

Adolescent Boys: Exploring Diverse Cultures of Boyhood edited by Niobe Way and Judy Y. Chu. New York: New York University Press, 2004. 380 pp. ISBN 0-8147-9385-1

In their edited volume, *Adolescent Boys: Exploring Diverse Cultures of Boyhood*, Niobe Way and Judy Chu draw on empirical research to enrich current representations of boys' development. They state that their main goal is to challenge stereotypes about adolescent boys propagated in social research and the popular media—that is, to dispel myths of adolescent boys and, in particular, minority boys—as "at-risk," "problematic," "not interested in intimacy," "primarily interested in sex," and "emotionally stoic" (p. 3). As editors, their commitment to a broader and deeper understanding of boys is reflected in the range of topics examined (e.g., identity development, family, peer, and romantic relationships, and schooling experiences), samples studied (e.g., boys from diverse ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds), and methods employed (e.g., quantitative and qualitative approaches are utilized). As a whole, although the volume highlights when generalizations about boys are appropriate and when they should be tempered, it should not be read as a comprehensive overview of previous research conducted on adolescent boys.

Who Should be Studied?

Although not represented as an explicit goal of the volume, we noticed that there is heterogeneity in how each author conceptualizes "boys." Some authors represent boys as a collective who are more similar to, than different from, one another. For example, with their qualitative work, Chu (Chapter 4) describes the significance of social relationships to boys' developing identities and Tolman and her colleagues (Chapter 11) illustrate the desire that boys have for both emotional and sexual intimacy during adolescence. In their work, individual differences between boys are de-emphasized in favor of societal and contextual factors that may explain why the social experiences of boys and girls are similar (e.g., both boys and girls seek emotional intimacy) and why they are different (e.g., boys face greater peer pressure to conceal their desire for emotional intimacy than do girls).

Some authors take an alternative approach and compare the experiences of boys from different ethnic backgrounds. In this work they are able to explore the role of cultural, contextual, and experiential differences in predicting differences between boys. For example, Jeffries (Chapter 5) illustrates differences between Asian American versus Latino and African American boys' experiences of trust

with their parents through interviews, and Chen and his colleagues (Chapter 9) use both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore cultural differences in the behaviors that predict peer acceptance and rejection among boys from China and Canada. Work of this sort is important for highlighting cultural similarities and differences.

Other authors represent the experiences of specific subgroups of boys within the same environment. The qualitative work of Lee (Chapter 1), which portrays differences between Hmong Americans within the same high school context, and Walker (Chapter 2), which describes differences between working-class British boys best exemplify this approach. Through insights offered by the adolescents themselves in these chapters, it becomes clear how researchers' pre-determined groupings (e.g., Asian American vs. European American) and themes (e.g., masculinity or trust) may not be the most important or relevant ones to understanding boys' experiences. Researchers' presumptions and hypotheses may be based on erroneous assumptions and, as such, may obstruct the most accurate understanding of boys' experiences. Such pitfalls can be avoided when boys are given greater freedom to voice their values and opinions.

How Should they be Studied?

Although both qualitative and quantitative studies were represented in the volume, the most intriguing insights into boyhood were offered by those studies that employed qualitative methods. In contrast to most of the quantitative studies, which often lacked conceptual clarity, the qualitative work effectively dispelled even the most ubiquitous existing stereotypes of adolescent boys by providing rich accounts of boys situated within specific cultural and social contexts. For example, one theme that emerges from the qualitative chapters is the importance that boys place on their peer relationships and especially close friendships during adolescence. Some chapters have a direct focus on adolescents' peer relations (e.g., Part III on "Friends and Peers"). However, the importance and influence of peers also emerges in discussions of identity, family, sexuality and romantic relationships, and even schooling. We were struck by what Way calls "the adolescent [boys'] agency (e.g., to introduce important new knowledge that the interviewer had not anticipated)" (p. 172). By shifting the interviewer's attention to their own insights, adolescent boys reveal the importance of their friends and peers during this key developmental period. This is a clear benefit of qualitative studies. Had these been predominantly quantitative studies, this emphasis would have been largely obscured.

In the qualitative studies presented in the current volume, obtaining results involves interpreting the respondents' narratives and looking for themes. These

interpretations are dependent on either an emic or etic perspective (for a summary of the concepts see Berry, 1999). An emic perspective involves providing an insider's explanation for a particular phenomenon. This is useful because individuals who are immersed in a culture are often privy to information not easily accessible to the non-participant. Alternatively, an etic perspective involves making interpretations via an outsider's observations. The advantage here is that outsiders can sometimes see aspects of a culture that have become obscured to participants of that culture. All of the chapters primarily use an etic approach to describe adolescent boyhood. Although acknowledged, more could be said about how the researchers' social distance from their subjects may have influenced interpretations of the boys' responses. How do differences in gender, age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status play into interpretations that may miss the mark? For example, the authors of most of the qualitative chapters are female. How does being female weaken or illuminate certain themes in boys' lives at the expense of others? Similarly, do these subject-interviewer discrepancies play a role in what a boy chooses to reveal about himself or the topics that he decides to highlight?

There are several ways that researchers can place checks on misinterpretations. One solution is to become a true participant-observer by immersing oneself in boys' worlds in order to get observed confirmation of the interview findings. Chu indicates that she did this in her larger study, but solely relies on interview data, rather than observational notes, in her present chapter. Another way is to build checks into the process. Way and her research team met in groups where researchers challenged one another to provide hard evidence from the data for their interpretations, thus reducing the likelihood that individual biases influence interpretations and conclusions. Finally, one can adopt the approach Mike Rose (2004) takes in his recent book, *The Mind at Work*. In his research, Rose goes through multiple iterations in which he presents informants with his interpretations and begins a dialogue with them as to whether his observations and impressions are accurate. Here, he fuses emic and etic perspectives in a way that might best capture the essence of the phenomena he is studying.

Even with checks, qualitative studies are no doubt enhanced when considered in concert with quantitative studies. At its best, a mixed-methods approach is one where researchers adopt "a self-conscious and explicitly articulated strategy for combining information from multiple methods based on a belief that the resulting inquiry will be more credible, more useful, or more comprehensive than would have been the case if any single methodological approach had been adopted alone" (Raudenbush, 2004). This book takes a first step in this direction.

References

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Reviewers

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