The Trouble with Boys
Stephen Frosh, Ann Phoenix and Rob Pattman

Teenage boys have a troublesome reputation, making them central figures in contemporary moral panics. Media and government, teachers and police, focus on boys mainly as potential problems, with their apparent underachievement at school and the escalation of street crime linked especially to mobile phone theft being the main current examples, but generally heightened instances of 'control' problems ranging from delinquency to sexual abuse perpetration also being quoted (e.g. Farrington, 1995; Vizard et al, 1995). Many researchers in the area of gender and identity have also drawn attention to an apparent 'crisis' in contemporary forms of masculinity, marked by uncertainties over social role and identity, sexuality, work and personal relationships, and often manifested in violence or abusive behaviours towards self and others (e.g. Frosh, 1994, 2000; Jukes, 1993). This both reflects and contributes to the production of a parallel developmental 'crisis' for boys, engaged in the process of identity construction in a context in which there are few clear models and in which the surrounding images of masculinity are complex and confused. More generally, changes in employment and in normative gender relations mean that boys and young men are having to forge new, more flexible masculine identities. Developing an understanding of the ways in which they manage this task is made especially complex by the fact that masculinities are racialised and expressed through social class positions (Back, 1994; Edley and Wetherell, 1995; Pattman et al, 1998).

In response to concerns over this supposed crisis in masculinity, various researchers have addressed questions relevant to the understanding of how boys and men are dealing with social changes. The study of boys and masculinities is not new; indeed, Willis' (1977) study of white working class young men making the transition from school to employment produced findings which fit with current claims that masculine cultures are violent, misogynist and anti-school. However, a decade or two ago it was more easily assumed that even if specific groups of boys and young men were considered problematic because of their poor educational performance and culture of toughness (e.g. working class and/or black boys), this was not to be seen as a general problem with masculinities. In contrast, more recent writers have been inclined to assume the existence of just such a general problem and have suggested a variety of (sometimes contradictory) explanations, including the absence of adult male role models in the classroom (Pollack, 1998), boys' problematic behavioural styles (e.g. Jackson, 1998; Salmon, 1998) and the impact of feminism (Kryger, 1998).

Some researchers have pointed out, however, that the evidence on which notions of a 'crisis' in masculinity has been constructed is not as robust as might be expected. For example, they argue that there has been a neglect of the fact that working class and black boys have always done badly, while the most privileged boys continue to do well; and that there is an implicit blaming of girls, women teachers and feminists and neglect of the fact that half of all girls in Britain do not gain five grades A-C at GCSE (the standard measure of academic success). These and similar complications with the data make simple explanations of the underachievement of boys in terms of some essential mismatch between school achievement and the masculine psyche, or masculine socialisation, less than helpful (Epstein et al., 1998; Skelton, 1998; Yates, 1997). Instead, several researchers have argued that the ways in which boys act as masculine, and their masculine identities, need to be seen as

gendered practices which are relational, contradictory and multiple. In this respect, a gap in our current understanding of boys and masculinities is of complex notions of what it means to 'do boy' in specific contexts (Connell, 1996; Davies, 1997), that is, of the multifarious ways in which young masculinities are made.

For reasons such as these, we have come to view gender as performative and relational. Here we are drawing on work arguing that masculinity exists only in relation to femininity and is *constructed*, through everyday discourses, in various 'versions' or *masculinities* (e.g. Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). This is not to say that boys and men create themselves out of nothing, in any way they wish. Rather, there are popular and culturally specific ways of positioning boys and men which, for example, emphasise their toughness and propensity for 'action', whether it be harmless, responsible or disruptive. In this regard, our work follows ethnographic and discursive studies that address boys' cultural practices. These studies converge on the idea (first developed by Connell, 1987; 1995) that it is possible to view constructions of masculinity as the products of interpersonal work, accomplished through the exploitation of available cultural resources such as the ideologies prevalent in particular societies. There are two especially key issues here: first, the everyday practices associated with what Connell (1995) theorises as 'hegemonic' masculinity (the ways in which 'approved' modes of being male are produced, supported, contested and resisted) and, secondly, the commonalities and differences in gendered identities created by, for example, social class and 'race'. Few studies in this area have taken this theoretical perspective to identity and fewer still have included a mix of 'racialised' and social class groups as well as girls in order to get a broad understanding of gendered identities.

Our own thinking on these issues arises out of a large research project on 11-14 year old boys in London schools which we carried out from 1997 onwards, with funding from the ESRC (Frosh et al, 2002). It examines aspects of 'young masculinities' which have become central to contemporary social thought, paying attention both to psychological formulations and to social policy concerns. This entails in-depth exploration, through individual and group interviews, of the way boys in the early years of secondary schooling conceptualise and articulate their experience of themselves, their peers and the adult world. As such, it offers an unusually detailed set of insights into the experiential world inhabited by these boys -how they see themselves, what they wish for and fear, where they feel their accession to masculinity to be advantageous and where it inhibits other potential experiences. In describing this material, we explore questions such as the place of violence in young people's lives, the functions of 'hardness', of homophobia and football, the discourse of boys' underachievement in school, and the pervasive racialisation of masculine identity construction (Frosh et al, forthcoming; 2000a; Phoenix and Frosh, 2001).

The boys in our study were drawn from twelve secondary schools in London, including private ('independent') and state sector, single sex and coeducational schools. We conducted 45 group interviews with groups usually of 4-6 young people 9 of which included girls. This involved a sample of 245 boys and 27 girls. Seventy eight volunteers from the boys who had taken part in the group interviews were selected for two individual interviews, separated by two to four weeks. We also interviewed 24 girls, once each, with a focus on their thoughts about boys. What was most important about our style of interviewing, both in the groups and in the individual interviews, was that although we ensured coverage of a range of pre-set areas (for example, relationships with boys and with girls, intimacy and friendship, attitude towards social and media representations of masculinity), we concentrated mainly on

being 'interviewee centred', with the interviewer taking a facilitative role, picking up on issues the interviewees raised and encouraging them to develop and reflect upon these and to provide illustrative narrative accounts. The second interview in particular explored repetitions, contradictions and gaps in the material from the first interview, allowed more focused investigation of specific points relating to the research questions and offered the respondent the opportunity to reflect and comment on the process of the interview itself.

Here we want to summarise just a few general 'findings' from the mass of data available. The first of these is simply that 11-14 year old boys (and the girls we interviewed) have sophisticated understandings of the current contradictions associated with the negotiation of masculine identities. For example, many boys recognised that popular masculinity is pervasively constructed as antithetical to being seen to engage with schoolwork. Yet, some were clear that they wished to attain good qualifications without being labelled by other boys in pejorative terms. Many saw masculinity and toughness as inextricably linked but said that they themselves were not tough, leading them to give self-justificatory accounts of why they might be exceptions to the masculine norm. A common view constructed by the boys related to the racialisation of masculinity, with African Caribbean boys being seen (as in other studies -e.g. Sewell, 1997) as particularly masculine, but nevertheless often being denigrated. These contradictions were related to some significant themes in the ways it was possible to 'do boy' in London, four of which we outline below.

1.   Boys are defined in large part in terms of their difference from girls, and so have to avoid doing anything that is seen as the kind of thing girls do.
2   Popular masculinity involves 'hardness', sporting prowess, 'coolness', casual treatment of schoolwork and being adept at 'cussing', attributes which are regulated or 'policed' in peer culture.
3   Relationships with parents are of considerable continuing importance to young teenage boys, but are also regulated in gender-specific ways.
4.   The power of certain images of appropriate masculinity often militates against educational achievement by making it difficult for boys to demonstrate an interest in working towards school success.

1. Differentiating boys and girls. Talking about girls comprised a substantial part of most interviews. Sometimes the topic of girls was introduced by the interviewer, but often girls featured prominently when boys discussed issues such as popularity, academic work, fighting and sport. For many boys it seemed impossible to talk about themselves without alluding to girls. Boys commonly posed a number of gendered oppositions involving denigration and idealisation of femininity. While boys asserted themselves as tough and active, several of them described girls as more mature, evidenced in their attitudes to school work and friendships and their ability to be serious and to give emotional confidences. A number of boys seemed to project on to girls a capacity for closeness and sympathy which they denied in boys. We also found that the construction of heterosexual desire seemed to involve a positive affirmation of these gendered oppositions; that is, gender difference was eroticised.

The girls we interviewed were similar to the boys in their construction of gendered dichotomies, though they attached quite different meanings to these and evaluated the 'feminine' and 'masculine' components differently. Almost all the girls were highly critical of boys for being immature, irresponsible and troublesome, seeing themselves, in opposition, not only as mature, sensible and conscientious, but also more engaging and as having a much wider range of interests than boys. However, their negative constructions of boys were usually qualified in ways that undermined simple and straightforward divisions between good

girls and bad boys. Often girls attributed boys' 'bad behaviour' to peer pressure with the implication that when they were on their own boys could be all right. In addition, some boys were constructed as exceptions and seen as 'nice'. As with the boys, however, the girls tended to eroticise gendered difference: they wanted as boyfriends not 'nice' boys, but boys who were funny and sporty.

2. 'Hegemonic' masculinity. Although there is considerable debate in the literature over the existence and significance of an organising mode of 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' masculinity, it is apparent from the interview material provided by these boys that attributes such as 'hardness', antagonism to school-based learning, sporting prowess and fashionable looks remain very influential in determining boys' popularity and also their views of themselves and others as properly 'masculine' (Phoenix and Frosh, 2001). The function of hegemonic masculinity as a method of social regulation amongst young men is especially important. This could be seen, for example, in the ways in which *football* was a key motif in the boys' constructions of masculinities and was raised as an important theme by both boys and girls: the relationship of a boy to football to a considerable extent defined the extent to which he was considered appropriately masculine. *Style* is also important and is a particularly racialised marker of masculinity, with African Caribbean boys being high status in this respect. Social class issues also operated, with both working class and middle class boys expressing caution about, and/or dislike of, boys from other social classes. This was particularly marked among private school boys for whom social class spontaneously emerged as an important preoccupation. In addition, our data provides evidence of ways in which boys police their identities by constructing certain boys as transgressing gender boundaries, and rendering them effeminate or gay. Homophobia was extremely pervasive, and we have examined this in relation to fears and anxieties associated with popular ways of being boys (Frosh et al, forthcoming).

3. Parents. When boys spoke about their relations with adult men and women usually this concerned their parents, with most boys constructing their mothers as more sensitive and emotionally closer to them than their fathers who were seen to be more jokey but also more distant and detached. It was possible to identify two systematic oppositions in relation to parents which were produced in both individual and group interviews:
1. Emotional closeness (mostly with mothers) as opposed to emotional distance or unavailability (mostly from fathers).
2. Identification with fathers but not with mothers, particularly through sport (especially football) and having fun.
Twenty three boys (out of seventy eight) indicated that their fathers were much less available for them than their mothers; only two said that it was the other way round, and many boys wished they could see more of their fathers, with some indicating that fathers did not respond adequately to their needs for help. Nineteen boys specifically mentioned turning to their mothers when things went wrong, for instance over being bullied or getting into trouble at school, compared to four who turned to their fathers.

4. Education. The elements which constitute 'hegemonic masculinity' make those boys who wish to identify with the academic values of a school subject to social disapproval from their male peers. Few managed to be both popular and overtly academically successful. We found that 'having a laugh' was a way of being a boy in relation to adult authority and classroom learning, and was part of an oppositional culture around which high status could be constructed. Conscientiousness and commitment to work were, in contrast, feminised. However, many of the boys also expressed anxieties about impending examinations and

whether they would achieve decent grades. In the individual interviews some boys admired girls for working hard, and were critical of boys for their obsessive focus on football and their relative lack of commitment to schoolwork. Teachers were not considered to provide identificatory models. Many of the boys in the study expressed resentment against what they perceived to be teachers' preference for, and favouritism to, girls. This perceived bias was, in ethnically mixed schools, reported to be racialised. Black boys were seen to be (unfairly) punished more than were white boys (Frosh et al, 2000b).

Conclusion

Our research brought home to us how rich and full of expression the accounts boys give of their lives can be. The image of the angrily grunting and inarticulate teenager is not one which stands up to scrutiny when one looks at what can happen when boys are given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and are encouraged to talk. It is worthy of note that almost all the boys who were interviewed individually became engaged in very thoughtful and rich discussions with the interviewer, often entrusting him with deeply felt material which they seemingly did not speak about elsewhere. Material of this kind included uncertainties over friendships, disappointments with parents, anger with absent or unavailable fathers, feelings of rejection and 'stuckness' in relationships, ideas about girls and fears and aspirations for the future. All this suggests that, given the right circumstances, boys can be very thoughtful about themselves and their predicament. Even at age 11, they are often capable of reflecting in a complex way on how their actual lives are at odds with what they would wish them to be, and even about how constraining certain aspects of masculine identity might be for them. They often spoke particularly poignantly about losses and also about how much value they placed upon parents who attended to them sensitively and seriously -and how disappointed they were by parents who did not.

We found that boys could be sophisticated and thoughtful about all these things - about what they could learn from relationships with girls (though they tended to idealise and disparage them), about how social class is divisive (though they usually reiterated class assumptions in their talk), about the destructive power of homophobia on their relationships with each other (though they continued to mock and pillory boys thought to be gay) and about the injustices of racism (though they drew on discourses of 'race' continually). Building on this thoughtfulness without moralising but by simply questioning boys' experiences -and also without embodying sexism, racism and homophobia in teaching and other adult practices- will never be enough on its own, but at least is something which could be done, and could make a difference to boys. We see a role here not just for teachers and counsellors in schools, but also for educational psychologists, who are often faced with demands to help deal with very troublesome boys or may be acting in a consultative role to schools. More broadly, psychologists of various sorts are having an input into the current debates on 'what to do about boys', and we would hope that this input would include a recognition both of the power of social 'discourses' to govern boys' identity-construction and behaviour, and of the extent to which boys nevertheless often seek alternative ways of 'doing boy'. Given the opportunity, many young teenage boys are eager to think and talk about their lives, and about how to make things better.

References

Back, L. (1994) The 'White Negro' revisited, in A. Cornwall and N. Lindisfarne (eds) *Dislocating Masculinity* London: Routledge

Connell, R. (1987) *Gender and Power: Society, the person and sexual politics* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press

Connell, R. (1995) *Masculinities* Cambridge: Polity

Connell, R. (1996) Teaching the boys: New research on masculinity, and gender strategies for schools. *Teachers College Record, 98*, 206-23

Davies, B. (1997) Constructing and deconstructing masculinities through critical literacy. In C. Griffin and S. Lees (eds). Special Issue 'Masculinities in Education' *Gender and Education 9*, 9-30.

Edley, N. and Wetherell, M. (1995) *Men in Perspective - Practice, Power and Identity* London: Harvester Wheatsheaf

Edley, N. and Wetherell M. (1997) Jockeying for position: the construction of masculine identities. *Discourse and Society 8*, 203-217

Farrington, D (1995) The development of offending and antisocial behaviour *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 36*, 929-964

Frosh, S. (1994) *Sexual Difference, Masculinity and Psychoanalysis* London and New York: Routledge

Frosh, S. (2000) Intimacy, Gender and Abuse: The Construction of Masculinities. In McCluskey, U. and Hooper, C. (eds) *Psychodynamic Perspectives on Abuse: The Cost of Fear* London: Jessica Kingsley

Frosh, S., Phoenix, A. and Pattman, R. (forthcoming)

Taking a Stand: Using Psychoanalysis to Explore the Positioning of Subjects in Discourse British Journal of Social Psychology

Frosh, S., Phoenix, A. and Pattman, R. (2002) *Young Masculinities: Understanding Boys in Contemporary Society* London: Palgrave

Frosh, S., Phoenix, A. and Pattman, R. (2000a) 'But It's Racism I really Hate': Young Masculinities, Racism and Psychoanalysis *Psychoanalytic Psychology, 17*, 225-242

Frosh, S., Phoenix, A. and Pattman, R. (2000b) Cultural contestations in practice: White boys and the racialisation of masculinities. In C. Squire (ed) *Culture in Psychology* London: Routledge

Jackson, D. (1998) Breaking out of the binary trap: boys= underachievement, schooling and gender relations. In D. Epstein, J. Elwood, V. Hey, and J. Maw (eds) *Failing Boys?, Issues in gender and achievement* Buckingham: Open University Press

Jukes, A. (1993) *Why Men Hate Women* London: Free Association Books

Kryger, N. (1998) Teachers= understanding and emotions in relation to the creation of boys= masculine identity. In Y. Katz and I. Menezes (eds) *Affective Education: A comparative view* London:Cassell

Mac an Ghaill, M. (1994) *The Making of Men: Masculinities, sexualities and schooling* Buckingham: Open University Press

Pattman, R., Frosh, S. and Phoenix, A. (1998) Lads Machos and Others. *Journal of Youth Studies, 1*, 125-142

Phoenix, A. and Frosh, S. (2001) Positioned by 'Hegemonic' Masculinities: A Study of London Boys' Narratives of Identity *Australian Psychologist, 36*, 27-35

Pollack, W. (1998) *Real Boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood* New York: Henry Holt

Salmon, P. (1998) *Life at school: Education and Psychology* London: Constable

Skelton, C. (1998) Feminism and research into masculinities and schooling. *Gender and Education, 10*, 217-227

Vizard, E., Monck, E. & Misch, P. (1995) Child and Adolescent Sex Abuse Perpetrators, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 36*, 731-756

Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour* Aldershot: Gower

Yates, L (1997) Gender equity and the boys= debate: What sort of challenge is it? *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 18*, 337-347