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Narratives of teenage boys: 
Constructing selfhood and enacting identities.

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requirements for the degree of 
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Abstract

In Western societies, contemporary youth discourses tell us that teenage boys are all too often ‘trouble’ and ‘troubled’, especially in terms of risky behaviour, mental health concerns, and educational under-achievement. Contemporary understandings of these issues have largely been informed by developmental psychological theory, and a plethora of management strategies and policies have emerged out of the debates about the apparent ‘boy crisis’. Yet we know little of how boys make sense of their experiences, and negotiate their relationships with the people and environments that constitute their everyday social world. This research applies a critical approach to developmental psychology and identity construction. It contributes to our knowledge of how teenage boys perform masculinities and enact resilience in diverse contexts, and how they are influenced by, and respond to, social and cultural discourses that frame and shape their behaviour and sense of self. Participants were eleven senior male students from a New Zealand high school, who provided narrative accounts of critical events during their adolescent years by means of personal time-lines and individual interviews. Findings include the boys’ understandings of peer and family relationships, high school culture, and subject positions available to them within the wider community and a global society. Boys positioned themselves individually and collectively as they reproduced, resisted, and countered age and gender stereotypes. They revealed themselves to be competent social actors in a complex world, constructing multiple identities and drawing on resources afforded by their social and institutional connections. Thus, they showed that they are actively engaged in the process of creating legitimate spaces to occupy, and which enable them to imagine possible future selves. The findings generated ideas for how we may work more effectively in our clinical practice with teenage boys if we privilege their perspectives and the meanings they attach to their everyday experiences, and problematise discursively constructed understandings of adolescence and adolescent boys. Implications of the findings for research and practice are discussed, and ideas for future research are suggested.
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