EMERALD ADVANCES IN MASCULINITIES

DEBATING CHILDHOOD MASCULINITIES

RETHINKING THE INTERPLAY OF AGE, GENDER AND SOCIAL CHANGE

EDITED BY

UTSA MUKHERJEE

FOREWORD BY RAEWYN CONNELL

Debating Childhood Masculinities

Praise for *Debating Childhood Masculinities*

> How are boys taught to be boys and girls taught to be girls? This simple question is deeply political, power-laden and possibly even unsettling [. . .] Through a critical feminist, queer and anti-colonial approach to gender and childhood, this important book provides us with the tools and frameworks to start thinking about this question.
>
> —***Shannon Philip***, **Lecturer in Sociology, University of East Anglia**

EMERALD ADVANCES IN MASCULINITIES

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Debating Childhood Masculinities: Rethinking the Interplay of Age, Gender and Social Change

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Foreword

When I was growing up in settler colonial Australia in the 1950s, the prevailing view about boys and girls was summarised in a little rhyme, almost a proverb, that everyone knew:

> What are little boys made of?
> Frogs and snails, and puppy-dogs' tails!
> What are little girls made of?
> Sugar and spice, and everything nice!

No wonder it was boys who grew up to scheme, fight and rule the world, while the girls practiced their niceness!

Of course gender difference appeared more complicated if you gave the matter serious thought. For instance, my father was a gentle and courteous man who never hit his children and despised flag-waving politicians. Nevertheless, when the war against fascism came, he joined the Royal Australian Navy and went off to hunt Japanese and German submarines and try to kill their crews. (As far as I know, his ship never found any.) My aunt, who was definitely more spice than sugar, joined the army and went off to the same war. However, she went as a nurse, not as a combatant, and ended up caring for sick prisoners in an internment camp. The prevailing view remained that combat was natural for boys and men, while caring work was natural for girls and women.

By the time I had grown up and began to do research with boys and girls, such ideas were changing. The women's liberation movement arrived, ideas of gender equality were in the air and there was strong criticism of the idea of fixed, natural characteristics separating girls from boys. Increasingly, the prevailing view – at least among those who were not busy defending the patriarchy – was that masculinity and femininity were *learnt*. There was a 'male role' and a 'female role' in society. The norms for these roles were taught by agents of socialisation such as parents, role models, mass media, churches and peer groups. Under this pressure, children gradually internalised the roles and so acquired the characteristics (aggressiveness, dominance, passivity, niceness, etc.) that society thought appropriate for men and women.

The idea of sex roles mattered for education, providing a kind of map of how young people learnt gender. For those critical of gender inequality, it also provided a strategy of change. Change the role norms, and the process of

socialisation would move the world in another direction. Many educational programmes attempted to do just that – with limited success.

Sex-role theory is still around but is not now the cutting edge. It was never very good at understanding power, or dealing with diversity or explaining change. Other things have happened in social research that have pushed our understanding of masculinities and femininities in new directions. Post-structuralism offered subtle ideas of discourse and subject position. Queer theory invited us to question taken-for-granted ideas about embodiment, especially sexuality. More attention has been given to the multiple forms of gender, including the diverse forms of masculinity from which ideas of hegemonic, marginalised and hybrid masculinities arose. A strong revival of post-colonial thought (perhaps better, anti-colonial thought) has challenged the way ideas from the global North – and mainly about the global North – have provided the framework for social science across the world. We now look to the majority world for intellectual resources, as well as to Harvard, Oxbridge and the Sorbonne.

These changes have posed serious challenges to studies of childhood and studies of gender, but they have also opened new pathways. This book responds to the challenges and shows how to use new perspectives. Its chapters present research and practical experience from seven different countries, and they use a variety of theoretical frameworks. The research participants range from relatively privileged youth in stable family and school situations, to refugees and other migrants, and youth expelled from schooling. Some of the studies include girls as well as boys, giving a valuable point of reference, though the main concern throughout is with boys and masculinities.

In this book, the reader will find fresh evidence about familiar concerns, such as the learning of gender hierarchies, the significance of sports, boys' concealment of fear or anxiety and the gendered relationships between boys and their fathers and mothers. You will also find evidence about violence – fighting among boys, sexual abuse of children by adults, pressure to 'play hurt' in sports – and about the impact of disciplinary practices in schools and families. You will see the material side of childhood interacting with social relations: the equipment of informal sport, the forms of dress, the household rooms allocated to boys and girls, their differing possibilities of privacy and the spaces in which children are, and are not, allowed to move.

The book is notable for its attention to the emotional dimension of gender. A particular strength is the authors' recognition of what psychoanalysis calls 'ambivalence', or what we might call the contradictory character of emotional life. We have examples of boys who acknowledge social conventions about masculinity but also reject them or find them uncomfortable. We have discussions of 'effeminacy' among boys and negative, abusive or sometimes supportive responses from adults. We see social controls, and also resistance to controls, or evasions and silences.

All this comes into view because the studies on which this book is based have a close focus. Most of the authors worked with small groups, using interviews, focus groups and field observations. These methods, well used, provide vivid pictures of children's social worlds, in their intricacy, uncertainty and flux. Children are

active makers of their social worlds, including gender identities and gender relations. However, they do not make them out of thin air. They work with materials mostly from the societies around them, which are still (though in varying ways) gender-divided and patriarchal. And young people are indeed young: their capabilities and their funds of experience are limited, though both grow through childhood and adolescence.

This said, *Debating Childhood Masculinities* provides strong warnings against the common habit of underestimating children's capacities. Children from very early are inventive in their use of materials, in their relations with adults and their views of themselves. They create stories; they may supply themselves with imagined friends or imagined lives. By adolescence, they are able to conceive utopias, other ways of ordering society: we see this today in the environmental movement among youth. This is not just a matter of fantasy. To the extent it shapes young people's practices, it becomes ontoformative, making new social realities.

Good social research has the capacity to surprise us, and there are surprises to look for in this book. The surprises include the marked ambivalences in some boys' responses to conventions of masculinity; the resistance by girls to family surveillance, at least in one of the studies; and the striking finding that some youth who are already stigmatised as troublemakers actually believe that taking responsibility is a key part of masculinity.

There are other surprises, but I leave them to the readers. There are lots of interesting details about children's worlds in this book, and there are serious conceptual arguments to engage with. My best wishes to the research participants, authors and readers in building our shared understanding of childhoods and masculinities.

Raewyn Connell
Sydney
November 2023

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Debating Childhood Masculinities: An Introduction

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Abstract

The introduction sets out the wider context which led to the development of this volume. I argue that younger children have often been overlooked and under-theorised within Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM). Moreover, existing research on childhood masculinities is often siloed in either childhood studies, gender studies or masculinity studies, with little dialogue between these fields. This volume bridges these fields to showcase an international and interdisciplinary body of scholarship that explore the way childhood masculinities in today's world are being negotiated, represented and lived out at the intersection of generational and gendered politics and social change. This chapter ends with an overview of the chapters in this volume and their contributions to wider debates on age, gender and social change.

Keywords: Childhood; Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities; children's agency; childhood studies; gender relations

In recent years, there has been significant growth of scholarly interest in the changing nature of masculinity with many researchers drawings attention to the coexistence of a multiplicity of masculinities and the relation between them. Notable contributors to these debates have also demonstrated the way various notions of masculinities, as lived out in the contemporary world, are interlocked with class, race, sexuality and other markers of social difference. This body of scholarship, which is often grouped under the rubric of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM), is more relevant than ever before not only to make sense of changing ideals of masculinity but also in the face of 'regressive change[s]' unfolding around us, such as the emboldening of 'political masculinism', backlash against progressive gender politics and raging warfare across the globe

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(Mellström, 2023, p. 158). Children and young people today are growing up in this milieu, and indeed, a number of misogynist 'manfluencers' promoting anti-feminist and male supremacist content online are targeting their messages specifically towards teenage boys (Wescott et al., 2023). Yet, CSMM has rarely had serious critical engagement with the way masculinities are learned, negotiated and lived out by younger children in the context of wider social change in gender relations and masculine ideals. Within much of CSMM writings, '[a]dult men typically just *are*, without both gender and age!' (Hearn, 2007, p. 81). Increasingly, young adults and youth have featured in this body of scholarship, but younger children's perspectives and experiences have remained on the margins (Cann, 2014).

The extant literature on childhood masculinities is often siloed in either childhood studies, gender studies or masculinity studies, with little dialogue between these fields. In much of social science scholarship, including CSMM literature, children's understanding and enactment of gendered practices are still widely understood in terms of a unidirectional model of gender socialisation wherein children are seen as passive recipients of gender scripts handed down by adults. This is despite the concern with 'gendered lifecourse' in early feminist work within CSMM (Hearn, 2007) and the strides made by critical childhood scholarship which has long argued for recognising children's agency and their own role in co-constructing and (un)doing gender (Paechter, 2007; Thorne, 1993).

This dearth of critical scholarship focused on childhood masculinities led to the development of this edited volume. I recognise this as an opportunity for CSMM scholars globally to think more critically about childhood masculinities that take children's agency and voices into account. At the same time, childhood studies must reckon with the significant shifts currently underway in the sociological scholarship on men and masculinities. Against this backdrop, this edited volume embraces a critical stance informed by anti-racist, feminist and queer approaches among others to showcase an international and interdisciplinary body of scholarship that explore the way childhood masculinities in today's world are being negotiated, represented and lived out at the intersection of generational and gendered politics and social change. The chapters share the premise that childhood masculinities are not biologically determined but are culturally conditioned, historically contingent social-material constructions that are produced at the intersection of generational and gendered relations in a given society at any time. In other words, the volume advances a situational and processual understanding that posits that 'masculinity is something that not only some specific bodies (those assigned male at birth) have or own, but as a position that is more situational and which can be deployed and activated by a variety of bodies' (Gottzén & Straube, 2016, p. 221). This approach takes bodies seriously and highlights the way practices of masculinity 'constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do' without reducing the question of masculinity to the biological constitution of the body (Connell, 2005, p. 71). Just as masculinity studies are not the same as study of men, research on childhood masculinities does not simply pertain to the study of boys and boyhood. Of course, research with boys can offer a point of entry for studying childhood masculinities as many authors in this volume show, but there

are other equally important entrées into this question that do not centre the cis-male body as Martino and colleagues' chapter in this volume reminds us. In this way, this volume differs in its objectives from efforts to make 'the invisible boy visible' within scholarship by capturing 'boys' gender making' (Hällgren et al., 2015, p. 7), although that is a relevant and important intellectual project in itself. Instead, the chapters in this book foreground childhood masculinities by unpacking the interplay of age, gender and social change. In many ways, contributing authors build 'on the idea of masculinities as something *achieved*... [and] contextualized as specific plural identities which intersect with class, ethnicity and sexuality' (Pattman et al., 1998, p. 126, emphasis authors'). Further, the authors champion a gender-inclusive approach to masculinity including chapters that look into trans and non-binary masculinities.

My hope in putting this volume together was to create a space for greater critical scholarly work on childhood masculinities that offer new directions for both childhood studies and CSMM. As editor, I did not provide a top-down framework for authors to shoehorn their work into, but I encouraged them to think from the lives of children without centring adults' perspectives and to firmly anchor their analysis in historical and geographical contexts of their work. The result is a set of eight exceptionally rich chapters that make important empirical and conceptual contributions to CSMM and childhood studies. The golden thread running through the chapters in this volume is their focus on power and gender inequalities in the analysis of childhood masculinities. Almost every author in this volume has to varying degrees built on and/or critiqued Connell's (2000) pioneering work on masculinities. Although Connell's (2000) writings focused primarily on youth and men in the Australian context, they have much to say about childhood masculinities, especially with reference to power that researchers continue to engage with.

Global gender politics and 'democratic projects of change in masculinity' (Connell, 2016, p. 313) require us to step outside dominant global north centric frameworks, challenge existing geographical inequalities in knowledge production (especially in CSMM and childhood studies) and give due importance to research from the Global South that can offer new avenues for developments in the field. Building on this insight, the chapters in the volume are drawn from an international pool of scholars committed to equity and social justice. The contributing authors are based across four continents and eight countries, offering contextually grounded analysis of childhoods and masculinities. Their work adds greatly to our current knowledge on the topic and in turn has the potential to inform progressive actions and policy changes on the ground. As Connell (2016, p. 315) puts it, 'accurate knowledge and theoretical insight are priceless assets for action, [especially] when action is concerned with contesting power and achieving social justice'.

Overview of Chapters

The volume is made up of four equal sections. Although not exhaustive, these sections offer some of the most instructive lenses for understanding childhood masculinities in the contemporary world.

The first section is about 'Emotions and Affect' – an area that has recently witnessed a revitalisation of interest with CSMM but remains woefully underresearched when it comes to childhood masculinities. The two chapters in this section draw on original data to cast fresh light on masculinity and emotions in the context of children's school environments in contemporary Finland and India, respectively. Peltola worked with boys aged 12–15 years across three schools in Helsinki to illustrate the practices and possibilities of sharing emotions within children's relationships with parents and friends. Based on the data, Peltola unpacks 'contradictory narratives of masculinity' where boys simultaneously critique hegemonic masculine norms and help reproduce those very norms through their practices which has implications for whether and how they can confide or share emotions. Relatedly, Shailly in her study with 11–14-year-old boys in two government-run schools in Delhi identified 'boy code injunctions' that are enforced upon boys by others and which condition the way boys in these schools express their emotions. Although these norms limit boys' understanding of masculinity, some boys stress their strategies of challenging these norms and crafting their own approaches of managing emotions. Both chapters centre the narratives of children and illuminate the role of institutional discourses and social norms in shaping narratives of masculinities that boys draw upon and enact in their daily lives. They also offer key methodological lessons for researching emotions and masculinity with researchers embedding themselves in school settings to generate rich data with children. This approach also allowed them to grasp the social context in which children spend significant portions of the day and which provide a frame of reference through which children make sense of and co-create their narratives of masculinity.

The section 'Bodies and Materialities' that follows provides novel conceptual frameworks for thinking about childhood masculinities. In their chapter, von der Heyde and colleagues theorise what they call 'materializations' of childhood masculinity by combining practice theory with neomaterialist perspectives to arrive at a social-material understanding of masculinity that is always context-dependent. For them, materialities and praxis are not mutually exclusive; rather they produce one another. Gender in this sense is at once a praxis and a material. They illustrate these arguments by drawing on empirical data from their joint project with stunt scooter riding children and young people in a city in north-west Germany. Martino and colleagues take us to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings to explore possibilities for gender justice and gender democratisation from a trans studies perspective. While gender inequalities in ECEC settings have primarily been explored in erstwhile literature in relation to the inclusion of male teachers in ECEC, this chapter takes these debates in a new direction by foregrounding trans-informed theoretical frameworks. The authors weave secondary data extracts, cultural texts and (auto)biographical narratives from their location in North America to carve a new space in the study of

childhood masculinity that stems from the critical project of gender expansiveness in ECEC settings. Through their robust critique of cisgenderist and cissexist beliefs in contemporary thinking around this issue, this chapter offers new critical tools for theorising childhood masculinities.

The third section contains two chapters that are concerned with violence and exclusion that are enmeshed in some children's lived experiences of masculinities. Thomas' chapter is based on her year-long ethnographic study in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) in London. In the United Kingdom, PRUs are alternative schooling provisions meant for young people excluded from mainstream schools on disciplinary grounds. Boys, and especially Black Caribbean boys, experience disproportionate levels of school exclusion in the United Kingdom. Therefore, Thomas worked directly with boys in a London PRU alongside their teachers and social workers to capture the impact of school exclusion as well as the implications of interpersonal and institutional violence on school-excluded boys' subjectivities and masculinities. She calls for more intersectional approaches to childhood masculinities research. The next chapter in this section is by Sharma who foregrounds the narratives of adult men survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) in India to reflect on hegemonic masculinity. Specifically, he explores the gendered meanings that men survivors of CSA make of their abuse experiences. In this analysis, effeminophobia – which Sharma defines as 'anxiety and disdain regarding feminine-identified behaviours, mannerisms, attributes, and presentations among boys and men' – emerged as a key constituent and product of these meaning-making processes and acts as form of violence in itself that impact men and boy survivors of sexual violence. Sharma deals with this important issue with extreme care and sensitivity to offer important insights into the workings of hegemonic masculinity and effeminophobia which remains underexplored in the Indian context and beyond.

The last section consists of two chapters that bring into relief how notions of masculinity and femininity mediate children's inclusion in various spaces and their spatial mobility. Carlman and Hjalmarsson's chapter is based on their research in Swedish sport clubs. They explore constructions of masculinity within Swedish sports settings and their implications for the inclusion of children with refugee backgrounds in these clubs. They posit 'sports integration' of refugee children as a social relational process imprinted by power inequalities. Carlman and Hjalmarsson develop a critical approach to sports integration by demonstrating how access to sports is often shaped by normative ideas of gender and ethnicity where certain masculine-coded qualities of children are portrayed as the 'right fit' for Swedish sports clubs. However, the authors caution against seeing children with a refugee background as passive actors within the Swedish sports context and instead highlight these children's agency. The last chapter by Üzümcü focuses on how constructions of masculinities and femininities are pivotal to how children's spatial mobility and individual privacy are negotiated within families in Eskişehir, Türkiye. Üzümcü's ethnographic study which involved boys, girls and parents across 33 families demonstrates how individual privacy management is a key aspect in children's everyday life through which notions of masculinities and femininities are enacted. Üzümcü calls for greater intellectual investment in relational frameworks for the study of childhood masculinities that take the

intersection of children's gendered and age-based cultural locations seriously and does not focus on masculinities in isolation.

These overviews bring home the truly international scope of this volume, with contributions that theorise childhood masculinities through often-underexplored lenses across different geographical and cultural contexts. The diversity of contributions dispels any vestiges of universalising theories of masculinities found in early CSMM literature. The authors take children's experiences and perspective seriously and stand apart from adult-centric narratives of childhood masculinities. Hopefully, the insights offered by these chapters will inspire further in-depth work in this area.

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Emotions and Affect

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