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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.

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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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