Internalizing the Present in the Articulation of the Future

Masculinity, Inequality, and Trying On New Possible Selves

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Abstract: Young men, especially from working-class backgrounds, often lack the space, capacity, or opportunity to reflect upon masculinities and their role in shaping future trajectories. By devising mechanisms to engage young men differently in creative activities, participants in our project were supported to think beyond assumed futures and explore new possibilities. Mobilizing the theory of possible selves, this article draws on data across three creative university outreach workshops in England with 18 participants who were given the opportunity to explore masculinities using creative writing, photography, and dance/movement. Combining artifact analysis and semi-structured interviews, the article argues that these workshops created safe spaces for young men to articulate their concerns and fears about harm and risk in everyday life while facilitating an exploration of alternative possible selves.

Keywords: education, higher education, masculinity, possible selves, widening participation, working-class boys

Since the work of Paul Willis (1977), the transitions of working-class boys through education and into work have been subject to a rich vein of sociological and educational inquiry in the United Kingdom and beyond (e.g., Briggs 2021; Brown 1987; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Roberts 2018; Wallace 2019; Ward 2015). Willis (1977) highlighted how young working-class men positioned jobs in industrial settings as the most desirable post educational outcome and introduced notions later associated with hegemonic working-class masculinity (Connell 2020; Kenway and Kraack 2013). Within Willis's study, the "lads" subculture is presented as one in which participants railed against behaviors deemed to be conformist, positioning educational engagement as effeminate and undesirable. However, since the late 1970s society has experienced significant technologization and socioeconomic change in line with a neoliberal government agenda (Brown

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1987; Mac an Ghaill 1994). More recent research (Ingram 2018; Roberts 2018; Ward 2015) has examined the complex, sociohistorically situated negotiations of masculinity in a contemporary societal context. For Steven Roberts (2018), boys enact masculinities in different ways depending not only on their characteristics, but also on the dynamics of their surroundings, and like Tracey Warren (2007), he problematizes traditional notions of a "breadwinner" working-class masculinity present within Willis's research. Instead, he argues that masculinities were likely shaped by the opportunity for work in the service-driven economy. Michael Ward's research (2015) with working-class boys in postindustrial South Wales shines a light on how participants navigated insecurity and change in their transition to adulthood amid precarious socioeconomic conditions. Offering a more contemporary conceptualization, Ward's research demonstrates complexity and plurality within participant data, charting the consequences of significant socioeconomic upheaval within the region and its consequences for the young men. More recently, Alex Blower (2020) explored how young working-class men in the West Midlands of England accessed, accrued, and mobilized capital to form orientations for their future in education and work, with a specific focus on higher education. Mobilizing Phil Hodkinson and Andrew Sparkes's (1997) *horizons for action* as a conceptual tool, the research contested notions of an "aspirational deficit" among working-class boys in education, arguing that working-class boys' future educational expectations are negotiated in relational dialogue with intergenerational experiences of education and work. Therefore, scholarship highlights a complex interplay of social, geographic, and historical factors, intersecting with negotiations of masculinity to shape working-class boys' orientations for their future in education and employment.

In the last decade, policymakers have also focused upon narratives of educational underachievement for white working-class children (Atherton and Mazhari 2019; Hillman and Robinson 2015). While research has problematized political discourse overtly focusing on white working-class underachievement in a political context dominated by anti-immigration and nationalist rhetoric (Adjogatse and Miedema 2022), DfE (2023) data highlights that rates of higher education progression for white British boys who are eligible for free school meals (FSMs) are among the lowest of any group in England..

It is against such a backdrop that in 2021 a university outreach initiative was developed to support the educational attainment and progression of boys in the South of England who were eligible for Free School Meals.

Mobilizing the university's creative subject specialisms as a mechanism to engage young working-class men, the Being a Boy project engaged with issues related to masculinity and identity through the production of creative artifacts. The project sought to provide a unique opportunity to engage young men in receipt of FSMs (as a proxy for low socioeconomic background) in critical reflection about the role of masculinity within their lived experience. Falling outside of mainstream educational curriculums, which often limit young people's educational agency (Abrahams 2018), the relative freedom of the university outreach initiative provided scope to engage young men with the subject matter differently. Privileging trust, respect, and reciprocity, Being a Boy sought to create a relationship with participants that differed from the teacher–student dynamic experienced in formal schooling, enabling an environment to be developed where participants felt their voices were valued by operationalizing an engaged pedagogy, one in which everyone in the room was an active participant (hooks 2014). As such, in a societal context where the young men's lived experience is much maligned (Lawler 2012), Being a Boy sought to create a safe space for them to interrogate their assumed futures, facilitating a dialogic exploration of new possibilities. Therefore, we argue for the value of creating safe, supportive spaces that allow young men to creatively explore both their current sense of self and future "possible selves." Before engaging with the substantive content of the workshops, we will first contextually situate them by investigating why working-class men are the target of higher education outreach, outlining how masculinity, future aspirations, and educational transitions are negotiated in a a fluid, relational manner.

Possible Selves in Higher Education Outreach

Access to higher education is an ongoing policy concern globally (e.g. Atherton et al. 2016) and specifically within English higher education policy (McCaig et al. 2022). Accordingly, higher education providers are required to develop plans to address the entry rates of underrepresented groups. The resultant interventions have historically focused upon how to "raise aspirations" to encourage progression to higher education based on a logic that raising aspirations results in better educational achievement and success (Spohrer 2011) and that low educational attainment is caused by a deficit in aspiration. However, this "raising aspirations" agenda has framed individuals who do not access higher education as being "in deficit," a position

that has been extensively critiqued (e.g. Baker 2017; St. Clair et al. 2013) and is problematic because it privileges a certain kind of aspiration focused on career success related to graduate employment (Rainford 2023). For many individuals, this career-focused definition of "aspirations" might not align with their wider sense of what their imagined positive futures look like or of what opportunities will be available to them. Heather Mendick and colleagues (2018) found that aspiration formation is often shaped by issues of enjoyment and belonging more than pay. Aspirations are also likely to be tempered by geographical opportunities, especially in terms of higher education progression (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018) and the scarcity of roles in certain industries (Allen and Hollingworth 2013).

Given the complexity of the elements that contribute to realizing aspirations, a more positive approach is to frame interventions around helping individuals develop their sense of a future possible self, enabling them to understand how higher education may or may not feature in this reckoning. The theory of possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986) considers how an individual develops like-to-be and like-to-avoid selves, which shape their behaviors in alignment with their orientations. Through operationalizing this theory, outreach interventions can be a space for individuals to explore novel like-to-be selves. However, the theory is highly individualistic and omits the consideration of structural barriers to realizing these selves. Therefore, we draw upon a more sociologically oriented approach to possible selves (i.e., Clegg 2019; Harrison 2018; Henderson 2019; Henderson et al. 2019). A sociological lens considers structural barriers, which constrain choices, and their relationship with individual agency. Neil Harrison's (2018: 11) development of the theory adopts the notion of a "palette" of like-to-be and like-to avoid selves that are informed by what is probable. Structural and cultural barriers can also be framed in terms of expectations (Harrison and Waller 2018); thus, we argue that like to-be-selves require both an individual to aspire to a particular desired future and a future that fits in with the expectations of what is probable for individuals to realize in their particular contexts. Furthermore, Holly Henderson (2019) has argued for the resonance between possible selves and higher education outreach interventions, making possible-selves a useful theoretical lens through which to study the issue of young men and their future orientations.

Our project considered how individuals' palettes are likely to be colored by their life experiences and understandings, using this notion as a basis for the way in which interventions were developed. Furthermore, we ac-

knowledged that this sense of the probable could be shaped through policy, practice, and structural and cultural issues. As Sue Clegg (2019) has argued, individuals' futures are often both socially and politically constrained. Therefore, for working-class young men, issues of inequality and masculinity are likely to be closely entwined with the like-to-be and like-to-avoid selves that make up their palettes, aligning with Hodkinson and Sparkes's (1997) concept of *horizons for action*. This sociological view on career choices claims that decision-making takes place within an area of choices shaped in a relational negotiation between material circumstances and individual perceptions of "the possible." Hodkinson and Sparkes argue that these horizons constrain and enable individual choices based on a perceived capacity to realize a possible future. However, unlike horizons for action, a palette of possible selves is broader than simple dispositions toward future education and work, as it considers futures within a holistic framing. Perceptions of the possible are often shaped by what is seen as valuable in individuals' sociocultural contexts.

To better understand how the project influenced the vibrancy with which certain trajectories featured in participants' palettes of the possible, we operationalize here Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital to explore how its objective and embodied forms were accrued and mobilized by the young men. Used in conjunction with possible selves, cultural capital provides an opportunity to understand the accrual of physical and cognitive resources through the boys' engagement with the project, and in turn the impact of their acquisition on their negotiation of "the possible." For young men from working-class backgrounds, these possible selves are often shaped by intersecting inequalities and cultural expectations that are particular in nature. Such experiences are relational, embedded within geographies, communities, and social histories that have a bearing on their past, present, and future orientations for education and work.

Engaging Working-Class Boys in Higher Education Outreach

For over 30 years, discourse around widening participation has featured heavily within higher education policy and practice (McCaig et al. 2022; Thompson 2019). Over the last decade, disparities in the educational attainment and progression of working-class boys have featured with increasing regularity in government discourse (e.g., House of Commons Education Committee 2014) and in the discourse of higher education

policy bodies. However, stark disparities remain. In a recent demographic analysis of entrants to higher education (DfE 2023), progression rates for white British boys and for white and Black Caribbean boys who are eligible for FSMs were14 percent and 17 percent, respectively. For male students who are not eligible, the rates of entry nearly double, standing at 36 percent and 32 percent, respectively. However, although girls' attainment does not garner the same level of attention as a policy concern, it is also worthy of note that just 21 percent of white British girls who are eligible for FSMs progress to higher education, constituting a gap of 27 percent between them and their more advantaged peers, 5 percent larger than the gap between the rates of progression for British boys who are and are not eligible for FSMs.

Despite the evidence for such a stark disparity in higher education progression, there is less evidence that universities have engaged in any strategic actions to address this issue. An analysis of Access and Participation Plans made by the Office for Students evidenced that of a total of 838 institutional targets set for fair access and participation, only 11 referred specifically to interventions targeted toward boys from white working-class backgrounds (OfS 2019). Alongside a persistent discourse about disparities in access, in 2022 the Office for Students introduced a regulatory expectation for universities to engage in activity aimed at raising General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) attainment (OfS 2023b). For boys eligible for FSMs in the Dorset region of England, where the study university is situated, GCSE attainment presents a significant challenge. Data from the Boys GCSE Attainment Dashboard (2023a) shows that in 2018/2019 17 percent of boys eligible for FSMs obtained a grade 9-5 in GCSE English and Maths, constituting a gap of 25.7 percent when compared with those boys who were not eligible for Free School Meals.

Being a Boy Project

At Arts University Bournemouth, male students make up just over a quarter of the total undergraduate population and, as with many small and specialist institutions offering a creative course portfolio, students who were eligible for Free School Meals account for a small proportion (11 percent) of entrants to full-time undergraduate degrees each year (OfS 2023b). As such, alongside an opportunity to support young working-class men in an educational context, the project also provided a means by which to facil-

itate the accrual of cultural capital aligned with potential progression to creative higher education.

A challenge when conducting activity with young men can be a willingness to engage in discourse about thoughts or feelings that may be uncomfortable (Robb 2021). Through the use of creative practice, the project aimed to construct a safe, engaging space where such reflections could be undertaken. Drawing on the creative course portfolio at the institution, the Being a Boy project mobilized the disciplines of creative writing, photography, and dance as exploratory mechanisms for the young working-class men to engage in reflections about the role of masculinity in their own lives and experiences. During the development of the project, we recognized that framing activity within a set of stereotypical assumptions (Ashley 2009) such as an interest in sports and competition risked homogenizing their collective tastes and interests. Within the context of the project, we felt that basing activity on tropes aligned with a working-class "breadwinner" masculinity (Roberts 2018; Warren 2007) would be unhelpful. Such stereotypical notions (Lawler 2012) risked aligning to a media and political discourse in which working-class boys are positioned under a lens of cultural deficiency. To be able to focus interventions upon developing the range of possible selves, it is important to understand what shapes the like-to-be and like-to-avoid selves of specific groups can take. Therefore, this project operated to provide opportunities to these young men, but it was also intended to give them a space to articulate like-to-be and like-to-avoid selves, thereby helping them to develop a more nuanced understanding of possible futures.

Methods

Participants

The project involved 18 young men aged 12 to 16. While they were not asked to state their class background or parental occupations, the majority were in receipt of FSMs (Table 1), which is a commonly used proxy for low socioeconomic background. Furthermore, the interview data showed familial employment patterns that were aligned with routine and manual occupations. Being a Boy was promoted in a range of local educational settings through established partnerships between educational organizations and the university's access and participation team, but individual participants elected to take part in the project. Consent for participation in the project

was initially gained from the participants, their teachers, and their parents, but individual participants engaged with the project in slightly different ways, with three participants joining all three workshops.

Table 1. Participant Data

Workshop	1: Empower (creative writing)	2: Capture (photography)	3: Lift Off (movement/dance)
Attendees	11	10	4
Mainstream School	7	5	1
Alternative Provision	4	5	3
Third Sector Partners	1	1	1
FSM (Free School Meals)	100%	80%	100%

Project Structure

The formal workshops within the project were specifically ordered, starting with writing, then photography, and then dance, to help the participants develop a sense of creative confidence, as this can be a barrier to engagement with creativity (Rainford 2020). There was a concern that a fear of the unknown with dance for participants would limit their engagement. The concept of creative confidence was also considered in the structure of individual workshops. In the Empower workshop, the facilitator offered a space where participants felt free of judgment and where their voices were seen as valued and valuable. All facilitators scaffolded the creative tasks, so participants were not afraid to take the first step into the unknown.

Data Collection

Within each workshop, a range of creative artifacts were produced by the participants. In the creative writing workshop, a number of prompts and frameworks were given to aid them with the writing of the poetry. For the capture workshop, each participant created three photographs:

> **Image 1:** A representation of masculinity, how you feel it is seen by society (media/social).
>
> **Image 2:** A representation of how peers represent masculinity—colleagues, friends, and neighbors.
>
> **Image 3:** How you hope to represent your own masculinity in the future.

In total, 30 photographs from Capture and 11 creative writing journals from Empower were analyzed. Lift-Off was omitted from the dataset, as the related video could not be analyzed thematically. Structured creative methods offer a way to make the familiar strange (Delamont and Atkinson 1995; Mannay 2010) and to offer different ways of knowing and thinking (Gauntlett 2007). The resultant artifacts also constituted third-objects used to focus reflections in the follow-up interviews (Dumangane 2020).

Analysis

The creative artifacts were analyzed using an adapted version of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis approach. For the photographs, we independently became familiar with the corpus of images before conducting a descriptive analysis of each artifact, noting features of interest in terms of pose, lighting, and objects. These descriptions were then analyzed for initial themes. Each participant was also asked to supply a statement of intent with the photographs, but in all cases this was insufficient to inform any meaningful analysis. While creating a methodological challenge, this also reinforced the importance of creative methods in exploring issues that participants might not have the vocabulary or ability to explain in writing. For the poetry, this was coded using a more traditional approach to thematic analysis, identifying themes within the lines of the poems. Following the initial coding, three semi-structured interviews were conducted as a method of triangulation for the analysis to check our initial analysis, as this was done often without prior knowledge of the participants' intent with only one of us being present during the workshops. Interviews were transcribed and coded thematically by both of us, with all three sets of data being integrated to develop and refine the final themes used in this article.

Ethical Issues

The project received favorable ethical approval from the Arts University Bournemouth Ethics Committee. Given the creative nature of the project and the identifiability of participants in the photographs in particular, this project needed to negotiate both an ethics of recognition and an ethics of anonymity (Clark 2020). This was in some ways complicated by the public nature of the artifacts and the associated documentary film. Therefore, it can also be seen that the negotiation of appropriate ethical decision-mak-

ing was an ongoing process throughout the project, involving participants, parents, and teachers as recommended by Dawn Mannay (2020). For this reason, some interview quotes are not attributed to specific participants if they could be deanonymized from them. All participants agreed to the use of their data in the analysis.

Analysis

Within the data, four key themes explored in this article were generated. Within their creative outputs and interview narratives, two themes that focused upon the participants' existing experiences were evident: "Protective Identities and Avoiding 'Harms'" and "Safety in Exploring Masculinity through Creativity." Two additional themes focused upon participants' future: "Trying On Possible Selves" and "Accrual and Mobilization of Cultural Capital."

Protective Identities and Avoiding "Harms"

Within the photographs, the poses that the participants often adopted in response to a prompt asking them how they are viewed by society appeared confident, but guarded poses were also common. Folded arms, shoulders hunched forward, or poses symbolic of boxers were common to several participants. This suggested that these young men often saw themselves represented as at risk and presented themselves as needing to avoid the harms that were often projected upon them. This conclusion was supported by the interview data. Commenting on an image in which his fists were clenched, a participant related the physical gesture to other situations where he may readily adopt the same pose:

> Sometimes I think it's more of a, in some sense like a survival kind of thing because especially living in rough areas you don't know if a person is going to come up and try and start on you and having a closed fist is definitely more of a kind of—gives you that kind of thought of "I'm going to be ready in case anything happens."

This response associates a clenched fist with a sense of being prepared. It is a gesture that implies readiness for a physical altercation, which, living in an undesirable area, is more likely to occur but which is also aligned with hegemonic notions of masculinity. In this instance, there was little oppor-

tunity for him to avoid the risk of physical harm, so he therefore needed to be ready to deal with the possibility of a fight just in case it happened.

Alongside discourse surrounding physical harm, participants also spoke of a risk of harm borne of their negotiation of difficult emotions. Anger in particular was one emotion that featured in a number of the pieces of creative writing. For example, some lines from the "How to Be a Boy" poems that recurred across participant pieces included:

> Try not to let your blood boil.
>
> Simmer your emotions around others.

Both of these lines speak to the idea of struggling to deal with emotions and to the harm that expressing them might entail. The way that participants described dealing with anger varied across interviews. While some found talking helpful even though it was difficult, others described a strategy for controlling their anger that involved physical actions. Geo, for example, describes how he would hit cupboards in his bedroom:

> **Geo:** I've just got better at controlling anger.
>
> **Int:** What types of things [do you do], how [do you control it]?
>
> **Geo:** So my desk at home is a unit, got a few drawers and cupboards, and I've just hit the drawers in a massive blow every now and then.
>
> **Int:** Okay, does that mean they're quite dented now?
>
> **Geo:** No, they're made of wood, so it's [i.e. the desk] really strong.
>
> **Int:** Doesn't that hurt your hands, though?
>
> **Geo:** Well, I've gotten used to it now.

For Geo, controlling his anger was an individualized process that he chose to engage in by himself. This default to physical outlets for emotion aligns with notions of hegemonic working-class masculinity. Both Geo and Jay appeared to articulate that this felt like an appropriate way to express their emotions and that other methods such as sharing thoughts or feelings in writing might be viewed negatively by their peers. Such a notion was reinforced by Jay when reflecting on the similarities and differences of the workshops in comparison to his day-to-day experiences in the classroom:

> I feel like it would be used more against me than it does, than it, like, than how it would be for me. I feel like you know the bullying and torment would definitely go up quite a bit for I guess you know something stupid like writing how I feel on a page.

Within his usual educational context, writing down his thoughts and feelings on a page could present a risk to his physical and emotional well-being,

as he emphasized by choosing words like "bullying" and "torment" to describe the potential repercussions of engaging in practices that fall outside of normative masculine expectations for a boy at his school. When considered in relation to Geo's description of dealing with undesirable thoughts and feelings through acts of physical aggression, it could be argued that dispositions linked to self-protection placed them in a double-bind of threat. Either they talked about thoughts and feelings and in doing so risked their physical and emotional well-being at the hands of their peers, or they conformed to normative masculine expectations, running the risk of self-inflicted injury.

Safety in Exploring Masculinity through Creativity

In contrast to constructing self-expression as risky enterprise within a classroom context, the project provided a space for safe exploration. It also created a space for engagement with education that, following Willis' work might seem less desirable for these groups. Yet for many participants, their involvement constituted the first time they had engaged in creative workshops. As such, their engagement had the potential to be an intimidating prospect. However, during the interviews participants reflected that the space was one in which they felt comfortable:

> I think it was just the general atmosphere of the room. You know, no one was really jokey, no one was like and honestly like you know they don't really care that I'm from a different school, they don't care why I'm there. You know, they're there for their thing, I'm there for mine. (Jay)

Discussing his thoughts and feelings about the creative writing workshop, Jay expressed a lack of worry about judgment from his peers, either by those from his school, or by the others in attendance. Such reflections positioned the context and atmosphere of the workshop in stark contrast to their experiences in school. For Fear, this was due in large part to the facilitator:

> **Int:** So what did you think of (facilitator) as a teacher?
>
> **Fear:** Really good, involving everybody and everything.
>
> **Int:** Is that what made him good?
>
> **Fear:** Yes, and he's a good chatter. He takes his like view and changes it with other people's view.
>
> **Int:** Was it the same as like the type of stuff that goes [on] here, [or] is it different?
>
> **Fear:** No, it's different.
>
> **Int:** Like in what kind of way?
>
> **Fear:** Because (facilitator) pretty much makes our view become his view while he learns, while our teacher just makes us do work.

Reflecting on the difference between the practice employed by the workshop facilitator in comparison to teachers at his school, Fear felt that the dialogical relationship was a key difference. Rather than the knowledge held by the tutor being legitimated as that which held the most value, Fear felt that the workshop was a conversation—one where views and opinions were shaped in a relational negotiation to arrive at a shared understanding. To draw back to bell hooks (2014), this engaged pedagogy made participants feel that their experiences were a valued part of the learning process. They were not seen as empty vessels to be filled but as being integral to the interactions in the classroom. The poems demonstrated this willingness on the part of the participants to reflect on those aspects of their lives and selves that the interviews suggest may have been difficult outside of the comparative safety of the workshop setting. This freedom facilitated deep reflection surrounding the thoughts and feelings that they found challenging, as can be seen in these two lines from one poem:

> I come from not being able to stay calm.
> I come from breaking things.

From discussions with the adults around this particular participant, it is unlikely that, prior to the workshop, he would have been comfortable articulating this position in this way. Research shows that he would have likely been too uncomfortable to do so (Robb 2021).

Trying on Possible Selves

There was evidence, within the poetry, of participants' desires to explore who they are and might like to be. Participants often referred to their preferred way of being, which was often a long way from their everyday lives; this was evidenced in a disconnect between their aspirations and lived realties. For example, one line read:

> Don't let your dreams dissolve.

Or, even more poignantly, another line read:

> Chop your brilliance to smaller expectations.

However, it was within the photographs that a trying on of different selves was most clearly evident. The body of photographs demonstrated a wide range of explorations of different lighting arrangements, poses, and stances. While the participants were often unable to access the vocabulary within their artist statements or in the follow-up interviews to articulate these choices, these choices (about different possible selves) were complex and

clearly visible in the photographs. This disconnect was also evidenced in the pre and post workshop surveys, where participants expressed themselves in much more basic, or sometimes performative, terms, resorting to inappropriate language or non-responses to questions. When these artifacts were also put into context with commentary from the adults around them, these images often revealed the participants' exploration of identities beyond those performed in everyday life.

One of the most common tropes drawn upon in the photographs, though, was that of the superhero. This was enacted in varying ways. One way was through contrasting use of naturalistic lighting choices in some shots with evocative lighting in others, adopting colors evoking various superheroes and supervillains. These playful way of drawing upon popular culture and using it as a framework to express ideas of masculinity was a means by which the participants could express notions that would otherwise be hard for them to articulate.

In the photographs, some participants focused on how they would hope to represent their masculinity in the future; these were often more experimental in nature. Playing with color to light the scene and exploring very different poses were both common to these images. Some of these poses were not only less threatening than others, but they also showed more confident expressions and looks of self-assurance: the participants come across as relaxed, thoughtful, and contemplative. In one series of photographs, across the three shots, one participant showed an evolution from a more monstrous, dimly lit vision of their masculinity into a confident, strongly lit pose with his chest pushed out and his face sporting an expression of pride. This complex visual articulation allowed the participant to use the creative tools at his disposal to try on a different persona, which they linked to the idea of Clark Kent (Superman's alter ego).

The trying on of a creative self is not just a one-off process though, and the enduring nature of the artifacts and their place in the participants' lives is also important here. One of the initial observations of the body of creative artifacts was their quality and the skillfulness of their creators. From the careful considerations of composition, pose, and lighting in the photographs, to the often skillful use of language in the poetry, these outputs were unlike much of what participants produced within their day-to-day lives. This quality was acknowledged by the facilitators, the teachers, and the audiences to which the artifacts have been presented. Most importantly though, the quality of these artifacts was acknowledged and valued by the young men themselves. This led to the creative outputs having a life beyond the project itself:

Int: Whereabouts are they now? [the pictures]

Fear: In my room.

Int: Have you got them on the wall?

Fear: Yes.

Int: That's cool.

Fear: I got it [them] laminated, which was really helpful. Because if they weren't laminated, they were just going to fall off.

In Fear's case, the images produced as part of the photography project were exhibited on his bedroom wall. Laminating them for protection and displaying them prominently at home implies a sense of pride in their production. The physical legacy of the project was on full display.

Accrual and Mobilization of Cultural Capital

The fact that the participants now say these creative artifacts are important to them and their lives points toward the final theme in the data; the role the project played in the accrual and mobilization of cultural capital aligned with creative educational participation. In the passage below, Fear described how the visits misaligned with his preconceptions surrounding the institution:

> Yes, bigger than I thought and more things you could do there. Because for an art[s] university, I thought you were using like paint and that, and that's it. I didn't expect molding, combining pictures, photography, all of that. I didn't expect that for art.

Due to limited opportunities to try different creative mediums in his day-to-day educational experience, Fear voiced his surprise at the large variety of different disciplines that fell under the umbrella of "art." For Fear, visiting the university unlocked an awareness of a broad suite of creative educational possibilities available to him. Instead of art being synonymous with paint and canvas, it now involved specific areas of creative practice that were included in a variety of artistic educational opportunities. While being in a creative university setting increased participants' awareness of creative educational opportunities, the project workshops afforded a mechanism for the participants to engage at a deeper level.

Following the creative writing workshop, the participants were also given a book authored by the facilitator. Given the book's content, it was agreed that the students could have it once they turned 15. Often, the initial excitement fades quickly after outreach workshops. However, during the interview, which took place several months after the workshop, Fear

spoke of his excitement to receive the copy that was being held for him by a staff member, thereby demonstrating the lasting impact of the project:

> **Fear:** I liked it a lot because I cannot wait; this year, I get the book finally.
>
> **Int:** Oh do you?
>
> **Fear:** Yes, I cannot wait because I'm still upset that I couldn't have it last year.
>
> **Int:** Well [staff member] has got it stored away for you.
>
> **Fear:** I keep on reminding her and making sure she doesn't forget it.

Alongside a sense of personal pride, within the interview Fear voiced his excitement to share his work with his family at a celebration event organized by the university several months after the workshops had taken place:

> **Fear:** My mum is excited to see what I've done.
>
> **Int:** Yes, does she see much of your kind of schoolwork and stuff?
>
> **Fear:** No, because we don't have parents day here, I don't think. I'm not sure, though I think she might have seen some of my work in primary school and that's it.

Having little opportunity for his educational engagement to be a source of celebration, Fear described his mother's excitement to see the artifacts produced as part of the project. Interestingly, although he articulated his experience of the workshops as very different from his experience in the classroom, the artifacts produced were still framed as his "work." However, rather than being something he had been made to do, they were something he had worked hard to produce and were therefore a clear source of pride.

For Jay, the impact of the workshops was more closely tied to feelings of confidence and self-worth:

> I actually find myself now thinking, you know when I get scared of something, get scared of talking to a new person or jumping off of a small cliff into water with my friends, you know, I kind of think back to the university project as like I was scared of going and you know I was scared of meeting the new people and doing all the new stuff, and now I think back to it, it's like I done it. Also, if I can do that, I can do anything.

At the outset of the project, he described how his engagement invoked his fear of trying new things and meeting new people. However, he took part despite his misgivings. In the interview, Jay articulated how this experience is now one that he draws on when encountering new situations that he finds challenging. While for Fear there was a sense of pride in the acquisition of objectified cultural capital in the form of the artifacts produced during the workshops, for Jay the capital he described is embodied, influ-

encing his future negotiation of social settings that he may find intimidating or unfamiliar.

Reframing the Possible

As can be seen through the data discussed above, these workshop spaces offered the conditions for the participants to "make the familiar strange" (Mannay 2010), helping young men to discuss issues they may find uncomfortable and that might traditionally restrict their willingness to open up and talk about their emotions (Robb 2021). Given the complexities of masculinities highlighted in previous research (e.g., Blower 2020; Ward 2015), one can see how this project enabled the participants to have an outlet to articulate some of those complexities, especially around safety and risk, in a group of relative strangers. Through the interview narratives, we can see how starting that for some of the participants these conversations have allowed them to reconsider other preconceived ideas of who they are and who they should be, maybe enabling a reorientation of their palette of selves in terms of their individual identities.

However, creating spaces to discuss masculinities did not just keep a narrow gaze on that aspect of their identities. These spaces enabled their thoughts and feelings to be valued and be seen as valuable; the data showed a transformative aspect to this work for some participants. The repeated assertion that these spaces were not like school matter for young men who, to varying extents, may be disengaged and marginalized in formal educational spaces. Beyond this, it can be seen that these interventions had an impact more widely in helping these young men to challenge their conceptions of the possible and the probable.

On a practical level, the data also shows a reconceptualization for some participants of what an arts university is and what it offers. For the university, obviously, this is the ideal goal of educational outreach, aligning with policy intentions set out by the Office for Students. However, there is a more nuanced challenge of what a like-to-be self might involve when we look at the articulations around what it means to write and around how, in some cases, their experiences of the workshops differed from their experiences of school, challenging preconceptions created based on previous educational engagement. The power of demonstrating that spaces for learning can be places where young men feel safe and supported should not

be underestimated, although the long-term impact of this understanding is yet unknown for these young men.

Drawing this data back to the notions of the palette of possible selves and possible horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), we would argue that only choices that feel attainable possess the required level of vibrancy to distinctly feature on an individual's palette. From the data, it can be seen how participants' positive experiences and the pride in their work facilitated a broadening in their suite of the possible. Yet, for some participants these possibles may not feature boldly on their palette of the probable due to other insurmountable structural barriers such as GCSE attainment and prior qualifications.

Conclusions: Possible Selves to Probable Futures?

Contributing to a rich vein of scholarly research on the connection between masculinity, inequality, and working-class boys' future educational orientations, our article highlights the value of a creative methodological approach. Mobilizing the data from the Being a Boy project's core activities, it captures, explores, and contributes to our understanding of the complexity and nuance inherent in young working-class men's negotiation of their future orientations, something that is often ignored by policymakers. Using a university outreach initiative as its basis, it embedded such understanding within a context that sought to address some of the challenges that it illustrated. In doing so, the article offers rich insights into the educational experiences of the participants in the Being a Boy project. It demonstrates how the project reached beyond the "here and now" of the intervention and how the creative outputs developed through engagement with Being a Boy became a source of pride for the participants interviewed. Within its limited scope, the project successfully constituted an opportunity for those involved to try on alternative possible selves linked to future creative education and employment.

However, it also shone a light on the pervasive influence of structural inequality, constraining the vibrancy with which alternative future possibilities may appear on the palette of the probable. As highlighted in the data analysis and subsequent discussion, at the time of their engagement with the project several of the participants had experienced educational marginalization in the form of exclusion from mainstream secondary education. Their experience of marginalization restricted access to forms of institution-

alized cultural capital, such as obtaining five GCSEs at grade 9-5, which are a prerequisite for progression to higher education at the age of 18. As a result, while the project provided the opportunity for new possible selves to be "tried on," it was in a context where young working-class men face a multiplicity of risks borne of their educational and social location. These were risks that engagement in a single project delivered by a university had little power to mitigate.

The findings of this study contend that, for young men to build a palette of probable selves that may constitute a subversion of normative working-class masculine expectations present in their day-to-day contexts, more substantive mechanisms may be required. Careful consideration would also need to be given to the ethical and moral consequences of interventions that could encourage a deviation from such normative expectations and carry the risk of potential harm as a result. Should such risks be mitigated, the study's findings suggest that a more longitudinal, sustained program may be required, one that offers time and space for exploration and reflection over a prolonged period of time.

Within the formalized structures of mainstream educational curriculums, the time and space for exploration and reflection is often limited. Therefore, higher education outreach offers a greater freedom for such an endeavor to be embarked upon. However, in order to do so successfully, it needs to dispense with assumptions about the futures that participating young men aspire to. Instead, it should provide the facility for future orientations to be co-constructed in a space that offers the opportunity to try on alternative possible futures—futures that, due to the sociohistorical conditions in which the young men operate, may have fallen outside the boundaries of conceptualization. With sustained and careful intervention, these alternative futures may enter into the palette of the possible with the vibrancy required to one day be realized.

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