ourselves, and performances of neoliberal selfhood carry the expectation that one will become an adept player in the game. In

studying the identity work of these young men, I consider how a working-class habitus must be transformed in order to align itself with middle-class contexts; now I shift focus to address how first-in-family males come to perform neoliberal subjectivities at university.

Investing in New Forms of Selfhood

Seminal scholarship by Sennett and Cobb (1972, p. 30) documents how working-class men enter into a process of untangling themselves from a working-class background, in the process having to ameliorate the feeling that they are betraying their origins. Extending this work in current times, recent scholarship has documented how working-class masculinities struggle with neoliberal discourses (Stahl, 2014; Cornwall et al., 2016; Stahl et al., 2017). Documenting the identity negotiations of low-socioeconomic-status boys in the Bronx, Alexander (2019) explains that a 'future neoliberal masculinity' is grounded in the accrual of financial and symbolic capital. Alexander calls attention to the ways in which young men are strategic—operating often with limited capitals—in performing a version of neoliberal selfhood that often masks their internal struggle. Complementing this work, Giazitzoglu's (2014) upwardly working-class males came to craft themselves and produce competitive subjectivities, aligning their dispositions through a strong identification with neoliberal ideology. As they secured white-collar jobs, they became boastful about what they had accomplished and rationalized becoming socially mobile through skill and hard work (Giazitzoglu, 2014, para 4.9). Both contemporary examples of studies of upwardly mobile working-class masculinities highlight how men come to invest in new forms of selfhood, or how they contend with 'four Cs—change, choice, chances, and competition' (Phoenix, 2004, p. 229), which require adaptation.

In his analysis of the durability of capital amongst the petite bourgeoisie, Bourdieu claims that those who possess enduring educational capital and strong cultural capital 'enjoy a dual title of cultural nobility, the self-assurance of legitimate membership, and the ease given by familiarity' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 81). The boys in the *First-in-Family Males Project* did not possess this ease and familiarity. In enacting new forms of selfhood,

they, therefore, adopted strategies to guard against a feeling of inauthenticity. After all, Giazitzoglu's (2014) research on upwardly mobile working-class males documents how their lack of 'exposure to the middle class habitus and "class rules" associated with affluent males' results in their performances being ill-informed, where they draw too heavily on the media as a main point of reference (para 8.5). In considering class as integral to one's sense of self, Lawler (1999) maintains that socially mobile women seek to 'de-stabilize' their working-class identities acquired in their origins in order to adopt a middle-class identity which, of course, still carries the 'sedimentations of an earlier habitus' (p. 17).

The majority of the boys attended their secondary schools for prolonged periods of time. These were sites where they established longstanding connections with their fellow students as well as their teachers. Nearly every boy in the study described the atmosphere at their school as friendly and stable. Within the new space of the university, they were compelled to make new connections with students (many of who came from very different backgrounds) and they also experimented with performing different subjectivities. One participant, Kinsley, described the new environment and how it brought forth different aspects of his persona that were previously latent or unrealized:

> No, I think I have kind of—I actually, talking to my friend about this kind-of-ish but it's weird because at high school there is a social side of it—like the nerds or the uncool kids—like the popular kids—like a blend of all these kids, right, and they have like a reputation, whether it's in school or out of school. But at uni it's just such a clash of schools and personalities and ages and so it's like you really—if you want you can show a different side of yourself kind of at uni. Like you can portray yourself as, not as a different person to who you are, but you can really bring out who you are, kind of—it sounds a bit weird but I mean, because in primary school from what I remember, like, I was a real joke star and in high school that all changed because there's hierarchy and you wouldn't make a joke because you would be afraid that, you know, no one would laugh at it because no one would know you or whatever. But here no one really cares to be honest—you can just do whatever and everyone is chill with it. I don't know, I haven't really changed who I am or try to change my identity but maybe I have just brought it out. (Kinsley)

Kinsley's words remind us of how the social informs our sense of self. In Bourdieusian terms, '[s]ocial structures and cognitive structures are recursively and structurally linked' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 14). For Kinsley, the university space provided a certain freedom away from the collective social history of his secondary school. Given this perception, dispositions that had remained dormant came to the fore. Furthermore, some of the participants spoke about having their aspirations reaffirmed and extended through their university study. For Samuel, who studied IT, his experience on the course led him to entertain how his skills could be transferred into the field of business:

> like, since studying here we had a subject called Design Digital Innovation, something like that, along the lines of business and success. I really want to aim higher and perhaps at the end of my uni I want to work hard towards starting a business maybe. (Samuel)

Samuel, who seemed to know what counted in terms of his future employability, was steadfast in applying for every opportunity. He explained that his decision to attend university was influenced by guarding against precarity:

> My decision was just security of getting a job. When I finish, I want—I actually want to get it into—get a job out of it. I don't want to have to have wasted my time learning that for nothing.

Samuel expanded on this further, explaining that he felt he needed to be proactive:

> Yeah, so with security, that's why I'm motivated to get experience and apply for these internships as fast as I can and as soon as I can. I want to beat the others because, you know, especially IT, it's a pretty competitive field. (Samuel)

Part of what fuelled his aspirations was a desire to support his family ('cause like we're financially not there'), specifically his single mother, who was employed as a casual farm labourer. Samuel's present efforts to

craft an aspirational identity were also informed by his 'professional projections of an ideal self' (Shuker, 2014, p. 228; see also Alexander, 2019).

Another student, Avery, who described himself as growing up poor, and who out of all the participants worked the most hours during secondary school, found his experience at university only confirmed his commitment to making money: 'Yeah, that's still the goal in life. Isn't that everyone's goal really, is to make something of themselves, depending how they define that? I guess for me it's money equals success' (Avery).

Dominic's sense of success was about money but also the enjoyment of what he was studying. Reflecting back on the decision to go to university, Dominic felt positive. Despite not making many friends or connections at university ('I'm just kind of doing my own thing, just continuing my hard work'), being in the university space allowed Dominic to reaffirm his 'hard-worker' learner identity established in secondary school:

> Yeah, I feel pretty confident what I am studying—I am enjoying what I am studying at the moment so I feel like I am confident that once I leave university that I will still be motivated to do what I want to do. So I feel like the course I've picked is good. In terms of going to university it's a good decision. I have seen some of my old friends who have moved onto full-time jobs and getting a lot of money, but I just think about how much more money I will be earning once I finish my degree. (Dominic)

Linked via social media to their working-class former secondary school classmates, many of the participants were exposed to visual representations of the 'quick money' culture of those who were gainfully employed which, in some instances, did make them question whether they had made the right decision. Lehmann (2009a, 2009b) writes of working-class students having an instrumentalist attitude to gaining their university credential, seeing it as a necessary step to future employment. Overall, the experience of being at university—of taking a different and unfamiliar pathway—where they were surrounded by other people they perceived as ambitious motivated them to focus on planning for their future. Being enmeshed in the daily milieu of the future-oriented space of the university significantly influenced how they constructed their subjectivities, as they became aware of what was expected to be competitive in the labour

market. However, there were some instances where this actually occurred prior to commencing their university study. Before Lucas officially started at university, he described doing the groundwork in order not simply to be prepared, but to position himself advantageously:

> but a lot of groundwork and a lot of planning in that for the future as well, so it was very productive as well, trying to get ahead of the game before it starts and that. And I think it really did help me because a lot of kids are like get into uni, or uni, it's like what do we do, what do we do? And that was within our degrees whether it be units, whether it be what's required and that, so because I did a lot of research … (Lucas)

Lucas's words concerning 'being ahead of the game' suggest he felt he had a knowledge of the game. Within an era of neoliberal performativity, social identities are aligned to new logics concerning what is valued; many of these identities are fabrications: as Ball (2006) astutely notes, we are caught up in the game. In his first couple of weeks at university, Lucas did not struggle with the academics and, perhaps as a result, he saw university less as a rite of passage and more as foundational to his future success. Having excelled in his business course in secondary school, he portrayed his experience at university as developing a business model where he was the product:

> it's just laying the foundations, it's not something that you can really just jump into university and start doing, it's a process. So this is establishing, it's the establishment phase, whereas your next—it's almost like a business cycle I guess. First stage is your establishment, then you've got your growth which is one to two years, and then your maturity's your third year where you're actually going out for jobs and actually trying to do things. And the same thing, that can be applied in the university/career sense. (Lucas)

Additionally, Lucas's words highlight that class is about 'being in the know' or 'knowing how to play the game', and Lucas seemed to have both a budding awareness as well as a keenness to become more proficient in learning these games.

While exposure to the university space was important, the often substantial travel to university worked to remove the boys from their working-class suburbs, allowing them to observe a wider diversity of lifestyles. Tyler, who was pursuing a degree in hospitality which brought him from the western suburbs of Sydney into the central business district, reflected on how his university experience and being in the central business district had influenced him:

> I think I've definitely matured in a way just because I've seen, I feel like I've seen there's a smaller part of the bigger picture, I've seen—I'm in the city all the time now, so I'm seeing those type of people … So even seeing all the people in the city and all the lecturers how … students … just all that professionalism. I just feel like I've gotten a little bit of that. (Tyler)

In terms of self-crafting, Tyler was one of the few students to set up a LinkedIn profile early on in the study, which he cultivated, celebrating his milestones as he proceeded through his degree. There were often images of him in a professional suit and tie winning awards, suggesting he was not only successful but that he knew how to self-craft himself in alignment with conceptions of white-collar success.

Central to investing in neoliberal forms of selfhood was a change in language which was apparent over the course of the study. One prominent example in the data was the use of the word 'networking', which did not appear in the interviews conducted when the participants were in secondary school:

> Networks, very important. Just knowing people, putting yourself out there. Going to events. Because [my university] holds a lot of career events where you meet other lawyers, people who worked in that field. And to be able to go to those is a very good opportunity to network, introduce yourself. It is very important to have networks. (Jacob)

> So, university has changed me in the fact that I feel like to be able to achieve my goal at the end, getting into a career and then having a networking structure so that I could actually ask for like, you know, lecturers to recommend me to companies and all that, that type of thing. I feel like my aggressive approach isn't going to cut it. (Vuong)

Vuong here recognized that his 'aggressive approach' to being a high achiever and securing the necessary academic capital was not going to be enough. He would need those in positions of power to supply increased access to social capital in order to ensure his success. This differs substantially from the subjectivity Vuong presented at the beginning of the study, which was more focused on gaining a respectable ATAR. At that stage, he relayed that his parents 'thought that having a university degree would get me set up for life'. Lehmann (2009b) writes: 'Lacking the social capital that guarantees (or at least eases) access to lucrative middle-class careers, working-class students have only human capital—in this case a professional, applied degree—to break into middle-class career paths' (p. 144). Vuong now knows that ensuring his future success will involve more than his academic capital; furthermore, he will need to perform a version of selfhood in order to gain this additional capital.

Lucas, who invested heavily in self-marketing, found networks were a capital which led to other forms of capital. Early in his time at university, he was fortunate to secure employment clerking for a judge and, when I asked how it came about, he was clear that his networking was integral to this opportunity:

> Just networking, presented myself, gave myself the—had a good resume and that, made sure I've already done stuff. And they were, 'Yeah, we'll give you [the job]—we think that you have the skills and tools and you have the experiences you need to do that.' And I mean, that also is transpiring in uni whether it be … I've joined a bunch of clubs … you need to do that … (Lucas)

Lucas's prestigious job was a rarity and the majority of the boys secured simple service-sector work. However, how they accessed the employment was the same, drawing on either new acquaintances or their older networks through the social capital within their local communities. Elim, who was studying for a business degree, struggled more than any of the other boys to pick up service-sector work. It was a point of continual frustration for him. While he did eventually secure work at a petrol station, the anxiety around securing stable employment shaped his

subjectivity around what he wanted from his university experience, specifically in relation to increased networks:

> I probably want to extend my network for people I associate with in terms of, like, professionally like that. I want to start expanding, so by the time I actually do need it, it is expanded enough … That's the thing, I think when I start with the university teachers and see if they actually can network me, because I think I know one or two that did say something about knowing people working in areas like that. So, I must start with them and see if they can get me there and then I will probably see what goes from there. (Elim)

Dominic, who was studying engineering, found the expectation to network daunting and his words suggested a resistance to such practices. He had had no close interactions with any engineers prior to university and he described himself as shy. He said he had really only started to be outgoing toward the end of his time at secondary school:

> Yeah, it's like there's a lot of people … we have gone to field trips and stuff like that to meet civil engineers and stuff like that. So, I haven't spoken to them one to one but they have just talked to the class and stuff and people that really want to network with them have gone up to them. I just haven't got the confidence to go up to them and talk to them. I don't know … I have really got to work on that. (Dominic)

Dominic's words here remind us of Shuker's (2014) work on self-marketing in university admissions which distinguishes between '"reluctant" passive-internal students who unenthusiastically did what they had to, and "resistant" active-internal students who refused to tailor their image to external demands, out of principle' (p. 234). Dominic knew what he had to do—he knew the game—but struggled to self-craft around this particular form of selfhood. His habitus was engaged in a process of reconciling aspirations, a process of negotiation between the neoliberal expectations embedded in the higher education sector and the working-class values of being 'loyal to oneself' (Stahl, 2014).

Conclusion

In focusing on the 'injuries of class', Sennett and Cobb's (1972) definitive work describes the betrayal that is often a part of social mobility; furthermore, this work documents that many working-class men feel ambivalent when they successfully become middle-class and this 'ambivalence they treat as a sign of vulnerability in themselves' (p. 37). In later work Bourdieu (1984, p. 471) writes that people define 'themselves as the doxic order defines them … condemning themselves to what they have to be, "modest", "humble" and "obscure"'. This chapter has focused on a segment of the data from the *First-in-Family Males Project* in which the boys presented subjectivities which were competitive and driven. Their words suggest university life entails a hustle, and an accrual of capital. This represents a significant change from when I first met them in secondary school in terms of how they understand the role of education in their lives. Furthermore, this adopted selfhood could work to mediate the injuries of class, or perhaps in adopting the identity performances of 'the dominant middle-class culture that is increasingly characterized by selfish individualism and hyper-competition' (Reay, 2013, p. 667) they are simply working to fit in.

In considering the performance of the entrepreneurial subject, I am interested in how social structures contribute to developing their subjectivities, as their habitus 'resist and succumb to inertial pressure of structural forces' (MacLeod, 2009, p. 139). The dialectic between field and habitus causes a push and pull, as the habitus struggles to reconstitute itself as it seeks coherency. The process of social mobility and the expectations around transforming oneself from a secondary school student to a university student can result in an emerging secondary habitus, a 'cleft habitus' (Bourdieu, 1999). This destabilized habitus allows students to adopt certain identities that are conducive to upward mobility while simultaneously maintaining their dispositions acquired in their habitus of origin. Ball (2006) writes: 'Performativity works from the outside in and from the inside out' (p. 694). With this in mind, entry to higher education serves as the first step of class dislocation where individuals come to aspire beyond their social status of their parents; it also serves as a liminal time of transition where students experiment with and invest in

new forms of selfhood as they come to make themselves in the university space. Ultimately, whether it is the structural barriers they encounter (money, transport, geography) or the identity barriers they negotiate, they are in a process of calibrating different versions of selfhood in order to position themselves advantageously.

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7

Narratives of Value and Fulfilment

Building on conceptual work on aspiration, values and masculinities, this chapter maps a dimension of subjectivity for those participants who navigated the 'rough ride' of the first year—that of fulfilment. As masculinities are 'actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given social setting' (Connell, 2000, p. 12), these participants' prolonged contact with the university environment meant they began to draw on different resources, influencing their selfhood. Discursively constructed, the young men's subjectivity of fulfilment and empowerment—albeit fragile—is a result of negotiating a plethora of internal complexities and contradictions. Destin and Debrosse (2017, p. 101) note how the experience of becoming upwardly mobile contributes to a growing sense of uncertainty which can have implications for one's self-confidence and future direction.

Working-class disadvantage in education has been 'characterized by a preoccupation with access barriers, failure, economic and cultural deprivation, and active resistance' (Lehmann, 2009, p. 137). While not disputing this important work, I am interested in how the young men in this study performed a subjectivity of fulfilment and came to feel empowered. Producing this subjectivity is a care of the self (in a Foucauldian sense), and part of how they reconcile their decision to 'go against the grain' and take a very different path from their parents, which brings the risk of identity dissonance (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Reay, 2002).

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Alternatively, their commitment to this subjectivity could represent an attempt to fit in or, perhaps, the university space did in fact offer a sense of validation they did not experience at secondary school. In presenting the ways in which the boys experience moments of fulfilment and pride, I question how durable their sense of pride is.

While I will draw comparisons to the data presented in the previous chapter, the focus here is on identities in transition as the participants adopted new forms of selfhood aligned with their expectation that they would be fulfilled through their university experience. The discourse of fulfilment and improvement was arguably integral to their pathway as the transition to university carries with it an expectation of transformation. Using habitus to investigate working-class student identities experiencing change in higher education, Lehmann (2009) writes:

> New experiences and information can, however, also be allowed into one's world, where they gradually or radically transform habitus, which in turn creates the possibility for the formation of new and different dispositions … Transformations can be confirming or contradictory, they can be evolutionary or dislocating. (p. 139)

Such transformations have significant implications for how the participants came to craft their identities advantageously as they picked up on the currencies that count in higher education. Their capacity to reconsider how they imagined themselves echoes previous arguments regarding the 'the central importance of fantasy and imagination to working-class students hoping to go to higher education' (Walkerdine, 2011, p. 256).

The first-in-family experience—as one of going against the grain—speaks to the affective dimension of class (Sayer, 2005). O'Shea et al. (2017), and others, have noted how the journey of a first-in-family student can be framed through a strong identification with pride. With this sense of pride comes a responsibility to do well, 'The university gave me a shot. I'm just—I'm kind of proud of that. That I have to prove that I'm—I'm worth the shot. Do you know what I mean?' (Jacob).

In considering how university—and his progress at university—had come to mean something to him in terms of his fulfilment, Jacob further elaborated:

> Yeah, I've tried, like I'm more interested I guess in the uni, so yeah, like it's, I think university isn't something you can just, like, slack off in. I mean the moment you fall behind is the moment, because I'd say high school is more lenient, I guess. They want you to succeed, but in uni you have to want to succeed for yourself. So yeah, I think that that's the big difference there. (Jacob)

Kinsley, who was a self-professed lazy and relaxed student, saw his first-in-family status as something that set him apart from others:

> I mean the fact that no one really in my family has gone to university and I am the first one, I think that in itself kind of feels like—like not an immense sense of being a pioneer like, 'Hell yeah, I was the first one to do this. Shut up—I am better than you.' I just mean it's cool to think that I am the first one. It's kind of … it's endearing … it's cool. (Kinsley)

While Kinsley was always quick to lighten the mood, his words suggest that being first-in-family is an integral part of his identity ('endearing'), but that he does not necessarily see himself as better or different than others. Kinsley was the middle child, and both of his brothers did not end up attending university, one securing an apprenticeship while the other struggled to do so. In considering how aspirations and masculinities are formed relationally, with his brother's pathways in mind, Kinsley's words downplayed his success, reflecting the working-class disposition of 'fitting in' where 'no one is better than anyone else' (Stahl, 2015, p. 151).

In discussing what was important to him in the moment, Levi spoke of how occupational expectations existed in conjunction with his own sense of well-being, each mutually informing and shaping his sense of personal fulfilment:

> I think the priority is obviously for me to, to be happy and do what I want. So to get the job I want, to be whoever I want to, do whatever I want, I think that's important. But also I want to be the best person. I want to, I want to be pleasing for everyone, I want to make everyone happy, even though it's a bit far-fetched. (Levi)

Describing his notion of fulfilment, Levi here highlighted both a commitment to himself and to the welfare of others. Levi balanced his part-time work, extensive basketball commitments, his academic studies and a 45-minute commute to campus, which meant he had a very busy schedule. The majority of the participants had busy schedules, and successfully budgeting their time was integral to their sense of selfhood and sense of value. The expectation they identified strongly with was that they could *and should* do it all without question. Given this was a consistent theme in many of the interviews, I asked Levi to reflect upon his schedule and his sense of independence.

> I feel like such a kid in the big picture but at the same time such an adult because I've got all this responsibility a mix as, it's all, it's weird, sometimes like a kid but then other times I have to be an adult and got to find the balance … I've like, stepped into it in terms of independence and taking control of my life is sort of the difference. I'm sort of feeling like I'm growing up and being able to make the choices is the sort of the difference between 'Year 12 me' and 'me now'. (Levi)

Independence and Feeling Valuable

In *Guyland* (2008), a prominent text informing studies of masculinities in higher education, Kimmel identified a Peter-Pan mindset where the young men he spoke with, who were mainly middle-class, articulated a tremendous sense of anxiousness and uncertainty regarding adulthood. This anxiety can lead to problematic behaviours: 'In college, they party hard but are soft on studying. They slip through the academic cracks, another face in a large lecture hall, getting by with little effort and less commitment' (Kimmel, 2008, p. 3). Kimmel does note the class differential where 'working-class guys cannot afford to prolong their adolescence; their family needs them, and their grownup income, too badly' (pp. 11–12). Regardless of whether the participants in the *First-in-Family Males Project* attended university or not, the majority of the participants did not identify strongly with a Peter-Pan mindset. They instead worked long hours in part-time jobs, striving to excel and be fulfilled in multiple

areas of their life. Instead of disassociating themselves from the demands of adulthood, they embraced their independence and spent these formative years on the treadmill, running from one obligation to another as we saw with Levi. Such a lifestyle informs a certain sense of self and vice versa. When Osman reflected on how university worked to make him more mature, he called attention to how it provided him with the space to foster a sense of ownership over his own progress:

> Towards learning, I've got more responsibility. Before my parents used to push me to do that, do this, study, eat, do that, clean your room. Now, now they just left it for me, now I have, because now at uni, so they're actually have moved to act as an adult, honestly. I guess now everything I have to do it all by myself, I can't have anyone behind me, keep telling me do this, do that, do that. (Osman)

In reflecting on his sense of fulfilment and a feeling of 'making it' at university, Isaac's narrative was centred upon a feeling of being independent:

> I have said I want to become more independent. I think that is sort of making it. I think you have to be independent to do it otherwise you are not doing anything so you have to be independent. You have to be I'm going to get up—I am going to go to the train station—I am going to come to uni. I am going to study—I am going to watch this lecture—I am going to take notes, not the teacher says, all right 20 minutes take these notes. You have to do it yourself. (Isaac)

In reflecting on what he was taking pride in during his second year of university, Tobias spoke of not simply his academic attainment but how he had been able to adapt, to craft an identity that was more socially inclined:

> Probably—I'd say my results in some instances and probably my ability to adapt to certain situations because that wasn't too high last year, I don't think. Because I don't want to just keep in my shell and my same group of people talking to—and probably I find that uni's probably taken it—you have to get out of your shell to meet new people and socialize and stuff like that. (Tobias)

In their work on the 'ideal student' as an influential figure, informing how students *come to be* at university, Wong et al. (2021) draw attention to the fact that this figure is proactively engaged with the wider academic community. Many of the boys felt compelled to access all the universities had to offer but just did not have the time. Part of Vuong' sense of fulfilment was the freedom he associated with university life (see Stahl & Zhao, 2021). While he found the competition between students stressful (see Chap. 5), he was also excited by the pace of academic learning and being with students who worked at a similar level to himself:

> Because I feel like, at school, it was, from time to time it's a bit suffocating, due to, just the variety of students in the classroom. For some students might be a bit slower and we are taking some others will be faster uptake. And then, but the teacher has to provide for all of them. So this means that often the faster learning rate students would often be dragged behind a bit. But at uni, it's like what you yourself can do. Rather than teachers trying to drag you along. Or sometimes, from time to time push you further. So I feel like I belong here a lot more, because I can actually demonstrate what I know a lot better. Or what I can do a lot better. Than what I could do at school. (Vuong)

Vuong explained that his skills are validated in the space of the university, whereas at his disadvantaged secondary school this was often not the case. While both working-class and middle-class boys struggle with being perceived as both masculine and academically successful (Whitehead, 2003), it is far more of a struggle for working-class boys (see Renold, 2001; Swain, 2004). Furthermore, given the importance of validation for upwardly mobile working-class males, these affective experiences serve as powerful moments, contributing to affirmation of their aspirations.

Dominic's sense of value and fulfilment was overly focused on his academic capital and came from what he felt he could accomplish academically. Dominic was a high achiever, but his words suggested he carried a tremendous amount of anxiety around his academic performance and employment prospects (see Stahl, 2021b). I asked Dominic to reflect back on where he felt he had been successful since we last spoke and he said:

> It's a tough question, well mostly in university you consider success as grades. So if you are getting HDs you're obviously doing well; if you're getting credits or … then you're not doing too well. That's just my standards anyway. I don't like credits too much but yeah … there's not much else you can do in uni to make you feel like you are succeeding. Obviously, you do to be on top of your work. Like for me, if I had an assignment due five days later and I hadn't started it obviously I feel like I am not succeeding at doing much at all. (Dominic)

In direct contrast to more middle-class masculinities which are informed by an Australian 'easy-going-ness' (Nichols & Stahl, 2017), Dominic's words demonstrate the pressure he puts on himself to achieve well. What is most relevant here is how Dominic links his sense of value to grades and the effort he puts in. His words highlight how, for those who are first in family and who do not necessarily consider higher education a natural progression, academic success feels like a central part of how they come 'fit in' or 'stand out' (Reay et al., 2009). Bourdieu (1984) calls attention to how individuals from affluent backgrounds who possess durable forms of educational and cultural capital enjoy a sense of self-assurance—a sense of ease. Dominic's words suggest he did not feel a sense of ease, influencing how he perceived both himself and his education.

This section has sought to capture what made the boys feel valuable during their transition to university. In his historical analysis of how self-making and masculinities are interwoven, Kimmel (2002) writes of the importance for men to feel autonomy and self-control, and to prove themselves in a 'public sphere, specifically the workplace' (p. 141). Highlighting the role masculine identity practices play in fulfilment, gendered patterns for men have historically been tied to independence and autonomy (Connell, 2005; Phoenix et al., 2009). Independence is a key part of how masculine subjectivities are produced, but we must remember they are in the process of *becoming independent* as opposed to being fully independent. Charlie captured the conflicted nature of this transitional time:

> I don't know. I thought I was independent, but I really wasn't … And so, it was an immature independence. But now I really am. I pay for everything myself, obviously when I still live at home … mum cooks meals for me and everything but … The way I see it is I'm still not quite an adult yet. (Charlie)

Producing Subjectivities of Fulfilment

While documenting working-class disadvantage remains a powerful theme in educational research, increasingly there are efforts to capture some of the diversity of working-class young people's experiences and identity work as they invest in new forms of selfhood in relation to their education. Lehmann's (2009) research calls attention to how young people who are first in family often associate success at university with the 'working-class virtues of hard work and value for money' (p. 146). This echoes research in Australia where students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have been documented to desire stable careers that provide financial security (see Gore et al., 2015). Other studies have called attention to how individuals from non-traditional backgrounds can feel a sense of profound fulfilment that comes from their experiences in higher education (O'Shea et al., 2017; Woodin & Burke, 2007; Danielsson et al., 2019). Integral to success for working-class students in education is the opportunity to 'take agency of their learning process' so they can feel an ownership over their personal transformation (Duckworth & Ade-Ojo, 2016, p. 301).

Across the data from the *First-in-Family Males Project*, it seemed that once the participants had developed their skills around time management, they felt more comfortable and were able to tap into a stronger sense of fulfilment. Lucas described his transition into university as 'liberating' where, in constructing his schedule, he felt he could be agentic:

> I only do three days of uni, and then work on top of that, and everything. It's like, you have so much control, and I guess, scheduling your life and that. And so, that's a lot of responsibility on you to make sure when you need to do X, Y and Z. But at the same time it's very liberating, because it means, whereas—you know, school, you weren't able to go to certain things, now you can, you know, cut and switch things, and you can put things in. And so, I guess it makes your life more of a jigsaw puzzle, rather than like a set schedule, which I think works well with me, because I'm very much the person who likes to chart my own, sort of day, and do. Because like, I can prioritize. (Lucas)

Faced with a new social milieu of university, with its own customs and language, Lucas here was confident that he could prioritize effectively. As an outlier in the study, Lucas expressed a feeling here of knowing, of ease (Bourdieu, 1984), in how he adapted himself to the university environment. The perception of the ideal student is academically ambitious and highly motivated (Wong et al., 2021) and this informed Lucas's sense of selfhood; his experiences worked to reaffirm it. Highlighting how he saw fulfilment, Lucas pushed himself to forge social connections and assume leadership roles—specifically crafting himself around opportunities that he perceived as advantageous to his goal of future employment (see Stahl & McDonald, 2019).

Linking back to Charlie's comment regarding 'immature independence', other participants described the transition to university in terms of their own burgeoning self-development, where they were able to see themselves less as adolescents and more as adults:

> I'd like to say I've matured. I've definitely become more independent. I'm doing a lot of things for myself now, mum and dad aren't on my back anymore it's up to me, big steps as childish as that sounds. So I think that's the main thing: I've become way more independent. (Levi)

> Well, since day one I was very nervous indeed. I was very shy. I was, I was, I was scared to ask people for help. But now after, after semester 1, I'm much more confident, I've found that confidence within me. I approach new people, I talk to a lot of new students here and there. I've made new friends, wherever I go I made friends. I guess it makes my job easier since I've got to know more people it makes it, it doesn't make it hard from before. (Osman)

Osman's words suggest that his experience at university unlocked something that was not previously brought to the fore in his secondary school environment ('I've found that confidence within me'). At a later point in the interview, Osman discussed how he has felt like giving up but that his aspiration has kept him motivated:

> It has been a good journey since day one and this is my second semester. At the moment it feels I'm going pretty good. I've been studying hard; I've

> been working hard. There has been times where I gave up, but then when I had … when I thought about my goal I have to achieve it, I've got the motivation to come back. (Osman)

Highlighting another dimension of fulfilment, universities themselves invest in specific strategies to foster fulfilment. Each university associated with this study engaged in a wide array of activities (e.g. O-Week, Sports Day) to cultivate a feeling of belonging, and some participants benefited from this while others did not. For men from non-traditional backgrounds, organizations specifically designed around ethnic and cultural pride seemed important and previous research has documented how these men may struggle to acclimatize to university life (Harper, 2004). An important part of what motivated Fiamalu, a Pacific Islander student, was internalized intergenerational aspirations, or the 'migrant dream', and a desire for socioeconomic advancement through education (see Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010). However, while he was determined, Fiamalu's aspirations required validation (see Stahl, 2021a). For example, at university he described his experience at a cultural tournament between multiple universities in Australia which was key to his development:

> I've become more open, way more open. I've met so many people, even people with—that have the same background as me, because we have a—we had a tournament—we had a tournament for this Pacific Islander thing, yeah, and we got together with Queensland—Griffith University came down, Queensland University of Technology came and … from Brisbane, and then there was people here from USYD, from UTS, I mean, all of the … universities together, we had this experience. (Fiamalu)

The first person in his family to finish Year 12, a significant part of Fiamalu's identity was defying stereotypes and living his life in a way that positively reflects his Samoan culture (see Stahl, 2021a). While naturally quite a taciturn individual, he was forthcoming about the tournament as an affective experience that opened him up to new possibilities, new modes of selfhood, while also validating his trajectory.

As already mentioned, working-class young people can feel caught between two worlds and, while many of the boys were able to recount

their experiences with fulfilment, ultimately their sense of fulfilment required continual validation. As the habitus experiences competing fields and is no longer able to easily produce cohesive meaning, there is a 'difficulty in holding together the dispositions associated with the different stages of the given field, and in adjusting to the newly established order' (Yang, 2013, p. 9).

As he divided his time between the northern suburbs of Adelaide and the central business district, Elim felt conflicted about what university means:

> It depends really, I mean, it depends now because nowadays I know there's more options to … so it depends like which kind of environment you're in. Because some people hold university to a high degree, especially quoting people, if they hear someone quote university, they probably … empowered them because they think they are accomplishing something … so it depends the kind of environment you're in. (Elim)

One of the few students to attend university from his secondary school, Elim was aware there are many pathways into employment that do not involve university. His words highlight that other people's perception of university varies, and some may not see it as fulfilling or empowering at all. For working-class men, the changes they are enduring in becoming socially mobile require affirmation which can be difficult to come by (see Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame, 1997; Ackers, 2020). This leads us to the next section, which considers how the boys' sense of fulfilment could be, depending on circumstance, quite fragile.

The Fragility of Fulfilment

In documenting how cultural capital is passed down through generations, Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) write of the 'the inheritors' whose capitals provide them with a sense of inherent capability and self-assurance; they embody the ease that comes with being precisely where they are meant to be. Higher education is a natural fit for 'the inheritors' as it complements their culture, whereas working-class students have to

acclimatize both academically and socially, leading to feelings of inferiority and dissatisfaction. Highlighting the fragility of fulfilment, the boys in the *First-in-Family Males Project*, for the most part, did not feel powerfully connected to the university environment. While they mentioned a feeling of belonging and supplied examples of social integration, there was rarely the sense that university was a natural progression or that they were entitled to be there.

Within a neoliberal era, Ball (2006) writes: 'We become rounded paragons with multiple strengths and infinite possibilities for further work, adept in the studied art of convincing exaggeration. We make fantasies of ourselves, aestheticise ourselves' (p. 699). There exists a pervasive expectation that students will both embody and perform the 'entrepreneur of the self' (Du Gay, 1996)—furthermore, they also internalize the expectation that they will feel fulfilled through this performance. Therefore, the imagined futures the young men engaged with—as part of the process of moving beyond their circumstances—remained fragile. Extending this point further, I have previously argued how, when new institutions are encountered, preconceived imaginaries become fragmented: 'the visage slips, the myths recede as the weight of reality sets in' (Stahl, 2021b, p. 146). These processes inform how the participants' aspirations were 'cooling out, warming up, and holding steady' (Alexander et al., 2008, p. 375) as they navigated the university space.

The fragility of fulfilment comes in many different forms but often concerns how students see themselves in relation to a pre-set ideal university learner, a neoliberal fiction. Dominic, who worked a minimum of twenty hours a week managing a take-away pizza place, shared his perception of where he is measuring up and where he is not:

> Yeah, like when I walk in there … I feel like I'm actually a uni student. Like, the typical carry bags, all the textbooks and stuff, all around doing hard work, putting your head down. But I haven't done any of the community stuff—like they have events all the time, every week or so often. (Dominic)

In his view, he did feel like he belonged ('I'm actually a uni student') but his schedule did not allow him to engage fully in the university

community. Furthermore, his schedule did not allow him to actually spend much time at university; therefore, his sense of pride around being a university student was somewhat fragmented. His part-time work was integral to him feeling a sense of independence and personal fulfilment, but it came at a cost of feeling less fulfilled in the university space. While many Australian students work throughout their studies, the majority of boys in the *First-in-Family Males Project* worked as many hours as were manageable, often rightfully complaining how physically exhausted they were. This highlights not only their financial constraints, but how for young working-class men the importance of labour and of earning remains powerful (McDowell, 2004); furthermore, the long hours contributed to the fragility of their university aspirations.

As the university was seen as a space of capital accrual, Dominic's words highlight that fragility was connected to a feeling of not capitalizing on all the opportunities available. However, while Dominic's time was sparse, other boys like Rashid struggled to pick up any part-time labour, which meant they had more time to spend at university. This prolonged exposure to the institutional culture influenced how Rashid came to see himself in relation to what was valued by the institution. Rashid's aim was to develop himself in relation to what the university had to offer:

> I'm hoping to make a change. I want to try and participate in volunteer stuff and go to the tutor sessions and things like that. It's not really my—something—not the tutoring but the volunteering stuff is like not—something I'm a bit apprehensive about … Yeah, because I think it would be beneficial in the long term, even on a resume and stuff because I don't have a lot of things to put on my resume right now. (Rashid)

While the boys in this study did not engage in strategic self-crafting strategies to secure their place at university (see Shuker, 2014), once they got to university the exposure to the higher education context made them start to consider their own employability. As discussed in Chap. 5, many seemed to have at least a fragmented knowledge that an academic degree would not necessarily set them apart in their desired occupation and that they would need to self-craft in other ways to improve their

marketability. This informed the fragility of their aspirations because they had made it to university—an accomplishment unto itself—and now it felt like the goalposts had changed a bit.

Manny, who struggled in a competitive engineering degree due to not having the prerequisite science knowledge from his secondary school (see Stahl, 2021b), became very frustrated after failing a course. When reflecting on this moment and his general trajectory, Manny stated almost defiantly: 'You don't really need a degree to get money. There's plenty of jobs out there that pays still around a high amount to live off.' When I asked Manny whether he could have gone and done one of those jobs instead of choosing to go to university, he highlighted how, as a Pacific Islander, he felt a cultural imperative: 'Mostly because my parents, my parents came from another country and they want a better future and since most of my culture don't really go to uni, so I'm like yeah …' After failing the course Manny wavered and entered into a period of deep reflection, as his aspirations were 'cooling out' (Alexander et al., 2008, p. 375). He picked up more hours at work and distanced himself from the university space, just barely scraping by academically. Eventually, with the support of his parents, he was able to change programs to an education degree, where he felt more comfortable and really began to excel. This highlights the importance of students—especially students from low socioeconomic backgrounds—being advised appropriately about whether their academic skills will position them to be successful. It is also apparent that it was not necessarily university that Manny was struggling with, but instead his academic preparation in certain curriculum areas, as well as the hyper-competitive culture in engineering, which he found off-putting and where he struggled to craft himself as valuable. Manny's story of fragile aspirations connects with Mendick's (2006) study of masculinities in mathematics, where she calls attention to the 'working-class class pretenders' (p. 75), highlighting that the classing and gendering of different disciplines can be an uncomfortable fit for students, undermining their progress and confidence (see also Danielsson et al., 2019).

The longitudinal research of the study allowed me to capture some of the complexities as the boys transitioned into university and, eventually, out of university. I conclude this section by focusing on two boys—Khuyen and Keagan—who were well suited to university and had similar

profiles to the other boys in the study, but were unable to make university work for them. Their stories highlight not only differences in class and ethnicity, but also in opportunity. Khuyen, who was Vietnamese Australian and whose parents owned a restaurant, enrolled in a university in a foundational course with the intention to—if successful—transfer into the health sciences. It is important to note here that Khuyen secured a very low ATAR ('I think around 50'), which mean he only qualified for a foundational course. Within those first few weeks of university, Khuyen described himself as:

> I feel like I want to study now except for when I was in Year 12, it was a forced thing, you had to do it, but now it's like I'm here, I know I can do it and I want to do it.

Socially, he joined the university volleyball team and described making a lot of friends. When I asked him about his goals, he explained:

> really I was aiming to get either just distinction or high distinction in all my courses but one course I already got a credit which I'm like … I just need to motivate myself more to actually study and put more time and effort.

Khuyen's journey was not uncommon and, while he did lack academic preparation, he seemed willing to put in the extra effort to catch up. His learner identity incorporated a sense of positivity, where he acknowledged his progress against the odds:

> In my applied science classes and my anatomy classes, I've just been excelling in both of them but then I have no background so it just makes me feel so much better. I can excel in a topic while I'm actually learning at the same time I'm actually trying to deal with stuff.

In the second half of the year Khuyen had picked up work in a steel factory where he averaged 38 hours a week. The physical exhaustion led to him deferring university and he was able to pick up extra hours at work, which meant he could contribute to his parents' bills as well as his

older sister's bills, as he sometimes stayed with her as her house was closer to the factory. While he enjoyed university and could have returned, the university experience seemed to have lost its allure. Despite not really having the necessary time, he was pondering if he could perhaps study online:

> Yeah I guess uni was just like I went to class and I did my work but because—I guess it's just like a teacher reading off a PowerPoint, you know what I mean? You sit there and you take down notes and straight up reading from there, so you can basically go home and do the same thing, but at the same time waking up at 6 o'clock in the morning just to get to your tute or whatever and then you sit there and you go for two hours and then you could just do that when you wake up at any time because of the PowerPoint, because once the lesson is done it just goes straight to online. So I'm not sure.

Returning to Ball's point regarding how we imagine ourselves, 'how we become rounded paragons with multiple strengths and infinite possibilities for further work' (2006, p. 699), Khuyen no longer saw himself as a university student and his sense of infinite possibilities was now aligned more with the factory work. Over the course of the interviews, it was clear he identified strongly with the working-class males he met in the steel factory (see Stahl & Zhao, 2021). He described his first instructor as a best mate, 'like we would just hang out the whole entire time. Like after work and all of that you drink a lot, go out a lot and that but it was good.' Miles et al. (2011, p. 420) demonstrate how working-class men, when they reflect back on their upward mobility, are aware of their own individuality. They contend that career identities exist in relation to a conflicted sense of selfhood. While Khuyen barely finished his first year of university and thus does not have the benefit of hindsight, his interviews did reflect an internal conflict around individuality and collectivism. The pursuit of factory work allowed him to be a family provider, but it also offered him a form of social validation that for some reason he did not feel at university.

When I first met Keagan, who was Anglo-Australian and attended a low-fee-paying independent school in the western suburbs of Sydney, he

saw university as part of his future. His father was a manager, and his mother was a chapter president for a national charity. Keagan's journey of social mobility was composed in relation to his father who left school when he was in Year 10, 'so that he could help pay rent for the house and stuff'. As Keagan described it, 'I model myself off my father' and 'he's worked his way to the top'. Though Keagan's parents had not been to university, he recognized that it was a different generation and that university was now more essential. With this in mind, Keagan's perception of success was 'about personal achievement', though he often struggled with his studies and specifically found it difficult to maintain a positive mindset. When we discussed his plans for university, Keagan seemed uncertain:

> I've never experienced university before and I don't know what to expect, so I haven't anyone that's really, can give me an insight on that. But I think it will be obviously a lot harder because I'll have to do a lot more individual work rather than having the support of teachers, the one-on-one sort of stuff.

Furthermore, Keagan was one of the few boys in the study to speak openly about his concern about university fees and accruing debt. Having little knowledge of university, his words suggested that he sought value for money; he wanted to know that university would be worth it in terms of attaining employment, as noted other studies (see Gore et al., 2015).

When I met up with Keagan the following year he had chosen not to continue his university studies after the first semester:

> I was putting work before university so then I just fell off university … So, I decided that I'm better off just working, because that's what I'm, that's my strength, I'm better at working than I am actually studying and stuff like that.

While he suggested university was not an unpleasant experience and he was quick to make friends, Keagan was quick to note, 'I could have done it easily but I didn't—so it just wasn't for me.' Keagan seemed confident that his part-time work would translate into full-time work but he was proactively sending out his resume around Sydney in the hopes of

securing better employment, which he eventually did, serving as a paid protégé to a property manager for a large company. When I met up with Keagan years later, he reflected back on this experience:

> If you're really focused on one thing and don't have, some people have really tunnel vision. Mediocre. You see a lot more than, yeah. So for me personally, with uni, I had tunnel vision. I couldn't see myself doing a job such like this without completing a degree or such. But, like I said, [I] opened up, got into the job, I didn't need uni to push me any further than I'd already got. I got a break. I got my head in a decent company, and I'm working my way up the chain. (Keagan)

In Miles et al.'s (2011) research the upwardly mobile men they interviewed 'narrate the kind of particular story which establishes their individuality and selfhood as that which is not to be seen as a career cipher' (p. 420). In contrast to this work which emphasizes a working-class subjectivity of modesty, Keagan seemed to identify strongly with his individuality, with performing as an entrepreneur of the self, contributing to a subjectivity of independence and proactivity. He described his university experience as limiting and, in contrast, he portrayed his journey as capitalizing on opportunity ('I got my break', 'I'm working my way up the chain'). This complicates some of the arguments presented in Chap. 5 regarding the university space as a site which compels first-in-family males to invest in new forms of selfhood as Keagan's journey highlights how white-collar work can also bring new dispositions to the fore.

Conclusion

In mapping how mainly middle-class boys become men at university, Kimmel (2008) writes:

> [m]iddle-class kids know that their career is supposed to be more than a job; it is supposed to be financially rewarding, emotionally rich and statisfying, and offer a sense of accomplishment and inner satisfaction. Work, for them, is an 'identity quest'. (p. 32)

Underpinning these arguments is the notion of career fulfilment and the realization of an internalized expectation. For the boys in the *First-in-Family Project*, their sense of fulfilment is perhaps less linear despite being heavily exposed to discourses which promote how university *can* and *should* be both fulfilling and integral to employability.

This chapter has documented the subjectivities of those boys who were able to navigate the 'rough ride' of the first year and who felt a strong connection to the experience. In charting some of the dimensions of fulfilment and, more importantly, their expectation that university *should* be fulfilling, I have highlighted how, during a liminal time in their lives, they constructed themselves in relation to both communal and societal expectations. As these constructions structured their subjectivities, what seems most influential is how they perceived themselves in relation to the figure of the 'ideal student' and how this perception influenced their sense of *becoming* at university. The fragility of fulfilment is underpinned by feelings of inferiority and inauthenticity, of never measuring up, both in terms of wider social validation and also in reference to their own expectations. This struggle has been documented in other studies of upwardly mobile working-class males, such as Giazitzoglu's (2014, para 2.5), which highlights that working-class males' search for 'acceptance, belonging and legitimacy' often incorporates prolonged feelings of inauthenticity.

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8

Relational Subjectivities and Self-crafting in Times of Transition

The transition to university brought the participants into contact with many different people as well as a diversity of new experiences. As they experienced these changes, they adapted and crafted themselves in order to feel a sense of belonging. These adaptations sat alongside foundational aspects of their selves, their primary habitus. As Bourdieu (1997) writes, 'social agents are endowed with habitus, inscribed in their bodies by past experiences' and '[t]hese systems of schemes of perception, appreciation and action enable them to perform acts of practical knowledge' (p. 138). This chapter focuses on the participant's change in identity alongside the shifting dynamics between the two primary social groups the boys interacted with: the peer group and the family. First, I consider how the boys gained value in their peer groups and how—when they no longer had daily contact with their secondary school peers—this placed their identities in a state of liminality and uncertainty. This occurred when they were in the midst of finding new friends in the university context, often interacting with people who are very different from themselves. Second, I consider how the boys, nearly all of whom lived at home, perceived their changing role in relation to their family. Studies of first-in-family students have captured that the students themselves, and the family as a whole, make the journey together as the transition to university is a new experience for all involved (O'Shea et al., 2017; King et al., 2019). Lehmann (2009) points out that 'having to learn the ins and outs of

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being a university student without support in one's family' is not advantageous for their success (p. 640).

The aim here is to document how the boys perceived changes in themselves as they readjusted various social expectations, and what this might have meant for how they crafted their identities. I treat both the peer group and the family as sites of learning and social support where the boys were forming their identities in relation to the identity repertoires present in the social milieu. This is not to say that the family and the peer group were the only sources of identity the boys drew upon and I recognize these young men learned in a variety of overlapping and mutually informing contexts (e.g. sports training, service work). Wider societal discourses around 'adolescence' and the shift from boyhood to manhood were also arguably underpinning these transitions. Identities, after all, do not exist in isolation from discourses but are instead produced *by* and *through* them. Identities are imbued with symbolic connotations, and discourses come to define and set limits on what we can think, feel and be (see MacLure, 2003).

The Changing Peer Group

Notions of 'mateship' permeate Australian culture and evidence would suggest they are particularly important to men (Weaver-Hightower, 2008). In exploring some aspects of the emotional geographies for first-in-family young men, it is important to recognise that male friendships and the notion of 'mateship' powerfully inform expectations around masculinity and masculinity performances. These notions were also foundational to how the participants came to aspire. We know that masculinities, as a form of gendered subjectivity, are policed and regulated as young men seek legitimation, social validation and belonging (see Loeser, 2014; Connell, 2003a, Martino, 1999). As emphasized in the previous chapters, social validation is integral to identity construction but increasingly we are seeing evidence in Australia of Australian men suffering from episodes of loneliness (Patulny, 2013; Franklin et al., 2018). Scholars struggle to identify the causes of their suffering, the 'unmet belongingness needs' (Franklin et al., 2018, p. 137) within their lifeworlds and

loneliness comes to the fore in periods of transition (Franklin & Tranter, 2008).

Robbie, who was Indigenous and therefore received extra support, struggled to maintain a connection to other students after the initial honeymoon period of O-Week (see Stahl et al., 2020). Robbie, who described himself as introverted and shy, portrayed forging new friendships as an endeavour requiring effort:

> That's hard to say … It's hard to—because you've got to try and find someone that relates to you so you can be good mates and—because a lot of people say the mates you make here, you have for the rest of your life and stuff like that. So you've got to try and—yeah, I met a lot of mates and stuff, … people that I talk to and stuff. But I want to—someone that I hang out with more often and study with and stuff like that, try and find them. (Robbie)

In considering relationships as forms of social support that undergo a shift during the boys' transition to university, Robbie presented an interesting picture. At secondary school he was socially supported by his more outgoing cousin, Justin, and both of them attended the same university and enrolled in the same program of study. When Justin chose to leave university and pursue a different route, this became a jarring experience for Robbie. Furthermore, Justin's departure presented difficulties for Robbie as it undermined his confidence to make friends. Also, by the time Justin left university many peer groups were already solidified and other students had established their support structures, making it difficult for Robbie to socially integrate. Furthermore, as the academic work intensified, Robbie struggled to keep up and did not have close confidants to rely upon: '…it's just like I'll talk to them eventually once I get my bearings. I'm just waiting until I get a handle on uni first' (Robbie). Struggling to belong can have detrimental effects, as research continues to highlight that first-in-family students rely on the networks they make at university to counteract limitations in their knowledge (see Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Lehmann, 2009).

Across a variety of international contexts, many researchers have highlighted the role of peer pressure at the secondary level in producing the

subjectivities of young men (Imms, 2007; Martino, 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). In his research on boys' constructions of masculinity, Imms (2007) emphasizes boys' 'layered engagement of masculinities' where they have a capacity to think outside dominant gender norms but often a reluctance to act outside such norms. Echoing other research in this field (see Swain, 2005; Kimmel, 2008), Imms (2007) writes:

> The structure of the stereotype was so limited that no room existed within it to allow boys to extrapolate the concept of masculinity further … Masculinity discussion was a vacuum for boys. They had little knowledge of its construct and their culture restricted any development of these constructs as an alternative to the stereotypical. (p. 42)

This portrays masculinity as a totalizing and dominating force. While I do not dispute the concept's salience, masculinities are, at the end of the day, culturally infused 'patterns and practices' that are subject to change: 'one can point to situations where masculinities are indeed unstable or in tension' (Connell, 2003a, p. 18). Other scholarship in critical studies of men and masculinities has called attention to 'slippages' (Beasley, 2008) and 'hybridisation' (Demetriou, 2001), emphasizing adaptability and plurality. Evidence on men transitioning to higher education suggests less of an alignment and more of an open acceptance of more diverse forms of masculinity (see Harper, 2004), though overall, the data from the *First-in-Family Males Project* suggests that many of the participants saw the other men at university as serious, studious and hard-working, in contrast to their more relaxed secondary school peers:

> They're switched on. They know what they want, they're here for a reason, they're not wasting their time. They're not here because they have to be here, they're here by their own choice. So I feel as if the people here at university, compared to high school, they're, they know what they want. (Campbell)

> But a good majority of the male population at [secondary school] was your generic, stocky Australian kind of kid who likes footy, who likes cricket, who's into trades, cars, etc. That kind of general stereotype of a man. And

> you look at university here, it's almost ironic that we're, we're speaking about how there's so much more acceptance about a lot of things and there is yet still a lot of stereotypes that, even though you don't have to point it out, still exist. (Theo)

Gender performances shift according to the discursive environment (Francis, 2000; Stahl & McDonald, 2021). As they entered into a process of renovating their identities as learners, the young men often had to scale back performing a subjectivity of 'easy-going' and 'laidback' masculinity as it did not align with the competitive, individualistic university contexts which emphasize individual responsibility (Nichols & Stahl, 2017). This is not necessarily a straightforward process as there was comfort for some in the more relaxed subjectivity acquired and maintained throughout secondary school. The performance of the laidback student was validated by the secondary school peer group, but did not carry the same currency at university. In comparing the males at university with the males at his secondary school, Manny voiced a preference for males who are not pretentious:

> Well, the dudes at my high school, only some of them were snobby, we had like one dude who was snobby because he was super smart but then the rest are down to earth dudes who aren't as smart. I like the down to earth people, I don't like the snobby people that are up themselves. (Manny)

Theo, who was studying IT, discussed the stereotypes linked to curriculum areas at university, but agreed that these stereotypes are not all encompassing:

> That's just it. Like I said, that you can stereotype the people here as being, you know, quite nerdy or geeky, however you want to describe it as that kind of thing. There's also a lot of people who you would never expect to be anyone that would work with computers, like someone who's dressed in their footy guernsey walking around, you know, go to the gym 24/7 and yet he's also a network technician. It's like, a lot of the time, a good 70% of the time, your stereotypical expectations are confirmed, and then a good 30% of the time they are thrown out the window. (Theo)

Away from their secondary school peers, the new social climate of the university provided an exciting prospect for validation. Entering a prestigious maths program at an elite university, Vuong now regularly interacted with the city's elite. These experiences not only made him feel respected but also seemed to raise his class consciousness:

> I feel a lot more respect of how I went in school now, than I did then, because most of my [university] friends went to prestigious schools. One of my friends went to the USC, which is a university-funded school right next to this university, and it's a high school. And they teach high school, Year 12 subjects and everything, but they were pretty much directly in contact with this university. They got the benefits actual lectures, and using lecture rooms in this university for subjects like maths and all that. Other people in my friends' group, they'd go to really prestigious private schools who have 99.95 ATARs, like 10 students or more come from that school—these types of schools.

Lucas, who was never a stranger to using a business metaphor, put the comparison between his secondary school in the western suburbs of Sydney and his elite higher education institution in these terms:

> But that's what I mean. That's the whole thing—it's unique. It's individual, almost self-fulfilling to try and say that everyone's [motivation] is the same but also try and find their USPs [unique selling points], you can't really marry that up. Within my friends, there is definitely things that are similar [to secondary school friends] but to then take that in a wider perspective, I think, why someone goes to university can be very individualized and is something that I think some people might still be working it out. Some people have worked [it] out for a while, some people are still in two minds. You never know. (Lucas)

Lucas, who was politically involved in conservative politics, believed that each person's motivation to attend university was a personal choice. At secondary school, where he was a high achiever, he was respected by other students but struggled to fit in socially, whereas at university he found people he felt he really connected with and who he perceived as valuing his drive and determination to be successful. Given that many of his

secondary school friends did not attend university, his words suggest a recognition that university is not for everyone and that some may come to it at a later stage in their lives ('some people might still be working it out').

A significant part of how we demarcate a working-class and middle-class masculinity is how they conceive of themselves in individualistic terms (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). In analysing the relationship between masculinity and social class, Morgan (2005) writes of 'a collective solidarity (traditionally associated with the working class) and individual achievement and risk taking, associated with the classic bourgeoisie, or the middle classes' (pp. 169–170). Some of Lucas's words capture this and, as he experienced extended periods of time in the university space, he came to increasingly identify with elite forms of selfhood. However, the other participants who experienced an elite university space did not all agree. Leo, who changed directions often and experienced both a working-class university and an elite university, found the students in the elite space problematic:

> The students? Oh, yeah. They're very to themselves. A lot of them are very to themselves, very focused, I think, on just getting to that classroom, getting there, getting out, doing their notes and whatever. A lot of them are very, you can tell that there are the people that are there just to be in university doing an arts degree or doing … I don't want to talk shit on arts degrees, but doing a degree because they want to be at university to, you know. They wear their designer clothes and they go about with their bags and their little Air pods in, and they walk out with their boys, and they're on their phones all day.

While Leo struggled with university study and cycled through a variety of part-time service-sector jobs during his first post-secondary year (see Stahl, 2020), he never wavered in his view that university should be about employability, or should provide financial security, as seen in other studies of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (see Gore et al., 2015). As a poor boy from the northern suburbs of Adelaide, his words suggest he is acutely aware of the differences between his background and that of most university students, and of how university students craft

themselves (e.g. Air pods, designer clothes). Also, when he described his social acclimatization to university life, he expressed a 'loyalty to self' (Stahl, 2014), valuing his sense of personal authenticity over what he perceived as more superficial forms of social connections:

> Yeah, I'm not going to pretend to be someone else because if they don't like me for who I am then I am not going to have a relationship or friendship with someone where I am pretending the whole time. That's just not a friendship really. So if someone likes me because I am pretending to be cool or pretending to be masculine or whatever and then they like me because I am masculine and I'm not masculine … what's the point? (Leo)

I got the sense that Leo was not willing to adapt himself, to self-craft according to the new social space of the university. Despite his inquisitive mind and love of learning, he eventually left university altogether and gained an apprenticeship. Echoing the earlier example of Robbie, he appeared to face a persistent struggle in forming social connections. Many Australian students who come from more prestigious schools attend university with many of their friends from secondary school and, for this reason, university often has a feeling of being a natural progression. Such social amalgamations, though, make it difficult for those who are first in family to acclimatize socially, contributing to their feelings of isolation:

> I mean, it's been a little hard to … but I've met some people … you have to work with them in group assignments as well because … have a group assignment … so you make—you're not forced to make friends like you are in school so much but you have to go out of your way to make friends and talk to them in tutorials, meet up with them for lectures and then work with them … It's kind of hard because a lot of people already have their friend groups, some of them have been from school coming together so that's even harder if you're trying to get in with them, be friends with them. But there's activities around the uni … to different events on that you can hang out at and meet people so it's not impossible, you've just got to work at it. (Avery)

Avery here highlighted an awareness of the barriers he faced ('people already have their friend groups') and how, as a result, he needed to invest

more in making the social side of university work for him. Not every participant in the study was able to make this connection and, while they did not always express it clearly, some did seem uncertain as to why they could not get the necessary traction socially. Samuel was fortunate as some of his friends from secondary school attended the same university as him, which he realized placed in him an advantageous position:

> That's actually—for me, obviously with my friends coming here, I haven't felt that. But if I look around, I can see some people who often sit by themselves and stuff. So, I understand and—yeah—understand how hard it can be, especially when—coming to uni, some people already have friendship groups established and it's hard for them—for people who come here along to join in a group. It might be easier for people to meet with another person who doesn't have a friendship group. (Samuel)

I have previously documented how adjusting to university life requires adopting the skill of time management (see Stahl, 2021b). Clearly, some participants' failure to organize their time had significant implications for their academic achievement but it also contributed to whether they maintained their friendship groups from secondary school. Given that the majority of the participants endured quite daunting commutes to university—coupled with their work-intensive schedules—they were often pulled away from their secondary school friends who were all pursuing different pathways, and this further contributed to a feeling of isolation.

> The only thing that, at the moment, that I would be missing out on is just that time to catch up with friends now, with uni starting and it being four times a week, and then Friday being my one day that's free, but then my other mates are working, normally on the Fridays, and then I'll work weekends. So, it's trying to balance that if I can, that'll be the only thing at the moment, yeah. (Oliver)

> Yeah, no, definitely. That's actually a very good point. Where some have sort of seen things starting to crumble and things are starting to break away and that, then it also leads to people realizing that oh, this person is important and, whereas they might haven't had spent as much time dedicating

> focus on X, Y and Z, they now have because it's just the inevitable fact that when you have a large group and everyone's now going to five or six different unis and they're all meeting new people. (Lucas)

While the notion of 'balance' has many different dimensions, in their first year at university nearly every participant commented on a desire to find a balance, suggesting a prolonged feeling of disorientation. As some friendships 'crumbled' and as the participants invested in new university acquaintances, the interviews often reflected an effort to compartmentalize as they struggled to shift between multiple friendships groups, each representing a different phase in their lives:

> I still catch up with all my mates and stuff all the time, but it's just some mates I don't see as often as I thought I would. And there's some mates maybe I see more than I do. Now since school I've been with all my uni friends probably more than I have with my older friends from school and stuff. I have a bunch of boys that we always hang around with, that's my group, and then I have my uni friends. So it's like whenever I'm not at uni I try to go with the boys and when ''m not with the boys I'm trying to be with them. You know what I mean? (Tyler)

Tyler's words highlight the importance of friendships established during a formative time in his life and how this sat alongside his newly acquired 'uni friends'. Both were foundational to his sense of self and his future and I got the sense he had invested in both as both were equally important to his well-being. In considering the first-in-family male experience, we should not discount the importance of fostering and maintaining social connections, as Weaver-Hightower (2008) writes: 'the concept of "mateship" is perhaps more important to the sense of Australian masculinity than any other facet' (p. 39).

Over the course of the study Jacob found himself increasingly influenced by those at his university and, in fact, rarely spoke about his friends from secondary school. What is interesting here is that Jacob at first did struggle socially to integrate into university life but, knowing it was essential to his future employability, he invested the time and effort into fostering these important connections. When we spoke about sources of inspiration, he said: 'Probably my university friends off the top of my

head. They're the people I hang out with the most and they're the people I'm spending most of my time with studying and whatnot. So they're probably the most impactful' (Jacob).

Whereas secondary school was arguably a social space of more authentic forms of friendship, the university, as a future-oriented space, had the underlying aspect of employability where it could be difficult to distinguish whether the individuals they interacted with were friends, colleagues or potential future co-workers. While this was confronting, it did not seem to be a barrier, per se.

> So I feel like there's very clear distinction in universities of professional connections and then friendly connections. So it's about working [that] out and some will blend and some will diverge between two, particularly where I … for me personally … I know that a lot of that has now happened where it was initially just a professional you're doing something for the sake of doing something, now it's becoming more friend orientated, it's becoming on a personal level. (Lucas)

While the overlaps between professional and personal were not necessarily detrimental, they were something new and, therefore, confronting at first. Whereas roles were clearly assigned at secondary school, now the participants were compelled to decipher their social connections.

In one of the last interviews with Adam, a high achiever studying science, I probed him to reflect back on his secondary school learner identity and how he felt he had changed. Our discussion particularly centred around the word 'ambitious' and if he would describe himself as ambitious. Adam articulated: 'I don't like people calling me smart [or] you have lots of ambition.' I asked him to discuss this further:

> I don't know, it's hard to describe. I'm not going to say to people don't say that to me—I'll just say, okay, thank you. At the same time I'm like, I don't like people … I guess for me, I feel like if especially someone who doesn't go to university says that to me, then the conversation can turn around to them saying, I feel like I'm not working enough. Because I've had that experience with a few of mine, a friend that used to go to high school. I've bumped into them on the train, and then they're kind of saying, 'You're doing so well, but then I'm stuck here working here' and they start complaining about that stuff.

In considering the strong affective dimension of moving across class boundaries, which carries with it a certain moral significance (Sayer, 2005), Adam's words highlight his shame in 'getting out' and how social mobility can be a 'wrenching process' (Reay, 2013, p. 667). To conclude, I draw on the work of Lawler (1999), who suggests that Adam can 'get out' in terms of social class—as his university degree will open up opportunities—but he cannot necessarily 'get away'. Adam came to see himself through the existence of those who had not been able to be as socially mobile, as his past seemed to 'catch up' with him (Lawler, 1999, p. 16).

Shifting Family Dynamics and the University Experience

The experience of childhood is shaped by the quantity and types of resources (capital) families possess and operationalize when 'they confront various institutional arrangements (field) in the social world' (Lareau, 2003, p. 275). Sociological research continues to document how socialization practices within families reproduce social class differences across generations (Gillies, 2005; Hartas 2010). Drawing on research conducted in the United States, Lareau (2003) documents middle-class parents' processes of 'concerted cultivation', in which they seize opportunities to maintain an advantageous position. In contrast, working-class parents are satisfied with the 'accomplishment of natural growth', which may have intrinsic benefits but often plays out negatively in schools. Researching in the UK, Gillies (2005, p. 845) found that working-class parents aspire for their 'children to gain a basic education, stay out of trouble, and survive the psychological injuries of school failure', whereas middle-class parents' priorities are academic performance and career advancement. However, as class can be a complex and muddled picture, so can parental practices. Echoing the findings of Siraj and Mayo's (2014) fifty in-depth case studies of children in families in the United Kingdom, many of the boys in the *First-in-Family Males Project* came from disadvantaged families who had high aspirations for their children. While financial resources may have constrained them from providing significant

educational support, they were supportive in other ways (Gofen, 2009; Stahl & McDonald, 2021).

I am interested in the changing family dynamic in reference to gender as the young men transition to university life. Adams and Coltrane (2005) note that boys often maintain ambivalent connections to families (p. 230) and that '[o]nly by looking at the structural constraints people face—things like access to education or jobs—can we understand how and why cultural definitions and practices governing men inside and outside families have developed' (p. 231). As the participants shifted from adolescence to manhood, albeit incrementally, they were striving to become independent which involved a renegotiation of their relationship to their family. Connell (2005) argues that conflict with parents 'becomes inevitable as adolescent males feel their powers and try to establish their independence' (p. 12). While this may or may not be the case, a feeling of independence was an important part of the participants' journeys in the post-school years (see Chap. 5). This echoes other research on first-in-family males, such as that of O'Shea et al. (2017), who note that mature-age males who were in their 20s and 30s often framed their journeys in higher education in terms of not wanting to rely on families emotionally or financially.

Studies have documented that many young people from working-class backgrounds are fortunate to receive a great deal of support from family members, even if they do not often fully understand the aspirations of their children (see Walkerdine, 2011; Siraj & Mayo, 2014). In my interviews with parents, their words suggested the effort was there but that they simply did not know the landscape. Kathryn, a mother who resided in the western suburbs of Sydney, spoke of not knowing what universities had to offer. 'Yeah, I didn't even actually know what UTS [University of Technology Sydney] did. We've sort of just focused on Western Sydney [university] because it's close and it's got—getting a very good reputation now—it seems to be improving.'

Another parent, Melissa, who worked as an accounts administrator, while her husband, David, was a small business owner, lived in a large house located in a peri-urban neighbourhood outside of Sydney. Financially they had done well for themselves, influenced by the Sydney property boom. As Colton was her oldest child and the pursuit of

university was a new endeavour for the entire family, she explained that she and her husband felt that university was one pathway to consider alongside other options.

> Well that's funny because like, I mean, I didn't go to university. David [husband] didn't go to university. We just went off and he did his trade, I done my thing. So you know, if Colton goes to university he'll be the first one, so it's a good thing …
>
> And the hard thing to is, the, like I don't like to use the word nag … but he probably thinks I nag … 'Are you studying enough? Are you doing enough as you can? Like, should you be doing more?' And then I think, oh, I don't want to, you've got to, you know, where's that balance where you're not stepping over the, you're not pushing him over the, I'm pushing him over the edge—like 'Mum, stop!' But like, we went to the meeting at [the secondary school] the other night for the HSC, and they were like 'Don't stop nagging your boys now. You can't afford to stop nagging.' I don't like to nag him but I know he can … I know he's capable of so much more …
>
> I think the pressure and everything, I think, and then he turned around and said, 'Oh, I think I just want to do a trade.' And we said 'Okay, if you want to do a trade that's fine.' You know, like the top eight paying jobs are … at the moment … are trades anyway … (Laughing)

Highlighting the importance of family relationships in becoming socially mobile, upwardly mobile men require intergenerational dialogues to validate their non-traditional pathways (see Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame, 1997; Ackers, 2020). Alexander (2019) elucidates that 'imaginings of future gendered selves become intertwined with discourses of neoliberalism' and that such 'constructions of future adult masculinity' echo the 'voices of teachers, mothers, fathers, father-figures and role models who play a part in the relational construction of future selves' (p. 40). Parent dialogues, of course, can take on many forms and convey many messages. In the *First-in-Family Males Project*, what was particularly noticeable was that the parents did not put pressure on their sons to aspire for fear of negatively influencing the parent–child relationship, reflecting other research conducted in Australia on working-class families and education (see Connell, 2003b). The main impetus for university study really seemed to come from the teachers, rather than the parents, who were

instrumental in cultivating the young men's aspirations through 'persistently nurturing' them (see Stahl, 2021a). This contrasts with other work on first-in-family students where parents push their children to university with the desire 'for a better life than theirs, about their own realization of the limitations placed on their parents' lives because of their class position' (Lehmann, 2009, p. 643).

Another aspect which influenced the changing family dynamic was the long commutes and time spent at university or in service work, which meant significantly less interaction with family. Many of the participants described this as confronting and difficult as they often felt a close affinity to their family:

> Yeah, not seeing them as much is really, is probably the biggest thing, cos obviously, as I've said in the past, [I'm] very family orientated … (Fred)

> Yeah, not just the commute, like everything. Because like, I'm so busy now, so they barely see me. So yeah, that has influenced family life. (Campbell)

> And, now that I'm in uni, it's difficult for them to ask me for any help at all. Because I'm spending such little time at home. And even when I am at home, I'm always studying and just working and or sleeping. Catching up on the sleep that I lost for staying up too late studying. So, its, so, yeah. I am not much of a presence in the family life anymore. (Vuong)

While this is difficult to discern, the lack of extended time with family possibly contributed to the participants adapting to new forms of selfhood, as evidenced in Chap. 5. However, while it is worth considering this, as the boys learned new ways to self-craft, they still required validation, and the family continued to serve an important role in this respect. After all, the 'transformation of habitus requires recognition by others in order for working-class students to develop a new sense of self' (Lehmann, 2009, p. 643). Furthermore, in considering masculinities adapting in reference to social change, Mac an Ghaill (1994) writes of the interplay of 'family/kinship relationships, peer networks, media representation, and school and workplace experience—that provides a filter through which masculinities are culturally produced and reproduced' (p. 75). The assumption here is that peers, family members and teachers need to be

the audience which recognizes the aptitude, skills and aspirations of working-class youth so they can begin the process of change required for their intended trajectory. When speaking about how the transition to university meant less time with the family unit, Lucas articulated:

> Have I sort of re-evaluated things—I guess, yeah, that's sort of, maybe a big thing, is like re-evaluating things that are important and that, and what not. Like you know, like the time—you know, I don't get to see like, my family, really throughout the whole day. Like, I'll see them in the mornings and see them at night, whereas, you know, you'd have a lot more time to spend with them. So, like, the time you do have with them, you really, I've really learned to cherish that a lot more, which I think is a very nice thing and that. It's something that you don't really understand until like, I guess, you know—because I'll happily—so, I won't get home until twelve am, just because I have, like, I'll have uni, and then I have events on afterwards, and then, you know, catching the train home from Sydney to [the western suburbs], it's like—(Lucas)

Lucas reflected on the change in how he perceives his family and his words suggest he did not want to lose sight of the factors that had shaped and supported him. As previously mentioned, the majority of the participants described university as giving them more freedom. Reflecting the sentiment of the wider cohort, Jacob described his parents as 'a lot more laid back than when I was in high school now that I'm in uni'. Vuong, who often came into conflict with his parents over various matters, found that his sense of independence at university was often curtailed as his parents became overprotective:

> at school my parents trusted that the teachers would take care of me. This time around it's more like I have complete control now, so that there wasn't lecturers or tutors to chase after me when I'm doing something wrong or anything like that. It means it's completely my responsibility all the way through. And so the family dynamic has changed a bit in that my parents have gotten a bit more overprotective, trying to make up for that responsibility that the teachers already had, and as a teenager, I'm still going through that rebellious stage. (Vuong)

While Vuong here was engaging in his typical self-deprecating humour, his words suggest that his parents were anxious about his progress at university and how he may be influenced by spending long hours on the university campus in the city. However, this kind of data was rare and the majority of the students seemed to positively represent their relationship with their parents and wider family, sometimes calling attention to how the relationship had improved by attending university where they could be more openly emotional.

> [In terms of] spreading my emotions: I don't want to make that a big thing. If I'm in public, or out with friends, I don't really want to show them that I'm emotional. But in more like a friendly-family environment, with people that I'm close with, so, I'm not really ashamed to tell them how I feel, and get them to help me understand if it's okay or if it's not. It's just little things like that. (Tyler)

Highlighting how his relationship to his parents had changed, Levi commented on being more open and communicative:

> Just for example in high school if I was—if I was seeing a girl I wouldn't have—I would be hesitant to tell my parents. But now I'm like, oh yeah, Mum—for example—I'm going out on a date with this person … blah, blah, blah and other things. Just say if I'm struggling at the moment, I'm stressed, and I've definitely learnt to communicate with them more and again which allows them to help me, and it makes it so much easier. (Levi)

In considering the importance of intergenerational dialogues between fathers and sons, Ackers (2020) highlights how such relationships serve to authenticate pathways while mediating the identity work involved with becoming upwardly mobile. However, for the majority of the boys in the study it was their mothers who seemed to be key sources of validation as they were more involved in monitoring the boys' progress and emotional well-being at university, continuing a role they had previously established during the participants' formal school years. Osman noted his mother's continual support: '[s]he always wanted me to go through [to university] from the beginning. She was like, your dream is my dream …

and yeah, she always encouraged me to do my best and it will work out eventually at the end and it did.' Samuel described a powerful emotional experience when the ATAR was released, which he immediately shared with his mother:

> So my mum would have been at work when I woke up at 8 o'clock to check my ATAR so when I got 90 I rang her up and I told her I got 90 and she was like—she has been waiting for my ATAR. She is more excited for it than me and when I told her I got 90.05 she was very proud that I got over 90. The only disappointment was that I didn't get over 95 or something because she really wanted to get a scholarship of some sort. That was very funny. I told her, like, other students might not have gotten that high, but she is disappointed that I didn't get a scholarship.

Tobias, who intended to take some time off of university due to some personal reasons, shared that this raised concerns for his mother but not his father:

> My dad was understanding, but my mom was just, because I wanted to take a year, half a year off eventually, but she was worried that I wasn't going to pick it back up, that whole mother's job—I'm, I'm assuming.

Tobias' mother eventually convinced him to only take a semester off as opposed to a full year. Fathers were rarely mentioned in the data and certainly not in reference to the boys' aspirations or progress at university. This is not to say the fathers were not integral in shaping the aspirations of the young men, but the boys seemed to associate their mothers with their educational progress:

> Garth: What about you and your stepfather? Do you guys talk about [university]?
>
> Reuel: Oh, yeah, but not too deeply about it. We just talk about, oh, how's things, and stuff like that, but yeah. I mainly talk to my mum about it.

Conclusion

Aspirations are constructed and reaffirmed relationally through interaction with others. This chapter has focused on how the boys invested in forms of selfhood as two key forms of social support—the peer group and the family—underwent change. Furthermore, both social groupings served as important sites of gendered 'patterns and practices' (Connell, 2003a, p. 18) and, furthermore, both sites carry with them gendered expectations. In terms of their peer groups, the boys vacillated between their secondary school peers with whom they had a collective history and the new acquaintances they made at university who often came from very different backgrounds. As boys transition to adulthood, the relationship between boys and their families requires renegotiation. The boys in this study—apart from two who temporarily moved out only to return—lived in the family home and thus their maturation was structured in relation to the presence of one if not two parents. Staying in the family home, which was located in the catchment area of the secondary school, also gave them continued access to their primary peer group. The continued exposure to family seemed to have implications for how they came to understand themselves as men, which incorporated 'the virtues of nurturing, caring, service, and emotional involvement that provide the underpinnings for successful family functioning' (Adams & Coltrane, 2005, p. 234). What is clear is the boys were in the process of seeing themselves as different in relation to these structures. As they were becoming more independent, this was done through a commitment to maintaining these connections, suggesting that peer and familial belonging remained a powerful part of their identity.

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Part III

Conclusions

9

Reflections and Recommendations

Engaging working-class males in their education, specifically post-compulsory education, remains a persistent, almost intractable problem (Archer et al., 2007; Stoet & Geary, 2020). The reasons for this remain diverse as 'strong economic and institutional forces' shape our lives (Adams & Coltrane, 2005, p. 231). The individual motivations to be socially mobile, to go against the grain, do not occur in a vacuum; they are instead informed by educational systems and societal structures (see Kupfer, 2015). In considering the participants' identities in the context of societal changes and the remit of widening participation in Australia, it is clear that the university, an environment that fosters an expectation to accrue capital, contributed significantly to how the boys came to understand themselves. While class formation has changed significantly from the pre-industrial and industrial/capitalist eras (Somers, 1992), Australian masculinity has historically been tied to embracing manual labour over mental labour (Crotty, 2001). *Self-made Men: Widening participation, selfhood and first-in-family males* has addressed how masculinities and social class are interwoven and inform how young working-class men come to be educated. The longitudinal nature of this study allowed me to explore the individualizing effects of the university environment and how the boys crafted themselves in different ways depending on the demands of the institutional context and the opportunities available.

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Overall, the young men in the *First-in-Family Males Project* had their university experience framed by intense schedules where they had to balance their academic commitments with working long hours in various service-sector positions. In contrast to other research on masculinities in higher education, there were very few examples in the data of boys being 'party animals' (Kimmel, 2008), or even having the opportunity to socialize, which reduced their opportunities to self-craft in accordance with institutional norms or the social milieu of the university (Stahl & Mac an Ghaill, 2021). The words of most of the cohort suggested they lived cloistered lives, though this was perhaps more likely for those from non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds, many of whom abstained from alcohol. The majority of participants spoke of striving for a balance between their own time and the demands of work and university study. If we consider their journey as aligned with the transition from adolescence to manhood, the way in which the participants described their feelings around independence and autonomy suggests an acceleration of the development of the qualities we associate with normative masculine adulthood.[1]

Studenthood in Neoliberal Education Contexts

In considering the widening participation rates in universities globally, Marginson (2016) describes how higher education can make up for inequalities at the primary and secondary levels. He highlights that 'relative advantage is crucial' and that if 'higher education functions as a positional good' then we must focus our attention on 'its sorting role [which] is as important as the absolute opportunities that it brings. Starting positions are unequal and some pathways carry more value than others' (p. 415). He does, however, emphasize that higher education systems with high participation rates can 'vary in the "slope" of their stratification of educational opportunities' (Marginson, 2016, p. 415), thus shaping outcomes for students within the economic milieu in which they navigate.

[1] This is not to say first-in-family young women do not have similar experiences (see McDonald, 2021). However, there were notable differences in how they presented their gendered subjectivities, with boys calling attention to the importance of independence, proactivity and ownership (see Stahl & McDonald, 2022).

While I support many of the policies in Australia which work to widen access to university (see Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Pitman et al., 2016), I also feel it is important to remain critical. While there exists a policy remit around increasing participation, there needs to equally be a collective responsibility to provide adequate supports for academic and social progress to ensure excellent outcomes in terms of student well-being. Saunders (2010) asserts that neo-liberal higher education policy reforms focus on 'meeting the needs of the market, technical education and job training, and revenue generation' (p. 54). The journeys of these young males—not dissimilar from the journeys of other students from non-traditional backgrounds—are influenced by what Lynch et al. (2015) call a 'bums-on-seats' approach to widening participation. As a result, those students who attend university are often caught up in what O'Shea et al. (2017) describe as a 'tendency for knee-jerk reactions by institutions to address issues such as attrition rates [which are] often in the form of add-on remedial or needs-based support, rather than integrated evidence-based programmes which are sustainable across increasingly diverse cohorts' (p. 36). Much of what occurs in widening participation programs is reactive, as opposed to proactive, which does not serve students or educators well.

As I have alluded to before, the widening participation initiatives in Australia are to be commended though they are not without fault—and certainly not without heavy critique. Highlighting the impact of neoliberalism and neo-conservatism, Zajda (2020) explains how, despite these efforts toward widening participation, Australian higher education actually promotes inequality:

> The divided and highly elitist and stratified higher education sector, by means of their hegemonic structures, legitimises social inequality. In general, students from lower SES are unlikely to be successful in entering universities, let alone prestigious universities. Hence, equity-driven policy reforms in higher education are unlikely to succeed. Furthermore, national economic priorities, aligned with a knowledge economy, human capital and global competitiveness, compel increasingly entrepreneurial universities to reward high-level over low-level knowledge, skills and training. The latest higher education reforms focus more on economic competitiveness,

> academic elitism, quality and standards, rather than on addressing access and equity, in order to solve serious educational inequalities in the higher education sector. (p. 55)

The rhetoric here is represented in other scholarship as well. For example, Marginson (2016, p. 422) notes how policies which 'foster equity as inclusion, also increases the regressive effects of family background on educational and social outcomes'. According to Arum et al. (2007, p. 3) as systems expand, and participation widens, class inequalities in access to elite higher education and career outcomes are not necessarily reduced.

The Production of Classed and Gendered Subjectivities

The boys in this study performed different subjectivities than those found in previous research conducted with first-in-family males in Australia (see O'Shea et al., 2017; Stahl & Loeser, 2018). Transitioning directly from secondary school, they often had fewer obligations than mature-age students as well as less life experience. Furthermore, they had not endured the physical suffering involved in manual labour, which framed many of the narratives of O'Shea et al.'s (2017) participants. As a result, their class consciousness, which did evolve over the course of the three years, was still, for the most part, burgeoning. Complementing research on men entering higher education, the participants largely did not believe participation in higher education indicated a change in their social status (Burke, 2009, p. 91). Instead, at this stage in their education, their words suggest an investment in self-improvement, capitalizing on opportunity and expanding their networks, all with the desire to fulfil their aspiration for gainful employment.

Burke (2009, p. 85) notes that the construction of the self is 'always tied to notions of the "Other" and misidentifications are key processes of subjective construction', intertwined with hegemonic discourses of

widening participation. As the participants' class antennae was expanding, we see little engagement in othering those who had chosen a different, more vocational path. Giazitzoglu and Muzio (2020) describe how many working-class men who achieve white-collar forms of employment internalize the judgements of middle-class men and come to 'look down on features of their own social class of origin' (p. 15). There was also little evidence in the data of the boys pathologizing their neighbourhoods or feeling a strong desire to distance themselves from their working-class backgrounds. As socially mobile working-class young men, their identities were forming in relation to the norms of middle-class masculinity, which privilege personal achievement, high-status careers and the competitive edge, but it is important to remember this occurred gradually over time. Furthermore, what we do not see—at this stage—is feelings of class frustration, as documented in other research on upwardly mobile men (see Giazitzoglu, 2018), as, perhaps, it is too early in their social mobility journey. Given the participants' concerns about employability, this frustration may come to fore as they cash in their academic capital in order to secure gainful employment.

Sayer (2005) describes how educational capital is 'different from other forms of capital in that it has the effect of introducing sharp distinctions rather than mere gradients between groups' (p. 79); furthermore, I would argue the pursuit of educational capital for first-in-family males, with the long hours spent studying and the intense scheduling in order to balance service work and university studies, is where the *distinctions begin to sharpen*. In reflecting on the experiences of the participants in the study, there were few real surprises. The boys who came from more aspirational working-class families, whose parents had more secure forms of employment, were able to navigate the 'rough ride' with more ease than the boys who had grown up in poverty and/or had immigrated from another country. Furthermore, boys who attended better secondary schools often were more academically prepared and more articulate about their weaknesses and, importantly, more confident in seeking out either formal or informal assistance.

Masculinities in Higher Education: Effective Forms of Support

Many have documented how young men in higher education can engage in masculine identity practices that are counterproductive to their success (Kimmel, 2008; Laker & Davis, 2011; Phipps, 2017). In their work on the struggles of American young men at university, Schwab and Dupuis (2020) outline a variety of identity expressions which contribute negatively to their social and academic experience. The first expression is *detachment and denial* where, as an emotional strategy, young men 'continue to conform to the masculine expectation of stoicism' where 'they can downplay these emotions by denying they ever happened' (p. 7). Another is the *downplaying of significant and severity* where emotions associated with anxiety and weakness are dismissed as not valid because they conflict with the norms of hegemonic masculinity. And finally, the men they spoke with had a *fear of reputational damage* which, according to Schwab and Dupuis (2020), serves as another justification used to explain their silences. Echoing the words of other scholars, Schwab and Dupuis highlight how the performance of masculinities impedes progress, as the fear of reaching out to others places them at a severe disadvantage. This calls attention to the complexity of offering effective forms of support for men in higher education. Looking across the *First-in-Family Males Project* and considering the boys who were able to make university work for them and the ones who were not, I propose five policy strategies for improving the university experience for this specific equity group.

First, the data suggests the boys initially experienced significant confusion over what university actually is, suggesting that misinformation plays a significant role. Policymakers, and those working in higher education, would be wise to consider the how the transition to university for these young men requires breaking down myths as well as making dramatic adjustments to their learner identities. As boys rely heavily on websites, the information the university distributes needs to be carefully considered to counteract some of these myths. Furthermore, advertising and marketing may be useful in getting students to consider university as an option, but they often promote an instrumentalist view of 'value for

money' and 'employability'. While this may resonate with working-class students who see university as a means to an end, such forms of advertising are reductionist as the universities themselves offer more than that.

Second, turning to the structural factors at play, the majority of the young men in the *First-in-Family Males Project* attended secondary schools with limited curriculum offerings, placing them at a severe disadvantage (Teese, 2000/2013; Tranter, 2011). As they navigated their studies and secured their ATAR they were assigned bonus points which, in some cases, determined whether they were accepted into university. Substandard academic preparation and the inflation of scores did not set them up for success and, when they underperformed, they were quick to blame themselves. Adding another dimension, and echoing recent research (see Tomaszewski et al., 2017), they received limited to no career counselling at the secondary school level, so they often enrolled in university courses that were not what they thought they were and for which they lacked the prerequisite knowledge to excel. It is important that policies—whether at the secondary or university level—work to support young people, especially young people who are unfamiliar with what university entails.

Third, while the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008) notes that working-class young men are the least likely to enter into higher education in Australia, there is surprisingly little attention to the role of loneliness. I am reminded here of how 'the concept of "mateship" is perhaps more important to the sense of Australian masculinity than any other facet' (Weaver-Hightower, 2008, p. 39). In short, the peer group, must be taken seriously.[2] I accept the affective lives of young men can be difficult to document and isolation can have many different causes and dimensions; however, the study of the interrelationship between Australian masculinity and serious episodes of loneliness continues to be an important area of work (see Patulny, 2013) as scholars continue to highlight the 'unmet belongingness needs' within the gendered lifeworlds of Australian men (Franklin et al., 2018, p. 137). Entering university required the young men in this study to pull away from their secondary school friendship

[2] I accept the main critique here would be that potential participants may remain in their working-class peer group, as opposed to engaging in strategies to broaden and leverage their social capital.

group and, while they should have been able to make new friends at university, they found many of their more advantaged peers already in established friendship groups. While clearly the formal institutional strategies in higher education intended to foster belonging are to be applauded and certainly play an important role (e.g. Orientation Week, etc), many of the boys in my study did not engage in such activities, suggesting other approaches are required. One widening participation initiative that remains largely untapped in Australia is counteracting social isolation before it occurs by sending non-traditional students in small groups—a 'band of brothers' approach. The intention is the small group will journey through university life together and, over the duration of the program, the peer accountability will strengthen a sense of purpose, self-identity and community (see Oguntoyinbo, 2014; Contreras, 2011). Considering that boys are not likely to admit weakness and seek formal forms of support, this seems like an idea that could be leveraged well.

Fourth, I asked each of the participants about their experiences with learning in the higher education classroom, particularly in relation to how these experiences may have fostered an affective connection, whether positive or negative. Few boys were able to articulate a close connection with their learning and, for the most part, seemed to find the academic work tedious and transactional across the disciplines. This compels us to question not only what is occurring in the neoliberalized pedagogic space of higher education but, more importantly, what can be done to create a sense of belonging and ownership. Universities are no longer radical spaces (Connell, 2019); instead, they exist within market-driven polities where the notion of capital endangers the agentic space to develop critical pedagogy (see Giroux, 2009; Cooper, 2015). It is certainly worth considering whether the boys in this study would have benefitted from more radical approaches to teaching and learning during their time at university—specifically approaches which compelled them to question their sense of self and their wider trajectories.

Fifth, only one participant in the study received any form of strategic and personalized mentorship and he was eligible for this due to his Indigenous status.[3] Research continues to suggest that mentoring for

[3] The two other Indigenous boys in the study were eligible but chose not to take advantage of the mentorship.

students from low socioeconomic backgrounds is productive, positively influencing their sense of self. Mentorship can facilitate access to social and cultural capital (Geagea & MacCallum, 2020) as well as important knowledge which students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may find essential for navigating university life. These forms of mentorship do not necessarily need to be same-gender, though that is frequently the case. For example, Morales' (2009) work on Dominican-American first-generation male college students draws attention to mentors' critical role as 'approvers', who are 'legitimizing, encouraging, and facilitating the participants' educational plans' as a figurative 'stamp of approval' (pp. 395–396). While I actively resisted mentoring the participants, the fact that the boys were keen to meet up with me every few months suggests they would be inclined to embrace such an approach.

The five strategies discussed above are by no means exhaustive. Through international networks and conferences, universities have made progress in improving the university experience for non-traditional students. While some of this is ad-hoc, other aspects have become engrained in institutional cultures, specifically for universities who are serving primarily working-class populations. There are many practitioners in Australia today who feel passionately about widening participation and who work within institutional constraints to perform what must be challenging and difficult work. And, at the end of the day, institutions can only do so much: as Marginson (2016, p. 421) asserts, 'not just schooling and higher education but prior social inequalities determine whether people from low-income families, remote locations or excluded minorities improve their social circumstances'.

Concluding Thoughts

Any critical reflection on what would assist the boys in succeeding in their studies must consider their sense of working-class culture and how it stands in tension with the entrepreneurial self which is compelled by the university. Studies of working-class males continue to emphasize how—operating often with limited capitals—they perform a version of neoliberal selfhood that often masks the internal struggle (Alexander,

2019; Giazitzoglu, 2014, 2018). Miles et al. (2011, p. 420) demonstrate that working-class men, when they reflect back on their upward mobility, are aware of their own individuality. They contend that career identities exist in relation to a conflicted sense of selfhood. This wrestling lends itself to feelings of modesty and performing a subjectivity of ordinariness (Miles et al., 2011; Stahl, 2013; Stahl & Zhao, 2022).

The words of the boys in this study suggest the institutional culture was a foreign and competitive environment which was isolating and required them to change. Given the focus on self-crafting and investing in new forms of selfhood, the majority of the data presented in this book concerns the ones who were able to adapt, to self-craft accordingly and overcome the 'rough ride'. We do not, therefore, see examples where social mobility was so unsettling that it was detrimental—where, as Sennett and Cobb (1972) assert, there was a loss of 'conviction of their dignity when they try to take responsibility for either an increase in or a limit on their "freedom" as society defines that word' (p. 37). There were several boys who found the institutional and student body of the university to be inhospitable and, instead, selected alternative pathways. Self-crafting, and an acute awareness around self-crafting, seemed to be more pronounced for those boys entering elite spaces whereas for working-class boys who attended universities that could be considered working-class there was less of an identity juncture. Given the increasing prevalence of neoliberalism in Australian education at every level over the last decade, we would expect the first-in-family males in this study to be well-suited to a higher education sector awash with performance indicators and other forms of accountability, but that did not appear to be the case.

I return here to Forster's fictional novel *Howards End* (1921) and his portrayal of the character of Leonard Bast as a poorly educated young man who strives to better himself despite his 'mind and body had been alike underfed' (p. 45). On the cusp of the twentieth century, Bast is exposed to the onset of modern life through his encounters with the middle-class Schlegel sisters and, as a result, can glimpse a life he could lead if social conventions did not serve as a barrier. His work ethic and thirst for knowledge amount only to frustrations. Bast, in a conversation with a Schlegel sister when he has just lost his job as a clerk, notes how the game is, and will always be, different for him:

> *I shall never get work now. If rich people fail at one profession, they can try another. Not I. I had my groove, and I've got out of it. I could do one particular branch of insurance in one particular office well enough to command a salary, but that's all. Poetry's nothing, Miss Schlegel. One's thoughts about this and that are nothing. Your money, too, is nothing, if you'll understand me. I mean if a man over twenty once loses his own particular job, it's all over with him. I have seen it happen to others. Their friends gave them money for a little, but in the end they fall over the edge. It's no good. It's the whole world pulling. There always will be rich and poor.* (p. 227)

Bast here not only highlights the limitations of class and the social inertia of downward mobility ('the fall over the edge'), but he also breaks down the social construction—the social artifice—which structures inequality, where thoughts, poetry and money have little meaning outside of the meaning people imbue them with. Class here appears almost totalizing and deterministic. As a textbook case of a Bourdieusian habitus disjuncture, Bast's efforts to improve himself reveal not only that class is internalized, but that this is only to a certain extent.

* * *

To conclude this final chapter, I return to Campbell and his journey through higher education, which served as an introductory example. When I first met Campbell in the western suburbs of Sydney he felt strongly about attending university and had the support of both his parents and grandparents. As he transitioned to university, through a chance occurrence, Campbell was not only able to work in the white-collar sector; he quickly achieved a managerial position, evidence of how he quickly adapted to new forms of selfhood. This experience made him question exactly what university was for and how it would figure in his wider trajectory. Feeling the lure of money and prestige, he said, 'by the time I'm twenty-one, I can already earn that kind of money, instead of waiting that extra three-year, five-year period.'

Through a process of deliberation in which he sought mentorship, Campbell decided a university qualification would be advantageous in the long-run and, through forming a strong relationship with his

supervisor, Campbell was able to devise a schedule in which he could complete university and maintain the position. Campbell's story highlights that when aspirations and opportunities collide it can be a powerful and affective experience. Moving across and within fields, Campbell's habitus strengthened his perception that things were natural, as they were meant to be. Campbell came to see more possibilities and he encountered few barriers which made him doubt that his trajectory should be upward. Furthermore, his habitus mediated what was possible from the range of possibilities on offer as his range of possibilities increased through employment.

What is interesting here is he still valued his university degree which, by his account, seemed largely unnecessary where he believed he was headed. In a follow-up interview with Campbell, I challenged him a bit about his decision to stay at university, as I was curious about why he stayed when other opportunities presented themselves:

Garth: … You thought about leaving university, but then you decided to stay and yeah, et cetera. Yeah. In terms of leaving university, I mean would that, in your mind would that be just not capitalizing on opportunity?

Campbell: Well, to be honest with you, I've been speaking to a lot of people.

Garth: How so?

Campbell: Okay. I've been speaking to a lot of people in high positions, and people were in places that I would like to be in the future, and they're seeing that in today's day and age, a lot of people have the degree, it's really the experience that separates people. So the reason why I'm still at university is because, yeah, at the end of the day, I just want that piece of paper on my resume. It'll look cool, I guess, but it really comes down to the experience in my opinion. That's why it doesn't really bother me. I am going to stay with my degree because that's the decision I've made. But in other people's circumstances, it doesn't really matter.

Garth: Yeah. I don't know, maybe this is true of your industry, I don't necessarily know, but people who don't get a university degree can often be unfairly represented or pathologized in society. What are your thoughts on that?

Campbell: I actually got the opportunity to speak to one of my—one of the general HR managers within my work—and he was saying that, when, back when he was doing interviews and so forth and recruiting, he said that the biggest thing that he looks for is someone's personality and someone's, how someone comes off.
Garth: Okay.
Campbell: Now he said that the degree doesn't really matter. He will hire an employee who has a great work ethic and is someone that will participate and work towards the goal of the whole company over someone with a degree. Because you can't train work ethic, right, you have to find it, and it comes down to the individual.

Campbell's journey from adolescence to adulthood, similar to the rest of the cohort, carried an impetus for change. His words suggest a strong identification with a neoliberal subjectivity and meritocratic beliefs, influencing how he performed the self. Furthermore, while Campbell was exposed to discourses which seemed to disregard the importance of a degree—and he could have easily left his university studies—the degree still seemed to mean something to him (and to his family), suggesting higher education was not inconsequential but instead a key aspect of how he saw himself as upwardly mobile.

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Glossary

ATAR Australian Tertiary Admission Rank which is calculated by the Australian states' university admissions centres and provides a score between 0 and 99.95 which denotes a student's ranking relative to their peers upon completion of their secondary education

Bonus points Also known as 'adjustment factors', they boost the ATAR to help students gain entry into universities and other tertiary institutions

Centrelink A government service that provides financial assistance to those in financial hardship

First-in-family Students who are first in their immediate family to attend university (commonly used meaning, although there are other definitions)

HECS Higher Education Contribution Scheme where Australian students defer tertiary education fees to be paid through the taxation system once they are employed after the completion of their university degree

HSC Higher School Certificate which signifies successful completion of senior high school level studies in New South Wales. The comparable qualification in South Australia is the SACE.

O-Week Orientation Week at university, which usually takes place the first week of the academic year and involves many activities focused on acclimatizing the students socially to the university space

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SACE South Australian Certificate of Education, which signifies successful completion of senior high school level studies in the state of South Australia. The comparable qualification in New South Wales is the HSC.

Year 12 Final year of compulsory schooling in Australia

Youth Allowance An income support payment available to unemployed young people aged 16 to 21 (aged 18 to 24 if a full-time student or on an apprenticeship).

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