

Asked to write something about the status of boyhood and boyhood studies my thoughts immediately turned to a recent article by Chris Haywood (2008). The article in question is a critique of what Haywood identifies as the current orthodoxy in work on schooling, gender and sexuality. Indeed, it is critical of some of my own work on boys and young men and even previous work by Haywood himself (see, for instance, Haywood 1996; Redman et al. 2002). I'm sure Chris will forgive me if I say that I don't agree with all of the interpretations he makes nor with all the conclusions he draws in this article.

Nevertheless, it strikes me as making a number of important points and, since these seem to have wider relevance for boyhood studies and for our understanding of boyhood itself, in what follows I want to spend some time thinking about them.

Haywood's main argument, as I read it, concerns the need for vigilance in relation to our taken for granted assumptions. As he suggests, in time, yesterday's new insights are likely to become today's somewhat stale orthodoxies – ones that, needless to say, may inhibit our capacity for creative engagement with our objects of study. Haywood's contention is that much of the work on gender, sexuality and schooling – including work on boys and young men – has reached an impasse of precisely this kind. To my mind, he makes two particularly telling points in support of this argument. The first concerns a tendency to over-read the cultural worlds boys and young men inhabit through a particular set of theoretical preoccupations, broadly derived from post-structuralism and the wider 'discursive turn' of the 1990s. The second, not unrelated point, concerns a tendency to ignore important aspects of the processes by which gender and sexuality are constituted.

Pre-eminent among the theoretical concerns Haywood identifies as preoccupying current work are the critique of desire as something that denotes a particular psychological ‘type’ (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) – which Haywood refers to as ‘sex-desire’ (Haywood 2008, pp. 2-3) – and, linked to this, Judith Butler’s notion of the ‘heterosexual matrix’ – the concept that, within current formations of gender and sexuality, to be ‘properly’ or ‘successfully’ masculine or feminine is necessarily to be heterosexual (Butler, 1990). To be clear about this, Haywood is not suggesting that we reject these concepts. Rather, his point is that their ubiquity is now such that we risk not being able to see beyond them. Citing some of his own more recent research he suggests that, particularly for younger boys and those in early adolescence, the meanings and practices of heterosexuality may have only limited relevance. Not only were the boys more likely to orientate themselves to such things as ‘knowledge about cars ... the ability to use computers and understanding of wrestling’, they also ‘appeared to take up homoerotic discourses’ which, even if done ‘in a mode of institutional resistance ... or humorous performance’, nevertheless suggested that ‘proper’ masculinity was not always strongly linked to conventional heterosexuality in this particular cultural site (Haywood 2006). The main conclusion Haywood draws from these findings, is the need to pay careful attention to the precise means through which ‘boy-ness’ is constituted for different individuals in different contexts and at different times. Only by re-prioritising such ‘how’ questions, he implies, are we likely to be able to say with any confidence that we have not reduced the fluidity and range of the social world – including that of the erotic – to the limits of our own conceptual apparatus.

The second major criticism that Haywood makes of current work – its tendency to ignore important aspects of the processes by which gender and sexuality are constituted – is perhaps even more significant. Haywood argues that current work on gender, sexuality and schooling (including my own) frequently deploys ‘a methodology that relies upon the centrality of the body’ (Haywood 2008, p. 5). At first glance this claim may seem questionable since much of the work cited views gender and sexuality as being made and remade in talk and interaction – whether this is understood in terms of ‘performativity’, sub-cultural practices or something closer to symbolic interactionism. Indeed, this focus means that, in such work, bodies as bodies are frequently notable by their absence. However, what I understand Haywood to mean is that work of this kind tends to ignore the ways in which gender and sexuality can be viewed as emerging within (or as being ‘assembled by’) socio-technical arrangements that include but extend decisively beyond the *boundaries* of the human body. At least, this seems to be the implication of his discussion of work on sexuality in early modern Italian convents in which, if I’ve read Haywood’s account correctly, sexuality is seen as a property of the convents’ architectural arrangements (ibid., pp. 7-8). From this perspective, talk and interaction can be viewed as only one dimension of – or register in – a wider ensemble or complex in which social practices, bodies and things exist in relations of mutual constitution, each being present in the other.

Needless to say, Haywood’s arguments echo wider developments across the social and human sciences. For instance, his emphasis on the need to return to ‘how’ questions

(‘how is “boy-ness” constituted in particular times and places?’) bears at least some resemblance to the ‘pragmatic’ sociology of Antoine Hennion (see, for example, 2001). Equally, his emphasis on those aspects of social worlds that extend beyond the boundaries of the human body seem to point, as well as towards Hennion, to Actor-Network Theory and Science and Technology Studies (see, for instance, Latour 2004). Indeed, developments of this kind have recently been heralded as marking a fundamental shift in intellectual debate, one whose magnitude is equivalent to that of earlier linguistic and discursive turns (Blackman et al. 2008). Whether or not this is the case, there would seem to be some merit in taking Haywood’s points seriously. Needless to say, this does not mean they should be adopted uncritically. For instance, many of the psychoanalytic arguments in which I am myself interested, seem as likely to be in tension with these points as they are with post-structuralism. Still less does it mean that we should simply abandon lessons learned from existing approaches. However, it could well be that our thinking about boyhood will be enhanced by an engagement – critical or otherwise – with the sorts of position that Haywood is advocating.

References

Blackman, L., Cromby, J., Hook, D., Papadopoulos, D., and Walkerdine, V. (2008). Editorial. Creating Subjectivities. *Subjectivity*, 22, 1-27.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. London: Routledge

Haywood, C. (1996). Out of the curriculum: Sex talking, talking sex. *Curriculum Studies*, 4(2), 229-49.

Haywood, C. (2006). Sexuality and schooling: A politics of desire. Unpublished PhD thesis, Newcastle University.

Haywood, C. (2008). Genders and sexualities: Exploring the conceptual limits of contemporary educational research. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 18(1), 1-14.

Hennion, A. (2001). Music lovers: Taste as performance. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 18(5), 1-22.

Latour, B. (2004). How to talk about the body? The normative dimensions of Science Studies. *Body and Society*, 10(2/3), 205-230.

Redman, P., Epstein, D., Kehily, M.J., and Mac an Ghail, M. (2002). Boys bonding: Same-sex friendship, the unconscious and heterosexual discourse. *Discourse*, 23(2), 179-191.