

# Reading Raewyn

## *Reflections on a Lifelong Inspiration*

Sara Delamont

It has been 20 years since Raewyn Connell published *The Men and the Boys* (2000a), which can be seen as the foundational text of boyhood studies. This journal is a good place to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of that book, and there are two special issues coming in the winter of 2020 and spring of 2021. Connell's work has been part of my academic thinking about education and gender for 47 years. I have chosen to situate my appreciation for *The Men and the Boys* in the context of that 47-year time frame. *The Men and the Boys*, which we are celebrating in the next issue of *Boyhood Studies*, came late in my engagement with Connell's work. It is important to understand that Connell's work has spanned three scholarly developments: the rise of women's studies, men's studies, and boyhood studies.

*The Men and the Boys* is a book with a global sweep. It addresses big topics in men's studies, in the context of globalization. Connell focuses on bodies and embodiment, on sport, on enculturation, and on power and hegemony. Because it focused not only on adult men but also on boys, it is a foundational text in boyhood studies. Here I briefly contextualize the book in Connell's overall scholarship, and as a thread in my own career.

Few readers of Connell in 2020 will have started where I did. I began my journey with Connell in 1973, when I was a new lecturer in the School of Education at Leicester University, teaching sociology of education to large classes of postgraduates training to be teachers. My two colleagues, Gerald Bernbaum and Tom Whiteside—and yes, they were called Tom and Gerry by the students—assigned me the lecture on education and politics. I had then, and still have now, no idea what they envisaged I should write the lecture to cover. I suspect they were thinking of the research papers being published about the student unrest of 1968 in the United States, Paris, and at the London School of Economics. The student rebellions, and the anti-Vietnam War movement, were the catalysts for the women's movement and therefore for women's studies. I went to the School of Education library, run by Roy Kirk, and found Connell's *The Child's Construction of Politics*



(1971) on the shelf, which solved my problem. It had been researched when Australian troops (I think only men) were fighting and dying in Vietnam. It was not only what I needed to write a lecture, it met the criteria, which I had not yet codified for myself, for the type of empirical sociological work the students needed to learn about. That book included insights into how boys in Australia were thinking about manhood in an era when “their” soldiers were dying in a foreign war. Connell’s work was pioneering in that the children’s voices were treated with respect, a rare quality in 1971, but one central to the *Boyhood Studies* agenda. Taking Connell’s subsequent research seriously is important, because the research agenda of any scholar of boyhood needs to include understanding the wider context of the societies and institutions in which boys are located. I see *The Men and the Boys* more clearly against the other studies she had conducted.

Later, working at Cardiff University, I seized on *Making the Difference* (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett 1982) and *Teachers’ Work* (Connell 1985) with delight when they appeared. Connell’s Australian books not only focused on elite schools, but also included girls’ schooling, when the intellectual agenda of sociology of education up until the late 1970s had been heavily focused only on educating boys (Acker 1981). There was, and is, so little good sociology of elite schooling that finding research on fee-paying schools in Australia was inspirational. I had done my own PhD fieldwork in an elite girls’ school (St. Luke’s) in Scotland and was constantly told that such institutions were not “typical” and were sociologically “irrelevant.” It never made sense to me that sociologists did not study the schools that educated the ruling class and the upper middle class, who were going to make the decisions about state education for everyone else for the next 50 years. In both these books male hegemony in schools was explored, and the inequalities of class and wealth were discussed alongside gender issues. Not all researchers work hard to address both class and gender concurrently.

Reading *Teacher’s Work*, I remember being deeply impressed by the sensitivity Connell brought to a case study of a feminist mathematics teacher, who had deep ambivalences about working in a private school and the privilege that it represented, but was also passionate about mathematics. She had decided that it was vital for some young women at least to experience success in math, and for schoolgirls to meet women mathematicians. However, her teaching experiences in state schools had convinced this woman that she could not achieve those goals in coeducational settings or when dealing with the indiscipline in schools in the state sector. The presence of boys, especially working-class boys, impeded her desire to teach girls math

successfully. Connell showed that this teacher's subject identity, her feminism and her political beliefs, were in conflict in complex ways related to schoolboy masculinities.

Connell moved on from educational research to write about gender more widely, and produced three books that changed social science discourse. In *Gender and Power* (1987), *Masculinities* (1995) and *The Men and the Boys* (2000a), Connell produced a theoretical rethinking of sociological standpoints on gender. *The Men and the Boys* needs to be seen alongside those two predecessors as the foundation for social science research on boyhood. Rather than recapitulating the arguments in those books, the source of inspiration for boyhood studies comes from the positioning others imposed on Connell after *Gender and Power* was published.

Connell's work is highlighted in my book *Feminist Sociology* (Delamont 2003), which probably could not have been written without Connell's pioneering scholarship. I was particularly interested in a pair of book chapters (Connell 1997, 2000b) that may not be familiar to readers of *Boyhood Studies*. The 1997 chapter is in a collection on *Feminist Sociology* (Laslett and Thorne 1997) and is a messy text with vignettes from Connell's life, and a memorable comment on how *Gender and Power* (Connell 1987) had been used to put her into a pigeonhole as a founder of the new men's studies.

What is most striking is the difficulty many journals and reviews have in categorising the book. Can't be social theory because it's not about Marx and Weber. Can't be women's studies because it is written by a man! . . . Seven journals work out a solution that completely throws me. . . . Because it's about gender, and because it's by a man, it must be men's studies. . . . I have not felt so firmly positioned since the days when reviewers decided that because I wrote about class I must be a Marxist. (Connell 1997: 159)

The birth of men's studies now seems a long time ago, and today its existence is uncontroversial. *The Men and the Boys* was a keystone of the next academic area to grow: boyhood studies. Revisiting the discourse Connell reports from the 1990s and comparing it with the establishment of boyhood studies would be a good project.

Connell above all does not deserve being "positioned" by others. The intellectual continuity between her research on how Australian boys in the late 1960s understood masculinity in the era of the Vietnam War and her work done when HIV was rampant provides a legacy of contemporary work on boys. I conclude here by saying that I have owned all the books except *The Child's Construction of Politics* (Connell 1971)—which could usefully be republished with a contemporary introduction about Extinction Rebel-

lion—but on retirement I gave my copies to younger colleagues and current doctoral students to help them take Connell’s ideas into the future in their careers. Their research on boys and men will take Connell’s ideas forward.



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## Note

1. Raewyn is a transgender woman, who made a formal transition late in life. Most of her earlier work was published under the gender-neutral name R. W. Connell. See [http://www.raewynconnell.net/p/about-raewyn\\_20.html](http://www.raewynconnell.net/p/about-raewyn_20.html).

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