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Reflections and Recommendations

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

G. Stahl, *Self-Made Men*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-07954-2_9

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

Studenthood in Neoliberal Education Contexts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Production of Classed and Gendered Subjectivities

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

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

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

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

Masculinities in Higher Education: Effective Forms of Support

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concluding Thoughts

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

Garth: How so?

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

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

Campbell: I actually got the opportunity to speak to one of my—one of the general HR managers within my work—and he was saying that, when, back when he was doing interviews and so forth and recruiting, he said that the biggest thing that he looks for is someone's personality and someone's, how someone comes off.

Garth: Okay.

Campbell: Now he said that the degree doesn't really matter. He will hire an employee who has a great work ethic and is someone that will participate and work towards the goal of the whole company over someone with a degree. Because you can't train work ethic, right, you have to find it, and it comes down to the individual.

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

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