The Geeks: Studious Working-Class Masculinities

Introduction

Education has played a key role in shaping popular conceptions of Welsh society as being relatively open and meritocratic. It has been argued that a higher value has been placed on educational achievement as a way out of poverty and as a means for improving one’s own occupational prospects than in other sections of the British population (see Williams, 1960; Lewis, 1980; Rees and Delamont, 1999; Williams, 2003). Whether based in fact or not, popular perceptions of the sons (less so daughters) of farmers, coal miners and steelworkers using educational success as a way into university, professional occupations and as a means of escape have persisted (Rees and Delamont, 1999; Weeks, 2007). Yet in Cwm Dyffryn and the South Wales Valleys more generally, education as a form of social mobility or as a route out of poverty occurred at the individual level, rather than for the collective community and those who managed it were often the exception to the rule.

As I highlighted in the previous chapter, more young men from some working-class families are opting to continue in forms of post-16 education than might have traditionally done so. Here, I outline the lives of The Geeks, another set of working-class boys in the same year group who lived in the same disadvantaged community. In opposition to The Valley Boiz, these young men’s front region displays of masculinity were a lot more studious and could be considered as stereotypically ‘geek’. These geekier performances of self were characterized through acts of working hard academically to achieve good grades in a range of subjects, but most notably maths, science and technology. Outside school, these acts were accompanied by leisure interests such as reading books and comics,
drawing, writing poetry, playing with gadgets and computer games, and appearing less interested in cars, sport, drinking, girls or fashion. In comparison to The Valley Boiz and other young men at the school, they also seemed to publically express less misogynistic and homophobic views than their peers. The performance of a studious, geekier form of masculinity, in an environment where more traditional notions of masculinity were the default reference point, proved problematic and they occupied the lowest status position in the school's social hierarchy, even as they transitioned through the Sixth Form. These performances were seen by others in their year group as ‘feminine’ and attracted homophobic name calling and bullying from their peers. However, just like The Valley Boiz, other presentations of self could occur. As The Geeks transitioned through the Sixth Form into older masculinities, some contradictions to the front region of the performance were also apparent. The Geeks, in some situations and in settings away from the school and on occasions Cwm Dyffryn, engaged in many of the traditional, sexist, macho practices that they distanced themselves from and criticized others for engaging in.

I begin this chapter by looking at the literature on working-class boys' educational achievement. I focus especially on the role of locality and address how this impacts on the development of a studious performance of masculinity. I then define the peer group and look at what being a 'geek' meant in this context. The chapter then analyses in detail the front displays of this more studious form of working-class masculinity before (as I did with The Valley Boiz) highlighting some contradictions to this display. In other settings, it also became apparent that there were costs and consequences that accompanied these traditional class-based performances.

Working-class educational achievement and the performance of studious masculinities

Social science research that has centred on working-class young people in the UK and elsewhere has tended to focus on their problematic relationship with education. In particular this work has addressed three main themes. First, studies have concentrated on the role of education as a route to social mobility and as a way out of working-class origins. This pathway traditionally occurred through the grammar school system (Jackson and Marsden, 1962; Lacey, 1970). Second, a prominent focus has been on anti-school or rebellious behaviour, poor performances and educational underachievement (Hargreaves,