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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

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 self-hood, 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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