Rethinking Masculinities and Young Age: Primary school students constructing gender

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Gender, Work and Social Inquiry (School of Social Sciences) and Politics (School of History and Politics), The University of Adelaide

May 2012
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Key to Transcriptions

/ a speaker is interrupted by another speaker

- a speaker interrupts her/himself

… brief pause

[inaudible] inaudible

[comment] comments added in for clarity

(laughs) other sounds made (such as laughter)

[…] talk is edited out
Questions are seldom asked about whether Connell’s influential masculinities framework may be entirely applicable to young people. In particular, young age is rarely considered as a potential barrier to hegemonic masculinity. Attention to the intersection of masculinities/gender and age is crucial to understanding young people’s gender constructions, and illuminating the limits age presents to accessing particular gender discourses. This thesis offers a focused consideration of masculinities in young age, drawing on empirical research in two South Australian co-educational primary schools, comparing classes of students aged 6-7 years old and 11-13 years old. The views of boys, girls, teachers, and parents are all included to provide a broad understanding of gender in students’ lives.

Connell’s framework has identified that gender is produced hierarchically, and that hegemonic masculinity is privileged over other masculinities and all femininities which ensures men’s privilege (as a group) over women (as a group). Drawing on Foucault’s notion of discourse, this thesis considers the usefulness of reframing hegemonic masculinity as a *discourse* of hegemonic masculinity. This approach was used to conceptualise how, while in the research participants endorsed practices relating to a particular version of masculinity, boys expressed plural and fluid gender practices. As a result of their young age, boys were denied full access to physicality and sexuality, which are often viewed as key to hegemonic masculinity. Instead, the participants constructed a discourse of hegemonic masculinity largely around sport, an activity which many boys had access to and could practise. A discourse of idealised femininity was mainly defined in terms of appearance, and helped to uphold the overall privileging of masculinities.

This thesis highlights how young age exacerbates the incoherence and diversity of gender constructions, and explores how, while different gender practices may be subordinated, they can sometimes be combined with or challenging to a discourse of hegemonic masculinity. The strength of a hierarchical arrangement of practices relating to masculinities is also explored. The importance of considering masculinities within the broader gender context is illuminated by an examination of gender relations, and the participants’ understandings of gender privilege, discrimination, and equality. This thesis demonstrates the ways in which young age impacts on gender constructions and offers a more nuanced way for theorising the intersection of age and gender.
Declaration

I, Clare Bartholomaeus, certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Parts of Chapter One initially appeared in:

- Bartholomaeus, Clare (2009) “‘I’m not allowed wrestling stuff”: The difficult fit between hegemonic masculinity and junior primary school boys’, in *GEXcel Work in Progress Report Volume VI, GEXcel Theme 2: Deconstructing the Hegemony of Men and Masculinities*, Alp Biricik and Jeff Hearn (eds.), Linköping University, Sweden, pp. 201-208.
- Bartholomaeus, Clare (forthcoming) “‘I’m not allowed wrestling stuff”: Hegemonic masculinity and primary school boys’, *Journal of Sociology*.

Parts of Chapter Three initially appeared in:


_________________________________________  __________________
Clare Bartholomaeus                            Date
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the participants involved in the research. I am grateful to the head of junior school and principal for allowing me to conduct research in their schools, and to the class teachers for letting me into their classrooms and for being willing to be interviewed. Thank you also to the mothers who volunteered to participate in interviews. Most importantly, a big thank you to all of the students who were involved in the research.

Thank you to my thesis supervisors Associate Professor Chris Beasley, Professor Emerita Chilla Bulbeck, and Dr Susan Oakley, for providing me with support, feedback, and confidence that my topic and arguments were worthwhile.

Thank you to the GWSI and Politics departments. Completing my PhD was assisted in various ways by staff and students from both departments. In particular, thanks to Dr Kathie Muir, Professor Margaret Allen, Dr Anna Szorenyi, Dr Megan Warin, Dr Margie Ripper, Dr Pam Papadelos, and Dr Kate Cadman. Thanks also to Dr Angelique Bletsas for our theory discussions and her general PhD advice. I also appreciate Sarah Hoggard and Ryan Cortazzo for all of their administrative and technical support, and Helen Attar and Marg Hosking for their library assistance. Thanks to fellow PhD students in both disciplines. From GWSI thanks particularly to Gabriella Zizzo, Kirsty Whitman, Jillian Schedneck, Dr Penelope Eate, Dr Pauline McLoughlin, Dr Toni Delany, Ruthie O’Reilly, Kanchana Bulumulle, Tom Cole, and Tara Bates. A special thanks also to Margie Charlesworth and Sam Williams for their friendship and proofreading efforts. Thanks to my History and Politics friends Jessie Edwards, Dana Papuc, Kieran McCarron, Elspeth Grant, Nicole Berry, and Rong Fan for their support and our ‘sanity lunches’.

I have also gained a great deal from discussing my research with others at conferences and via email exchanges. Thanks especially to Janet Whitten for sharing sources with me.

I am grateful to everyone who has helped in some way with my thesis. A special thanks to Emma, Eleanor, Ciara, and Jasmine for their feedback on the student activities, and for their insights into the worlds of young people. Thank you also to Susan Ferguson for allowing me to practise a parent/teacher interview. I also appreciate the people who have read various forms of my thesis, particularly Andrew and Amy who both proofread the full thesis.
Thank you to all of my family for their support, especially my parents and brother Stefan. Thanks also to my friends, particularly Allana, Amy, Annabel, Steph, and Tamsyn, for providing me with much needed distractions from my thesis.

I would also like to acknowledge the financial support I have received from the Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) scholarship, GWSI Postgraduate Funds, Postgraduate Allowance from the School of History and Politics, the Karen Halley Fund, and the HUMSS HDR Publications Support Scheme.