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Murray Drummond and Claire Drummond

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Murray Drummond and Claire Drummond

Flinders University, Australia

Abstract

This is an article about boys and their construction of masculinities. It draws on 5 years of qualitative research data from the same group of boys from early childhood through to 10 years of age in an attempt to articulate the way in which boys come to view their bodies, and other male bodies, in contemporary Western culture. The research is based on focus groups and is a part of a longitudinal study with the same cohort of boys, at a school in Adelaide, Australia. The data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis to identify key emergent themes. The results indicate that there is an emerging trend among boys from early childhood through to middle primary school surrounding the acknowledgement of male body aesthetics as a signifier of being male. The use of terminology such as 'six-pack' is now commonplace among all of the groups. The consistency around muscularity as a signifier of being a man was very high among the boys of all ages. It is clear that greater emphasis needs to be placed on younger males' and boys' awareness of the meaning of the male body in contemporary Western society.

Keywords

Focus groups, health promotion, qualitative approaches

Background

The way in which boys perceive their own bodies as well as other males' arguably plays a significant role in the development of a young male's masculine identity. For a considerable amount of time, concerns around body image and identity have been primarily linked to adolescent girls and young women (Dohnt and Tiggemann, 2008). However, the significant emphasis that is placed upon bodily aesthetics in contemporary Western culture has meant that

Corresponding author:

Murray Drummond, Flinders University, SHAPE Research Centre, School of Education, GPO Box 5001, Adelaide, South Australia 5001, Australia.

Email: murray.drummond@flinders.edu.au

boys and young males are not immune to body image concerns (Drummond, 2011; McCabe and Ricciardelli, 2003). Much of the research on bodies has focussed on young people particularly around adolescence and early adulthood (e.g. Carlson-Jones, 2004; Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2004). By drawing on 5 years of qualitative research data from the same group of boys from early childhood through to 10 years of age, this article examines constructions of masculinities by articulating the way in which these boys come to view their bodies, and other male bodies, in contemporary Western culture. Importantly, this article will provide rich descriptive qualitative data to highlight that boys under the age of 10 have strong perceptions of what a male should look like in terms of body aesthetics and the meaning associated with these bodies in contemporary Western culture.

Too often society does not attend to the needs of boys regarding issues pertaining to bodies and body image. This is despite evidence suggesting that body image and eating disorders are increasing in prevalence among young males (Drummond, 2011). Given that this has largely been the domain of girls and young women, there is a real need to focus on the voices of boys and young males and to listen to their perspectives, particularly to understand any issues or concerns boys may have in relation to body image and body aesthetics. This may include issues associated with muscularity, height, weight, cosmetic features as well as overweight and obesity concerns. The more we know and understand boys and their bodies, the better we will be equipped to deal with problems that may arise (Drummond, 2012). However, it is important to recognize that this article not only is about boys' body image concerns but also reflects boys' attitudes and opinions associated with the male body. Ultimately the rich descriptive qualitative data provide a unique looking glass through which we can understand boys and their bodies and how this may play a role in the construction of masculinities.

Methods

Participants

This article reports on the first five years of a larger eight-year longitudinal study investigating the way in which masculinities are constructed among boys from early childhood through to adolescence. Thirty-three boys from a middle-class independent school in metropolitan Adelaide, Australia, were interviewed in focus group settings. The basis of the research is around sport, health and physical activity. However, given the qualitative nature of the research and the focus group interviews, there are a range of issues and topics to emerge beyond the original focus. Therefore, an article such as this will reflect discussion to emerge around the male body. Consent was provided from the parents of 33 boys and the school for the duration of the project, and the study was given institutional ethics approval.

Procedure

The boys were interviewed in focus groups of around 4–6 in each group. Fontana and Frey (2000) assert that a focus group interview is a technique for gathering rich, descriptive qualitative data in a systematic manner. Patton (2002) adds that the objective of the focus group is to use a social context where people consider their own views and those of others in order to gain high-quality data. In this study, the interviewing techniques adopted successfully enabled broad discussion around specific aspects of sport, health and physical activity across a range of age groups from early childhood through to middle primary school.

The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. In order to assist the interviewer in developing a specific line of enquiry, an interview guide was used in each of the focus groups. The interview guide was developed through the researcher's immense experience and previous research in the field as well as contemporary literature. The approach that was taken was phenomenological in nature in that the boys' responses were the basis of further enquiry and exploration. Patton (2002) identified this as being an ideal way to capture as much rich descriptive data as possible. The interview guide then allowed the researcher to refocus the line of enquiry to ensure that all topics were covered and the same set of core issues were covered within the focus group.

The boys were interviewed in a range of settings within the school environment. However, research ethics protocol meant that each interview had to be within close proximity to classroom. In order to eliminate the children's potential fear of retribution from teachers in the event of speaking openly and candidly about a multitude of topics, the interviews were out of 'ear-shot' of the teachers. This also reduced the teachers' 'positional power' and further enhanced the opportunity for the boys to speak freely (Drummond et al., 2009). Enabling the boys the opportunity to provide rich, descriptive, qualitative data is important to understand the issues that confront boys from a range of perspectives associated with their health and well-being. While not unique, listening to voices of children in qualitative health research has been limited. Drummond et al. (2009) have claimed, that although there is a wealth of literature on children and health, what is absent from the literature are the voices of the children themselves. Indeed, the majority of studies in this area tend to be *about* children and *on* children but do not often *include* children's voices.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then open coded (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and analysed using inductive analysis. Patton (2002) claims that inductive analysis enables categories to emerge from open-ended observations, while the researcher gains an understanding of the patterns that exist. Further, Patton (2002) states that inductive analysis involves recognizing categories, patterns and themes in data through constant interaction with the data. Differences and similarities in the data were documented based on the author's personal understanding, professional knowledge, and the literature (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Results

This article provides the results from the first five years of the larger eight-year longitudinal study that is investigating the construction of masculinities around sport, health and physical activity among boys from early childhood through to 10 years of age. It will seek to explore the notion of, and terminology associated with, the male 'six-pack', given the manner in which the study participants placed a significant amount of emphasis on the way the male body is supposed to look and its aesthetics.

Participants

The boys commenced participating in this study five years ago when they were five or six years of age. For consistency, they are interviewed at the same time each year by the first author who asks

the boys similar and related issues. However, each year the first author recognizes difference in the boys. For some, it may be subtle and may involve a change in expression or confidence in answering questions. For others, it can be far more significant in terms of the topics they raise or their bold and brash manner in which they discuss them. Sometimes their manner is simply based on producing a reaction or wanting to be perceived in a particular way around their peers. Noteworthy is that this 'particular way' is heavily influenced by traditional masculine stereotypes that include disparaging remarks towards girls and sexualities (i.e. gay) as well as the championing of language that is now beginning to border on swearing. Interestingly, and not surprisingly, the one thing that has been consistent from the earliest interviews with the boys up until the most recent is the importance and significance placed on muscularity as a descriptor and signifier of being a man.

There has been a solid amount of emerging literature on men's bodies and the significance of muscularity among men over the past decade. We are now at a stage of understanding this issue where we know that for many males, muscularity is a signifier of masculinity (McCreary and Sasse, 2000; Morrison et al., 2003). Indeed for a certain groups of males, such as adolescent males and young straight and gay men in early adulthood, muscularity is prioritized as a key indicator, and expectation, of masculinity (Drummond, 2005; Filiault and Drummond, 2007). One of the current issues with contemporary developing literature is the level of 'sameness' that is occurring around muscularity and masculinity. That is, many qualitative and quantitative articles are simply identifying the same key issues that reflect men's views on muscularity. It could be argued that such articles are merely restating what we already know. Therefore, there are several ways in which we can move this discussion forward with respect to the male body. One of those ways is to develop a more theoretical perspective around men's bodies rather than a descriptive interpretive model that has been largely conducted thus far. Another way is to explore issues surrounding the meaning of boys' bodies, which in turn will provide a deeper understanding of what is occurring with males at the developmental stages with respect to their bodies from a social, psychological and emotional perspective. We still know very little about boys' constructions of masculinities and how the body may play a role in this construction (Drummond, 2012). Therefore, while descriptive and interpretive in its orientation, the following results from the participants in this study are unique and will be drawn upon to highlight the ways in which they come to view the male body including their own. The significance of this emerges from the boys' voices, which have not been previously heard around these sorts of issues, particularly at such a young age.

The meaning of size

It is clear from the results that boys of all ages within this research place a good deal of emphasis on size, and in particular muscular size, in their discussion and assessment of being a man. All of the boys, regardless of age, had a good understanding that they are not currently capable of attaining a highly muscular physique, as some boys stated, 'like my dad'. Therefore, the level of anguish or potential disappointment was not apparent in their claims. Indeed, most of the boys were positive and looking forward to becoming big and muscular as they moved towards adulthood. It is important to note that there was a sense of inevitability that they would become big and muscular simply by becoming a man. In the following account, the reception age boys (five to six years) discuss their perceptions of muscularity and articulate when their musculature will occur,

Q: What are some things you can tell me about men?

A: Men have strong muscles.

A: Men are strongest.

Q: Why?

A: Because they get fit exercising.

A: Because they eat healthy food. Not junk food.

Q: But can women get muscles too if they eat healthy food?

A: No, because they don't have any muscles. Because they're not boys.

While the boys talked about muscularity within this discussion, they also emphasized the importance of strength as a seemingly inevitable consequence of musculature. In their eyes, 'being strong' was also an indicator of being a man. Importantly, for many of these boys the only real way that they could 'test' notions of strength was to compare and contrast this with girls and women (see Drummond, 2012).

In the following discussion, the boys reflect on the meaning of muscles and the size of those muscles. Comments were made around boys with visibly larger muscles having an advantage over those boys who did not. This is what Filiault and Drummond (2007) have termed as a 'hegemonic aesthetic'. As a consequence, some boys may feel empowered to use this hegemony to disempower others. In the following comment by one of the boys in year one, he explains the way in many boys perceive the way in which some males can display power through visible musculature and use this power to demean others with less developed muscles.

He stated,

It's mean to show people your muscles to other people because if they have smaller muscles and someone has bigger muscles and then they'll go 'ha, ha you have small muscles', it will be mean to them.

It is clear from the discussion above that the boys interpret the meaning of muscles in a number of different ways, and this can occur within a short period of time in the discussion. It seems the boys, across all age groups, have a relatively fundamental perspective around muscles. For most of the boys, the equation looks something like muscles = strength = power and dominance. Seemingly, within the discussions we have been engaging in over the past five years, there is not a universal perspective as to which component is required first. For example, the boys also identified that if a male is strong, he is likely to have muscles and display power and dominance (i.e. strength = muscles = power). Similarly, there is a belief that power and dominance means that a male is likely to have strength and muscles (i.e. power = strength = muscles).

The following comment by one of the boys in year 3 (an eight-year-old) is exemplary of the way in which many of the other year 3 boys articulate their view on men, muscles and strength: On commenting on an Australian Football player, he stated:

I really like him because he's really strong and he's muscley and he's tough and if he gets punched in the head he doesn't cry.

In response to the question whether it was important to be muscley, the same boy stated, 'yes, because you win'.

Similarly another boy claimed:

Because boys are going to get stronger, so they can get more muscles and be fitter, so they can run faster. Like my dad, he's really strong and really muscley.

As these comments highlight, the boys were firm in their belief that men are strong and display muscles. What was also quite prominent was the discussion around the abdominal muscles colloquially known as the six-pack. This provides us with an insight into an area of the male body that has not been reflected on among boys and certainly early childhood and prepubescent boys previously.

Male aesthetics and the six-pack

Over the past decade, the term six-pack has become a common vernacular among young people in the Western culture. Through globalization influenced by local and global media, as well as the Internet and social networking sites, it is arguable that there is a homogenization effect occurring around the use of words and language. The body is a site of particular gaze for many young people. Photographs and images are easily viewed in the online environment and comments can be readily made for a huge 'audience' to see and discuss. The term six-pack, which originated from body-building origins, has infiltrated everyday language among young people and fuelled its acceleration of use through popular media and global Internet and social networking sites. It is clear from the boys in this research that the terminology has now infiltrated their own language, despite not really knowing what it means, nor its implications. However, it is arguable that the use of such terms is problematic in that it begins the process of focussing the bodily gaze at a much earlier age than adolescence and has the potential to establish preconceived notions of the body prior to significant developmental periods in a child's life. As a consequence, there are likely to be greater individual expectations upon what the body should like during adolescence and early adulthood.

In the following discussion, some eight- and nine-year-old boys began their first foray into discussing abdominal muscles (abs) and six-packs. It was also clear that they were experimenting with its use and attempting to understand these terms through their own explanation. In the following quote, one of the boys provides commentary on the way in which a number of boys in this research think about males and the six-pack:

All my family basically, except my mum and my sister, have a six-pack (i.e. the males). Because my dad's a jockey and me and my brother just swim the whole time and play sport. But you have to use your six-pack for good (laughs). You can't just show it off all the time. But it's not your fault if you show it off when you're swimming. Like in the Olympics. It's not like they wear rashies or that sort of thing.

Noteworthy, the visible six-pack has become synonymous with strength for most of the boys in this research. When asked what they perceived to be a strong person, many of the comments included that of having a six-pack. For example, one boy claimed:

A strong person is someone with abs. You know, a strong muscley dude with a 'six-pack'.

This final comment that is presented next provides an opportunity to gain insight into the way in which the boys perceive the male body, and the implication of this body on broader aspects of life.

According to the boys, who are now in year 4, having 'abs' and a six-pack provides a number of opportunities that may not be otherwise afforded to those without an aesthetically appealing stomach. It is also the first time across all interviews that the boys began talking about 'ladies' (girls) in any way other than being stronger than them and beating them in sport. This comment was representative of the way in which other boys in the research are beginning to perceive the male body and the role of the six-pack.

Boys want to be big and strong so they can get the ladies. They also have to have a six-pack. Everyone wants a six-pack to show off to the girls. I've seen these guys on the beach and they just rip their shirts off and go 'look at this ladies' and they're (the ladies) like 'uh, huh'.

Discussion

This article has highlighted the manner in which young boys have a clear and socially constructed understanding of what a male body is 'supposed' to look like in terms of it being hegemonically aesthetic. Others might regard this as a form of social capital afforded through the visual aspect of the male body, much in the same way that women's bodies have been in the past. Additionally, the article has attempted to shed light on boys in the middle primary years and the changing nature of the way in which they perceive the male body.

The majority of boys in this study regarded a man's body as one in which muscularity, strength and power were synonymous. There was a belief that with the advent of becoming a man, muscularity and strength would follow in a somewhat linear fashion. There was certainly no evidence to suggest that the boys in this early childhood group, or the middle primary years, were anxious about their own bodies. Nor were they envious of men with bodies that they considered to be muscular, strong and powerful. Indeed it was this perception that they would one day be muscular, strong and powerful themselves that allayed any concerns with regard to this.

The boys in the middle primary years viewed the male body as one that has the potential to influence others' perceptions of them, particularly in terms of the culturally 'revered' six-pack. It was evident that the boys in this age group were beginning to understand the social capital that can be attained through a body that is visually appealing. They were also cognizant of the meaning of that body to girls, and potential social relationships in the future. This is an area of the boys' development that they are just beginning to explore but are quickly coming to understand the relevance of a 'socially revered' body.

It appears that the boys are receiving their information about the meaning of the body from a wide variety of sources, particularly the boys in the middle primary years. They have far more access to computer and Internet technologies than the younger boys and the sites that they access when playing online games, for example, provide the ubiquitous nature of the male body that the boys referred to when they claimed, 'we just get it from everywhere'.

Given that the boys have identified that they are gaining the information directly from these sources, there is certainly a need to begin thinking about strategies, particularly in schools to minimize the impact of such images on boys and the manner in which they have the capacity to socially construct the stereotypical image of what it looks like to be a man in contemporary Western society.

Implications for school health

The data within this research provide evidence that boys in early childhood and the middle primary years (up to 10 years of age) have clear perceptions of what a male body is supposed to look like in contemporary Western culture. It is also evident that these perceptions are often unrealistic in terms of muscularity and size and are heavily influenced by societal factors. Teachers of Health Education, and Social Studies, in the primary years need to be aware of such issues and begin addressing them early in a child's life. It is important both boys and girls are privy to sharing discussion around this topic, rather than in gendered isolation, given the significance of society on perceptions of bodies for both genders. Too often schools focus on the meaning of bodies for girls, given the significance of body image issues that girls have displayed in the past and in contemporary time. Certainly, the new electronic media and social networking sites are having a major influence on the way in which young children perceive the body. Unlike girls who had the capacity to view unrealistic images of female bodies through traditional media such as girl-oriented magazines, boys now have access to a range of unrealistic male body images as they increasingly engage with the online environment. The constant advertisements that adorn the sidebars of websites as they play games is one such example of the ubiquity that boys have referred to in terms of attaining this information 'from everywhere'. The male body is something that needs to be dealt with in schools in an environment that is nurturing to ensure the information is understood and reinforced.

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