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Narratives of teenage boys: Constructing selfhood and enacting identities.

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Roslyn Louise Munro

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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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Table of Contents

Abstract i

Acknowledgements ii

Table of Contents iii

Chapter One: The Trouble with Teenage Boys 1

Discourses of Development 3

Discourses of Risk and Resilience 6

'Troubled Youth' Discourse 9

Angry Teens 10

Misbehaving Teens 13

Distressed Teens 17

Failing Teens 18

'Troubled Teens' within 'Troubled' Families 19

Constructing Identities 20

Deconstructing Hegemonic Norms of Masculinity 21

Cultures of Violence 22

Cultures of Sexuality 24

Student Identities 26

Sporting Identities and Practices 27

Chapter Two: Storying the Experiences of Teenage Boys 30

Research Aims 30

Methodology 30

Theoretical Framework 32

Identity Construction and Meaning-Making through Narrative 32

Discourses and Subject Positioning in Narrative Identity Construction 34

Methods 36

Participants and Recruitment 36

Data Collection 37

Ethical Considerations 43
Data Analysis 46

Chapter Three: Analysis and Discussion **52**
Negotiating Self **53**
Developing Self 54
Maneuvering around the Genderscape 61
Making Sense of Difficult Life Events 69
Negotiating Family **79**
'*Home is where the heart is' – or something like that* 81
Freedom From and Freedom To 86
Negotiating Friendship **90**
Identity Work in Peer-Inhabited Spaces 91
Virtually Social 99
Negotiating Love 102
Negotiating Society **110**
Responding to the Critics 110
Forging Global Identities 116
Practising 'Good Citizenship' 124
Negotiating Future **133**
Constructing Future Selves 134
Reconstructing Existing Contexts and Changing the World 137

Chapter Four: Conclusions and Implications **141**
Implications for Research and Practice 146
Suggestions for Future Research 153

References **155**

Appendices
Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet **177**
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form **179**
Appendix C: Summary of Findings for Participants **180**