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Passion in a climate of austerity: Young men's perceptions of education and career success in a polarized economy

Nitin Deckha, PhD

In an article exploring the relationships between educational underachievement and downward income trajectories among US men, *New York Times* columnist Binyamin Appelbaum quotes MIT economist Michael Greenstone: “I think the greatest, most astonishing fact that I am aware of in social science right now is that women have been able to hear the labor market screaming out ‘You need more education’ and have been able to respond to that, and men have not,” (Appelbaum, 2013). Indeed, scarcely a month seems to pass where the related issues of male underachievement and un(der)employment are not being recorded. From Hannah Rosin’s *The End of Men* (2012), to descriptions of the recent economic downturn as a ‘hecession’ (Beckmann, 2001; Hennessy & Yalnizyan, 2011; Salam, 2009), the fate of boys and men has captured the attention of a range of academics, educators and policy makers. Sidestepping zero-sum games in which male decline is a direct effect of putative female ascent, as some such as Rosin (2012) are wont to assert, and attentive to critics, particularly in the education field, who point to the factors of race and class as more significant than gender in explaining achievement gaps (Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010), my discussion here endeavors to offer a more intricate and nuanced view. For, beyond the statistics of graduation and attrition, enrollment and dropping out, unemployment and incomes, are an interconnected set of economic forces, social roles, cultural representations, educational ideals and outcomes that conspire to produce a spectrum of learner subjectivities, from the underachieving, underemployed and uncertain male ‘slacker’ to the high-achieving, well-employed, and confident female. I emphasize here the word spectrum to shun both the zero-sum game of males losing and females winning and as an initial signpost to my own research.

What are the forces that are producing the spectrum of male learner subjectivities? First, is the gendered impact of contemporary schooling and education and the well-discussed debate about boys' underachievement (for example, Epstein, 1998; Francis, 2006; C. Jackson, 2002; C. Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Martino, 1999; Martino & Berrill, 2003; Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2003). For Sax (2007), the causes of male underachievement, uncertainty and disengagement from education include various cultural, psychological and biological phenomena, such as video game addiction, endocrine disruptors, falling testosterone levels, rising levels of ADHD diagnoses, a 'slacker mentality' reminiscent of Cross (2008)'s boy-an ideal as well as 'feminized' classroom and curricula styles. Indeed, regardless of academic critique against Sax's perspective, one can take a cursory glance and easily find statistics to support a growing gender educational achievement gap in Ontario, Canada (Kerr 2010) and across the United States (College Board Advisory and Policy Center 2010). Indeed, there are even global indicators that suggest that, wherever girls have equal access to schooling, they perform better than do boys (Jha and Kelleher 2006; OECD 2011, OECD 2015). These statistics have fueled the interest in single-gender classrooms and schools (Sax 2007); yet, as some critics have argued (Watson, Kehler & Martino, 2010) they reify and simplify gendered experiences in the classroom, stereotype boys' behavior so that it valorizes what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have called 'hegemonic masculinity,' and marginalizes the irreducible impact of social class and race. Indeed, on this latter point, race and ethnicity works alongside with gender in complex ways and across geographies, such as in Toronto (Brown, 2009) and across the United States (College Board Advisory and Policy Center, 2010).

Significantly, the debate has largely focused on boys in elementary and secondary education, although some authors extend their arguments to young men and the gendered

dynamics of achievement in higher education (Francis, Read, Robson & Melling, 2003; C. Jackson & Dempster, 2009). Going forward, I want to identify three male learner subject-positions that I've been able to discern from the literature before proposing a fourth, which is the focus of my paper.

One prominent male learner subject-position hangs on the notion that academic achievement is 'uncool'; thus, in order to be 'cool,' males must shun academic work (Epstein, 1998; C. Jackson, 2002; Martino, 1999), or, more importantly, being seen to do academic work (C. Jackson, 2002, p. 40). These notions of cool masculinities, some of them decidedly British, reinforce 'laddish' or 'macho' behaviors in the classroom, which include: " 'having a laugh,' alcohol consumption, disruptive behaviour, objectifying women, and interest in pastimes and subject constructed as masculine" (Francis, 1999: 356). Importantly, and evocative of Sax's notion of the 'boy code,' these behaviors 'play an important part in boys' social status among male friendship groups, as well as (and interconnectedly) with their construction of masculinity' (Francis, 1999: 361). With the force of peer pressure, laddish behavior thus interprets visible academic achievement as "'feminine' or 'queer'" (C. Jackson 2002, p. 40). Hence, if these males are to preserve their enactments of behaviors that coincide with hegemonic masculinities, they have to de-emphasize school work (Epstein, 1998; Martino, 1999).

Jackson elaborates a second male learner subjectivity, building on this de-emphasis, arguing that laddishness can be seen as a self-worth protection strategy (C. Jackson, 2002). Using the work of Covington (1992, 1998), as well as the earlier work of Dweck (1999) – a precursor to her newer work on 'fixed' vs. 'growth' mindset (2006), Jackson, following Covington, suggests that the "competitive nature of the education system means that many pupils are motivated to avoid failures and to protect their sense of self-worth rather than to achieve per

se” (C. Jackson, 2002, p. 41). As such, males may adopt cool laddish behaviors and their endorsements of hegemonic masculinity as a self-worth protection strategy from the competitive nature of the (neoliberal) academic system, itself a central theme in this paper.

In response to laddish self-worth protecting underachievement, Skelton and Francis (2012) also uncover a third male learner subjectivity, which they describe as ‘Renaissance Masculinity.’ They argue that some socially dominant males in the classroom are able to maintain a high level of academic achievement, even in supposedly ‘feminine’ subjects such as English, by enacting a peer-accepted script of dominant masculinity that includes “expressing an evident commitment and adeptness at sport, having camaraderie with other boys, and maintaining ‘cheeky’ but good humored relationships with teachers” (2012, p. 447).

Fourthly, and the focus of my paper, is to submit one more learner subjectivity that I evince from the narratives of university-going young men in Ontario, Canada, who use the notion of ‘passion’ to orient, anchor and self-stylize a learning subjectivity. These various male learner subjectivities are further complicated by what Cross (2008) has called the ‘boy man ideal.’ The collision of a masculine, class-based habitus with that of a larger popular culture that markets ‘toys for boys’ and youth-oriented escapism, in which young and older men can defer the former responsibilities of the adult ‘breadwinning’ male, and thereby embrace slackerdom and a general ‘failure to launch’, finds expression in a spate of popular films (e.g., *Slacker* (Linklater, 1991), *Failure to Launch* (Rudin, Aversano & Day, 2006), and *About a Boy* (Bevan, De Niro, Epstein, Fellner & Rosenthal and Weitz & Weitz, 2002). Indeed, while many young and older women pursue and challenge themselves with educational and employment opportunities, which by the dint of feminist activism have become increasingly available, it is easy (albeit simplistic) to lament the seemingly opposite movement of some males. Certainly, if

high-school graduation rates (Jha & Kelleher, 2006), university enrollment rates (College Board Advisory and Policy Center, 2010; Kerr, 2010), and now, incomes of young, educated, urban women are correct (Luscombe, 2010), women are increasingly participating in the post-industrial knowledge economy, creating careers in its higher-end tier of creative, technical, managerial and executive functions or taking the jobs in the ‘cleaning and helping professions’ which men seemingly don’t want (Autor & Wasserman 2013).

Moreover, the dynamic causes and effects of post-industrial economy, with the rise of a knowledge-based service economy, where both manufacturing, blue-collar jobs and certain masculine modalities of working are in decline (McDowell, 2000, 2003) are affecting men in specific ways. In particular, most affected are those men who have had limited education and who have been raised and/or subscribe to a masculine ideal which it makes it difficult for them to ‘do’ the female-gendered emotional labor required in the service industries (Erickson & Pierce 2005; Nixon 2009). Indeed, rather than all men writ large, the decline of manufacturing jobs has enormously affected this class-marked demographic of men. For as Autor (2010) describes in his notion of the polarization of job opportunities, it is this shrinking middle of manufacturing jobs and others at risk of outsourcing and offshoring which has given the current economic downturn a decidedly masculine tinge, thus resulting in descriptors such as ‘hecession.’ Indeed, as Nayak (2003) vividly shows in his ethnographic research on working-class men in England, the polarization of job opportunities in a knowledge-based, post-industrial economy leaves men who lack education with shrinking ‘proper’ job prospects that coincide, as Nixon (2009), puts it, their working-class habitus. As a result, this fuels male detachment from the formal labor market (Fletcher, 2010). Indeed, in my research context of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, in southern Ontario, Canada, a recent report about insecure or precarious employment documents

the decline in local labor-market participation rates, pointing out that “[w]orkers with fewer educational credentials are simply dropping out of the labour force, a trend most pronounced for young men with limited formal education” (Poverty and Employment Precarity Research Group, 2015, p.14). Moreover, this report continues, “[f]or men, insecure employment is associated with delayed marriages and postponing the start of families” (Poverty and Employment Precarity Research Group, 2015, p.19).

Lastly, linking the changing experiences of education, the postindustrial economy and growing precarious employment has been the seismic impacts of neoliberalism (Braedley & Luxton, 2010; Giroux, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005) and the idealization of a neoliberal self, which valorizes an individualized, autonomous, rational and calculating persona (Beck, 1992; Walkerdine 2003). Moreover, as Connell (2010) notes, “Neoliberalism is best seen as a large-scale historical project for the transformation of social structures and practices along market lines. Such a project has to recruit supporters if it is to be successful. It is undertaken by multiple social actors, not just one” (p. 33). Indeed, in the elaboration of the neoliberal self, the pursuit of higher education amidst a volatile job market becomes especially salient. As such, for today’s young people in North America, Britain (Fenton and Dermott, 2006) and in Portugal (Cairns, Growiec & Alves, 2014), higher education, despite its costs, can be seen as a calculated strategy to help protect oneself from the impacts of growing work casualization or precarity and to create career trajectories that might be more likely lead to financial security. Fenton and Dermott, in fact, suggest that their data studying young adults in the UK showed an “absence of a dominant pattern of uncertainty, insecurity and fragmentation” (2006, p. 219) and that higher education offered protection from the job-switching and precarity that affected low-educated youth. Moreover, even in the case of severe austerity encountered by young Portuguese in tertiary

education, Cairns et al. (2014) report that “more education” was still regarded as “a potential means of improving prospects” (1056), along with significantly, moving outside of Portugal to another part of the European Union for work.

In the realm of education, these effects have resulted in program cuts, shifted priorities and given rise to postsecondary programs that offer co-ops, placements, internships, as postsecondary institutions increasingly link higher education to job-ready skills deemed necessary by an increasingly volatile labor market. Indeed, my own institution, offers four-year undergraduate education in targeted fields (such as business, early childhood, justice studies, kinesiology, and media studies) that strive to deliver both the academics of an undergraduate degree as well as the job-ready skills of a college diploma. The notion of ‘delivery’ is important. For, neoliberalism has created an educational marketplace in which students simultaneously become customers taking on debt while shopping for an education that can catapult them successfully into a highly competitive job market.

Research Project: Analytic Framework and Methodology

In order to explore how postsecondary students construe their educational experiences and career aspirations, as gendered learners in today’s educational and labor market, I undertook a small research project in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. With the support of two research assistants, I devised a research process that included a series of focus groups. I wanted to probe more deeply into how students themselves understand and narrativize their educational experiences and career aspirations. Researchers have shown how narratives shed insights into pedagogical experiences (Bleakley, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Huber, Caine, Huber & Steeves, 2013; Marshall & Case, 2010; Scutt & Hobson, 2013).

Kamberelis & Dimitriadis (2013) discuss the various levels of control that the researcher/facilitator has in a focus group. Certainly, I created the key questions to explore my topic a priori. I designed the discussion points during the focus group sessions, including the activity to do ‘mind maps’ for participants to describe and map out their educational and career journeys. In addition, I chose videos and articles to incite discussion about career preparation and trajectories in a volatile, competitive market. Yet, I engaged two research participants with whom I shared my focus group design, and who also participated in schematizing participants’ mind maps and on occasion, in posing questions. As such, our focus groups had a semi-structured session, the control of which was more negotiated and dialogical. Certainly, as the researcher/facilitator and also perhaps because of my social status as a middle-aged, male, albeit racialized, there were power asymmetries that are inherent to focus group design (Carey & Asbury 2012, p. 29). Yet, the collective conversationality of the focus groups, mediated by research assistants who were students themselves, reveal “the dialogic nature of focus group interaction” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2013, p. 20). Kamberelis & Dimitriadis point out that this stems from the “*pedagogical* surface of focus group work,” (p. 20; italics in original) and further identify two other “surfaces”: the *political* surface that permits collective identification and support of social and political issues and the *empirical* surface which speaks to the epistemological dimensions of focus group inquiry and, importantly, the “complex negotiations between “self” and “other” in inquiry (p. 20; italics in original). Taken together, the dialogue, collectivity and engagement with others may allow the researcher/facilitator of a focus group to practice self-reflexivity and what Kamberelis & Dimitriadis (2013) describe as “intellectual/empirical modesty” (p. 35). For, in the give-and-take of conversational focus groups, “focus groups can (and often) do mitigate or inhabit the authority of the researcher,

allowing participants to “take over” or “own” the interview space, which usually results in richer, deeper understandings of whatever is being studied” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2013, p. 40). In total, in my research study, there were fifteen focus groups participants. To explore how young men and women described their educational experiences and career aspirations, we held one group consisting of four females; one group consisting of four males; and a larger, third group, consisting of four males and three females. We based these divisions on an expressive, self-identified view of gender based on demographic data collected before the organization of the focus groups. Participants had to have either attended or graduated from post-secondary education and be between the ages of 18-29, following the rough contours of Generation Y or Millennials. They were recruited through posters and e-mail notifications at postsecondary institutions in the Greater Toronto Area, including Humber College, University of Guelph-Humber, York University and Ryerson University. Of the eight males who participated, 50% were of colour. Table A captures the full demographic details of all the focus group participants. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, all names of the focus group participants are fictitious.

During each focus group, my two research assistants (both female) and I co-facilitated a series of activities with the participants anchored by three themes: (1) Career Aspirations, (2) Gender and Career Choices; and (3) Generational Angst? Anxiety and Fear in a Tight Job Market. For the first theme, participants were asked to map out how their education and other opportunities (placements, internships, co-ops, etc.) are helping them realize their goals. They were asked to address their conceptions of success, happiness, passion and their ‘dream.’ For the second theme, participants were shown three short videos on women and men in ‘non-traditional’ gender careers (women in construction and mining; men in ‘pink collar’ industries) and to discuss attributes men needed to be a successful nurse, early childhood educator or

kindergarten teacher and attributes women needed to be a successful engineer or to work in mining or the oil patch. For the third theme, they were given a recent article about a 29-year old's struggle in landing a job and asked the following questions: How does it relate to what you are hearing from your friends and your own experience? Does it make you feel anxious or fearful about the future? Do you worry about deferring moving out, buying a house, starting a family, and/or being in too much debt?

Due to the small number of participants, my research assistants and I separately and collectively reviewed notes and transcripts of the sessions, and identified key threads in the focus groups dialogue that emerged from the three themes mentioned above. These threads included: financial stability/security; happiness; education; success; and, passion. As a result of our limited sample size, our findings are directional. Nonetheless, they do yield some curious findings on whether and to what extent gender shapes educational experiences, perspectives on success and career preparedness among 18-29-year-old postsecondary-going people in the Greater Toronto Area.

Focus Groups Narratives

Marshall and Case (2010) deploy McCormack's (2000) multi-pronged dimension of analysing narratives, paying attention to how student narratives reveal social relations, relationships between self and society, the situational context of interviews, and moments when something unexpected emerges. In the focus group narratives that I offer here, we see many of these aspects, including how students narrate the social and economic contexts in which they construct their educational experiences and their relationship with the educational and career-creation process. I organize these narratives into three significant themes: (a) financial security; (b) education and networking; and (c) passion.

Theme A: Financial Security.

Consider the following exchange:

Stephanie: My ultimate goal is to become a Dean at a University and not to be greedy but I have a set salary that I want to achieve at least 100,000 a year or more, only because I want to live comfortably and because I want to travel

Barry: [I]n the future I'd love to combine my passion for the arts with my education and get a career in the entertainment side of PR. So either music, fashion, TV or film anything like that. Salary wise, I'd like to obviously live comfortably. I'm not expecting to make like \$100,000 a year as long as I can just live comfortably and support myself I think I'd be happy.

Author: What does live comfortably mean?

Barry: Be able to pay the bills without like you know having to worry about will I have enough money for groceries and rent next month.

Austin: No anxiety about money exactly yeah.

Author: No anxiety over money, okay.

Stephanie: It's stressful, and for me, like I said I like travelling and travelling is not cheap.

Author: Is that similar to what you were raised with or similar what you see in society somewhere? Do you see what I mean? How do you know you're comfortable?

Nelson: Maybe it's not live comfortably, maybe we just sort of mean financial security. Because money provides opportunity. Right?

Cindy: I don't know something like where you have control. Like you won't have to be trying so hard to get money to pay for the bills or, I don't know if you want to go

travelling you won't have the money to do that. It's something better probably than what your family has now. That's how I think about it.

Author: Okay so you'd want to do better financially? Than your family?

Cindy: Yeah and if you're struggling at home right now or something and you want to do better than that that's why you want to go to school.

In this exchange that juxtaposes female and male narratives, we can evince the entanglement of financial security with the fear, stress and anxiety of not being able to afford a life of 'living comfortably,' which some define as six-figure salaries and the ability to travel. Opposite to the stress and anxiety that a lack of sufficient money is the sense of security and opportunity and, interestingly, as Cindy suggests, control. Some, like Stephanie and Barry, mention specific career trajectories, and all might align with Elchardus and Smits' (2008) cluster of the ambitious cluster desirous and expecting financial and upward mobility. Moreover, they might agree with Cairns et al. (2014) finding that higher education advances career prospects; indeed, as Cindy seems to suggest at the closure of the above section. In this way, higher education can be seen as a catalyst and conduit to a career trajectory that affords greater financial comfort in the future.

Theme B: Education and Networking.

Fiona: Women in the workplace have this expectation that they have to be really successful and beyond that nurse or secretary or whatever it may be...I don't know society has this sort of idea of success as being more toward an office job, like professional or something...they have to overcompensate and go to university and have to do this and that and get a better education and it has to be more professional roles.

Fiona elaborates further on higher education, not only as tied to an ‘idea of success’ but to a cultural ideal of professionalism that, for women, represent an ‘overcompensation,’ which perhaps suggests a gendered reading of the volatility and competitiveness of the labor market and the potential to secure upward mobility via a ‘profession.’ Yet, interestingly, she, along with her focus group peers, do not see higher education, in and of its own, as securing the launch of a career:

Fiona: [I]f you don’t have a lot of credentials like a university degree or even a college diploma but you have a lot of hands-on experience, and it depends on the job, and you can actually develop those skills without having that specified training or education. You might actually be able to outperform somebody coming in with a degree..if someone has the right attitude and works at it, you can train anyone on the specific job skills.

Austin: Can I touch on the point about having degrees? I think there is definitely okay Dean, you need a PhD—there are certain paths where you definitely need education. Most paths education doesn’t hurt, doesn’t deter. No one is not going to hire you because you have education, if anything, it is definitely a plus. But there’s like a spectrum in terms of how much it matters in different careers. And I’ve spoken to a number of people including I can’t give the name, but one of the Dean’s at Ryerson [University]. I’ve spoken to a lot of successful people who, when I went to private school, my parents struggled to get me into private school, I met a lot of people whose parents are very affluent and I, that was one of the reasons my parents put me there is because they wanted me to experience the way that they raised their kids the way that they talk and think about life. They wanted me to be able to be successful and see things that way. And I’ve talked to a lot of these people and they don’t really suggest education. Like a lot of

them are basically—believe in like your network. If someone is two degrees away, then fine, talk to your first degree person and get in touch with the second degree person through them and like network, network, network, and that's how you will get what you want. It doesn't work for a lot of paths like being a Dean, but if you want to be involved in business or anything entrepreneurial or even want to be involved in things where you're helping people like community worker programs and things where you want to get involved in the community there's a lot of ways to network in that and go very high without ever having to have an education.

Both Fiona and Austin, responding to Stephanie's earlier desire to be a Dean, point to the value of higher education, but state how, on its own, it is insufficient to provide a career success. For that, they highlight and elaborate the value of on-the-job experience (or experiential learning), on-the-job training, and networking. Indeed, as Austin illuminates, such experience and networking is valuable for not only entrepreneurial fields in which we might expect it to be, but even the so-called helping professions. Yet, such an approach is not for the faint of heart, as the next exchange illustrates:

Nelson: You need to be a driven individual to go out there, have prepared whatever you need to go up there and talk to someone 'hey listen my name is so and so like I'd love to work for you... it's up to the individual ultimately to go out and do that and I think a lot of people that I've met along the way are just not as driven or determined to do so.

Simran: I agree with you because in a way you need to have those skills in order to make sure they get the job that you want.

Cindy: You can't be shy.

Taken together, Simran, Cindy, Nelson, Austin, Fiona elaborate and elevate the performance of a determining, calculating self, which reflects Beck's (1992) individualisation thesis as at the heart of neoliberal subjectivity. They echo Du Gay (1996)'s assertion of how individuals become entrepreneurs of the self (in Francis & Skelton (2008, p. 312). Yet, this "auto-entrepreneurialism," in which to assemble a portfolio of experience and social relationships as they pursue postsecondary education, is observable both female and male narratives. As such, the young men are not demonstrating an anti-academic 'laddish' or 'slacker' mentality (Epstein, 1998; Francis, 1999; Jackson, 2002; Martino, 1999), that sets academic pursuits in opposite to masculinity. Rather, they are joining the women in asserting a neoliberal subjectivity of self-driven pursuits where they combine the process of earning a higher education credential with the expansion of their social capital through networking with the aim to, connecting from theme A, of securing financial stability and comfort. How does gender fit into this? In the next, and larger section, I want to evince that the elaboration of this subjectivity, is, for the young men, couched in a language of 'passion', which orients and anchors the pursuit of career and goal aspirations.

Theme C: Passion.

Nelson: I initially wanted to do maybe like become a lawyer or something like that but then I sort of fell in love with policing instead. So, I began participating in law and police related organisations did a lot of volunteering...I currently volunteer with these youth at risk so I teach them lifesaving and first aid...I've already applied to the Police Service and I'm waiting for their answer for their response. Ultimately, ideally my goals are, I want to be able to live comfortably... have financial freedom. What I mean by that is not have to worry about bills like as a student I still am obviously worrying about how to pay

for this and that and paying off debt etc. I want to continue and have the same passion I have now in the years to come so I never get bored of it. Have purpose, I really want to be able to—for me, the ultimate defining goal for me is to be able to say I have a purpose. I need to have a reason for doing this I need to be able to sort of have justification for why I'm doing what I'm doing. And I want to be the best at what I do. And to be the best and the other thing is to always grow. I love to take different courses and different sort of skills I always try to keep building myself and I love to do that. And of course, socially, the goals are ultimately having a family and you know be free of debt, always have a goal you got to have a plan, right.

Nelson offers a mapped-out narrative that features a career which he 'fell in love with'; namely, policing, in tropes that we saw in earlier themes, such as financial comfort and security. Yet, he frames his desire for this career in the language of passion, goal setting and realization, and purpose. Around this organizing core, at once of his narrative and his eventual life, he hangs other desirable attributes, including having a family and being free of debt. He enunciates the centrality of the self-making learner, a product of neoliberal education reform in which learners must curate their own courses of study, calibrated to their self-determined goals. Even desire – here as purpose or passion – is seen as residing in the individual. Moreover, one could argue that the dominant cultural narrative of 'finding your passion' reverberates with neoliberalism as well. Yet, if Nelson presents, consider Declan, a contemporary of Nelson, although with a vastly divergent experience:

Declan: When I was in high school, I had no direction, nothing particularly that I wanted to do...But in grade twelve, I had a really good teacher for World Religion and he got me really interested in stuff like that and I had friends that were into literature so the arts

were a really big influence. So, I ended up in Classics, Humanities and Religion at [Wilfrid] Laurier [University] and switched to Carleton [University]... moving away from home cost me a lot so that became a big problem ... So I decided to take a year off, get some money and only take as many classes as I could afford without incurring more debt, but it spread out my university a little bit more than usual, maybe five and a half years 'cause I had a lot of part - time jobs...labor, call center, bakery, and camp...I also did, on the side, film and writing, both fiction and nonfiction, like newspapers.

Declan's narrative foregrounds the transformational of higher education as public good into an increasingly privatized benefit and cost borne by the learner. It sketches the effects of the rise of the post-industrial knowledge/service economy divide, which fuels the downsizing, offshoring and descaling of 'proper' industrial jobs that the young, working class men studied by Nayak (2003) deride. Declan, embracing the 'flexible' self, finds ways to 'make it work' – to navigate from service job to service job. Certainly, his experience resonates with the growing trend of precarious employment (Poverty and Employment Precarity Research Group, 2015). Yet, it also leads him to his passion:

Declan: [After] university... I ended up teaching and working at camp as an outdoor educator...up to this year I was just directing the program for kids with intellectual disabilities. I decided I wanted to pursue my creative side, my storytelling side, so that's what brought me to the post-grad program in Radio at Humber... I really [love] radio... it's definitely my passion, I'm so glad that I found it as a method of storytelling... So, the next step: I'm almost done and I have something lined up in Toronto at TSN [The Sports Network] ..., and then hopefully I want to get a job in small- town Ontario...I want to buy a house, have a family...that's kind of my goal.

So, Declan, like Nelson, finds his passion in radio as a form of storytelling. As with Nelson, he enunciates a shared language of passion and goals, the latter -- house and family -- however prosaic, align with those of Nelson. As such, Declan crafts a self-stylized pursuit of passion, evocative once again of the flexible, neoliberal self, taking ownership to make oneself. While Declan's pathway to his self-stylized pursuit of passion seems more labyrinthine than that of Nelson's, both reflect learner subjectivities that emphasize finding one's passion and purpose and being responsive to opportunity and change. Importantly, postsecondary education figures strongly in their narratives, providing a critical space to gain knowledge, perspective and tangible skills that both facilitate the passion and will lead to the desired career. Yet, as we saw in Theme B, and in the narratives of young women as well, education hardly seems the protagonist of the story. Other experiences, including their own experiences outside the classroom -- from volunteering and paid work -- are highly influential in shaping the contours of their goals, which often include having a family and obtaining a measure of financial freedom (from debt). Moreover, these journeys are personally meaningful and resonant, and so if some young men are reporting higher levels of educational satisfaction it may be that education, whether an initial or subsequent course of study, is a major piece of a larger puzzle in the pursuit of personal passion and purpose.

None is as clear on the significance of passion as that of Keith. Here he differentiates having a decent-paying good job in warehousing and delivery at a global food and drink company's distribution center from building a career for which you have passion:

Keith: This guy [his operation manager] even told me when I moved up into the driving position: "Oh don't go that way because there's no visibility. You can't be any higher

than that.” But from the warehouse position you can talk you can work your way up and learn the business. And that’s exactly what a lot of people did in my position.

Author: Is there a lesson there?

Keith: The lesson is huge! ... It says stick to the grunt work and work from the bottom up. That’s what it means to me and that’s what it’s going to be for policing. I’m going to start off in the bottom and then what my goal is, is to be Staff Sergeant... It takes a long time but for some people you can put yourself up there just by learning by learning about the business you’re with. Like if I keep going in the position that I am in, I know there is no visibility in driving but I can easily push into the office work and start working in the sales and from sales I can move into operations and then from operations I can keep moving up. And it’s not that hard because I, unlike a lot of people I work with, can speak better than my own operations manager.

Interestingly, Keith narrates a typical work trajectory, before the advent of the flexible self: at the bottom, work hard, move up. It appears to be a good opportunity, allowing Keith to avoid precarious employment. Yet, Keith remains disenchanted. Speaking in comparing himself and his manager, he opines:

Keith: The difference is learning from university that’s where I feel I can advance ahead of him...but that’s not my passion. My passion is not with [the company].

Author: So, you’re saying you could do this as you already have a network [with this company] but your passion is something else which may be harder to start.

Keith: That’s exactly what I’m trying to get at. Where my passion is, it’s hard when the money is holding you down. I make good money but at the same time what I made with

my lifestyle I need to have this job but at the same time I have to start applying but I can't because I'm stuck here. I make too much money to just leave it. And it's bad.

Despite being comfortably employed in a position with room for advancement, Keith wrestles with the sense that he's deferring the pursuit of his passion for the income and attendant lifestyle his present job affords. Keith distinguishes pursuing a 'job for money' versus a career based on personal passion, a self-reflexive recognition that also motivated confreres Declan and Nelson. This quest for purpose is tempered by the era of economic uncertainty and precarity in which young people live.

As Reuben declares, echoing the researchers of the Poverty and Employment Precarity Research Group (2015) in linking growing precarious employment with the delay of conventional signs of adulthood:

Reuben: I still feel optimistic, but some things that I had planned for maybe it'll have to be put on hold for a little bit longer. So maybe something I planned to have at thirty won't come till thirty - five or thirty- six, or something like that. That's how I see it, but I'm not pessimistic, 'cause people have it worse than me so I still remain optimistic about the future.

Yet, Reuben acknowledges the hyper-competitive environment which his generation faces: "When my parents were coming out of high school, they weren't competing with people from Taiwan, Japan for jobs. We're competing with people from all over the world for jobs, whether it's a police officer or you want to be a lawyer...it's become super – competitive" (Reuben, personal communication). Unfortunately, according to another respondent, Austin below, the passion pursuit of a 'dream' career stands in contrast to the grim realities of the job hunt and prospects for college and university graduates, and as he starkly puts it, the 'dream' vs. the

haunting specter of rising student debt loads.

Austin: I feel like from talking to people...there's a sense of if you need money and you're not doing what your dream is perfectly, that you have to do a number of things. You can either go back to school so you can either collect more debt, where you can learn something more—hopefully help you get a job. But it will at least feel like you are being productive. You are working towards higher income or you are learning things you won't learn. Or you just apply to as many jobs as possible most of which are not your dream, they are just things you think you can get hired at because you have the need to make money.

Austin bluntly offers the flipside to the neoliberal dream, and the rhetoric of the flexible, entrepreneurial self: indebted, but highly educated youth in a Sisyphean struggle. As Austin continues:

Austin: It's not even easy to get a minimum wage job. It's like you put out fifty resumes...in places in your neighbourhood that are you know within twenty minutes to get to and it took three months before I got any responses from any of them. And the one that responded hired me. And you know, even that I had to quit, they wanted me back after that (laughs). But I quit because...I'm so consumed by this full-time job here that...I'm not spending enough time trying to network and build my career as an entertainer or online business with my websites... I feel like a lot of people feel trapped in that situation and I feel like they have to go back to school because they can't get that job...Or they need to get a minimum wage job which still isn't easy, and then when you get the minimum wage job sometimes you settle because you have some sense of comfort and you're also very consumed by it, there isn't as much time to go looking elsewhere.

Austin's narrates a bind many young men and women face in positioning themselves in a neoliberal climate of precarious employment: between education and money, where further education can quickly equal increasing one's debt burden; between a minimum-wage job and the Dream Job; the difficulty of even landing the former and then once secured, how the time and energy to pursue the possibility of the 'dream job' vanishes. Importantly, the political, economic and social realities that produce the state of precarious affairs, remain undiscussed. Rather, for Austin, it is the individual who fails, for "it is the duty of the individual to be sufficiently flexible to maximise the opportunities available her/him, and any failure resides in the individual rather than in the socioeconomic structures" (Francis, 2006, p. 191).

Nonetheless, Austin remains optimistic, a sentiment echoed by Nelson:

Austin: The way that I try to picture it is that my parents always said to me, "Do what you like because you'll be good at it, if you're good at it somebody will pay you good for it". And if you sort of keep fostering that ability or fostering that talent or whatever it is, eventually you will find a career out of it. You just have to think outside of the box.

Author: How do you learn to think outside of the box? Do you learn that in school? Education?

Nelson: Experiences. It's different things you do. Right? Expose yourself to as many things as possible look for opportunities, don't sit back, go out there, be driven.

Discussion

While young men, like young women, share the anxieties regarding financial security, the necessity to couple a pursuit of higher education with volunteering, on-the-job experiences and networking, the narratives of many of the young men reflect the salience of passion as a recurring motif in their production of a successful self. This self is characterized by higher

education, but not solely so. More salient is crafting a learner subjectivity whereby one demonstrates the ability to build and balance educational achievement with job experiences alongside a self-styled, developing passion for a vocation. Despite twists in these biographical snapshots, passion undergirds how young men define their learning subject position and make meaning of their educational and career journeys.

Vallerand (2008) sees self-determination theory, in which people pursue their will and goals meaningful to them, in line with a notion of passion, as part of a process where:

people engage in various activities throughout life in the hope of satisfying the basic psychological needs of autonomy (a desire to feel a sense of personal initiative), competence (a desire to interact effectively with the environment), and relatedness (a desire to feel connected to significant others) (p. 1).

Vallerand distinguishes ‘obsessive’ from ‘harmonious passion,’ describing how:

[H]armonious passion results from an autonomous internalization of the activity into the person's identity. An autonomous internalization occurs when individuals have freely accepted the activity as important for them without any contingencies attached to it...When harmonious passion is at play...the activity occupies a significant, but not overpowering, space in the person's identity and is in harmony with other aspects of the person's life (2008, p. 2).

I submit that the narratives that I’ve explored show young men engaging in pursuing harmonious passion. Yet, passion and the self-stylizing of a learner subjectivity needs to be reconciled with neoliberal realities, where idealized selves must “narrate their life story as if it were the outcome of deliberative choices” (Gill, 2008, p. 436). If young men are to be successful learners and workers under neoliberalism, they must do so by adopting this neoliberal subjectivity.

Unsurprisingly, then, their evocations of passion, drive and motivation align with the heroic narratives of entrepreneurs (Olsson, 2002), where “success for [the male entrepreneurs] is linked to hard work, risk-taking, and learning by mistakes through the tests, trials and tribulations of the heroic quest” (p. 146).

This then begs the question; namely, should we read these narratives by young men and their pursuit of passion and purpose as necessarily masculine? Gill (2008) argues:

To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen. Could it be that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects? Further exploration of this intimate relationship is urgently needed to illuminate both postfeminist media culture and contemporary neoliberal social relations (2008:443).

Moreover, Francis and Skelton (2008) read Walkerdine (2003) as associating some of neoliberal subjects’ key attributes – diligence, responsibility, self-regulation, and care as ‘feminine’ (p. 314). Yet, Francis and Skelton (2008) argue that other tasks include “entrepreneurism, assertion, self-confidence, ‘drive’, self-reliance, risk-taking, are ‘masculine.’” (p. 315).

So where would passion fit? Is it a synonym for ‘drive’ in the list of masculine attributes? Vallerand in other studies (Mageau & Vallerand, 2007; Vallerand, R.J., Blanchard, C.M., Mageau, G.A., Koestner, R., Ratelle, C.F., Léonard M, et al. (2003) asserts that harmonious passion is not gendered, or the results of various studies don’t vary by gender. Indeed, in its evolution, as the young male narratives evince, passion evokes both socially constructed masculine and feminine traits: diligence, responsibility, self-regulation, self-confidence, ‘drive’,

and risk-taking to name several. As such, I submit that we should read their narratives as the product of risk-taking, heroic and self-confident self-entrepreneurship that necessarily involves self-regulation, introspection, diligence and responsibility. In this way, they offer a new learner subjectivity for males beyond laddishness and ‘cool’ masculinities that shun academic achievement.

While Olsson’s notion of the heroic quest echoes in the narratives of the young men that I’ve discussed, I would distinguish the latter from being subsumed under the much-theorized notion of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For, nowhere in the young men’s narratives is an explicit sense of domination of women or other men or an overt sense of male privilege. Rather, the domination is self-referential; they perform and stylize a sense of self that, however gendered, is more about how they see their learner positionality in our unequal, postindustrial, neoliberal service economy awash with underemployed university graduates. In this way, they stand opposite to the beleagueredness of the displaced, middle-aged blue collar/working-class male in the research of Fletcher (2010), Nixon (2009) and that of Walkerdine (2006). Walkerdine, studying laid-off steelworkers in Wales, writes how: “one man described himself as too shy and not pushy enough to get the work he wanted...[a sentiment] commonly felt by older men having to cope with the demands of a labor market in which they have to constantly market themselves” (2006, p. 23). By contrast, Austin, Keith, Nelson, Declan, and the others share the characteristic reflexivity necessary for agency in our times. Yet, while Connell (2010) emphasizes that “the treasured figure,” of neoliberalism, the entrepreneur, is “culturally coded masculine,” (p. 34), it is not the “traditional masculinity” of the working class. Therefore, how we conceptualize masculinity and the notion of hegemonic masculinity needs to be framed. Korobov (in Chu et al., 2009) suggests that:

For young heterosexual males, traditional masculinity may no longer have the cash value it once did. Instead, it seems to be increasingly supplanted for an "everyman" form of "ordinary masculinity" that indirectly achieves power, control, and dominance through knowing self-deprecation, ordinariness, and nonchalance. This supplanting of the traditional masculine script of the hyper- virile, seductive, tough and in-control hegemonic male is no longer a media fad reserved for beer commercials and sitcoms, but is alive in the quotidian details of boys' and young men's everyday social practices (pp. 124, 126).

Young men, as reflexive social actors in a neoliberal educational and employment marketplace, are learning to fashion new ordinary, masculine selves beyond the traditional contours of the hegemonic male. There are echoes of the lad in Korobov's "ordinary masculinity" and Hodgett's statement that "To be a boy is to succeed without trying," (2008). To be successful, young males in the knowledge economy, in a time of precarity and adversity, seem to be adopting Gill's observation of neoliberal subjectivity; namely, the imperative to self-regulate, self-transform and "present all their actions as freely chosen" (2008, p. 443). Indeed, "knowing self-deprecation" requires introspection and self-regulation. I would argue that these young men may be succeeding because they are heeding the call of neoliberal educational policies and practices, which embed learner success on the actions of individuals themselves. Thus, the rhetoric of passion offers a culturally suitable way to anchor and elaborate neoliberal subjectivities.

Conclusion

Sociologists of education have long spoken about the "hidden curriculum" (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990) that influences and structures what and how students learn. In higher

education, that hidden curriculum involves the learner becoming a customer of specific knowledge and training with the tacit understanding that postsecondary education is a valuable commodity in the neoliberal knowledge economy. Administrators, educators and students participate in co-creating this understanding; students are demanding ever more market-responsive education, and universities and colleges continue to respond by innovating new programs (A. Jackson, 2013). In this way, both sides force learners to become flexible and adaptive.

Furthermore countering the media portrayals of young men as slackers, cooped up in their parents' basement and failing to launch, and critical voices that argue that young men are being 'left behind' (Jeffrey, 2008; Jonas, 2011) by the vagaries of a post-industrial, service economy, the men in my study assert a different discourse of self-understanding. Importantly, they are not reproducing an unadulterated hegemonic masculinity reliant on older patriarchal lifeways, nor are they trying to recuperate a lost masculinity. While complicit with hegemonic neoliberalism, these narratives occur at a time where many men are un(der)unemployed, underachieving and made redundant. Therefore, they may offer insight into crafting a resilient male subject, and thereby, a new framework to reimagine masculinity that doesn't reject femininity, but selectively incorporates some of its attributes.

What then, is the place of gender in the 21st century neoliberal, flexible learner? Beyond lamenting gender achievement gaps, these narratives show remarkable similarities in how young men view education as one of the conditions of a successful life, which in turn, includes financial freedom and comfortable living, precisely the hallmarks of a middle-class lifestyle that too is under threat by the polarization of job opportunities. They reveal how young men are looking for educational experiences that can align with their own personalized views of passion and purpose.

One could surmise that those who find passion for a course of study tend to feel confident of their skills and be convinced that these skills have prepared them for a competitive job market. More troubling are those young men who do not have that confidence and passion, both necessary dimensions for a successful learner subjectivity in a neoliberal climate of austerity and precarity.

Study Limitations

In terms of my study's limitations, I didn't study those young men and women who have not pursued higher education, who may have dropped out or pushed out of high school and would have a potentially more antagonistic relationship with higher education. I didn't find young people with undergraduate experiences in the sciences and engineering, whose greater likelihood for well-paid employment might have suggested other self-stylizations, or conversely, more entrenched neoliberalist subjectivity. In addition, given my focus on young male narratives and their evocations of passion, while this present article does juxtapose narratives for the young female participants with those from the young males, the discussion of the narratives does focus on the narratives of the latter. Indeed, a separate article would be required and warranted to elaborate the themes in the narratives of the young females.

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