Article

Men and Masculinities
1-23

DOI: 10.1177/1097184X18756709
journals.sagepub.com/home/jmm
SAGE

Masculinity in the Midst of Mindfulness: Exploring the Gendered Experiences of At-risk Adolescent Boys

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Abstract

Teenage boys are a source of considerable concern in society, with generally poorer health, educational, and social outcomes than their female counterparts. Of particular concern are "at-risk" adolescents, who by definition are liable to poorer outcomes than peers not deemed at-risk. However, there are indications that activities such as mindfulness may offer opportunities for such adolescents to negotiate more positive constructions of masculinity. This study piloted a new four-week mindfulness-based intervention, created specifically for a group of eight at-risk adolescent boys at a school in London. In-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with participants before and after the intervention and analyzed using grounded theory. The data revealed an overarching theme of "pressure control." Participants depicted themselves as facing multiple pressures, many of which related to making the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood. However, the context of the intervention enabled them to generate a masculine construction in which they were able to reclaim agency and self-control. Notably, such control was often exercised in the direction of facilitating emotional connection

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and agility, thus subverting traditional masculine expectations. The results show that at-risk adolescent boys are capable of more nuanced and skilled emotional competencies than they are often given credit for.

Keywords
mindfulness, intervention, at-risk, adolescence, masculinity

Males in Crisis

Men and boys are often regarded as a source of concern in society, seen as troubled or deficient relative to their female counterparts. While many men and boys do prosper, males on the whole (i.e., as a statistical generalization) fare poorly in terms of health compared to females, with higher mortality rates, partly attributed to men being more likely to engage in health-risk behaviors such as alcohol abuse (Office for National Statistics [ONS] 2012a). Men have equally problematic outcomes in mental health, accounting for three-quarters of all suicide deaths (ONS 2012b), and 67 percent of those detained under the mental health act (The National Health Service Information Centre 2011). Men are much more likely to perpetrate violent or antisocial behavior, constituting 95 percent of the United Kingdom (UK) prison population (Ministry of Justice [MoJ] 2012a). Finally, in education, boys are outperformed by girls at all ages (Economic and Human Rights Commission [EHRC] 2011). Such is the prevalence and gravity of these issues that males are frequently asserted to be "in crisis," with a "widespread popular and academic agreement that something is troubling men" (McDowell 2000, 201).

The reasons for these poorer outcomes for males are complex and multifaceted (Stoddard et al. 2011). However, recent theorizing has attributed at least some of the responsibility for such outcomes to masculinity, and the prevalence of masculinity norms that can have deleterious effects (Courtenay 2000). Encompassed in a framework of social learning theory, it is argued that males' gendered behavior is shaped by societal expectations that are at least partly responsible for the poor outcomes above, as men demonstrate masculinity by engaging in behaviors that can be maladaptive, from health risk behaviors like drinking (de Visser and Smith 2007), to aggression (Mosher and Tomkins 1988). More complex causal links are also proposed. For example, norms around emotional toughness are linked to tendencies toward "restrictive emotionality" in men, that is, detachment or disconnection from emotions, to the extent that Levant (1998) refers to "normative male alexithymia." This disconnection is seen as contributing to affect dysregulation, that is, difficulties managing one's emotions (Addis 2008), meaning that males are more likely to "externalize" their distress in often destructive ways including anger, aggression, risk-taking, substance/alcohol use, overwork, and suicide (Pollack 1998)

At-risk Youth

Thus, masculinity is widely viewed in the literature as a "risk factor" for poor health and social outcomes (Gough 2006). Moreover, some males fare worse than others on these indices, as highlighted by the intersectionality paradigm (Hankivsky and Christoffersen 2008). Intersectionality refers to the way in which the multiple identity categories to which a person belongs—such as gender, ethnicity, and class—interact in complex ways. For instance, in terms of mental health, gender-related outcomes are complicated by socioeconomic status, whereby men in the poorest fifth of the UK population are almost three times more likely to suffer a common mental disorder than men in the richest fifth (EHRC 2011). So, while males generally are a concern, particular subsets are regarded as warranting especial attention. One such subset is "at-risk" youth, defined as "adolescents who face disadvantage or adversity narrowly or broadly defined" (Swahn and Bossarte 2009, 225), such as living in an area characterized by high crime and poverty. At-risk youth are a significant issue: on one metric—supervision by a youth offending team—there are over 85,000 in the UK alone, almost 80 percent of whom are male (MoJ 2012b). Almost by definition, at-risk youth have poorer health and social outcomes (Swahn and Bossarte 2009).

The reasons why at-risk youth are more liable to poorer outcomes are again complex and multifaceted. Some reasons are non-gender-specific: for example, compared to non-at-risk youth, those at risk (of both sexes) are more exposed to risk factors for behavioral and mental disorder, from peer delinquency to exposure to violence (Youngstrom, Weist, and Albus 2003). Some reasons *are* gender-specific, where it is argued that the "masculinity as risk factor" thesis is exacerbated by social factors such as socioeconomic status, since males from disadvantaged backgrounds are reportedly more likely to assert their masculinity through behaviors like aggression (Seale and Charteris-Black 2008). One explanation is that asserting power is a marker of masculine status. Men with structural power—for example, occupational influence—can draw on their social standing as a way of demonstrating agency and status (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This option is relatively foreclosed to males with less standing, who may be compelled to resort to cruder means of assertion, like violence, referred to as compensatory "hypermasculine" behaviors (i.e., traditional masculine performances taken to extremes; Mosher and Tomkins 1988). At-risk male youth are especially liable to such "hypermasculinity," leading to even worse health and social outcomes than for males generally (Varano, Huebner, and Bynum 2011).

Adolescence as a Critical Juncture

In considering the challenges faced by at-risk youth, of particular relevance is the idea that this age is a critical juncture in the inculcation and adoption of gender-based identities and behaviors (Barrett and White 2002, 451). Of course, gender socialization occurs throughout childhood, with boys subject to gendered messages

that shape behavior in line with masculinity norms, perhaps best encapsulated in the exhortation that "boys don't cry" (Mejía 2005, 32). These kind of "shaming" messages serve to curtail the emotional expressiveness of boys. For example, Chaplin, Cole, and Zahn-Waxler (2005) found that boys' expressions of emotionality decreased 50 percent from pre- to early school, influenced mainly by parental discouragement of emotional expression. However, adolescence (e.g., from the age of eleven) is really the time when such gendered pressures (e.g., via shaming) really come to the fore in shaping behavior (Mejía 2005).

The significance of adolescence in this regard was shown by Lomas et al. (2013), who analyzed narratives of men who had taken up meditation. The analysis found that most interviewees reported suddenly crossing a "threshold" into adulthood around the age of twelve to thirteen, at which they experienced pressures to "be a man"—including being emotionally tough—that had not been present (or pressing) earlier in childhood. This pressure can be enforced in various ways such as bullying of behavior regarded as "feminine." For example, homophobic bullying is related to increased risk of suicidal ideation and behavior, with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual (LGBT) boys between two and twelve times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual boys (Saewyc et al. 2008). It is particularly at this "threshold" in adolescence that boys are liable to adopt forms of masculine behavior that later may prove harmful, like emotional toughness. These behavioral changes range from "laddishness," alcohol consumption, and disruptive behavior (Francis 1999, 357) to adopting a "cool pose" of bravado, concealing vulnerability by erecting an "impenetrable wall of toughness" (Pollack 2006, 191).

Moreover, this imperative to adopt masculine behaviors associated with adulthood might be particularly acutely felt by at-risk youth. Jones (2002) analyzed transitions into adulthood and observed a "slow track" and a "fast track." The former describes a process of crossing and recrossing boundaries between childhood and adulthood in a series of partial transitions between dependence and independence. This "track" relies on parental support until the youth acquires social/cultural capital, mainly through educational attainments. In contrast, the fast track involves a sudden transition, characterized by negative physical and emotional experiences as the youth is thrust, somewhat unprepared, into adulthood. It is precisely at-risk youth who are more liable to this fast track, with all the adverse consequences that can ensue.

Critiquing the Crisis Narrative

However, despite the negative appraisal of males and masculinity depicted above—the "males in crisis" narrative—many gender theorists have begun to argue that such outcomes are neither necessary nor inevitable (Courtenay 2000). Such theorists have propounded a more nuanced, constructionist reading of gender, in which the potential for adaptive change is recognized—both for males themselves (e.g., males can learn to take on behaviors that are more conducive to well-being) and for masculinity (i.e., it is possible for societies to evolve more enlightened gender expectations).

Indeed, in Lomas et al.'s (2013) aforementioned research with male meditators, they found that participants had been able to negotiate more adaptive forms of masculinity—characterized by features like emotional expressiveness and abstinence from alcohol—which were beneficial to their well-being (see Lomas et al. 2014a, 2015). Lomas (2013) summarized these findings under the rubric "critical positive masculinity": positive in the sense of conducive to well-being, while critical in the sense that these men were challenging or circumventing traditional masculine norms.

Moreover, the research uncovered the complicated social dynamics that upheld these positive changes. For instance, most participants had been supported in their efforts to enact a more adaptive masculinity by a "Community of practice" (CoP; Lave and Wenger 1991), based around a meditation center. Using Connell's (1995) notion of hegemonic masculinity, Lomas et al. (2015) suggested that these CoP offered an alternative system of hegemonic norms, which was relatively positive (i.e., beneficial to the health and well-being of most members, and to those they interact with). Yet, reflecting Gramsci's (1971) recognition that hegemony inevitably involves power dynamics that leave some people marginalized, even these "positive" norms had the potential to cause harm to certain members. For instance, some participants reported forms of ostracism based on their unwillingness to accede to norms such as engagement in religious rituals. Nevertheless, the research did show the potential for men to negotiate more "adaptive" masculine ways of being, in their case through involvement with a meditation-based CoP.

Meditation with At-risk Adolescents

In light of Lomas et al.'s (2013, 2014a, 2015) findings—for example, the potential for meditation-based contexts to offer opportunities for alternative masculine performances—it would seem of interest to enquire into the possibilities for at-risk adolescent boys in this regard. Indeed, there has already been much research on the benefits of meditation for adolescents. Meditation can be defined broadly as a method of "training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control" (Walsh and Shapiro 2006, 228–29). More specifically, most research has been on mindfulness, defined as "the awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn 2003, 145). One can see, theoretically, how this type of attention training might be useful to young males, for example, helping them develop cognitive and emotional skills. Indeed, there is a burgeoning literature on the use of mindfulness with young people. For instance, a meta-analysis by Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, and Walach (2014) obtained twenty-four relevant studies (nineteen featuring a controlled design); significant between-group effect sizes were found for cognitive performance (Hedge's $g = .80$), stress ($g = .39$), and resilience ($g = .36$). Similarly, in the context of youth more generally (up to the age of eighteen), a meta-analysis by Zoogman et al. (2014)

identified twenty relevant studies and concluded that mindfulness had a significant beneficial effect on "psychological symptoms" (e.g., depression and anxiety).

However, as valuable as such analyses are, there have so far been no studies focusing on the implications of mindfulness practice for at-risk adolescent boys specifically, and particularly in terms of their gendered identity and behavior. That is, one might wonder, what types of masculinity are hindered or facilitated by engagement in mindfulness-related activities. We have already noted above the potential for critiquing the "males in crisis" narrative, highlighting the fact that males are capable of negotiating more constructive (e.g., beneficial to well-being) performances of masculinity. Indeed, Lomas et al. (2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015) already demonstrated that meditation can be helpful in this regard, for adult men at least. As such, it is of interest to see whether meditation can be similarly useful for at-risk adolescent boys. To this end, this study reports on the exploratory piloting of a new mindfulness-based intervention created specifically for a cohort of at-risk adolescent boys. Our interest here is not whether this program was "effective" per se (e.g., in engendering emotional well-being), since the methodological approach is not such that effectiveness can genuinely be assessed. Rather, the research sought to explore the following questions:

- How do at-risk adolescent boys enact masculinity in the context of a mindfulness-based activity?
- Can their enactments be considered "positive"—for example, beneficial to well-being—thereby challenging the "males in crisis" narrative?

Method

Participants

Eight adolescent males aged thirteen to fourteen were recruited to the study through an inner city comprehensive school in London. An appropriate ethical protocol was developed in conjunction with the school and was approved by the University of East London (School of Psychology ethics committee). Inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) at-risk (as defined and identified by the school), (b) male, (c) aged thirteen to fourteen, and (d) able to understand English. The exclusion criterion was having been identified as currently suffering from a clinical mental health condition. The participants were judged by the school to be at risk of underachievement and/or exclusion from school, and consequently were approached by the school lead on student well-being (who also attended sessions as outlined below), and invited to participate. It was emphasized that participation was noncompulsory, but nevertheless was an activity they might find "helpful or rewarding." An information sheet, written specifically for this age-group, was given to participants. A similar information sheet, written for adults, was given to their parents. Two separate consent forms were also created: one for participants and one for parents. The participant and

one of their parents had to sign their respective consent forms before participation. All eight students who were initially approached gave their informed consent, as did their parents. Seven participants were born in London, and one moved to London from Europe at the age of three. Seven participants were from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and one was white. For context, the school is an "all-through" (age four to eighteen) school in one of the most socioeconomically deprived boroughs in London. However, while state-funded, it is one of the first generation of "free schools," a status which gives schools significant freedom, removed from national strictures, in their curriculum design and pedagogical approach. In this school, efforts have been made to put well-being at the core of the school values, for instance, through coaching groups. It is thus an atypical urban comprehensive, a fact that obviously has some bearing on the results.

The Intervention

Participants undertook a pilot mindfulness intervention, namely, a four-week program, featuring one one-hour session per week. Sessions were on school premises, during the school day (just before lunchtime). Sessions were conducted by three of the research team. The mindfulness practices were led by Itai Ivtzan (II), a trained and accredited mindfulness teacher (and teacher trainer), who spent two years in China and India in a number of different Ashrams, studying mindfulness with a variety of spiritual teachers, and subsequently spent the next twenty years teaching mindfulness while updating his knowledge and teaching through courses such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindful Self-Compassion). II has extensive experience of teaching across diverse age-groups (including children), both in secular and nonsecular contexts (though the intervention here was presented as secular), and who adheres to the UK Good Practice Guidelines for teaching mindfulness. Helping II facilitate group discussions within the sessions was Ellie Garraway (EG, who works professionally with at-risk youth) and Tim Lomas (TL, a scholar with a background in masculinity studies). While not being mindfulness teachers (and hence not leading the mindfulness practices), both EG and TL have practiced mindfulness regularly for a number of years, and EG is in the process of undergoing teacher training.

The school's lead teacher on student well-being was present at all sessions (but did not actively participate); as per the ethics protocol, he was on hand to ensure student well-being during and after sessions and to maintain order in the event of any behavioral trouble (which, in the event, did not arise). The ethics protocol also had other provisions in place to ensure participants' well-being over the course of the intervention. For instance, teachers monitored the participants in classes in between the sessions and were instructed to alert the school's lead teacher on well-being if they had any concerns. Likewise, the parents of the participants were also encouraged to get in touch with the school if they had any concerns. In the event, no such issues arose. It might also be noted that there was a 2:1 ratio of adults to participants

in the sessions (four facilitators and eight boys), which is obviously a far closer ratio than typical mindfulness interventions. This likely had some impact on participants, for example, potentially imposing some degree of pressure (or encouragement, looked at more benevolently) to participate in activities that may have been attenuated with a larger ratio.

The sessions were designed to introduce participants to a range of mindfulness practices that might be helpful in the context of their lives. This design was created by the research team, based on their professional experience and expertise, over several stages that unfolded over two sessions of intervention planning. First, II generated a list of common practices used across many mindfulness-based interventions (e.g., breathing meditation), as well as a list of teaching activities and metaphors which he felt had worked well in teaching mindfulness to children and adolescents (e.g., describing the mind as if populated by different animals, such as the "monkey mind"). Then, drawing on her experience of working with at-risk youth, EG provided input on which of these practices and activities would be most suited to this population. The team also followed the guidance of scholars who have used mindfulness with children (e.g., Burke 2010), such as keeping practices to around five to ten minutes, thereby ensuring that these would be concise enough to retain participants' attention. EG also drew up a list of other developmental activities, which she had previously used with at-risk youth, such as goal-setting sessions and sharing circles, which could potentially augment the mindfulness practices.

The research team then agreed on a list of activities and a schedule for these. This protocol was consequently presented to the school's lead teacher on well-being, to check that he was satisfied with the content and structure, which he was. It should be noted that although the intervention was created specifically for these participants, the intervention should not be regarded as being exclusive and specific to at-risk boys. The intervention comprised fairly standard mindfulness practices, adapted in a relatively conventional way for young people (e.g., as per Burke 2010). As such, the originality of the intervention mainly consisted in the fact that it was specifically being tried out with a sample of at-risk boys.

Data Collection

Two semi-structured interviews were undertaken with each participant: one preintervention (around one week before the first session) and one postintervention (around one week after the last session). Interviews took place on school premises and were one-to-one, involving the participant and EG. Interviews were conducted in a sensitive way, with participants encouraged to share their views openly and honestly. Interviews lasted around thirty minutes, guided by a preprepared schedule, and were tape-recorded (and later transcribed). The aim of the preintervention interview was to get a general "baseline" sense of the participants' well-being, and of life generally, that is, before being introduced to mindfulness. It included questions such as: which aspects of life are going well? which aspects of life aren't going so well?

what do you do if you're feeling unhappy or stressed? and, do you feel you have to act in particular ways because you're a boy? Postintervention interviews then attempted to ascertain whether the boys had experienced or perceived any changes in their well-being, or life more generally, since participating in the intervention. This included questions like: what do you think of mindfulness? did you find it hard to practice? and, what effect did taking part have on your life?

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using a version of grounded theory (GT), a process of inductive analysis created by Glaser and Strauss (1967), in which emergent themes are identified, allowing theory to be generated. Not all steps of conventional GT were followed here; we did not engage in theoretical sampling, nor were we guided by saturation. However, in practice, GT has come to represent a rather broad label, encompassing diverse approaches that have adapted the initial methodology in various ways (Cutcliffe 2005). As such, given that we followed the central coding sequence of open/substantive, selective, and then theoretical coding, we are comfortable retaining the term GT to describe our analysis. The data analysis was mainly conducted by Chloe Stanton (CS) and TL. In the first stage of open/substantive coding, CS read the preintervention transcripts closely line by line, looking for emergent codes, which generated eighty-two codes. Once postintervention interviews had been transcribed, these were also read through, looking for additional codes, which generated a further sixty-five codes, thus creating almost 150 codes across the two sets of interviews.

Then, together, CS and TL refined the list of codes (e.g., some codes were conflated), producing a final list of just over ninety codes. In the next stage of selective coding—also conducted conjointly by CS and TL—codes were compared with each other in a process of constant comparison and were aggregated into themes based on conceptual similarity. This produced around twenty themes, each formed of four or five codes. For instance, in relation to mindfulness were several codes pertaining to concentration, including "focusing," "concentrating," "paying attention," and "controlling the mind." These were all aggregated into a theme of "developing concentration." In the final stage of theoretical coding (also involving CS and TL), the themes were then aggregated into meta-themes, again based on conceptual similarity, producing two overarching meta-themes: pressure and self-control. These meta-themes were examined for a master theme, which could serve as a theoretical explanation for the data, namely pressure control, as elucidated below. The coding framework was then shared with the rest of the research team, particularly EG (who conducted the interviews), to gain their approval (e.g., in terms of whether it tallied with their own appraisals of the boys' experiences of the intervention), which both granted. TL then wrote up the results, as featured below; this was also shared with the whole research team and all concurred with the analysis presented.

Results

One overarching master theme emerged from the data, which was "pressure control." Under this were two interlinked meta-themes: pressure and self-control. These will be discussed in turn, with select quotes provided in italics for the confirmability of the themes (Drisko 1997). To preserve anonymity, participants are identified using the letters A–H.

Pressure

In appraising their lives, participants almost uniformly portrayed these as beset by multiple pressures. These included pressures relating to their particular life stage (adolescence), to being "at risk," and to gender. In many ways, these findings recapitulate themes that have already been uncovered in the literature. However, they become particularly interesting when framed in light of the second meta-theme of self-control, as shall be seen below.

Firstly, in terms of pressures relating to life stage, participants corroborated the notion—even if they did not directly articulate it themselves—that adolescence can represent a difficult "threshold" period between childhood and adulthood, echoing the findings of Jones (2002) and Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2012). Looking backward, some pupils conveyed a sense of childhood being a relatively pleasant time, compared to the strains of the present. For instance, B had difficulty identifying what made him happy, but when prompted further, he suggested *primary school*. Likewise, G, who described feeling *depressed,* said movingly that *when I was younger, I was kind of happy*. Childhood was generally portrayed as a time when the boys were able to have *fun*, relatively unburdened by pressures (in comparison to the pressures they were now feeling). Indeed, many still reported a lingering attachment to the activities that had provided such enjoyment in childhood, like playing sports and video games. As B put it, *most of the time I like playing with my console . . . and just like having fun*.

And yet, their current age was depicted as a time of transition. There was the sense of both trying to grasp what adulthood would be like (e.g., what it would require of them) and also already starting to move into these newer patterns of behavior. Although some of these looming demands were presented as daunting (e.g., pressures to find gainful employment, as explored further below), the boys also gave a sense of enjoying exploring their new roles. Many articulated themes of freedom and independence; for example, G said he just wanted to be *independent with my friends, doing like, what we want to do.* And yet, exacerbating the difficulties of transition was the feeling that the boys were in some ways being held back by authority figures, such as parents, who still treated them like children in many respects. For instance, asked what he'd like to change most about his life, C exclaimed: *I wanna change it out, I wanna explore, explore the world basically*. Thus, despite the anxieties of impending adulthood, many participants did seem keen to make this transition into being a man. And yet, when envisioning the type of masculine performance that would be required of them in adulthood, the boys did

not necessarily fall back on conventional tropes. For example, when questioned on what feelings he'd like to have more of, B said he wanted to be a *friendly, loving, caring guy*. When asked why, he said:

> Cause it shows a way of maturing, and like I'm ready for the future, cause in the future you're gonna have to get married one day, and like, you're gonna have to care.

However, any excitement or positivity the participants felt about their impending manhood was tempered by the second main source of pressure, which pertained to being at risk. More specifically, it transpired that when the school selected these participants as being at risk, they did so on the basis of the boys principally being at risk of failing academically and/or being excluded. (The researchers had simply asked the school to select boys who they considered to be "at risk," and who they felt would benefit from the intervention, without specifying the nature of the risk). Whether the boys themselves knew they were specifically deemed to be "at risk" is unclear (and they were not addressed as being "at risk" by the research team); however, all seemed to be aware that they were generally being offered additional help to improve their performance at school. Indeed, this appears to be the basis on which the teachers verbally encouraged the students to take part in this study.

Thus, the students were generally aware that they were perceived as underperforming by staff and/or family members. D described falling short of his teachers' expectations: *My exams . . . they're alright but they're kind of low, like the teachers expect more of me*. Alternatively, G highlighted the burden of his family *think[ing] of you as clever, and hardworking* and yet *you can't meet their expectations*. Some pupils felt this pressure was unfair, particularly because all kinds of factors can hinder test performance, including this pressure itself. C described feeling overwhelmed in test situations: *When I'm doing, like, tests, lots of things are going in my head*. He struggled to label this feeling, and following further questioning described it as *confusion*. Most pupils articulated negative emotions in relation to this pressure. When asked which feeling he has most of, G replied:

> Sadness, well like, kind of like depressed . . . because in all the subjects we have to do . . . the teachers keep saying "work hard, work hard."

This academic pressure then became entwined in problematic ways with the first set of pressures noted above, namely, negotiating the transition to adulthood. Even at their relatively young age, the boys were in the habit of appraising their potential life outcomes and reflecting on the pressure to attain markers of a successful adulthood (such as a good career). Many seemed to have internalized—or at least been influenced by—the message that life outcomes were dependent on academic success. When asked, "What would you like to change most about your life?" B replied, *my grades, in terms of, like GCSE, that's what's gonna like control my life*. Similarly, F

referred to *so much pressure* in relation to school performance, and likewise articulated the sense that his success or otherwise in that regard will shape his life:

> You have to do GCSEs and if you do well than you can get a good job and go to University but if you don't do well, [you] won't be able to do much . . .

While many of the themes outlined above could be regarded as gendered—that is, pertaining to how the boys felt they needed to act *as males*—gender was mostly an implicit rather than an explicit concern within the interviews. However, at points, the interviewer did ask whether the participants felt any explicit sense of gendered pressure. Here, the results were mixed, with some pupils denying that they experienced any specific gendered pressures. When asked, "do you ever feel expected to behave in a particular way because of being a boy?" two simply said, *er . . . no*, while a third said, *I don't see a difference in how people speak to me and to a girl*. However, the remaining pupils did convey a sense of gendered expectations, which introduced a further layer of pressure (compounding any pressures pertaining to adolescence and being at risk). Four boys specifically referred to the pressure to be tough and strong or at least to act like it. As B put it:

> You're not supposed to kind of like be wet, you're not supposed to be like "aww," you're not supposed to act kind of like weird and girly, you're supposed to act tough.

Most participants gave a sense of being constrained by these expectations such as the need to conceal their distress rather than expressing it and showing their vulnerability (see Addis and Mahalik 2003, for discussion around emotional concealment related to masculinity). Even boys who did not explicitly connect this pressure to gendered expectations nevertheless seemed to have internalized norms that could be regarded as "traditionally" masculine, such as stoicism. For instance, when asked what he did if he felt "unhappy or stressed," F echoed others in saying, *I just stay quiet, and try not to talk to anyone*. Finally, D gave a revealing and somewhat unsettling insight into how these gender norms might be upheld, indicating that the pressure to be "masculine" could be enforced through social coercion and explaining how he sought to avoid being *judged* for seeming *feminine*.

> Everyone in the school, like, they expect you to be, erm, masculine, but there's other boys out there, they are a bit like feminine, and people judge them. There was one boy, like everyone judges, everyone stays away from because he's a certain type of person, and that's what I don't like, like if people judge you, that's not good.

Self-control

We've seen that participants described having to negotiate a complex set of pressures, many of which appear to relate to making the difficult transition from

boyhood to manhood. So far, the themes align with existing literature in this area, which has tended to present adolescence as a challenging period of change (e.g., in terms of biology, identity, and social relationships). However, when we consider the boys' reports of engaging with the mindfulness intervention, the results take us into some interesting new territory. In particular, participants tended to depict the intervention as allowing them to *(re)gain control* over important aspects of their life, from school performance to personal relationships. Now, as will be discussed below, it is beyond the scope of this study to ascertain whether participants "really" did develop self-control in the ways they described (though we must not necessarily rule it out either). Nevertheless, it remains significant that nearly all boys did articulate a narrative based around this notion of developing self-control. This was not uniformly true, mind you. One boy did remain disengaged throughout the course—as he apparently also often does in class—and reported that *it didn't really, like, make a difference to me*. However, his explicit detachment made the enthusiasm of the remaining seven all the more noticeable.

Nearly all boys presented a narrative of progress (as did the male meditators in Lomas et al. 2014b). Half of the participants reported finding mindfulness hard at first; F was typical in finding it *quite difficult to focus* in the meditative activities. However, after practicing it at home, many suggested that they *got the hang of it* (C) and even found it *actually pretty easy* (B). Thus, there was a narrative of skill acquisition, of cultivating and attaining a certain level of mastery. Of course, as noted above, we could not ascertain the extent to which participants genuinely *were* developing proficiency at mindfulness. Indeed, in the literature, mindfulness is regarded as a difficult skill to develop, with most clinical interventions deeming a minimum of eight weeks intensive training necessary to develop even a basic level of familiarity and skill (Segal, Williams, and Teasdale 2002). As such, we must treat the participants' accounts here with caution. But this does not alter the fact that most boys *reported* themselves as developing proficiency in this regard, asserting their ability to deploy mindfulness instrumentally.

More specifically, the boys portrayed themselves as gaining a greater sense of self-control and mastery—over various aspects of life—through learning mindfulness. For a start, boys spoke about being able to control their mind, such as their focus and attention. As G said, *At first, I didn't really understand it, so it was like, "What's the point of this?" . . . But gradually it made sense, cause it was like to help your mind focus.* Similarly, A was drawn to the idea of *controlling your mind better* and B to the thought of *improving your brain*. This was then presented as a solution to some of the pressures outlined above, such as their difficulties with regard to studying and their struggling performance at school. For instance, B echoed several other boys in describing himself as having developed his concentration skills as a result of the intervention, suggesting that this had impacted positively on his studies: *Maths is still like kind of tricky, but I think I've improved. Now like, I can focus more.* When asked why, he said, *I think I've used the mindfulness stuff.* Similarly, D said it had helped him with reading in class:

> When I keep calm and relaxed and just clear my mind, then I can get all the words in and understand what happens in my book.

In a related way, the boys spoke about cultivating greater emotional control; not in the reductive sense of "eliminating" emotions but more along the lines of concepts like emotional intelligence (Mayer and Salovey 1997), involving capacities such as emotional awareness and management. For instance, a number of participants spoke about recent situations in which feelings of anger had arisen, in which they recognized these feelings welling up, and so used various mindfulness techniques to relax. For instance, D reported that he often got *stressed* because of his brothers *shouting and fighting*, but he had *used the meditation to calm me down and feel more relaxed so I don't overact, and just keep on my feet.* Likewise, E used mindfulness during communal gaming. Previously, he said that *If my team's doing bad, normally I'd shout at them through the mic and show a lot of anger*. However, since starting the course, he said would try to *take the mic and controller out of my hands and put them on the bed, and I'd do the mindfulness and it will make me feel better.* Similarly, participants portrayed themselves as likely to deploy mindfulness exercises in future to help them deal with difficult situations. A spoke about an upcoming exam and said he was *gonna do the [breathing] meditation . . . and even when I revise just do that before it to just try and calm myself down.* Similarly, D said he would use it to stop reacting to provocation in class, which had previously led to behavioral problems (e.g., fighting):

> *[Other students] say mean words to me, and I used to take it really serious, but know I know the meditation, I need to like get on with what I'm doing . . . I'm growing up and need to take more responsibility and stop overreacting if they're just doing something to disturb me*.

Indeed, most participants described their intention to continue with mindfulness, doing so with a level of enthusiasm which was surprising to the researchers. For example, E suggested that the course had been very helpful to him, and that other people had noticed a difference too: *Cause I notice more people around me, I've got like complements from people saying I'm a very caring person now and stuff.* Indeed, he had generally *gained loads of confidence*, which was one of the outcomes he had initially hoped to get from participating, since *I wanna be a leader, and I think I've been leading in sessions.* As such, he said, *I think [mindfulness] is amazing. I'm gonna go deep into it in the future, like when I'm an adult I'm gonna teach my family about it.* Such sentiments were echoed by most participants, and all would recommend mindfulness to other students. (Even the one participant who was generally disengaged in the course said he would still recommend it to his friends, although he said *it depends on different people. If they like it then, yeah, people who wanna relax more and take their mind off stuff.*) More specifically, the participants suggested it would be good for *people that are a bit struggling* (A), *people who need maybe to calm down and control themselves* (C), and *people that are finding it hard to*

concentrate and are feeling stressed (E). Most movingly, D said, *Yeah, I would recommend it to people who are suffering of similar things like me.*

Discussion

The results here offer a moving portrayal of the emotional lives of a group of at-risk adolescent boys. This is a population that, for multiple reasons—by virtue of being adolescent, and/or male, and/or at risk—are often portrayed as being emotionally disconnected or otherwise challenged (Levant 1998). Yet, the participants here revealed themselves to be capable of discussing their emotional dynamics, and personal lives more generally, with real insight and candor.

Before delving into the details of the findings, it is important to first reflect upon their *nature*, to articulate our epistemological position. Clearly, a range of positions are available, so other scholars might well interpret these findings in alternative ways. So, in the spirit of reflexivity, our preference is for a stance of "critical realism" (Layder 1993). This means that, while we are alert to the performative nature of qualitative data—that participants are constructing a narrative/position for the "benefit" of an audience—we do not treat it *merely* as a performance. After all, as Connell (1995) put it, treating interview data as "fiction" to be "read" for narrative devices risks "spurning the effort respondents themselves make to speak the truth" (p. 91). As such, we endeavored to approach the data in the spirit of Ricoeur's (1981) ideal of a double hermeneutics ("willingness to suspect, willingness to listen")—a hermeneutics of both faith (hence the realism) and suspicion (hence the critical).

As such, we remain open to the possibility that the intervention *did* have a positive effect in the ways reported by participants. Of course, this possibility was not tested empirically and can only be inferred from participants' testimonies. And, although the hermeneutics of faith means we do not discount these testimonies, the hermeneutics of suspicion also renders these somewhat problematic, as discussed further below. Nevertheless, the notion that the intervention may have had a positive impact corroborates other work which has linked mindfulness to various beneficial outcomes for young people, such as improved concentration and attention (Hong and Cho 2012), calmness (Broderick and Metz 2009), social competence (Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor 2010), and emotional resiliency (Semple et al. 2010). Indeed, these themes were present in the testimonies of nearly all participants here (seven of the eight). Moreover, that these outcomes were reported by a group of at-risk adolescent males—a group which until now has not specifically been studied in relation to mindfulness—is especially striking.

Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the data offers a unique insight into the way these boys purportedly tried to use mindfulness skills in "real life," such as defusing anger in social settings. Here, the findings augment the work of Singh et al. (2007) who found that mindfulness helped adolescents with conduct disorder to curtail their aggressive and/or disruptive behavior. The findings also echo Singh et al. (2003) in highlighting the benefit of mindfulness practices that focus on concrete, physical sensations. Whereas

Singh et al. (2003) taught a patient with mental and behavioral problems to focus on the soles of his feet, our participants seemed to particularly appreciate a breathing exercise in which they used their index finger to trace the outline of their other hand. This physical activity seemed to anchor their attention, whereas a more cognitive activity (e.g., simply asking them to "watch" their breath) may have left them rather unmoored. Thus, the findings potentially offer revealing clues as to how newcomers to mindfulness—and adolescent boys specifically—might best respond to teachings, and try to utilize it in their lives.

That said, we acknowledge that readers who lean more toward a hermeneutics of suspicion may regard these positive testimonies (about the efficacy of the intervention) with a degree of scepticism. Indeed, as noted above, the mindfulness literature is fairly consistent in suggesting that four weeks of training is usually insufficient for developing proficiency (Segal, Williams, and Teasdale 2002). However, even if the interviews were *entirely* discounted as evidence in favor of the intervention—or of mindfulness generally—they would still be very revealing in many ways. For a start, they belie the notion that adolescent males are incapable of introspective insight, self-awareness, and emotional literacy. Participants here spoke movingly and revealingly about the challenges in their lives and about their hopes, fears, and joys. It possibly helped that the interviews were conducted 1:1 with an empathic female researcher. For instance, in conducting focus groups with young men, Allen (2005) found that participants often engaged in identity work by putting up a front of bravado in the presence of their coparticipants. However, Allen also noted that, beneath this bravado, emotional vulnerability and openness would sometimes emerge. Thus, the 1:1 interviews in the present study possibly helped the boys let down any such shield of bravado. Then again, one could easily make the alternative case that participants would seek to impress a female researcher by showing how tough and self-sufficient they were, which is a common masculine trope (Addis and Mahalik 2003). In any case, it would not be fair to position their openness simply as a function of the female interviewer: even in the intervention sessions, in front of other boys (and the two male researchers and male staff member), most boys were certainly willing and capable of offering emotional insights.

Moreover, beyond the sheer fact of these boys' emotional openness, the data are revealing in terms of participants' constructions of masculinity—at least within the context of the research. That is, performative theories of masculinity hold that gender is actively constructed within the dynamic parameters of specific social situations (Butler 1990; Connell 1995). As such, it is entirely possible—indeed, highly likely—that the boys here would negotiate alternative gendered performances away from this kind of research setting (e.g., when playing with their mates). Nevertheless, even within this limited research context—a mindfulness-based intervention and accompanying interviews—the boys offered an interesting picture of how masculinity is negotiated by this particular population (namely, adolescent boys deemed at risk of academic failure and/or exclusion). Specifically, for these participants, there appeared to be an overriding need, desire and intent to claim *agency*,

and to exert *self-control*. Whatever psychological and social effects the intervention may have "actually" had, much of the interview data regarding the intervention can be read in terms of participants striving to articulate a position of agency and self-control.

Participants presented themselves as having to manage multiple pressures related to their life phase, that is, negotiating a difficult transition between childhood and adulthood, as noted above. As per Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2012), participants' interview data revealed a tension between competing types of gendered performance. Looking back, boyhood tended to be associated with relatively carefree fun, and particularly activities such as playing sports and computer games (see, e.g., Cherney and London 2006). And yet, the boys also seemed preoccupied with the demands of impending adulthood, which was both suddenly very present (e.g., in their concern with forging a career) and yet frustratingly elusive (e.g., in being treated like a child by their parents, and thus being denied the freedom they coveted). Moreover, there was an ambiguous sense of anticipation about this impending manhood, seeming both feared (e.g., in terms of its burdens and responsibilities) and craved (e.g., in terms of its possibilities).

It was in this context, then, that the participants' responses to mindfulness were so revealing. The intervention appeared to allow or encourage the boys to enact a masculinity based around (re)claiming agency and self-control (i.e., through mindfulness). However, although exerting self-control can often be regarded as a traditional hegemonic masculine norm (Mahalik et al. 2005), the boys here seemed to deploy it in ways that challenged traditional masculine performances. Specifically, participants presented their newfound agency and self-control as facilitating emotional awareness and engagement, which are qualities not conventionally associated with masculinity (Levant 1998). There are perhaps parallels here with studies on masculine performances in professions traditionally perceived as feminine, such as nursing. For instance, Pullen and Simpson (2009) found that although male nurses expanded their construction of masculinity to include attributes such as caring and compassion, they nevertheless reframed their discourses of care to priviledge traditional masculine qualities, for example describing their emotion work as "more rational." Thus, such nurses appeared to be both enacting traditional hegemonic masculinity *and* adopting "feminine" qualities, with masculinity thus partly subverted and partly maintained.

It is possible that something similar was happening in the present study, whereby the boys were using discourses of control—provided by the context of a mindfulness-based intervention—to legitimize a nonconventional masculine performance involving emotional connection and agility. If so, this is in stark contrast with the kind of essentialist perspective that views males generally—and at-risk adolescents in particular—as inherently troubled and emotionally disconnected/illiterate. Rather, the results here align with recent constructionist theorizing that emphasizes the ability of males to refashion their way of "doing" masculinity in more adaptive ways, as highlighted in the "critical positive masculinity" paradigm (Lomas 2013).

Moreover, the results are particularly noteworthy, given that the specific male population studied here (i.e., at-risk adolescent boys) is generally regarded as especially vulnerable and/or challenging.

There are, as always, limitations to the study, and thus with our results, interpretations, and conclusions. Perhaps the biggest limitation is the relative lack of contextual data on the participants or their engagement with the course. It was unfortunately beyond the scope of the study to collect anything more than the most cursory demographic or personal details about the participants, with these being limited to facts such as age, ethnicity, and their "diagnosis" of being at risk. In retrospect, it would have been helpful to have gathered more personal information about their background and current life circumstances—not only through more extensive interviews with the boys themselves but also with significant others in their lives (e.g., family members and teachers). Without such detail, it is much harder to draw conclusions about their gendered performance in the context of the research. For instance, our interest was of course piqued by the one participant who did *not* appear to find the intervention interesting and rewarding. However, other than being told by the school representative that he can often be somewhat disengaged in school generally, we did not have any real context for making sense of his reaction. Similarly, it would have been instructive to gather more detail on participants' engagement with mindfulness during the course of the intervention (e.g., monitoring their home practice through diaries). This would have helped us to assess the extent to which participants really did attempt to practice mindfulness over the four weeks (as they reported doing). That said, mindfulness research has generally been poor at tracking participation outside of formal sessions (i.e., engagement with "homework" activities; Vettese et al. 2009), so our study is not unusual in that regard.

Thus, future work on this topic—that is, on the impact of mindfulness on the gendered performance of adolescent boys—would benefit from more extensive data collection. It would also be instructive to investigate this topic with different "categories" of at-risk boys. In the current study, having been asked to simply select a cohort of "at-risk" male pupils, the school chose those who were primarily at risk of failing academically and/or exclusion (although one could reasonably speculate that at least some of the group were at risk in other ways too). It later transpired that the school had selected this particular group out of a concern that other "types" of at-risk boys—for example, those with issues around aggression—might have proved too problematic for the intervention and/or the research team. However, mindfulness has been successfully used with youths with these kinds of behavioral difficulties (e.g., Singh et al. 2007). As such, future studies in this area might do well to consider more behaviorally challenging or vulnerable groups of at-risk boys in future. Nevertheless, the findings, limited as they are, still give an interesting insight into the potential for adolescent boys to construct alternative gendered ways of being—that is, in contrast to more conventional teenage performances (e.g., being "laddish")—that may be more beneficial to themselves and others.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by a small grant awarded to Tim Lomas by the Richard Benjamin Memorial Trust.

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