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## Configuring of Masculinity in an Ethnocentric Community School

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**Abstract:** *This paper presents snapshots of a qualitative study that investigated how Year 8 boys in an ethnocentric community school configured their constructions of masculinity. Fifteen boys participated in focus group discussions that extended over a six-week period. For one focus group, the boys were invited to bring a 'totem', which was an embodiment of their masculinity. The findings from the focus groups revealed both collective and individual constructions and enactments of masculinities that were talked into existence and transmitted through hegemonic discourses. Yet the findings also revealed the boys' individual agency to engage with other ways of doing and being a boy. Key recommendations emerging from the study include the need for boys to have opportunities to talk more openly among themselves about their gendered identities and for access to the thinking and experiences of how masculinity might be conceived within a wider community of practice.*

### Introduction

This study of boys' configurations of masculinity in an ethnocentric school was an outcome of our involvement in Stage 2 of the Commonwealth Government's Boys Education Lighthouse Schools program (BELS). Over time, we became increasingly mindful that although boys may share some commonalities of experience in relation to 'being a boy' in Australian society, they are far from being a homogeneous group (Lingard, Martin, Mills & Bahr, 2002). The Commonwealth Government report *Boys, Literacy and Schooling* (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002) stressed both the importance of boys having opportunities to negotiate their construction of masculinity, and the need to address stereotyped or hyper-images of masculinity in what it means to be male. With this focus in mind, we sought to look beyond the school-based project undertaken by one ethnocentric community school in suburban Melbourne and explore how a group of Year 8 boys were 'configuring' (Connell, 2000) their ideas about masculinity. In doing so, we considered the evolving processes informing their configurations, both from the researchers' perspectives and the perspectives of the boys. The questions guiding the research were:

- What are the boys' perceptions of enacting their masculine identities in the context of the school setting?

- How does the boys' ethnic culture contribute to the process of configuring their masculinities?

Previous studies have explored how boys' engage with their gendered identity formation in multiracial school contexts (Kalantzis, Cope, Noble & Poynting, 1990; Martino, 1999; Martino & Frank, 2006), but there is a paucity of studies that focus on the impact of ethnicity. Central to the design of this study was the importance for boys to have opportunities to negotiate their masculinities *within* and *between* themselves in ways that could provide insights into how masculinity is mediated via ethnic heritage. As Connell (2000) asserts, within the expanding literature on masculinity and youth sub-cultures there is a particular need to look closely at non-Anglo ethnic groups that epitomise collective gender practice. Public concern about growing violence in city centres, which is often racially or ethnically motivated, highlights the importance of studying youth sub-cultures and their active constructions of masculinity.

Our focus group method allowed the study's participants to recognise that gender matters, and to value being male with the positive virtues this entails. In this way, we embraced the sixth principle for educating boys that guided the Commonwealth Government's Success for Boys and the BELS Stage 1 and 2 school-based projects. Our focus group method also aligned with the Civic and Citizenship domain of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (Level 5) that requires students to develop a stronger sense of personal identity in a world where dislocation and change are accelerating. This aim is consistent with the *Educational Goals for Young Australians*, which states the need for students to have 'a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing' (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, 8-9).

### **An ethnocentric community school**

The school of the case study was founded to service the educational needs of the children of Greek immigrants. In this P-12 school, all students are Greek Orthodox and the school community seeks to maintain close links with the 'motherland'. Accordingly, the curriculum places a strong focus on the teaching of Greek culture, religion and language. Skrbis' (1999) asserts that minority ethnic communities — like this case study school — survive the long distance from their motherland by working through their schools to transmit social values as a form of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Hofstede furthermore uses the term 'collectivist' communities to describe schools that are concerned with interlinking their social values with the 'survival of the collective' and so 'take on strong moral tones' (1980, 214). This is evidenced in the school's Vision Statement, which emphasises the 'moral, social, and academic development' of each student.

Constructs of masculinity, however, are consolidated around subject positions in an environment where different race, ethnicity, class and sexuality determine what is perceived as 'cool' (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). The boys of this study are in an ethnically homogenous school and so traditional subject positionings are not easily confronted, as they involve either the likelihood of being conspicuous (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997) or the

tensions of having to renegotiate their ideas of identity. In an earlier study, Kalantzis *et al.* (1990) found that immigrant groups did not necessarily want schools to reproduce their culture, but preferred access to be measured in mainstream economic and social terms. Their study, however, was situated in multicultural school settings, in contrast to this school's ethnically-homogenous setting, where there is a strong desire to maintain the *status quo*. According to Bourdieu & Passeron (1977), social constructs vary across societies, making them highly arbitrary. These arbitrary values are often taken up by the community elders and imposed upon each new generation, so regulating and maintaining the cultural durability of selected principles — 'cultural capital' — that are deemed worthy of reproduction and lead to a pervasive cultural environment or 'habitus' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Becoming a bearer of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1977) allows a person to interact successfully with other members of their community. The more cultural capital boys show in their interpersonal dealings within a community, the more others recognise them, so the greater value and credibility they are seen to possess. Boys must therefore have 'linguistically coded' (Allen, 2005) language that allows them to perform the version of masculinity approved by their immediate community. Ideas of masculinity are also tightly woven with ideas of 'honour' and correctly 'holding face' in the local ethnic community. Gilbert (1998) refers to males being expected to know how to 'perform' correctly as men. She suggests there is encoded information that is transferred through what Indigenous Australians would call secret 'men's business'.

As McLeod and Yates (2006) argue, habitus, or 'socialised subjectivity', acknowledges that people do not simply copy role models available to them. Rather, it is through the discourses, practices, institutions and interactions they have with others in their environment that establishes principles about what matters and is noticed, and how individuals conduct themselves physically, socially and emotionally. 'Habitus', therefore is the embodied accumulation of dispositions or 'ways of being'. But McLeod and Yates question whether this framing of habitus is transferable to gender identity and ethnicity. In our listening to the voices of the boys and their interactions while configuring their ideas about masculinity, we therefore focused closely on the narratives of their ethnic heritage.

### **The research process**

Given the study's focus on documenting personal constructs of gender, a qualitative approach was undertaken. This allowed students to tell their own stories, strengthening the democratic and dialogical dimensions of the study by increasing the likelihood that previously silenced voices would be heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As Gough (2005) suggests, there is great need to hear silenced voices and to analyse 'noise' behaviours that may be marginalised by dominant cultural narratives. A qualitative approach enabled participants to be viewed from a dynamic viewpoint; the boys were given the opportunity to self-reflect as they narrated their responses, providing insights into their internal sequential thought patterns. To establish emergent thinking and some starting points for the focus group discussions, a brief questionnaire survey was administered to all participants.

The Year 8 cohort of boys (N= 21) was invited to participate in the study, but only 15 were granted permission by their parents to participate and agreed to do so. Yet, given that 71 per cent of the cohort were participants, it is highly likely that a range of views was represented from the Year level. All participants had been born and raised in Australia and had attended the school since Preparatory level. In the preliminary stages of the study, participants organised themselves into two groups. Table 1 identifies the groupings:

<b>Group 1</b>	comprised boys considered mostly to be ‘cool’ and ‘athletic’	Antonis, Chrysanthos, Dimos, Jerry, Kyriakos, Spiridon, Tassos, Thomas
<b>Group 2</b>	comprised ‘boundary’ dwellers (Wenger, 1998: 103) but having some kudos as ‘computer geeks’ or ‘rebels’	John, Kleanthos, Nektarios, Nikitas, Paul, Theo, Vaios

**Table 1: Focus Groups and Participants**

Three focus group discussions were held over a three-week period during class time, the duration of the discussions varying from 40-60 minutes. Refreshments were provided, as people tend to feel more relaxed when they eat and drink together, which then allows the researcher an opportunity to clarify issues (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The boys negotiated how and when refreshments were to be distributed and this contributed to the dynamics of the focus groups.

Consideration was given to having a moderator from a non-educational and non-Greek background. However, we believe that the information that emerged is best understood by those who share similar backgrounds and are accepted as ‘insiders’. Given the short timeframe of the study it was essential that rapport and trust be established quickly, so teacher-researcher Dimitri acted as moderator. Discussions were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed with field notes being maintained to capture the reactions, emotions and body language that simple taping does not reveal. For the third focus group, the boys were asked to bring a personal ‘totem’ that they identified with their ideals of being a man — an embodiment of their masculine identity. The term refers to an object that acts as a marker or identifier of belonging to a tribe or clan. Two themes that emerged from the analysis of focus group data are discussed in light of their perceived relevance for teacher education: *actualised masculinity* and *binding by tradition*.

### **Actualised masculinity: rites of passage and the power of totems**

Theories of *identity* are concerned with the social formation of the person, the cultural interpretation of the body and the creation and use of markers of membership such as rites of passage. (Wenger, 1998, 13)

The purpose of asking boys to bring a totem to the focus group was to see how totems might reify the boys’ notions of masculinity, and if so, whether they would treat these totems as ‘productive of meaning’ (Wenger, 1998). This request was deemed significant, as totems can transform the ways that societies and individuals function by passing on

knowledge and culture from generation to generation (Gordon, Petocz & Reid, 2006). All boys were able to bring either an object or an objectified image that expressed their masculinity. These totems included a football, a stereo system, a men's magazine and a computer-action game.

John produced a picture of a shotgun and used its associated qualities to reconstruct a reflection of it was to be a man.

- JOHN Oh, that's my shotgun at home...it's silver and has a wooden handle and -
- VAIOS And you can kill lots of people with it.
- JOHN Yeah, and I've gone duck shooting and quail shooting.
- MODERATOR Okay, and who gave it to you?
- JOHN Oh, my dad.
- MODERATOR Why is it important to you?
- JOHN Because it's been passed down from my grandfather to my father to me.
- MODERATOR Right, um, and why do you feel more of a man when you have it?
- JOHN Because I don't see girls carrying around shotguns.

The underlying significance of John's totem is that the shotgun has been passed down to the succeeding male in each generation. The handover of the object from father to son is suggestive of a transmission of culture, placing importance on its heritage (Connell, 2000). John's response as to why it makes him feel more of a man implies that guns are off limits to girls and males have some territorial claim over them. Vaios, does however, try to cast some doubt on the gun's moral validity by claiming it could be used to kill, but John is not playing by the same rules; he does not accept the same ethical considerations on what it was to be a man, thereby using the shotgun's lethal potential as the actual reason that it is to be revered. Such differences in outlook subsequently led to evidence for the existence of multiple narratives on masculinity.

The fact that John had actually gone shooting affirms that the gun is not just a family heirloom revered by a 'boy', but a totem of actualised power for an actualised 'man' who has undergone some rite of passage. This rite of hunting became a common thread in the boys' narratives, with others in the group eager to tell of a father, uncle or older brother taking on a warrior role. By contrast, Vaios identifies his totem as an *FMH* (For Him Magazine). When asked why he had chosen this, he responds:

- VAIOS Because half is filled with girls in bikinis.
- PAUL Oh come on, pass it round!
- MODERATOR Okay, and could you please tell me why this magazine makes you feel like a man?
- VAIOS 'Cause it's got girls I suppose.
- MODERATOR Okay, and who introduced it to you?
- VAIOS I found my brother's secret stash and that lead me to it.

Here, Vaios defines his masculinity in clearly sexual terms, identifying his totem as an objectification of the female form. The fact that Vaios's brother is hiding his *FMH* magazines in a 'secret stash' indicates that this totem is 'off limits' and that access is 'a rites of passage' issue. While Paul's comment implies that group membership should allow access to the totem, the fact that Vaios's brother has not afforded him right of entry suggests the boys are in a liminal phase: the period between states where they have left

boyhood behind but are not yet considered men. Nektarios, who identifies his stereo system as an embodiment of his masculinity, guards his totem closely, making explicit that if anyone touches his stereo he will 'bash 'em'. Again, there is an implicit understanding that any totem that has been imbued with a boy's masculinity becomes transformed in some way, and is not to be touched or exposed in a casual manner.

When Thomas is asked about his totem, he identifies his PC, because 'there are pictures of cars and just other stuff that I'm interested in'. After an embarrassed silence Thomas admits he also likes his PC because it contains 'Uh, okay, pornographic material... and some [car] burn-outs'. This embodiment of masculinity is likewise guarded closely, with Nektarios only admitting access to a close circle of friends. By contrast, close friends Tassos, Kyriakos and Jerry identify their totem as computer-action games. When asked why games were so important, they respond:

KYRIAKOS I really like it 'cause it shows my character.

TASSOS I like playing it.

MODERATOR Do you identify as a hero or...?

TASSOS You can be the hero or the villain.

MODERATOR Is that good or bad to be either?

TASSOS At the start it's good to be bad, because you get a good weapon at the start, and that really helps.

Whereas John sees the power of his totem (shotgun) lying in its transference from male to male, Tassos sees power being mediated through the character he embodies in the computer game. Evil is viewed as just a necessary inconvenience one has to surmount, because it means Tassos can then get a 'good weapon' to help him position himself to succeed in the grand struggle of the game plan. Gee (2003) claims that these action programs present boys with choices that alter outcomes and thus confer a virtual sense of power in reshaping the world. Gee notes that boys closely identify with a particular hero; in Kyriakos's case, a villain, because this character resonates with his own persona. Boys tend to identify with an individual figure because each one is specifically defined and has a particular archetype association. At first glance it would appear that this might encourage boys to develop singular, mono-faceted characters. However, as the dialogue unfolds, Kyriakos is asked if he would like to *be* his favourite hero (Axle) *himself*:

KYRIAKOS No, he's evil.

TASSOS I dunno. Well, like he's kinda evil.

MODERATOR What do you mean he's 'kinda' evil?

TASSOS He's mad! He's good *and* evil.

When asked if he likes that, Tassos replies that he likes to be 'in between... to be mischievous *and* good'. Tassos appears to show more complexity in his identity construct, identifying with a being who is able to walk between worlds; a being who, like a *bricoleur* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), can manipulate whatever weapon 'is at hand' to position himself successfully during the struggle of the action game.

The conversation among the three boys becomes quite animated at this stage, creating an almost esoteric narrative, with the other boys listening from an outsider positioning. These 'outsiders' find themselves showing a disdain for what appears to be a 'nerdy' discourse, but simultaneously show an interest in the grander narrative about the good and evil, with Jerry identifying with 'the hero', as it allows him to 'do good deeds'. This manifestation of concurrent disdain and respect for individuality lends support to the

boys' tolerance for multiple constructions of masculinity, as long as they accord with power and 'coolness'. While the boys may identify computer-action programs and their characters as totems of masculinity, the *Boys getting it right: Report on the inquiry into the education of boys* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002, 60) noted that computer-based 'realities' appeared to offer a very limited range of masculine values, namely strength, toughness and winning.

The boys' totems were associated with rites of passage and, as Wenger (1998) suggests, were productive of meaning. Yet, despite the totems providing insights into how the boys conducted themselves physically, socially and emotionally, they did not reveal explicit connectedness to the boys' ethnic heritage. Somewhat surprisingly, not one boy identified *his own body* as an object or totem of masculinity, as there is considerable evidence that boys frequently talk about their bodies as being prime sites for defining and proving one's 'normal' masculinities (Martino & Parlotta-Chiorolli, 2003). While the boys did talk about their sporting prowess, and did on occasion flex their biceps to prove a point of superiority when arguing, they did not enter into any narcissistic promotion of their body, looks or physique. This may have been due to their relatively young age or from a feeling of embarrassment that any such dialogue could be identified with homoeroticism or homosexuality, which Pascoe (2005) refers to as the 'threatening spectre' of emasculation. Also, the reality of the focus-group Moderator being their teacher is likely to have moderated the boys' responses.

### **Binding by tradition**

'We don't know when it started, but now it's like having a tradition.'  
(Kleanthos)

Despite the totems not having explicit cultural specificity, the boys were clearly bound to what they perceived to be Greek cultural traditions. In a discussion on family values, Thomas and Tassos noted the significance of names being passed down through the generations, and John claimed that when there is death in the family 'you shouldn't be like swearing or going out and partying', with Chysanthos adding that 'you shouldn't shave for like 40 days.' As none of the boys had yet shaved, it is interesting to note how they had already appropriated their future roles as Greek men. When asked if there were certain ways boys have to behave as men, Vaios responded with one word: 'Greek', making it apparent that to him, culture, ethnicity and race were all directly informing gender construction directly.

Ultimately, the boys indicated that tradition gives legitimacy and therefore 'realness' to their conceptualisation of masculinity. When asked if they think men in Greece are more real than men in Australia, agreement is unanimous. In probing this response, Theo adds that men in Greece have served in the army, which gives them 'experience'. Consequently, 'men in Greece are far more male, as they have all completed their military service like their fathers before them.' The closer a man can associate himself to traditional concepts of maleness, such as the military, in their view, the more authentic the construct of masculinity.

When asked about the difference between Greek-Australian men and those in the motherland, there is consensus with regard to whether experiences can give a man a greater claim to maleness:

- THOMAS They've different religion.  
TASSOS And they also look different and everything; and it doesn't really matter.  
JERRY They're both men.  
CHYSANTHOS Well...  
MODERATOR Does that mean they're the same?  
THEO Let's say a Greek man walks into a room and says, you know, 'Wife, open the TV, make me a coffee'. An Anglo man would never say that. He would say 'Grab me a beer, put on the footy'. It's kinda the same way but they express it in a different way.  
JERRY Yeah, they both have different religions but they're both men.

Chysanthos seems to hesitate before agreeing that men in Greece are the same as Greeks born here, believing that being born in Greece gives a man more credibility in claiming to be masculine. This seems to resonate with the assertion by Davies (2003) that among Indigenous Australians, those who are on 'the Land', can lay claim to a 'truer' Aboriginality than those who have become urbanised and are living in cities. Nevertheless, the boys seem to agree that while men may show marked differences between themselves, there is an underlying and unifying masculine condition that all men share.

Loyalty to the motherland is unswerving, despite all boys being born in Australia. As Antonis says, 'If there's a soccer match in Australia, even if Greeks are in Australia, they still go for Greece... Yeah.' This study affirms that for these boys there is still a form of 'long-distance obedience' (Skrbis, 1999: 4), leading to an obligation to support Greece in competitive events. Martino and Palotta-Chiarolli (2003) take this idea further, believing that ethnic masculinity is formed as a 'protest' or 'site of resistance' to concepts of Anglo-masculinity, that in turn attempt to reverse hierarchical dualisms of Angloethnic superiorities.

When questioned, only one of the fifteen participants said he had actually visited or lived in Greece for any protracted period of time. So if the boys have never been to Greece, how is it they hold such clear understandings of a reality half-way across the world? Skrbis describes this as a 'mental shelter', not as an actual entity but as a *topos*: a 'constructed' view of homeland (Skrbis, 1999, 44). He notes that parents and grandparents tend to 'glorify the homeland, and that their portrayal provides the gift of emotional fulfilment and which is subsequently seen as a legitimate object of one's desire. When asked where they think their ideas come from, the boys' responses range from television, the Internet and magazines, to parents and teachers. When probed further, the following answers are offered:

- THOMAS Grandfather and grandmother.  
TASSOS Grandfather, grandmother, also TV and also things on phones.  
KYRIAKOS My grandfather always watches these pictures on Greek TV.  
KYRIAKOS Yeah, they're, like, racist... my grandfather's racist.  
THEO Phones, like John has been to Greece and he tells me stuff like there was this full on African guy speaking full on Greek... It's a



'historical' narratives. The seemingly insular nature of this school setting appears to create a degree of separation from wider Australian social and cultural values (Skrbis, 1999), with these values being seen as 'alien' and 'other'. While it is not within the scope of this study, the interplay of class with race, sexuality, gender and nationality is a significant factor that cannot be overlooked (Connell, 2000).

The boys' identity constructions are also concurrently informed by their agency; that is, the voice of their own 'inner' desire to be who they want to be (Davies, 1993). Using this 'voice', some boys confront social conventions and dare to be themselves. To this end, the study opened up space for the boys to explore and reflect on their own feelings in addition to discovering more about their peers. While student reflections on the benefits of discussing their masculinity vary, one boy waited until his peers had left, looked around carefully and then said others did not know how hard it was 'to talk about these things... I know it's right... but and then I go home and listen to my dad who tells me it's all crap.' His words reveal that individual students do have agency and make choices about what they think and do so, despite filial allegiance and obligations. The boys differ in the extent to which they are prepared to accept or reject challenges to their constructs of masculinity. This suggests that in some instances their identity formation is influenced by the struggle between socialisation and personal desire, as well as the temporal and historical aspects of their masculine identity formation.

While the study exposes hyper-images of masculinity, it also reveals the fluidity of constructs, indicating the need for boys to explore socially-different views. For these adolescent Year 8 boys, this is a 'period of uncertainty and experimentation in their lives' (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2007), and it is imperative that schools assist them as they confront the construction and re-construction of their gender. Actions that can be taken in relation to boys include:

- raising teachers' consciousness about gender issues and how to create meaningful spaces within the curriculum for students to explore their gendered identities through dialogue and self-reflection. This may involve teachers confronting their own gendered identities (Kenway, Willis & Blackmore, 1998);
- opportunities created explicitly within the curriculum to deconstruct and challenge hegemonic masculinity (Lingard, et al. 2009);
- invitations to men from a broad range of professional and work experiences to discuss and share their experiences of being a man. These speakers may be selected to reflect broad configurations of both traditional and alternative gendered identities in order to challenge boys' ideas and stereotypes; and
- further studies that explore the interplay between gender, class and ethnicity, particularly in ethnocentric schools.

Ultimately, these practices may assist boys to connect meaningfully with the processes involved in becoming adult men in modern Australian society. This is particularly needed at a time when there is growing concern about youth sub-cultures and non-Anglo ethnic groups which have recently been victims of discriminatory practices.

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