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**Narratives of teenage boys:
Constructing selfhood and enacting
identities.**

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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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Chapter One: The Trouble with Teenage Boys

Imagine driving down an unfamiliar, deserted street at dusk when a punctured tyre forces you to pull over. You go to call home to say you will be late, but as luck would have it you discover that the battery of your mobile is as flat as your tyre. Just as you are getting out of the car, you glance up and see a boisterous group of teenage boys round the corner and head in your direction. What goes through your mind when you look at them? Well, that may very much depend on what you think you know about them. The ways that we construct adolescence and adolescents informs how we see, understand, and relate to young people and, in turn, have a direct impact on their lives.

This research aims to explore ways that teenage boys construct their identities and negotiate adolescence. I take a perspective that seeks to understand the social and cultural processes and meanings embedded in boys' narrative constructions of their experiences and relationships, and the social and political agendas that provide contexts for the knowledge we construct about them. I propose to investigate these ideas by first considering historical and contemporary discourses of adolescent development, risk and resilience, and 'troubled youth'. I then endeavour to show how the construction and enactment of boys' identities are framed and shaped by 'common-sense' understandings of adolescence and masculinity. I think it is worth explaining at this point that I use the terms 'adolescents', 'youth', 'young people', and 'teenagers' interchangeably because I have been unable to find, or create, an alternative expression that might preclude connotations of age, biology, or gender. I suspect, however, that I tend to privilege the 'teenager' label because that is how they most commonly refer to themselves.

There is an abundance of research describing and categorising the behaviours and developmental pathways of 'troubled youth' (Helgeland, Kjelsberg, & Torgersen, 2005; Hurrelmann, 1990; Kalafat, 2003; Smollar, 1999). Much less common are studies that seek to explain how boys negotiate their journey through the adolescent years and orient their behaviour in relation to others. Why is it, then, that the voices of

teenage boys have rarely been heard? Perhaps their reputation for communicating in monosyllabic grunts, or a barely perceptible raised eyebrow, has deterred researchers from exploring the world of adolescent boys from *their* perspective. A research endeavour that seeks to explore shared meanings of adolescent experiences, and how they relate to notions of self-identity and group values, may be met with less resistance than approaches aimed at eliminating ‘problem’ teenage behaviour (Gergen, Lightfoot, & Sydow, 2004). Blackbeard and Lindegger (2007) also suggest that there is a need for innovative approaches to studies with teenage boys that encourage their active participation in the research process. The point is that if we are interested or concerned about what drives boys’ behaviour, and if we hope to shed some light on how they make sense of their world, then we should be actively engaging them in our research endeavours.

In the public mind, youth culture is at once vibrant, exciting, and energetic, but also threatening (Bottrell, 2009). During the past two decades young people in general, but boys in particular, have been the subject of much media attention and they are increasingly portrayed as a social problem. What has been called the ‘crisis in masculinity’ has also provoked a surge of academic research (Sherriff, 2007). Considerable energy and resources are directed towards finding solutions to eradicate ‘problem’ subcultures, such as ‘boy racers’ and youth gangs, which are constantly under public scrutiny and in the media spotlight. Boys are also being increasingly targeted for special attention in education to address their apparent failure to achieve academically compared with their female peers (Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Weaver-Hightower, 2003).

The need for constant vigilance by adults and effective social control is assumed, and institutions have been designed specifically for the purpose of managing and moulding teenagers through this apparently critical developmental stage (Fine, 2004). Classifications of at-risk youth have emerged out of traditional developmental psychology and are grounded in a narrative of youth as occupying a space of transition from childhood to adulthood (Kelly, 2006). Challenges to the developmental approach include studies aimed at understanding adolescents and adolescence from the perspective that sees young people as competent social actors who actively negotiate and transform social practices, rather than passive, isolated

individuals (Burman, 2008a). Kelly (2006) proposes that one challenge for contemporary society may be to create a legitimate space for adolescents to occupy.

I return now to the question of how we have come to know what we know. Psychological theories have had considerable influence over how people construe themselves (Frosh & Saville Young, 2008). The impact of developmental research is far-reaching: it informs a number of important professional practices and social structures, including education, health, law, and social welfare (Burman, 2008a). Thus, I present a critique of developmental discourses as a starting point for this debate.

Discourses of Development

Individual development has traditionally been constructed as a logical and basically uniform trajectory that leads us in a more or less orderly fashion from childhood through to adulthood. In Western societies, adolescence is commonly understood by adults, and quite possibly by teenagers as well, as a natural, inevitable, and distinct chronological period of social and biological change (Burman, 1994; Fine, 2004). Developmental psychology has been studied from a broad range of perspectives. In terms of biological maturational processes, the onset of puberty has long been defined as the landmark event that heralds the beginning of adolescence (Kosslyn & Rosenberg, 2004). In addition, a number of prominent psychologists have constructed theories which have informed understandings of cognitive, moral, personality, and social ‘phases’ of human development. Early last century, Piaget (1926) first proposed his stage model of cognitive development, based on the premise that children’s thinking changes qualitatively over time. According to this model, formal operational thinking (i.e., the ability to think logically and systematically), begins and increases during adolescence. By contrast, Vygotsky (1935) emphasised the importance of sociocultural context in maturational processes. Three decades later, Kohlberg (1963) developed a model of developmental stages of moral reasoning that links progress in

moral reasoning to stages of cognitive maturation. Erikson (1968) proposed that personality develops through a series of critical psychosocial stages. According to this model, adolescents are faced with a crisis of identity which must be successfully resolved in order to achieve a stable identity.

Studies based on quantitative paradigms have dominated the field of adolescent psychology. They have been primarily employed to investigate mainstream diagnostic and developmental constructs. One recently published example of this approach is a 25-year longitudinal study by Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder (2007). The study sought to provide evidence to support conventional distinctions between the constructs of conduct and attentional problems, and to measure their impact on later developmental outcomes in New Zealand-born children. Cross-sectional designs have also been widely used in developmental research. As Burman (2008b) argues, these types of studies construct human development as a linear process because they seek to measure changes in fixed states over time. It must certainly be acknowledged that the developmental literature has provided important insights into how young people think, feel, and behave. However, it could be argued that attempts to produce 'master narratives' have tended to overly homogenise the diversity and complexity of young people's experiences (Kölbl, 2004).

A critical approach to psychological research considers psychological theories to be historically and socially constructed (Emerson & Frosh, 2004). It therefore pays attention to how psychology, as a form of knowledge, informs current notions of the self (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). Proponents of social constructionism have especially scrutinised the fundamental premise of individualist ontology in conventional psychology literature (Burkitt, 1996). The prevailing cognitive perspective that views ideas purely as the product of individual minds and mental processes has been challenged by critical psychologists (Billig, 2008).

Billig (2008) traces both cognitive and critical psychology back to philosophical debates with their roots in pre-modernity and even classical times, illustrating the point that all ideas, including those underpinning critical psychology today, have developed in the context of important historical processes. In other words, the 'social' in contemporary thinking cannot be meaningfully separated from the 'historical'.

Therefore, I include a brief examination of the historical and political environments that have shaped some of our current psychological understandings, as this is an essential component of any critique of developmental psychology. Burman (2008b) posits, for example, that metaphors of developmental progress and growth are aligned to linear notions of economic progress and biological growth. Ideas more specifically relating to normative phases of child development emerged alongside child-centred pedagogic discourses and practices, and discovery of the 'Normal Curve' generated discourses about normality, individual difference, and deviation from the norm (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). One important focus of developmental psychology has been on the identification of 'undesirable' outcomes of development (including deviance and pathology), which, in turn, has generated a raft of social policy imperatives designed to thwart such problematic trajectories (Burman, 2008b). Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008) suggest that an indication of the level of societal anxiety around negative outcomes can be found in the educational policies that were developed in the 1930s, in response to growing concerns about adolescent delinquency and child poverty. These policies reflected the idea that 11 or 12 years of age was an appropriate cut-off point for determining a child's fitness for either further education or entering the workforce. In New Zealand, as in a number of other Western societies where similar structures operate, the continued existence of 'intermediate schools' is indicative that this age-based mindset continues to influence the way we conceptualise phases of child development. The intensified development of the secondary education system reinforced the notion of adolescence as a social category, and provided a site for the construction of youth cultures (Connell, 2005). As Connell (2005) points out, the fact that different youth cultures have emerged out of different historical contexts suggests that development does not follow a pre-determined biological or maturational path. Furthermore, he asserts that as youth cultures are created by young people as a collective, an individualist understanding of development can be challenged.

Developmental theories about adolescence focus on the individual child in transition toward a state of maturity, but, as Aapola (1997) contends, the multi-layered social and discursive processes through which adulthood is conceptualised are ignored when adolescence is defined in these terms. And when adolescence is perceived as a time of chaos and a tumultuous battle against biological processes it has serious implications

for young people, including age-based pathologising that may ignore complex psychosocial aspects of their lives (Aapola, 1997). Discourses of adolescence are also powerfully linked with discourses of gender, although there is a growing body of critical research that seeks to dislodge the notion of gender as “known and knowable” social identities (Nayak & Kehily, 2006). Adult discourses, by contrast, are more strongly associated with social processes involving notions of responsibility and the ability to make rational, legal, and moral judgments. This creates further tensions as teenagers’ behaviour is primarily understood and evaluated in relation to socially constructed norms of adult behaviour.

Discourses of Risk and Resilience

At the core of conventional risk discourse is the emphasis on personal responsibility for deviant behaviour. It is easy to get caught up in “the growing chorus of despair and resignation”, and to see no option but to micro-manage our teenage population or give up on them (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2001, p. 223). Here in New Zealand, successive governments continue to make the development of programmes for reducing teen antisocial behaviour a high priority (Curtis, Ronan, Heiblum, Reid, & Harris, 2002). When teenagers are judged to be a danger to themselves or others, social control practices are conceptualised as protective strategies, thereby legitimising the need for and the interventions delivered by a multitude of professionals - psychologists, psychiatrists, teachers, and social workers, to name but a few (Aapola, 1997). Schehr (2005) argues that popular and political accounts of youth risk function to marginalise teenagers as undesirable and threatening. This deflects attention from the roles played by dominant cultural agendas and institutional structures that frame a multiplicity of complex life experiences, and thus constitute the context within which family and youth distress, and subsequent risky behaviour, develop.

The vast majority of the extant research in the area of adolescent ‘problem behaviours’ has focused on identifying specific variables, or combinations of

variables, that are thought to contribute to such behaviours. Behaviours that are believed to interfere with the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood are constructed as ‘risk factors’ (Kemper, Spitler, Williams, & Rainey, 1999). The most frequently cited risk indicators in adolescents are violence and crime, dropping out of school early, substance use, risky sexual behaviour, unemployment, and suicide (Johnson, 1994). MacPherson et al. (2010) propose that risk-taking in young people is linked to positive and negative reinforcement processes. That is, positive reinforcement is associated with risk-taking propensity and negative reinforcement is related to low distress tolerance. Risky behaviours are often understood to develop in the context of family dynamics, peer relationships, school, community, and the wider society. ‘At-risk youth’ are *managed* in countless ways; by their parents, schools, communities, and a host of government organisations.

Closely linked to youth risk discourses are prevailing notions of ‘resilience’. A developmental approach is often applied to the concept of resilience in children and teenagers. Within this framework, their developmental stage and level of functioning are considered important indicators of a young person’s capacity to adjust to internal and external stressors (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005). Resilience is generally thought to be linked to static sets of risk factors (as defined earlier) and protective factors, and understood as an ability to survive and succeed in life despite exposure to negative experiences and environments (Hauser, 1999; Hollister-Wagner, Foshee, & Jackson, 2001). Protective factors, also sometimes referred to as strengths and assets, have been constructed in terms of internal and external resources (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, coping strategies, and social support) (Dumont & Provost, 1998; Richman & Fraser, 2001). Gilligan (2000) uses the metaphor of weighing scales to emphasise the idea that the addition or subtraction of even one of the risk or protective factors may determine whether there is a positive or negative outcome for an individual.

There are difficulties with this perspective that arise from the variable and arbitrary ways in which these constructs are defined. For instance, there is the issue of what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ outcome. Typically, resilience outcomes are operationalised as measures of exceptional levels of functioning, but Rutter (2001) offers a more comprehensive view of resilience. He sees it as a relativistic construct

that can give rise to a range of possible outcomes, and he further argues that behavioural responses to adversity can not be understood simply in terms of assumed consequences of apparent risk and protective factors. In other words, it should not be assumed that positive experiences guarantee protection from adversity or stress. Nor can the way in which an individual copes with problems guarantee a particular outcome. Outcomes are context-dependent, culturally specific, and are necessarily linked to whatever causal paradigm is being used to explain them (Ungar, 2003). For example, an aggressive teenage boy could be considered to have a poor outcome in terms of his potential vulnerability to abuse and rejection by his peers. Alternatively, he could be seen as resilient if he were to use aggressive behaviour constructively to solve a problem, for example to escape an abusive or otherwise dangerous situation. In other words, different groups of people draw on contextually specific definitions of resilience. Therefore, it may also be useful to view resilience as attempts by marginalised individuals and their communities to reframe problem behaviour as adaptive when faced with limited resources that promote wellbeing (Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald, 2005). Furthermore, risk and protection factors are not fixed, but rather they are temporally and culturally multi-dimensional and fluid; that is, they can occur together, accrue over time, and they may function in different ways depending on an individual's age, or have a variable impact on individual children at different times in their lives (Ungar, 2003; Walsh, 2002). The impact of risk and resilience on one's lived experiences may be better understood by exploring the interrelationships between diverse contexts and underlying social forces. It may, for example, be more useful to conceptualise resiliency in terms of adaptive behaviours rather than personal characteristics, whereby people draw on their resources, competencies, and abilities in the creation of their own realities (Ungar, 2003).

As many of the standardised psychological measures typically used to assess serious emotional problems in teenagers fail to take into account the positive contributions young people may make to their own resilience and to their family's functioning, greater use of qualitative methods may help to elucidate some important practices of resilience (Armstrong et al., 2005). Massey, Cameron, Ouellette, and Fine (1998) raise a number of interesting questions in relation to resilience research. Firstly they ask, how can researchers avoid imposing their own notions of thriving and hardship on their participants so that alternative representations may be heard? Secondly, how

can a person's subjective experiences and achievements be acknowledged whilst also taking account of constraints stemming from, and opportunities afforded by, the contextual structures in which they occur? And thirdly, how can researchers recognise that there may be times when people experience, for example, happiness and success in difficult circumstances, as well as times when they do not thrive as well? I would argue that a narrative research approach may provide a better understanding of how individuals construct their selves, lives, and relationships within the context of difficult situations, and how these constructions may change over time (Hauser, 1999).

‘Troubled Youth’ Discourse

Our ‘troubled youth’ have been the focus of a substantial body of research, and much of this work has been explained in terms of genetic, biological, and ecological risk factors that may predispose a young person to poor developmental outcomes (Richman & Fraser, 2001). An examination of the literature around ‘problem youth behaviours’, and the contexts in which they are thought to develop, may help us understand ways that adolescence has been culturally framed by society. While girls also feature strongly in the statistics, Gergen et al. (2004) argue that it is predominantly the negative stereotyping of teenage boys that has generated a “youth crisis” mentality. It may even be that the relentless media coverage of what has been perceived as ‘growing youth violence’ now positions boys as not only troubled, but also dangerous (Ralphs, Medina, & Aldridge, 2009). In Weaver-Hightower's (2003) view, violent, headline-grabbing events such as the Columbine High School massacre in the United States have contributed significantly to a “moral panic over boys”. The proliferation of a youth crisis discourse is also closely linked to the notion of a “risk society”; that is, a society that seeks to order reality and dispel fear by attempting to identify and manage all possible risk (Schehr, 2005).

Below, I present an overview of research around issues specifically related to the construction of youth risk. As noted earlier, research about ‘problem youth’ is not uniquely about boys, although more often than not results are reported in gender-specific terms. My intention is to demonstrate ways in which adolescents in general (framed as a cultural and age-based collective), and adolescent boys in particular (framed as a gendered collective) have been socially constructed.

Angry Teens

Advocates of integrative biopsychosocial models of adolescent aggression have mainly approached their investigations in one of two ways (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995). That is, some researchers have proposed that aggression develops out of early chronic and intractable personality traits that negatively influence interactional styles, particularly in times of uncertainty or in unfamiliar environments. Others have been more concerned with examining the influence of proximal contexts, such as school and family, on antisocial teen behaviour. As a society we tend to be fairly dismissive of acts of aggression when they occur in the context of everyday interactions among young people. Finkelhor et al. (2006) suggest this may be because adults tend to presume that young people are more resilient to the impact of aggressive behaviour from peers and siblings. They also suggest that we are often inclined to frame it as character building, or assume that when children get into fights with each other the responsibility is shared. Some ideas have been proposed to challenge these common-sense suppositions. For example, if young people are perceived as unpredictable and impulsive, peer assailants may seem even more threatening to them than adults. It has also been suggested that their relative lack of maturity could exacerbate feelings of victimisation (Finkelhor et al., 2006). Fighting, bullying, and sexual harassment among peers is reportedly much more prevalent in adolescents when they transition from primary to secondary school (Pellegrini, 2002). School is therefore one of the main contexts explored by researchers seeking to understand aggression in young people and to plot their trajectories to adulthood (Sourander, Helstela, Helenius, & Piha, 2000).

Peer aggression in the form of bullying is usually described in terms of an imbalance of power, with emphasis on differences in physical size. That is, bullies are generally presumed to be larger and stronger than their victims. Individuals with few friends are also understood to be considered easy targets. Bullying is constructed by some adults as a normal part of growing up, and may therefore be ignored by some parents and subtly condoned in schools where teachers hold this belief (Smith & Brain, 2000). Cyber-bullying is one of the more recently conceptualised subsets of peer aggression. The term refers to the idea of deliberate harm that is inflicted, for example, via texts and emails, through social networking websites, and in chat room forums. It is understood to have potentially serious effects on the mental health and wellbeing of the victims, and in some cases on the perpetrators as well (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

School bullying discourses exist among wider social discourses of bullying that circulate in society at large (e.g., work place bullying), and may therefore be considered to contribute to a more generalised moral crisis (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). A developmental model of school bullying emphasises individual characteristics of the victim and bully, and often demonises or pathologises their parents in the process (Baldry & Farrington, 2000). As such, it pays little attention to sociocultural contexts and power hierarchies that relate to gender, ethnicity, social status, and sexuality (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Government resources are increasingly being earmarked for anti-bullying initiatives. These include programmes designed to teach young people alternative ways of handling conflict, and social skills training aimed at teaching them how to avoid becoming victims (D'Oosterlinck, Goethals, Boekaert, Schuyten, & Maeyer, 2008; Pellegrini, 2002). However, understandings of aggression as a fairly stable personality trait (and therefore difficult to 'treat') may be reinforced by the fact that many of these management strategies do not appear to have produced the positive outcomes that were anticipated (Pellegrini, 2002).

Aggressive behaviours are widely believed to signal the likelihood of later serious violent offenses, and violent offending by young people is reported to be increasing at a dramatic rate (Hollister-Wagner et al., 2001; van der Geest, Blokland, & Bijleveld, 2009). Research efforts have therefore been increasingly aimed at mapping pathways related to adolescent violence. Exposure to violence can give rise to a variety of

responses in teenagers, one of which may be to affiliate with a gang. Gang culture is not a new phenomenon, but persistent media attention on youth gangs can instill fear into communities. Reasons for this fear are likely to relate to social and political discourses that automatically link gang membership with crime, violence, and drug use (Sanders, Lankenau, & Jackson-Bloom, 2010). However, there are many reasons why teenagers may be motivated to join a gang. For example, they may view it as a way of gaining status and a sense of belonging, to relieve boredom, to satisfy a desire for danger and excitement, or because they see it as a way of protecting themselves (Deuchar & Holligan, 2010; Garbarino, Bradshaw, & Vorrasi, 2002). While increased surveillance of suspected youth gangs may help to appease public fears of crime and violence, there are also important implications for the way that it can marginalise young people. For instance, those living in 'known' gang areas risk being labelled a gang member by police for associating with one, being excluded from certain public spaces simply for wearing 'hoodies' or black clothing, and attacked by gang members just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time (Ralphs et al., 2009). Thus, as Ralphs et al. (2009) observe, marginalised teenagers are being increasingly victimised, stigmatised, and forced out of public spaces as the net of social control expands. Interestingly, Deuchar and Holligan (2010) present a similar argument, but from the perspective of boys who do identify as gang members. The young people they interviewed described feeling trapped within the confines of the Glaswegian housing schemes in which they resided because invisible boundaries created by territorial gang culture (and in this context associated with football club affiliation) dictated where they could go and what they could wear without risking being attacked. Gang membership was also seen to restrict their access to other community networks, and to create a sense of distrust in adults due to a history of conflict with authority figures and institutions. Thus, both young 'gangsters' and non-gang members living in gang-dominated neighbourhoods may have to be constantly vigilant, and both groups may be similarly constrained by geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural borders (Larsen et al., 2004; Sanders et al., 2010).

Misbehaving Teens

‘Delinquency’ refers to behaviours that have been conceptualised as deviant and antisocial, such as substance use, truancy, crime, and unsafe sexual practices. However, punitive criminal justice responses to adolescent delinquency, founded on assumptions related to individual agency in non-normative behaviour, appear to have failed to reduce youth crime rates (Schehr, 2005). It should also be noted that a number of so-called ‘deviant’ teen behaviours include activities that adults have the right to engage and seek pleasure in, like sexual intimacy, drinking alcohol, and smoking (Fine, 2004). Developmental research consistently reports that delinquency escalates rapidly during the mid-teens (Sim & Koh, 2003; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007). Skorikov and Vondracek (2007) speculate that the subsequent decrease in risky behaviours may be because young people are likely to become more oriented towards possible future careers as they grow older.

A great number of apparent causes and negative consequences of delinquent behaviour have been widely disseminated. For example, Vitaro, Pedersen, and Brendgen (2007) suggest that rejection by ‘normative’ peers and affiliation with ‘deviant’ peers may be key processes involved in the development of hostile behaviour and substance abuse. However, this presupposes that categories of normative and deviant peers exist as stable constructs. Vitaro and colleagues further hypothesise that rejection by peers may limit opportunities for children to learn how to interact adaptively with others and may exacerbate antisocial behaviour, while substance use could provide a means of coping with such negative experiences. An alternative view, they argue, is that disruptive peers may reinforce aggressive behaviour while also increasing opportunities for conflict. And finally, they suggest that interpersonal violence and substance use may also differ in terms of the extent to which these behaviours are considered acceptable, as peer approval could influence which types of behaviour become more prevalent.

A substantial body of research has been devoted to addressing concerns related to persistent school absenteeism, generating many theories that seek to explain apparent links between truancy and teenage delinquency. Henry and Huizinga (2007) present a number of these ideas. It has been suggested, for example, that deviant behaviour may

be a consequence of teens having too much unsupervised and unstructured time. School bonding is also considered by some researchers to be critical to the development of pro-social behaviour, so it is thought that disenfranchised students may engage in drug use as a form of self-medication to reduce their sense of failure in the school environment. Other views hold that delinquent behaviour associated with truancy may result from a lack of social control in the absence of adult authority figures, and that it may be socially rewarding when the experiences are shared with friends. McIntyre-Bhatty (2008) offers an interesting alternative to the 'delinquent' construction of truancy. She proposes that schooling may be understood as a strategic political intervention aimed at shaping future citizens who will uphold dominant moral and social values, preserve democracy, and ensure the economic success of the nation. Truancy, then, may be constructed as a rejection of those values, and even as a threat to the governing bodies. McIntyre-Bhatty goes further, suggesting that truancy may also be considered "quasi-conformist" rather than 'deviant', as it may be seen to reflect and enact a more generalised expression of dissatisfaction with contemporary education systems. Thus, she concludes, it may well be schools, and not students, that need "treatment".

Another much-reported cause for concern involves issues around young people's consumption of alcohol, which is often discussed in relation to road toll statistics that tell us more teenagers are dying as a result of alcohol-related car accidents than from any other cause (Godbold & Pfau, 2000; Smith & Geller, 2009). The media remind us daily of the dire consequences that may befall young people who drink and drive. Speed is also frequently cited as major contributing factor. Falconer and Kingham (2007) propose that cars have evolved into status symbols and tools with which identities can be constructed and performed. They discuss how car sub-cultures are manifested in different ways and in different contexts. For example, competitive racing operates legitimately in dedicated spaces and is supported by groups in power. However, when teenagers get together on suburban streets to socialise around their prized possessions, they are homogeneously labelled 'boy racers' (despite the often large presence of girls), and their activities are assumed to be deliberately subversive and a threat to 'decent, law-abiding' citizens. Yet it is not just the girls who are invisible to the outraged public. So too are the boys' other identities (e.g., as students, workers, sons etc.). Regardless of the accuracy of the label, teenagers are seen to be

actively engaged in the process of establishing and negotiating hierarchies of social status among their peers, using cars as one of their key resources (Falconer & Kingham, 2007).

Further contributing to the troubled youth picture are reportedly high rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases amongst adolescents (Crockett, Raffaelli, & Shen, 2006). Young people accumulate information about sex and sexuality from a variety of sources, including their parents, peers, schools, churches, the internet, and the media. They are therefore likely to be exposed to multiple, and conflicting, beliefs and attitudes. It has been suggested that some teenagers are motivated to engage in unsafe sexual activity because they are particularly attracted to novelty, danger, and excitement, while others may do so out of a desire to rebel against authority (Miller & Quick, 2010). Allen, Porter, and MacFarlane (2006) contend that susceptibility to peer pressure in early adolescence can be predictive of risky sexual behaviour, while Crockett et al. (2006) suggest that adolescents' capacity to regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours may be an important factor. These various theories have also been used to explain increased alcohol use in teenagers, which, in turn, has been implicated in increased sexual risk-taking when used in sexual contexts (Tarter, 2002; White, Fleming, Catalano, & Bailey, 2009). Tensions between notions of agency and protection exist in contemporary teenage sexuality discourse, and in politically charged debates about the content and delivery of sex education programmes in schools (Thomson, 2004). Moral panics about the erosion of family values and the sexualisation of children may go some way towards explaining why sex education is commonly viewed as both dangerous and protective (Green, 2006). In her study about young people's views on the heterosexual age of consent, Thomson (2004) found that her participants' perspectives stood in contradiction to the gendered messages historically implied by the law and the assumption that adolescents lack the capacity for agency. Instead, she conceptualised her participants as employing public discourses on teenage sexuality as a resource, enabling them to negotiate their sexual practices and identity.

As illustrated above, it is commonly accepted that peer pressure is an inevitable feature of adolescence and that it exerts a powerful force over teenage behaviour (Ennett et al., 2006; Godbold & Pfau, 2000; Schad, Szewedo, Antonishak, Hare, &

Allen, 2008; Sim & Koh, 2003) A central feature of the peer pressure construct is that people can be urged, encouraged, cajoled, or dared by others in their age group to think and act in certain ways. Adolescent peer conformity, according to Santor, Messervey, and Kusumaker (2000), is measured by the extent to which young people adopt a particular course of action because they understand it to be endorsed by their peers, while Schad et al. (2008) suggest that peer pressure restricts teenagers' capacity to develop autonomy. Perrine et al. (2004) postulate that self-monitoring can interact with peer pressure in predictable ways. That is, teenagers with higher levels of self-monitoring would be expected to be more vulnerable to the effects of passive peer pressure because it is assumed that they would be more attentive to, and adept at, reading subtle social cues. This suggests that self-monitoring is understood as a fixed personality trait that can be differentiated from other personal characteristics and independently measured. In short, peer pressure has been blamed for many of the ways that teenagers are seen to be behaving badly, and thus features prominently in the delinquency literature. However, Ungar (2000) draws attention to a growing body of research that challenges the conventional peer pressure construct, framing it instead in terms of personal agency and empowerment within the context of peer relationships. For example, adolescents may understand their 'high-risk' behaviour as strategic, rather than compliant, seeing themselves as agents of their own personal and social empowerment which they can accomplish by imitating the behaviours and appearance of their peers. Thus, although young people often seem to engage in high-risk activities purely for their novelty value, such behaviours may also serve to strengthen peer relationships. Similarly, Pilkington (2007) suggests that research in the last decade has seen the notion of peer pressure as the most useful explanation for links between youth culture and substance use, displaced by the idea of normative recreational drug use as one manifestation of youth culture. She further argues that increased surveillance, control, and disciplinary strategies have been sanctioned by discursive constructions of the 'youth drug problem', that pathologise 'excessive' substance use and "shift responsibility for minimizing risk to individuals, families and communities" (p. 214).

Distressed Teens

Teenagers may signal that they are distressed by manifesting symptoms of depression and anxiety, which may be specifically targeted by a range of psychotherapeutic and pharmacological interventions (Compton et al., 2004; Lambert, 2004). Some distressed teenagers also engage in deliberate self-harming behaviours, and in extreme cases this can result in their death (Nock, 2009). Teenage suicide has long been considered a major public health concern (Apter, 2010), although adolescents themselves do not necessarily construct suicide as a 'health issue' (Gilchrist, Howarth, & Sullivan, 2007). Previous studies have documented a wide range of personal, psychological, and contextual factors understood to contribute to self-harming and suicidal behaviours in young people. These include, anxiety and depression (McDonald, Taylor, & Clarke, 2009; Ursoniu, Putnoky, Vlaicu, & Vladescu, 2009), unemployment and poverty (Gilchrist et al., 2007), victimisation, fighting in school, drug use, dating violence, and risky sexual experiences (Epstein & Spirito, 2010); being an immigrant (Lipsicas & Mäkinen, 2010); being gay (McAndrew & Warne, 2010); being incarcerated (Sawyer et al., 2010); and perceived low level of family support (Tuisku et al., 2009). Results from an epidemiological study spanning the nine-year period from 1996 to 2004 suggest an increasing trend in rates of deliberate self-harm, attempted suicides, and completed suicides in adolescents and young adults, with the largest increase in completed suicides occurring among males aged between 15 and 24 years (De Munck, Portzky, & Van Heeringen, 2009). In 1990, New Zealand youth suicide rates for this age group were listed as the highest of all the OECD countries (Eckersley & Dear, 2002). Whilst these are certainly disturbing data, it is worthy of note that different cultural groups can attach very different meanings to the notion of suicide, which serves to remind us that the statistics are, themselves, socially and culturally constructed (Durie, 2001).

Most youth suicide prevention interventions such as public awareness campaigns, psychological treatments (e.g., Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy), and crisis management in schools, have been designed in accordance with prevailing assumptions about what constitutes 'evidence-based practice' (Hollon & Beck, 2004; Tarrier, Taylor, & Gooding, 2008). As such, they reproduce specific ideas about what causes young people to become suicidal and what

kind of prevention and treatment programmes should be implemented. Gilchrist et al. (2007) suggest that there are tensions that relate to individualist values embedded within discourses of adolescence as a period of transition to adulthood. They argue that, from a Western perspective, transitioning to adulthood is understood to involve becoming self-reliant, financially independent, and planning for the future. Suicide may therefore be constructed by some young people as a viable option when they are unable, for whatever reasons (e.g., unemployment in a depressed labour market), to achieve normative expectations, and when such experiences give rise to an enduring sense of hopelessness and personal failure. In some countries (including New Zealand, Canada, and the USA) alternative suicide prevention strategies have been developed to address diverse cultural understandings of suicide in minority populations. These approaches are aimed at empowering communities, and reflect their values and worldviews with regard to relations of power, community connectedness, and cultural, physical, spiritual, dimensions of health and wellbeing (Durie, 2001; J. White, 2007; Zane, Hall, Sue, Young, & Nunez, 2004).

Failing Teens

Some teens are constructed as ‘at risk of failing’ in relation to the parameters of success that are determined by our educational policies. As Johnson informs us (1994), there is nothing particularly new about this idea, except that up until the 1980s the problem was framed in terms of socially disadvantaged youth, whereas now it is more broadly defined to encapsulate the notion of educationally at-risk students who are predisposed to failure. Researchers have investigated the issues from a range of different perspectives. Johnson, for example, has explored what she calls “discordant child-environment interactions”, applying a ‘best fit’ scenario to predict potentially negative consequences of a specific set of environmental risk factors for an individual child with a particular set of personal characteristics. Sherriff (2007), on the other hand, directs attention to the impact of peer group dynamics on academic performance. He suggests that, during their transition and adjustment to high school, boys may be especially vulnerable to peer influences on their attitude to learning and behaviour at school, given that peer support and acceptance can be particularly important at this time. Barone (2007) argues that educational policy-making may

benefit more from research that makes the narratives of those who have been stereotyped and marginalised through prejudicial educational discourse available to parents, educators, policy-makers, and academia. Whilst I would agree that it is important for us to understand the challenges faced by boys who appear to be struggling at school, I also believe we could gain useful insights from talking to boys who are not only ‘getting by’, but even excelling within the current educational system.

‘Troubled’ Teens within ‘Troubled’ Families

Despite the fact that definitions of family have expanded to include a wide array of diverse family entities (e.g., single-parent families, step-families, extended family arrangements, and families with gay and lesbian parents), the ‘nuclear family’ seems to have remained fairly well entrenched in our collective psyche as the ‘ideal’ set-up in which to raise healthy offspring. So it is not surprising that for decades there has been intense interest in looking for links to family structures and familial relations as possible explanations for why young people may be at risk. Family violence, authoritarian parenting styles, parental conflict, and lack of parental support and family cohesion have for a long time been heralded as major contributing factors in a range of negative emotional and behavioural consequences for teenagers (Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Richman & Fraser, 2001). Steinberg (1987), for example, asserts that children growing up in single-parent households and step-families are at greater risk of becoming involved in deviant behaviours than their peers who live with both biological parents. More recently, Noack, Krettek, and Walper (2001) have suggested that increased levels of family conflict associated with parental separation negatively impacts on different aspects of young people’s psychosocial adjustment and on the development of their peer relationships. They do concede that in cultures where single-parent and step-families are considered relatively ‘normal’, this may be less evident (Noack et al., 2001). It does appear, however, that there has been a more recent shift away from deficit models that pathologise families and assume causal links between ‘dysfunctional families’ and negative outcomes for children and teenagers. Recent perspectives have heightened awareness that notions of ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ families are socially constructed (Walsh, 2002), and that families are

complex social systems in which each member influences the quality of family functioning (Sabatier, 2008). This shift in focus situates family struggles within the context of difficult life circumstances and emphasises resources that may be identified and strengthened in family relational networks (Walsh, 2002).

Constructing Identities

According to Caronia and Caron (2004), the performance of everyday life may be understood as a “never-ending cultural work” through which individual and collective identities are enacted, and meanings and social structures are constructed. Fine (2004) suggests that teenagers shape and reconstruct their personal and public identities through interactions in multiple social and cultural environments, including institutions, family, and peer groups. They may sometimes appear to exist in a state of flux, alternating between resisting and accepting authority. Yet, their apparently erratic behaviour does not necessarily represent resistance against normative social rules or an attempt to alter them. Fine argues that it may, instead, reflect attempts to understand what is expected of them by adults, while at the same time assimilating this information with their own needs and desires as they endeavour to establish boundaries within the context of the social structures that envelop them. The behavioural choices that teenagers make are by no means always carefully planned or even conscious decisions, but they do impact on how they see themselves and are seen by others.

So far I have explored some of the ways that adolescence and adolescents are constructed and positioned in relation to discourses about troubled youth. In the following section I discuss ways that teenage boys may construct their identities and negotiate these discourses.

Deconstructing Hegemonic Norms of Masculinity

I will now consider the impact of powerful discourses of gender on the issues discussed above, paying particular attention to their significance for teenage boys. Gender is not an essentialist state, but rather a well policed fiction that encourages boys to act in harmony with sanctioned societal norms and rules in order to ensure their place among their peers (Curtin & Linehan, 2002). While peer groups have the potential to exert considerable influence over identity-creation, for example through inclusion and exclusion strategies, they may also provide contexts in which teenage boys can develop alternative or contradictory constructions of adolescence and masculinity (Blackbeard & Lindegger, 2007). Blackbeard and Lindegger (2007) conceptualise the male peer group as a central site for the accomplishment of ambiguous masculine identities, which vary in relation to a range of “hegemonic imperatives”, including norms of heterosexuality, privileged sporting codes, the objectification of girls, and racial boundaries. From this perspective, then, gender is what people *do*, not who they *are*.

‘Masculinity’ is not a biologically, preordained entity, but a set of socially, culturally, and historically constructed understandings (Frosh, 2002). Masculine identity-making has been destabilised and reshaped by feminist activism, and because gender is constructed relationally it is central to the ways in which teenage boys construct their identities (Pascoe, 2003). Emerging models of masculinity have replaced the idea of a single, fixed, and instrumental ‘male role’ with the concept of multiple masculinities (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Nayak and Kehily (2006) describe heterosexual masculinity as “an impossible ideal”, but one which teenage boys embody, regulate, and enact on a daily basis by approximating its norms. As boys are not ‘hard’ by nature, constructing the hegemonic ideal of the ‘tough man’ and monitoring gender boundaries may in fact be quite hard work for them (Pattman, Frosh, & Phoenix, 2005). According to Pattman and colleagues (2005), this is often achieved through displays of misogyny and homophobia.

Pascoe’s (2003) research suggests that, rather than falling into categories of masculinity, teenage boys draw on tropes of masculinity that best serve their self-narratives. In Pascoe’s study it was observed, for example, that even when boys took

up non-masculine positions they did so while simultaneously referencing and emphasising their commitment to heterosexuality. Phoenix et al. (2003) posit that some of the most highly valued forms of masculinity appear to be linked to hierarchies based on toughness, an ambivalent attitude to schoolwork, irrefutable heterosexuality, and threats or acts of aggression. It follows that hierarchical constructs such as these may serve as a point of reference in relation to which teenage boys feel obliged to position themselves, even if they do not subjectively wish to inhabit a particular cultural position. I posit that high schools represent important sociocultural and relational environments in which this identity work takes place. In these contexts, multiple identities may be created and reproduced by teenage boys as they negotiate their positions in relation to academic performance, sports codes, male and female peer groups, educators, and institutional authorities (Blackbeard & Lindegger, 2007). Schools are hegemonic structures in which dominant discourses are presented as the natural way of the world (Armaline, 2005). School-based practices assume the existence of irrefutable 'male' and 'female' sex categories, and when gender is expressed by teenagers within educational institutions it is commonly seen as a practice-run for adulthood (Nayak & Kehily, 2006).

Cultures of Violence

Traditional views of male violence have historically assumed this to result from individual pathology and innate biological characteristics. This has been an enduring discourse that is not confined to adult understandings. For example, in a study by Cowan and Campbell (1995) examining adolescents' attitudes about rape, both girls and boys attributed most of the blame to uncontrollable male sexual urges or male pathology, rather than societal factors and male dominance. As Phillips (2007) suggests, this perspective neglects ways in which behavioural norms for boys and men are socially constructed and affirmed, and in so doing diverts attention away from social responsibility and accountability for enforcing and reproducing masculinity norms. She contends that Western societies practice strategies of violence to attain or maintain a culturally constructed 'ideal' masculinity when other strategies fail or cannot be deployed. Weaver-Hightower (2003) holds that males are lashing out in ways that harm themselves or others in what he calls a "crisis of masculinity",

resulting from decades of feminist work, in particular around sex roles, that has made the traditional hegemonic role less available to men and boys. In other words, if a shift in societal attitudes is perceived to have rendered males less powerful in roles that once enabled them to assert their masculinity, they may feel compelled to find new outlets for its expression. Deuchar and Holligan (2010) posit, for example, that gang membership may be seen by teenage boys as a vehicle for demonstrating masculinity, because it is understood to provide a context in which they can express aggression and assert power. However, such 'options' are not necessarily available to all boys to the same extent. This is exemplified in Sike's (2005) study of life at a special secondary school for 'troubled boys'. In this context, boys' 'problem' behaviours are conceptualised as a complex mix of personal and social power, and vulnerability. Sikes argues that their power to hurt people and damage property within the school environment is juxtaposed with their relative powerlessness in the wider community, since most of the boys perceived that they lacked the personal characteristics necessary for membership of the delinquent or criminal world.

Conventional constructions of male violence may also be seen to obfuscate adolescent boys' efforts to *do boy* in socially acceptable ways. For instance, living with domestic violence is a harsh reality for a large number of teenage boys and yet many domestic violence refuges have had age-based policies (and many still do) to exclude them for fear that they could become violent (Baker, 2009). Consequently, many of these boys see themselves labelled as 'potentially dangerous men'. According to Baker (2009), the reasons they may be refused entry relate to historically dominant ideas about family influences on behaviour. These include what has been conceptualised as the 'cycle of violence', which draws on social learning theory. The 'cycle of violence' predicts increased risk that boys will adopt their father's controlling and violent behaviour, and that this will manifest itself more generally as antisocial behaviour across a range of contexts (Ireland & Smith, 2009). Despite these beliefs, numerous studies have failed to find convincing evidence of gender-specific responses to domestic violence in child victims (Baker, 2009).

Male peer aggression, as discussed earlier, is often enabled by the platitude that 'boys will be boys'. And developmental psychological research in the area of bullying typically essentialises gender differences. That is, male bullies tend to be

characterised as being physically aggressive, female bullies as relationally aggressive, male victims as counter-aggressive, and female victims as helpless (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Blurred understandings of violence, games, and play-fighting mean that everyday physical conflict among boys in the schoolyard is often normalised as ‘rough play’ or ‘self-defense’. Yet sometimes, as Pellegrini (2002) posits, boys may deliberately engage in bullying tactics as a strategy to boost their standing among their peers. According to Bukowski and Sippola (2000), some girls are more tolerant of aggressive behaviour in popular boys, and may actually be attracted to aggressive boys that they perceive to have high peer status. However, boys who ‘transgress’ against heteronormative rules (e.g., when a boy hits a girl, becomes ‘excessively’ aggressive, or is the victim of bullying by girls) are punished and ‘othered’ by both female and male peers (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). In other words, bully and/or victim labels can discursively position young people in various gendered ways that signal what Ringrose and Renold (2010) refer to as “gender deviance”.

Cultures of Sexuality

How and in what contexts do boys fashion their sexual identities? What might help explain, for example, research that suggests boys are engaging in more sexual risk-taking than girls (Crockett et al., 2006)? In a review of American ‘lad magazines’ (of which the target readership is adolescent boys and young men), Taylor (2005) reports that articles commonly represented normative male sexuality as oriented towards, and indeed in need of, frequent and varied sexual activity. Recommendations for improving the sex life of young males included using alcohol, and having “unorthodox sex” in a variety of ways and locations. Magazine articles purportedly about meeting the needs of female partners were predominantly seen to reinforce traditional male gender beliefs, because they were framed as ways of fulfilling males’ sexual experiences and goals. Apparently, too, the only mention of non-heterosexual orientation concerned bi-sexual girls and lesbians, and these were presented in ways that also offered possibilities for male pleasure.

Gendered sexuality is also articulated through educational institutions, so in these contexts male students are not only learning how to become future workers but also future men (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 1997). In Haywood and Mac an Ghaill's (1997) study conducted with students in a further education facility, heterosexuality was seen as an important cultural resource for young male trade apprentices. They argue that the boys collectively positioned themselves as sexually competent as a way to constitute and consolidate their masculine power and status. They did so, for example, by displaying their capacity to attract females (e.g., by their appearance, employment status, nightlife, and owning a car). Gender non-conformity, especially in school environments, can present difficulties for young people that those from other minority status groups may not experience (Flowers & Buston, 2001). For instance, other groups of marginalised teens may feel a strong sense of belonging at home, and be able to identify more easily, and therefore seek support from, 'similar others' at school. But, as Flowers and Buston (2001) suggest, homophobic environments can make it hard for boys who identify as other than heterosexual (e.g., as bisexual, homosexual, or transsexual) to 'go public' with their sexual identity. Thus, they may be denied the opportunity to share their experience of 'difference' at home, school, and in other social spaces. 'Coming out' in a deeply entrenched heterosexist society can be a daunting process, and may leave them feeling excluded, vulnerable, and sometimes desperately unhappy. Although many report experiencing a strong sense of being different in terms of their sexuality well before they reach adolescence, it may be that as teenagers they become more aware of their unacceptability and outsider status (McAndrew & Warne, 2010; Oswald, 2001). They may experience feelings of shame, denial, or self-loathing, and they may fear ridicule from peers and rejection from their parents for failing to live up to their expectations. Of course boys can experience these kinds of worries for many other reasons, but rarely, if ever I would imagine, for being 'straight'. Some gay boys may feel compelled to behave more aggressively or to participate in 'macho' sports like football as a way of being seen as more acceptably masculine, or even in the hope of 'passing' as straight (McAndrew & Warne, 2010). As Flowers and Buston (2001) contend, constructing and performing a heterosexual identity may appear to be an easy way out, but "living a lie" can exact a heavy cost.

Student Identities

Discourses that assume the education system to be failing teenage boys (or, that boys are failing the education system) appear to have predominantly been constructed around the perception that important differences exist between boys and girls, in terms of capability, behaviour, and attitude. Much of the research aimed at improving boys' educational outcomes has focused on the development of curricular and structural strategies for managing boys' 'high energy' demands and apparent learning deficits in the classroom setting (Weaver-Hightower, 2008). An increasingly popular intervention in co-educational schools is to separate the boys from the girls for classroom-based activities. This approach is often well supported by teachers and parents because many believe that gendered competitiveness is both natural and commonplace in the school environment. Since girls are understood to be outperforming boys, there is the perceived risk that mixed classes can negatively impact on boys' learning (Wills, 2007).

Other researchers have instead sought to reveal social processes that may promote conformity or resistance to available positions for boys within educational contexts. Jackson and Dempster (2009), for example, have proposed that boys in high school may be reluctant to apply themselves to academic work, or to admit to having made anything more than minimal effort when they do achieve well, because it would be seen as contrary to a 'cool' masculine identity. This is potentially problematic for boys because attaining 'good' academic qualifications is associated with having 'good' career options. So, since success is highly valued within education, and within Western society more generally, this means that in order to be both successful and 'acceptable' in the eyes of their peers they have to construct themselves as having 'natural' ability that allows them to perform well with little effort (Jackson & Dempster, 2009). Jackson and Dempster describe the flipside of this discourse as being "effortful achievement", which is conflated with femininity. To some boys, the notion of hard-working students conjures up images of girls being focused on their coursework, well-organised, and 'swotting' in libraries until all hours while the boys are out socialising. One way that boys may resist the effortless achievement discourse, while still affirming their 'laid back' masculinity, is to adopt a counter-school culture in public, but value learning and academic achievement in private (Abraham, 2008).

Interestingly, it could also be said that hegemonic masculinity may have evolved to the extent that it may now include the previously marginalised stereotype of the ‘nerd’. Nerd identity appears to have been transformed in light of the rapid growth of the computer industry, which pervades our everyday lives, and has brought with it new employment opportunities and reconstructed power relations (Kendall, 1999). In other words, the nerd community may now be seen to have control over an increasingly valued commodity. Kendall (1999) problematises gendered aspects of nerd masculinity in drawing attention to the dissonance created by the inclusion of both “hypermasculinity” (characterised, for example, by superior intelligence and deficient social/relational skills) and “feminization” (including small stature and poor sports ability). Yet, I contend that it is also possible for some boys, sporty or not, to overtly position themselves as diligent and intelligent, *and* masculine.

Sporting Identities and Practices

Sport represents an important domain in which boys construct masculine identities (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2010). Attitudes, rituals, and beliefs about sport that are seen to prepare them for manhood may be learned at home, at school, in the wider community, and through media exposure to sporting practices. For example, fierce expressions of loyalty to particular sporting codes, and even to individual teams, may be passed on within the family. Fathers may encourage camaraderie and aggression in sport as a way of demonstrating their own heterosexual male identity, and to ensure that their sons likewise develop into ‘good hard men’ (Deuchar & Holligan, 2010). Historically, high school cultures have patently afforded a much higher status to male-dominated sporting codes than to those considered more typically ‘for girls’. High-profile, physically combative sports that emphasise individual achievement over team-work have produced a hypermasculine male identity among athletes, which Miller (2009) refers to as the “toxic jock”. This ‘jock’ profile has been associated with a range of ‘problem’ behaviours in high school athletes, including increased alcohol use (Taliaferro, Rienzo, & Donovan, 2010), sexual risk-taking (Wetherill & Fromme, 2007), drug use, interpersonal violence, and suicidal behaviour (Miller, 2009). I would argue that in order to retain their ‘hard-earned’ status in the ‘glory’ sports, boys may also feel compelled to show a high degree of stamina and fortitude in the face of

injury. A case in point is found in Yard and Comstock's (2009) study, in which a high proportion of high school athletes reported returning to play sport prematurely following a concussion, thus putting themselves at risk of re-injury, more severe post-concussive symptoms, and future cognitive impairment. The highest rates were for boys who played football. The researchers suggest that athletes who ignore the advice of medical professionals may do so because they feel under pressure from their coaches, parents, and peers to 'toughen up'. School sports are also part of a wider sporting culture that includes competition at local club, national, and international levels. Competition in these arenas can be intense, and the banter that goes on between fans of opposing teams is seen as part of the whole 'sports experience'. As some of the boys in Deuchar and Holligan's (2010) study acknowledged, alcohol during matches can tip the balance between friendly rivalry and violence.

A review of the history of sport in Australian public schools has led Crotty (2003) to suggest that violence has been tolerated in the name of high school sport and constructed in this context as "boyish rough and tumble" since about the late nineteenth century. Where aggressive behaviours and attitudes in sport were once condemned, they were later endorsed as signs of manliness and virility, and thereby legitimised as an integral part of boys' healthy transition to manhood. These changing constructions of violence were connected to changes in education practices, which aligned with military ideals of masculinity and replaced religious and moral ideologies of earlier times. In fact, willingness to fight was seen as a model attribute for young men in the times leading up to the First World War. Rowing, cricket, and football were promoted as appropriately robust forms of physical energy and manly teamwork, and boxing and wrestling were framed as self-defence training, whereas tennis was demoted to the level of an "effeminate pastime" (Crotty, 2003). The significance of an historical relationship between masculinity and military values resonates with Johnson (2010), who claims that the militarisation of schools is just as relevant today in the construction of hegemonic masculinities. She argues, for example, that some acts of violence she witnessed at an American military-style school were understood by students and teachers alike to embody and epitomise the notion of a valiant warrior. This suggests to me that aggression in teenage boys is still considered an acceptable, and sometimes even courageous, expression of their masculinity.

As the above discussion illustrates, there seem to be plenty of reasons why parents, teachers, community elders, the police, politicians, and a whole range of other interested groups might be concerned about the health and wellbeing of young people, and perhaps especially teenage boys. It does seem evident that teenagers lead complicated lives and have to negotiate some very challenging situations. What we also know is that many teenagers do not suffer the poor outcomes that may be expected when the cards appear to be stacked against them. However, one problem as I see it is that we still have very limited understanding of how they make sense of their experiences and negotiate the social-discursive terrain with which they are presented in their everyday lives. I decided to conduct my research with teenage boys because I was interested in understanding why boys, in particular, seem to present such an enigma. Furthermore, I specifically selected boys who might be considered on the basis of external criteria to be well-functioning (ie., they were seen to be ‘successfully progressing’ through school) because previous research appears to have been predominantly focused on youth populations that have been already marked as ‘troubled’.

Chapter Two:

Storying the Experiences of Teenage Boys

Research Aims

The aims of this study were to understand how teenage boys make sense of their experiences, paying particular attention to the ways they understand and overcome personally significant challenges, and how these are integrated into their everyday lives. It was anticipated that an analysis of the narratives constructed by the participants would reveal ways in which they create and perform their identities, perform capacity, and reproduce and resist historical and contemporary social discourses of development, adolescence, and masculinity. A further objective was to consider the implications of the findings for clinical psychological practice in working with adolescent boys.

Methodology

My theoretical approach to the present study can perhaps best be described as a critical narrative analysis. That is to say that I was primarily concerned with the functionality of the boys' stories; what sort of account of their life they were providing, what subject positions they took up as their stories unfolded, and how this was accomplished (Hiles & Cermak, 2008). This approach was underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology that views knowledge as the product of diverse discourses linked to wider social and cultural narratives and relational processes, and to political and institutional power structures that shape the daily lives of individuals (Aapola, 1997; Burkitt, 1996). Thus, it locates people's lives and interpersonal

relationships within social, historical, and political contexts, while enabling them to determine salient aspects of their own experiences. From this perspective, we configure and reconfigure knowledge out of ideas and beliefs that are produced within the social and interpersonal worlds we inhabit, and we constantly revise how we understand ourselves in tandem with the ideas to which we are exposed (Frosh & Saville Young, 2008). As Kvale (1999) so succinctly puts it: “Knowledge is neither inside a person nor outside in the world, but exists in the relationship between person and world” (p. 101). Social constructionism also seeks to understand what is enabled, suppressed, or resisted when we perform social practices, by revealing the social ‘rules’ that govern our interactions (Paris & Epting, 2004).

Discourses of adolescence and gender were used to critically examine and deconstruct traditional understandings of teenage boys’ development. Drawing on positioning theory, I sought to reveal the performative nature of subject positions available to boys in the creation and reproduction of their multiple identities, and to gain insights into how they access resources that enable them to adopt, disrupt, or reject positions within, or counter to, dominant norms of adolescence and masculinity. I have endeavoured to approach this study in a way that gives priority to the boys’ personal narrative accounts, in order to develop an understanding of their perspectives of themselves, their lives, and the world they live in. My objective, primarily, was to produce a critical interpretation of the research data. To this end, I determined that a multi-perspective approach, combining narrative and discursive methodologies (acknowledging that there are also a number of versions within each of these approaches), was appropriate for an analysis of the material and necessary for answering my research questions. As Chamberlain and Murray (2008) assert, there is no ‘proper’ way to conduct research, so researchers can and should be innovative and creative in their research strategies. Kincheloe (2005) offers similar advice. He uses the term “researcher-as-bricoleur” to describe the researcher who embraces and continually negotiates methodological complexity, actively engaging in the construction of the research methods, processes, and narratives that represent his or her endeavours to generate knowledge. Social constructionist and personal sense-making processes are interwoven within narrative data. Analysis of narrative data, therefore, pays attention to the situated-occasioned sociocultural contexts as well as to the individual’s creative and agentic meaning-making processes (Hiles & Cermak,

2008). Therefore, developing a methodological bricolage enabled me to hold and attend to both discursively and narratively produced versions of the boys' experiences. In this way, I was liberated from the idea of research method as a set of proscribed procedures, which allowed me to remain grounded in, and respectful of, my participants' multifaceted life experiences without separating them from their contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Identity Construction and Meaning-Making through Narrative

Boys' stories are rich with the meaning-laden terms that they use to understand and describe themselves and other people. They select what is important to them in the construction of their personal narratives, and through these narratives they construct their identities and subject positions in relation to others (Hiles & Cermak, 2008). Contemporary research on identity reflects a shift from treating identities as static, innate personal properties to viewing them in contextual and interactional terms, both constructed and achieved discursively (Georgakopoulou, 2006). So it is by telling their stories and engaging in the process of meaning-making, that boys constitute, reproduce, and transform their personal identities (Munro Hendry, 2007). From this standpoint, it is assumed that self-definition is neither stable nor predetermined but instead context-dependent, fluid, multiple, and also performative. Sarbin (2000) uses the term "social identity" to describe aspects of selfhood and world-making that are linguistically constructed, and shaped by cultural and historical determinants. Fairclough (2003) describes identity as having both social and personal aspects, and argues that it cannot, therefore, be construed solely as an effect of discourse. It could be said, therefore, that boys are socially positioned but also social agents for whom a 'sense of self' is a prerequisite for their personal and social identity construction. Like Fairclough, Frosh (2002) contends that the choices people make are not entirely reducible to socially constructive forces. Rather, from within available (dominant or

subjugated) social positions, people purposefully engage in sense-making, adopt particular viewpoints, challenge, negotiate, evaluate, misunderstand, and imagine.

Narratives are performative and offer possibilities for action (Hiles & Cermak, 2008). As social performances, they vary according to who is positioned as narrator, audience, and actor(s) in the story (McNamee, 2004). The process of identity construction is embedded within the storied world of everyday social interaction. Thus, boys interpret both themselves and others through narrative, and their social world is also shaped by the stories they exchange (Murray, 2003). Through telling their stories, boys also engage in a process of making sense of breaches between themselves and their social contexts (Bruner, 1990). That is, they construct narratives through their social interactions in ways that help them make sense of departures from what they may understand as 'the natural order of things' (but not necessarily with the aim of condoning or resolving the breaches). Thus, within the narrative paradigm, a boy's world may be understood by exploring how he makes sense of his experiences and integrates them over time, and how he constitutes and accomplishes meanings through his narratives in everyday social interactions and practices.

Narrative is a resource employed to produce and reproduce meanings within social relationships, the consequence of which may be that certain actions are enabled, sustained, or obstructed. However, the notion of narrative being used by boys as a relational tool does not mean that this is an inherently conscious process over which they have rational control (Smith & Sparkes, 2006). Everyday language is the main resource that people draw on to create meaning in relationships, and it is the medium by which narratives are constructed, legitimised, and shared with other actors in our social world (Gergen et al., 2004). Narrative accounts are dynamic co-constructions, negotiated by both the narrator and those with whom the exchange is enacted. Furthermore, narrative production and interpretation is influenced by power imbalances in social relationships, not only between individuals, but also between their personal stories and the plot-lines of dominant societal narratives (Murray, 2003). It is within this sometimes conflicted space that we might see boys' resistance and challenges to dominant understandings about boys and adolescence. In terms of structure, narratives provide temporal and reasoned accounts of boys' past experiences and of events they may anticipate in the future. That is, boys draw on

culturally available plot-lines to actively organise and connect together different episodes and experiences in their lives (Murray, 2003). In so doing, their narratives are imbued with meanings.

Discourses and Subject Positioning in Narrative Identity Construction

Discourse is framed around three main principles. Firstly, it is both constructive and productive; secondly, it is action-oriented; and thirdly, it is contextually situated (Wiggins & Potter, 2008). Discourses are related to social performance, in that they reproduce social relationships and structures, while also constituting and representing dominant understandings in particular ways (Roy-Chowdhury, 2003). Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008) conceptualise the work that discourses do in our everyday social worlds as follows:

...discourses are not 'things' but form relations between things; they are not objects as such but the *rules* and *procedures* that make objects thinkable and governable; they are not autonomous entities but cohere among *relations of force*; and, finally, discourses do not 'determine' things when there is always the possibility of resistance and indeterminacy (p.105).

Boys use social discourses to position themselves and others when they engage in processes of narrative identity construction. Discourses offer multiple and sometimes contradictory positions from which they can view the world. Multiple positions are possible because boys habitually interact in different ways, at different times, with different people (Phoenix et al., 2003). Subject positions and identities are situated, organised, and negotiated within social discourses, cultural practices, and power relations (Aapola, 1997). When boys represent themselves by taking up culturally available positions, or enacting socially constructed understandings of adolescence or masculine identity, they reproduce those discourses (Phillips, 2007). Thus, boys take up subject positions that represent particular ways that they understand and interact within the world, and they experience and enact their identities from within particular subject positions. For them to be able to communicate their subject positions, they need the necessary discursive skills to express themselves, make judgments about

themselves and others, and have insight into the rules that shape their social encounters (Harre & van Langehove, 1999). Harre and van Langenhove (1999) differentiate between 'selfhood' and 'publicly presented selves'. They define selfhood as our sense of personal identity, which incorporates cultural assumptions, is linked to our sense of personal agency, and is experienced as the continuity of our individual worldview. By contrast, our public selves are discursively presented, for example by means of declarations and narrations, and they are jointly constituted and interpreted through everyday interactions with others. Positioning conveys a person's action orientation and, as such, is a more dynamic and fluid concept than the idea of *having* or *being in* a 'role' or 'position' (Murakami, 2004).

Boys' narratives reveal the influence of social discourses that have become deeply embedded over time, evolving into 'common-sense' understandings. Drawing on discourses to justify a particular subject position or discursive act is all the more persuasive when the discourses are ingrained and taken-for-granted within the culture (Emerson & Frosh, 2004). However, it is always possible for dominant discourses to be challenged through the construction of counter-discourses, because they are not fixed and independently-functioning commentaries of social life. For example, boys' identity construction can involve their denial, resistance, or challenges to pervasive discourses which depict them in stereotypically negative ways.

Discourses also exist in relationship with other discourses and, thereby, mirror social interactions between individuals and groups of people. Thus, they can be understood as resources for people to use in their relational work, as Fairclough (2003) explains:

The relationships between different discourses are one element of the relationships between different people – they may complement one another, compete with one another, one can dominate others, and so forth. Discourses constitute part of the resources which people deploy in relating to one another – keeping separate from one another, cooperating, competing, dominating – and in seeking to change the ways in which they relate to one another (p.124).

In other words, social discourses, practices, and institutions are inter-dependent. Social discourses shape the construction of institutional structures and practices, which in turn both reproduce and validate the discourses (Willig, 2008). Accounting

for the discursively produced understandings embedded within the construction of boys' narratives helps to make visible aspects of their lives that are rendered manageable, governable, or problematic by dominant discourses and counter-discourses (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). A critical analytic approach to research provides opportunities for new insights into networks of social practices (encompassing social activity and agency, and social structures) that enable possibilities for positive social change to be explored (Fairclough, 2003).

In summary, I argue that boys do not simply *use* discourses and subject positioning in their narrative identity construction, but *negotiate* discourses when they take up certain positions, when they position others in certain ways, and when they are positioned *by* others.

Methods

Participants and Recruitment

My research was conducted with a group of boys who attended a public high school (i.e., governed by the State) situated in an urban suburb of Auckland, New Zealand. The only criterion for inclusion in the project was that the boys were aged 16 or over. Sixteen is the age at which young people are defined (if somewhat arbitrarily) to be legally and morally responsible for decisions about their health and wellbeing, and this meant that the boys did not require parental consent to participate. However, they were encouraged to discuss the project with their parents if they wished to do so. This particular school has a large student population, by New Zealand standards, is co-educational, and draws its students from a culturally and economically diverse community. It was selected for these reasons, as I considered that it represented a context in which boys would experience the effects of a wide range of discursively produced notions of adolescence, gender, culture, and education.

A letter was sent to the school seeking permission to recruit senior male students as participants. An Information Sheet enclosed with an introductory letter outlined the purpose of the research and the safeguards on confidentiality (Appendix A). The school arranged for me to introduce myself and the study to boys in one of the senior classes. This was a class that had been selected by the school, and whose students had indicated an interest in the project when briefed by their teacher. At this meeting I provided the boys with copies of the Information Sheet, presented an overview of the study, discussed confidentiality and privacy processes, and explained what their participation would entail if they accepted my invitation to take part. I explained that each participant would be paid NZ\$30.00 for their time, which was funded by the Massey University Doctoral Research Grant. The boys were invited to ask questions and also to contact my supervisors if they wanted more information.

Eleven boys agreed to participate in the study when I returned to the school the following week, and their written informed consent was obtained (Appendix B). The boys were aged 16 and 17 years, six were New Zealand Europeans, four were from families of Mediterranean descent, and one boy was New Zealand-born Chinese. They all lived in a community with a low socio-economic designation. The boys were given the opportunity to suggest possible locations and times for their interviews. All of the boys expressed a preference for the interviews to be conducted in one of the school offices during school hours, and they were given permission from their teacher to select a time-slot that suited them.

Data Collection

I used a number of strategies to elicit the boys' narratives, and to increase opportunities to tap into the processes by which they constructed identities and meanings in the context of their everyday experiences. These involved the boys' construction of personal time-lines, their selection of material objects of personal significance, and their participation in individual interviews. The following describes each of these data collection methods and processes.

Prior to their interviews the boys were asked to create a time-line of their teenage years, identifying personally meaningful events and experiences that occurred during that period. I explained that the time-lines would be used to provide ideas for discussion during their interviews. My primary reason for using this approach was to avoid (to the extent that this is possible) influencing decisions about what may have been considered important issues for them. In other words, the onus was on the boys to set their own agendas for their interviews. I emphasised to them that they had complete control over how the time-lines were produced and presented, and over what and how much information was included in them. I requested only that the time-lines be made available to me (i.e., via email or handed to their teacher in sealed envelopes for me to collect) before the day of their scheduled interview. I made this request so that I would have an opportunity to become familiar with the information in their time-lines and, thereby, be better positioned to assist the flow of discussion during the interviews. When I read the time-lines, I made a few notes to identify key points which could serve as interview prompts. Thus, the time-lines were a tool for generating data. However, their construction also functioned as a process intended to encourage the boys to reflect on the impact of their experiences and facilitate openness in recounting them to me. It was further hoped that the task of creating the time-lines would reduce any pressure the boys may have felt to provide coherence in their stories, as it enabled them to recount a series of episodes rather than one single narrative to cover an entire period.

The boys' time-lines came in many forms, in terms of their appearance, structure, and content. Three were handwritten and the others typed on computers. All of them were constructed chronologically, either by age, year, or class level. One boy used "Age 10" as his starting point, while the others chose to begin their time-lines from the year they entered high school. The time-lines ranged in size from half a page to two full pages. Some boys used just a few words to convey an idea, as the following examples taken from several different time-lines illustrate:

Moved house
Got top in music
Changed friend group
Stopped playing soccer

End of first real girlfriend
Wrote my first composition
And yep I'm the weird one :D
100% in all internal assessments so far this year
Had a bit of a struggle, school work not going so well

Other boys produced more detailed accounts of points they were making, as shown in the extracts below:

Only really interesting thing that I can remember about [that year] was my first and current girlfriend who I met and am currently still in a relationship with. First kiss etc. Quite an important Event for me. Another girl who was my friend didn't talk to me for months because of this.

I got my restricted license which made me really happy because I was really nervous about taking the test. It let me drive by myself and made me feel a lot more confident and independent.

Grandma was over. Mum, Dad, Grandma and Grandma's boyfriend, still not sure what to call him, were discussing what should happen to murderers etc. It seemed they were for the death penalty. With the amount of times the law catches the wrong people, I found this disturbing and I left ASAP to go to my room and think.

I've lived with mum and brother only for a little while now. She decides that we're moving...to live with her partner. It's a 40 minute drive. Great big house, pool table, bar, big back yard. Cool guy, not enough. Don't want to leave friends of 3 and a half years and job.

I came back from Europe and found it quite hard to get used to New Zealand again because in Europe I had no worries or responsibilities but in New Zealand I had to go to school and start preseason training again.

So far, the fastest year of my life. Of particular note is my current experience of what most could easily call a first love, a first genuine love. Although, in amusingly fairytale fashion, it is quite the 'forbidden love' (due to a number of factors).

In addition to creating time-lines, the boys were invited to bring for discussion during their interview an item that held some personal meaning, or said something about who

they were. My idea in asking the boys to select an object of personal significance represents my attempt to find a novel way of gaining further insights into ways they construct their self-identities. In this regard, I have drawn on Harrison's (2004) work which explores the use of visual methodology in narrative research. She suggests, for example, that photographic images can be considered a form of representation (i.e., a resource, as opposed to a topic of study or social practice), and can be construed in relation to oral or written text. Thus, visual evidence may reveal significant aspects of people's personal lives and their social or cultural worlds. It may also highlight differences between their self-perceptions and the ways others view them, thereby providing opportunities for the construction of counter-narratives. In the present study, the boys' objects are thus considered to represent aspects of their self-reflective identity work, and to have facilitated the telling of narratives of their 'selves' that might otherwise not have been told. As the formation of mental imagery is one way in which we make sense of our world, it follows that personally symbolic material objects may be a valuable resource for understanding participants' worlds (Harrison, 2004).

The nine boys who elected to bring an object with them were asked at the beginning of their interview to talk about why they had chosen it and what meaning(s) it held for them. The objects they brought were: a twisted metal fork, a map and compass, a computer disk, a folder of sheet music, rosary beads, a friendship book, a soft toy, Photoshop artwork, and a Rubics cube. A few of the boys told me they had given quite a bit of thought as to how they could express what their items meant to them. With some of the other boys, however, this reflective process was less evident. That is not to say that they gave the matter less consideration, but more so that they may have articulated quite complex ideas in relatively simple terms. The boys ascribed meanings to their objects, and conveyed notions of the self and understandings of experience in a variety of ways, as illustrated in the examples below:

(Twisted fork) It's not like other forks. I was looking for a way it could sort of explain just a bit of who I am. Yeah it's based on a magic trick that I learned which utilises actually the softness of a fork. And so that's I guess one metaphor, one way of looking at it. Even though it's a steel fork, it's still rather soft. On appearance it's rather hard and callous.

(Map and compass) Well it's for orienteering and I was trying to think of some alternative meaning - like compass, strong direction in my life - and this particular map, this course, was one which was kind of up and down. I had some good legs and some bad legs. And so that's sort of my life I reckon, up and down but generally going in the same direction.

(Computer disk) All my friends know that I use the computer a lot and it's like my image in the group.

(Sheet music folder) I've been playing the piano for about 7 or 8 years now and it's just something I really like doing. It's just fun to do and relaxing and nice. Some musicians are well most of them are kind of a bit weird and quirky.

(Toy) It's a Pokemon toy. My sister had quite a lot of toys and she moved out and left some toys. I kept that one coz I was a pretty big fan when I was a kid. And me and my friends are all still just young at heart really so we're still into all that sort of stuff. I'm still sort of like a kid and I don't really care if people think it's weird.

In some cases, there was a clear link between a boy's item and some aspect of his time-line, so the object provided a nice lead-in to a related topic. In other cases, they provided additional topics for exploration in the interviews.

The interviews with the boys each lasted approximately one hour. They were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim by myself. Obvious identifying information, including names of people and locations, were replaced with pseudonyms or more generic terms (e.g., friend, brother). The use of a narrative format emphasised my position that the boys were assumed to be authorities on themselves and their lives. Having said that, I recognise that there is always an asymmetrical power relation in any interview situation. Kvale (2006) notes that interviews can easily create the impression of an environment in which non-threatening, egalitarian, and liberating conversations take place, which can potentially disguise the more subtle and subjectifying forms of power in qualitative research interviews. Another issue I had to consider involved the question of how to reduce the distance between myself and the boys during our interviews, so that they would feel comfortable enough to share their experiences with me. In order to increase opportunities to build rapport with them prior to their interviews, I gave them several weeks to create their time-lines. During

that time I made contact with them (by telephone and email) to arrange their interviews and to acknowledge receipt of their time-lines, which gave them opportunities to become more familiar with both the research and with myself.

The experience of participating in narrative interviews can be cathartic and empowering, while also enabling participants to contribute to the construction of knowledge (Vickers, 2002). The act of 'story-telling' may be seen as transformative, in that it can provide opportunities for people to gain insight into their lived experiences, and foster personal growth (Pellico & Chinn, 2007). The interview process is, thus, a context in which participants' worldviews may be significantly altered (Stiles, 1990). Wolgemuth and Donohue (2006) take these ideas a step further in an approach they refer to as an "inquiry of discomfort", which aims to foster an intentional transformation, in both the researcher and participants, from entrenched identity positions to socially constructed and performed subjectivities. During the course of the interviews for my study, some of the boys offered feedback about their experience of participating in the research. For example, one of the boys explained how he wanted to use the opportunity to participate in the study to gain confidence, since he usually experienced considerable difficulty organising his thoughts and communicating them to others. He stated:

I think talking and hearing what I am saying makes me understand it a lot better...I felt nervous that I had to talk about myself and I knew I'd struggle talking to you about what I've done and how I think but I thought maybe it could be beneficial for the future - like for me, like practice talking to people. If I want to get a job and go to university I have to learn to talk to people.

One boy expressed a general view on the value of conducting research with teenage boys, as this quotation illustrates:

You need someone to research and get different opinions.

Another of the boys was much amused at the idea that anyone would think they might need compensation for their participation, because, in his view, boys relish the chance to be heard and understood. He put it this way:

When we were getting told about this programme someone said you know as compensation we would get money. And I just said, someone's paying me to talk? I'll just talk. We just love people knowing and hearing our opinions. To me that's more payment than any cash fund.

The ways the boys constructed themselves through narrative, and reflectively engaged in conversations with me around how they made sense of the world, suggest to me that their engagement in this research may well have generated new insights and possibilities for them.

Ethical Considerations

Approval for this study was obtained from the Massey University Ethics Committee at Albany, Auckland. Ethical practice is a multi-faceted process that is by no means limited to trying to predict and address any potential ethical issues prior to undertaking a research project. However, as this is certainly an important and useful part of the process I will briefly outline the steps I took to *embark*, ethically, on this study, before discussing the issues that challenged me subsequently.

From the outset of the study I emphasised to the participants that their stories would be greatly valued, and that the personal information they chose to share would be treated with sensitivity and respect. It was envisaged that a narrative approach would provide an environment in which the boys might feel empowered by opportunities to share their personal stories and celebrate the diverse ways they find to negotiate situations that challenge them. To foster in them a sense of ownership in the project, they were also advised that a summary of the final report would be made available to them (Appendix C). Before commencing the interviews I reminded the boys about their right to decline to answer any question, or to withdraw from the interview at any time or from the study up to a week after the interview. They were also informed that the information they provided would be treated as confidential, their identities would be protected, and that they could ask to have the tape recorder turned off at any stage. The boys were informed that they would be given an opportunity to express any concerns at the end of their interview, and strategies were in place to provide them

with appropriate support should the need arise. I was also conscious that I needed to be sensitive to the boys' demeanour throughout the interviews, and to check with them if I sensed any signs of unease.

The points made above were all important things to consider and revisit with the boys before commencing the interviews. However, there are always some unanticipated issues that arise during the course of a research project. Brinkmann and Kvale (2008) refer to potentially ethical concerns that cannot be fully addressed prior to commencing a study, but instead need to be responded to continually, as "fields of uncertainty". I experienced a number of uncertainties and tensions at various stages of the process. For example, although I had been prepared to speak to all of the senior boys about this project, my contact at the high school preselected one particular class for me to meet. As this was a high band academic class I assumed the reason had something to do with how articulate these students were perceived to be. So right from the start certain preconceived notions about the participants appeared to be filtering through. Also, when I began the interviews I wondered if using the school's counseling offices that were made available to me for this purpose might create an even greater power imbalance between us. This is a space that might conceivably have either heightened the boys' level of discomfort and sense of vulnerability or, conversely, been construed by them as a safe zone. It had been the boys' preference to hold the interviews at school during school hours, and I did not see any signs from them to indicate that this had been problematic. It did occur to me, though, that conducting the interviews at school might reinforce any perceptions they may have had about my 'association' with the school or the education system. This thought had first presented itself when I noticed that many of the boys' time-lines contained numerous references to their academic performances. When I broached the subject with them during their interviews, only one boy told me he had thought that was what I wanted them to talk about. Also, this same boy did not turn up to his scheduled interview on two occasions. When I followed up with him later by telephone and reminded him that he was under no obligation to continue his involvement, he assured me he had simply forgotten and was still keen to participate. Yet I still sensed that I was missing something, so I asked him at the beginning of his interview if he felt unsure about being there. He explained:

That's just coz I didn't know what to put on my time-line. It wasn't that hard but yeah I didn't think that they were that major...and you might have been looking for like something big.

However, he relaxed when I reassured him that whatever was important to him would be interesting to me. In fact, he ended up talking about a number of experiences that he had not listed in his time-line, and he specifically identified "family matters" as something that he had not thought to include, but that they were important to him. It was the opposite case with another of the boys, who made it clear that he did not want to talk about his relationship break-up despite having mentioned it in his time-line. He simply stated:

It's still pretty recent and I don't want to get upset.

So, instead, we had a more general conversation about what it felt like to be attracted to someone, and he brought up the issue of his break-up voluntarily at a later stage in the interview. Some of the boys spoke of being shy or having difficulty expressing themselves clearly to other people. I believe they found it reassuring to hear that I was also a little nervous going into the interviews (and they could easily see I was technically challenged by the audio-recorder). However, I did notice that I occasionally slipped into the role of protective mother or therapist in trying to put them (and perhaps myself) at ease when they seemed uncomfortable. I tried to be mindful that the boys may have had much at stake in this research project, especially if they chose to divulge very personal information and to push themselves outside their comfort zones.

I also heard echoes of those who had questioned the 'appropriateness' of a person of my age and gender conducting interviews with teenage boys. I certainly do not dispute the notion that the boys may have withheld, or constructed differently, information that a younger and/or male researcher might have been privy to. However, I argue that it is also possible that they would have been reluctant to expose their vulnerabilities, or to test out their resistance to normative ideals, in the company of a young, male interviewer. A similar argument could be made regarding diverse cultural perspectives. These issues can never be resolved to complete satisfaction

because we are not dealing with ‘variables’ that behave in some essentialist fashion. Rather, they combine in complex ways with other important interactional features of narrative co-construction (Georgakopoulou, 2006). Thus, my own cultural and historical understandings are recognised as being embedded in both the data and my interpretation of the data. As an academic, a researcher, a clinical psychologist, a mother of three sons, and previously a ‘teenager’, I am multiply positioned in relation to dominant discourses of gender, psychological knowledge, education, adulthood, parenting, mothering, and adolescence. Talking with these boys triggered memories in me about my own adolescent experiences, and about moments of joy and fear watching my own sons and their friends finding their way. Sikes (2005) warns against the risk of ‘othering’ participants because of our tendency to make sense of others’ experiences by comparing them to what we already know. With limited opportunities to get to know the boys, this advice seemed especially pertinent to the present study. I think, however, that I was able to attend to the boys’ understandings of experience without being too distracted or biased by my own. Hopefully, too, I have succeeded in making visible some of the ways that I have contributed to, and may have influenced, the co-construction of the boys’ narratives.

Data Analysis

As a methodological resource, narrative analysis allows for a close inspection of the interplay between personal meaning-making, identity construction, and broader social debates and discourses (Emerson & Frosh, 2004). Emerson and Frosh (2004) offer the following definition of personal narrative within the context of an interview:

Personal narrative is (i) a respondent’s personal story that comprises a relatively discrete, discursively coherent and thematically interwoven subsection of interview text which is, nevertheless, (ii) jointly constructed over the real time of the interview with the interviewer in ways that (iii) privilege the researcher’s areas of interest qua research, but (iv) that privilege the respondent’s views, responses, voice, experience and meaning-making, in relation to those areas of research interest. (p. 50)

My analysis aimed to reveal layers of personal and shared social meanings, constructed through identity positions that may have replicated, resisted, and ruptured

the broader social discourses and relations of power within which they were created. As Emerson and Frosh (2004) argue, critical analysis by way of paying close attention to detail in each participant's narrative allows for individuals' experiences and points of view to be valued in their own right. Another of my research objectives was to inform clinical practice, but I also wanted to challenge the emphasis on anthologising psychological theory as a basis for clinical practice, so I have probably erred on the side of interpreting the boys' behaviours as agentic and as acts of resilience, rather than problematic. A further issue I considered related to the extent to which I may have viewed the boys as naïve or unsophisticated, and I wondered about the impact of reframing some of the ideas they had communicated to me. Barone (2007) suggests that some researchers might see it as hijacking deeply personal understandings that participants have shared, whereas others might argue that it would be unethical not to attempt to expose ways in which individual experiences are embedded in, and constrained by, sets of political power relationships. I hope that I have managed to do justice to both perspectives by starting with an analysis that was well grounded in the boys' narratives, and then allowing it to generate ideas beyond the data so that related, but broader, concepts could be revealed and explored. Another point I wish to highlight relates to a pragmatic decision on my part to reduce the texts to discrete 'core narratives', and to delete my own questions, prompts, and responses from the excerpts I have included in my report. I want to acknowledge that, as narrative interviews are situated and occur through dialogue, this approach risks neglecting aspects of the discursive nature of the data construction.

In terms of the analytic process, my first task was to allocate pseudonyms to each of the participants and organise my files accordingly. It was useful to do this at the outset of the proceedings so that I could begin to experience a sense of getting to know them without having to retrain my memory at a later time. I consider that my analysis began during the transcription phase, as it was then that the boys' individual voices, pauses, emphases in their speech, and expressions of emotion were imprinted on my mind. This helped me later to make more sense of their 'individual' perspectives across different contexts. I adhered to Willig's (2008) advice to listen to the interview recordings and read through the transcripts the first time without making any attempt to analyse the material. The objective at this early stage was to get a feel for what the text was doing before trying to identify how something was being accomplished. The

next task was to immerse myself in the transcripts over multiple readings. Hoskins and Stoltz (2005) refer to this immersion as a kind of “embodied knowing”. Each subsequent reading of the transcripts was felt to be at a deeper level because it incorporated new understandings (Emerson & Frosh, 2004). This further facilitated a gradual process of building up each story as a whole, before breaking them down into more self-contained segments (Hiles & Cermak, 2008). I then went through all of the transcripts making some tentative notes in the margins.

At this point I think it is worth reflecting on some of the messiness inherent in qualitative research designs, because all too often research is presented as tidy, polished documents, concealing the angst of the researcher and disarray of the data that may have preceded their completion. By about this stage I was certainly becoming more aware of my increasing sense of discomfort, which resonated with experiences of the analytic process described by Emerson and Frosh (2004). For example, the imperfections of conversational language, with its faltering, fragmented, and half-finished delivery of questions and responses, was all too evident as I embarked on my first reading of the transcripts (which I had compulsively transcribed word by word, despite being constantly assaulted by grammatical and linguistic treachery - both mine and the boys’). I struggled to resist the urge to edit and correct what had been spoken so ineloquently by all of us at times. I had to keep reminding myself to take care not to privilege the more technically sound speakers and segments of talk when interpreting the data and selecting extracts to include in my report. When I did finally begin to notice some ‘themes’ in the data I was reluctant to write them down, for fear of getting stuck on the surface in a sea of superficial headings. I was also dismayed by the lack of uninterrupted monologues in my search for something that resembled ‘a story’, and I found it difficult to figure out where a ‘narrative’ began and ended. The ideas that were emerging came only in short bursts, embedded as they often were within snippets of talk across an entire transcript. I remembered a suggestion by Pellico and Chinn (2007) that inspired me to try a different strategy. They propose that narrative criticism begins by examining pivotal moments described by the storytellers, personal insights and strengths they identify, and elements in their narratives that they determine as critical. I realised that, in order to do this, I needed to get even closer to the data than I had been. So, I decided to switch my approach to a

more detailed, line-by-line study of the material. Some of the questions I floated as I was reading through the data at this time included:

- How does this boy understand experiences he identifies as ‘important’, as well as the more ‘ordinary’ aspects of his life?
- What is this boy trying to accomplish by presenting his account in this way?
- What resources and discourses are available to him, and being accessed by him?
- What kinds of identities and social positions are being constructed, and what do they offer or constrain?

These questions assisted me to focus more deliberately on how the boys’ storied experiences were being constructed to convey something important about how they saw themselves, and about what opportunities or problems they perceived in the interface between their self-concepts and their social environments. By the seventh transcript I had reached what seemed to be saturation point. That is, there no longer appeared to be any new ‘big ideas’ coming through. By now I had constructed a provisional set of broad ideas. These were (in no particular order):

- Negotiating individual difference and fitting in
- Agency in peer relationships: stereotypes and peer pressure
- Gendered communication
- Comparing cultures & cultural positioning
- New Zealand cultural norms
- Conveying selfhood
- Coping and resilience
- Lessons in love
- Constructing success and failure
- Navigating new territory
- Family matters
- Performing maturity
- The social in online worlds

From here I attempted to track patterns and ideas within the transcripts, paying attention to contradictions and repetitions, and noting whether the episodes being recounted were oriented towards or away from the present. It was apparent that there was considerable cross-over in the material I had entered under each of my tentative headings. I reflected on how these ideas were linked to each other and might be organised within a framework of overarching concepts. I began to conceptualise the ideas as constituting fragments of larger cultural narratives which have been constructed around the social relationships that boys have to negotiate in the construction and performance of their identities. This process culminated in my decision to structure my findings under the following headings:

- Negotiating Self
- Negotiating Family
- Negotiating Friendship
- Negotiating Society
- Negotiating Future

I now had cause to take a fresh look at all of the transcripts, in order to expand on some of the ideas I had written about within each of these domains. As I was doing so I also asked myself some new questions, namely:

Who stands to lose or gain something?

What new spaces are created and what might be at stake?

How have I come to see things in this particular way?

What assumptions do I bring to this understanding?

The above questions guided me towards a more critical evaluation of the data, by extending the scope of my analysis beyond what the boys were saying about themselves and their experiences. This allowed me to examine more deliberately how the discursive production of their accounts functioned to enhance or restrict their lives, and to better identify and articulate the discourses and common-sense understandings that were influencing my own interpretations.

In the following chapter I present and discuss my analysis of the findings which emerged from my research. In the subsequent and final chapter I then consider the implications of this work for clinical practice and offer suggestions for future research.

Chapter Three: Analysis and Discussion

The storied experiences and understandings of the teenage boys who participated in this study are relational in context and socially performative. This means that they make sense of their lives by locating their experiences within their networks of relationships, and that their behaviours are enacted in ways that accomplish certain goals. In other words, self-narratives are “employed in relationships to sustain, enhance, or impede various actions” (Gergen & Gergen, 1997, p. 163). The boys’ narratives reveal diverse ways in which they negotiate, fashion, and represent their ‘selves’ in relation to their significant others, and to the institutions that constitute their social world. They position and reposition themselves depending on the image they wish to convey and the particular context that is being foregrounded. For example, they identify as both ‘different’ and ‘same’ in a variety of ways; as young adults, students, athletes, academics, mates, boyfriends, sons, and brothers. In this way they can be seen to construct and perform individual, collective, and social identities at different times and in different sociocultural domains. The boys employ a variety of narrative strategies to demonstrate their multi-faceted identities. Thus, their stories capture important ways that they negotiate and make sense of ‘experiences of youth’, which Griffin (1997) describes most eloquently as “a complex series of intersecting moments” (p. 6).

The main ideas that emerged from the data analysis are presented below under discrete headings. However, it should be noted that there is considerable overlap, with much of the data straddling several of the areas selected for discussion. An important point to highlight here relates to my decision to present the analysis as individual ‘narratives-within-narratives’. By this I mean that I have abstracted snippets of conversation from within larger stories, which are themselves but layers of the boys’ self-narratives. These personal narratives are, in turn, constructed and reconstructed within even broader ‘master’ narratives. As will become evident, I refer to the boys by name (albeit pseudonyms), situate their stories in the present tense, and, in many instances, follow the flow of one boy’s narrative for a time before moving on to a

related example. Privileging the boys' individual accounts and meaning-making is not intended as a form of moral fence-sitting, but a way of foregrounding agency in their discursive positioning and, thus, recognising that they can be self-reflexive and capable of self-directed change (Emerson & Frosh, 2004). However, it is not my intention to treat the data as representative only of the ways that these particular boys understand their lives. While it is important to bear in mind that the following analysis is based on narratives of boys who are considered to be generally high-functioning, I would nonetheless argue that the meanings revealed in their individual stories may also serve to illuminate experiences commonly shared by other teenage boys (Pellico & Chinn, 2007). It is hoped that the approach I have taken in presenting my analysis in this way will help the reader to conjure up images of real boys with real voices, evoke and challenge memories of his or her own teenage experiences, and elicit a sense of participating in, rather than passively observing, the construction of these narratives.

In the following sections of this chapter, I present my analysis of ways that boys construct and enact their identities as they negotiate notions of self, family, friendship, society, and the future.

Negotiating Self

In authoring stories of the self, culture and memory are critically linked (Andrews, 2004). As Andrews (2004) explains, the selection of certain experiences and the exclusion or only partial rendering of others in the construction of an individual's self-narrative represents an act of engaging in a cultural performance, in that our personal memories are connected to, and shaped by, wider social processes. The movement through space and time in the construction of personal narratives allows for the possibility of improvisation and transformation of selves and identities, a process Bamberg (2004) calls "becoming". According to Harre and van Langenhove (1999), there is a tension within different psychological perspectives between the notion of a

continuous selfhood and the plurality of selves that constitute our social identities. However, they posit that both constructions of self are produced by means of discursive practices. Bamberg suggests that the interactive realm of narrative production functions as a site where storytellers stake their claims (and thus reveal their identities), and, additionally, where they deploy rhetorical devices to convince others of their own worldview and moral stance. In this section I aim to reveal ways that teenage boys claim identity positions and negotiate ‘self’ in their understandings and constructions of their place in the world.

Developing Self

The concept of ‘growing up’ is conventionally constructed around notions of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development (Passer & Smith, 2001). Children are often viewed by adults as inherently innocent and vulnerable, and as lacking in personal agency and the competencies that come with age (Gottschall, Wardman, Edgeworth, Hutchesson, & Saltmarsh, 2010; Moran-Ellis, 2010). Teenagers may of course have a very different view of their ‘younger’ selves. One way that they may come to understand more about who they are and who they have become is by revisiting past experiences and creating meaning out of the contradictions and similarities they observe between ‘then’ and ‘now’. They may also waver between moments of nostalgia and urges to shed their child skins and move on. As Pasupathi and McLean (2010) suggest, constructions of the past can inform a young person’s emergent sense of identity in important ways. For example, by reflecting on their earlier experiences as ‘children’, they can construct aspects of a self-concept that may endure over time. This process may also enable them to increasingly engage in a navigation of more complex, and sometimes contradictory, views of the self. In turn, this self-reflective work may facilitate their increasing commitment to certain values and perspectives.

Boys in this study reveal ways that they integrate memories of being younger into their current understandings of the people they are today and who they may become in the future. Their identity constructions and subjective positions are embedded in discursively produced notions about how ‘developing teenagers’ ought to behave and

think. Thus, some boys perceive that one of their tasks is to work out which of their ‘child behaviours’ they should discard or ‘grow out of’ in order to facilitate their journey towards adulthood. Fine (2004) uses the analogy of a “cultural toolkit” to depict a set of socially legitimised behavioural options teenagers may employ in different ways, depending on the social context in which they enact a particular strategy. According to Fine, this toolkit comprises a pool of ‘adult’ behaviours that teenagers may consider self-enhancing (e.g., embracing ‘adult’ discourses about risky teen behaviours in conversations with adults), and ‘childish’ behaviours that they can draw upon for impression management (e.g., engaging in ‘immature’ pranks to get a laugh from their peers). However, boys do not only associate ‘growing up’ with the enactment of certain behaviours. They also understood it as an embodied experience. Physical and sexual maturity, as publicly displayed through body size, is an important component in the construction of hierarchies of masculinity within peer contexts (Forrest, 2000). As some of the boys in his study reveal, being small in stature compared to their peers can be associated with feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability. It stands to reason that if a boy experiences himself as ‘bigger than before’ he might feel better able to navigate both his social and material world. Simon, for example, can be seen to evaluate his own ‘progress’ in this way.

Sometimes I’m paranoid about things that might happen like walking around in the dark...I suppose I’ve matured a bit. I’m not as small any more...I’m less worried about it now. I’m probably still just as vulnerable. Now I don’t sort of walk around looking like a little kid and scared.

Simon’s narrative suggests that teenage boys may experience ‘maturity’ as both an emotional and an embodied sense of self. In this case, being “less worried” is constructed as a consequence of increased emotional maturity, in that Simon portrays himself as being ‘in touch’ with his feelings, and therefore capable of identifying times when he feels afraid or vulnerable. Oransky and Marecek (2009) construct boys’ emotional growth in a similar way, noting that some of their participants showed themselves to be emotionally aware since they were able to recount and describe experiences of worry, hurt, and fear. In terms of embodied maturity, it could be argued that when boys are perceived by others to be more ‘adult’ than ‘child’ due to their size, they may also be assumed to be reasonably confident and competent

individuals. On the other hand, if a boy's physicality deviates even slightly from the hegemonic masculine norms, he may be regarded as inferior by his peers (Sherriff, 2007).

Feelings of vulnerability or powerlessness can certainly continue beyond childhood, but the focus of a boy's apprehension may change as he becomes more sensitive to his social world. As Simon states:

There's different worries that I've started. Just generally worrying about what happens in later life like going out in the real world coz like Dad had problems at work and I just don't want that to happen to me. It shouldn't coz I'll be a lot younger.

Here, it seems that Simon's earlier worries have to some extent been superseded by concerns that are more relevant to him today. Currently his fears are linked to his father's potential unemployment, which makes sense given that he lives in a society that endorses occupational and financial achievements as measures of success (Lehmann, 2009), and as a moral imperative for young people in their transition to adulthood (Bessant, 1996). A parent's inability to find work or retain a steady job may also represent a rupture to common-sense notions about the stability of adult status (Griffin, 1997), and the permanence of family life (Samuels, 2009). As Simon's narrative demonstrates, boys may manage these contradictory discourses by envisaging their 'successful' future selves.

As Simon's story continues, below, we see that he constructs his emerging 'more responsible' sense of self as problematic.

I'm probably thinking more ahead now than I was then coz like then you didn't really worry about anything...It's quite annoying sometimes though coz sometimes I'd just like to be able to do something first without having to think about it and then not doing it because I realise it's not a good idea.

Simon's apparent desire, or sense of obligation, to 'think before he acts' seems to sit uncomfortably alongside his tenuous hold on the responsibility-free child he once was, or at least *remembers* being. Thus, teenage boys can experience tensions that may stem from the perception that they can no longer behave in certain ways because

they have already reached a point of no return. In other words, because they cannot *un-know* what they know now, they cannot revert to their ‘child ways of being’ that previously allowed them to be spontaneous, and kept them blissfully unaware of potential consequences of their actions. This image of the ‘innocent and unencumbered child’ resonates with Griffin’s (1997) view that the discourse of adolescence as a period of change and transition “operates in contrast to prevailing notions of innocent dependent childhood and static mature adult status” (p. 7). This appears to present a dilemma for Simon, since he speaks almost nostalgically about when he was younger, but his positioning along the ‘developmental continuum’ does not allow for the possibility of coming and going between childhood and adolescence.

For some boys, experiences associated with getting older may also bring with them a growing awareness of difficulties that those around them may be facing, and an increasing sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of others. This is illustrated in the following excerpt, in which Ben describes how he both *wants* and *needs* to be available for his friends, even though he is currently struggling with problems of his own.

I’ve had a few friends that have been having issues as well that I’m sad for as well and I’m trying to make sure they’re alright with that. And I guess I’m thinking about that but I’m also sick at the same time. Coz I’m getting older now. I find out that there’s other people that are having troubles as well and I need to try to be there for friends when they need me.

This narrative suggests that another way in which teenage boys may perceive themselves to have grown up is in their capacity to rise above personal problems in order to be more responsive to the needs of others. Here again, this could be interpreted as a form of emotional maturity, in the sense that it takes skillfulness and empathy to read others feelings (Oransky & Marecek, 2009). However, the cost of achieving this kind of maturity is constructed in terms of giving up the carefree life of a child. Ben states:

I’m still like just the same as I’d always been but I just told them if they ever wanted they can let me know if they want to talk or anything. Coz I was pretty carefree really but probably at the beginning of this year I just started seeing that I’m getting older and I

need to come to terms with the fact that I'm going to be getting a job in the future and I guess the problems are going to start coming up a lot more than they were when you were a kid.

What Ben identifies as a significant feature of growing up is the need to adapt one's behaviour in order to manage the new responsibilities that come with age, and to prepare for what is assumed will be a more complicated and demanding future. So, for Ben, it is his *behaviour* that he perceives as having changed, rather than *himself* as a person. This suggests that some boys conceive of a 'core' self-identity that remains more or less consistent throughout their childhood and teenage years. Ben's narrative also appears to be strongly situated within an established discourse of development that sees individuals as transitioning from childhood to adulthood (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005).

Sam, on the other hand, seems to understand maturity as an emerging personality trait that is manifested through a range of new behaviours. As he reflects on how he and his peers have changed since starting high school, he focuses on the notion that young people mature at different rates. That is, he exemplifies how positioning oneself in relation to one's peers may be used by boys as a way of emphasising social maturity (Demant & Jarvinen, 2006). Sam demonstrates this idea by portraying some of his peers as more childish than others in specific ways that they interact.

You see like from Year 9 to Year 11 people get a lot more mature personality-wise and talk about anything like you can talk about girls more openly. People mature more, don't act as childish like don't run around screaming although there are people in our class that still do that. And you don't joke about like you don't do 'Your Mama' jokes any more.

Maturity is, thus, constructed as a multi-faceted way of being and acting. From Sam's perspective, maturity is achieved in the context of an emerging self-identity. It is understood by him to facilitate the development of more sophisticated social skills that make it possible for boys to explore, for example, their gendered world. There is also the impression of a moral element in this perception of a more mature state, which is constructed in terms of self-regulated behaviour. It is revealed in Sam's observation that humour at the expense of others is no longer considered appropriate or acceptable for people of his age. The use of humour in adolescent peer relations

can be an important feature of identity construction and power relations (Klein & Kuiper, 2006). For example, it may be employed in the creation of hierarchical masculinities in schools. As Huuki, Manninen, and Sunnari (2010) suggest, humour can represent a resource used by dominant boys to strengthen their power positions and to marginalise other boys. The researchers observed in their study that the ‘successful’ use of specific forms of humour was dependent on a boy’s status. For instance, high-status boys were able to legitimately and successfully express humour through homosexual performances, provided their heterosexuality was unquestioned, but marginalised boys who did this were seen as failures. The humour of low-status boys was likewise devalued by dominant boys. Thus, Huuki and colleagues posit that humour may not only affect a boy’s social position, but his status may also determine the perceived value of the humour he uses.

For another of the boys in the present study, the idea of maturing out of childhood is associated with greater self-sufficiency. In the following narrative, Finn’s reflection on his younger days elicits in him a sense of having gained certain knowledge and skills that he is now old enough to put to good use.

I don’t know like back then you didn’t know things and you’ve matured from there and got smarter and more able to handle more situations. Like five years ago I wouldn’t have been able to go camping by myself, or with a few friends. I’d just have no clue. I’d be like what do I do, do I cook, do I anything, or now I’d just be like yeah I can handle that. I’ve got more experiences to build on when I start something new.

Finn’s account about growing up is constructed around ideas about gaining greater independence and becoming better equipped to handle new challenges. It is understood as an iterative process by which knowledge and competencies build incrementally. He seems to be saying that, because of this, the business of growing up becomes increasingly easier to manage. His narrative is about learning and ‘becoming’ (e.g., “smarter”), but there is no indication that he conceptualises the process of maturing as occurring in a linear fashion. Rather, it seems to be understood as a series of new contexts of experience. Even so, it is not merely new experiences that he sees as opening up to him, but also opportunities to demonstrate new competencies. He states:

Yeah like feel more confident doing things and taking on new risks and challenges. I can predict stuff better like seeing how risky something is, like going mountain biking or that sort of thing. You build experience up and like figure out oh I shouldn't really take that jump whereas five years ago I would have been like, should I take that jump, and not thought about it as much.

Here, Finn has taken up a counter-position to a youth risk discourse that portrays adolescent boys as impulsive risk-takers. His narrative is concerned with what adults would most likely frame as 'healthy' risk-taking, since it emphasises personal challenges within the socially acceptable arena of sport. The image he presents is one that fits well with his conceptualisation of having matured *from* childhood, as it highlights his perceived capacity to assess, and if necessary avoid, potentially 'dangerous' situations.

The above examples demonstrate ways that boys make sense of how they have changed and grown since their younger years. A thread that runs through each of these narratives relates to their sense of 'maturing out of childhood', which they understand in various ways. Different meanings that boys attach to the concept of maturity include growing in both stature and confidence, becoming more competent, learning to regulate their behaviours, gaining independence, becoming more emotionally self-aware, having a greater capacity for compassion towards others, and becoming more future-oriented in their thinking and planning. Some boys appear to experience a sense of self that Harre and van Langehove (1999) might suggest conveys a certain stability across time and space. Boys can also be seen to frame some of their peers as lagging behind in their development, in order to position themselves as more 'mature'. Other boys seem to understand themselves as both "being and becomings", to borrow Uprichard's (2008) terms. They see themselves as *being*, for example, in terms of their personality, physical size, and social maturity. Yet, they also demonstrate ways in which they experience themselves as actively engaging in a process of *becoming* (more skilled, an adult, a wiser person perhaps). This process is understood by some as a gradual accumulation of experience and knowledge that continues seamlessly beyond childhood, as opposed to representing an indication of their 'incompleteness'.

Maneuvering around the Genderscape

Gendered identities constitute part of the social identities that teenage boys construct and negotiate within the different social spaces they inhabit. Gender may be conceptualised as sets of ideas, values, and normative behaviours that are constructed and enacted within these social arenas. Social expressions of gender differentiate between masculine and feminine practices, and therefore signal legitimate ways to *be* and *do* ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ (Ivinson & Murphy, 2003). As with other identity work, gendered identities may be fractured, transformed, contradicted, and contested. Frosh (2002) speaks of boys’ awareness of an ‘ideal’ masculine status that is both impossible to attain and restricts them in their social relationships. Connell (2005) would agree that teenage boys experience considerable pressure to conform to hegemonic definitions of masculinity, but argues that multiple paths are available to them. As illustrated in this section, boys adopt aspects of normative gender positions while resisting others, as they encounter multiple social domains across the genderscape involving family, peer groups, classroom environments, and sporting arenas.

Gender roles have conventionally been portrayed as social representations of a natural order (Forrest, 2000). For example, females tend to be socialised to be more emotionally expressive and relationship-oriented than males (Feiring, 1996). Consequently, it may be difficult for boys to explore alternative versions of masculinity if they are only exposed to traditional gender practices in their everyday environments (Ging, 2005). These notions surface in the following example, as David demonstrates *doing emotion* in accordance with his understanding that emotion-work is an inherently feminine activity, while males prefer dealing in ‘facts’.

Well my Mum’s a lot more emotional so you try and explain your feelings and how you feel about situations to her more than - my Dad’s quite straight up. So you just tell him straight up. Like Dad’s soccer, the economy and stuff like that.

In this way, gender is constructed in accordance with conventional thinking as a male/female dichotomy, with masculinity defined as ‘measured’ and ‘rational’ (and femininity automatically positioned as ‘irrational’) (Walkerdine, 1989). Frosh (2002)

points out that this historical and hegemonic masculine notion of the “rational man” who lives within his “unpredictable, irrational body” has been challenged by feminist critiques, but argues that rationality need not be rejected entirely, since rationality itself constitutes a form of meaning-making. Rather, he suggests that we need to expand our ideas about how we make sense of experience by including the ‘irrational’ (e.g., emotion, creativity, and spirituality).

In his narrative of gendered learning and identity construction, David has so far located himself in relation to his understanding of his parents’ gendered world. Having, thus, laid out the ground-rules as he sees them, he then tentatively troubles the ‘male’ perspective, or at least the meaning of his own relationship with this performance of masculinity. He does this by juxtaposing *being* less emotional by nature, with *showing* less emotion by choice.

Like I’d tell my friends straight up but I wouldn’t go into my feelings...It’s just the way it’s developed. I think most guys are less emotional so they do say the facts more than their emotions...Coz I certainly feel things but just don’t talk about it.

As might be expected, gendered rules governing emotional expression that play out within boys’ family contexts are also reproduced in their peer relationships. That is not to say, however, that parents always communicate traditional notions about masculinity to their sons. As Wilson et al. (2010) observed in their research with gay, bisexual, and ‘undecided’ adolescent males, some boys receive clear messages from their parents that they do not have to conform to dominant definitions of masculinity. Boys may also glide in and out of the various cultural scripts they learn. We can see with David that this possibility creates a perplexing state of affairs, for hard as he tries to avoid swimming against the tide, we can sense the emotion he experiences leaking out around the edges of his resolve.

Male peer group practices police what is able to be talked about ‘among the guys’. These practices reproduce an ‘emotional deficit’ model, reflecting as they do the notion that a lack of emotionality in hegemonic masculinity inhibits the sharing of emotions within boys’ male friendships (Bank & Hansford, 2000). However, there are

inconsistencies in common-sense understandings of what kinds of emotions boys can or should experience and express, as Sam illustrates:

Sometimes it's just easier talking to girls about feelings because when talking to guys it would be like - coz you know how guys are like not meant to have feelings as well. Like when you're talking to a group of guys you try not to talk about feelings coz of that but when it's with girls it's all right.

As shown above, boys can and do acknowledge that they experience feelings, but may perceive limitations regarding the extent to which they can express emotion to others, and how closely they can interact with other males (Frosh, 2002). However, they are also seen to manage these contradictions by identifying certain spaces, such as private conversations with their mothers or female friends, as providing opportunities for the expression and exploration of feelings without threat to their masculinity. In this way, they create subject positions for themselves within the emotional world (Frosh & Saville Young, 2008). Thus, it is argued that teenage boys actively engage in negotiating a sense of their own emotional self and development.

Another important context in which social gender identity is experienced and performed by teenagers is in high school. Within this environment, students negotiate a range of social possibilities or constraints about how they can legitimately behave (Ivinson & Murphy, 2003). In Western society, success is often measured by how well an individual does in relation to others, and this has implications for how gendered practices are perpetuated in our social institutions. As teenagers' lives revolve largely around school, this means that they are constantly being compared to their peers and defined by their perceived competence in school-related activities. In co-educational schools, not only are boys pitted against boys, but they also compete with girls. That is not to say that all boys, or all girls for that matter, are competitive by nature or even particularly care how well their peers are performing. Furthermore, it has been suggested that boys often resist trying to achieve academically because it is not seen to fit with the heterosexual masculinity they perform in the classroom (Curtin & Linehan, 2002). However, a number of the boys in this study certainly do experience themselves as growing up in a society that encourages a healthy dose of 'may the best man win'.

David, for example, positions himself as a high academic achiever whose ambition to succeed appears to be mainly fuelled by the fact that he and his male friends compete against each other. As Sherriff (2007) has noted, even though girls and boys may share certain goals, the ways they go about achieving them can be gendered. He argues, for example, that teenagers often seem to be less concerned about competing against members of the opposite-sex than they are about competing against their same-sex peers. David illustrates this point:

My friends have come to see me as someone who does achieve well...[we're] very competitive. That's the main like the source of how I do well...It's boy competitive attitude verses the girls...I do it to win. Girls just do it coz they have to. Sort of participation verses doing well. They participate and do well but they don't push themselves to do well.

Here we can also see that there is a clear distinction made between perceptions of boys' attitudes and those of girls. 'Being competitive' is thus constructed as a gendered phenomenon, described in terms of a typically 'male' mind-set that differentiates boys from girls. That is, when boys achieve at a high level it is understood to be the result of effort and determination. Conversely, girls are seen as relatively disinterested actors who, nonetheless, manage to attain good results merely by participating. David's version of the high school academic scene sits in opposition to the image constructed by boys in Jackson and Dempster's (2009) study, in which they portray themselves as 'effortlessly achieving', and girls as hard-working and conscientious. It may be that David presents himself in this way in order to convey that he not only has ability, but knows exactly how to use it. In other words, he can score points for being doubly skilled.

Pete, on the other hand, situates his understanding of gender differences in education within an enduring public discourse that depicts boys as failing at school.

They do seem to think that pretty much all of us are struggling with the NCEA [National Certificate of Educational Achievement] because they talk about how it's more biased towards girls but I don't know. The girls probably are succeeding better but I don't know if that's because of the NCEA or because the guys don't feel like studying as much as they do.

Pete appears to be wrestling with conflicting messages about possible biases in the education system and gendered notions of natural ability and drive. What is potentially most at stake is that boys may increasingly come to believe they are disadvantaged by the system and that their chance of a 'successful' future is therefore in jeopardy. If this were to happen, it might well become a self-fulfilling prophecy for this generation of teenage boys. Within the contemporary debates about boys' academic underachievement, prevailing discourses construct boys as both passive victims of girls' relative success, as well as active agents of their own underperformance resulting from their poor attitudes to learning (Griffin, 2001). An analysis of the arguments put forward in a government inquiry into boys' education in Australia has led Hodgetts and Lecouteur (2010) to suggest that such constructions decontextualise comparisons of male and female performance, as they fail to account for social inequalities (especially related to ethnicity and socioeconomic status) that are considered to have a much stronger impact on performance. They also dispute the notion that an increasing emphasis in the curricula on literacy and a shift to continuous assessment (both constructed as areas in which boys are naturally weak) have given girls an advantage. Mahony (2000) argues for changes in the culture and politics of teaching that will challenge existing gendered constructions of ability and achievement. An international response to the panic over boys' education has seen a preoccupation with recruiting more male teachers. In Mahony's view, however, the more important issue is that we need men who can work with boys to construct alternative masculinities that will allow them to value skills which all students can benefit from (e.g., competence in self-expression and relating to others).

Organised competitive team sport provides a further social context in which hegemonic gender norms may be constructed and regulated. Although the popularity of different sporting disciplines varies from country to country, certain sports attract especially high rates of participation by teenage boys worldwide. One thing that the most popular team sports have in common is that they are, with few exceptions, gender-segregated and male-dominated (Connell, 2005). This is significant in terms of masculine identity formation because, as Connell (2005) notes: "recreation involving bodies in ritualised combat is thus presented to enormous numbers of youth as a site of masculine camaraderie, a source of identity, an arena of competition for prestige, and a possible career" (p. 15). Children are socialised by adults from a young age into

moral codes embedded in sports activities, including conventions around 'sportsmanship' that apply to both players and spectators (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007). As the following analysis reveals, teenage boys view participation in sports as a social practice in which they observe others' behaviour and learn to conduct themselves in accordance with normative expectations. In this respect they also see the 'sports team' as providing a unique platform for such accomplishments. Although not always articulated by the boys, it could be argued that the behaviours they try to emulate are those they see as highly valued masculine traits that speak to 'brotherhood' through notions of comradeship and allegiance. As the next excerpt illustrates, Anton constructs the playing field as a place where boys determine the quality of their friendships on the basis of their team-mates' behaviour under pressure and the degree of loyalty they show to the team.

A lot of my friends that I know now are actually from my team. So you get to know people really well. The main group I hang out with, like the majority of them are in my soccer team...you get to see what they're really like. Whether they're going to help you when you need it. Like how much they want to do well or how much loyalty they have to the team. You get to really see the qualities people have...It makes you see who you really want to spend time with I guess.

There is clearly more at play here than soccer. What seems particularly important to Anton is that the game provides an opportunity to assess what his team-mates are really made of and whether they can be counted on. He appears to be saying that if they pass the test of loyalty in this arena, it bodes well for how they will treat their friends in other situations.

By contrast, Andrew's narrative of sport has quite a different focus. The experiences he recounts speak to the privileging of certain masculinities over others in the sporting arena. He uses the example of a school trip to show how societal attitudes towards certain sporting sub-cultures are constantly reproduced and reinforced. His deeply felt sense of injustice simmers close to the surface.

I saw the discrimination between rugby players and netball players and then the other sports. The rugby players get treated so well in this country. And squash players it's like the lowest...I think it's because they don't understand the skill involved. They think that

their sport's the best I guess. And anyone can play squash. It's an easy, wussy sport because it's not very physically demanding. But really it is.

Gendered practices in Andrew's school are elucidated by his opening comment which immediately locates rugby and netball in the prized positions. Furthermore, a gendered and value-laden sports hierarchy is seen to permeate New Zealand culture more generally. As a 'lowly' squash player, Andrew is among the boys who are marginalised for playing a sport that is denigrated by the rugby fraternity as "wussy". In Hird and Jackson's (2001) study of narratives of heteronormativity, their British and New Zealand teenage male participants constructed 'wuss' as the opposite of 'stud', such that 'wusses' were seen to be effeminate or homosexual. According to Martino (1999), the term 'wuss' is actually a sexualised expression derived from 'weak pussy', referring to female genitalia. Furthermore, given that weakness has historically been part of the discursive construction of femininity in patriarchal societies, Andrew's use of the word in this context shows how dominant boys can effectively feminise and subordinate other boys while simultaneously strengthening their own positions. Andrew clearly contests the lofty status accorded to rugby players, and thus resists this particular stereotypical construction of masculinity. However, by essentially glossing over the 'obvious', that *boys* play rugby and *girls* play netball, it could be argued that he, too, is reproducing gendered stereotypes. As Connell (2005) points out, organised sport has become an important means of differentiation among boys, as well as an important way of constructing 'difference' between boys and girls. It has also been suggested that boys who do not subscribe to the pursuit of academic success may view sport as a cultural resource that enables them to create alternative places of belonging and lay claim to a hegemonic masculinity (Abraham, 2008).

Ignorance of the technical ability and physicality needed by boys to succeed in 'lesser' sports is perceived by Andrew to be at the core of the issue. Interpreted in this way, it is not so much the high value placed on physical strength that is called into question, but rather the misperceptions about who is seen to embody it. Andrew attempts to clarify why he thinks rugby players get so much attention:

Yeah coz it's macho I guess...They're more tough...Because then they're more physically able apparently. With guys it gets respect and with girls it's like more attractive I guess.

Teenage boys are positioned by common-sense notions of masculinity, where toughness is highly regarded by both male and female peers. Moreover, this is about *heterosexual* masculinity, which constructs physical toughness as an important attribute for attracting the opposite sex. Allen (2003) contends that heterosexual masculinity exists as a key feature of hegemonic masculinity in New Zealand culture. For example, many of the young men in her study positioned themselves as emotionally detached, macho, and sex-obsessed studs, although there were others who resisted these dominant discourses.

Belonging to this elite group of males is also seen by Andrew to have other advantages. For example, when rugby players misbehave they apparently go unchallenged and unpunished.

The rugby players got treated really well especially by other staff in the school...It was like rugby came first. Even though they caused lots of troubles...they broke the rules...And we didn't get any recognition even though probably we were the best performing team in our school...In this country I don't think it could change...I just get over it.

From Andrew's perspective, the rugby boys can flout the rules without fear of reprisal. A further source of frustration and resentment stems from his perception that popularity and recognition is bestowed upon those who rank highest on the sports hierarchy, regardless of how well teams from 'othered' sports may perform. Andrew's final remark ("I just get over it") could of course be taken at face value, meaning that he has resigned himself to accept that our societal mind-set is unlikely to change. However, when I consider Andrew's narrative in its entirety, I also note his resistance to other dominant social discourses (e.g., the stereotyping of 'nerds' as social outcasts, and adolescent males as out-of-control binge drinkers), which I discuss later. Therefore, I contend that he in fact has no intention of just rolling over and accepting that things cannot be different.

In summary, gender can be seen as an ongoing process of social negotiation that requires boys to continually enact and uphold gendered self-identities in order to achieve specific goals within specific social arenas (Oransky & Marecek, 2009). As boys navigate their genderscape, they engage actively and reflectively with a number of issues in trying to make sense of the gendered practices they are exposed to in their everyday life. They explore accessible, contestable, and alternative ways of enacting masculinity, and inhabit or reject different masculinities depending on what needs to be accomplished (Connell, 2005). Their narratives have revealed how hegemonic gendered practices are legitimated and reinforced within the home, the school, and the community. Boys may learn from their parents how to enact emotion in ‘appropriately’ masculine ways, and they may reproduce these behaviours in interactions with their male peers. However, they can also be seen to question and resist proscribed ways of being emotional beings. In school contexts, boys have to navigate gender systems that operate in academic and sporting domains. Gottschall et al. (2010) assert that “schooling functions as a technology for social selection and sorting” (p. 19). We certainly get a sense from some of these boys that they experience a fiercely competitive culture within the school environment. Belonging to a sports team can be understood by boys as providing them with opportunities to strengthen relationships with their male peers. It is also evident that the sporting arena is an important location for identity construction, and that it represents a site where hegemonic masculinities are rewarded (O'Donovan, 2003). However, it is worth noting that although most of the boys interviewed for this project have described themselves as avid and skilled sportsmen in a variety of disciplines, not one of them has been involved in New Zealand’s ‘national’ sport of rugby. Boys’ attempts to reconstruct hegemonic notions of masculinity to ensure their own inclusion could be framed as a demonstration of resilience.

Making Sense of Difficult Life Events

Difficult experiences can provide opportunities for teenagers to gain important insights about themselves and their capacity to deal with adversity (Weber, Rowling, & Scanlon, 2007). This higher level of self-awareness may, in turn, influence the way they imagine their futures. Possibly one of greatest challenges a young person might

face is coming to terms with serious illness and death. Major disruptions to family life are also likely to present considerable hurdles to teenagers. When they experience critical events such as these, their relationships with important people in their lives often take on much greater significance (O'Connor, 2006). As Ungar (2003) has suggested, people may draw on both personal and social resources to navigate confronting issues. The boys in this study demonstrate a number of ways that they do this when they experience situations they perceive as potential threats to their stability, security, and wellbeing.

When Finn recalls the recent loss of his grandmother and near-death of his cousin, he reflects on how these experiences have made him take stock of what matters to him most.

It makes you value life a bit more to see how easy it goes...Like having a happy family, like having two parents and brothers and sisters and I know some people don't have that. Having a life where you have most of the things you need and some things you want. Like some people don't have that either. Yeah like you think about that a lot more I think after being through stuff like that.

Seeing first-hand that life can be snatched away at any moment gives rise to ideas about what might be conceived of as a 'good life'. For Finn, the essential ingredients appear to be positive family relationships within what he constructs as an 'intact' family, complete with siblings and both parents. These experiences appear to have inspired in him a sense that he already has everything he really needs to be happy, plus even a few 'extras' that can make life just that much more enjoyable. Children and teenagers in a New Zealand study by Burrows and Wright (2004) emphasised similar ideals in their constructions of a 'happy and healthy life'. Many of the ideas expressed by these young people appeared to reflect contemporary, individualistic understandings of health and morality (e.g., having a healthy family and community, being goal-oriented, having a clear conscience, helping others, and being friendly, fair, and brave). However, Maori participants in Burrows and Wright's study tended to place greater weight on taking care of others, which fits with a Maori health perspective that emphasises whanau (social connectedness) as a key dimension of wellbeing.

As Finn continues, he finds it difficult to reconcile the enormous gap between his own circumstances and those of others who are much less fortunate. He states:

Like sometimes when I go and buy stuff you sort of think someone somewhere doesn't have this or they can't afford this. When you see someone tipping out their drink in a rubbish bin or something it's like some people will die like a hundred people are going to die today because they haven't got a drink.

Positioning himself among the lucky ones, Finn demonstrates emerging insight and concern about the harsh realities of life beyond his own doorstep. This could be interpreted as a challenge to ideas about adolescent egocentrism proposed by Elkind (1967), which conceptualise teenagers as being too self-involved to concern themselves with others' problems. Finn underscores his growing awareness of others' suffering by drawing attention to practices of consumption and waste that are enacted in comparatively carefree and affluent societies. Finn's narrative suggests that difficult personal experiences can function for some boys as a wake-up call to appreciate the people and things they most value but may often take for granted. For some, this might also represent a first step towards a more charitable and community-oriented approach to life.

Other boys may look for meaning in the aftermath of a loved one's death by trying to understand the emotions that such a loss can elicit. David, for example, recollects a sequence of unsettling feelings when he attempts to explain the impact of losing his grandfather.

Although I didn't express it a lot I held it in internally. It kind of built up and I then got real sad. Then it kind of dissipated over a period.

David describes a sense of having kept his grief close to his chest, concealed and protected, until it reached a level of intensity that allowed him to name what he was feeling. He recalls a gradual release from his sadness, suggesting that he may have gained some insight into his ability to endure and survive emotional pain. David describes below how he was to be able to make some sense of his feelings and his loss in a way that was personally meaningful.

I have a wall with all these certificates of what I've done. And so when I feel down I look up to them and that kind of builds me up. So I cherish my achievements and that helps me through tough times. Since he has died I have noticed it more.

Thus, tokens of previous accomplishments are seen as a resource that provides strength in difficult times. I argue that these physical symbols of success may also, if only at a subconscious level, activate a renewed sense of belonging to the communities and institutions that they represent. This 'connectedness' may be conceptualised as social capital, a construct that Pooley, Cohen, and Pike (2005) describe as the "glue" that holds individuals and groups together, and constitutes connections involving social relationships, networks, and skills. However, as Vaisey (2007) contends, "the spatiotemporal organization of social life" (p. 853) (i.e., the structural and operational aspects of social networks) does not of itself give rise to a shared sense of belonging or generate social capital. Although these are necessary components, he argues that a common understanding of ideas, culture, and identity in the context of a group's practices and interactions is at least as important in the construction of a sense of community. We could say, therefore, that the notion of 'community' not only represents a location, but also a process and an experience that boys may construct in different ways. Social capital produced through experiences of community may thus be understood by some boys as a particularly salient resource that can provide some continuity when an important relationship has been lost.

Another of the boys, Sebastian, tries to make sense of his apparent lack of feeling upon learning that his father had had a debilitating stroke. He states:

I kind of expected that I would break into tears or something because I do know that I'm probably more sensitive than other boys. I cry at the most mediocre things...I expected it to happen but it didn't.

Sebastian emphasises his sensitivity, rendering a 'soft' masculinity that is contrasted with "other boys", whom he positions as comparatively thick-skinned. It is difficult to tell whether he is bewildered by his 'unemotional' response on this occasion, or whether he interprets it as evidence of his capacity to show emotional fortitude when it is most needed. He seems content to just let the idea hang there, unresolved, as he

shifts his attention to how his family will fare, and what they will need from him in order to survive this crisis.

And I guess that at that point I just sort of thought that if my Dad wasn't able to do anything any more and the family was left to my mother and my elder brother that I still had to help them out...Because he's the eldest, he's kind of like the caretaker of the two younger brothers. I thought I don't want to have to trouble them too much. I felt that as strong as they needed to be, I needed to be just as strong for them.

Cultural beliefs can have a significant influence over young people's understanding and experience of stressful circumstances (Haid et al., 2010; Shek, 2004). This idea is illustrated by the way that Sebastian's narrative is framed around family relationships, roles, and responsibilities, and appears to be situated within a collectivist cultural worldview. Embedded within Sebastian's cultural framework is an understanding that the mantle of responsibility is automatically passed to the eldest male sibling when a father is unable to continue in his traditional custodial role. The family's survival is constructed in terms of its ability to collaborate, redefine roles, and redistribute responsibilities. Family members are thus expected to take up new positions, as necessary, in order to endure beyond critical life events as a strong and mutually supportive family unit. In this way, a family may see its resilience as strengthened by its adaptability and connectedness (Walsh, 2002).

In the context of his 'family of friends', however, it is Sebastian who takes up the eldest brother position, as he explains below.

They know that my Dad has had a stroke but that's about as far as it goes...because I mean I don't want them to worry about it. I don't want them to worry about how I feel...I just kind of want to save them the trouble of it.

Sebastian's reluctance to express what Oransky and Marecek (2009) refer to as "soft emotions" (such as worry, fear, and sadness) may represent a dilemma frequently encountered by teenage boys. That is, boys risk being marked by their male friends as weak or effeminate if they seek out or offer emotional support, and the potential threat to their masculinity can be powerful enough to prevent some boys from opening up to their male peers about very distressing experiences (e.g., the loss of someone close, or

a traumatic event). An alternative explanation for the account Sebastian offers above is that he regards it as his job to spare his friends the burden of knowing his emotional pain. This positioning allows him to recreate himself, transforming from the 'overly sensitive' boy he initially revealed into the 'pillar of strength' among his friends, the one who can bear the load so they do not have to. Sebastian has demonstrated how he enacts resilience by drawing on perceived external and internal resources. On the one hand, he takes comfort in the belief that his family know how best to take care of each other and can adapt as required. On the other hand, he has a sense of 'inner strength' that enables him to manage his own pain, support his family, and protect his friends. This perceived emotional strength is not depicted as a personal attribute, but rather appears to derive from a spiritual dimension of his self-identity. He explains:

Well I do rely a lot on my faith and my religious beliefs. I draw quite a lot of strength from that. And yeah I feel that that's enough for me to keep going and to just get on with life.

Sebastian's narrative suggests to me that some boys shoulder the burden of difficult life experiences by constructing themselves as responsible enough and emotionally strong enough to handle the ordeals they face.

A strategy used by other boys to deal with their personal problems is to firstly evaluate how others may have handled themselves in similar circumstances. This approach is illustrated by Lucca, as he reflects on the fallout from his parents' separation, and concerns himself with how he might avoid going down the same path as his older sister.

It's just seeing my sister, he's had some problems not being able to accept the parents' break-up and he failed third year at law and then she took a gap year and in the second semester he's going to start again so I'm fully supporting him starting again. But I don't want to lose a year. That was literally losing a year. It was like a year of I'm stressed, unhappy and depressed and I'm fat. And I don't want that to be me. Learn from other people's mistakes. If you want to know the road ahead of you, ask the people coming back.

Here, Lucca can be seen to showcase a range of personal qualities that position him as more ‘adult’ than ‘teenager’. He does so by expressing empathy towards his sister, maturity in taking responsibility for his own future outcomes, and the wisdom to learn from others’ mistakes. By presenting himself in this way he accomplishes two things. Firstly, he shows that he has personal attributes that equip him to make good decisions when confronted by problems, and secondly, he demonstrates an awareness of having choices and therefore some control over his actions. To use Fine’s (2004) analogy, this narrative illustrates how boys might choose to adopt adult-type behaviours and attitudes from their cultural repertoires in order to demonstrate their ability to successfully negotiate difficult situations.

Lucca goes on to describe another challenging event that prompted him to review his behaviour and reconsider his options for the future. In this instance, a period of hospitalisation is perceived as having provided a catalyst for positive change.

Later there was sort of like a change in my attitude towards learning...My attitude was just - horrible chain of words - I can’t be stuffed, can’t be bothered. Afterwards it was like, I can...Weirdly enough it was my stay in hospital...terrible, terrible, horrible experience.

Again, we see Lucca employing a somewhat adult tone in the delivery of his narrative. This is illustrated by the way he admonishes himself for both his choice of language and his previously poor attitude. In Best’s (2006) view, this might be interpreted as an attempt on Lucca’s part to counter prevailing perceptions of teenagers as apathetic and immature. It could be argued, therefore, that this represents resistance to discourses that stereotype adolescent boys as ‘naturally’ lacking in motivation or the ability to find their own way through problems without adult input.

Perhaps it is the process of reflection after a stressful event that helps elucidate for some boys what may be learned from such experiences. Here, Lucca reveals how the harsh reality of serious illness slowly penetrated his sense of security.

The big revelation was I’m finally out of hospital, coz it was such a big, huge change...Time is precious. And I was in this ward where one person...he had this enormous tumour on his leg and this guy had a lovely wife and like four kids and a

flourishing business and he could have seriously died...There were some people with kidney stones and a bunch of weird not that major but potentially fatal illnesses in there. I just thought this could have been me. I could have died. Not really likely but it could have happened, right. I've always thought that but I never really knew that.

Lucca's narrative exemplifies the use of the adult construction of growing through adversity (Giles & Curren, 2007; Packman, Horsley, Davies, & Kramer, 2006). He also understands his experience as having given him a new respect for 'time', which he now constructs as a precious commodity that can no longer be taken for granted. He is confronted by his own mortality, whereas previously he may have felt entitled to a future by virtue of his youthfulness. Lucca conceives of this moment as a critical turning point in his life, giving rise to a newfound sense of purpose.

At the end of my life I want to be able to say I'm not sad I didn't do anything. In movies you'll see old characters saying, oh I wish I did this more, oh I wish I did that more. I just thought well I don't want to wish that I do things coz wishes don't often come true. I want to look back and sort of be happy about it, be proud of everything I've said and done, participated in throughout my life.

Catapulted into an imagined future, he sees himself one day looking back from the vantage of old age and judging the quality of the life he has built. His creation of a 'life worth living' is described in uncomplicated terms. That is, there seems to be an assumption that effort, determination, and smart choices will be rewarded with happiness and a sense of achievement. Below, Lucca can be seen to take an inventory of his recent efforts, which he offers as proof of the positive impact of his 'epiphany' in the context of his everyday life.

So I thought that year when I came back to school pretty much I just joined the school orchestra, I was always in drama but I did that more passionately I guess. Um squash, I'm terrible at squash but I'm doing heaps of like trying everything, paying more attention in class, getting better grades. Coz I know I can do a lot of these things. I was born smart, I just understood things better than a lot of other people and I thought why not use that to reach my fullest potential rather than complain about how I could have but didn't.

An agentic self is emphasised in this narrative, suggesting that some boys construct resilience out of a troubling life experience by taking up individualist subject positions that require them to be responsible for setting and achieving their own goals. However, this perspective is potentially problematic, because it assumes that all teenagers enjoy equal power status and access to resources, and need only a strong will to realise their dreams. Despite Lucca's rather idealised formulation, a central idea that emerges from his story is that teenagers learn from experience and life is not something that can be taught. He concludes:

Yeah so finding it out is a lot better than being told.

The above narrative illustrates how boys may make sense of their problems by constructing themselves as autonomous and agentic beings who can choose to learn and grow through challenging personal experiences.

In the above examples we have seen a number of strategies that boys employ to overcome difficult issues that confront them. Other boys, by contrast, choose to take more passive approach. Rather than try to change themselves or do things differently, they might prefer to deliberately steer clear of potential problems. This seems to be Simon's plan, as he explains:

I've had my Learners for like long enough to have my Restricted but I haven't started learning to drive yet...It seems too risky to me. Lots of things can go wrong. It's safer just walking places.

Driving represents increased freedom for many young people, so they are likely to experience a certain amount of pressure, especially from their peers, to get on the road as early as possible. Simon, though, is wary of the dangers he associates with driving, so he chooses to delay the process. However, it is possible that this allows him a different kind of freedom, that is, the freedom to go places without being fearful or 'at risk'. He is quite matter-of-fact in the way he constructs his general approach to potentially problematic situations. It's simple really, he seems to be saying, just play it safe.

Usually I just avoid things that will become a problem beforehand and make it so they won't be a problem. Sometimes I do it consciously and sometimes I just do it coz it's sort of what I do.

In Western society, development and growth are conceptualised and valued as signs of positive progress, while 'slow' or 'delayed' development tends to be seen as deficient (Burman, 2008b). So when a boy chooses to avoid or delay certain experiences until he feels better able to handle them, should his behaviour be construed as problem, or as a strategy that works well for him at that point in time? It is argued that deliberate 'inaction', in certain circumstances, is simply a different way of performing resilience. From the perspective of contemporary clinical psychology, avoidant behaviour is framed as a maladaptive coping mechanism used to alleviate or prevent anxiety responses (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In other words, avoidance is seen as a possible indicator of pathological anxiety, and specific psychological interventions have been developed to treat these types of 'disorders' in adolescents (Adler & Manassis, 2009; Hollon & Beck, 2004). But for some young people, knowing what feels safe and, from this awareness, deciding to stay well within their comfort zone may be constructed as a valid way of managing life's challenges, because it gives them space to learn and grow at a pace that suits them.

The above narratives suggest that boys attempt to create meaning out of difficult experiences, and construct ways of *doing* resilience, by drawing on understandings that derive from their family life, social networks within the wider community, cultural worldviews, belief systems, and sense of an agentic inner self. Thus, it is argued that boys may negotiate adversity by positively positioning themselves in relation to resources that may be conceptualised in terms of social capital and personal agency. As illustrated, boys may respond to difficult events by constructing notions of a 'good life' that is rooted in individualistic discourses about healthy family structures, capitalist ideologies, and the pursuit of happiness. This process may also lead to a clearer understanding of what they most value in life, and an increased capacity for compassion. It is possible, but not assumed, that such insights could translate into the construction of a more philanthropic approach to life. Boys growing up within collectivist cultural contexts may frame adversity in terms of 'family resilience', emphasising the potential for personal and relational adaptability and

growth as emerging out of a shared experience of hardship (Walsh, 2002). Notably absent in the boys' accounts were any specific references to perceived emotional support from friends. Rather, they seem to focus instead on their perceived capacity to withstand emotional distress. I take this to represent an effect of regulatory practices of normative gendered behaviour that constrain boys from sharing their problems with male peers and, as a consequence, may deny them opportunities to help each other.

For some boys, experiences of loss alter their constructions of 'time'. When they come to see time as a finite resource, they describe feeling an increased sense of obligation to 'make the most' of their lives. This is in accord with a common assumption that the drive to maximise one's potential is a natural feature of the human condition. Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik (2007) contend that such ideas, which are commonly expressed by young people in their narratives of death and illness, reflect some of the moral messages that permeate their lives. Similarly, there is an expectation that young people should learn something important about 'what they are made of' and, therefore, *grow* from challenging experiences. So it is not surprising that boys may position themselves as having 'improved' in some way when asked to talk about the impact of difficult times in their lives. However, there are also those who do not judge their progress in terms of successfully confronting challenging situations, choosing instead to take a cautious and measured approach to life where possible. I suggest this, too, may be constructed as a form of resilience in the face of sometimes considerable pressure from adults and peers.

Negotiating Family

The notion of 'family' is a social and cultural construct, which makes the historically dominant, Westernised concept of a 'typical nuclear family' (i.e., consisting of a married, heterosexual couple, living with their biological and naturally-conceived children) something of a myth. Though the basic composition of some families may remain relatively stable for many years, they may also fragment and regroup over

time. Romanticised narratives about family life depict the family home as a conflict-free zone, a place that provides refuge from external stresses, and a sturdy springboard from which to launch young people into adulthood (Burman, 2008a). These are powerful narratives when we consider the potential for stigmatisation for teenagers who do not experience a normative family life, and for parents who are judged to fall short of raising happy, healthy young people within stable, caring family units.

Sitting alongside such idealised family snapshots are discourses of family disharmony. These have largely been borne of psychoanalytic, sociobiological, and cognitive-developmental theories, all of which predict an increase in the frequency and intensity of interpersonal conflict during adolescence, and emphasise parent-adolescent relations as the main site in which this occurs (Laursen & Collins, 1994). The conflict during this 'adolescent phase' has traditionally been linked to hypothesised developmental processes of adolescent individuation and independence-seeking (Stuart, Ward, Jose, & Narayanan, 2010). Thus, parent-adolescent relationships have typically been portrayed as being fraught with tension, with parents struggling to maintain control while their sons and daughters battle with equal determination for autonomy and freedom. While this is undoubtedly true at times, it only partially explains the complex and evolving nature of these relationships (Best, 2006). Reflexive modernisation theories posit that contemporary institutions, including families, are experiencing a transformation brought about by democratisation and detraditionalisation (Williams & Williams, 2005). Democratisation refers to an increasing emphasis on negotiation within family relationships that is believed to be gradually replacing more conventional, hierarchical patterns of parental authority. Detraditionalisation, in this sense, suggests that many social traditions are undergoing a change in status or being constructed in more fluid terms, including parent-teenager relationships. It stands to reason that the fluidity within these relationships means that mothers, fathers, and their teenage children will also experience their interactions in quite different ways at different times (Steinberg, 2001).

‘Home is where the heart is’ – or something like that

Families have always come in all shapes and sizes, but perhaps never more so than they do today. One important aspect of the increasing diversity of families relates to the rapidly rising global population mobilisation (Barnett et al., 2010; McCann, Poot, & Sanderson, 2010). As such, in New Zealand as in many other Western countries, there is a growing population of teenagers from immigrant families (Stuart et al., 2010). For some of these young people, this means that they have opportunities to experience family life in diverse settings, as Lucca illustrates in the following excerpt.

All my relatives are back there. People say home is where your hat is or something like that. I think home is where the rest of your family is...This is sort of the business home. And that's like the fun, happy, relaxing, everything's perfect home. Everything is different. Especially in that trip because it was just me and my older brother so we could literally do whatever we wanted to do. And it was great because that kind of freedom isn't usually offered to people my age. Especially, there's a certain age when parents in New Zealand won't let their kids do anything, like stay the night at friends they haven't known for five years or if they haven't talked to their parents.

While Lucca appears to understand ‘family’ and ‘home’ as inseparable concepts, he perceives differences between his New Zealand and ‘homeland’ family contexts in terms of their everyday functioning. That is, he constructs one of his homes as the main centre of operations, where the mundane business of daily life is performed, while painting his other home as “perfect” because it offers him an escape from the usual rules and routines.

If we extend the “business home” metaphor, it could presumably be seen to represent a site where family members perform their duties in accordance with assigned roles within the family system. This is problematised by Lucca for the apparent constraints it places on his personal liberty, an issue that is unlikely to have had as much relevance for him at a younger age. In a more general sense, however, the debate is situated within broader cultural frameworks. It is understood more in terms of different parenting practices in different cultural settings, whereby parents in New Zealand (who, for the purposes of Lucca’s argument, appear to be amalgamated into a generic group) are viewed as comparatively more restrictive and protective towards

their teenage children. Clearly, there are multiple contextual factors that might shape a young person's notions of home and family. In Lucca's case, impressions of family life are not only constructed in the context of cross-cultural practices, but also coloured by problems he remembers having to endure after the breakdown of his parents' marriage.

It was weird. It was like being a human ping-pong ball, a tennis ball. It's just one week you're there, one week you're here, you know it didn't seem like much. And it's not like having two homes. It's like having quarter homes coz they didn't add up to a home.

Using the analogy of a ball being bounced back and forth, we get the sense of a boy at the mercy of more powerful forces; namely, his parents, societal views about how children are best managed when parents separate, and the politics and institutions (e.g., Family Courts) that control such practices. Some teenagers may perceive advantages in having more than one family home, especially if they are given some choice in the matter. But in this instance, fractured living arrangements are interpreted as a case of 'more is less', whereby having two parental homes is understood to dilute the experience of being *at home* in either one of them.

How families renegotiate their relationships and reconstruct their lives in the context of parental separation may depend on, among many other possible dynamics, the age of the children at the time. We would expect, for example, that very young children might adapt more easily to structural family changes provided their basic need for nurturing and security continue to be met. Of course when teenagers reflect on such experiences retrospectively, their current understanding of how the process has played out in their own family, and how they see other families managing in what they perceive to be similar circumstances, is bound to shape their memories and the way they reconstruct their family narratives. Ben's experience of a blended family is a case in point, as shown in the following text:

My family hasn't really got much problems I don't think. Like I've heard of a lot of families that are together from two families and there's always lots of problems but I feel we've coped quite well. I was quite young when it happened. I'm not sure what it was like for my step-sister and brothers coz they were older but I think it's been fine for me.

Cartwright and Seymour (2002) suggest that the quality of the relationship(s) between the biological parent and his/her children during the adjustment to step-family living can have a significant impact on the family's overall happiness and ability to function. For young people, adapting to life in a blended family also involves establishing relationships with step-siblings as well as with the new step-parent. Ben's narrative suggests that a common view of blended families is that they encounter considerable difficulties in their attempts to make joint living arrangements work. Ben, however, depicts his family as having accomplished the task successfully, thereby offering a counter-position to discourses of 'inevitable conflict' within blended families. He refers to the collective "we", implying a shared experience, but at the same time acknowledges that disruptions to family life may be more unsettling or challenging for older children. A teenager's sense of belonging and security within a blended family may, therefore, be influenced by their perception of how well or poorly their siblings and step-siblings adapt to the structural changes and negotiate new family relationships.

Whether teenage boys portray their family life in a positive or negative way seems to be related to the perceived quality of their relationships with other family members. Regular communication, especially between teenagers and their parents about everyday events, is constructed as central to this idea. For example, in Thurlow's (2003) view, young people tend to define 'good communication' in terms of the quality of their relationships with significant others. Given that it is fairly common to hear parents complain that their teenage children increasingly shut them out of their lives, it might surprise us to hear boys tell us that they want their parents to be involved and interested in what is going on for them. Sam, for instance, seems troubled by what he perceives as insufficient or unsatisfactory communication with his parents, and a lack of what might be conceived of as 'family togetherness'.

...we don't talk all that much - about anything. Like when I go home it won't be like on TV like 'How was your day, how was school?' We just go home and do our own thing. Like my Dad has no idea what's going on at school...My Mum's at work most of the time so I don't really see her all that often. I don't talk to my Mum all that often coz she gets on my nerves because she's real annoying. Like opening sentence would be 'You did this wrong.'

In addition to ideas about the effect of different communication styles on overall family functioning, understandings of what may contribute to ‘good’ outcomes for young people have been informed by research on the involvement of fathers in family life. In particular, there appears to be a general consensus that fathers have a significant impact, be it positive or negative, on their sons’ lives (Baker, 2009). This premise has generated notions of the ‘good father’, discursively constructed within Western culture as one who takes an active role in his children’s care and is involved in the community groups and institutions in which they participate. This perspective can create tension for boys living in culturally and economically diverse communities (and may be pertinent to Sam’s experience), in which some fathers may define their commitment to family life by their ability to provide for them financially. However, this does not automatically deprive fathers of a sense that they are physically and emotionally ‘there’ for their children (Summers, Boller, Schiffman, & Raikes, 2006). I argue that dominant social discourses about family life and parental roles can influence boys’ evaluations of their own family’s practices as positive or negative. In the extract above, Sam observes that families depicted on television shows, for example, behave quite differently to his own, suggesting that media representations of family life generate understandings among teenagers of normative family practices. Another important point of reference for boys involves their perceptions about their friends’ family interactions and relationships. Sam notes:

One of my friends his Mum would be like what did you do today and they talk a lot and they kind of know everything that happened that day.

Here, Sam can be seen to construct the ‘good mother’ as one who is highly visible and regularly initiates conversations with her son, which appears to be interpreted by Sam as proof of her interest in her children’s lives and concern for their wellbeing.

Another boy, Pete, also draws on ideas about daily interactions and conversations as a way of examining his experience of family life. He locates his family narrative in the context of an everyday shared event in the home, to convey the notion that this may be an important way for family members to strengthen their bonds with one another.

My family gets on quite well. We have dinner around the table every night and you know we talk about what's been going on at school and things like that. And some of my friends' families do that but then the ones that have older brothers and sisters they eat at different times and things like that. I don't know what that means actually or if it's important.

Gilligan (2000) suggests that familiar routines, such as shared family meals, may be understood as important sources of order and structure in family life. Several layers of meaning appear to be imbedded in the way Pete constructs 'dinner-time' in the above excerpt. Firstly, there is an implied link between the daily ritual of spending time together and positive family relationships. Secondly, dinner-time is constructed as both a location and a practice, which facilitate regular sharing of their daily experiences. Thirdly, it seems to elicit in Pete reflections about why other families may do things differently. In this respect, he demonstrates an understanding that other families may operate in quite different ways, and that family practices may be re-negotiated at times to accommodate the changing needs and lifestyles of growing children. Despite his ambivalence about the meaning and significance of his reflections, Pete has identified key features about his family relationships that he constructs as representative of important dimension of his life.

Thus far we have seen some of the ways that boys construe notions of family and home. Their constructions are framed around cultural narratives, the quality of family relationships, and prevailing discourses that define normative family structures and practices. Some boys have to negotiate family life in multiple contexts. Through such experiences, they may perceive important differences between, for example, the way their immediate family operates compared to their extended families. Additionally, boys who experience major transformations in their family structure, such as when their parents separate and re-partner, show that they are able to conceive of themselves as actively contributing to the process of creating new family set-ups. Daily routines and conversations that encourage family members to regularly share everyday events are seen by some boys as central to a family's general wellbeing. Yet, we may tend to underestimate the complexity of families' lives today. The reality is that many parents are torn between finding time to spend with their teenagers in the

face of intense work schedules, economic crises, and ever-increasing sources of media entertainment that compete for their attention (Weaver-Hightower, 2008).

Freedom From and Freedom To

Certainly for some teenagers, their evolving family relationships may well have the greatest significance for them when they are perceived to restrict or enable their ability to become more independent. Best (2006) suggests that young people engage in a “struggle to claim greater freedom over self and setting” (p. 63) that involves a process of continual negotiation with their parents. Williams and Williams (2005) discuss the role of technology in facilitating, and extending beyond the private sphere of the home, negotiations around social and spatial boundaries. They illustrate, for example, how the mobile phone may be used by parents to “enter their children’s time and space” (p. 321) as a means of maintaining control and surveillance, while for teenagers it may enable them to expand their spatial boundaries and thus increase their sense of independence. ‘Freedom’ is subjectively experienced and therefore not easily defined in terms of specific possibilities it may open up for teenagers. The boys in this study mainly seem to understand these possibilities in terms of having freedom *from* being overprotected and micro-managed, as well as freedom *to* explore the wider world and test their ability to cope on their own. In other words, freedom represents shifts in their relationships at home as well as broadening their horizons.

When freedom comes in the form of a break from constant parental supervision, it is normally understood as a gradual process. That is, for many teenagers it might begin with an occasional night at home alone, and progress to increasingly longer periods of self-management. ‘Parent-free’ time usually seems to go hand-in-hand with an expectation that the young person is ‘responsible enough’ to look after him- or herself. One participant, David, identifies a recent taste of independence as an important event in his life.

I had four weeks to myself but my Nana lived next door and she came over every day.
But yeah I liked the freedom that I had when he wasn’t there. Just cooking dinners when
I wanted and watching TV all day pretty much and just taking that pressure off myself

that I would normally have when my parents are around. Like got to do dishes now, got to do the jobs, got to study. Like by myself if I have nothing I have to prepare for then I just completely blob out and do nothing. But if my parents are there I kind of force myself to do something.

Freedom is thus framed as a period of respite from both self-inflicted and parent-imposed pressures of a normally hectic daily schedule. It allows for choices about what, when, or even *if*, any particular thing gets done, so it is also understood in terms of personal agency. 'Time', in this context, is constructed as a resource that can be used, managed, and enjoyed, but also as an over-valued commodity that can be legitimately squandered. The desire for freedom to go wild, as discourses of 'out-of-control youth' and 'absent parents' might have us believe, does not rate a mention in David's story. Rather, his account is about taking time to relax and yet also attending to everyday tasks, like cooking dinner and doing the dishes. By emphasising the ordinariness of these daily chores, he positions himself as a responsible young adult who understands the duties he is expected to perform and the rules that regulate this kind of freedom.

Freedom is also constructed by teenage boys as something that can only be fully experienced away from home and in the absence of adults. This next big step towards independence, as most of us would probably interpret it, also calls for ongoing negotiations with parents. These negotiations can be especially complicated when parents position themselves at different stages of readiness in the process. Tensions often arise in relation to concerns about safety, as shown here in Finn's talk:

I think my Mum understands stuff a bit better sometimes on like our terms. So like if we want to go somewhere and do something she'll be like oh yeah I understand, you can go and do that. But my Dad would be more like I don't think you should, like that's a bit unsafe...like I want to go on a road trip when I get my full licence with a few people. And my Mum was like oh yeah I think that would be alright. I don't really think my Dad would be like that. I think he'd get persuaded eventually. Keep working on it.

Previously inaccessible spaces may be opened up when boys can drive themselves around independently (Best, 2006). These new spaces are seen to represent unexplored territory, in both a physical and metaphorical sense; that is, as both

unfamiliar destinations and as sites of personal discovery. For many young people, being able to drive may be perceived to mean that they can become less reliant on their parents, gain more control over some areas of their life, and have more opportunities to be spontaneous. However, it can be difficult for teenagers and their parents to reach a shared understanding of what is a safe and appropriate degree of freedom. Finn can evidently see that there is still some work to be done with his father in this regard, and conceptualises it as an ongoing process of give-and-take. Thus, this work that boys do with their parents may be understood as a series of negotiations, which sometimes involves enlisting the help of one parent to convince the other that they are ready to take care of themselves. The problem is that it is difficult for teenagers to prove themselves capable and responsible without actually being given the chance to experience new situations in which to test their competence.

Compared to Finn, Pete's negotiations with his parents to gain more independence seem relatively straightforward. This appears to be because he understands their expectations of him as having been quite clearly articulated. Parents often try to manage their teenagers' behaviour by controlling and supervising their daily chores, schoolwork, social activities, and friendships (Smith, Guthrie, & Oakley, 2005). For some boys, then, freedom may be achieved through being aware of and complying with their parents' requirements in these areas.

My parents don't restrict me all that much so long as I've done enough study to keep them happy...They seem to be happy with me going out so long as I've got someone else that they know. Coz they know quite a lot of my friends because they do see them a lot. So as long as they know that they're going to behave and not be stupid so as long as I've got some of my friends with me they're fine with me going out pretty much.

Thus, meeting parents' expectations, in terms of study and choosing sensible friends for example, can be used as a bargaining chip to gain more freedom outside the home. Gaining parents' trust is also constructed as an ongoing process, whereby specific strategies can be used to facilitate desired outcomes (like ensuring there are plenty of opportunities for a boy's parents to get to know his friends). Pete's closing comment implies an awareness of discourses about highly conflicted parent-teen relationships, which he is seen to contest:

...occasionally when I've been staying up late doing homework or something and the next morning I'm not especially nice to talk to. But no I haven't had any of these big arguments that seem to do with your parents. It's probably changed but it's been really gradual so I haven't noticed it.

It is common for adults to devalue or dismiss teenagers' capacity to communicate with any degree of proficiency (Thurlow, 2003). Conversely, what stands out in the more recent literature about family relationships is that many teenagers do not describe their negotiations with parents as particularly challenging or stressful (Steinberg, 2001). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that young people engage in a process of transformation aimed at maintaining and strengthening these relationships while also enabling greater autonomy (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Some researchers suggest that parent-adolescent conflict may be decreasing as a function of increasingly liberal attitudes and behaviour on the part of parents today (Kloep, 1999; Williams & Williams, 2005).

Discourses about 'children/adolescents', 'childhood/adolescence', and 'family' are fundamental to and constitutive of the cultural narratives that define and reflect who we (and others) are, why we behave the way we do, and where we see ourselves headed (Burman, 2008a). It could be argued that the discursive production of families and parenting continues to be one of the master narratives that regulate modern society. It wields considerable power, particularly in terms of legitimising the reproduction of dominant narratives of family and parenting (Andrews, 2004). Just as it has long been assumed in Western societies that schools are necessary for children's learning, so too has the nuclear family been assumed to be an indispensable social institution in which cooperative and efficient allocation and exchange of resources takes place (Burman, 2008a). Both of these socially constructed sites are increasingly being reevaluated and reconfigured in recognition of the need to adapt to the culturally diverse and changing nature of society, and to the growing demand for alternative models that are more inclusive of non-normative practices. In terms of family practices and structures, these include joint custody arrangements, blended families, single-parent families, house-husbands, gay and lesbian civil unions and parenthood, collective child-rearing, and multicultural families. As illustrated in the data, teenage boys' constructions of family, home, and intra-familial relationships are

embedded in cultural and social discourses. Boys cut across geographical and structural divides in their reflections on diverse family practices. My analysis suggests that some boys living in 'non-nuclear' families might construct their situation as problematic, for example if they struggle to negotiate shared custody arrangements. Others, however, can be seen to challenge the nuclear family construct by depicting their 'alternative' family structure as normative, especially perhaps if it is all they have ever known. Finally, boys position themselves as agents of change who engage in reflective and continuous negotiation with their parents. As such, I concur with Williams and Williams' (2005) view of teenagers as proficient negotiators in creating opportunities for greater independence.

Negotiating Friendship

Establishing and maintaining friendships is understood to be a particularly important undertaking for young people (Lahelma, 2002). A commonly held view is that friendship is a resource that facilitates the mastery of age-appropriate tasks (Crosnoe, 2000). Some aspects of adolescent peer environments do not appear to have changed much over time. For example, the transition to high school is still conceptualised by many as a critical and sometimes highly distressing episode in a teenager's life (Neild, 2010; Peterson, Duncan, & Canady, 2009). It can be a time of separation from primary school friends, and calls for new strategies to adapt to an unknown setting and find a place of belonging among a new community of peers. One social context that has changed dramatically in recent decades is the virtual world of cyber space. New forms of media have historically given rise to public concerns about their influence on children and young people (Lee, 2009). Yet for many young people instant messaging, chat rooms, and video gaming, to name but a few, represent exciting new possibilities for communication and socialising. Online gaming has proven to be a particularly popular past-time with teenage boys (Delfabbro, King, Lambos, & Puglies, 2009). Adolescence is also typically seen as a time when young people discover what it feels like to attract and be attracted by others (Montgomery &

Sorell, 1998). Their first romantic experiences are considered to be an integral part of the process of identity formation (Feiring, 1996). Within their peer networks, be they same-gender, opposite-gender, or cyber relationships, teenage boys look for validation, test out different identities, conform, resist conformity, and experience being socially excluded or accepted.

Identity Work in Peer-Inhabited Spaces

Peers, especially same-sex peers, have long been recognised as being an influential and key source of teenagers' socialisation and identity work (Bottrell, 2009; Fromme & Emihovich, 1998). It follows that much of this activity takes place in the spaces most frequently and densely populated by teenagers. As would be expected, then, teenage boys often choose to account for important aspects of their identity construction through stories that revolve around engagement with peers and negotiation of peer relationships in the school environment. In their search for acceptance and belonging, the process of developing and maintaining new friendships can be a tricky business. In the present study, a common strand running through the boys' stories is the 'push and pull' between notions of standing out and fitting in.

Bearing in mind that all of the participants in this study were drawn from a high band academic class, we might expect them to refer to notions about intelligence, and all that supposedly goes with it, when talking about where they fit among their peers at school. Perceived level of intellectual ability, as measured by academic performance, remains the primary classification system deployed by our current education system for the placement of high school students into their most 'appropriate' class groups. Little appears to have changed in this regard in the last century. Those deemed to be 'more intelligent than most' usually find themselves placed in classes with labels like 'top stream', 'accelerant', and 'high band'. These class labels are widely promulgated around school communities, and appear to have been designed to signify the 'advanced' status of their members and the relatively high speed at which they are capable of 'progressing'. The term 'nerdity' is still largely associated with superior intelligence, and understood to signal particular abilities in the sciences and information technology, as well as a degree of social incompetence. However, as we

will see, it is clearly experienced as an evolving and, in Kendall's (1999) opinion, much contested identity.

In the present study, the boys' talk is at times embedded within such discourses. The following analysis focuses on a number of ways that boys demonstrate how they may be constrained by, tolerate, and resist being seen by others as 'nerdy'. Additionally, they show themselves capable of deconstructing a static notion of nerd identity, while simultaneously legitimising its status. Thus, they sometimes manage to modify the stereotype and 'own' it in ways that make it possible for them to style an identity that coheres with some important aspects of their personhood.

One of the participants, Kyle, uses the context of computer gaming, an interest he shares with a number of his classmates, to illustrate his ambivalence as he struggles to understand where he fits among his peers.

I'm not sure if [he's] really a friend but he's into it. He seems to have the habit of disliking me and liking me. It's kind of odd...[a friend] told me he thinks it's because I talk too much about online games in class and [he] doesn't want to associate himself with me because he doesn't want to look stupid in front of everyone or something.

Evidently, peer alliance can be tenuous at times. Unspoken social rules that create the potential for ridicule, and ridicule-by-association, appear to be understood as one reason for being kept at a 'safe' distance by one's peers. This may happen especially, for example, when a boy thinks his status in the peer group could be threatened by associating with someone who shares a common interest but has a lower popularity ranking. Although Kyle initially presents himself in this way, as marginalised by one of his peers, he then counters this positioning by relocating himself within the context of his class as a whole. He states:

I know that people in like lower classes they just sometimes see our whole entire class as just a bunch of nerds or something.

This exemplifies how groups of 'high achievers' may be homogenised and similarly 'othered' by students at lower academic levels. In such circumstances, it would seem that hierarchical social positions are contested as a function of an institutional system

that classifies its students according to their academic rank. Having thus demonstrated an affiliation with particular individuals and groups, as well as the possibility of moving back and forth across these blurred social boundaries, Kyle then ponders the essence of what makes him unique.

I'm like way more into computers than anyone else...everyone's like weird in their own way but I'm like weird in a different way to everyone else I think. I'm like crazy into something whereas people are usually just like different.

It would seem that, while everyone is understood as having some distinctive characteristics, merely 'being different' does not sufficiently capture the extent of one's passion and individuality.

In a similar vein, another of the boys, Andrew, goes to some lengths to illustrate a variety of strategies he uses to stand out from the crowd.

I like to do things that other people can't do. Particularly things that are like sort of involve your brain. And so I do cryptic crosswords. Also I do juggling and card tricks. I'm one of the magic people, but I'm the juggling man.

Here, we can see that some boys not only find ways of differentiating themselves from other people in general, but also from peers with whom they may share a similar bent. To do so, they may position themselves in a number of distinct ways (for example, in Andrew's narrative above, as an intellectual, a juggler, and a magician). It could be argued that this enables them to signal which of their personal qualities they most value. These, in turn, may be constructed as internal resources that enable them to achieve, for instance, a high level of mastery in certain activities (in Andrew's case, pursuits requiring intelligence, dexterity, and technical expertise). Andrew's main group identity at school, in this example, is with "the magic people", but he also shows how he has created a point of individual difference by becoming "the juggling man". 'Being different' is thus depicted as a desirable state, but may incur a social cost when interpreted by others in stereotypical ways. Andrew considers how the various selves he performs in public may be understood by those around him, and what aspect of himself and his behaviour might specifically contribute to their understanding.

They'd associate it with being a nerd probably...Well other people call me a nerd. I wouldn't say I'm a nerd. No. Just because I did well in school and I like to do things that involve my brain...I guess smartness is associated with being a nerd...having a big bag...and maybe in the way I think, the way I act.

As can be seen here, the nerd construct is complex. The image may be reproduced, embodied, and perceived by others, through a combination of behaviours and artifacts. Being 'smart', as emphasised in Andrew's talk, is one mark of nerdity, and an over-sized schoolbag is understood as an easily recognisable symbol of the species. The schoolbag is just one example of countless material objects that are taken-for-granted in everyday life. Such objects are increasingly being conceptualised by researchers as essential tools used in the construction of identities (Caronia & Caron, 2004). In the segment of talk above, it also seems as if a transformation is gradually taking place in Andrew's storied self. At first, he positions himself as rejecting of a nerd label, considering it to have been imposed on him by others. Subsequently, however, his use of subjective language (i.e., "I did well in school", "the way I think, the way I act") could be taken to mean he experiences a degree of agency in its reproduction. This suggests that some boys may be prepared to accept partial ownership of the nerd stereotype, at least on their own terms and by their own definition of it. As part of this (re)defining process, Andrew goes on to explain how he can adapt his behaviour when outside the school environment, while his ability to be "analytic" remains intact.

But if I'm out of school I'd say that I'm analytic but I don't necessarily act upon it in the same way....I can be more casual, relaxed.

Andrew's words speak to the contextually-situated nature of the behaviours at his disposal. They expose a complex layering of personal and sociocultural influences on boys' behaviour in a *mélange* of personal agency, normative behavioural expectations, and institutional control. On the one hand, he seems to be saying he can let his guard down, perhaps even temporarily break free of his nerd status, when out of school. By implication, the school, as a structure and system created for the purpose of educating and socialising young people into becoming competent individuals, makes it possible for this stereotyping to develop and be readily

reproduced by its students. On the other hand, Andrew's ability to be "more casual, relaxed" is presented by him as a consequence of how he *chooses* to act in a given situation, indicating a belief that he has at least some personal control over his behaviour. His narrative also builds on the idea that teenage boys experience a process involving a series of multiple and sometimes overlapping social positioning as they go about establishing a sense of self among their peers. In the following excerpt, Andrew goes on to describe what it was like for him trying to find his place among his new classmates when he first started high school.

I was sort of halfway between friends with athletic people in our class...who are more physical, then also halfway between them and the more nerdy people in our class like who are currently my friends.

Andrew recalls this experience in terms of initially occupying a space between two social groups (i.e., "athletic people" and "more nerdy people"), the groups being defined by ideas about physicality. As I imagine many of us will recall from our own school days, competency in sport can serve to demarcate boundaries between in-groups and out-groups (Sherriff, 2007). Here, the notion of belonging is seen to be constructed as fluid, and is associated with being accepted by peers on the basis of attributes they perceive to have in common with each other. Andrew considers himself to have been a member of both groups, able to move freely between them. He also constructs this as a dilemma, but one which can be resolved over time since friendship is understood as something more enduring and sought-after than, for example, being admired for one's physical prowess. Reflecting further on this question of similarities and differences among his classmates, Andrew plays around with the idea that different categories may co-habit the nerd construct.

We're not the 'nerd' nerds I don't think...They're more like chess club and hang around and talk about computers and stuff in a weird way...I guess it's different classes of nerds...The 'nerd' nerds are more withdrawn and quiet and studious. We're more outrageous. It's also who we are. My group is quite well known around the school for being outrageous and joking around.

He continues to trouble the notion that nerdity can be defined by a fixed set of characteristics. His inclusion of judgment statements (i.e., "talk about computers and

stuff *in a weird way*", "different *classes* of nerds") suggest the existence of some sort of hierarchical structure. Definitions of different types of nerds are offered, both in terms of what might be understood as aspects of their core identities, as well as by the ways they behave. To strengthen his claim that he and his friends do not really belong among the super nerds, and perhaps also to validate his own sub-group's elevated social position, Andrew's rhetoric draws attention to their standing within the wider school community.

The discussion has so far focused on ways that boys negotiate identity in the context of developing peer relationships, and how they often seem to engage in a sort of balancing act between embracing their individual self-concepts while also finding a comfortable fit in terms of their various group identities. Another way that boys may forge a way through this complicated project is to make themselves (and their 'selves') less visible until they come to better understand the rules of the game. Making the initial transition to high school could be considered a time of significant adjustment for many teenage boys, as they are often faced with the challenge of adapting to a much larger school environment, with new sets of administrative and social conventions to learn.

As illustrated above, one of the earliest challenges they may encounter is finding ways to manage the transformation of their social relationships and connect to new peer groups (Langenkamp, 2010). Sam, for example, reflects on the worries he experienced about having to start afresh, as he stood uncomfortably, but as yet unnoticed, on the threshold of this unfamiliar social landscape. The dilemma he presents here seems to be about how to negotiate that first awkward step, and then figuring out the business of making 'enough' new friends to fill the gaps created by the ones that are left behind.

It was just like real different and like when you first came into your classroom everyone was like talking and then there was you at the door and looking to where to sit and it would just be like, Uh oh. And then you wouldn't know what your friends would be like...Coz there was no-one that I knew in my class...It was like would I be able to make the same amount of friendships as I had before. It felt like kind of sad a bit coz a lot of my friends were going to other schools, some were like moving...Having a nice amount of good friends. Yeah that would help.

Sam's account suggests that some boys may be most concerned with what they see, or believe others see, as an acceptable number of friends they can claim as their own. Others, of course, may feel just as well-connected with only one or two close friendships. The other idea this narrative reveals relates to the sense of loss that boys can experience when established friendships are no longer readily available to them. In some cases, this may be linked to a broader sense of relinquishing, whether voluntarily or reluctantly, cherished aspects of 'childhood'. As illustrated in the following text, Sam connects his feelings of sadness and loss to memories of his early exposure to high school 'playground etiquette'. He speaks of the unexpected constraints placed on his choice of activities and use of space during class breaks.

Coz of lunch-times and morning teas. At intermediate you can play sport for like a whole hour. You can run around and stuff, play. But in high school you just pretty much stand there unless you're on the field...Coz there's just like older people who don't do that and you don't want to be different...a bit strange, a bit weird...And especially now like one of my friend's little sisters came and she's in third form. And we were talking about it and she's like missing all the playgrounds and lunch-times...I didn't give her any advice. It's just like accept it.

This could be construed as a lesson in skillful compliance. It demonstrates not only how some boys may deliberately conform to normative peer behaviour, but actively reproduce it as they work their way up the ranks. They first learn the system through observation of more senior students. These older students are perceived to convey important messages about what may be constructed as transgressions of the schoolyard code - ignoring these messages risks inviting social stigma. More specifically, the sports field is understood to be the only place within the high school environment where it is acceptable to be physically active. This goes hand-in-hand with the idea that 'play' must either be left behind in childhood or else reconfigured as activities befitting teenager status. So for some boys, blending in and being accepted is achieved by staying under the radar. I conceptualise this as a resilient strategy, but one which is not automatically available to, or able to be performed by, all boys. There will certainly be those who receive unwanted attention from their peers despite doing all they can to remain invisible, and yet others who simply cannot grasp the more subtle rules that regulate certain normative social practices.

In summary, people access their culture's available narratives to locate themselves among their social groups (Gergen, 2008). For teenagers this involves having to negotiate an ill-defined set of social and institutional practices. They encounter dilemmas of identity-creation and belonging at every turn, but in the process they are presented with opportunities to reflect on taken-for-granted understandings, and to resist or embrace multiple social positions (Hundeide, 2005). Or, as Dimitriadis and Weis (2001) might put it, they try on their possible selves and experiment with how they fit. As we have seen teenage boys may take up positions that enable them to find a place of relative belonging among their peers, whilst also claiming a unique point of difference. One way they convey such accomplishments is by firstly locating themselves as belonging to a clearly defined group of like-minded individuals, thus setting themselves apart from other peer groups. It seems that once they are confident of a 'fit' with at least a part of their teenage community, they set about carving a niche which they alone can be seen to occupy. Other boys, however, employ a different strategy, one which involves careful decisions about when and how to remain relatively inconspicuous until the game is mastered. The multiple positions that boys adopt appear to be understood by them as either a function of their own agency or a consequence of being 'othered'.

One way to understand young people's identity performances is to view them as deliberate strategies aimed at accumulating stocks of social capital that they can convert into something of value (Bottrell, 2009; Leonard, 2005). Social capital is a multi-dimensional construct, but at its core is the notion that personal and collective resources are embedded in social networks and accessed through social interactions (Son & Lin, 2008). It is in this sense that I suggest boys in the present study can be seen to demonstrate tactical identity-work as they negotiate the social processes which play out within their peer relationships and friendship networks (and also, as discussed in subsequent sections of this report, within the context of their other significant relationships and institutional affiliations). I further argue that peer relational contexts are understood by some boys as providing them with important resources that enable them to attain social status. Conversely, boys who experience relationships with their peers as weak or problematic have less social capital to exchange for status positions, and may need to construct other ways to secure a sense of belonging and gain peer acceptance.

Virtually Social

The internet provides opportunities for teenagers to experiment with alternative ways of being, and of being seen by others. The social nature of online activities can create a sense of belonging (Delfabbro et al., 2009), as the following examples would suggest. Video-gaming may be seen by some boys as a safe and easy alternative to communicating with others in person (Young, 2009). Simon, for instance, describes himself as unpractised in the art of meeting new people in the school setting. His inexperience and shyness makes it hard for him to initiate face-to-face conversations with his peers.

It's not really something I've had a lot of practice at. Most of my friends are quite loud coz I don't really start conversations.

By contrast, the world of online gaming can give Simon a sense of being with others, connecting and interacting with people in a way that does not require him to be extroverted or socially experienced. In Lee's (2009) view, the internet might be seen as beneficial for people who are socially anxious or lonely as it can provide a social network that might otherwise be lacking in their life. Simon attempts to explain why it feels more like a social encounter to him than simply time spent on a computer, in that it involves real-time conversation and action.

It's hard to explain coz you just sort of talk to them at the same time but if you're doing something like with a team properly then it's fun coz you can talk to them. And things are actually organised but the rest of the time it's just fun. Sometimes when you're doing really well it feels good.

He seems to be saying that socialising is enabled by the fact that they are all busy engaging together in play and teamwork, as though the act of gaming itself offers a distraction from having to worry about one's social performance as a 'conversationalist'. This form of play is practised in a global playground and perceived as both entertaining and rewarding. Thus, it represents an environment located beyond the confines of a boy's everyday world. A sense of community may develop when players share common goals and are rewarded by achieving certain outcomes and the admiration of other players (Delfabbro et al., 2009). Age is

irrelevant in this space, but other personal characteristics are obviously deemed to be of some import. Simon explains:

It's weird because like they're all different ages but coming together for the same interests. And some of the people go to the game but are really immature...From what they say and how they spell...I suppose most of them in this game...are saying the truth but some of them make things up.

While players are not defined in any significant way by their age, they may nevertheless be evaluated on the basis of their perceived maturity. From this narrative it can be seen that the online world is very much a milieu in which impressions are formed and judgments made, just as they are in any other social situation. Players can join groups, lead clans, and battle to the death in this fantasy world. It is a place where individual players exist in the form of their alter egos, but also engage in real online alliances that are subject to plays of power, as discussed by Kyle in the following extract. Here he talks about how clan leaders can exert power over other players by permitting or denying them membership to their clans.

I applied for the Aus clan and they told me that I wouldn't be accepted...Because I wasn't good enough even though I was probably beating at least half of their clan members...I just asked one of the leaders and they said no...Then about two or three months later they asked if I wanted to join and then I couldn't be bothered.

There are obvious similarities to dilemmas of acceptance and rejection that play out in the classroom and other teenage peer settings, as discussed earlier, but it may be that the effects of being socially rejected in this forum are considerably less restrictive for the boys. As Kyle points out, below, it is possible to develop friendships within gaming communities and also to have control over the extent to which such friendships cross over into the real world.

...you generally get to be friends with the people...You meet people on line and you talk to them through the game and you learn about what's going on with them and stuff and you get to know each other...some people it would be good to see in real life but you kind of you hear about all the bad things that happen to people meeting others online and yeah you don't really want to end up in that kind of situation. So even if you did get to know someone online most of the time they're in different countries anyway so it's pretty

hard to get to them. But when they're in the same country I'm still not sure whether I'd actually want to go and meet them because you don't really know that much about who they are because they're pretending to be someone else.

These 'friendships' are constructed as being unique in a number of ways. Firstly, interpersonal connections are usually transitory, often terminating at the conclusion of a game. Secondly, as they are not constrained by international or geographical boundaries, players rarely meet one another in person. Thirdly, players generally maintain their anonymity through the creation of fictional identities, which may both protect and inhibit them from developing real-life relationships with other players. On the other hand, as Lee (2009) suggests, the lack of social cues and the anonymity of the players can make it easier for them to enter into new relationships. Cyber space is also understood as an environment that can arouse 'stranger danger' concerns, and it would surely please parents to know that their teenage children do appear to register their warnings.

When we think about someone who spends much of their time in virtual reality, it may conjure up images of a socially inhibited individual engaged in a very solitary recreation - and of course that may be true in some cases. Kyle, however, paints a very interactive picture of his online experiences.

It's kind of like you have to use strategy in a team like it decides what they're going to do and you decide where to go and you try to support the rest of your team...in the game there's usually objectives on the map and you have to either go and blow something up or capture secret documents or something. And it's kind of like in soccer how you have the objectives to get the ball into the goal and you support your team and they support you to get the ball in the goal and you all kind of have your own roles like defenders and attackers and stuff... so it's really team play. If you don't play with the team you don't have much chance of winning.

Kyle highlights the importance of collaboration, strategic planning, and the enactment of specific roles to enhance the performance of his 'team' as a whole. In this instance he is drawing on his actual experience as a soccer player. Yet for boys who have a passion for technology but also a lack of interest or mastery in more physical

activities, the 'alternate' world may provide opportunities to experience team-work in a way that may be otherwise unavailable to them in the real world.

Thus, it would appear that virtual communities may be experienced as places where teenagers can engage in social relationships that are not bound by age or geography, and can exist without an offline element (McMillan & Morrison, 2006). Parents may worry about the potential harm to their children's social development if they view time spent on the internet as a poor replacement for interacting with friends and family (Lee, 2009). Alternatively, it could be argued that the internet can be used to make new social connections that are not restricted by time and space (Lee, 2009). While video games have morphed into vibrant, self-contained, three-dimensional cyber communities (Young, 2009), differences between real and virtual relationships are easily articulated by the boys. Online behaviour is understood as a social performance and judged by them as appropriate or otherwise in much the same way it is in the real world. It could be argued that virtual worlds give teenage boys opportunities to experiment with new identities and to be more vocal and 'out-going' than they might normally be (Young, 2009).

Negotiating Love

Interpersonal relationships, including romantic friendships, are critical contexts in which young people develop self-identity and practice autonomy (Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010). However, the literature on teenage romance largely focuses on demographic patterns of adolescent dating and sexual aspects of developing heterosexual relationships (Feiring, 1996; Montgomery & Sorell, 1998). For example, a commonly reported finding in research on adolescence is that young people begin to shift the focus of their attention from their same-gender friendships to cross-gender relationships (Connell, 2005). In Connell's view, this reflects "the modern Western gender order" (p. 17), with its family structure based on heterosexual adult unions, such that heterosexuality is reproduced as a normative pattern of adolescent behaviour. But what do we really know about teenage love and romance? How do they initiate and experience their early forays into this uncharted terrain?

In one way or another, the boys in this study situate their experiences of attraction and love within the contexts of their peer group, family, and community. They reflect on what it means to have romantic feelings for someone, how this differs from their other personal relationships, and how it impacts on those around them and is judged by others.

For Andrew, new possibilities are created when he finds his social status reclassified and elevated by a girl outside his immediate friend group.

...she recognised me as [his] nicer nerd friend. Like well she described me as his hot nerd friend...now I have someone who it's really fun to be with but in a different way. Like not just coz we're joking around. I don't know I just like being with her. It's a little bit more serious I guess. A bit less joking around, always making jokes about everything.

Physical attraction is understood as the catalyst for a relationship in which fun and companionship take on new meanings. Some researchers propose that social skills such as companionship and intimacy develop in close friendships and relationships with parents, and are then further explored and refined within emerging romantic relationships (Feiring, 1996; Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001). Andrew can be seen to make a distinction between the kind of fun to be had with mates and the fun that can be found in romance. The former is described as “joking around”, terminology often used by teenage boys in reference to the pranks, ritualistic ridiculing of self and others, and making light of serious or emotional issues that characterise many of their male friendships (Forrest, 2000; Oransky & Marecek, 2009). Here, Andrew seems to be saying that ‘fun’ with his girlfriend feels as though it somehow has more substance to it.

I guess it's a little bit more intimate maybe with my girlfriend. It's mutual. Like she's feeling the same way. My Mum's just like understanding of how I feel.

Intimacy appears to be understood as something that enables reciprocity in the relationship, in terms of shared understanding and emotional support. By contrast, parents apparently can *care*, but not *share*.

Another of the boys experienced ‘true love’ as developing gradually out of an established friendship. This “fairytale”, as Sebastian calls it, is constructed as a story of forbidden love constrained by a perceived social morality that would prohibit such a union. What is understood to be at stake is the risk of being censured or rejected by others, particularly by parents and peers.

[It’s a] fairytale in the sense that it’s not probably socially acceptable...Well I would say that at this stage our age difference isn’t what most people would call socially acceptable...It doesn’t really matter to us. And it probably wouldn’t matter if we were older or in the future but at this stage people would probably see it as just weird...Just our peers in general so it would be teenagers like us and probably even our parents...I’m sixteen turning seventeen, she’s thirteen...It’s just kind of one of those social rules. One of those sort of schoolyard rules. Don’t go out with someone who’s that young or that old.

Positioning himself as a non-conformist, Sebastian demonstrates his awareness of the social rules that underpin this dilemma and are policed by his peers in the school setting. He also shows that this social force is limited in its power to curtail his actions, as he sees himself as skillfully managing the situation by keeping the relationship secret. This means he can retain his honourable standing among family and friends, and still enjoy his unauthorised romance.

We do hang out after tennis...Most of the other time we’re bound to internet and secret phone calls...Physically it’s mostly built on sort of unspoken glances.

This Romeo and his Juliette are resourceful in finding opportunities and ways to be intimate. There is a sense of excitement but also innocence in their secret exchanges. It would seem that it is not the physical but rather the emotional connection that makes this relationship intimate. Sebastian presents the notion of platonic intimacy as something of a revelation, and it seems as though he is struggling to define this relationship because it does not match any of his previous experiences or expectations. To some extent, this story exemplifies the challenge that teenagers face when engaged in a process of negotiating between abstract moral and behavioural codes and normative expectations (Spera & Lightfoot, 2010). Sebastian states:

I know what it feels like to be just straight out attracted to somebody else. But this is just different. It's far different. It's completely non-physical. It's platonic and that is a rather new feeling being able to be attracted to someone purely because of who they are rather than what they are.

Reflecting more generally on some of the pros and cons of being 'in a relationship', he attempts to explain what it means to become intensely preoccupied with one another. This is not so much about how much time they spend together. Rather, it relates more to the idea of expending considerable mental and emotional energy to the project, which is possibly understood as a measure of loyalty and commitment. This aspect of the relationship appears to represent a compromise that constitutes both choice and obligation.

I think a friend of mine once called it quite colourfully an unhealthy dependence which I thought yeah that explains it quite well...I mean it is a new feeling. Just having to rely on someone else because you know that they're thinking of you, you're thinking of them and so that whole kind of feeling's really quite new.

It is perhaps this all-consuming attentiveness that is understood to inspire and facilitate more open communication and a deeper level of trust. Sebastian's narrative suggests that these are in fact important goals in the relationship.

I guess because of that brother-sister relationship we kind of had as friends before. I mean we do trust each other quite a lot and so it hasn't been like an issue to gain each other's trust because we already know that we can talk to each other. And then being together just makes it a little more comfortable talking about just about anything I guess.

As illustrated in the above examples, notions of love and intimacy are associated with meaningful communication, mutual support, and trust. It is worthy of note that the boys construct emotional connectedness as a significant feature of their romantic friendships. This could be interpreted as a challenge to traditional masculine stereotypes which reproduce notions of emotional impoverishment or deficiency in teenage boys (Oransky & Marecek, 2009).

Other boys focus more on how romantic relationships impact on their established friendships, and discuss the strategies they employ to manage these potential

‘disruptions’. There is usually at least a temporary realignment of the existing friendship group as a result of the extra time that is often invested in new dating relationships (Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001). For example, Sam suggests that a temporary ‘time-out’ is to be expected when one of the boys gets a new love interest.

If one of them did they might leave the group. We’re not going to like tell them to come back or anything. We’ll just leave them and when they come back, they come back. It’s not like a permanent loss, it’s just like a temporary they’re gone for now.

The idea presented here is that a boy can simply choose to leave the group for ‘as long as it takes’, and it seems to be taken for granted that this is a temporary situation as things will eventually go back to normal. However, it is unclear whether this could be because these relationships are not expected to last very long, or because there is assumed to be a honeymoon phase that requires the new couple’s undivided attention.

Anton, on the other hand, sees potential problems in such an arrangement so he deliberately avoids any cross-contamination of romance and friendship. His personal dating policy is to cast his net further afield.

I’ve never really gone out with people from school. I don’t like that whole aspect of it that you’d have to sort of see them every day and you’d have to spend too much time with them...you’d lose some of your freedom coz then you’d have to spend too much time with them and you wouldn’t get to really like hang out with your friends and do stuff that you normally want.

From Anton’s perspective, dating someone from his own school would create a dilemma because he would be torn between attending to his new partner and hanging out with his friends. He believes that committing the required amount of time to maintain a romantic relationship would impinge on his freedom to do some of the things he most enjoys. He may also be concerned that he would not be able to please anyone, least of all himself, no matter how he was to divide his time. On top of that, there is the perceived problem of missing out on the ordinary stuff, the kind of shared experiences that fashion and fortify friendships with mates. For some boys, then, there appears to be much at stake when they introduce romantic relationships into the peer friendship context.

Another of the boys approaches the matter from a different angle. Rather than problematise the experience, Finn headlines his memory with features of a new romance that I suspect may sound a little more familiar to us. These are the things that we would perhaps anticipate as a teenage love story unfolds; that is, the rush of excitement when two young people suddenly feel ‘chemistry’ between them, exploration of the sensual, and perhaps the ‘discovery’ of a deeper level of friendship.

We just got to know each other and then just one day it was just like bang. And then just got real good friends and stuff and hung out for ages and it was pretty cool...a little bit more physical but other than that just still kept good friends.

As shown, when Finn was suddenly smitten there does appear to have followed the kind of intense and time-consuming phase referred to by the other boys. This is constructed as a time for exploring intimacy and companionship from a new perspective. Compared to the earlier examples, however, Finn puts a slightly different slant on his friends’ responses.

It might have been a bit more awkward for my friends and stuff like having to endure us.

While Finn acknowledges that his friends probably had to make allowances for some of his behaviour, he makes no mention of any alternative pathways. That is, the integration of new romantic relationships into the existing friendship group is, at least at some stage, seen as a given. In other words, it is not a question of *if*, but only *how* the process might play out.

For teenagers living in today’s world, a discussion around dating practices would not be complete without some mention of the role that technology plays. Ben, for instance, chooses to enlist his friends’ support to help him work through a relationship break-up by communicating with them via the computer. It could be that the internet is an important social networking medium for boys who want to share emotionally challenging issues with their peers, but find it difficult to do so face-to-face.

I could talk on MSM. I’ve had a break-up recently so I’ve been talking to friends about that.

The mobile phone is another tool that features in this relationship work. It is not uncommon to hear parents complain that their teenage children spend too much time texting their friends and not enough time ‘talking’ with them. The inference is that this is an inferior and disjointed form of communication, because it denies them opportunities to learn to read and respond to the finer nuances of social interactions. However, texting can be used to convey important emotional messages and to address misunderstandings (Pope, 2007). Here, we see how the art of texting can involve complex communication and relational skills, as Lucca reconstructs the evolution of a tricky ‘conversation’.

...she was my best friend first and then through texting her a lot...it’s really become talking. Which is sad kind of, not really, yes, mixed feelings about texting...Through talking to her the conversation got a little bit towards something else...it was a miscommunication through text. That’s how we started, how we got together in the first place.

Texting is thus understood to be a legitimate way of talking, while simultaneously eliciting a degree of ambivalence about the implications this might have. It is also seen to allow for an existing friendship to be actively renegotiated, with the possibility that it could move to a new level. As the story continues, the social skills required to interpret confusing non-verbal cues and repair instances of miscommunication become increasingly apparent. Just as people might briefly avoid eye contact or show some physical response to an uncomfortable moment during a face-to-face encounter, the speed at which a ‘textee’ responds, and the brevity or expansiveness of their messages, are recognised as important conversational performances in this context.

I’m pretty sure I can regurgitate the conversation. I was like, oh man what do I say to this girl that I’ve led on, supposedly, and not hurt her feelings. And she got what felt like really defensive. Like she was texting back slower - I don’t know it’s this weird relationship through text that you make – she was texting back slower and kind of like shorter as well... There was like a bit of awkwardness...Awkwardness on text, can you believe it... it’s just like a pause when you’re not really talking to each other when you’d normally get a response far quicker.

Ultimately, Lucca demonstrates the capacity to move between what could be constructed as ‘older generation’ and ‘younger generation’ positions in this context. His experience tells him that romantic relationships can be successfully negotiated

through texting by socially competent operators. He disputes the notion that texting is, by nature, an emotionless interaction. Yet he accepts there is a compromise, in that some potentially useful social cues are missing from this form of communication.

People complain about how cold and unnatural texting is...texting is just simpler...It's missing something yeah. It's missing that facial expression and body language that most conversations need.

In summary, we can see that teenage boys explore, manage, and make sense of romance and intimacy in many different ways. Within emerging intimate friendships, boys can learn lessons in connectedness, sensitivity to others' needs, and communication around issues that are important for self-understanding (Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010). For some, there is a clear sense that these relationships provide a context for the development of deeper relational and emotional experiences. Boys can be seen to be actively engaging in the process, weighing up advantages and disadvantages, and negotiating a balance between their own needs and those of others.

If we want better insight into how boys of this age experience love and romance, it is important to understand that theories about predictable stages of adolescent relationship development are culturally constructed. As Kloep (1999) observes, young people experience intimate relationships in different ways and at different ages in their lives, depending on the social and cultural contexts in which they live. She notes, for example, that at the age when young people in Western societies are usually starting to explore the idea of intimate friendships, their counterparts in some non-Western countries may already be married. Likewise, normative patterns of sexuality are by no means the only sexuality identities available to teenage boys (Connell, 2005). Although still marginalised, alternative ways of expressing sexuality (such as gay, bisexual, and transgender), and therefore also new discourses of masculinity, are increasingly being articulated (Ging, 2005). Interestingly, many of the boys in this study did not feel compelled to specify the gender of their romantic partner, nor did I ask them for clarification. I make this observation only to remind us how easily we may find ourselves making assumptions based on dominant heterosexual relationship discourses.

Negotiating Society

Teenagers may build social, cultural, and moral capital by drawing on available resources from within their immediate contexts, as well as through their engagement in social relationships within their community and the wider society. As their social world expands, they may become increasingly aware of the ways they are represented and positioned in the media. Also, the more they are exposed to cultural diversity, the more they may learn to appreciate others' perspectives, and to assimilate and reconcile different points of view into their emerging self-identities (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). Teenagers are increasingly socialised into shared norms and prepared for 'prosocial' roles when they interact with adults in community contexts (Jarrett et al., 2005). It has been suggested that young people may experience a stronger sense of community (i.e., a sense of belonging, contributing, and being valued by the community) when they believe themselves to have a voice, and some power and influence over community matters (Evans, 2007). Nowell and Boyd (2010) contend that 'sense of community' may not only be experienced as a resource, in terms of personal benefits, but also as a responsibility in that civic-oriented values embedded within social institutions are encouraged in young people.

Responding to the Critics

The media, as a convenient and ubiquitous source of social and cultural knowledge, is understood to play an influential role in teenagers' understanding of themselves and the world (Aasebo, 2005; Wildermuth & Dalsgaard, 2006). Young people consume, negotiate, and reshape culturally available meanings, symbols, and images. Their engagement with the media is, therefore, considered to be a central part of their everyday identity work (Brown, Dykers, Steele, & White, 1994). According to Thurlow (2003), psychologists and sociologists are increasingly recognising the prejudicial impact of the homogenous and predominantly negative ways that adolescence has been constructed by their disciplines. For example, young people are often depicted as poor communicators (except among their peers), and youth culture

as bizarre and transient. In Millington and Wilson's (2010) study, adolescent boys offered perceptive critical interpretations of representations of youth identities on television and in the movies, particularly regarding hegemonic masculinities built on characteristics like strength and toughness. In some instances, however, these masculinities were reportedly also admired by the boys.

Various portrayals of adolescence and adolescent boys are critiqued and resisted by the boys in this study. These include representations of adolescence as a period of storm-and-stress, racialised and gendered stereotypes, the idea of a 'generation gap', public discourses about teenage boys as disaffected and delinquent, and constructions of the 'ideal' teenage boy. Media stories are typically understood by the boys as partial, distorted, or completely erroneous representations of teenagers in general, and teenage boys in particular. The representations of youth are seen to be either bolstering negative stereotypes or functioning as attempts to govern teenagers' behaviour.

One participant, Pete, feels that his experience of being a teenage boy bears little resemblance to what is portrayed in television programmes aimed at teenage audiences today.

It doesn't fit at all...The TV boys are basically always split up into like the jocks and the nerds pretty much. In lots of TV programmes it still happens like that and everyone is so stereotypically put into those two groups.

I would suggest that nothing much has changed over the years, in terms of the consistently stereotypical ways that boys are positioned and represented in this medium. In this example, Pete is not necessarily denying the existence of, for example, 'jocks' and 'nerds'. Rather, his argument may be that this is simply far too narrow a view, as it takes no account of the diversity that exists within contemporary male teen culture, or of the multiple positions available to boys. The perceived lack of fit between television and real life may also relate to the fact that American sitcoms, which feature most frequently on New Zealand television, are not really seen to reflect the New Zealand way of life. This point is illustrated by Pete when he observes

how race-related behaviours are often reproduced and constructed as normative practices in this genre of television programme.

It's quite different I suppose because in the TV shows people tend to well you see a lot of the white guys hanging out just with the white guys and people sticking to the skin colour and I don't think that really matters that much at all. Probably it happens here but it doesn't really matter to me. I suppose it probably would matter if someone was biased against me because of the skin colour or something stupid like that but I don't mind.

The ethnic stereotyping described above, which depicts groups of young people drawn together on the basis of their skin colour, elicits some uncertainty as to whether or not this represents a mismatch with New Zealand's cultural context. More importantly perhaps, the discussion leads Pete to reflect more deeply on his own understanding of discriminatory practices. The position he takes up is one in which he sees himself as having little, if any, direct experience to draw from. This positioning enables him to construct himself as relatively unaffected and unconcerned by notions about racial tension. It could be argued that he is reproducing a discourse of racism that researchers have termed 'colour-blindness', whereby race is understood to be socially constructed, but the ways that racial ideologies structure everyday life and are perpetuated through everyday practices are downplayed (Holyfield, Moltz, & Bradley, 2009). Pete does, however, speculate that his understanding could well change, or at least the issues could take on greater significance, if he were to experience being on the receiving end of racial prejudice. This suggests that everyday exposure to media constructions of normative behaviour may also give rise to new insights in teenage boys. A further example is problematised by Pete. This time he credits the newspapers with replicating images of testosterone-crazed boys who have no control over their behaviour.

It seems you know in the newspaper they say that with teenage boys you know with all the hormones they go crazy, but I haven't really felt much of that. Life just seems to be going on pretty much as normal...you just deal with it...Most of my friends seem to be sort of the same. Occasionally you know there are a couple days when they don't feel like doing anything and they just get angry but most of the time it's pretty much just normal.

The disparity between such representations and Pete's lived experience is highlighted. Life appears to be understood as a fairly consistent process in which emotional ups and downs are inevitable, but not overwhelming. So, while there is some awareness that biologically-oriented discourses about teenage development are reproduced through the media, the idea that all boys go through a period of dramatic biological upheaval is seen to be resisted.

Pete is not a lone voice in his denunciation of negative teenager stereotypes reproduced in the media. Ben, for example, accepts there may be some truth in the stories he hears in the news, but rejects a universal 'problem youth' narrative.

I guess there has been quite a lot of violence and teenage boys on the news, how there's young teenagers who've robbed shops or something...But if someone has a view of all teenage boys like that I don't know it's just I wouldn't view all teenagers like that. I'd just think that some people are like that and they're most likely struggling with a lot with stuff coz I know when you do struggle with stuff people have different ways of coping.

Ben does not feel compelled to offer an alternative picture of teenage boys, or teenagers in general, but instead contextualises the violent or criminal behaviour of those who make the headlines. He does this by suggesting that their actions are probably responses to circumstances in which they may be struggling to cope. As such, the issues are located within the domain of sociocultural factors that impact on teenagers' lives and wellbeing.

Similarly, another of the boys, Anton, has difficulty understanding why young people tend to get lumped together and depicted as a problem group. He states:

I don't really see how you can say every teenager doesn't want to do any work or anything serious like that. It doesn't really matter about your age. I think really if you want to succeed you're going to do what you need to anyway...I think it's down to you as a person...You can't just generally assume that everyone who's under 20 is just going to want to mess around. I think a lot of people get that impression but I don't think it's true.

Here we can see that Anton rejects the idea of people being classified purely on the basis of their age, as though being “under 20” somehow limits a person’s capacity to succeed and contribute in a worthwhile way. Devlin (2005) argues a similar point. He contends that “mainstream clinical-psychological discourse of adolescence” (p. 175) is enacted through the media, promoting the kind of age-based pathologising and criminalising of teenagers that these boys highlight in their talk, while failing to acknowledge any underlying socio-economic factors that may contribute to their development and identity creation.

Sebastian is even more emphatic in his protest, dismissing media portrayals of teenage boys as “completely bogus” and highly selective.

Well I do take media studies and so I do understand that it’s well I’d say completely bogus the whole thing. Well I mean media obviously they want everything picture perfect I guess. They’re portraying teenage guys well they kind of send out the message that teenage guys should be like this, look like this.

The idea offered here is that popular media representations are seen to create an imperative to look and behave in accordance with some unattainable image of the ‘perfect’ teenage boy. Bucholtz (2002) suggests the media have a powerful influence over young people’s engagement with capitalist consumerism. Sebastian legitimises his standpoint by positioning himself as someone who is quite knowledgeable about how the media machine works. The main point he seems to want to convey is that boys are not so easily duped by these socially constructed ideals.

Some guys might be like that but I just think it’s a little bit weird being told how you should be especially by people you don’t know...other guys probably are affected by it, a few other people. I’m not sure...But the people I hang out with I’m pretty sure that they’re not affected by it much.

In the above quotation, Sebastian alludes to an underlying political agenda in the routinely reproduced messages of how teenage boys should look and act. While he seems aware of its potential power to regulate the behaviour of some of his peers, he denies its influence over his own or his friends’ behaviour.

Presumably, as boys develop a stronger sense of self over time, we would expect there to be a shift in how they respond to everyday representations of teens and teen culture. Aasebo (2005) proposes that one way teenagers might demonstrate personal growth and make sense of their reformulated responses to the media is by highlighting contrasts between how they used to understand the world, as children, and how they understand things now, as teenagers. This is precisely what David seems to be doing in the following example, as he reflects on how and why his worldview has changed over the years.

Now I see a lot of things for what they are. That's from watching the news and everything so I like to watch that. When I was younger I was like a child and you'd see things differently.

Initially, David describes his current understanding of the social world as being largely informed by the media. He also infers that 'reality' is less visible to young children. However, he counters this position when he begins to think about how information may come to be generated through the media. He states:

Is there any common perception on teenage boys? Like past research, are there any common trends on that?...like lots of drinking, driving lots and fast, and not really aware of their schoolwork and stuff like that - I get that a lot from the news and newspapers...there's a few people who do that but there's more that don't. And so I think the data's kind of quite skewed and I get quite angry coz not all people are like that.

Thus, it appears that David is starting to see a relationship between "trends" in research about teenage boys, and common-sense understandings about them that are reproduced in the media. It follows that this new insight could give him cause to question some of the 'facts' presented in the daily news, and possibly therefore to reconsider his view of the media as reliable sources of information. The stories identified by David as most commonly circulated in the press are all too familiar. They depict teenage males as a problem group in a variety of ways across multiple contexts. Rather than identify with these negative media images, studies have found that teenage boys frequently express frustration at the way they are characterised by adults (Thurlow, 2003). As we have seen here, some boys clearly feel the need to

defend against what they see as biased reporting and gross generalisations that overemphasise the antisocial activities of a relatively small percentage of youth.

In summary, it is argued that boys interact with the media in ways that help them make sense of their identities, as males and as teenagers. They also show themselves capable of recognising and deconstructing prevailing ideologies of gender and adolescence (Ging, 2005). Examination of media representations of and about young people is therefore considered to be an important way of discerning readily available discourses that inform constructions of, and psychological theories about, adolescents and adolescence (Burman, 2008b). Researchers have repeatedly noted a pervasive pattern of “fixed and predictable” representations of teenagers in the media that both signal and magnify a societal sense of moral crisis (Devlin, 2005). Individuals and groups of people are continuously subjected to a process of social classification that either proliferates or subverts socially constructed entities based on *similarity* or *difference* (Fairclough, 2003). This classification work is alluded to by the boys in their critiques of media representations of teenagers. For example, teenagers are frequently lumped together and, at the same time, differentiated from other age-based categories by their ‘unruly’ behaviour. When references are made to their perceived lack of direction or motivation to engage in ‘worthwhile’ activities, such as employment, some notions of difference may be collapsed. In such a case, they may, for example, be represented as equivalent to all other employment-seeking individuals in terms of autonomy and available opportunities. Despite the considerable power the media may wield in terms of their potential to label, contain, and control the teenage population, many of the boys in this study simply refuse to be reduced to a uniform group of ‘problem youth’. Furthermore, they show themselves to be media-literate, and capable of articulating their cultural positioning in relation to dominant discourses of adolescence and critically assessing the “discursive and institutional ‘nature’ of mediated communication” (Wildermuth & Dalsgaard, 2006, p. 20).

Forging Global Identities

Teenagers today are increasingly growing up in multicultural societies, and the processes of globalisation have important implications for their cultural identity

construction (Jensen, 2003). Once they enter high school they are likely to encounter greater cultural diversity than they did at primary school because high schools typically draw students from a wider catchment area. Teenagers are exposed indirectly to other cultures through different forms of media, and many also gain first-hand experience through trips abroad (Jensen, 2003). As they become more culturally versatile, they may be inclined to further explore their own cultural background. Multiple contexts contribute to the formation of their emerging cultural identities, including peer interactions, relationships with parents, and their perception of societal attitudes towards specific cultural groups (Sabatier, 2008). In the case of teenagers from immigrant families, showing awareness and interest in their cultural roots may enable them to meet family expectations, while still allowing them to identify with their peers and the wider society as their main reference group (Germain, 2004). Berry et al. (2006) speculate that experiences of discrimination often cause young people to become more oriented to their original culture. Germain (2004), on the other hand, has found that positive experiences, such as visits to and from relatives, also inspire teens to embark on cultural searches.

A common theme among many of the boys' stories is that their experiences abroad have impacted on them in important ways. Andrew, for instance, believes that the differences run deep between life in New Zealand and life in a European country he recently visited, in terms of societal and cultural practices and attitudes. Firstly he recalls being struck by a culture saturated in the history of a country that has existed for as long as he can imagine.

I found it really interesting just the culture and the way their society works compared to ours. It was educational. There was so much more depth sort of to their culture. Coz they've been around for sort of ever.

Living among such cultural wealth becomes subtly merged with the notion of *being* more cultured (and possibly more spiritual) as a nation. Andrew then defines culture in terms of its relationship with education and intellect. He states:

They're just like more cultured. They have all these churches and different religions. Like the people I stayed with they seemed so much more informed. Almost like their country has got more intellectual people than ours. Like a lot of people here seem to be

quite into rugby and Holdens and Fords and building and stuff like that. And drinking beer and barbeques. And over there it's more refined maybe, with Fine Arts.

Culture, in this example, is broadly defined with reference to legacies from the past, diversity of religious creeds, and sophistication with regards to everyday preferences and social practices. Some degree of engagement with the iconic 'Kiwi bloke' image is, in Terry and Braun's (2009) view, inevitable for boys living in New Zealand, and it can have considerable impact on their identity work. Here, Andrew makes no attempt to soften the contrast or to disguise his position when it comes to weighing up 'all things cultural' against a life devoted to 'rugby, racing, and beer'. Thus I would argue that, by choosing to only highlight typically 'masculine' practices, a gendered version of New Zealand culture has been constructed by Andrew, and found wanting. Having distanced himself from his own cultural background and identified strongly with 'other', Andrew may be left with the dilemma of figuring out where he now belongs. In an apparent effort to resolve this matter, his argument now takes on a more pragmatic approach as he switches his attention to functional and structural aspects of the education system.

Their schools are like graded. Like you go through primary school and depending on how good you are you get separated into the workers' sort of school, like builders and mechanics and then one for like office workers like typists and stuff...And then the top ones are for scientists, engineers, like the more professional - I'm not saying that mechanics are not professional - but more academic.

Andrew describes a hierarchical structure that mirrors a social class system. It ranges from schools for the 'future working class', through to the "top ones" for those destined to become scientists, professionals, and the like. The message he conveys is that it makes good sense for teenagers' likely career trajectories to be identified early and managed in this way. Andrew can evidently see advantages for himself if he could be part of such a system, namely that he would be among like-minded people who would understand and value him, as he explains in the following text:

I think I'd be with more people like myself. It would be good yeah because the people who aren't necessarily very much like me don't respect me. Most people here wouldn't think that what I'm about is worth any time I guess.

Clearly, for Andrew, this is not just a matter of streamlining the education system. Rather, it is about meaningful connections with other people, *belonging*. He also perceives differences in other contexts, for example in the way young people communicate with each other in their normal daily interactions, as shown below.

The people my own age were pretty much the same as here except they're probably a bit more forthcoming with what they mean, a bit more blunt than over here. Like they'll say something is bad instead of saying that it's not so good. Just like say it the way it is rather than trying to go around it. I think that their being more forthcoming's really good because then it takes out the possibility of misinterpreting people.

There is an impression that Andrew feels quite 'at home' in this foreign land, where the business of making oneself understood seems less complicated to him. By contrast, he thinks he would risk offending people back home in New Zealand if he used a more direct approach with them.

They'll think it's offensive and think that it's not really the way to say something. They'd think that I mean it in a sort of offensive way.

The subtle complexities of everyday social etiquette may become more apparent to young people when they travel. The more they notice difference in others, the more they may reflect on taken-for-granted, everyday practices in their own cultural context. For example, Andrew draws attention to what he sees as a more deliberate and formal protocol for greeting friends, and we might assume from his earlier observations that this is another cultural practice which appeals to him.

It's probably more I don't know maybe formal coz quite often they like greet each other. Like actually just stop and say hello. And sometimes shakes hands even...It's just kind of weird coz we sort of just turn up and then we're together. There's no sort of stop and greet each other. It's subtly different.

In some respects, Andrew's cultural exploration has come to represent an account of his own self-discovery. Through his reflective evaluation of 'other' he has discerned ways of *being* and *doing* that appear to fit comfortably into his emerging sense of self and the world. If this is so, then he is now in a better informed position, which will

facilitate his selection of aspects of multiple cultures in the formation of his own cultural identity. As Berwick and Whalley (2000) suggest, critical reflection about experiences within unfamiliar cultural contexts is key to teenagers' "culture learning". They further contend that the reflective process may enable teenagers to more deeply question existing cultural assumptions, adapt their worldview, and create options for themselves. Similarly, experiencing other cultures first-hand may shift some teenagers from an ethnocentric cultural position to a more inclusive cultural perspective (Berwick & Whalley, 2000).

For other boys, returning to their family's homeland is seen to provide opportunities to reflect on their bicultural or multicultural identities. For example, in Lucca's case, having some understanding of the political and cultural context in which his parents spent most of their lives seems critical to his own self-concept. In the following extract, he explains how living in a country with a long history of being at war creates a more disciplined nation. He speaks of a society in which parents do not have the luxury, as it might be seen, of *negotiating* with their children. Parents are in charge, children are expected to obey without question, and according to Lucca, everyone understands how the system works and why it has come to be like this.

Parents are quite angry back there...stricter. They're just more disciplined because conscription over there is a big thing. Every father has to go to the army for at least six months and every time there's a war they get called. That's actually the reason we're over here. The children over there are just more disciplined. The children know that if they do something wrong their father will give them an earful.

There is also the idea of a strong sense of unity and connectedness in this community, which Lucca constructs in contrast to community life in New Zealand. Of course he may never have experienced 'small-town New Zealand', but arguably the more salient point might be that this closeness is understood to relate to the community's shared history of struggle and adversity.

It is an interesting contrast because...the town is so small the parents have been everywhere. So you say I'm going here they know where to find you there. They know the people. They know who owns it. They know the parents and grandparents. Everyone is like really close-knit.

From these observations, we can imagine that boys from immigrant families may become quite adept at navigating between and across very different cultural spaces. However, unlike their parents, teenage boys are still in the early stages of constructing their identities, so important differences between their cultural identification and that of their parents may become increasingly apparent over time (Birman & Trickett, 2001). Acculturation research suggests that cultural gaps may be more likely to develop between parents and their children in cases where the children immigrated at a young age or were born in the host country (Birman & Trickett, 2001; Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). For example, if the language spoken in the country a family emigrates to differs from the parents' mother tongue, intergenerational cultural differences may be even more pronounced in some of these families. Butcher (2008) argues that language is a central marker of cultural membership, and that bilingualism may be seen as a strategy that reproduces belonging to cultural groups. Bilingualism, therefore, may be used to reinforce alternative spaces of belonging (such as peer friendship groups based on common cultural backgrounds), and also as a means of including or excluding others. These ideas are illustrated here in Lucca's narrative:

Well one of the things is that they're bilingual friendships. We can speak our own language to each other which is really good, comes in handy sometimes because when New Zealanders or any other nationalities join our friend circle we've always got our [own] jokes plus English jokes so we've got an extra kind of level. Also our parents are all quite stereotypically alike so we can all make fun of the way they talk English.

Above, we can see how Lucca and his "hybrid" friends, to borrow Butcher's (2008) expression, construct language as a cultural resource that allows them to feel more connected to one another. They can also choose to speak one language over another at different times for different reasons. In Lucca's view, this gives them the advantage of being able to decide when to remain culturally distinct from their 'other' friends and when to position themselves within the wider social network. They are also positioned in multiple ways in relation to their parents' cultural group. For example, the parents are represented as an homogenous immigrant group, whose foreign accent and/or limited grasp of English is the source of much amusement among their comparatively competent (that is, bilingually *and* multiculturally) teenage children. Lucca then repositions the parents and children so that they once more share the same cultural

world, but this time he uses their common language to link them together rather than to signal their differences. As shown below, language is understood by Lucca to not only unite generations within families, but also to unite families who share the 'immigrant experience' and originate from what was once a unified cultural background.

The reason I say 'our' language is because we are Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian, Bosnian, and as the years go on some of the countries keep dividing...There is literally just one or two words different. So we just say 'our' language because we're not trying to diversify each other purely because the Government is trying to diversify us. Croatian and Serbian isn't the same language any more because they are purposely making different words.

Lucca further problematises a straightforward view of cultural affiliation by demonstrating how the members of this community actively reconstruct their cultural identities. In his view, these families experience a greater sense of political freedom in their 'new' country, so it provides a context in they can challenge the cultural differences that once created barriers between them. Yet, given their political histories, this is by no means a simple process, as Lucca tries to explain:

I don't know it's really complicated and there were a lot of wars fought between us...A lot of people here, a lot of my friends, the mother is Serbian the father is Croatian and they didn't accept that back there. But here it's just fine, a lot of the time here nobody even knows what it is.

Lucca's narrative is about connections and transformations: the past gives meaning to the present; cultural resources are shared and adapted; old adversaries become neighbours and friends. In short, his story demonstrates that the processes of cultural identification and acquiring cultural capital are complex and fluid.

For some boys, visits to their 'home' country will not necessarily elicit such broad reflections about cultural belonging. Sometimes it is the more mundane aspects of life, the things that seem most relevant to the boys' current lives, which leave the biggest impression on them. Anton, for example, notes how differently the school day is organised and tries to figure out how this might impact on daily life.

And school's quite a bit different. They only go in the mornings and they end at twelve. And then some people go from twelve to four... You have a bit of school but the day's not as structured I guess.

Anton perceives that young people might experience their lives as less structured under such a system. We can only guess at what this might mean. It could be, for example, that leisure time is more highly valued, or that teenagers engage in more independent learning or have more time to hold down jobs, or that they are seen as more mature, or alternatively, more at risk for having less structured lives. The point is that all are possibilities which Anton may now be able to imagine, having had a glimpse of a different way of life. Anton's trip to his country of birth is also constructed as an escape from what he describes as the stress, demands, and responsibilities of his usual everyday existence.

Over there I was sort of on holiday... I had no responsibilities. And then when I came over here I had to start going to school again and training and worrying about tests so it's quite a bit different. Like over there I didn't have to do anything particular. It was just relaxing. Over here it's quite a bit more structured and it's quite a bit repetitive. Like everyday you have to go to school, go home. Everything's sort of you have to do this and this and this.

As this experience occurred in the context of a holiday, Anton is presenting a rather romanticised view of an alternative lifestyle. Nevertheless, it does give him cause to think about the longer term implications of going through life without any particular goals or commitments, as the following text demonstrates.

Over there it was just what ever you really feel like at the time... it's good for a couple of months but I don't think I could live without doing anything particular. I think I have to have something to pass the time really. Yeah you can't really just do nothing your whole life.

I would argue that Anton's experience has served to broaden his perspective on the wider world. It has given him pause to consider the structured nature of his daily life and to measure it against other possible ways of living. It has also prompted him to think about how he might achieve some sort of balance between work and pleasure, structure and freedom, and activity and relaxation, in his future life.

As illustrated above, boys from all cultural backgrounds are increasingly mobile, crossing social boundaries and navigating multiple worlds. Their experiences of international travel create new opportunities for them to observe everyday practices in culturally diverse contexts, and to compare different ways that societies are structured and organised. When boys have direct experience of more than one cultural perspective, cultural identity formation becomes a more complicated and reflective process. When they find themselves at a cultural crossroad, they may have to make decisions about which conventions and values of a particular culture to embrace and integrate into their own worldview, and which to reject (Hundeide, 2005). An important task for some boys may be learning how to move between two or more cultures in such a way that they can remain connected to their families and culture(s) of origin, while also experiencing a sense of being fully integrated into the society in which they live (Sabatier, 2008). Some boys manage cultural belonging and difference by crossing between languages, which allows them to understand, communicate, and identify with the social practices and cultural conventions that are embedded in each language (Butcher, 2008). Overall, it would appear that boys' 'other culture experiences' give rise to meaningful reflections, which validate or challenge their existing worldview and contribute to the construction of their multicultural identities. While this process may be difficult for them at times, it also presents them with opportunities to develop skills that may allow them to better navigate cultural difference and contribute to society in a multicultural world (Jensen, 2003).

Practising 'Good Citizenship'

Teenagers are exposed to normative ideas about what is socially acceptable, desirable, and possible through their interactions with others in a variety of contexts (Vignoles, Manzi, Regalia, Jemmolo, & Scabini, 2008). Many teenagers in Western societies, for example, will have their first experience of paid employment and/or voluntary work within community organisations some time around their mid-teens. We often construct these kinds of experience as good preparation for their entry into the adult world. As teenagers become increasingly familiar with a range of normative social roles, they may begin to explore different options with a view to pursuing them

further at a later time (Marshall, Young, Domene, & Zaidman-Zait, 2008). The shaping of capable, moral citizens has been an important goal of developmental psychology, but notions of morality have historically been constructed in gendered, culture-specific, and individualistic terms (Burman, 2008a). Such constructions privilege certain groups of people and marginalise others, while also reproducing the idea of a predictable and universal developmental pathway. Citizenship has also become a priority in education, such that schools explicitly go about the business of instilling the ‘necessary’ qualities, skill-sets, and understandings in their students (Hall, Coffey, & Williamson, 1999). However, it may be increasingly difficult for government agencies to shape the ‘good citizen’ as a nation-specific ideal, because young people have appropriated the right to claim multicultural identities (as discussed in the previous section), and therefore global citizenship, for themselves. In other words, new narratives of youth are emerging, just as they always have done, in relation to historical and political moments of transformation, and in local, national, and international contexts (Griffin, 2001). The following analysis reveals ways that teenage boys actively engage in negotiating a place for themselves in society. It shows, for example, how boys construct themselves as self-disciplined, agentic, responsible, and contributing members of their wider communities. Conversely, moments of uncertainty and confusion are also evident in their narratives.

The development of self-surveillance and self-discipline is commonly regarded as characteristic of the successful transition to adult status (Griffin, 1997). Sebastian’s story alludes to this discourse, in that he constructs himself as ‘appropriately’ conscientious and dependable in his role as youth orchestra pianist, as the following excerpt shows.

Well it is a really demanding position. Obviously it’s got a lot of responsibility with it. And so I’m bound to having to practice quite often just to make sure I’m ready for whenever I have to do it.

Reproduced in this narrative is the idea that an individual’s worth is measured by hard work and commitment. Sebastian occupies a social world which positions him as a responsible and contributing member of his community, and rewards him for demonstrating these desirable qualities. His self-imposed surveillance evokes an

image of Foucault's (1977) panopticon prison, which Foucault conceptualised as a self-regulating system that symbolises a shift away from externally applied discipline and control. Sebastian elaborates further:

Well it has taught me responsibility. Things like that you can only learn through experience – responsibility, dedication, having to push yourself to do something that at times might be difficult. This one is probably the most difficult, challenging kind of things I've done. It is rewarding. It gives you that feeling of - it's a little hard to explain but it just makes you feel good.

Here we can see how the system maintains itself. That is, we can probably assume that Sebastian receives praise from his youth orchestra community for his dedication and skill, which, in turn, inspires him to keep up the good work by continuing to push himself. He constructs the notion that people have the capacity and responsibility to challenge themselves, so they can grow and learn in different social contexts. A sense of pleasure or wellbeing is understood by him as the incentive and reward for doing so.

An obvious difference between voluntary roles within the community and paid employment is the money. Since earning money is often cited by teenagers as a primary incentive for getting a job, we might expect that they would highlight this as one of the more appealing aspects of their first work experiences. Yet it hardly rates a mention in these boys' stories. What receives considerably more attention is their perceived sense of accomplishment from learning how to successfully hold down a job. As Ben explains:

It's good about the fact that when I get up and I have to go to work and I have to get myself motivated coz I can't be late. And I actually have to organise the time to get ready and leave at the right time. And it's good that I know I'm working and making money for it and that sort of getting me into the workforce thing. But to start off it was pretty stressful the job coz it was really busy out the back.

Ben experiences his first job as personally rewarding for a number of reasons. For example, he associates it with increased self-motivation and improved time-management skills, which again tap into notions of self-regulation. These ideas are

also linked to discourses around taking responsibility for one's own outcomes, and the need to develop a 'good work ethic'. Perhaps of most significance to boys when they secure their first paid job is that they become legitimate members of the workforce. I contend that they would likely see this positioning as increasing their social standing among adults and their peers, and their sense of community belonging. They may also perceive other benefits and responsibilities, such as having more opportunities to interact with adults in the wider community, gaining greater independence, and making a contribution to society. These are similar to ideas expressed by adolescent participants in a study by Lister, Smith, Middleton, and Cox (2003). Lister and colleagues suggest that young people construct self in relation to the community in terms of both passive (e.g., being law-abiding) and active practices (e.g., behaving responsibly, helping others, making a positive contribution), and that the concept of 'good citizenship' may evoke a sense of being constructive, giving something back (e.g., through taxes and volunteer work), and being respectful and respected.

For other boys, working may be more about socialising and having fun. Below, Lucca lists some of the things he especially likes about his restaurant job.

Best job I've ever had. Because it starts usually around 4pm and ends at about 1am. So I like that whole night aspect, like I finish work at night, I'm cool. It's just great work. It's just working behind a bar, bringing people their food, being formal, smiling all the time. But you need to have great posture. All those things. And you're just talking, you're permanently in the atmosphere...and the atmosphere is always good.

It would appear that Lucca had never before considered the idea that work and pleasure could co-exist. He constructs his job as allowing him to claim a 'night life', something many teenagers aspire to. Lucca identifies a range of interpersonal skills and other qualities that he sees as enabling him to look and act the part. Specifically, he seems to understand that finding an acceptable balance between being polite and friendly, carrying oneself well, and being a skilled communicator, are more important than the actual mechanics of the job. In other words, social competence and self-confidence are seen as central to successfully navigating this adult world, as illustrated below.

When people leave they're always thanking us and tipping us and saying oh you're so wonderful, you're so good, blah, blah, blah. It was like just meet me halfway man and you'll have a good time. And it was just always a good night. Everyone was having fun, there was no arguments. Every time you dropped a glass you just swept it up and it was like, it's OK it's not a problem.

Employment is thus understood as providing a context in which boys can feel included, appreciated, and treated by adults as equals. Whitlock (2007) argues that while young people are constantly interacting with their social environment in a process of give and take, it is through a sense of reciprocity and mutual respect that they perceive a connectedness to adults and the wider community. Lucca also describes his work setting as an environment in which there is a constant flow of good-humoured banter between staff and patrons, and amongst co-workers. Hall and colleagues (1999) have suggested that it is by means of these seemingly casual, uncomplicated interactions that the exchange of normative understandings and individual perspectives frequently occurs. They further argue that such understandings may also be reinforced, contested, and negotiated within these contexts.

As boys increasingly have to negotiate these complex social arenas, it follows that they will gradually become more aware of how they are 'supposed to' behave if they want to gain a secure footing in the adult world. Thus, in order to figure out what kind of person they want to be and which behaviours are considered socially acceptable, boys might observe how adults behave and interact. They may also begin to pay closer attention to the behaviour of their peers. Sebastian, for example, positions himself as a religious person to explain why he is not attracted to the party culture that so many of his peers are into. There is also a sense that his religious values only partially account for his views and actions, and that his self-identity is experienced as multi-layered. He states:

Sometimes people might ask me why I don't drink or why I don't go to all the parties.
But I'm just like nah. Even if I wasn't a churchgoer I just don't see myself as going there.
It's just not something that I'm not really that much into.

Santor, Messervey, and Kusumakar (2000) suggest that the price of conformity to peer group membership, as reported in numerous studies, can be high for young

people. Most commonly, peer influence has been linked to a variety of behaviours that are considered risky, antisocial, or inappropriate for teens (e.g., substance use, delinquency, and sexual behaviours). Many interventions target peer influence by teaching teenagers ways to resist temptation, and by challenging misperceptions of normative behaviours (Perrine & Aloise-Young, 2004). A ‘problem youth’ discourse is reproduced in Sebastian’s narrative, through his depiction of binge drinking as a normative practice among his peers. He also seems to hint that there may be a cost to behaving so excessively. He states:

I mean knowing a lot of people in a lot of different classes at school they usually come in on Mondays and they talk about going out on the weekends and got pissed or how they had a crazy party at their place and I’m just wondering how they can live so much in two days.

It could be argued that the price of non-conformity can also be high. For example, adolescents in Demant and Jarvinen’s (2006) study, who identified as drinkers and party-goers, positioned themselves as fun, normal, socially mature, and well-connected. The researchers suggest that, consequently, teens who do not drink and party risk being labelled as boring and immature.

In Finn’s view the problem is not teenage drinking *per se*, but rather the decisions that some of his peers make involving alcohol. He considers himself immune to pressure from peers, positioning himself as ‘too smart’ to do anything that might put him or others at risk, as he explains in the following quotation.

Like most times people do stuff and it doesn’t go wrong. Only if you’re stupid it could go wrong. Like if someone offers me alcohol when I was driving. I’d definitely not do that...I’d just be like nah. I don’t know some people just have crazy ideas.

By comparison, self-control is seen as unimportant with regard to certain other peer-influenced behaviours, such as brand consumerism, because these types of behaviours are deemed to be relatively harmless.

It controls some things that you want like you want a phone, you want an I-Pod, you want some good shoes or something coz other people have them. And you want to do

things like you want to go to parties coz other people are doing it. Yeah sometimes you're just like nah that's not really important and sometimes you're like yeah I'll give in to the peer pressure on this one. Yeah but there are some things go too far like drugs and stuff...I haven't really gone too far with anything.

The idea presented here is that whilst teenagers have agency, 'peer pressure' is a fluid concept and, as such, might also be usefully employed by young people as a convenient excuse for doing things that risk inviting criticism from adults. I suggest that discourses of 'good citizenship' are also embedded within this narrative, as it is constructed around the notion that young people should know right from wrong, be able to differentiate between high- and low-risk behaviours, and should choose moderation over excess.

Another boy, Andrew, similarly derides excessive drinking and drug use, but in this case the issue is constructed around perceptions that getting drunk or stoned is often seen as a status symbol among teens. Andrew states:

Some of them, what they're doing is a waste of time. Like thinking that they're really cool. And drinking and drugs. Just thinking that's sort of a clever and cool thing that they're doing...It's fun sometimes - not to be ridiculous but just be with your friends and stuff. It's fun to do some things. It's fun maybe, that's a good word, like to get drunk but not like to get absolutely wasted and vomit and stuff like they do. But just have a nice time. Yeah. It's not worth bragging about.

It could be that the boys in this study claim to take up 'sensible', moderate positions as a way of constructing themselves as knowledgeable and respectful of the law. Alternatively, their positioning may indicate that they are predominantly guided by their personal values and beliefs. That is not to say that the two ideas are mutually exclusive, as boys' self-concepts and moral identities are doubtless shaped to some extent by legislation, as well as by other influential social institutions and people in their lives. It could also be argued that this is a group response to peer group cultures and norms, constructed by boys who believe themselves to be viewed as outsiders by some of their more 'gregarious' peers.

Just as boys might resist negative peer influence, they may also contest the views of significant others. This idea is exemplified in Kyle's account of a conversation between his parents and grandparents on the subject of crime, punishment, and justice.

Well I wasn't talking I was just listening and I was meant to be cleaning up dinner which I was doing slowly. And they were just talking about criminals and how they should be punished and things like that and whether people deserve what they get and stuff. And yeah they were talking about capital offenses and they decided they were with the death penalty but I didn't really like that. You kind of don't kill someone coz if you get the wrong person then you can't bring them back so I don't think the death penalty should really be used.

As Kyle silently engages with the debate from the safety of an adjoining room, we witness him trying to make sense of discourses about risk and responsibility. For teenagers, locating their moral positions on these kinds of issues is undoubtedly a complicated and continuous process. For one thing, notions of risk and responsibility are socially and culturally constructed, so there is much diversity among the criminal justice systems that operate around the world. Some boys, as Kyle's narrative demonstrates, are also faced with the challenge of trying to reconcile their own emerging moral positions with divergent views held by influential people in their lives. I propose that many teenage boys may experience themselves as having strong convictions but lacking 'adult' status, thus constraining them from being able to express and defend their views openly and confidently.

In David's narrative below, his discomfort is palpable as he tries to describe and make sense of why a television documentary about transsexuals had so perturbed him. We can see him slip and slide around notions about gender and normality, which speak to discourses of 'nature verses nurture', and of 'biological essentialism verses social constructionism':

I have very strong views. Like last night there was that transsexuals thing and I don't know why but it made me kind of angry. I know they couldn't help it but I just felt real angry that, not angry but frustrated that - well it was anger. I'm becoming a bit of a hypocrite now. I felt angry that they were different. Not different, I saw them as freaks, but they weren't they were just born different. Like deep down I knew that they couldn't help it and I had sympathy for them but how I felt when I saw them was kind of angry.

Claiming to have “very strong views”, David nonetheless becomes increasingly unsettled as he tries to maintain his position. At issue is how, and by whom, notions of normality (and judgments associated with such ideas) are constructed and reproduced. Boys edit the constant flow of cultural messages that are communicated to them in social experiences, especially within close relationships, and these messages thus shape the construction of their possible selves (Marshall et al., 2008). My sense of David’s confusion in this story is that he has found himself trying to argue someone else’s perspective, while his own position is, as yet, far from established. He observes:

I think my parents, and especially my Grandad, they have very strong views on society and stuff and so I’ve sort of developed that.

Up to this point David is still somewhat invested in the idea that people who seem to so ‘radically’ deviate from the norm are perhaps to be feared, shunned, or pitied. However, constructions of ‘normal’ and ‘different’ can become more problematic when applied to one’s own sense of self, as illustrated below.

I’m definitely not normal. I do not consider myself normal...But I’m not different like how I view they are.

An important task for teenage boys may involve exploring why some expressions of difference are easily tolerated by some people, and therefore legitimised, while other differences can position individuals as deviant. Griffin (1997) links this idea to the concept of citizenship, in that certain representations of ‘different’ (e.g., teenagers who are homeless, unemployed, have mental health problems or disabilities) allow society to position some groups of teenagers on the margins of citizenship, or exclude them completely. I suggest that it is through a process of critical reflection that rigid beliefs and assumptions can be dislodged, making it possible for young people to more effectively negotiate the diverse society in which they live.

As illustrated, teenage boys construct and negotiate their emerging adult identities across a range of social encounters. However, I would argue that ‘adulthood’, as the end goal, does not adequately represent the complexity of what they are trying to achieve. Rather, I agree with Hall et al. (1999), who suggest that the notion of

‘citizenship’ may more usefully capture the nature of teenagers’ identity work in these contexts. Osler and Starkey (2003) also share this view. They contend that teenagers are often depicted as “citizens-in-waiting”, and the sites in which they learn citizenship include their homes, schools, workplaces, and the community organisations to which they are affiliated. Narratives of boys in the present study show how understandings about ‘good citizenship’ may be learned, experienced, and tested in these social worlds. The boys construct this enterprise in relation to contemporary discourses of adulthood that involve notions of self-control, responsibility, independence, goal-oriented practices, and a ‘good’ work ethic. The boys also position themselves as resistant to negative peer pressure. Their citizenship identities are seen to be further shaped by moral messages transmitted by significant others, which the boys reproduce or oppose. Concern for the wellbeing of the wider social collective, as well as the ability to appreciate and tolerate diversity, are considered fundamental to the concept of citizenship (Sherrod et al., 2002). I argue, therefore, that experiences which provide opportunities for boys to experiment with possible selves, to experience reciprocity and mutual respect in interaction with adults, and to question their own and others’ responses to difference, play an important role in the formation of their citizen identities.

Negotiating Future

Teenagers envisage their future selves across a wide range of possibilities. They construct, negotiate, and position possible selves in accordance with their understandings of the world (Usinger & Smith, 2010). They might imagine, for instance, what kinds of social and life roles they will take up, how their relationships with friends and family will turn out, where their studies/jobs/travel could lead, and what and how they can contribute to society. Some may be oriented to things about their lives that they want to change, while others may be more concerned with participating in social change on a larger scale. Griffin (1997) posits that adulthood is constructed as a set of normative, idealised subject positions that are enacted through

a cycle of production, reproduction, and consumption. She contends that adult status is, thus, represented as something teenagers can gain via a series of key transitions (e.g., leaving school, entering the workforce, marrying, starting a family). However, I would suggest that before they can imagine future adult selves they first need to have some sense of where they have been and who they already are. As illustrated earlier, boys do this by, for example, reflecting on aspects of their ‘selves’ as younger children, on ways they feel they have matured, and on how they are positioned in relation to family, friends, and society. In order to interpret how boys then construct future identities and subjectivities, we need to consider the discourses through which they are articulated. For example, as discussed in the previous section, community engagement and active citizenship are implicitly understood as indicators of healthy youth development, and considered crucial for individual, communal, and societal wellbeing (Cicognani et al., 2008). Therefore, we might reasonably assume that these discourses are at play when boys endeavour to project their selves into the future.

Constructing Future Selves

Employability is generally considered to be one of the fundamental aims of education and critical to healthy social development (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007). Our society values employment as a means of reaching one’s potential and regards it as providing legitimacy to claims of citizenship. To orient students towards ‘success’, the school system can exert considerable pressure on teenagers to select courses that will supposedly steer them in the ‘right’ direction. As another goal of our education system is to produce ‘life-long learners’, many young people are expected to engage in some kind of further education when they leave school. It therefore comes as no great surprise to learn that boys who are academically inclined in high school are often given to understand that university is the next logical step towards a worthwhile career.

One of the boys, Pete, is seen to reproduce the idea that people who gain tertiary qualifications in some way have an advantage over those who do not. He states:

You know if you've done well academically then you can go to university and it makes life a lot easier in that respect.

Thus, university is seen as instrumental, and perhaps critical, in the construction of future career success and a rewarding life. I contend that this narrative reflects a pervasive public discourse, which Lehmann (2009) sees as having evolved out of the relentless push to transform industrialised societies into 'knowledge economies', and which equates high levels of formal education with success. He posits that this discourse is especially prevalent in school cultures that value academic knowledge over applied, vocational forms of knowledge. This may mean that alternatives to university education, such as trade apprenticeships, are considered less worthy choices.

Other options for school-leavers involve taking a 'gap year' or doing 'the Big OE' before 'settling down'. However, these options can seem problematic to boys who feel under pressure to set themselves up, career-wise, as quickly as possible. To do otherwise may be seen as a frivolous waste of precious time that could delay their transition to adult status, particularly if this is understood to revolve around having a 'proper' job. As exemplified below, Ben appears to be entertaining a range of future possibilities, but struggles to justify taking time off to explore any alternatives. We could surmise that he perceives significant risk in allowing himself to be distracted from the ultimate objective at this crucial stage in the process. As he explains:

I've had a lot of different ideas of what I wanted to do when I'm older...I'm just trying to find if there's any other options and narrow it down. Coz I'm probably going to university after school and I want to know what I'm doing by then. I don't want to be stuck at university not knowing what courses to take, going the wrong way and end of spending a couple of extra years at uni that I could have done earlier.

Thus, rather than looking to expand his range of options, Ben seems intent on trying to narrow them down.

Similarly, Finn expresses concern at doing things in the 'wrong' order, believing that such a course of action risks potentially dire consequences in terms of his future standing in society, as shown below.

I want to get it out the way, get school done and then start getting the money and then move away and then do stuff. Not like have stuff waiting over the top of me, like oh my gosh when I come back from travelling I'm going to have to go to uni otherwise I'm going to be a bum.

On the other hand, there are also those who seem less constrained by such notions, instead locating their future selves in contexts in which cultural practices may be perceived to resonate with aspects of their self-concept. For Ben, this means that possibilities for self-creation are not restricted to his immediate social world.

I've always been interested in Japan and I've wanted to go there. First of all they make a lot of video games that I'm interested in coz I wanted to be a 3-D animation programmer and Japan's really big in that area. And the whole country and the way it works interests me like their schools and the way they dress. Their uniforms I like the best coz they all wear blazers and they're really formal and I've always liked that. That was the reason I was taking Japanese was coz I thought I might travel to Japan in the future and maybe even work there.

As these narratives demonstrate, and as Usinger and Smith (2010) have also suggested, one important way that teenage boys may manifest selfhood is through the positions they take up in relation to future careers. I would argue that the ways that some boys construct their 'ideal' career pathways reflect established discourses. These discourses assume a linear pathway towards adulthood and promote certain subject positions over others, such as the 'employed' over the 'unemployed', and the 'professional' over the 'labourer'. However, as Griffin (2001) points out, steady employment and the various other dimensions of adulthood associated with job security (e.g., status in the community, financial independence, and the ability to support a family and accumulate material assets) may be less readily available to young people today as a result of increased globalisation and a changing labour market. Concerns about rising youth unemployment rates could therefore contribute to the ways that some boys in this study construct certain pathways as constitutive of 'right' and 'responsible' choices. On the other hand, we have seen that boys also resist normative narratives in favour of constructing alternative possible spaces to inhabit in the future. They may do this, for example, by imagining a place that offers a contrast to their present social and cultural context.

Reconstructing Existing Contexts and Changing the World

Much of the research on future aspirations of high achieving teenagers focuses solely on their academic and career plans, but many talented teenagers also show sensitivity to human concerns and an interest in global issues (Reilly, 2009). The future can thus represent to them opportunities for things to be different. In this regard, boys conceive of various ways to effect change and make a positive impact on future relationships, society, and the world.

One strategy is to re-story problematic aspects of their existing contexts, by envisaging a future in which they will have the chance to right perceived wrongs. Sam, for example, who does not see much likelihood of developing a stronger connection with his parents, is nonetheless capable of constructing a future identity that positions him as a caring and dedicated ‘family man’.

I already didn’t like it before but after I found out that some parents do that I didn’t like it even more...when I’m a parent...I’d be more involved with my children...Like things that they should do. Like take you to games and talk to you about stuff so you can have something to talk about, someone to talk to.

So, while Sam may feel relatively powerless within his current family context, he experiences a sense that he has control over the sort of person he can become. This suggests that boys are capable of transforming negative experiences, such as difficult family relationships, into resources for the creation of their future possible selves.

Other boys’ future-oriented narratives are constructed more broadly, as they contemplate their ‘fit’ within different societies. Simon, for instance, feels out of place in a country he portrays as insignificant and unsophisticated. He states:

New Zealand’s kind of small, unimportant. Like the only thing anyone ever remembers New Zealanders for is Mt Everest and sport. And I don’t really care about sport much.

Rather than position himself as marginalised by his disdain for sport within New Zealand’s sports-dominated cultural context, Simon locates the nation as a relatively powerless and inconsequential player on the global stage. As illustrated below, his

intention to search for a place among people who will better appreciate and reward his particular talents shows a capacity to navigate societal and cultural boundaries in the construction of a future self.

Probably somewhere like England or somewhere in that general area...They pay more there. It's just a different situation. And most people over there are smarter than the smartest people here. Like on average coz we might have one smarter person here.

Being at odds with a dominant societal perspective can make it difficult for some teenage boys to establish a legitimate place of belonging, as previously indicated by other boys in this study. Yet, as Simon's narrative reveals, this does not necessarily preclude them from creating alternative subject positions for their future selves.

By contrast, other boys may be less concerned with change when they envisage their futures. Pete, for example, presents a positive view of life in New Zealand and sees very little need for improvement. He states:

I don't think that I'd actually change all that much. There's not much going wrong at all. It's a really good life here. I wouldn't mind if the population got a bit bigger because that way there would be more of the public services, transport and things like and make life easier to get around. I suppose if we had a bigger population we'd get better services and things. Immigration is quite good because basically everyone in New Zealand was an immigrant at some stage. But I suppose we are going to have to draw the line somewhere with who can get in and who can't because we can't have a rush of people coming to join because eventually we are going to get too big.

The inference here is that this is a cultural context in which the population is historically united by its shared immigrant status, and where an easy and equitable lifestyle is available to all its citizens. However, Pete troubles this picture of 'the good life' by imagining a time when claims to resources will be more vigorously contested and 'new immigrants' potentially deemed a liability.

Boys also draw on notions of responsibility linked to understandings of global issues in the construction of possible future selves. Their political identities may be shaped by what they learn from their parents, schools, and the media. Community and

political groups also constitute sites where teenagers may be exposed to debates about public issues, and where they may learn skills and knowledge that orient them towards political action (Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, & Maton, 1999). In the following narrative, Pete explores what it means to him to be involved in the business of raising public awareness and bringing about change, within both local and global contexts.

The reason that I joined the clubs in the beginning was just because I just decided that I wanted to become a Prefect.

Identity work in these contexts is multi-faceted, and both present- and future-oriented. For instance, as illustrated above, membership of such organisations is understood as one of the ways that senior students can demonstrate leadership in order to acquire status positions within their school community. Identity construction can also be seen to involve positioning of today's teens as accountable for the wellbeing of future generations. Practices related to environmental conservation or pollution are judged through the lens of responsibility and irresponsibility. As future citizens, teenagers are tasked with the fairly hefty responsibility of saving the planet and rectifying the 'mistakes' made by previous generations. Pete explains:

But I do like well the school does get quite dirty and I like cleaning it up. And yeah I do think we're speeding the global warming. Even if it's only a little bit, we probably won't be able to stop it but it's nice doing a little bit to slow it down.

Tentative political identities are also seen to emerge out of these sites. In the following segment from Pete's talk, and again drawing on narratives of global responsibility, discursively produced 'international human rights issues' are shown to represent a mandate for action.

That one [Amnesty International], well it happened when they were doing a big thing about the Beijing Olympics. I just went down to see what they were doing and yeah saw that life is nowhere near as good as it is in New Zealand with all the censorship and executions still happening. So I just decided to do that. I don't know what I'll be able to do to change something like that...petitions and they do a peaceful protest and those sorts of things.

Kennelly (2009) proposes that youth activism can be understood as the capacity of young people to enact political agency within the public domain, as opposed to making choices about their everyday lives. She suggests that young people often feel a greater sense of agency in the context of participating in collective experiences, a process she refers to as 'relational agency'. As such, it could be argued that political networks which attract and encourage youth membership are potent sources of influence in the discursive production of politically 'competent' future citizens. Conversely, little, if any, value may be attached to social activism by teenagers who perceive a lack of opportunity and resources, and thus may feel alienated and powerless within their own communities, and, by extension, the wider world (Arcidiacono, Procentese, & di Napoli, 2007).

In summary, boys in the present study are seen to negotiate discourses of citizenship and social responsibility in their construction of future personal, social, and political identities. They move between notions of continuity and change. Continuity seems to relate to what makes sense to them about their life and the world at the present time, and ideas for change emerge out of things that do not fit so neatly with their desired future. Change is expressed, for example, in terms of agency in their construction of better ways to manage future social relationships. Change is also associated with personal aspirations and the desire to inhabit a cultural context that fits with their sense of self. Opportunities for social and political engagement are framed by notions of responsibility to make a positive contribution to the future wellbeing of their local and global communities. Some boys construct themselves as politically literate through their engagement with various social entities and political movements. Importantly, I would argue that these narratives show that boys do not merely *imagine* future possibilities, but are reflectively and actively engaging in the process of creating them.

Chapter Four: Conclusions and Implications

This research explored processes of identity construction that teenage boys engage in, perform, and negotiate within their everyday social contexts. The study was aimed at gaining insights into how boys make sense of experiences that they see as having a significant impact on their lives. A further aim was to consider how psychologists who work with teenage boys might use this knowledge to inform and enhance their clinical practice. My interest in this topic has evolved out of a nagging sense that our society has become so troubled by ‘troubled youth’, and so preoccupied with marshalling resources for the control and treatment of their ‘problem behaviours’, that the perspectives of teenage boys about what *they* perceive as troubling, challenging, and complicated remain relatively unexplored. How the actions of teenage boys are evaluated depends on the domains in which they are enacted, and on whether it is adults or their peers who are making the value judgements (Fine, 2004). That is, it is not necessarily the choice of behaviours *per se* that determine their legitimacy, but how they are interpreted in the context of socially constructed boundaries.

The boys in this study have shown themselves to be communicative, imaginative, and reflective narrators of their lived experiences, contrary to popular stereotypes of adolescent boys as unemotional and inarticulate (Pattman et al., 2005). They certainly do not portray themselves as lurching blindly through a maze of biological chaos and psychological dilemmas, as traditional understandings of adolescent development might suggest. Rather, they are active agents in the construction of their personal and social identities, investing in particular subject positions as they reproduce, resist, and rupture pervasive and conflicting discourses of adolescence and masculinity. My research findings suggest that the construction and enactment of their multiple and often ambiguous identities involves complex negotiations, as they interact with the people and institutions that constitute their everyday social terrain. Boys locate their narratives within the context of family, friendship, and community networks, suggesting that these are contexts that can potentially provide important social, emotional, and tangible resources (Bottrell, 2009). Yet, it cannot be assumed that the

process of negotiation or the outcomes of their negotiations will always be experienced by boys as positive or liberating (Hird, 1998).

The following are the key ideas that emerged from my research analysis. Teenage boys construct themselves as maturing out of their younger selves through a gradual process of accumulating experience and knowledge. They see themselves as growing in social competence and becoming increasingly skilled as they gain new insights about themselves and the world around them. They position themselves in relation to their peers, in order to demonstrate different ways they understand 'maturity' and 'immaturity' to be embodied and performed. At times they may find themselves in conflict, torn between the pull of mature reasoning and the familiar comfort of childish self-indulgence (Fine, 2004). To some extent, boys depict the process of maturation as an expected phase of their development, and yet their trajectories are not clearly defined. Rather, they seem to understand 'growing up' in more fluid terms that allow them to shift back and forth between loosely circumscribed notions of childhood and adolescence.

Teenage boys have to negotiate socially constructed gender orders and discourses of masculinity that are legitimated and reinforced within their everyday relational and institutional contexts. At school they experience pressure to compete for social status and prestige with their male peers, especially in academic and sporting domains. Yet, they also understand that they can empower themselves by standing in opposition to hegemonic norms and constructing alternative masculinities as equally valid. Boys in this study show some awareness of the public debates around differential educational outcomes for boys and girls, but do not see them as particularly relevant to their own experiences. It is not surprising that, for boys who achieve well academically, discourses that view adolescent males as failing within a biased education system would make little sense to them.

Gendered 'rules' are understood to police boys' overt expressions of emotion and vulnerability. These normative rules may be 'learned' from parents, for example, and reinforced by peers and adults in the school environment. Thus, dominant discourses of masculinity that view males as emotionally shallow, or promote toughness, aggression, and rationality as qualities for males to aspire to, can create considerable

tension and confusion for boys when they experience sadness, grief, fear, and worry. Boys may justify their resolve to conceal their distress by framing it as a demonstration of courage and strength. However, boys may also show the capacity to question gendered assumptions and practices around expressing difficult emotions and support-seeking.

When boys experience particularly difficult life events, they may construct and enact resilience by emphasising their connectedness to the people and organisations they recognise as valuable resources in their lives. Meanings boys derive from adverse experiences are also embedded within their cultural worldviews, which may cue them as to ‘culturally appropriate’ ways to understand and handle their problems. Boys’ narratives suggest they perceive a sense of agency in looking for opportunities to use what they might learn from challenging experiences in ways that can enhance their own and others’ lives. In some cases, this could also be interpreted as the effects of a socially constructed directive for individuals to grow stronger from experiences of adversity and to push themselves to reach their ‘full potential’ in life.

Multiple versions of family life are constructed by boys and situated in relation to normative ideas about ‘typical’ family structures and practices. At times their stories follow what Andrews (2004) refers to as “normative scripts”, for example when they reproduce notions of ‘the happy, nuclear family’. However, there are also instances where they trouble such notions, for example when family extends across multiple cultural contexts and geographical locations, or when boys experience major family transformations and see themselves as contributing to the successful shaping of their reconfigured households. Teenage boys are seen to place a high value on having close bonds with other family members, especially their parents, and to prize shared time, open communication, and parental involvement in their everyday lives. At the same time, they also look to create opportunities for greater independence and freedom from parental control. Boys in this study do not describe their desire for autonomy as particularly problematic, in terms of its potential to generate conflict at home. Instead, they conceive of it as a gradual process of change that calls for a sharing of perspectives and ongoing negotiations between them and their parents.

Important identity work occurs in the context of teenage boys' interactions and relationships with their peers, and much of this enterprise is understood to take place in the high school environment. The initial transition to high school is experienced by some boys as especially daunting, since it represents a foray into an unfamiliar social landscape. It can be a time when much effort is expended negotiating new friendships and peer group membership. Boys encounter many dilemmas as they try to fit in, particularly among their male peers, whilst also attempting to define, express, and maintain their individuality. In some contexts, they may choose to conform to dominant norms of behaviour in order to blend in more easily, in the hopes of being accepted by their peers. On other occasions boys may position themselves as 'unique' by publicly enacting aspects of their self-identities that signal difference. Such strategies might also enhance their social status, or, conversely, see them othered by their peers. Thus, teenage boys make tactical behavioural decisions in their peer interactions as they negotiate complex systems of normative adolescent and masculinity practices. In other words, boys understand these identity construction processes as involving personal agency, but also experience themselves as constrained by the powerful influence of dominant codes of social behaviour.

Within emerging romantic relationships, boys take up positions that emphasise the value they attach to emotional intimacy, sensitivity to others' needs and desires, and having opportunities to share their views about 'serious and personal' matters. These ideas are presented by boys as a contrast to what they see as typical interactions among 'the guys', characterised by cracking jokes, hanging out, and having fun. So when teenage boys become romantically involved, they not only have to negotiate this new kind of relationship, but they also have to figure out how it can be accommodated into their existing friendship contexts. When boys embark on a relationship that may, for whatever reasons, be frowned upon by their peers, parents, or society in general, some might feel obliged to hide away from critical eyes. What could be at stake, however, is that important aspects of their selfhood might be also be suppressed in their attempts to avoid being criticised or ostracised.

Technological developments have provided new forms of communication and socialisation, which, in turn, create ever-evolving and culturally specific forms of adolescence (Burman, 2008b). Online activities and social networking could now be

considered practically mainstream as sites that offer boys opportunities to invent and reinvent versions of their selves, and to play around with fantasy personas. For some boys, it is constructed as a space in which they can experiment with aspects of themselves that they would normally conceal in face-to-face interactions. Online gaming is one domain in which technological expertise is highly valued and, therefore, can represent social capital for boys who may be marginalised in other peer contexts. Boys also see the cyber world as providing opportunities to explore new social relationships without the usual constraints determined by place, time, or age.

Outside of their family and school environments, boys gain social and cultural knowledge through the lens of the media and in their interactions with the local community and the wider society. They express frustration and bemusement at what they mostly seem to interpret as negative and stereotypical representations of adolescent boys and teen cultures, which de-emphasise social context and depict young people as an homogenous group. Boys' engagement with the media and deconstruction of dominant narratives constitutes part of their everyday identity work.

Boys today are growing up in multicultural environments and an increasingly global society. Their cultural identities are being continually shaped and hybridised by their exposure to cultural diversity. Cultural forms are produced, assigned meanings, and appropriated through interactions between self and other (Bucholtz, 2002). When boys observe different social and cultural practices and value systems, they make choices about which aspects of these experiences to integrate into their emerging worldview, thus engaging in the process of constructing their cultural identities.

According to Erikson's (1968) model of psychosocial stages of development, boys nearing 'young adulthood' status would be expected to seek greater autonomy and independence, exhibit increasingly 'prosocial' behaviours as understood by conventional notions of morality, pursue normatively proscribed pathways towards 'appropriate' vocations, and begin to consider their future roles, for example, as husbands and fathers. Agendas such as these are promoted within individualistic cultures, and I would argue that all of these ideas have been discursively constructed as representing the groundwork necessary for the development of 'good citizens'. Discourses of citizenship are embedded in sites that teenage boys are typically

expected to explore in order to prepare them for the adult world. They are increasingly socialised into normative adult roles, for example when they participate in paid employment and volunteer work. However, they do not passively engage in taking on adult-type roles or being 'socialised' (Connell, 2005), as evidenced by the meanings they attach to these social encounters. Boys perceive their engagement in such activities as providing important opportunities for them to demonstrate independence, integrity, responsibility, competence, self-discipline, and self-regulation. Similarly, boys deny the power of peer pressure, instead claiming to have control over their behaviour in the face of 'negative' peer influences. I would argue that their narratives illustrate how boys enact 'good citizenship' in accordance with well-established discourses of adulthood, as a way of positioning themselves as worthy of a place in the wider social collective.

Boys imagine and construct possible future selves through a process of reflection about who they are, how others may see them, what they believe is expected of them, and what they understand to be their available personal, social, and cultural resources. In this study, boys' narratives are predominantly embedded in educational and citizenship discourses that view formal qualifications and career success as appropriate and important goals for young men today. These discourses potentially position other pathways as inferior and risky. Boys also construct possibilities for change in the future in response to negative or limiting experiences in their current lives, and possibilities for social action out of their engagement with discourses around contemporary social and political issues. Thus, they can conceive of multiple subject positions and spaces they might choose to inhabit at some future time.

Implications for Research and Practice

The overall wellbeing of teenagers is understood to have declined, in spite of major growth in research into the psychology of adolescence. However, integrative theoretical and methodological developments in the field of adolescent psychology are emerging (Compas et al., 1995). Compas and colleagues (1995) believe this trend reflects a change from previously held assumptions of adolescence as an inherently stressful, problematic developmental phase, to a view that teenagers can and do

contribute to society in positive ways. Thus, the notion of adolescence as a distinct developmental stage may be gradually dissipating in favour of new understandings of adolescent behaviours, cultures, and identities, embedded and constructed within the context of conflicting social discourses. The challenge for developmental research is to redirect efforts towards an exploration of the meanings and processes of change and difference, which would demand a shift away from taken-for-granted assumptions of change or difference as inherently positive or negative (Burman, 2008b).

Research also needs to be ‘clinically relevant’, which has traditionally meant using clinical samples. However, qualitative researchers are increasingly expanding this definition by focusing on non-clinical samples (Harper, 2008). It has been argued that understandings of adolescent development have been distorted by the generalisation of findings based on samples of psychologically disturbed teenagers to the population as a whole (Steinberg, 2001). Steinberg (2001) points out, for example, that notions of storm-and-stress have been widely assumed to be normative phases of developmental individuating processes, but studies with community samples have disputed the idea that adolescence is a time of inevitable conflict. Bucholtz (2002) also suggests that an emphasis on the ordinary, everyday activities and interactions in teenagers’ lives would provide an important balance to the more dramatic, sensationalist, ‘pathological’, or ‘deviant’ aspects of youth cultures that have typically attracted so much academic and media attention. In a similar vein, Gilligan (2000) believes that we may learn much from investigating ways that many young people actually thrive in spite of difficult circumstances, but that this would require a deliberate shift away from the usual focus of research and practice. My own research takes this up and shows that boys can enlighten us on the kinds of issues they find challenging, and on ways they understand and resolve problems and tensions in their everyday lives. Thus, I argue that this knowledge, gained from engaging directly with boys in the research process, is highly relevant for and applicable to clinical practice. It extends our focus beyond ‘damaged’ boys, and has the potential to significantly alter the way we approach, understand, and facilitate change in boys’ lives.

In recent decades, clinical psychological practice has seen an increasing application of constructionist approaches. This is not surprising, given the match between individual talk therapy and qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews. Helping

people in their struggle to enrich their interpersonal relationships has for a long time been a major component of psychotherapy. More recently, however, there has been a growing trend, especially in family systems work, towards facilitating the process of identity-creation by examining what is denied or enabled within particular cultural discourses (Frosh, 2002). Narrative approaches have been applied to psychotherapy, especially family therapy, whereby the therapist acts as facilitator and collaborator in the process of narrative (re)construction to help clients resolve problems by experimenting with alternative stories (Hiles & Cermak, 2008). By altering their stories, people are empowered to revise their identities and shift their positions. The therapeutic arena can provide space for the examination, disruption, and transformation of storied selves, and representations of others, which previously may have been based on unquestioned rationales, assumptions, and expectations. For instance, a deconstructive, narrative form of therapy may be a way into counter-discourses of gender and alternative renderings of masculinity (Frosh, 2002).

The ways that boys' identities are conceptualised impacts significantly on approaches to mental health issues and clinical interventions. Therefore, it is critical that psychologists working with teenage boys continually reflect on ways that dominant discourses may structure and legitimise dominant models of assessment and therapy (Phillips, 2007). Pilkington (2007) proposes that 'youth' be understood as a set of cultural practices which young people enact, individually and collectively, as both responses to and strategies for negotiating and constructing their everyday social and structural contexts. Thus, when psychologists work with teenage boys, they should not view them, for example, as products of dysfunctional families, passive victims of peer pressure, or educational misfits. Nor should they be seen as "lost souls" helplessly floundering in the transitional void between childhood and adulthood (Pilkington, 2007). Rather, a culturally framed perspective of adolescence and of the experiences of teenage boys requires an understanding of the impact of cultural expectations and values on their lives (Compas et al., 1995). Central to this concept is the interrelatedness of multiple social contexts, including school, family, peer, and community networks.

I turn now to how clinical psychologists might meaningfully apply what we have learned from the boys who participated in this study. Gaining insight into how boys

construct and enact their multiple identities has the potential to generate novel and effective treatment approaches for addressing clinical issues. Given that teenage boys may be particularly susceptible to personal criticism and feelings of alienation, it makes sense for therapists to begin with an understanding of their world and the social context in which it has been constructed, before engaging in efforts to help them alter the way they think and behave (Furman, Jackson, Downey, & Shears, 2003). Furman et al. (2003) consider that the meanings that young people construct in their personal stories, as well as their beliefs and emotions, need to be accepted, validated, and normalised before they will be open to seeing new possibilities.

I would argue that, in order to understand the difficulties that boys may be experiencing, psychologists need to listen very carefully to their stories and their perspectives. In so doing, clinicians will necessarily have to adapt, or abandon entirely, a planned treatment approach when it no longer makes sense in the context of a boy's narrative. I offer an example from my own practice in this regard. One boy I worked with presented as acutely suicidal, depressed, and socially anxious, in the context of being labeled 'Emo' for his preferred 'look' and taste in music, and consequently he was bullied by his peers. The initial focus of therapy was to reduce his risk of self-harm. Standard practice in New Zealand for managing this kind of risk in teenagers is to construct a safety plan with the family so they can seek appropriate support during a crisis, and to provide distress tolerance skills training to the young person. However, it was very difficult to engage this boy in learning risk management strategies as he found it excruciating to talk about his feelings. Therefore, I had to change my approach with him and invited him, instead, to challenge his ideas about not fitting in at school. I did this by first making the observation that he would blend in easily in many other contexts, including, for example, in schools where the expression of 'alternative' personal styles was better tolerated, at university, and in the media design and film industries where he was keen to pursue a career. This conversation led to others of a similar nature, but what struck me most was that this identity work had an immediate and positive impact on his self-esteem, and that his suicidal and self-harming behaviours ceased in a very short space of time.

Psychologists need to pay attention to the ways that boys position themselves, and see themselves as positioned by other people and institutions, in different social and

cultural contexts. They need to explore what resources boys may perceive to be available to them, and in which contexts they may feel powerless or marginalised. I also suggest it that it is important to investigate with boys aspects of significant social relationships that they experience as supportive, as well as those which may be more complicated or problematic, and perhaps require more creative negotiations. Boys and their families can be assisted to reframe what they may have conceptualised as *their* problems, in ways that can help them see how wider public discourses play an important role in how ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ are constructed. I see this as a critical part of the process of identifying possibilities for agency in making positive changes, and opportunities for resistance to disempowering social practices, assumptions, and attitudes.

In practice, this approach may require a conscious shift in focus away from the ‘symptoms’ of psychological distress that boys manifest. A useful alternative may be to explore with boys how they construct who they are and who they want to become, and to try to help them see how their identity performances impact on the ways they are perceived by others in the various spaces they inhabit. In Pollack’s (2006) view, the lack of research on how adolescent boys make sense of their experiences has meant that outdated and inaccurate assumptions about them persist in professional and public discourse. For example, as participants in this study have told us, and as Pollack also contends, boys are relational, emotional, and concerned about others, yet they continue to be stereotyped as emotionally inept and lacking in empathy. Therefore, it is important for therapists to create a safe place for boys to be able to talk about how they feel, and to help them see emotional expression, vulnerability, and support-seeking as constitutive of legitimate masculinities. Boys are also telling us that they want to be accepted by their peers and to form close connections with their friends, but they do not want to compromise who they are in the process. In our practice we use Narrative Therapy techniques to help them to construct selfhood in ways that resist and challenge discursively produced, normative and gendered ‘rules’ which may be limiting their self-expression. These ideas may also be integrated into Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, for example, when using cognitive restructuring techniques that challenge boys’ to question their interpretations of and responses to restrictive hegemonic social ‘rules’ and practices.

I consider that my research findings also indicate that it may be useful to privilege family involvement in therapy over exclusively individual work. I base this argument on the idea that boys are telling us that their family relationships matter very much to them. As we have seen in this study, boys value ‘family time’, and especially, perhaps, the everyday practices at home that facilitate conversations and help their parents stay involved in their lives. In my own work with boys and their families, I have observed that parents are often surprised to hear that their teenage sons miss the things they used to do together, and want more, not less, time with their parents. Steinberg (2001) also calls for an approach to understanding families that pays more attention to the different perspectives and stakes that may be enacted within parent-teenager relations. With this idea in mind, it can be very informative to witness interactions between boys and their parents, and therapy can provide a space in which they may be helped to articulate what each of them is trying to achieve, and what they may also fear losing. When ‘normative’ family scripts detract from a family’s ability to feel confident in their efforts to create a nurturing family environment, I suggest that they be encouraged to deconstruct the validity of family discourses that define ‘family’ in narrow and restrictive ways.

The boys in this study who identify as first- or second-generation immigrants speak of wanting to stay well-connected to their families and their cultural roots, but their experiences of navigating their multiple cultural contexts differ from those of their parents. Therefore, when working with boys from immigrant backgrounds I would argue that we need to understand the challenges of acculturation from both the individual and whole-family perspectives. Adapting to a new cultural context can impact on a family’s ability to maintain traditional roles and responsibilities, for example as a result of financial demands. Parents may experience greater difficulties with language and fear that their sons will lose or reject important aspects of their cultural identity, which can put strain on boys’ relationships with their parents. Teenage boys might also adopt behaviours that facilitate a sense of belonging among their non-immigrant peers, but conflict with their parents’ cultural values. However, as revealed in Stuart et al.’s (2010) study, family members (both adults and teenagers) often express the desire to maintain strong connections to their culture of origin, and a willingness to compromise in order for this to occur. So I suggest that families be encouraged to talk about their diverse experiences with each other, in order to

increase their understanding of the different challenges they each face. Similarly, when boys experience difficult life events it is important to explore ways that their cultural beliefs about adversity and their culturally-informed approaches to problem-solving influence how they understand their difficulties and how they may, therefore, also construct resilience.

Negotiating peer relationships is clearly a complicated business, so it is not surprising to meet teenage boys in clinical settings who are experiencing problems in these areas. Some boys may have difficulty being accepted by their peers because they espouse unconventional ideas, or are seen to be different for the way they look or act. Others may struggle with the complexities of romantic friendships. I suggest it could be helpful to facilitate conversations with them that explore ideas around how friendship may be constructed in different ways, and how difference can be tolerated and valued. It would also be useful to understand what boys perceive as obstacles over which they have little or no control, and in what ways they believe they may have some agency in their social positioning within school and other peer contexts.

We have also seen that some boys understand their involvement in community groups as generating a sense of connectedness and belonging, and providing contexts in which they can demonstrate leadership, contribute to society, and enact positive change. Therefore, I see assisting boys to establish or strengthen ties with people and social structures outside of their family and peer networks as a way of providing important opportunities for identity construction, especially for boys who experience themselves as socially isolated or marginalised. However, therapeutic approaches that aim at empowering boys through community involvement may be ineffective, or worse yet, harmful, if they neglect to take account of the powerful effects of socially oppressive circumstances, such as poverty, violence, and discrimination (Evans, 2007). Therefore, I reiterate that we cannot hope to be effective in helping boys negotiate the difficulties they may encounter if we view any aspects of their selves and their lives as independent of their social and cultural milieus.

In summary, social constructionist approaches to clinical work with teenage boys, such as narrative and discursive techniques, encourage psychologists to privilege the meanings boys attach to their everyday social encounters and the importance of

context in their lived experiences. Constructionist paradigms also facilitate the deconstruction of discourses and social processes that may inhibit the expression of boys' self-identities, and position them in ways that may contribute to their emotional distress. We can apply what we learn from the narratives of boys in community populations to clinical practice, because many of the challenges they have to negotiate occur in the same relational contexts as those of boys who present to clinical settings. That is to say, we can use insights gained about the ways they negotiate significant social relationships, hegemonic discourses of masculinity, institutional practices, and dominant cultural narratives, to help other boys construct new ways of seeing and navigating the complexities of their social world. For example, understanding processes of integration and othering in boys' friendship practices can provide a framework for exploring how they communicate feelings of unhappiness, loneliness, and fear (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2010). I would argue that therapists need to create a safe environment for boys to express their feelings, and to explore the possibility of resisting normatively proscribed ways of 'doing boy' and 'doing teenager' within the context of their families, peers, school environments, and communities.

Suggestions for Future Research

My research explored the experiences of a small group of boys across a range of contexts which they identified as important. However, the scope of this project did not allow for an in-depth investigation into the many topics that were discussed in their interviews. I propose that future studies could focus specifically on a number of interesting ideas that emerged in the data: for example, ways that boys legitimate 'alternative' positions of status among their peers, which challenge normative practices and reduce the power of hegemonic hierarchies; how boys integrate their experiences within diverse cultural contexts into the construction of their emerging worldviews and multi-faceted cultural identities; how boys communicate and manage important aspects of their relationships through the medium of internet and mobile phone technologies; and how boys enact resilience in the seemingly 'ordinary' experiences of their everyday lives. I also suggest that this research be extended to include other groups of boys who may have fewer opportunities and resources to be

agentic. This could include, for example, boys who are disadvantaged or positioned as disabled, and boys whose sexual identities see them othered by discourses of heteronormativity.

I argue that the use of a narrative methodology allows boys to contribute significantly to the agenda of inquiry, positions them as the experts on their own lives, and empowers them as partners in the co-construction of knowledge aimed at informing better understandings of the experiences of teenage boys and teenage cultures. I also propose that we should continue to strive for creativity in our research methodologies, as there are many novel ways to generate knowledge and capture boys' identity work. It would be interesting, for example, to further explore meanings that boys construct out of material objects that constitute part of their everyday lives.

In conclusion, I contend that teenage boys do not merely see themselves as 'adult-apprentices', but instead legitimately inhabit the 'here-and-now' while simultaneously staking their claim to future spaces. They are active agents who engage with their social world, and respond in a many different ways to the cultural narratives that impact on their lives. They construct new meaning out of experience, appropriate subject positions, and draw on available resources to negotiate their daily challenges. As adults we can easily lose sight of the complexity of their lives and forget to listen to what they can teach us. Furthermore, discursive constructions of teenage boys as 'problematic' and 'out of control' leave little space for recognition of the positive contribution that they make, individually and collectively, to our society. It is hoped that this study has achieved its aim of challenging and deconstructing social discourses which position and stigmatise teenage boys as troubled and risky. I also hope that this research contributes to understandings of boys' identity formation and the enactment of their multiple selves in the negotiation of their everyday social encounters, and that these new understandings may be usefully applied in clinical practice.

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APPENDIX A



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Journeys through adolescence: Meaning-making in the narratives of teenage boys.

Information Sheet

My name is Roslyn Munro and I am a full-time student in the Doctor of Clinical Psychology programme at Massey University, Auckland. I am conducting a research project under the supervision of Professor Kerry Chamberlain and Dr Kerry Gibson as part of my degree requirements. My project aims to explore the experiences of teenage boys during their adolescent years. I am interested in hearing your stories about any events that have had particular importance for you as I would like to learn more about how things look and feel *from your perspective*.

I would really value and appreciate your participation in this study. I invite you to take part in the project if you are aged sixteen years or older and would feel comfortable being interviewed in English. In recognition of your time for participating in the research you will be given cash or vouchers to the value of \$30.00 as compensation. I will do all that I can to ensure that your participation in the study is a positive and interesting experience for you.

I will be asking you first to create a 'time-line' of your years since starting high school to identify any events that you feel have had an impact on your life. You are free to do this any way you want, for example using words and/or photos/drawings, on paper or on the computer. Please note that this study is not about school or education (although you can of course include events in your school life if you want to). I will then ask you to talk about some of the things you identify in your time-line in an individual interview with me. The interview will take approximately 1 hour and be conducted out of school hours at a place where you think you would feel comfortable to talk freely and without distraction.

The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. All information provided by you will be treated confidentially and only my supervisors and I will have access to the interview discussions. Your contact and identity details will be stored separately at Massey University to protect your confidentiality, and I will be the only person who is aware of your identity. The transcriptions will be accessible only to my supervisors and myself,

and will be used solely for this study. When the analysis is finished, the tapes and transcripts, without any identifying information, will be stored securely for at least five years and then disposed of, as required by research protocols.

Please note that you are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to decline to talk about any particular issues, to withdraw completely from the study up to one week after your interview (and have your tape and transcript destroyed at that time), to ask any questions about the study at any time during your participation, to provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used and that we will take care that you cannot be identified in any reports from the study, and to ask for the tape recorder to be turned off at any time during your interview. A summary of the project findings will be posted to you when it is finished.

You are free to contact either of my supervisors, Kerry Chamberlain or Kerry Gibson, or myself, if you would like further information about any aspects of this project.

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This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application 08 / 010. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Denise Wilson, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800 ext. 9070, email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz

APPENDIX B



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*Journeys through adolescence: Meaning-making in the
narratives of teenage boys.*

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Full Name - printed _____

APPENDIX C

Summary of Findings for Participants

Narratives of teenage boys: Constructing selfhood and enacting identities.

Roslyn Munro

The following is a summary of findings from my doctoral research project that you participated in during 2008. The study explored processes of identity construction that teenage boys engage in, perform, and negotiate within their everyday social contexts. It was aimed at gaining insights into how boys make sense of experiences that they see as having a significant impact on their lives. The key ideas that emerged from my research are described below.

Boys understand themselves as maturing out of their younger selves through a gradual process of accumulating experience and knowledge. To some extent, boys depict the process of maturation as an expected phase of their development, but also seem to understand 'growing up' in more fluid terms that allow them to shift back and forth between loosely circumscribed notions of childhood and adolescence.

Teenage boys have to negotiate ideas about gender and masculinity that are legitimated and reinforced within their everyday social worlds. At school they experience pressure to compete for social status and prestige with their male peers, especially in academic and sporting domains. Yet, they also empower themselves by standing in opposition to dominant forms of masculinity and by constructing alternative masculinities as equally valid. Gendered 'rules', learned for example from parents and reinforced in schools, are understood to inhibit boys' expressions of emotion and vulnerability. However, they also show the capacity to question gendered assumptions and practices around expressing feelings and seeking support from others. When boys experience particularly difficult life events, they emphasise their bonds with the people and organisations that are important to them. Their experiences

are also embedded within their cultural worldviews, which guide them as to culturally relevant ways to understand and handle their problems.

Multiple versions of family life are constructed by boys. For some, 'family' is understood in relation to 'common-sense' notions of 'typical' family structures and practices. For others, family life extends across multiple cultural contexts and geographical locations. Some boys experience major family transformations and contribute to the reshaping of their new households. Boys are seen to place a high value on having close family relationships, shared family experiences, open communication, and their parents' involvement in their day-to-day lives. At the same time, they also look to create opportunities for greater independence and freedom. They conceive of this as a gradual process of change that calls for ongoing negotiations with their parents.

Important identity work takes place within peer relationships. Starting high school is experienced by some boys as especially daunting, as they try to figure out how to fit in, but also how to maintain their individuality. Sometimes they choose to conform to peer behavioural 'codes', while at other times they deliberately emphasise their 'difference' as a way of gaining acceptance. These strategies can enhance their social status, or, conversely, see them marginalised by their peers. The cyber world is one social space where boys can invent and reinvent themselves in ways that may be difficult in face-to-face interactions. Within emerging romantic relationships, boys emphasise the value they attach to emotional closeness. They not only have to negotiate this new kind of relationship, but they also have to figure out how it will work within their existing friendship groups.

Boys express frustration and bemusement at what they see as negative stereotyping of adolescent boys and teen cultures. Today, boys are growing up in multicultural environments within an increasingly global society. When they experience different social and cultural practices, they engage in the process of constructing their cultural identities. Notions of social and political responsibilities are embedded in boys' understandings about their community involvement, and the possibilities they imagine for their future selves.