'I Am Going to Uni!' Working-Class Academic Success, Opportunity and Conflict

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s observable anxieties have been developing in popular discourse about the position of boys and young men (MacInnes 1998; Morgan 2006; Kimmel 2006; Roberts 2014; Ward 2015a). In the UK, these concerns have centred on a range of issues including boys' supposed educational 'underachievement' (when compared with the achievement of girls), high rates of suicide and poor mental health among young men, and boys' involvement in offending and anti-social behaviour. Similar concerns about these issues are emerging in a range of other countries around the world (e.g. Edström et al. 2015).

These problems are often framed as outcomes of a 'war' on boys (Hoff Sommers 2013) or a 'crisis' of masculinity (Morgan 2006; Syal 2013). However, as others have pointed out, this discourse is far from novel and has a much longer history than the current 'crisis' suggests (Connell 1995; Roberts 2014; Tarrant et al. 2015). Nonetheless, some studies have shown that some men are more disadvantaged by these economic shifts than others (Nayak 2006; McDowell 2012; Ward 2014, 2015b; Robb et al. 2015). Therefore, although the generic categories of 'men' and 'boys' are

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often used in policy and cultural commentaries, in reality it is young, working-class men living in postindustrial places who most embody this anxiety (Morris 2012; Ward et al. 2015).

Therefore, while there has been a significant debate in recent years around boys' and young men's educational engagement at primary and secondary level across the global north (Epstein et al. 1998; Martino 2008), concerns have also grown about young men's 'underachievement' in the higher education sector (Hillman and Robinson 2016) and their non-continuation (dropout) rates when compared with young women (Quinn et al. 2006). Yet further studies specifically show that in a similar way to the 'crisis' of masculinity discourse, not all men experience higher education in the same way. Just as in the primary and secondary sector, difficulties and challenges are more likely to be experienced by white, and black and minority ethnic, young men from working-class backgrounds (Lehmann 2009; Reay et al. 2009; Cobbett and Younger 2012) than their middle-class counterparts (Ingram and Waller 2014; Waller et al. 2017).

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with young men (aged 16–18) in a deindustrialized community in South Wales (UK), in this chapter I add to the literature on white working-class men by focusing on how academically successful men transition to higher education. I address how the performance of an alternative form of working-class masculinity linked to academic success, often coded as studious and compliant (see Connell 1989; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Frosh et al. 2002), proved problematic in a former industrial community. However, contradictions within these young men's in-school studious performances become apparent when their out-of-school activities are considered.

I begin this chapter by looking at the literature on white working-class boys' educational achievement. I focus especially on the role of place, and I address how this impacts on the development of a studious performance of working-class masculinity. After outlining the study and research methods, I look at what academic success means in this context. I then analyse in detail the displays of this more studious form of working-class masculinity, before moving on to outline some contradictions to this performance.

WORKING-CLASS EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AND THE PERFORMANCE OF STUDIOUS MASCULINITIES

Sociological work that has centred on working-class young people in the UK has often focused on their difficult relationships with educational engagement. In particular, this work has addressed three main themes.

First, studies have concentrated on the role of education as a route to social mobility and as a way out of working-class origins. For a small minority, this pathway occurs through the grammar school system (Jackson and Marsden 1962; Douglas 1964; Lacey 1970; Halsey et al. 1980). Second, a prominent focus has been on anti-school or rebellious behaviour, poor performance and educational underachievement (Hargreaves 1967; Willis 1977; Corrigan 1979; Jenkins 1983; Epstein et al. 1998; McDowell 2003). Third, this work has begun to look at the costs associated with educational achievement for working-class identity, once one has progressed to university or reached adulthood (Skeggs 1997; Weis 2004; Reay et al. 2009; Wakeling 2010).

However, this early work has been criticized by some feminists for lionizing working-class men and has accused male authors of glorifying oppressive forms of masculinity (Skeggs 1992; Delamont 2000; Ingram 2009). Alongside these criticisms, some studies have offered a more nuanced critique of the problems and practices associated with being a working-class young man, and have explored male dominance and power inequalities between men and between boys (Mac an Ghaill 1994; Reay 2002; Francis et al. 2010). Alongside these issues, what also seems to be important is the role that the locality or geography plays in the social and cultural construction of masculinity (Massey 1995; Berg and Longshurst 2003; Kenway et al. 2006; Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2015), and what it means to be a young working-class man in certain communities (Ward 2015b, Ward et al. forthcoming). This chapter adds to the literature by exploring the difficulties of academically successful working-class boys displaying a studious form of masculinity (see Francis 2009; Ingram 2009, 2011) when older traditions of masculinity, shaped by a locales industrial heritage and culture, are the default reference point in the community they inhabit.

Context and Methods

The South Wales Valleys were once a leading area of coal production. For nearly two centuries they were one of the largest industrial centres in the UK, employing up to quarter of a million men (Rees and Stroud 2004). A strong division of labour accompanied these communities where distance from anything seen as 'feminine' was essential for a strong masculine identity. Men earned respect for working arduously, and these roles were often seen as heroic, with punishing physical labour that involved different degrees of manual skill and bodily toughness, creating a hard, stoic masculinity (Walkerdine 2010). Male camaraderie, which was established through

physicality and close working conditions underground, was also developed through jokes, story-telling, sexist language and banter at the work site. This was further supported through social institutions such as miners' institutes, chapels, pubs, working men's clubs and sports. 'Real' masculinity was not formed through academic labour and book-based knowledge.

During the 1980s, owing to economic restructuring, the region underwent rapid deindustrialization (Smith 1999; Day 2002). This acute collapse coupled with the decline of the manufacturing industry led to a drastic increase in economic inactivity. The area suffers with high levels of social and economic deprivation and low levels of educational attainment. These industrial losses were accompanied by the erosion of traditional apprenticeships and youth training schemes, which would have supported these industries and provided a platform into adulthood and other forms of skilled-manual employment (Adamson 2008).

Given this context, this chapter draws on findings from an Economic and Social Research Council-funded ethnographic study which looked at the diversity of gender performances of a group of white, working-class men aged 16–18 ($n = 35$) within the former industrial town of Cwm Dyffryn[1] situated in the South Wales Valleys (see Ward 2015a). The overall aim was to investigate how masculinities were formed, articulated and negotiated by one school year group at the end of their compulsory schooling, and then to follow them through their different post-16 educational pathways. Access was granted by the headteacher of the high school where much of the research was conducted. The fieldwork included participant observation supported by extensive fieldnotes, focus group interviews, ethnographic conversations, and more formally recorded one-on-one interviews over the two-and-a-half year research period. The interviews were fully transcribed and, along with the detailed fieldnotes, coded using a CAQDAS software package for key themes. At the school, fieldwork included observing and actively participating in different lessons; 'hanging around' in the sixth-form common room and various canteens during break times; playing football and scrabble; and attending school events, such as prize nights, parents' evenings, school trips and sporting occasions. As 'young people's gender identities cannot be adequately comprehended within the microcosm of the school institution alone' (Nayak 2003: 148), this research was also undertaken across multiple other arenas of their lives. This was carried out to further understand the numerous ways that these young men performed their masculinities to different audiences and in different contexts.

Several themes emerged from the ethnographic study. First, the multiple, nuanced ways young men's lives were lived in a specific deindustrialized place emphasized that a degree of code-shifting occurred, where respondents adjusted and altered their performances of masculinity for different audiences. Second, different academic and vocational educational pathways framed the definition of the situation for these young men. Through these pathways, young men learnt what roles were expected of them when studying a certain subject or course and what was also expected of people around them. Third, outside their education institutions, the legacy of the region's industrial past and the working-class cultural milieu of the locale were re-embodied and retraditionalized in different ways across other local sites and spaces.

Using Goffman's framework for interpreting social interaction (Goffman 1959, 1974), I drew together the data based on friendship ties that became apparent as the fieldwork progressed.[2] Goffman (1959: 85) argues that within social interaction it is the front stage or front region of the actor's performance that is on display, and which functions 'to define the situation for those who observe the performance'. He also uses the term 'team' to refer to sets of individuals who come together to perform specific acts through different interactional 'frames'. These cooperations then help to express meaning within different social relations. The overall 'team' impression can be seen as a performance alongside the individual acts, through forms of impression management. The back stage or back region, which occurs behind the front and the 'team' performances, is further defined by Goffman (1959: 114) as 'a place, related to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course'. Away from the front display, things can be adjusted and changed. However, other actions, which might spoil or ruin the performance and the overall impression, are suppressed. In the remainder of this chapter I shall explore the performances of a studious form of masculinity displayed by one of these 'teams' or friendship groups within the study, the academically successful working-class 'geeks'.

Introducing 'The Geeks': Educational Achievement, Subject Choice and Family Biographies

Those young men who transgress a locality's social norms by being academically successful and having different cultural interests are often bullied and receive labels by their peers such as 'nerd', 'dweeb', 'dork', 'freak',

'brainiac', 'boffin' 'swot' and 'geek' (see Connell 1989; Martino 1999; Pascoe 2007; Mendick and Francis 2012). While the word 'geek' is a relatively simple term, it is full of ambiguity and has multiple meanings that change from place to place. Nonetheless, what these labels all tend to have in common is that those who receive them are deemed to be stigmatized (Goffman 1963) in some way or other as overtly intelligent, shy, unattractive social outcasts who often shun other people who do not share their stigmatized status. Accompanying these labels are particular attributes of personal front (Goffman 1959) that are deemed socially abnormal, such as unfashionable hair and dress styles, glasses and reputations for bad personal hygiene. The word 'geek' is likely to be used as a pejorative marker, and to be labelled as such is to be defined as a social misfit (Kendall 2000; Pascoe 2007). However, as will become clear, for some, this label was embraced and used to describe oneself and one's friendship group.

'The Geeks' friendship group consisted primarily of Leon, Gavin, Ruben, Scott, Nibbles, Alan, Sean, Ieuan, Sam, Sin and Nixon.[3] Apart from Sin, who was of Chinese heritage, all were white and had been born in the town, and when I met them in year 11 they had the highest grades in their year group. In the extracts below, a 'geek' is described by the young men themselves as someone who does not participate in sports and is more interested in video games, films and comics:

Sam: Get a sporting accolade and you're already like the greatest person ever.
Alan: If you don't do sport in school you're like...
Sam: ...a geek...
Sean: ...yeah, a geek basically.
      (group interview year 11)

MW: So do you play a lot of video games then?
Sean: Yeah, I'm a geek I am, I love games!
MW: So are you really a geek like when you say you are?
Sean: Yeah, I love all the geeky things, like um games, films um...
MW: ...you're well into your films are you?
Sean: Ah yeah! Graphic novels, comics, things like that.
      (individual interview year 12)

As Sean indicates here, being defined as a geek was also evident in other ways rather than just being positioned as academically successful. In year 11 some of The Geeks were smaller in stature and less physically developed than many others in that year group, making them easy targets for bullying. They turned up for lessons on time with their own pens and pencil cases, did their homework, and carried their books and other equipment in bags. The majority of their year group, which amounted to 134 pupils, tended not to be so studious. Along with this compliance to rules, they correctly adhered to the school dress code of white shirts with red ties, black V-neck jumpers, black trousers and black shoes. This uniform was accompanied by neat haircuts and, for some, horn-rimmed glasses or braces on their teeth that completed the stereotypical geek persona. These artefacts operate as forms of what Goffman (1959: 32) refers to as 'expressive equipment' of personal front and marked The Geeks with their own recognizable identity.

While The Geeks adhered to school rules and policy, the majority of the year group sought to disrupt uniform policy and replace compulsory items with their own. It was common practice to replace the standard black, V-neck jumper with a round-neck one, because this then meant that the school tie could be removed and it would go unseen by teachers. Other attempts by those in the year group to disrupt school rules included replacing shoes with trainers, wearing hooded jackets and baseball caps, and for some, adorning their bodies with flashy rings, chains and single earrings or studs. The Geeks' display of a more studious, compliant masculinity really did mark them out as a minority when compared with their peers. Besides these uniform alterations, a large group of pupils who were registered on sports educational programmes were also allowed to wear a tracksuit instead of the regular uniform. This not only validated a specific form of masculinity based on sporting prowess by the educational institution (Mac and Ghaill 1994), but also acted as a symbolic marker of status which The Geeks did not have access to, thereby 'othering' them as a group for not belonging to the sporting elite.

After achieving good General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades at age 16, all The Geeks returned to the school's sixth form (years 12 and 13). By the end of year 13 approximately 32 young men from the year group had completed their courses, with 15 progressing to institutes of higher education. The subjects of study chosen by The Geeks were predominantly in the arts (English, history, fine art), natural sciences (biology, chemistry, physics), maths and IT. 'The Geeks' had been in the highest sets for all their core subjects at GCSE level and, even though they

were a close group of friends, they were fiercely competitive over their grades.[4] They all harboured aspirations to go to university. This is not to say that others in their year group did not aspire to go to university or gain well-paid and meaningful employment, but for The Geeks this seemed to be of paramount importance in their projected futures. As Sam illustrates here, he had thought of a course he wanted to study at university and planned on spending a year in the USA as part of this:

Sam: Journalism is what I'd like to get into at the moment.
MW: Alright.
Sam: And I'd like to go to America as well for my university course.
MW: So you've thought a little bit down the line where you want to go?
Sam: Yeah, I have done a bit of research into it and they do offer it in some of the English universities and the exchanges into American universities, so I'll aim for that first … If I get rejected I'll just go lower down the ladder.
MW: So you've thought about going to uni then?
Sam: Yeah! [shouts] I am going to uni!
          (individual interview year 11)

Sam's final statement here shows not only a powerful sense of agency but also a commitment that he is not constrained by place, and his ambitions clearly illustrate a rejection of the locality and a willingness to move on. This marked him out as unusual, as remaining local was the norm. His determination to find a way to his goals by attending different universities if his first choice was unavailable is also clear. Attending a university for Sam is therefore a way to gain a specific form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) based on middle-class cultural norms, so often denied him and other boys like him who have invested in academic capital in the community.

The Geeks' parents' occupational backgrounds give some indication of their positive outlook on academic qualifications and they shared similar, although not identical, family biographies. A few of the boys had fathers and mothers who had some experience of higher education (Ruben, Nixon, Ieuan and Leon) and were employed in professional occupations as surveyors, teachers, secretaries or midwives. Other parents owned their own businesses in the form of motor repairs (Sean) and a takeaway food shop (Sin). However, there were also some parents who worked in more traditional working-class occupations, such as a lorry driver (Scott), a caretaker

(Sam), or in supermarkets or were unemployed (Gavin, Alan). Three of the boys (Scott, Ieuan and Gavin) said that their mothers stayed at home and described them as housewives, emphasizing traditional working-class gender divisions of labour within the family. Sadly, Nibbles' mother had died when he was 14 and his stepdad (his biological father had left the family years before) was on long-term incapacity benefit after being injured in an accident while driving a lorry.

Although some of these young men's parents could be seen as employed in middle-class occupations, my justification for using the term 'working-class' to refer to the young men as a group is that it is important to recognize the inequalities that they experienced by coming from a deprived locale and the levels of social, economic and cultural capital they had access to. I suggest that even having a professional parent in a deindustrialized area (with high levels of unemployment, and low levels of health and educational attainment and employment opportunities) is very different from having a parent who is a professional in a more affluent area (see Weis 1990). It is also important that the geodemographics of place are considered when defining class and how successful boys from poorer communities experience education (Burrows and Gane 2006).

The Performance of a Geeky Front: Classroom Practices and Social Interaction

For Goffman (1959) the front stage is the part of the performance that functions to define what is occurring in a particular setting or before a particular audience. In Cwm Dyffryn High School the focus on sport was strong and for many young men this was a clear way of projecting a successful heterosexual masculine image. This focus on sporting success infuriated The Geeks and their front performances of a studious masculinity continued to be at odds with the school's emphasis on sport.

Sam:	Get a sporting accolade and you're already like the greatest person ever!
Sean:	Do you know where the old gym is by there?
MW:	Umm.
Sean:	Well on the wall outside it, there are photos on the wall of sports men from the school, but you won't find any photos of people who done well and that …it's just all sports.

Ruben: Yeah, that's a point, yeah...
Nibbles: ...yeah...
Ruben: Like with all the past students they got this one played football for, or amateur football, for Wales turns out he's now just a bin man now, but he did play amateur football for Wales once ... so have his picture up. Then you've got other people then, who've gone, like Mark Bowen, who recent left he's gone to Oxford to study in Oxford [University] and they haven't got, you know, no recognition of him around the school.
          (group interview year 11)

The Geeks occupied a difficult position in their deindustrialized community and, as I have shown, were often seen as socially deficient as a result of their lack of interest in sports. In the extract from a group interview above, they position their own performance of masculinity as superior to that of the school environment, as they felt the institution itself was complicit in producing a form of masculinity based on sporting prowess and physical attributes. Their studious form of masculinity based on academic interests is not seen as an essence of 'real' masculinity, forged through industrial labour or associated with specific cultural or sporting practices. It therefore illustrates a more feminized and socially marginalized form of masculinity in the community (Phillips 2005). Ruben is also aware that some occupations, such as being a 'bin man', have distinct markers of status and class, and that by achieving academically he hopes to be able to distance himself from these lower-class occupations.

The front performance of this studious, geekier masculine brought with it certain disadvantages. Bullying and intimidation was often a problem in year 11 for The Geeks. Some of this bullying had been physical further down the school years, but it was still present through verbal altercations, subtle gestures and smirking. Sam in particular found solace in feeling intellectually superior to others and as a way of combating this bullying.

Nixon: They do try and bully us, or try.
MW: Obviously they're not stealing your dinner money... [group laughter]
MW: So what type of bullying would it take?
Sean: Verbal abuse like.
MW: Alright.

Ruben: I wouldn't say I get bullied by them really, but they do always do
           their little in-jokes, like 'Nixon, Nixon high five' and then they
           expect Nixon to turn around and they all find it funny that Nixon
           doesn't turn around.
Sam: It's like little smiley little faces...
Ieuan: [talks over the top of Ruben]... it's so retarded that it's funny but
           it's easy to beat them just by speaking.
Sam: We're more intelligent than them, as you probably all know, so
           you can just speak, you know just talk really fancy to them and
           they get annoyed and they just walk off, and you insult them
           without them realizing it, which makes us feel big.
                (group interview year 11)

Here Sam and his friends here are illustrating a form of what Redman and
Mac an Ghaill (1997: 169) call 'muscular intellectualness'. This was a way
for them to combat the verbal abuse that was targeted at them and to seem
superior by using their intellectual capital. This front performance helped to
articulate a form of masculinity that differed from that which traditionally
defined being a 'proper' man in their community. It also contradicted much
of what the school culture tended to validate through its focus on sports.
The development of 'muscular intellectualness' was also evident between
lessons when it was common for The Geeks to play scrabble. Scores were
kept and a record of who had won each game was collected. A dictionary
was used to check words and cheating was frowned on. During one game in
the school's library, Ieuan had tried to use the internet on his mobile phone
to look for a specific word, and, when discovered, this was met with disdain
by the others. The value of words in the scrabble game was a way to
symbolize capital and power within the friendship group, but outside it
the capital provided less protection and it was not equal to the power held
by the more sporty boys in terms of popularity (for a similar process, see Mac
an Ghaill 1994).

While the bullying had decreased as The Geeks had grown older and the
year group had grown smaller (at the start of year 13 only 35 pupils
remained out of 134 who finished the end of compulsory schooling in
year 11), Sean still found that Sam wasn't really able to deal well with
confrontation, and even with the reduced pupil numbers, being academi-
cally successful was still seen as abnormal:

Sean: Sometimes he (Sam) doesn't really think about other people like.
MW: I remember in year 11 sometimes boys used to take the piss out of you but most of them have left now, so he used a bit of humour to deflect it?
Sean: Yeah, but sometimes when he does that, it doesn't really help the situation! Like say they're like, you know, casually taking the piss. . .
MW: . . .yeah. . .
Sean: . . .and he'll get really bitchy and snipe at them or something and they'll just get worse and you're thinking by doing that you're making yourself look weirder! Just take it like!
          (individual interview year 13)

The 'piss take' described here is a practice with a direct link back to a working-class occupational culture where male chauvinism, together with racist and sexist humour, were part of the industrial workplace and were accompanied by practical jokes, coarse language, banter and messing around. In Sean's eyes, Sam needed to 'take it' (the piss taking or the banter) to stop being seen as 'weird' in front of some of his peers. In an individual interview with Sam, I enquired more about the banter that went on between his close friends and he said:

> We (do) take the mick out of each other, take the piss out of each other, if you fall over or spell something wrong, we laugh at each other. (individual interview year 13)

For The Geeks this banter was just another extension of their academic abilities, where 'having a laugh' came through picking out errors in others' academic work or commenting on their personal faults. The industrial legacy behind the 'piss take' was expressed in a different way by The Geeks, but it still illustrated the importance and power of it in determining one's ability to perform an acceptable version of manhood within the friendship group.

Whereas Sam struggled with other forms of banter, Sean was good at this. Being really quick witted and in the context of the reduced student numbers in the sixth form, he could answer back with a joke and almost always get a laugh from others around him, even those who were trying to 'take the piss' out of his friends. Alongside his 'geekier' interests (computer games and reading comics) he supported Liverpool Football Club and would regularly talk to others in the sixth-form common room about

whose team had beaten who, and whose team was better. However, because of his ability to take part in a football discourse and to make others laugh (he could also laugh at himself), I never witnessed any 'piss taking' experienced by others.[5] Scott, who was a lot shorter and slighter in stature than Sean and who did not have the quickness of wit, often attracted negative attention for his long hair, and beard which grew longer and longer as year 13 progressed. He was often referred to by others outside The Geeks group as 'Jesus' because of his supposed similarities to the religious figure. Only when his closest friends, Sam, Ruben and Ieuan, stressed how scruffy he looked and threatened to physically force him to shave and cut off his straggly beard and hair did he decide to get them cut. This then prompted much hilarity and questioning when he walked into the sixth-form common room the next day. It would seem that Sean's ability to perform a traditional version of working-class masculinity by investing in football banter, alongside his geekier masculinity, allowed him to code-shift and get something that Sam or Scott were unable to do.

Boyishness: The Geeks Doing 'Mature' Heterosexuality

Through their position as academic achievers in the year group, The Geeks were able to validate a form of masculinity through their high grades and by performing a studious presentation of self (Goffman 1959). However, others in their year group tended to reproduce and perform a version of masculinity based on traditional forms of white working-class credibility. These included non-academic work, sports, rejecting schoolteachers' authority, sexism, homophobia, misogynistic language and going out on 'the pull' (see Grazian 2007). In the school, and in the community more generally, there seemed to be official and unofficial ways of being male, with The Geeks occupying a difficult position as academic achievers, not just in terms of their studiousness but also in the way they treated the young women in their lives:

Sam: Some boys you know are very boyish!
MW: So between the boys (friends), do you talk like that about your...
Sam: ...no, no I keep my private life private, I've only had one girlfriend and everything I know and everything I have done has been with her, that's it, she is the only person.

MW: Well in some ways I think that it's really nice 'cos some of the boys the way they talk about it you know 'I was with her last night and cor!'

Sam: Yeah I know, it's callous, something to do a bit of fun … I know it's as if they treat them, not to sound clichéd, as an object. You know like I've got the latest mobile phone, I've got the latest girlfriend, that sort of thing.

　　(individual interview)

In this interview, Sam criticizes others in the year group for being what he terms 'boyish'. He portrays himself as against the objectification of women, a practice he perceives some of his peers are involved in.

While The Geeks' performances of a more studious masculinity are to a certain extent self-fashioned, Goffman (1959, 1974) argues that agency is mediated through the social context and interaction order where the individual is positioned. Selves cannot be totally created outside the social milieu that one is situated within, which can constrain one's actions and shape interactions with others. So despite their front performances outlined so far, The Geeks were far from the one-dimensional stereotype depicted by popular culture. The desire to distance one's self from the locale and from an archetype of masculinity was clearly evident, but at other times their masculinities seemed to be performed in often contradictory ways. In the final section of this chapter I want to move on to look at some of the contradictions to this studious front that I have outlined so far.

Contradictions and Social Pressures

As The Geeks reached the legal drinking age of 18, they started to frequent the pubs and clubs of Cwm Dyffryn and consume large amounts of alcohol. For Scott's birthday, Ruben had arranged for a game of 'pub snooker' to be played. Everyone invited had to attend dressed as if to play snooker in ties and waistcoats. A chart, which Ruben was carrying, had been drawn up with the names of all the players (Ruben, Scott, Alan, Sean, Sam, Ieuan, Siân and my name) on one side with the points scored or 'balls potted' on the other. However, alcohol was to be substituted for 'balls potted'. Pints of lager or cider were the 'red balls' and worth a point each, shots of various coloured spirits were the 'coloured balls', and the more sprits that were drunk, the more points could be earned. In theory one had to drink a pint or pot a 'red

ball' and follow it up with a shot of spirits or a 'coloured ball', progressing through the colours in sequence, just like in the traditional game of snooker. However, as my fieldnotes illustrate, it soon got a bit messy:

> When we got to the rugby club the game of 'snooker' was really beginning to get out of control. I had deliberately shied away from drinking spirits so as to last the night, but Ruben who was in the lead and still keeping score, kept downing shots one after the other. Scott, the smallest guy in the year group, was beginning to slur his words and I couldn't quite understand what he was saying . . . as the night wore on Ruben got in a bigger and bigger mess and at one point spilt a pint of lager all over the table, himself and the seats. (fieldnotes)

Even though a few years previously they had mocked their peers for indulging in underage drinking, and acting out of character when drunk, playing pub snooker provided a way for The Geeks to perform the more traditional working-class masculinities they missed out on by being academic achievers. But remnants of their front display of a studious geeky masculinity are also evident and not totally discarded. Here the young men are drinking with an aim not just to get drunk, but also to score points and record their achievement on a chart as they went along, in keeping with their geekier masculinities and to gain a form of accreditation for the act. By embracing social practices (e.g. dressing up in costumes) and drinking games of many undergraduates in higher education institutions, they could also be seen as preparing themselves for university life, highlighting how masculine pursuits such as binge-drinking cut across social class groups (see Thurnell-Read 2012).

Away from the town and within their own close friendship group, The Geeks were able to further participate in some of the practices that they criticized their peers for engaging in. On one occasion when The Geeks went out to celebrate Sean's 18th birthday in the capital city, Cardiff, they went into a lap-dancing club and paid for private dances with the women who worked there. The Geeks, who normally distanced themselves from many of the attitudes that their peers expressed towards women, when away from their home town felt much freer to indulge in many of the same practices they chastised others for doing. Without the risk of being judged by anyone they knew, or having their usual studious front performance of self challenged, the outing to a lap-dancing club was a chance for them to live the heterosexual fantasy and act like the 'real' men that their marginalized geeky position did not often allow.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has highlighted how a 'team' of academically successful young, working-class men, who I have termed The Geeks, progressed through postcompulsory education in a deindustrialized community.[6] I have explored the challenges involved in presenting a studious form of working-class masculinity, which differs from more credible performances of manhood in the region. I argue that this studious or 'geeky' performance rather than being a straightforward practice for these young men illustrates that a high degree of complexity exists in young working-class men's lives, and this must be understood when trying to understand the performance of young working-class masculinities and its relation to schooling, achievement and the wider 'crisis of masculinity' discourse (see also Jenkins 1983; McDowell 2003; Nayak 2006; Ingram 2011). While there are undoubtedly instances of studious practices of masculinity performed by The Geeks, and the adoption of middle-class academic aspiration, these are loaded with risks. The drinking and birthday trip to the lap-dancing club show that older versions of traditional working-class male culture (speech, practices and social activities) appear within these narratives. These young men were trying to be successful and embrace a neoliberal agenda within a globalized workplace. However, their agendas came into conflict with the heritage of their locale and the associated expectations of manhood. These working-class 'achieving boys' offer a hybridized form of masculinity, trying to escape but also falling back and feeling the pressure to perform traditional classed masculinities. The implication of this on their ability to achieve their goals is important and illustrates how much harder working-class boys must work than those from more privileged backgrounds in order to be successful in different aspects of their lives.

NOTES

1. A pseudonym which translates from Welsh into English as simply 'valley, valley'.
2. See Ward (2015a) for a full description of these friendship groups.
3. The young men chose their own pseudonyms
4. All school subjects were streamed into ability groups or sets.
5. In the UK, football or soccer (along with other contact sports such as rugby and boxing) has traditionally been thought of as a male working-class leisure activity and was a particular way to perform working-class masculinity away from industrial workplaces.

6. With the exception of Sin and Gavin (neither of whom did as well as expected and returned to the sixth form to resit their final year), all of The Geeks progressed to university. Sam, Ieuan, Scott and Leon left Wales to study and made the largest moves out of their community. While the rest stayed in South Wales, Ruben and Sean did move to the capital Cardiff to study, so they did make a break from Cwm Dyffryn.

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