

Constructing the Cult of the Self: on White, Working-class Males And The Neoliberalisation Of Identities - An Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract : This paper offers a reflective and reflexive examination of the lived experience of a group of young, white, working-class males engaging in secondary-education in England at a time when this population is widely recognised as the lowest attaining ethnic group within British schools. The focus of the paper is an exploration of the development of identities and aspirations, alongside contemporary demographic and ideological shifts in the British population, in their intersection with neoliberal education policies and the emerging ideological conflict between identity conservatism and liberalism. The construction and performance of intersecting social-class, gender, ethnic and national identities is considered as well as the process through which socially constructed narratives inform identities, values, and aspirations. Evocative autoethnography is then employed to offer reflections on working-class habitus and, in particular, classed and gendered codes that underpin expectations of manhood in post-industrial culture within an education system which seemingly requires the abandonment of aspects of a working-class background. Findings from the study identify the emergence of a culture of hyper-individualisation amongst white, working-class males in schools and a belief in the meritocratic ideologies of the New Right. In particular, the breakdown of the social contract, including notions of political and civic responsibility, coupled with the symbolic violence perpetrated against working-class culture and solidarity in British schools, have all informed the construction of a working-class masculinity which values the individual entrepreneur over the collective, and depoliticizes students to an extent where a focus on the spectacle and performance of success has replaced individual and collective investment in community.

Keywords : education, identity, masculinity, neoliberalism, working-class, intersectionality, autoethnography

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