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Frames of Self

Capturing Working-Class British Boys' Identities through Photographs

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With the aim of capturing and portraying adolescents' experiences, researchers have achieved a remarkable degree of intimacy through "shadowing" the private lives of adolescents, or observing adolescents as they engage in their daily routines and interactions. However, such studies are nevertheless limited as they tend to "see" young people through the researcher's eyes and words. Similarly, when photographs are used, the camera is usually operated by the researcher who frames the shot by choosing what to focus on, what to leave out, and when to press the shutter. This chapter presents results from a study in which I privilege adolescent boys' perspectives by handing the camera, and hence more control for what is "seen," over to the boys themselves. The purpose of this study was to understand how working-class adolescent boys see themselves in the world and how they interact with the wider society in which they live.

Challenging Stereotypes

The findings reported in this chapter are primarily based on one of two studies undertaken for the British Economic and Social Research Council between 1995 and 2001. These research projects were stimulated by growing mass media and policy perceptions in Britain that socially dysfunctional behavior by young men, as individuals and in groups, was increasing. Issues of concern included boys' reported under-achievement at

school, risk-taking (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse, crime, violence), unemployment, lack of role models, and lack of support networks, as well as the high rate of suicide among boys and young men. Although researchers agree that a degree of risk-taking behavior is normal for young people (Plant & Plant, 1992), others have suggested that accelerated risk-taking may relate to boys' attempts to develop an adult male identity. The task of achieving an adult male identity may be particularly difficult in societies where systems of guidance and support that were available to previous generations of males are disappearing or no longer relevant (e.g., Giddens, 1991; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997).

The two research projects were also a response to the media's tendency to homogenize male "youth" as universally anti-social and problematic. While some have strongly argued against this homogenizing tendency (e.g., Epstein et al., 1998; Martino & Meyenn, 2001), more nuanced understandings of boys' experiences (e.g., Katz, 1997) are rarely heard. Likewise, despite Willis's (1977) influential attempt to redeem white working-class heterosexual young men by means of Marxist cultural analysis, the "moral panic" (Cohen, 1980) at the end of the twentieth century has only reinforced Pearson's (1983) depiction of the post-War working-class young man as an actively dangerous threat to society. On the whole, adolescent boys, particularly working-class boys, continue to raise concerns, especially as their risk-taking behaviors remain one of the few ways for them to establish hierarchy among their peers (Hickey et al., 2000; Mills, 2001).

The Research Program

Much of the popular "Men's Movement" literature (e.g., Bly, 1990; Biddulph, 1994) mourns men's blighted youth, blaming adult male emotional isolation on a range of sources such as mothers, feminists, women teachers, absent fathers (either metaphorically or physically), and urban civilization. The study I present in this chapter aimed to explore the self-perpetuating bubble of isolation that boys are considered to grow up within (e.g., Brannen et al., 1994; Brod & Kaufmann, 1994; Bruckenwell et al., 1995). I sought to discover how boys were experiencing the demands of everyday life and whether they were developing coping strategies. I was interested in taking a closer look at individual boys to see how and in what ways they were influenced by the "script" (Gagnon & Simon, 1973), or sex role stereotype, that men should be powerful, strong, silent and self-suffi-

cient. This stereotype may be particularly influential among teenage boys as they seek to find and define their adult male identities (Moore & Rosenthal, 1993). I was also interested in exploring whether the plurality in current styles of maleness, divided by Harris (1995) into either classical (e.g., adventurer, breadwinner, playboy, sportsman, tough guy, warrior) and modern (e.g., nature lover, nurturer, scholar, technician) (pp. 12–13) meant that adolescent boys were currently experiencing more freedom of choice in building an adult male identity.

The key assumptions of my research were that boys' personal learning is experienced as a staged process involving observation, information processing, reflection, self-critique, reasoning, and theorizing about new ways of being. It is also a cognitively dynamic process in which learners compare new knowledge with existing understandings and evaluate it for its "fit" with their needs and experience (von Glasersfeld, 1991). This approach to learning and development required that I start with how young people see the world and how their own interpretations respond to new information and experiences.

In the first study, I used conventional ethnographic observation and interviewing methods to investigate boys' attitudes regarding their own identity. Seventy-eight boys were interviewed. Their interviews suggested that boys had two aspects to their identity: one that could be characterized as *private,* or more reflective and vulnerable; and a second one that is more publicly visible and could be characterized as *peer* oriented and assertive (Walker & Kushner, 1999). The second study extended the first one, except it also included an exploration of boys' interactions with the wider "society" (Walker, 2001). This addition brought a new methodological challenge in terms of investigating relationships that were less amenable to direct interviewing and where the physical presence of an observing researcher was highly problematic. In an effort to address this challenge, I asked some boys to photograph their worlds so that I might better understand their relationships to the wider society.

One of the most interesting findings from both of these studies was the struggle that boys appear to experience between the private world of their thoughts and feelings and the public pressure to conform to peer norms. In many ways, peer norms were a reflection of the norms of the larger society regarding "appropriate" male behavior. The tension between private thoughts and public action appeared to wax and wane over time but it was never entirely absent from the boys' interviews and was hinted at in their photographs. It was through wrestling with these two aspects of experience

that the boys seemed to be developing their own identities. This chapter explores the lives of four boys, told as stories surrounding the photographs they took, focusing on how each boy responds to the tension between private reflection and public pressure to conform to peer norms, and the struggle that emerges from this tension.

Method

Participants

The four boys who are the focus of this chapter live in a northern, de-industrialized, English city. These boys, who had been acquaintances but not friends prior to the study, were chosen by their school's Deputy Principal and represented a range of academic abilities. Uzi[1] was from a Pakistani family and Popeye, Noel, and GB were white. All four boys were from working-class families.

Procedures

I met these boys as a group and individually at their school: a single-sex comprehensive school with an ethnically mixed student body, situated in a catchment area with low socioeconomic status. The part of the city in which the school is located sits between an inner city area with a national reputation for poverty, racial tension, and drug-related violence, and more salubrious suburbs with mostly owner-occupied housing. The school is surrounded by brick, two-story, semi-detached and terraced housing with small gardens. Originally these houses were built by the City Council for a white, working-class population to rent. Many of these houses are currently occupied by families of South Asian origin.

I met with the boys seven times at regular intervals over a two-year period when they were between the ages of 14 and 16. The first six interviews had a focus group format and included group discussions of the photographs. I also conducted final one-to-one interviews with each boy. When I interviewed them for the last time, the boys were about to take examinations to mark the end of compulsory schooling and were beginning to consider the pros and cons of post-secondary education and to think more seriously about their employment prospects.

For logistical reasons, I was unable to visit these boys away from their

school. Hence I provided disposable cameras and asked the boys to photograph whatever seemed important to them. Cameras were introduced after the third interview. Disposable cameras were chosen since they are inexpensive and unobtrusive, can be used without fuss and, I hoped, would cause little disruption in the boys' daily routine. No attempt was made to train the boys in photographic technique or aesthetic considerations. I wanted them to feel free to "point and click" whenever they wanted. I found that this approach of having the boys take their own photographs was invaluable in my attempt to explore the fleeting, mobile, and often unvoiced time and energy the boys put into private values and public actions. It allowed access to places and events that a researcher would not necessarily be able to enter, and encouraged reflection and discussion.

Learning about Individuals through Their Photographs

Popeye

Popeye describes himself as confident and sociable. "I like being with people—company." He lives with his mother and his much younger sister. He has an older brother, now in the Army. He emerged as the self-appointed leader of the group and displayed none of the others' occasional physical timidity. At our first meeting, for example, he had two fingers splinted together, an injury acquired "scrapping," he said cheerfully. During a discussion of street violence when Noel was asked what he would do if he were threatened and had no older friend to turn to, Popeye interjected quietly, "Then come to me."

Six of Popeye's seventeen prints featured a red car belonging to an older friend. This car is the focus of much devotion. Three of the prints showed work being carried out on it (Figure 2.1) and two of them showed racing trophies on the roof.

> *Popeye:* There was something wrong with his exhaust so I had to get in the car and like fix his exhaust. It's a fast car, you see, so it gets raced.
> *BW:* How do you learn how to—
> *Popeye:* He tells me and I get under the car.

No one in Popeye's immediate family owns a car, and he is still too young for a driving license. To drive this red car seemed to be his dream.

Figure 2.1: The Red Car

The photographs appear optimistic. The sun is shining, and the setting is a quiet, tree-lined avenue with large houses set back from the road—which is unusual in this area. In addition, the trophies seem to suggest aspirations toward success, perhaps linked to the work being performed on the car.

The photographs of the fast red car, complete with trophies, appear to reinforce the successful hypermasculinity conveyed by Popeye's references in the group interviews to his fighting prowess. Two of his prints are of a girl in profile, sitting on a bed, hiding her face (Figure 2.2). Popeye informed the group, "She didn't want her photograph taken but I took it anyway, didn't I?"

The girl turns out to be his brother's girlfriend, and his comment suggests a macho attitude toward the quiet violation of taking photographs without consent. Again, Popeye's comment seems intended to display an active, assertive masculinity to the rest of the group. The weights stacked below the window denote activity and male strength. As Popeye explains, "I like to keep fit, you see, I do weights in my spare time."

In the one-to-one interview, however, another side to Popeye emerges. Although he has had a girlfriend for some months, she does not appear in

his photographs. I only became aware of her existence in our final interview. A primary reason for her absence in his photographs may lie with his desire to avoid ridicule from his peers. As Popeye says of his mates:

> Well they haven't got a girlfriend. They're mature but not mature, do you get me? If you talk (about her) it's, "Oh you sissy!" . . . Otherwise my mates, they look up to me. Well they're always phoning me and saying do you want to do this, do you want to do that. And when I go out with my girlfriend its, "Eeew!" Real moan.

He may keep his romantic interests out of his photographs to protect the private side of experience. His public self does not appear to provide room for his private experiences. As a leader among his friends, he feels he has a public hypermasculine "face" to maintain. However, he also seems to feel more "himself" with his friends and distances himself emotionally from his girlfriend.

> Well when you're with your girlfriend you're all loving and affectionate. And with my mates [you] prat around and be yourself. Yeah, you can be yourself much, much more. . . . I've got a load of friends, you see, and I need to keep

Figure 2.2: Brother's Girlfriend

> in touch with my mates. . . . I don't know but girls, if they go to see a lad, right, they fall head over heels, right? And as soon as they see you it's love, do you know what I mean? I'm not like that, I hate that. You can't love someone like that, four weeks, as soon as you ask them out it's love. Stupid. And as soon as you say, "I love you," you're trapped aren't you? And if you dump them they throw it back in your face! [Wordless mimicry] So it's best not to say it. [Laughs.]

Although Popeye's perspective here was not typical of older boys in the study, since many believed that their girlfriends were the only person to whom they could really express their "private side," this view is representative of the typical split heard in the interviews between the private emotional life of love and affection and the public persona of being a tough young man who feels "trapped" by love. It is also possible that the romantic private location is fairly new to him and therefore less familiar than the public sphere in which he operates with relative ease.

Yet despite his façade of toughness, Popeye is also affectionate and kind, as indicated in the picture of his dog (Figure 2.3). He was outraged that the dog had been thrown from a car by previous owners. But when the group laughed at the photo, implying that the dog looked "soppy," Popeye bridled saying, "He was only a puppy!" and quickly told a story emphasizing his own courage in removing the dog from its cruel situation, thus reinforcing his tough public persona.

Our last interview took place one to one during the time between the boys' practice examinations and the real thing. Popeye hadn't done as well in the practice examination as he'd expected to. "I didn't revise or anything. I just went in thinking it'd be a doddle." But the bad results had not discouraged him. "Without revising I got two good grades, so I've got to revise." This is typical of Popeye's attitude toward his current and future life. His happy-go-lucky, can-do disposition is evident throughout the transcripts and is echoed in his photographs of smiling people, usually one at a time, in pleasant, sun-lit surroundings. In Popeye's mind there is a clear link between where he is now and where he wishes to be in the future. That link involves some effort, he believes, but is manageable. He is following his slightly older peers who have trod the ground before him. He had thought about following his brother into the Army, but when we last spoke he was hoping to do a carpentry apprenticeship after leaving school or join the police force:

Figure 2.3: Popeye's Dog

Popeye: Well my mate, his brother's in the police. Go to the pub with him and everything. When you're in uniform you have to have a different head on but he's still all right. Sounds good. . . .

BW: Where did the idea of the police come from?

Popeye: Driving cars. So, police force, drive cars. Put your foot to the floor, you know, Vroom!

Fitting into a stereotypic image of a male who loves cars, particularly fast cars, Popeye discusses his future ambitions of being a policeman. He also discusses becoming a Physical Education teacher, "but I don't fancy the six years in college . . . it's like school all over again, isn't it?" He'd also like to travel: "Fancy living abroad. Like, doing a degree in Sport and Tourism. Then go, apply abroad and teach over there for a year and then come back and live here and go somewhere else." But when I remind him that, on our first meeting, he had said that he wanted to go to America and marry a rich woman he responds with an ironic, "Oh aye!" and realism takes over again: "I probably will live at home. It's like, my brother [has left], the last one home, you feel guilty leaving your mum because it's your responsibility, like, a bit, isn't it?" The apparent conflict between his public persona

of a confident male, driving fast cars, traveling, studying sports, teaching Physical Education, and his private desire to take care of his mother and make sure someone is home for her is readily apparent in his narratives.

Of the four boys whose stories are reported here, Popeye conforms most to the male stereotype. He sees himself as a leader and invests much of his energy in peer relationships, not allowing himself much time for private reflection or love. Although successfully maintaining a romantic relationship, he publicly dismisses this relationship both in his narratives and in his photographs. He seems to feel well in control of his future employment prospects, and his risk-taking is limited—he may be involved in a fight or two, but he always makes sure he has older friends with him.

Popeye is the most confident of the four, and it may be the ease with which he conforms to the male stereotype that makes him appear confident. Yet there is an underlying conflict apparent in his narratives and his photographs (and in the absence of particular photographs). He has a public sense of self and of the future that involves being a policeman, driving fast red cars, and spending time with his friends at the pub, and he also has a private world of his girlfriend and of his mother for whom he feels responsible and wants to take care of. This private world seems to be rarely discussed with his peers or in public. At times he even seems ashamed of this private world. This tension, while not seeming to undercut his apparent confidence, seems to lie at the heart of his identity struggle. Who is he now and who will he be in the future?

GB

GB is the middle child of seven, living with his mother and stepfather. In his interviews, he is friendly and cheerful, not allowing his stammer to inhibit his carefully considered comments. He had the lowest number of successful prints, which disappointed him. The majority of his photographs contained no people although several that had not "come out" were of family pets. Five of GB's photos were of his school—four looking out through barred windows and one of bleak strip lighting. He said he had wanted to emphasize that school was a "prison" (Figure 2.4). His photos seem to speak of private alienation and publicly expressed anger.

GB says he doesn't like going out with mates in the evenings any more "because all we do is cause trouble. That's all we do." This involves vandalism like building roadblocks with builders' rubbish. "And then when the

Figure 2.4: School

drivers come along speeding, they've got to stop and take it apart before they can go on and we're sitting in a bush at the side of the road, laughing!" Sometimes this leads to police chases, which adds to the excitement: "[We're] too fast. And policemen can't climb very well either, so we had to jump over a few walls." However, these activities were beginning to dwindle.

> *GB:* I don't want to get in any more trouble because I've been brought home by the police a few times, about four times, and I just can't do with it at the moment. . . . It's just say like I'm having a laugh, you know, causing trouble and everything, and then a few times I get caught, but when I do get caught I hate it. I don't like it at all. . . . It's just I don't like the feeling of guilt as well, like in my stomach here (rubs stomach). I feel really weird.
>
> *BW:* Do you only feel guilty when you get caught?
>
> *GB:* Er, oh! [Sounds surprised] S'pose so, yeah I do. I feel guilty when I get caught, apart from, I only feel guilty when I get caught, or I know I'm about to get caught, so I try and ease it off a bit. I try and suck up, lessen the punishment.

BW: So if you didn't get caught, if there weren't policemen out there catching you doing it, you'd still be doing it?
GB: Erm . . . probably, yeah.

GB reinforces the common myth that males left up to their own devices will cause havoc. Although he is trying to resist this behavior, he readily acknowledges that he would still participate in this behavior if he were not going to be punished. However, he refers to a feeling of guilt, "like in my stomach," which suggests a conflict regarding his actions. Yet it is unclear what the conflict is for him.

GB is physically a "late developer," which is reflected in his conversations and in his photographs. Girls are not mentioned or photographed, and while other boys talk about pretending to be older in order to visit pubs and nightclubs to meet girls, GB is "not really interested. [It's] daft, that." Nor does he share Popeye's interest in cars—GB talks about riding his bicycle and is more interested in harassing motorists than joining them. Over the two years I knew the boys, only GB remained fixed in his antipathy toward the police. It is possible that privately GB is interested in girls, but his lack of stature, and his family's lack of resources, make the early attainment of a girlfriend unlikely for him. So he invests in an anti-authoritarian, trouble-making public identity as a means of sustaining peer respect and self-esteem.

While school was gradually becoming less important to the other three boys as they turned more thoughts toward their futures, GB was still enmeshed in the small-scale, teacher-versus-pupil power struggles of the classroom. Near the end of our last conversation GB told me that he and a friend were about to be suspended from school. They had started a fire during a Science lesson. School still loomed large in his life, and his photographs reflected this.

GB's identity seems to be linked to his misbehavior and, if he didn't admit to feelings of guilt, one might believe that GB simply fit into the current stereotype of male behavior. Yet this "negative identity" (see Erikson, 1968) seems to stem from his genuine frustration with and anger at the prison-like nature he discerns in his school.

His pictures of his school and his unpeopled photographs reveal quite clearly his sense of alienation and isolation at school and at home:

BW: Do you talk to your step-dad much?
GB: No. Don't really talk to him much.

Figure 2.5: School Lighting

BW: How about your mum?
GB: I don't really talk to my mum much either.
BW: Is she too busy, or is it—
GB: —yeah, she's always busy, and I don't feel I can talk to her. I don't feel I can.
BW: So who do you talk to?
GB: Mates. I tell them everything.
BW: Do you tell them about the things that upset you?
GB: Not really no. Nah. I don't. I keep them to myself.
BW: How about your dad, do you see him?
GB: Not often, no. I don't really like him anyway.
BW: . . . So you don't talk to your parents much.
GB: No. If I tried I'd probably get a cup of coffee thrown over me.

It was in the one-to-one interview where GB indicated that privately he is beginning to suspect he has been putting too much emphasis on his peer relationships and that his risk-taking has been getting out of hand. He wants to resist the dictates and actions of his peers but finds it difficult when the context in which he lives doesn't support this resistance by

offering positive alternatives. GB is stuck with either following his peers or following the norms of an institution he refers to as a prison. His family does not provide him respite from his conflicts as they don't appear to spend much time talking to him. As others have noted about boys, GB does appear to exist in an emotional "bubble of isolation" (e.g., Lee, 1993; Phillips, 1993; Brannen et al., 1994; Bruckenwell et al., 1995) but at the same time this isolation is reinforced by the familial and institutional context. His friendships, even with their negative peer norms, may provide him with his only sense of connection and pleasure. GB's conflict, like Popeye's, seems once again to suggest a public/private split where the public, which includes his peers as well as his school, is confining him—and limiting his possibilities in the future. In addition, his private world of vulnerabilities and desires is not adequately responded to by his family or friends so he ends up feeling frustrated, alone, and seemingly angry.

Uzi

Uzi's parents came to Britain from Pakistan. He lives with them and his older brother and sister. Uncles, aunts, and cousins live nearby. He was one of the louder, more articulate members of the group. His interjections were not always appreciated by the others, who nicknamed him Mouth.[2] There were, however, gaps in his apparent confidence.

Uzi had requested that he have a camera in time for a school trip to an amusement park. He was delighted with his twenty-three prints, nineteen of which were taken during that trip. Of the others, one is a self-portrait, two are of detached houses belonging to members of his extended family, and one is of a large new truck belonging to a cousin. These pictures indicate family pride and, perhaps, personal aspiration.

Of the photos taken at the amusement park, six are of his friends (see Figure 2.6). Uzi was the only boy to take posed group photographs, and three of these are of groups of up to eight boys. The other three are taken with "trophy" girls[3] that they met that day: one is of a friend with his arm round a girl's shoulders and two are of Uzi and another girl who wears white clothes, their arms around each other as they smile shyly at the camera. Compared with the other boys' photos, Uzi's are crowded. He wants to convey that he is a popular member of his peer group. Uzi's own appearance in three of the prints is an obvious contrast to the other boys' absence in their photos. His representation in his photographs is consistent with

Figure 2.6: Uzi's Friends

the loud, confident, even arrogant public performance he gives in the group interviews. His private insecurities are only voiced in the one-to-one interview. But they are glimpsed in the photo of him with the trophy girl where he looks almost unrecognizably coy and unsure of himself.

The main reason for his delight with the photographs was a chance meeting with the Pakistani national cricket team, in England for a tournament, who were also having a day out at the park. Uzi (a keen cricketer himself) has eight photos of his sporting heroes, mostly posing for his camera, and one of himself with two of them. Uzi's adulation of the cricket team led to a group discussion of sporting role models and also allowed him to explain the importance of cricket in South Asia to three white boys whose major sporting interest was soccer. Britain's Asian population is stereotyped as hardworking and cerebral but physically timid. There have been much-publicized cases where gangs of white youths have indulged their xenophobia through organized "Paki-bashing." The fact that Pakistan's cricketers are easily the equal of English national teams gives boys like Uzi a rare opportunity to display ethnic pride.

It was noticeable that none of the boys took a single photograph of family members. One of Uzi's prints appears to buck this trend: it contains

Figure 2.7: Cricketer and Family

an Asian family picnicking on the grass (Figure 2.7). However, the photo is of a cricketer's family, with the hero-figure sitting in the middle of the group. Perhaps the boys felt that their families are part of their private sides, not to be exposed to public scrutiny.

No white face appears anywhere in Uzi's photographs, which give the impression of a sociable young man firmly embedded in Pakistani culture. However, from the private interview it became clear that he was undergoing an identity crisis. He described his relationship with his parents:

> It's like two totally different people, what I'm doing now and what they've done is totally different. What I do, for them I'm too Westernized. I'm too Westernized to be an Asian and what I'm trying to explain to them, I'm not born in Pakistan, I'm not from the Far East, I'm born in England. . . . I have British nationality and what's here, we can live by the laws here, so there's no point of me living by the laws from there. . . . I'm proud to be Asian, it's just that they're, you see, when I have kids, there's no way I'm going to be like them. . . . To tell you the truth, I do feel sorry for myself. [Pause] I sob sometimes.

When I suggested that most people his age have problems with their parents, Uzi maintained that the problems are greater for Asian young people:

> Well you see for English people, it's not that bad. They've got problems with their parents, but on top of that 'cause it's that age, that teenage. We've got that teenage and on top of that we've got that pressure as well, that you're Asian, you can't do this and that, you can't do this, you can't drink, you can't smoke, you can't do this. You can't eat such and such things. We've got these kind of—it's like we're tied up in one circle. If we step out of it we're out of line. We can't do that.

The photographs of himself with the "trophy girl" are evidence of Westernized behavior of which his parents would not approve, as was the story he told the group about giving the girl some cannabis to smoke, making it easier for him to "get into her." Although Popeye, too, was unimpressed by this story:

> *Popeye:* You should have been a gentleman . . . and just left her.
> *Uzi:* Are you stupid?
> *Popeye:* Was she nice?
> *Uzi:* No.
> *Popeye:* I bet she was really nice. You're just saying that now 'cause you regret it!

There was a marked difference between Uzi's story about "ungentlemanly" behavior and his shy demeanor with the girl as shown in the photograph. Perhaps this echoes Popeye's public/private split revealed by the photo of his dog. Popeye, though, is more confident in his public masculinity and uses it here when he takes a moralizing stance with Uzi.

There is also some dissonance between the "aspirational" photographs of a large house together with a new truck, both belonging to older cousins, and Uzi's own immediate future. His cousins and older brother currently make good livings as market traders but warn Uzi that the days are numbered for this type of enterprise. It has been suggested that his future may lie outside family-owned businesses—a prospect he finds privately threatening despite his publicly alleged independent-mindedness.[4]

Uzi's parents were obviously concerned about his future prospects and were, he said, "nagging" him every day to do well in his exams and to take

a further qualification exam in Business Studies. But when I asked "Do you see why your parents are anxious?" He responded:

> Yeah I know they mean all good, but they're going a bit too far with it. I know they mean good, by saying study, study, you know what I mean. Get your qualifications, I know they mean good, but it's not the way to push someone. You just stress them. At the end of the day, they're not going to sit in that exam room and do that exam. It's going to be me. The pressure's going to be on me and that way, no one can make me change my mind. It's like when I'm in lessons. I'll tell you the truth. I'm very ignorant at times. When a teacher tells me what to do, if my mind's to it, I'll do the work. Everyone says that, but when I'm ignoring him, and I'll ignore him and I won't do nothing no one tells me to do, no matter what, even the [Principal]. If he tells me to do no matter what I won't do it. I'll just ignore him, it's when my heart says to do something, I'll do it. When I feel like to do it, I'll do it. . . . I'll do what I want, no matter what.

Uzi spends time and effort reflecting on his private identity ("When my heart says to do something, I'll do it"). He is working hard to develop an independent-minded, British-Asian masculinity—perhaps trying too hard for this otherwise white peer group and adult authority figures. Peers and family/school are exerting equal but opposing pressure on his public identity, leaving him feeling alone in his struggle. Looking at Uzi's difficulties, the most obvious split is between his peers and family, which seems less of a problem for the white members of this focus group. Moreover, he is also wrestling in his private sphere, as he tries to work out apparently irreconcilable differences between his Asian identity and English context.

Noel

Noel lives with his mother, father, older brother, and younger sister. Like the others in the group, he was unsure whether to continue with post-compulsory education and has an unskilled Saturday and holiday job that offers only possibilities of low-status employment.[5]

His prints included one (Figure 2.8) that was the most dramatic of the collection. Noel was very excited about it:

> *N:* That's where some guy got stabbed. That's his blood.
> *BW:* Is it really?

Figure 2.8: The Blood Stain

> *N:* It is. I swear. Some guy slit his wrists, and this is where we train and play football. . . . We were training one day, and some guy, we saw some guy lying there and we thought he was just a tramp or something. But he'd slit his wrists . . . I thought he was dead at first.

From the conversation, it was unclear whether this had been a suicide attempt, or whether the wounded man had been attacked. His discovery of the man had prompted an immediate dilemma as to whether this was a situation best ignored. However, Noel and his friends had decided to obtain help and the man was taken to hospital. For Noel, this photograph provided evidence of how he and his mates had overcome the challenge of the situation and thus reinforced a heroic public image.

Three photographs of an empty soccer field are taken from an unforgiving angle, but this is Noel's "field of dreams" (Figure 2.9). As he said, "I couldn't take a photo of a match 'cos I was playing in it." Noel's long-cherished ambition was to be a professional soccer player. But this seemed unlikely. Despite the success of his team in local tournaments, the scouts had not spotted his talents. Another possibility was to take a college course, but Noel reflects:

Figure 2.9: Soccer Pitch

> I've been to Stantley College. It's a course for football. And I've asked three people that have been there, and they've said it's rubbish. Said you just get set up with a rubbish football team, facilities are crap, so I don't think I'll be going there.

He was considering another college course, one that combined Sport with English, but did not sound enthusiastic. He did not equate academic success with high-status employment. "It's like my brother, he's fairly smart. . . . He's got loads of good grades. He's well more smarter than me and my sister and he's still working in a supermarket. . . . So that's put me off a bit." He seemed much more concerned than the others in the group were about the future. Worries about upcoming exams paled in comparison to worries about his future.

> But now my bigger worry is what I'm going to do when I leave school. . . . That's what I'm most stressed about at this moment of my life. . . . It's just like all my mates, they've got something set out that they want to do—and some of them haven't got a fantastic thing that they want to do, but most of my friends have got something that they want to do and that they're going

> to go for. . . . I just want someone to be there and to say, "Right, this is your job, you've got this job. I know what you like, this is your job." I just want someone to say that!

His anxiety about his future emerged in the one-to-one interview, indicating that it is a private worry not to be shared with peers. Talking in the group interviews, Noel preferred to convey the impression of an optimistic, sociable sportsman capable of earning good money in unskilled labor.

A common topic of conversation for all four boys focused on the police. Noel took a photograph of a pub that he and his friends were too young to enter (Figure 2.10), so they "hung about" on the street corner opposite it until the police moved them on. In discussing this photograph, the group complained at length about police harassment. There was a feeling among the boys that they were under constant surveillance. As Noel commented:

> I don't like [the police]. I was working yesterday, and we were all in a car—me, him and him (points to photographs)—we sat there 'cos in our dinner break we just go in the car and have some dinner, with the doors open. And

Figure 2.10: Street Corner Opposite the Pub

> they just stopped and asked whose car it was. And we went, "It's the manager's." . . . They were watching us to see what we'd do. . . . That's how they are all the time. They see someone on the street and they'll stop you. . . . They think you're going to rob something, probably. As far as they're concerned, if we're not inside of our houses, then we're breaking the law.

The surveillance extended beyond the police. The boys also complained about feeling unwelcome in shops, cinemas, and leisure centers, and being seen as a nuisance by adults in general. GB told a story of a neighbor who called the police when he and a friend were playing soccer in the street. Even the street, the one public area that they might be able to claim, was apparently out of bounds. These feelings were summed up by Popeye's ironic question to me: "Is there a curfew, Miss? I don't know." The police are probably key reinforcers of the male norm but yet they also punish the male norm of misbehavior—a contradiction that appears to irritate the boys greatly.

By the last interview, however, Noel's views of the police had completely changed. His brother had recently been mugged twice by, Noel suspected, the group of friends he had previously "hung around" with:

> It can't be no-one else but all them lot. It's like a big gang. It's got to be them. . . . Now I know the police are right, just coming to move them. They should have at least two police cars just patrolling every night, just going round slowly. I think they should always have that.

Noel did not personally feel threatened by this gang because they knew him. However he did feel unsafe in his local streets because, he said, the police had been successful in "cleaning up" a neighboring area that had just displaced the trouble to his own area. "I never feel safe on my own turf," he said, and tried not to be alone on the street. Recently he had adopted the tactic of going by bus to a different area to "hang about" because he felt safer there. However, he believed he would continue to live in the area:

> All my family's here, all my friends are here. If I go somewhere else, I could stay in London, what's there to do? Just everyone's here that you know, you know your surroundings as well. And just the little things like your football team, Manchester United, things like that. And it's a good place, but other things are crap.

Like Uzi, there was a marked difference between Noel's public self as evidenced in the group interviews and the anxious, frightened boy revealed when he spoke on his own. Noel appears to be stuck in a blind alley. He sees no way forward. "I just want a flat and a girlfriend," he says, but has no concrete ideas of how to acquire either.

Discussion

The total absence of families, adults in general (except for the cricketing heroes), and the scarcity of girls in all the boys' photographs reinforces stereotypes of adolescent boys as peer focused. When asked about what was important to them, the boys almost invariably mentioned male friendships first. The boys are seemingly trying to rid themselves of family influences, while not yet becoming seriously involved with the opposite sex. They are working out who they are with reference to their male peers.[6] My data indicate that this self-work takes place in two locations—public, peer group situations where "lines" for the male "script" (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) were tested and rehearsed; and private reflections where the boys are trying to make the various influences from peers and adult authority fit with their personal moral code.

The photographs literally allow us to visualize this private sphere as well as the public image these boys want to convey to their peers. Shots of interiors give clues to inner lives and their desired public images of themselves. The "aspirational" images of cars, trophy girls, and large houses give indications of valuing consumer power and status. But it was the one-to-one interviews that illuminated the inner conversations the boys had as they worked out how they should be in the world. Perhaps some aspects of private life are simply too difficult to pin down photographically.

It was noticeable that the stories these boys told the group about their photographs tended to be dramatic and macho, for example the fast car, school as prison, trophy girls, sports, and the rescue of the injured man. More intimate data such as Popeye's girlfriend, GB's feelings about his illegal activity, Uzi's cultural dilemmas, and Noel's fear of street violence and anxiety about future unemployment, only emerged in the private interviews. Perhaps the boys fear that these more tender or anxious feelings would, if publicly revealed, leave them vulnerable to peer ridicule. However, it is the macho public stories that influence the impression boys make in the wider world and exacerbate the tendency of the media and

adults in general to think the worst of them—a case of words' speaking louder than actions.

The rules of society are represented in the photographs by the number of barriers depicted. Sometimes these rules are presented overtly (e.g., bars on school windows) and sometimes less obviously (e.g., fences, walls, curbstones, white lines on sports pitches). Authority is ubiquitous and constantly telling these boys where they may and may not go. And, as we have seen, the boys resent the restrictions they feel society places upon them, the surveillance they are under, and the consequent social exclusion and powerlessness they experience. It became obvious while discussing the photographs that the street is a highly contested area (Robinson, 2000). In some sense the boys feel that it is the only public space they are "allowed" to inhabit, and yet adults, police, and other peer groups make rival claims. GB's attempts to reclaim the street from motorists are genuine, if extreme, while Noel's fears of violence illuminate young people's struggle to acquire "street literacy" (Cahill, 2000).

The absence of adult images (cricketers aside) underlines the alienation these boys feel toward adult authority. Rather than being looked up to as role models, for many English boys their parents' generation is regarded, at best, as out of touch with modern issues and, at worst, with disdain. Arguably there is nothing new in this view. But today's boys feel that their parents' limited experience of social contexts and issues—like the clubbing scene, and drug and alcohol use by the young—together with their ignorance of new information technologies means that their advice is irrelevant (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). Boys look to their peers—which we can stretch here to include those just a few years older—for a steer on life. And the experience of these peers can affect the boys' own confidence and sense of identity.

Conclusion

These boys, three white and one of Pakistani origin, all live in the same working-class area and attend the same school. They were all intelligent and articulate. Yet their photographs and stories showed them to be tackling the demands of everyday life in different ways. As Connell (2000) points out, "[D]iversity is not just a matter of difference between communities. Diversity also exists *within* a given setting" (p. 10). Moore and Rosenthal's (1993) observation that the male stereotype is particularly

powerful for adolescent boys was illustrated in this study. Noel and Uzi had trouble adjusting to it and were beset by private doubts. For different reasons these two individuals were struggling to find a role that felt right for them, seeking but not yet finding a comfortable mix of Harris's (1995) multiplicity of acceptable adult masculine styles. GB had, through group vandalism, found an enjoyable way of conforming to peer expectation but it was bringing him into conflict with "society." His behavior could be seen to tally with Giddens's (1991) and Furlong and Cartmel's (1997) arguments that risk-taking can be an attempt to prove masculinity in a world that lacks previous generations' benchmarks and parameters. But although his vandalism gets him noticed by the police, it is lawbreaking of a relatively minor and temporary type and therefore possibly within the continuum of what could be perceived as normal for this age group.

Clearly the well-recorded atmosphere of anxiety and isolation that boys experience growing up pertains to the boys in the present study. The adult world seemed remote for these boys, having little connection with the future they see for themselves. As Furlong and Cartmel (1997) maintain, the world appears to be risky and unpredictable. These uncertainties are being negotiated on an individual level with little assistance from social structures such as families. Peers are more trusted than families. As a result, peer influence is perhaps greater than for previous generations. At the same time, peers do not seem to provide the boys with a sense of security and connectedness. The boys, for the most part, seem to struggle with finding a context in which both their private selves and public images can be consistent and known by others.

The difference between public stories about the photographs, which were told for group consumption, and the private feelings that emerged primarily in the one-to-one interviews exemplified one kind of strategy that these boys undertake to build their masculine identities. The boys appeared to be doing two things simultaneously: they were working to build a public self (or selves) and a private self. There was evidence that these two developmental processes felt very different, although they operated in parallel and the boundaries were fluid. Perhaps it is in the tension between the two, where the barriers come into being and crossovers occur, that attitudes and self-knowledge are formed. Because it is unspoken and yet constant, this self-work is difficult for the young person to explain and therefore for the researcher to pinpoint. This study, however, gave us some clues to the internal dialogue the boys engage in to deal with the ambiguities they experience in their public and private worlds. A similar disjunc-

ture between public behavior and private values and desires has been noticed by writers such as Moore and Rosenthal (1993) and Tolman et al. (this volume).

There are implications from these findings for the public policy debate on young men, risk-taking, alienation, and identity formation. The boys are experiencing a variety of social pressures in their search for an adult male identity that is compatible with real options. By understanding the interaction of aspects of identity experienced as personal, peer, and wider society dimensions, a greater understanding can be gained of how individual boys work in a three-dimensional world. With all four boys, the research was able to show how they were interpreting their experiences and developing identities in a world that, they felt, often showed them hostility, restriction, and a lack of acceptance.

NOTES

1. The boys are referred to by the pseudonyms they chose at the start of the research process.

2. Although, looking at the transcripts, Popeye talked more.

3. I use the term "trophy girls" to denote girls who were relative strangers, photographed almost as an accessory—they looked good on the boy's arm and enhanced the predatory masculine image that Uzi seemed keen to present. These photographs are not reproduced here to maintain anonymity.

4. Family-run businesses are a common type of employment for British Asians.

5. These include building work, catering, and retail.

6. These findings concur with the conclusions of Phoenix et al. (1999) that boys' first concern is popularity. Harris (1998) goes so far as to suggest that peer relationships (and to a lesser extent genetics) are what affect the development of personality: parental influence, she argues, is of little or no importance.

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