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CHAPTER 9

The Cultural Reproduction of Masculinity: A Critical Perspective on Boys' Development

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Introduction

"If you woke up tomorrow as a girl instead of a boy, how would your life be different?" We posed this question to a group of first-grade boys (all European-American) living in a small town in rural Maine.[1] Here is how two of those seven-year-olds answered:

Ned: Not too good!

Mark: How so? Why wouldn't it be good?

Ned: My mother wouldn't like it. She'd probably kick me out of the house.

Mark: You'd be kicked out of the house if you were a girl, huh?

Ned: Yeah. She wouldn't like it too much.

Mark: And how would you feel about it?

Ned: Not too good.

Mark: Not too good.

Ned: I'd try to go find myself again.

Adam: I would ask my dad if he could build a machine to turn me back into a boy.

Mark: [Laughter] That's a good idea! So you really like being a boy, huh? How else would your life be different? Say it took your

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father two days to build that machine; how would those two days be different?

Adam: Um, then I would change myself into a boy with my finger.

Mark: With your finger? Well, what if you couldn't do it with your finger and had to wait for your father to build the machine?

Adam: Then I would rip him to pieces.

Mark: You would what?

Adam: I would rip my dad into pieces.

Mark: But then you'd never get turned back because you wouldn't get the machine built.

Adam: Then I would build it myself.

Mark: So you would build it, ok. Meanwhile, what would it be like to be a girl?

Adam: Mmm, stupid.

Mark: Why?

Adam: Because it would be, it would be too much different, I don't know.

Within the intersection of psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, and cultural studies that define the contemporary field of "gender studies" there is widespread interest in masculinity and in the male gender role (Bly, 1990; Brod, 1987; Connell, 1987; Keen, 1991; Kimmel, 1996; Kimmel & Messner, 1989; Miedzian, 1991; Pleck, 1981; Rotundo, 1993; Stoltenberg, 1989, 1993). Explorations of masculinity in the United States have examined the influence of male gender role across a variety of dimensions, including male-female relationships, male-male relationships, sexuality, parenting, and "problem behaviors" (e.g., substance abuse, violence, delinquency, dropout, and other school-related difficulties). Inspired by pioneering work in feminist studies, there is increasing recognition that gender is a primary feature of social life for both men and women, so much so that "gender has now taken its place alongside race and class as the three central mechanisms by which power and resources are distributed in our society, and the three central themes out of which we fashion the meanings of our lives" (Kimmel & Messner, 1989, p. 2).

Yet in spite of this growing interest in understanding the experience of men *as men,* until very recently (see Garbarino, 1999; Pollack, 1998)

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little attention has been paid to *boys,* like Ned and Adam, particularly as they experience the developmental processes that give rise to their understanding of their own masculinity and male gender identity. There has, of course, been a great deal of developmental research conducted on boys over the past century or so—in fact, as Gilligan (1982) has noted, much of the critical theory-building research of such luminaries as Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erikson was based primarily on interviews with, and observations of, boys and young men. But it was not the experience of boys as boys that was of interest to these investigators. Rather, they assumed that studying boys and men was a perfectly acceptable way to study *human development,* since gender was, for them, a difference that made no difference in their quest to understand and explain human experience.

Things have changed, however, in recent years. Following Gilligan's (1982) recognition that the experience of women *as women* had largely been ignored in developmental research, there have been a host of studies focusing exclusively on the developmental processes at work in girls' and women's lives (see, e.g., Belenky, et al., 1986; Brown, 1991; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990; Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988; Jordan, et al., 1991; Rogers, 1993; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995; Walkerdine, 1990). Most centrally, this work has highlighted both the importance of relationships in the formation and reformation of girls' identity and morality, and the powerful effect that cultural expectations and prescriptions have on girls' understanding of themselves and their relationships. As such, Brown and Gilligan (1992) identify early adolescence as a time when girls encounter and struggle with cultural conventions, when they begin to feel pressure, that is, to capitulate to traditional notions of femininity and feminine behavior and dominant images of beauty and attractiveness. Some girls resist these pressures and the losses they engender, but others become tentative and unsure of themselves, experience a loss of voice, a narrowing of desires and expectations, and seem to move from genuine and authentic relationships to idealized notions of friendship and love.

While this groundbreaking research on girls has shed important new light on the developmental processes at work in the lives of half the population, it also raises the possibility of a new and deeper understanding of boys' development (see Pollack, 1998). That is to say, it is clearly time to turn the tables, and to view the experience of boys through lenses crafted, at least initially, by those studying girls. This is not to repeat the mistakes of the past (i.e., to study the development of one gender and to assume that the findings apply to the other gender as well). But it is to acknowledge that the recent theoretical and empirical work on girls' development can provide a useful starting point for a similar exploration of boys' development—focusing particularly on the ways in which boys' gender identity development is shaped and influenced by cultural processes.

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Such attention to the "cultural reproduction of masculinity" is enabled, moreover, by recent advances in the field of sociocultural psychology (see Cole, 1996; Martin, Nelson, & Tobach, 1995; Wertsch, 1985, 1991, 1998; Wertsch, del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). Influenced and inspired by the work of Lev Vygotsky (1934/1987, 1978), sociocultural scholars have focused sustained attention on the ways in which "mediational means" (i.e., tools and language), appropriated from the social world, shape human mental functioning (see Wertsch, 1985, 1991, 1998). As such, the sociocultural perspective seeks to offer an alternative to the explicitly individualistic perspective that has dominated our thinking about human development for the past century or more, by exploring and explicating the relationship between human mental functioning (understood as "mediated action") and the social, cultural, and historical situations in which such functioning occurs (Wertsch, 1995, 1998).

My aim in this chapter, therefore, is to sketch the outlines of a sociocultural perspective on boys' development that considers how boys' masculine gender identity is forged in their relationship to, and encounter with, the culture in which they live. For heuristic purposes I will present this perspective as an alternative to the psychodynamic approach to gender identity development—the most widely known and well-accepted approach to these issues. I begin, therefore, with a consideration of the psychodynamic perspective on boys' development, derived primarily from the work of Chodorow (1974, 1978). I then turn to the task of outlining a sociocultural perspective on boys' development, based largely on the recent effort of Penuel and Wertsch (1995) to formulate a sociocultural approach to identity formation. Next I consider a sociocultural interpretation of a gender-related incident that occurred among a group of boys and girls the same age as Ned and Adam. I conclude, finally, with a brief consideration of the methodological and educational implications of this new perspective on boys' development.

The Psychodynamic Perspective on Boys' Development

Based on Freudian and neo-Freudian/object-relations accounts of the effect of early childhood experience on personality development, the psychodynamic perspective assumes that the boy's relationship with his mother profoundly influences his masculine gender identity development. This influence begins early, during the pre-Oedipal period (birth to age three). During the first year of life, Chodorow argues, the young boy (like the young girl) develops a strong attachment and a sense of "primary identification" with his mother—he can not and does not differentiate himself from his mother, but instead "experiences a sense of oneness with her" (1974, p. 46). This attachment and primary identification represents, at least in part, a continuation of the child's prenatal experience of being physically part of his mother's body. It is

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also encouraged in most societies by the fact that mothers lactate; thus mothers tend to assume the role of primary caretaker for their infants and young children (both boys and girls).

During the next several years the primary task facing both boys and girls is to begin the process of separation and individuation—that is, "breaking or attenuating the primary identification with the mother and beginning to develop an individuated sense of self, and mitigating the totally dependent oral attitude and attachment to the mother" (ibid.). Here, Chodorow suggests, the pre-Oedipal experience begins to differ for boys and for girls. Mothers of daughters, it seems, often experience a sense of "double identification": "a woman identifies with her own mother and, through identification with her child, she (re)experiences herself as a cared for child" (p. 47). This double identification (whereby the mother identifies with her daughter just as her daughter identifies with her) does not occur in a mother's relationship to her son, and thus the processes of separation and individuation become organizing principles for boys' self-understanding from a very early age. A mother tends to treat her son as different and distinct from herself, even at a young age, "usually by emphasizing his masculinity in opposition to herself and by pushing him to assume, or acquiescing in his assumption of, a sexually toned male-role in relation to her" (p. 48). Thus, argues Chodorow, mothers identify less with their sons than with their daughters, pushing sons, in the process, toward differentiation and separation, and toward the formation of clear and distinct ego boundaries.

This process continues during the Oedipal period (ages three to five)—a period wherein two important developments occur as the boy's emerging sense of masculine gender identity begins to replace his early primary identification with his mother.[2] The first is that his father (and men in general) begin to become important in the boy's relational world, as a person (or persons) with whom to identify and to emulate. The second is that the boy begins to explicitly denigrate and devalue feminine aspects of his own and others' experience. Let me explore each of these developments in turn.

A boy's developing masculine gender identity is typically based on an identification with his father or with other important adult males in his life (grandfather, uncles, older brothers, etc.). Because, however, traditional social and cultural arrangements typically take the father away from the family for a large amount of time each day, much of a boy's masculine identification typically becomes an identification with an "invisible father," or with a fantasized masculine role, rather than with his father as a real person with whom he is involved in a genuine relationship. As a result, Chodorow argues, "a boy's male gender identification often become a 'positional' identification, with aspects of his father's clearly or not-so-clearly defined male role, rather than a more generalized 'personal' identification—a diffuse identification with his father's

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personality, values, and behavioral traits—that could grow out of a real relationship to his father" (p. 49).

As the boy begins to identify more strongly with his father, or at least with an idealized image of his father's role, he also strives to further weaken his identification with his mother by denigrating and devaluing her as a woman.

> A boy, in his attempt to gain an elusive masculine identification, often comes to this masculinity largely in negative terms, as that which is not feminine or involved with women. There is an internal and external aspect to this. Internally, the boy tries to reject his mother and deny his attachment to her and the strong dependence on her that he still feels. He also tries to deny the deep personal identification with her that has developed during the early years. He does this by repressing whatever he takes to be feminine inside himself, and, importantly, by denigrating and devaluing whatever he considers to be feminine in the outside world. (p. 50)

These two elements—the identification with his father and the subsequent rejection of the feminine—characterize Freud's vision of the "typical" resolution of the Oedipal crisis for the young boy. Moreover, from the psychodynamic perspective, a successful resolution of the Oedipal crisis gives rise to the superego—the seat of conscience and morality.

> As his early attachment to his mother takes on phallic-sexual overtones, and his father enters the picture as an obvious rival (who, in the son's fantasy, has apparent power to kill or castrate his son), the boy must radically deny and repress his attachment to his mother and replace it with an identification with his loved and admired, but also potentially punitive, therefore feared, father. He internalizes a superego. (pp. 50–51)

More importantly from the psychodynamic perspective, however, the attainment of masculine gender identity for boys, at its core, "involves denial of attachment or relationship, particularly of what the boy takes to be dependence or need for another" (p. 51).

While this perspective can be used to interpret Ned's and Adam's interview excerpts, in which both strongly reject—even to the point of violence—the possibility that their gender identity might somehow become that of a girl instead of a boy, a number of questions are nevertheless raised by this approach. The most important concerns how such a complex and complicated process as gender identity formation can occur completely unconsciously and intrapsychically, in the inner reaches of the mind. The psychodynamic perspective assumes, in other words, that boys develop their masculine gender identity completely out of relationships

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with others (parents, siblings, teachers, and friends), as one internal "object" is replaced by another. But what about the role that social, cultural, and historical factors and forces play in gender identity formation? Perhaps, in short, there is another way to look at some of these issues.

A Sociocultural Perspective on Boys' Development

A sociocultural perspective on boys' gender identity development begins with three basic themes that form the core of Vygotsky's approach to the study of human mental functioning: (1) "the use of genetic or developmental analysis to study individual functioning"; (2) "the claim that individual mental functioning has sociocultural origins"; and (3) "the claim that human action is mediated by tools and signs" (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 85; see also Wertsch, 1985). These three themes, taken together, highlight the primary emphasis Vygotsky places on the role that social, cultural, and historical forces play in shaping and influencing the process of development. For Vygotsky, therefore, development is a process whereby mental functioning is transformed, as forms of social practice/"intermental" functioning are internalized to become forms of mediated action/"intramental" functioning (see Wertsch, 1985, 1991, 1995).

In extending these general Vygotskian principles to the domain of identity development, Penuel and Wertsch have sought common ground between the work of Vygotsky and Erikson. While Erikson, who defined identity as "a subjective sense of invigorating sameness and continuity" (1968, p. 19), tended to emphasize individual functioning in his analysis of identity formation, and Vygotsky tended to emphasize sociocultural processes in his analysis of developmental phenomena, it is possible, Penuel and Wertsch argue, to "integrate individual functioning and sociocultural processes into a kind of mediated-action approach to identity formation" (1995, p. 88). That is, by seeking to maintain the dynamic tension that necessarily exists, as both Vygotsky and Erikson recognized, between the individual, on the one hand, and society, on the other, an understanding of the role that social, cultural, and historical processes play in the formation and transformation of individual identities is not only possible, but quite desirable.

Penuel and Wertsch's "mediated-action approach" to identity formation, grounded in Vygotsky's insights about developmental analysis, sociocultural processes, and mediation, and taking human action as its starting point, gives rise to three central claims:

1. "Mediated action," rather than an inner sense of identity, provides a basic unit of analysis;
2. Cultural and historical resources for identity formation are integral as empowering and constraining tools for identity formation;

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3. The use of a genetic method calls attention to the importance of studying identity in settings where forming identities are at stake in the course of the activity. (p. 90)[3]

Let me briefly explore each of these claims in turn, before considering their implications for understanding boys' gender identity development.

With respect to the appropriate unit of analysis to be used in a sociocultural approach to identity formation, Penuel and Wertsch argue that we must move beyond Erikson's notion of an "inner sense" of coherence and stability as characteristic of identity, toward a focus on the forms of "mediated action" in which an individual is typically engaged. Mediated action entails two central elements: an "agent," the person who is doing the acting, on the one hand, and "cultural tools" or "mediational means," the tools, means, or "instruments" used by the agent to accomplish a given action, on the other. Following Burke (1969), understanding and analyzing any action as mediated action therefore involves focusing on both *agent* and *agency,* on both "what person or kind of person performed the act" ("who did it"), and "what means or instruments [she] used" ("how [she] did it") (Wertsch, 1998, p. 12).

Such a focus on agents and the cultural tools that mediate their action (and interaction), moreover, entails acknowledging the fundamental and irreducible tension that necessarily exists between these two elements (Wertsch, 1998). That is, in examining the dialectic between agents and cultural tools at work in any given (inter)action, it is always tempting to reduce the action in question to a function of one or the other element. Such a temptation must be resisted, however, or we run the risk of destroying the phenomenon under observation. Consequently, this means focusing less on what persons *say* about their own sense of self-understanding, and more on what they *do* in specific situations and circumstances.

> Taking mediated action as the unit of analysis . . . allows us to ask a different set of questions about the way individuals use cultural tools to form an identity, without having to sacrifice Erikson's concern for coherence. In this approach, what we are attempting to interpret, explain, or analyze is meaningful human action, rather than either inner states of individuals or sociocultural processes, considered in isolation. . . . [T]he sociocultural framework asks us to focus on specific questions about the mediational means or cultural tools that people employ to construct their identities in the course of different activities and how they are put to use in particular actions. When identity is seen in this framework as shaped by mediational means or cultural tools, questions arise as to the nature of cultural tools and

> why one, as opposed to another, is employed in carrying out a particular form of action. (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 91)

Turning to the fundamental role that cultural and historical resources play in individual functioning, Penuel and Wertsch focus on the *ideologies* that are available in a particular social-cultural-historical context—ideologies that shape and mediate identity in critical ways. Such ideologies, moreover, can have both empowering and constraining effects on the development of identity.

> On the one hand, cultural tools in the form of ideologies provide individuals with a coherent world view, something that, in [Erikson's] view, youth desperately need to fashion an identity. In that way, these ideologies are empowering, providing youth with a compass in a contradictory and complex world. At the same time, these resources are, according to Erikson, constraining, in that individuals are limited in who they can become by the array of choices of ideology, career, and self-expression. (p. 90)

Penuel and Wertsch also argue that the meaning of cultural resources and tools is not fixed and immutable, but is rather quite fluid and flexible, determined, in large measure, by how such tools are used in a particular situation.

> The cultural and historical resources for identity formation do not constitute a single, undifferentiated whole, but represent a diversity of mediational means. In that way, identity may be conceived as formed when individuals choose on particular occasions to use one or more resources from a cultural "tool kit" to accomplish some action (see Bruner, 1990; Wertsch, 1991). Ideologies are embedded in a multitude of tools and signs; in this respect, identity researchers must be open to the variety of settings and signs in which an individual's identity is being constructed or expressed. (p. 90)

Finally, Penuel and Wertsch argue that "identity research must examine contexts in which identity is contested or under[going] transforming shifts" (ibid.). As such, they highlight not only the role that social processes play in the formation and transformation of identity, but also the degree to which identity is always as much a distributed or collective phenomenon as it is an individual phenomenon. They suggest studying identity in social-movement organization meetings, community support groups, and psychotherapy sessions, for example, to "provide insight into the way that individuals and groups can struggle against dominant discourses of their identity to co-construct a different way of speaking about themselves and develop new forms of action"

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(ibid.). It is important to undertake such studies in such settings, moreover, because "they are concerned . . . with the multitude of ways in which women and men struggle to come to terms with their membership in societies and with their own sense of who they are in the midst of a vast but structured field of signs, symbols, and voices from the culture(s) in which they live" (ibid.).

These three claims about the domain of identity development can be easily extended, I would argue, to the subdomain of boys' gender identity development: (a) mediated action provides a basic unit of analysis in the study of boys' gender identity formation; (b) cultural and historical resources for boys' gender identity formation serve as both empowering and constraining tools for the development of masculine identity; and (c) boys' gender identity development must be studied in settings where forming masculine gender identities is at stake in the course of the activity. In other words, boys' gender identity development is not simply the result of internal psychological processes that occur largely unconsciously, as early object relations are reconfigured and identification shifts from mother to father—as the psychodynamic account would have it. Rather, the development of boys' masculine identity is profoundly shaped by social and cultural forces, as boys form their understanding of themselves as boys in the course of mediated action and interaction that occurs in social settings in which identity is at stake, mediated by cultural tools and symbols—specifically, ideologies about what it means to be a male in this culture at this time in history.

Such a sociocultural perspective on masculine gender identity formation resonates with recent work on "masculinity ideology" (see Pleck, 1981; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993a, 1993b). On this view "masculinity ideology" (a sociocultural construction) is distinguished from "masculine gender-related personality traits" (the degree to which a person actually possesses or demonstrates psychologically or biologically based characteristics traditionally expected in men). Thus "males act the way they do not because of their male role identity, or their level of masculine traits, but because of the conception of masculinity [i.e., the masculinity ideology] they internalize from their culture" (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993b, pp. 14–15).

The "traditional" or "conventional" masculinity ideology—the social construction of masculinity most prevalent in the contemporary United States—consists of an interrelated set of attitudes regarding how a "real man" should act in relation to self and others (Pleck, 1981). Writing from an explicitly critical perspective, Connell calls this constellation of attitudes "hegemonic masculinity."

> In the concept of hegemonic masculinity, "hegemony" means . . . a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that

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> extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes. Ascendancy of one group of men over another achieved at the point of a gun, or by the threat of unemployment, is not hegemony. Ascendancy which is embedded in religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare/taxation policies and so forth, is. (1987, p. 184)

Traditional or hegemonic masculinity thus include attitudes about "status" ("A man always deserves the respect of his wife and children"), "toughness" ("A young man should be physically tough, even if he's not big"), and "antifemininity" ("It bothers me when a guy acts like a girl") (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993a).[4]

A variety of symbolic structures and cultural practices serve to perpetuate traditional/hegemonic conceptions of masculinity, ranging from those that operate on the social and cultural levels, to those that operate on the interpersonal level. Across the board, however, the common feature is that these structures and practices both privilege and perpetuate "men's dominance over women."

> Hegemonic masculinity must embody a successful collective strategy in relation to women. Given the complexity of gender relations no simple or uniform strategy is possible: a "mix" is necessary. So hegemonic masculinity can contain at the same time, quite consistently, openings towards domesticity and openings towards violence, towards misogyny and towards heterosexual attraction. (Connell, 1987, pp. 185–186)

Male bonding is the term Stoltenberg has coined to describe one of the most common and widespread of these cultural practices. The male bond, he says (quite sardonically), is fundamentally a "sudden and spontaneous" drama in four acts.

> *Act I* occurs when another player—someone who wishes to make you believe he is a real man—issues a challenge to your ranking on the vertical scale of manhood. To make you believe his own ranking [he] insinuates, for instance, that you are weak, not strong . . . vulnerable, not tough . . . powerless, not powerful. . . .
>
> *Act II* occurs when you accept the challenge and you sign the loyalty oath, swearing your allegiance to manhood. You do this not by attacking your attacker back [but] by forswearing your connection to some other human life. You sell out or put down or deride or dismiss some other human life such that in your challenger's eyes, and in your own, that human life is nobody to you. . . .

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Act III occurs when you have successfully met the challenge—and your challenger accepts your personal signature on the loyalty oath. Your challenger has been persuaded that you feel more loyalty to the bond between you as make-believe men than you feel to some other connection you may have once felt to another human life. . . . Your challenger and you can now bond, in the blissful relief that you both truly love manhood. . .

Act IV occurs when you encounter—in the flesh, face to face—the human you recently disavowed or betrayed or put down or mocked in order to qualify as a real man during the challenge of the male bond. If you handled your emotions correctly during the drama of that bond, the memory of your recent gender success ought to still be fresh in your body and your brain. Hence you should have no difficulty conducting your affairs in Act IV, when you now must deal with this particular human as if they are indeed nobody to you. Treating such an actual human as a nobody is much the preferable course of action . . . [because] it is so much simpler than trying to resuscitate in your frame of mind either their humanity or yours. (1993, pp. 266–268)

Male bonding is thus a form of mediated action by which men internalize, and thus reproduce, in the context of their interactions with other men, a conception of male gender identity that necessarily links masculinity, power, and violence.[5]

A sociocultural perspective on boys' gender identity development offers a way to understand how masculinity is shaped and mediated by social, cultural, historical, and institutional processes—processes, that is, that give rise to and support the ideologies of traditional or hegemonic masculinity that so often shape boys' and men's (mediated) action and interaction. But these processes still remain quite abstract, and it is difficult, without a concrete example in hand, to understand fully the way in which masculine identity-as-mediated-action is forged. Let me turn, therefore, to a brief exploration of an event in the lives of Ned and Adam's peers that will shed additional light, I think, on these important issues.

"I'm Gonna NAIL it on 'til the Blood Comes Out!"

Several years ago, a group of first-graders attending a primary school in a predominantly poor and working-class community in rural Maine were involved in the following incident, as described to us by the principal of the school:[6]

We had these girls go to a teacher after lunch time and they were upset, visibly upset. And they said the boys were saying

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> some words to them that were scaring them and they didn't like it . . . . The boys started to say, "Well, you're my girlfriend. And I'm gonna marry you and . . . we're gonna have sex." And . . . the little girl . . . said, "Oh, I know you. You just want to tie us up and have sex with us." And the little boy went on and on and pretty soon two other boys joined in, until there were . . . four boys . . . and it got pretty aggressive and real loud and pretty soon there were lots of things coming out from all the boys: "Yeah, we're gonna have sex with you," and "Yeah, we're gonna rape you; we're gonna kill you." And "Yeah, 'cause you're our girlfriend." And then one boy said, "I'm gonna put an engagement ring on you 'cause that's what you do when you love someone, but I'm gonna NAIL it on 'til the blood comes out!" And another boy said, uh, "Well, I'm gonna . . . put an ax in your head 'til blood comes out your eyes!"

Talking with the children after this incident, the principal became convinced that they did not fully understand what they were saying (the boys said that they did not know, for example, what the word *rape* meant), but were repeating things they had heard elsewhere. The one little girl who spoke back to the boys said she had overheard junior high students reading the opening scenes from Stephen King's most recent novel, *Gerald's Game,* on the school bus. The novel begins with a man tying his wife to their bed, enacting his sexual fantasy. The boys also spoke of repeating comments they had heard on TV magazine shows like *Hard Copy* and *A Current Affair*.

Although this incident perpetuated by a group of young boys against a group of young girls does not explicitly contain all of the elements Stoltenberg (1993) attributes to the classic model of male bonding, it nevertheless does represent, I would argue, an early and largely implicit form of a social practice that will likely, and sadly, play a ongoing role in the lives of the boys involved. In other words, this incident clearly contains elements of the kind of ritual and discursive reproduction of male gender identity, premised on male domination and female subordination, which perpetuates the ideology of traditional or hegemonic masculinity in this culture at this time in history. Let me briefly highlight some of these elements.

While there is no indication that the boys were responding to an explicit "challenge" to their masculinity, thrown down by one of their peers (Act I), there is an escalation in the incident as more boys joined in, and as things got more aggressive and louder, that clearly can be read as a kind of a "who can top who" competition among the boys involved. Moreover, the boys clearly insulted, threatened, and demeaned the girls, and while they professed not to know what "rape" means, they clearly knew that the words they were saying had the power to hurt

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(Act II). Similarly, while there is no explicit sense that the bond between the group of boys was made stronger because of their "successful" participation in the harassment of the girls (Act III), again, the fact that the group of boys expanded as the incident progressed can be read, I think, as at least an implicit indication that it was a "successful" male-bonding experience.[7]

Here, then, from a sociocultural perspective, is an example of how boys' masculinity is forged in a setting where gender identity is at stake (the boys clearly egged each other on), of how boys' masculinity is shaped by cultural resources and tools (words—like *rape*—and images—like the engagement ring—and ideologies—like the understanding of the relationship between sexual attraction and violence that is so pervasive in our contemporary culture), and of how boys' masculinity is manifest as mediated action (the threatening behavior directed toward the girls, using words and images as weapons). Consequently, even in its early and not-yet-full-formed-state, this example of male bonding among first-grade boys illustrates Penuel and Wertsch's claim about the rhetorical character of identity-as-mediated-action.

> We suggest that identity be conceived as a form of action that is first and foremost rhetorical, concerned with persuading others (and oneself) about who one is and what one values to meet different purposes. . . . It is always addressed to someone, who is situated culturally and historically and who has a particular meaning for individuals. (1985, p. 91)

It is an example, in other words, that clearly illustrates how boys' masculine gender identity formation is shaped and influenced by the sociocultural context in which the actions that constitute that identity occur. Masculine gender identity is not an internal trait or a characteristic of boys or men so much as it is a form of mediated action—rhetorical action—that has as its aim to persuade others (and oneself) that one is a "real man."

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the emerging sociocultural approach to the study of human development provides a richer and ultimately more useful perspective on the development of boys' masculine gender identity than does the more well-known and well-established psychodynamic paradigm. As such, conceptualizing masculine gender identity as a form of "mediated action"—that is, a form of action or activity shaped by cultural tools and resources—rather than an individual psychological trait, attribute, or characteristic, leads to an understanding of boys' gender identity development as fundamentally a process of cultural reproduction. On this view, therefore, prevailing ideologies of masculinity are used as tools to shape actions and interactions (both

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male-male and male-female, as the "male bonding" example illustrates), and boys' gender identity, in the end, is as much about rhetorical and performative attempts to convince others (boys and girls) of one's masculinity as it is about actually "being" a boy.[8]

To conclude, let me briefly consider some of the methodological and educational implications of the kind of sociocultural perspective on boys' development I have sketched in this chapter. Methodologically, it is critical that both ethnographic and interview methods be used to document the cultural and symbolic practices in which boys engage, the cultural resources employed in those practices, and the forms of masculine-identity-as-mediated-action to which such practices and resources give rise. Most importantly, as Penuel and Wertsch suggest, these methods must provide access to the settings in which these practices occur—settings (e.g., the "male-bonding" incident just described) in which forming identities are at stake in the course of the activity, and struggles with conventional expectations, and critiques of dominant discourses of masculinity, are possible. Needless to say, these methodologies must be largely qualitative—not to "generate hypotheses" or to "explore new areas of research," but to focus sustained and rigorous attention on the discursive and semiotic dimensions that are part and parcel of social, cultural, and historical processes.

Educationally, a sociocultural perspective on boys' gender identity development, in contrast to a psychodynamic perspective, suggests that the formation of masculinity is not an immutable internal process necessarily tied to the unconscious dynamics of the family romance. Rather, it is an external cultural process mediated and shaped by discursive and symbolic resources which, while quite powerful in their own right, can be altered. This resonates, moreover, with the view that cultural conceptions of masculinity do change over time (see Kimmel, 1996; Rotundo, 1993); hence what it means to be a boy or a man in one day and age does not necessarily correspond to what it means to be a boy or a man in another.[9]

Masculine gender identity, in other words, is malleable, and what it means to be a boy/man can be contested and negotiated. But this process must begin early, as boys struggle to hold onto and express their experiences of vulnerability in relationships—particularly their feelings of sadness, pain, and abandonment in the face of the conventional discourse about what it means to be a "big boy" or a "real man" that pressures boys/men to "be tough" (see also Pollack, 1998).

All of this is to say that there is a critical role for parents and educators to play in the lives of young boys—to interrupt the cultural reproduction of hegemonic masculinity, by providing boys with a different set of cultural resources and ideologies, and by encouraging them to participate in a different set of practices, than those currently available to boys as their gender identity is being formed. "Changing the script," so to speak, will not be easy, but it is possible, and if it means that the kind of negative, hurtful, and even violent behavior in which boys so often

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engage in order to "prove" their masculinity to others and to themselves can be avoided, it is definitely worth the effort.

Thus, to return to the example of male bonding I have presented, because the process of male bonding is not fully fleshed-out among this group of first-graders, because the boys involved are questioning and looking to adults in their lives for guidance and understanding, there is hope, I think, for a critical intervention, to interrupt the process and to plant the seeds of resistance. To do so would require adult men, primarily, to find ways to encourage young boys to resist pressures to engage in male bonding, and, instead, to develop relations with both boys and girls characterized by genuine mutuality, respect, and responsiveness—to help boys learn, as Stoltenberg (1989) says, "to refuse" conventional conceptions of manhood and hegemonic masculinity. To do so, moreover, would also undoubtedly disrupt the lives of the men involved, for forging authentic connections between men and boys in this culture and this time in history is as radical and risky as forging authentic connections between women and girls (see Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

In the end, though, however difficult it may be, interrupting the cultural reproduction of masculinity, as it currently occurs in the contemporary United States, may be our only hope for a more just, more compassionate, more caring, less violent world.

> Manhood is the *paradigm* of injustice. *Refusing to believe* in manhood is the personal and ethical stance of resistance to all injustice done in its name. And refusing to accept the manhood imperative—the lie that there *must* be a "male sex" to "belong" to—is a personal and political principle of revolutionary liberation. (Stoltenberg, 1993, p. 304)

Notes

1. This study has been conducted in collaboration with Peggy Stubbs, Lyn Mikel Brown, Devon Waugh, Nick Waugh, and Chris Mathews.

2. Note also Chodorow's (1974) statement that "All theoretical and empirical accounts agree that after about age three (the beginning of the "oedipal" period, which focuses on the attainment of a stable gender identity) male and female development becomes radically different" (p. 49).

3. A fourth claim, that "variation in the use of cultural resources for identity formation must be viewed in terms of commitments in Erikson's domains of identity—fidelity, ideology, and work" (p. 90), is not central to my aim in this paper.

4. It is important to note that this formulation has not been analyzed from the standpoint of race or class or sexual orientation. Thus is

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must be assumed that the conventional masculinity ideology to which Pleck and his colleagues refer is most typically associated with White, heterosexual, middle-class men.

5. William Pollack's (1998) recent discussion of what he calls the "boy code", which he defines as "a set of behaviors, rules of conduct, cultural shibboleths, and even a lexicon, that is inculcated into boys by our society—from the very beginning of a boy's life" (p. xxv), represents another example of the process by which masculine gender identity is mediated by cultural tools.

6. This is work done in collaboration with Lyn Mikel Brown, who has also written about this episode, primarily from the girls' point of view (see Brown, 1998).

7. It is also important to note, I would argue, the degree to which this incident reflects Connell's (1987) analysis of the strategies used to perpetuate the ideology of hegemonic masculinity. As such, it mixes messages about domesticity and heterosexual attraction ("I'm gonna put an engagement ring on you 'cause that's what you do when you love someone . . ."), with messages about violence and misogyny (". . . but I'm gonna NAIL it on 'til the blood comes out!").

8. See also Lyn Mikel Brown's (1998) analysis of the performative dimensions of girls' encounter with cultural conventions of femininity.

9. Thus a *sociocultural* perspective on boys' development necessarily goes hand-in-hand with a *critical* perspective on boys' development.

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