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Jimmy the Chameleon: Multiple Performances of Self

Introduction

In this book, we have seen the diversity that existed between a large group of young men within a de-industrial community. I have argued that in a variety of settings, spaces and in different social interactions, multiple regions of masculinity are displayed by these young men. These contradictions highlight the pressures that an industrial and cultural legacy of a specific geographic area, places on young men to conform to ideals of manhood. This chapter further explores the issue of multiple aspects of self, with a detailed case study of one working-class young man called Jimmy and his transitions through post-compulsory education. I explore how the challenges of working hard academically and aiming to be a successful athlete are simultaneously met with other pressures to achieve a socially valued form of masculinity through engaging in risky leisure practices, such as drinking large amounts of alcohol. I use this narrative to introduce the term ‘chameleonisation’ of masculinity to capture these complex processes, and I suggest that this metaphor is a useful step forward for the field of study as it enables the multifaceted processes young men have to navigate whilst growing into adulthood to be illustrated.

Code-shifting and multiple performances of a masculine self

There have been multiple studies involving boys and young men over the past few decades that have focused on the practices and processes that construct dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinity and the pressure to perform masculinity in certain ways. Other recent studies
conducted with young men both inside and outside school have illustrated that young men’s identities can be quite fluid and complex, and that there are possibilities for constructing alternate masculinities which are not necessarily subordinated or oppressed. In contemporary society, as some authors have documented, men might actually be developing softer or more ‘inclusive masculinities’ (Anderson, 2009; Roberts, 2014), demonstrating a real shift in attitudes and practices among men. However, as Heward (1996: 41) has argued, a difficult question that arises when looking at changing masculinity is ‘the extent to which individuals are constructed by their structural contexts and how far they can build alternative identities despite their stigma’. Jimmy is dealing with such a tension.

Goffman (1959: 45) suggests that ‘when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of society’ and that these values can change from group to group.

The self, then, as a performative character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate it to be born, to mature and to die; it is a dramatic effect, arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.

(Goffman, 1959: 245)

This can perhaps best be summarized by saying that there are many aspects to one’s self which can be altered in different situations. Nonetheless, as I have shown in this book, some of these aspects of self are more prominent in some situations than in others and actors must work hard not to reveal certain characteristics in front of the wrong audience.

Influenced by Goffman, Elijah Anderson (1999) in his ethnographic study of an inner-city neighbourhood in the USA, where most of the residents were poor African Americans, found that younger members of the community characterized themselves and each other as coming from either ‘decent’ or ‘street’ families. Those from ‘decent’ families (those more likely to be financially stable) were socialized to accept the values of hard work, to have respect for authority, a deep religious faith and a belief in education as a way for self-improvement. Those younger people from ‘street’ families were more likely to lead lives less secure than their ‘decent’ street counterparts, with drug and alcohol problems, and where violence was a part of everyday life. However, Anderson also found that