Second-Hand Masculinity: Do Boys with Intellectual Disabilities Use Computer Games as Part of Gender Practice?

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ABSTRACT

The development of a gendered identity is a process that both boys and girls navigate to construct ideas about the men and women they will become. There is little research on this process for men with intellectual disabilities (ID). This study aimed to explore the ideas that teenage boys with ID develop while thinking about the men they will become. Twenty one boys with ID took part in a group discussion of images of men performing various activities. Individual boys were then interviewed about the men they wished to become. These data were then analysed to generate themes about contemporary self-understanding. Analysis of the considerable talk about computer games revealed two themes: Games as permissive spaces to try out ideas; Games as space to embody second hand masculinity. These findings raise interesting issues regarding the boys’ developing identities and masculinity. Their involvement in gaming may offer the opportunity for boys to question both desirable and undesirable aspects of masculine identity.

Keywords: Computer Games, Gender, Gendered Identity, Intellectual Disabilities (ID), Masculinity

INTRODUCTION

The negotiation and evaluation of gendered identity is a process that both boys and girls go through to develop ideas about the men and women they will eventually become. Research considering masculinity is now an established area of study in the field of gender, but contemporary research which contemplates the influence of gender does not include a perspective regarding boys or men with ID. Consequently there has been no consideration of what methods could be used to assist these boys to develop their ideas as they make their transition from childhood to the adult world.

It is clear from the literature with regard to masculinity that, in the process of constructing a masculine identity, culturally normative or hegemonic forms of masculinity which protect the ‘legitimacy of patriarchy’ (Connell, 1995), offer an edifying and time specific blue print for men. Within the complexities of this blue print are constructions of masculinity that are

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dominant and those that are subordinate (Connell, 2000). Whitehead (2002) indicates that the existence of dominant and subordinated male behaviour is indicative of the inequalities of gender. However, it would be simplistic to assume that all boys or all men subscribe to either a dominant or subordinate construct of masculinity. Unfortunately, for most men and boys the existence of culturally normative forms of masculinity, even at a distance, are confusing as they attempt to navigate their way towards an identity that will be at least acceptable and will give them access to gendered spaces (Connell, 2000). Frosh et al. (2002) in their research with teenagers describe ‘popular masculinities’ which were used by participants in their study to establish difference. The term was utilised to reveal not only the dominance of a particular boy, but also the apparent opposing differences between boys, girls and boys and other boys who did not meet the standards of masculinity required. The location of difference and the dialogue which this creates appears to be an important process in the development of male identity. However, Swain (2003) argues that although the boys in his study found culturally normative views of masculinity problematic, these views were often supported and promoted in the visual and print media accessible to them. The risk to the boys of rejection by peers on the grounds that they did not or could not conform to an external view of masculinity was regarded as yet more problematic.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) explore the use of hegemonic masculinity yet further in their review of the development of the term in research. They confirm that the development of a construct of male identity for teenagers is made yet more complex as the interplay between dominant and subordinated masculine characteristics is contested. Considering the hegemonic formation of the masculine ideal in this way might lead one to assume that the ideas generated are somehow fixed and impermeable. However, for teenagers constructing normalized identities, place, space and time are influential (Swain, 2003; Archer and Yamashita 2003). This would appear to be the central argument that persuades us to consider that a number of issues are at play for boys trying to establish their identities. Paechter (2003) argues that achievement is dependant on the teenage boy’s successful or unsuccessful attempts to project their developing masculine identity on new social situations (Paechter, 2003). Swain (2003) agrees with this position as he posits the physical practice of the body not as something driven by existing notions of ‘doing boy’ but as brought about through its performance. This performance appears to be intrinsic to the establishment of masculinity and your success as a boy in many different areas of life. All of this reveals the complexity of the literature pertaining to boys with no apparent cognitive impairment. However, does this reflect the situation for boys with ID? Literature which focusses on masculinity and disability may help us to answer this question.

Male identity and masculinity has been considered in studies that regard this from the perspective of men who are physically disabled (Gerschick & Miller, 1994; Shakespeare, 1999; Ostrander, 2008). In these studies researchers have established the need for further investigation to consider the interrelationship between masculinity and disability. Gerschick and Miller’s (1994) seminal work documents the extents to which men with physical disabilities reframe their masculinity in the face of barriers to inclusion in their communities. This reframing as part of gendered practice can take on a number of forms and aims to emulate or subvert widely held beliefs of how men should be in order to gain acceptance. The contrast of experience between able-bodied men and those with disabilities taking part in the research is graphically illustrated highlighting that the disabled man is constantly at odds with dominant views of what it is to be a man. This perhaps illustrates that the development of a successful identity for men with disabilities, including attempts at acceptance by other men without disabilities, is complex and that it may be logical to assume that this may also be the case for men with cognitive disabilities.
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