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La revanche des deuxièmes : le désengagement comme expression de masculinité

Alicia Walker

Article abstract

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REVENGE OF THE BETA BOYS: OPTING OUT AS AN EXERCISE IN MASCULINITY[1]

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ABSTRACT. This study examines the factors influencing underachieving boys on a high-performing high school campus. Unlike the "laddishness" often seen in studies of underachievement among boys, the boys in this study were quiet, unobtrusive, and compliant within the classroom. Using qualitative interviews and observations conducted over a one-year period, the study showed the formation of student identities in response to the hegemonic masculinity of the "golden boy" portrayed by the popular boys on campus, which included high academic performance. The boys constructed an alternate masculinity, the Beta Boy, designed to demonstrate superior intellect through eschewing in-class work and homework but performing particularly well on tests.

LA REVANCHE DES HOMMES BÊTA: LE DÉSENGAGEMENT COMME EXPRESSION DE MASCULINITÉ

RÉSUMÉ. Ce projet de recherche étudie les facteurs ayant une influence sur des garçons sous-performant au sein du campus d'une école secondaire à rendement supérieur. Contrairement aux comportements immatures et tapageurs fréquemment observés dans le cadre d'études portant sur l'échec scolaire chez les garçons, les jeunes hommes de ce projet de recherche étaient silencieux, effacés et respectueux des règles de la classe. En se basant sur des entrevues qualitatives et des observations menées sur une période d'un an, les résultats de recherche montrent la formation d'identités étudiantes en réaction à la masculinité hégémonique du «golden boy», représenté par les garçons populaires du campus, incluant ceux réussissant sur le plan académique. Ces garçons ont élaboré une identité masculine alternative, les Beta Boy. Cette masculinité cherche à démontrer des capacités intellectuelles supérieures, en évitant tout travail scolaire en classe et à la maison, mais en réussissant particulièrement bien les évaluations.

The academic underachievement of boys is an educational issue around the globe in industrialized societies. In the U.S., it is a growing problem in particular. Numerous sources indicate that boys are lagging behind as soon as they enter the education system, and that this continues over the life

course throughout both their college and working years. Indeed, contrary to past patterns in higher education, in 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau (2008) estimated that only two-thirds of young men ever darkened the doors of higher education and that they are significantly less likely than their female counterparts to earn their degrees. This growing issue has only been exacerbated by the Great Recession during the late 2000s, as men held three-quarters of the 8 million jobs lost (Rosin, 2010). This is largely due to the specific fields in which those losses occurred, which have long been considered the work of men: construction and manufacturing. It's no coincidence that these fields do not require higher education.

The phenomenon of underachieving boys is not a new topic. There has been much discussion and inquiry into this subject in recent decades. Some attention has been given to working class students on this issue (Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; Ingram, 2009; Lucey, 2001; Lucey & Walkerdine, 2000; Morris, 2005; 2008; Reay, 2001; Weiner, 1998; Willis, 1997) as well as race (Conchas & Nogura, 2004; Ferguson, 2000; Luttrell, 2005; Majors, 2001; Osborne, 1999; 2001; Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995; Polite and Davis, 1999; Oyserman & James, 2008), while some researchers call attention to the intersectionality of race and class (Griffin, 2000). Many discussions look at shifts in education over the last few decades to locate the problem within schools themselves (Raphael, 1998; Johnston & Watson, 2005). Among these foci is a discussion pitting boys' success against the success of girls (Gurian, 1996; Hoff-Sommers, 2000; Pollack, 1998). Much criticism has been raised concerning the way the discourse posits boys as "victims" and girls as "privileged" (Epstein et al., 1998; Griffin 2000; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002; Watson, Kehler, & Martino, 2010), and many researchers have cited the entire "masculinity in crisis" discourse as a backlash against feminism (Epstein et al., 1998; Raphael, 1999; Skelton, 1998).

Of particular interest is the phenomenon of capable boys choosing to disengage from their academic work, but who are doing so in a very restrained and subdued manner as opposed to the assertiveness of hegemonic masculinity or the disruptive nature of laddishness described in previous studies. The purpose of this data collection was to discern some of the factors triggering the lack of engagement of certain male students, who based upon all available educational indicators should be performing at high levels. This study strove to understand the context and motivation of the underachievement of boys on a high-performing campus.

MASCULINITY AS A LENS TO VIEW UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Masculinity is an oft-used concept in the academic discourse surrounding the underachievement of boys, and the most commonly referenced in the literature is hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1985; Connell

& Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 1987; Epstein, 2006; Frank, Kehler, Lovell & Davison, 2003; Kessler, Ashenden, Connell & Dowsett, 1982; Renold, 2001). Hegemonic masculinity is predicated on the male norms, which Sexton explained "stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body" (as cited in Donaldson, 1993, p. 644). Hegemonic masculinity provides the nebulous and tenuous answer to the question, "what does it mean to be a man?" The posture of hegemonic masculinity is often enacted in an attempt of self-protection. Jefferson (as cited in Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 842) explains that "boys and men choose these discursive positions that help them ward off anxiety and avoid feelings of powerlessness."

Although other masculinities exist, hegemonic masculinity is the "dominant and dominating forms of masculinity which claim the highest status and the greatest influence and authority," and which serve as "the standard-bearer of what it means to be a 'real' man or boy" (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997, p. 119-120). Dalley-Trim (2007) asserts that "hegemonic masculinity is the form of masculine identity frequently aspired to by many boys, and that comes to dominate classroom sites" (p. 201). On many high-performing campuses, the most salient and desirable masculinity enacted is that of the "golden boy," who is well-liked by teachers, peers, and the opposite sex; confident; he is athletic;and academically successful. Connell (1996) explains this masculinity as that enacted by "a small number of highly influential boys [who] are admired by many others who cannot reproduce their performance" (p. 209). These are the boys everyone knows on campus. The mention of these boys' names will evoke warm gushing about their positive qualities. They are popular and well known. As Connell points out, "hegemonic masculinity is highly visible" (p. 209).

A type of hegemonic masculinity which has been put forth in the discourse on underachievement in studies of boys' anti-school identities is the concept of "laddishness" (Connell, 1989; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Jackson, 2002; Kessler, Ashenden, Connell & Dowsett, 1985; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Willis, 1997). Laddishness is a generally disruptive masculinity enacted in resistance to the perceived "feminine" nature of schoolwork. "Central to 'laddishness' is the 'uncool to work' pupil discourse, which means to be cool and popular students must generally avoid overt academic work" (Jackson, 2006, p. xix). It is characterized as disruptive, homophobic, and sexist, the type of behavior that is at times written off or excused with a "boys will be boys" remark, but within the classroom can be very unproductive. Laddishness is often considered the dominant masculinity enacted in present classrooms, and it requires boys to renounce anything "feminine" — which includes schoolwork — and to place their social status with peers above all else in importance. A fear of being seen as "homosexual" — in their view, synonymous with feminine — often pervades the laddish culture in classrooms (Jackson, 2003). Although laddishness is

often discussed in conjunction with underachievement, it's important to recognize that the terms are not synonymous (Jackson, 2006). Often conflated with hegemonic masculinity, it is theorized that laddishness is an enactment of a form or type of hegemonic masculinity; however, neither is laddishness synonymous with hegemonic masculinity (Jackson, 2006).

MULTIPLE STUDENT STYLES

Lyng (2009) elucidates the multiple student styles available to students on a campus. Her yearlong study in two Norwegian junior highs found that the student styles available to boys on campus included "macho boy, golden boy, geek, and nerd" (p. 464). These presentations of self (Goffman, 1959) were identities enacted by students in part in response to the social dynamics of their campus. As Reicher (2004) explains, "we can define ourselves either in terms of what makes us unique compared to other individuals (personal identity) or in terms of our membership in social groups (social identity)" (p. 928). At school, students choose from "pre-existing, symbolic categories" for their "public identities that are recognized and accepted by peers" (Barber, Eccles & Stone, 2001, p. 431). Thus, our own self-concept and our public self or social role are contingent upon the available social identities, from which we choose an identity or we construct an "othered" identity in contrast to them (Brown, Mory & Kinney, 1994).

METHODS

Collective case studies permitted the researcher to develop a full picture of the quiet, non-disruptive underperformer, about whom we know little. This qualitative collective case study included data collected through a combination of interviews, observation, and data review. This paper utilizes only part of a much larger several year study looking at what attitudes, values, and beliefs may exist to hinder students' achievement in one setting and promote it in another. To capture data for the larger study, interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, administrators, and superintendents of multiple districts, surveys, observation, and document review were employed. One hundred teachers, twenty central office personnel, fifty campus administrators, and fifteen superintendents were interviewed either individually or in focus groups for the larger project. Interview questions for the students included in this paper were developed to more fully investigate the phenomenon of underachievement among boys on high-performing campuses.

DATA COLLECTION

A combination of participant observation, individual interviews, and data review were used to gather data for the study discussed here. Participant observation involves researchers methodically experiencing and intentionally recording

in detail the many facets of a situation while continuously analyzing their observations for both meaning and personal assumptions. The observation data used in this study were collected in academic settings. The students were observed in academic classes, elective classes, the cafeteria, the school library, the gymnasium, and the school corridors as students passed between classes over the course of an academic school year. The researcher was also privy to the teachers' lounge, and teacher and administrator discussions regarding academic concerns. Ninety-minute semi-structured interviews designed to investigate the manner in which the young men interpreted aspects of their school experience were conducted with twenty sophomore and junior year high schools males, who were regarded by their teachers as underperforming. Interviewing the participants enabled a picture of the young men's perceptions to emerge. Each boys' transcripts were identified by a self-selected pseudonym.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The researcher employed the constant comparative method to code and analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Once the data is collected, the key points within the data were marked via a *code*, which is then used to group similar concepts and ideas. The researcher "simultaneously codes and analyses data in order to develop concepts" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 126). The concepts themselves are refined and their relationships explored through the process of constantly contrasting incidents within the data. Out of the gathered codes, the researcher then forms categories or themes. From those categories, the researcher can then form a reverse-engineered explanation regarding what is in fact happening. Thus, in lieu of beginning with a theory regarding how the boys would perceive their academic experiences or what was motivating their choice to disengage, the researcher let the data itself shape the theory of the boys' behavior.

Using the constant comparative method, the researcher began analyzing the data through categorizing and coding, which recognizes common units of meaning within the data across cases and arranges them into groupings which exemplify the experiences of the study participants as a whole. This was done by hand, in lieu of utilizing any software to run analysis. Transcript documents were reviewed line by line and allocated to develop themes and patterns that gave shape to the data. In qualitative research, it is critical to let the participants' words guide the theory creation when coding. As Maykut and Morehouse (1994) explained, "words are the way more people come to understand their situations; we create our world with words; we explain ourselves with words; we defend and hide ourselves with words" (p. 18). Coding and categorizing take on even more importance because the entire mission of the researcher is "to find patterns within those words and to present those patterns for others to inspect while at the same time staying as close to the construction of the world as the participants originally experienced it" (p. 18). In qualitative data

collection, data collected from interview transcripts are not arranged in line with pre-defined categories. Instead, the researcher derives her categories, and the relationships between those categories, and their meaning from the data itself. Salient categories become obvious during the coding and collection process. This enables the integration of perspectives into a theoretical model explaining the social process the researcher is investigating.

SETTING

The study took place at Essex High School,[2] a four-year high school located on the outskirts of a suburban area in the southwestern United States. Nestled among an enclave of half a million dollar homes, Essex is the newest high school in the district. Most of the citizens within the boundaries of Essex are affluent, long-time residents of the community with deep ties to the traditions of the area. Essex is a campus of approximately 900 students. The student body is largely White, and come from middle class to affluent homes. Roughly 18% of the student population is Hispanic; less than 10% of the entire student body is African American. Fifteen percent of the students are officially identified as economically disadvantaged by the qualifications for free and reduced lunch. There is not a significant presence of students officially identified as students who speak a language other than English in their homes. The campus currently serves freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior year students.

The campus is highly rated in its state rating system. The students embrace this mark of excellence and academic achievement is highly valued among the students. Everything in the state-of-the-art building is still pristine. From the outside, a passerby might mistake the building for an office building for a small tech company. Visitors to the building always comment on the condition and quality materials used to construct the school.

SELECTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Students were identified with the input of campus teachers based on the following criteria: (1) the student had been identified as a high performer based upon consistently scoring in the top tenth percentile on state standardized tests; (2) the student consistently showed failing grades at progress report time only to barely pass two or more classes by the end of the marking period; and (3) the student consistently failed to turn in work despite numerous attempts on the part of the teacher and the student's parents to get the student to complete assignments. All of the participants were White, male, from two-parent, high income homes, whose parents were not only college educated themselves, but held professional, white-collar positions.

The initial portion of the interview was used to develop a rapport with the participants and put them at ease. The interview was used to gain a better understanding of the participant's view of their underachievement as well as

what they viewed as the causes for it. The interview also focused on the climate within the campus and classroom and its possible contribution to the behavior. The influence of the interviewees' peers was explored during the interview as well as what possible changes the interviewee would like to see in his learning environment. The interviews helped the researcher gain greater insight into the complexities of the conditions that lead to underachieving behaviors.

PARTICIPANTS

All participants in this study chose their own pseudonyms. Cody, Adrian, Phillip, Owen, Calvin, Sam, Dennis, Hayden, Dalton, and Ryan were all sophomores the year of the study. Skylar, Alex, Cooper, Dallas, Finn, Stuart, James, Cameron, Liam, and Jake were all juniors the year of the study.

RESULTS

The student styles Lyng (2009) identified were visible among boys on this campus. The golden boy is "polite, reasonable and quite serious," enjoys "high status," is "quite clever in school," and "worries about grades" (p. 468). In fact, this was the dominant masculinity on campus. The golden boy was the standard for boys in terms of what everyone aspired to be. In this study, the Beta Boys named by name the students who were, as Cody explained, "the gods of our school." The geek was also an obvious identity: "calm, nice, pleasant, friendly" and "keeps up in school" (p. 469). This identity, too, was referenced by the Beta Boys. Skylar explained, "I'm not one of the geeks, one of the next Bill Gates." The identity of "macho boy" was only present in a few boys in each grade, who were barely tolerated by students and teachers. The macho boy has a "tendency to take center stage when he enters a scene" and is disinterested in school (p. 470). However, on Essex's campus, the macho boys were not underachieving by choice. These were the boys whose names were tossed about in teachers' meetings when discussing potential failing students on state standardized tests. Often these boys were tapped to be included in special tutoring and remedial services. Thus, their dismal educational performance was assumed to be the result of being behind academically. These boys didn't warrant mention by the Beta Boys. "The nerd," which was a unisexual identity in Lyng's study, is present and unisexual on Essex's campus as well. The nerd is an "academic" and not very athletic. Unlike the nerds in Lyng's study who were "often alone" and "often had no complete membership in a friendship group," (p. 471) the nerds on Essex's campus were plentiful and formed their own, distinct group. Although friendly with the golden boys and girls, they differed from this group by their absence in athletic endeavors. The Beta Boys sometimes conflated nerds with geeks, but sometimes referenced them. Phillip made mention of this identity, "I don't stay with one group of friends like them" in reference to some students he had named by name.

Alongside these identities was a competing identity, salient in the underperformers considered in this study. Rather than displaying the "laddishness" of disruptive, sexist, and homophobic behavior prominent in educational literature on underachievement, these "Beta Boys" were quiet, unassuming, and submissive to the teacher in the classroom. There were no reported incidents of Beta Boys accosting or bullying other students, nor were they to be found cat-calling their female peers. In fact, it would be easy to completely overlook these boys in the classroom. When the assignments were given out, he can be seen getting out paper and pen and beginning work. Indeed, Alex remarked, "there are times I have the work finished in my backpack, but I cannot bring myself to turn it in on principle." There were no overt behaviors of resistance or opposition to the teacher or the mission of the course. Even Alex's admission was not overt. His teachers assumed he had simply not completed the work. Beta Boys' names were not on the lips of their teachers or the administrators in the building as ill-behaved, troublesome, or rowdy students. Their school existence was wholly unremarkable with one single exception: they often simply did not turn in assignments at all. During the interviews, five themes emerged among the interview responses of the Beta Boys.

PRIMA DONNA SYNDROME

Throughout the interviews, all Beta Boys expressed a complete disinterest in doing tasks educators would consider "practice." To use a sports analogy, the boys were much like the players on the team who want to skip practice, then show up and play in the games. These boys resented being asked to do in-class assignments and homework. They would complete projects — as long as they didn't require creativity and art supplies — and tests, but purposefully not complete, or not turn in other work. Contrary to the "laddishness" seen in previous studies, there was no animosity or aggression in their statements. In fact, many interviewees fought back tears or wiped them away as we talked. All of the participants appeared to be exercising tremendous restraint to control and conceal their emotions throughout the interviews. Adrian started crying as he explained, "People give busy work, and I won't do it. And I fail." Ryan remarked, "I slack on doing my work because I know the material, so it's too boring to complete." Dallas stated, "All of this 'do you know this?' work is stupid. I don't need to waste my time." Finn summed it up: "I think homework is a waste of time. It's like regurgitating what you already learned. But you already know you learned it." Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out that "boys and men choose these discursive positions that help them ward off anxiety and avoid feelings of powerlessness" (p. 842). For these boys, making a statement by demonstrating their intellect by showing they didn't *need* to do the same level of "practice" work as the other students was particularly important.

LOOKING FOR THE "IN YOUR FACE" OPPORTUNITY

The Beta Boys all spoke of savoring the opportunity to "show" the people around them how smart they really were by outscoring everyone on tests. The chance to come "out of nowhere" and trounce everyone else academically was obviously a delicious idea to the boys. Dallas explained his strategy, "I do well on the standardized tests, just to show I know what I'm doing." Adrian smiled as he related, "Even if they think I'm stupid, who cares? I get the same grades on the tests or higher than all the kids who do all the work. And they're always shocked when I outdo them on the test." Owen said, "I don't do the work and then test will come and I'll get a 100. And no one else really got a 100 on them. So, yeah. Then people are shocked." Sometimes this idea went beyond the academic world. Finn said he was considering being a doctor. "Then my friends would see my name plate and I'd be like, 'yeah, I did that!'"

SEEKING HERCULEAN TASKS

The boys' perception of work they believed lacked relevance, necessity, and importance was that it was somehow insulting and wounding to their sense of self. The slight incurred by enduring coursework and assignments they saw as beneath them was only abated through the resistance of not turning them in and still passing the course because of their performance on tests. Interestingly, all of the boys spoke of desiring work that was *harder* than what was currently being asked of them. The researcher found it curious that students who were not completing their current workload would report that the real problem was that they needed more challenging work. But Beta Boys reported that they prefer work that is a "challenge." Cooper said he preferred work that "takes a certain level of thinking." Finn said, "Put all that [busy work] away and give me hard-hard stuff and see what I can do." Sam echoed the sentiment: "If something's really hard, I will try to beat it." Stuart added, "If it's really hard, I want to do it. But it's easy, I throw it away." Liam remarked, "Make it a little harder. When it's challenging, I perform closer to my potential." Sometimes their own philosophy seemed to confound them. Dallas said he often had the work in question *finished* in his hand, but could not bring himself to turn it in. When asked why, he explained that the work itself "seemed so pointless" to him.

In this same vein, over half of the boys spoke openly about their derision for the projects that were "too easy to bother with" or "insulting" to their abilities, which they also regarded as assignments that "integrate[d] art" into the coursework. Owen explained, "Contrived and inorganic projects or assignments really bug me. Those things shouldn't be for a grade." Adrian echoed this sentiment with his pronouncement that "glitter is the herpes of craft equipment." Calvin remarked, "Stupid artsy stuff... that is worthless. I won't do it." Hayden explained that "This shouldn't be all crazy and let's

arrange stuff all creative. It's like everyone is too focused on trying to make everything fun! This isn't supposed to be fun. It should be hard."

EXPERTS ON THE "REAL WORLD"

Another common theme among the Beta Boys was the idea that only work that was "relevant" to their future lives warranted completion. The boys themselves seemed to believe that they could accurately discern which work was useful to them. In fact, they shared the belief that most of their teachers had no real concept of which types of work and information were valuable in the "real world." Cameron complained, "We're learning how lawyers work, and I'm not even training to be a lawyer in real life, so how is this going to help me?" Adrian spoke of his favorite teacher (English) but had one big issue in her class: an assignment requiring him to identify the theme of the work. "When will I have to write the theme of the book if I want to be a pilot?" Hayden decried his history class, "Who cares what general fought where? No one is going to ask me that when I grow up." And Jake explained, "I'm moving out of [the state] after I graduate. Why would I care about the history of here? That's not going to matter in my job." Dalton summed it up: "I hate it here. The classes suck. I don't feel like I'm getting much that will help me in the future."

All of the boys talked about evaluating their classes and their assignments on whether or not they would be useful in the "real world." The idea that they themselves were the arbiters of a task's usefulness and transferability was above question. At no point did any Beta Boy consider the idea that since their teachers had more education and followed the curriculum set by the state education agency, perhaps they might have a better grasp on the skills needed by students to be successful. In their minds, the only judge of the future utilitarian value of the work was the Beta Boys themselves.

"I'M NOT GETTING THE KWAN"

A big complaint of the Beta Boys was not getting the recognition and respect they felt due from their peers; they also believed that lack of peer status impacted how some of their teachers regarded them. Adrian fought tears as he revealed that a teacher saw him at last year's awards ceremony and commented, "'I didn't think I'd see you here.' She didn't think I was smart enough to be getting an award." Finn recounted with irritation an incident in a science class where the teacher lent a popular student a pencil, but refused to lend his friend — a less popular student — the same item. Ryan explained, "It's like the popular boys are popular with the students *and* the teachers. And everyone treats them better." Hayden reiterated this point: "Some teachers think liking the kids all the other kids like will make them popular too. And sometimes it works!" Owen sighed as he explained, "It's hard to get motivated in a class with popular boys. If I raise my hand and they do too, the teacher is probably

going to call on the kid they like." James looked down as he related a daily ritual in his math class, "We walk into class together and the teacher says, 'Hey, [popular student]!' and I'm right there too and she says nothing to me."

In conjunction with the perceived preference for golden boys, Beta Boys also expressed upset that their teachers made no effort to find out about their lives. Owen reported an ongoing incidence of bullying, about which he had not told anyone at the school, because he perceived that they had shown no interest in him personally. He explained, "If they asked me what was going on, I'd tell them." When the researcher asked why he didn't independently share the salient challenges in his life with his teachers or parents, he said, "I don't want to seem whiny." Dennis echoed this: "I just try to hold back whatever I'm feeling." Finn summed it up: "I'm not the person who will tell you about my life, but if you ask me questions, I will tell you." When asked whether they shared their hurt feelings — or any feelings — with their peers, each Beta Boy looked at the researcher in utter horror. Skylar explained it best: "We don't have that kind of relationship. We're not girls. We don't talk about our feelings. I wouldn't even know *how* to go about that." Although the boys openly shunned "busy work," judged much of what was taught as useless, and lost respect for teachers they believed preferred popular boys over others', their teachers' perceived lack of interest in their lives also served as an insult to them.

DISCUSSION

Based on the data, it appears that the boys experienced a sense of weakness and apprehension of not being in control of their academic lives. They described that being forced to sit through courses with teachers the boys felt didn't understand, value, or respect them only then to be expected to produce work they patently found ridiculous to complete was more than they could bear. Each communicated that this sense of outrage combined with not being able to verbalize it was then coupled with the sense of powerlessness and angst; the boys reported that this was more than they could process. For these boys, the only behavior they could summon to combat it was to make a power play of their own. Refusing to participate is a covert power move. It is non-threatening, but still an exertion of power. Like the toddler who refuses to eat and cannot be forced to do so by his parents, boys who refuse to engage during class and turn in their work are contesting the authority of those in charge of them. Yet the behavior is not punishable. You can't send a boy to office for not being enthusiastic, or for not completing the work that he does in fact "work on" during class time. It is a shrewd exercise of power. As Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) explain, sometimes marginalized men "instead of trying to control others... try to show that they cannot be controlled" (p. 285). That is the essence of what these boys are doing. This alternate masculinity performance is enacted by males who feel unable to reach the ideal level of

hegemonic masculinity performance. Their behavior diverges from their female peers because of the burden of masculinity, which requires the acceptance, approval, and admiration of one's male peers.

While this student style or identity is not the dominant masculinity on their campus, the Beta Boys are enacting an alternate masculinity. As Connell (as cited in Schippers 2007) explains, "masculinity is a social position, a set of practices" (p. 86). Indeed, that's precisely what these boys are doing: drawing the boundaries of a social position in which they are not the receiver of rules and orders. They participate or not as they please. And their behavior causes their parents and their teachers to become attuned to their needs, wants, and desires. The adults in their lives cajole, bribe, and plead with them to get into the game and participate. This enactment of masculinity means they become the power-wielder by refusing to be controlled. These behaviors would fall into the category of those masculinity practices which fall into "how they elicit deference from others" (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 277). Carrigan, Connell & Lee (as cited in Schrock & Swalbe, 2009) remind of another important point of how masculinity is being exercised by these boys: "masculinity [is] about power relations *among* [emphasis added] men, not only between women and men" (p. 278). Most of the boys mentioned that they felt pity for the "sheep" who didn't manage their academic lives as they did, and instead obeyed every mandate and completed every assignment as they chased after their As. By circumventing the system and shirking work, these boys are — perhaps privately, in their own minds — asserting their own dominance and superiority over the other boys around them. This is of particular interest considering these boys were not only not campus sports heroes, most did not play sports at all. The key to masculine status in this particular K-12 setting where this study took place was to excel at sports. At minimum, one must participate. In light of this fact, Schrock and Schwalbe's assertion that "the process of learning how to signify a masculine self in situationally appropriate ways continues throughout life" (p. 283) takes on more relevance. In a situation where a boy is marginalized through his inability to perform masculinity in the most culturally accepted way, he may choose more covert and passive assertions of signifying his masculine identity.

Hegemonic masculinity — and the multiple masculinities men enact both in response to, and in lieu, of hegemonic masculinity — not only exist to support, perpetuate and legitimize male dominance over women, but to buttress the superiority of certain men over other men. However, like bell hooks pointed out in *Will to Change*, men are suffering under the weight of patriarchy just as women are. Yes, their suffering is different, and they do enjoy much entitlement and privilege as a result of its norms and standards. Unlike the suppositions of many researchers, it seems obvious from the interviews in this study that the Beta Boys are not responding to any systemic or curricular policy, and by their own admission, their behavioral response had nothing to do with how their

female peers were treated. To the researcher's surprise, the success of female students on their campus didn't warrant mention. Although they were asked specifically about both the structural practices and policies of their campus and their female peers' treatment, the interviewees dismissed those lines of inquiry entirely. In fact, when asked what their teachers, peers, or principals could do to impact their willingness to perform to their potential, the Beta Boys consistently came up empty. Not one of them felt that their unwillingness to engage would be impacted by a shift in campus rules or policies. Their only suggestions were harder work and a curriculum tailored to the boy himself — that is, work that was directly relevant to the boy's chosen future profession.

But like Connell (2005) points out, the life of the male laboring under the weight of masculinity is not a happy one. The constraints of masculinity are like the beast whose appetite cannot be quenched. Men are constantly asking themselves and one another to reify their masculinity, to adjust to changing climates, and to bend themselves to other men who are a more ideal model of hegemonic masculinity. While femininity exists in response and in contrast to hegemonic masculinity as well as multiple masculinities and exerts considerable restriction and limitations over women, men are by no means getting off scot-free themselves. The patriarchal system leaves no individual untouched and content. However, the Beta Boys demonstrate that when constructing and envisioning their school identity, the treatment of female students was not a factor. They considered only other male peers when positioning themselves and constructing an identity. As Hodgetts (2008) points out, "to be a boy is to 'succeed without trying'" (p. 476). The Beta Boys' stated desire to demonstrate their intelligence through high test scores without putting in the prerequisite work required of others is a display of their ease with which they navigate academics. The Beta Boys communicate their superiority over their peers through this practice of underachievement. By rejecting work their teachers value as "pointless" and not useful in the "real world," they likewise convey their superiority over their teachers.

CONCLUSION

Unable to enact the salient masculinity of their campus through athletic performance, the Beta Boys eschew attempts at assertive hegemonic masculinity or disruptive "laddish" behaviors, and opt instead for a more stoic approach to affirming their masculinity in the face of what they perceive to be social slights. In their minds, the most powerful move of all is to refuse to engage, and they exercise this play on a routine basis. Saving their best performance for high-stakes standardized tests and tests in their courses weighted high enough to ensure a passing grade permits them a "shock and awe" factor among their peers. This quiet, unassuming, and not disruptive alternative masculine identity proved maddening to their teachers, who were at a loss to motivate the boys to alter their academic behaviors.

The Beta Boys' emotionality during the interviews as well as their admissions that they very much desired a more personal interaction with their teachers was of particular interest to the researcher. The gendered nature of this refusal to engage academically has been confounding to many educators and researchers. Given the particularly emotional nature of the Beta Boys during the interviews themselves and their obvious and open derision and scorn for those teachers they felt *could* have engaged them on a personal level and asked about their emotional lives, but did not do so out of what the boys perceived as a greater interest in the "golden boys," it seems possible that the gendered aspect may lie in the lack of socially approved emotional outlets for boys in our schools. The Beta Boys were clearly sitting on an enormous amount of rage, pain, and hurt, and yet felt they had no one to whom they could confess these emotions. Without a sympathetic ear, they seemed unable to work through these negative, confusing emotions, which they professed having harbored for years. In fact, in every Beta Boys' story, the onset of their opting out behaviors was tied to a moment of outrage and feeling disrespected in the classroom.

Given the emotional basis and foundation underlying Beta Boys' conscious decisions to disengage from performing at potential, the gendered nature of underachievement in many Western societies' classrooms seems obvious. Girls who feel hurt, insulted, or affronted at school can turn to their parents, their teachers, or their friends with their feelings. This allows them to work through their pain, put it aside, and continue on with their academic behaviors unscathed. Because boys lack the outlet to process their emotions, they simply carry them about, nursing their hurt as it consumes more and more of their mental and psychological energy. Perceiving themselves as unable to volunteer these emotions without being prompted, they are trapped in a prison of the burden of masculinity, which says men are to be stoic and detached. It is this mandate of masculinity underscoring the Beta Boys' underachievement.

The findings of this study suggest that one area for future research is the performance of underachievers by choice in college. I hypothesize that of the reasons why some boys don't do as well in college — based on national graduation rates -- is because they are no longer able to "prove" themselves through blowing away traditional middle and high school types of exams or standardized tests. When faced with exams that require analytic skills based on homework and practice they should have been doing during the semester, they struggle. All of the Beta Boys spoke candidly about the one or two teachers in their lives who they perceived to be "different" in that the teacher was genuinely interested in their lives and engaged them academically. However, each Beta Boy revealed that simply putting aside their opting-out practices — even in that one class — proved very difficult for them as they had become so accustomed to their systematic rejection of routine assignments and tasks. This leads the researcher to wonder if once they arrive on college campuses

these practices are so ingrained they find it difficult to transition into a work ethic that would serve them in the higher education setting.

Solving the problem of the underachievement of Beta Boys requires greater involvement by teachers in the lives of their students. Put simply, teachers should, to whatever extent practicable, make an attempt to be engaged with every student — especially those who seem to be disengaged — because this could be the key to unlocking their patterns of underperformance. One single teacher alone cannot shift a Beta Boy's paradigm. Rather, he needs the efforts of all of his teachers if he is going to be able to set aside these patterns of behavior. However, each Beta Boy spoke favorably and tenderly about the one or two teachers who were engaged with them, and certainly tried harder in their classes. The broader implication of this data point is that while teachers need to show engagement and caring to all of their students, this is especially important when working with these quiet underperformers. Showing specific interest, concern, and attention was reported by these Beta Boys to be a determining factor in their decision to engage and participate.

NOTES

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2. "Essex High School" is a pseudonym.

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