

Resources and Strategies used by Young Black Men to gain Status on an Inner-city London Estate

For almost a century, urban ethnographies have investigated the practices of young men, trying to understand how they live their lives in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage and societal discrimination. These studies have revealed an intricate and complicated picture, which has allowed scholars to uncover patterns of cultural norms and behaviors and shown how groups of young men have their informal structures of organization, with their value systems and sets of social codes and rules.

Some studies, to which this paper aspires to add, have also explored how these young men construct, negotiate, and perform their masculine identities, for, within these groups of young men, there are also, inevitably, leaders who are the local poster boys and practice dominant and, often, hegemonic formations of masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2018). They exemplify the most powerful version of masculinity on show and perform a specific type of localized street masculinity, which provides a blueprint of how to think and act, so shaping and regulating what acceptable behavior is, what it is not, and to which the young people within the community must acquire and abide by.

Although many researchers acknowledge underlying structural disadvantages, these tend to flatten out more nuanced analyses of what is happening in these unique local contexts, played out by a complex set of individual circumstances (King, 2022).

Here, there is little room for either the voices or the agency of these young people (Waling, 2019). Few studies seek explanations in young people's own words, and we argue that we should talk and listen to them, try to understand, and uncover how they live and spend their days.

As sociologists, we are particularly interested in examining the practices and relationships of individuals as members of social groups and networks. The central proposition of this paper is that people (in this case, young Black men) draw on a series of resources available in a specific setting, which are activated using strategies to gain peer group status. The main aim is to analyse and delineate these resources and strategies that three particular young men accessed and employed.

The setting for this paper is an inner-city housing estate in London, which we call Maxwell (a pseudonym). Within an area of disadvantage, which experiences high levels of crime, Maxwell appears run down, showing a lack of investment, and despite signs of gentrification in the form of expensive coffee shops, there is, apart from the local youth club, a lack of services and recreational spaces. Many adolescents and young people on the estate are Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME). However, we also acknowledge that they were not just 'young Black men'; although the research's main focus was on ethnicity/race, gender and age, we draw on the concept of intersectionality (Collins, 2015; Hamilton, Armstrong, and Seeley, 2019), to also highlight other fault lines of oppression that enable the reproduction of inequalities, including poverty and social class [1]), which may have as much, or an even more, meaningful effect on identities in Maxwell.

The fieldwork draws on King's doctoral thesis (King, 2022), occurring over nine months, in 2019 against a backdrop of escalating youth violence and knife crime, particularly in London. During the preceding year, to March 2020, fatalities from knife crime in the UK were the highest on record (ONS, 2020). Almost 25% of males in London, aged 11-16, reported knowing a regular knife carrier (Harding, 2020).

As the young men in King's (2022) study insisted, they were not part of a gang, we have not explicitly drawn on "gang" literature; however, we are influenced by some recent critical ethnographic studies about UK gang culture (e.g., Densley, 2013; Fraser, 2015; and Gunter, 2008). The study is also inspired by "classic" ethnographies from the UK and US that explore power relations and the informal rules and codes that actors – particularly young men - use to organize their lives on the streets in inner-city spaces. These include Thrasher's *The Gang* (1927), Whyte's (1943) *Street Corner Society*, and, more recently, MacLeod's (1987) *Ain't No Making It*, Anderson's (1999) *Code of the Street*, Bourgois's (2003) *In Search of Respect* and Ilan's (2015) *Understanding Street Culture* [2]. These studies are frameworks for understanding youth violence in high-risk communities and demonstrate how an oppositional culture is created by socioeconomic disadvantage and societal discrimination. Common themes emerging from these studies include peer respect and affirmation, role models, masculine identities and vulnerability.

Following the introduction, the paper introduces the main theoretical orientations underpinning our analysis. After detailing the methodology, we present the main findings that explore the resources and strategies that three young men draw on and use to gain status and promote the estate's dominant and hegemonic forms of masculinity.

Theoretical Understandings

Masculinities

The theories of masculinity we draw on include the work of Connell (2000), Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Messerschmidt (2018), which have been highly influential in the field for over 30 years. In particular, we use *hegemonic, dominant,*

complicit, and *subordinate* masculinities concepts. Occupying a place in gender relations (Connell, 2000) and conceptualized in the plural, masculinities are multiple, fluid and contextual, dependent on time and place. Although we are interested in localized masculinities, these patterns also exist at regional and global levels. Taking an interpretivist position, we view them as socially constructed, negotiated, performed, provisional and open to change. There are hierarchies of masculinities everywhere. A dominant type is the most powerful and culturally renowned form of manhood (or boyhood) in a particular setting, providing a template of how to think and act.

The last 25 years have witnessed some conceptual confusion between dominant and hegemonic masculinities. However, most scholars in critical masculinities studies recognize that the critical difference between the two is that the latter “legitimizes unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities” (Messerschmidt, 2020, p. 21). Crucially, both dominant and hegemonic forms can exist in the same setting and be practiced by the same people. Complicit masculinities imitate characteristics of the masculinities at the top of the hierarchy. However, it is a weaker form, and the young men practicing it lack the resources to belong to the top group and thus have less power and influence.

The other pattern of masculinities we are interested in is subordinate masculinities, which are constructed by the dominant and hegemonic forms as inferior or anomalous. Their features are the antithesis of successful manhood (or boyhood). Nevertheless, by association, they gain some of the benefits of what Connell calls its “patriarchal dividend” (1995, p.79), including being looked after when in trouble.

Maxwell's Street Masculinity

Maxwell's dominant and hegemonic forms of masculinity create a local brand of street masculinity as part of the street culture. Following research by Gunter (2008), Ilan (2015) maintains that, instead of viewing *street culture* as one phenomenon, we should see it as a cultural spectrum or continuum. Gunter sees the majority of 'ordinary', or 'non-spectacular' (352), adolescents and young men occupying the centre-ground, while a small minority, inhabiting a world of 'badness', are found at the margin. This particular form of urban street culture that pervaded Maxwell's public spaces was inextricably linked to highly performative and sometimes violent formations of masculinity and played out in this geographical location while intersecting with race and social class. Several leading young men were exemplars of the dominant and hegemonic forms, and many on Maxwell aspired to join in their support of this version of manhood and become part of "the game" (Harding, 2020) of being "on-road" (Gunter, 2008). The street masculinity was driven by a desire to achieve and maintain peer group status and respect and underpinned by the resources an individual could access and mobilize by using and performing various strategies.

The street masculinity had certain features or characteristics, which predominantly constituted the dominant formation of masculinity: e.g., living in the fast lane; having "swagger"; taking risks; flaunting material possessions and displaying success; being "someone" and being able to command respect; using violence and often carrying a knife; being loyal and trustworthy; standing up for oneself and being independent; proving oneself; being able to offer protection to others and provide for one's family; taking drugs; showing antipathy to state authorities (especially the police); using

social media and music platforms; having local knowledge. However, many of these features were also awash with inequitable gender practices and beliefs and became hegemonic when they specifically legitimated unequal relationships (Messerschmidt, 2018): girls were objectified, and girlfriends were considered as trophies; homophobia and misogyny were rife, and other patterns of masculinity were usually feminized, subordinated and regarded as weak or lesser. Three other significant themes underscored this way of living: (1) a compelling need to belong, (2) a relentless anticipation of danger which gave rise to (3) feelings of vulnerability. There was also a fragility to this leading form of masculinity: leading figures' authority required daily maintenance; they were only as good as their last fight or altercation and could go quickly from hero to zero.

The Body

The social and material practices through which and by which masculine identities exist are often described in terms of what people do with their bodies – how they act, behave and perform, and become *somebody* (Swain, 2003). We have, therefore, embraced theories of embodiment and placed the body centrally in our research. Embodiment is a social process (Turner, 2000); the young men's bodies are not passive - something inscribed and acted upon – instead, they are actively produced and involved in the development and the performance of their bodies and can be viewed as embodied social agents. Connell refers to this practice as "body-reflexive practices" (Connell, 2000, p.27), whereby the body becomes both an agent and object of practice, showing how social and cultural factors interact with individuals' experiences of the corporal and material body.

Status, Resources, and Strategies

Young men's status stems from their position within the peer group hierarchy, which becomes relevant when considered relatively. Status is not given but is often the result of intricate and intense manoeuvring and negotiation and is sustained through performance on the street. Ultimately, their hierarchical position in the peer group is determined by the collection of economic, social, cultural, and physical resources that each young man can draw on and accumulate and the strategies they can deploy. Some resources may be *economical* (e.g., money, material possessions), *social and linguistic* (e.g., friendships, interpersonal skills, ways of talking), *cultural* (e.g., latest fashions; social media; specific knowledge), and *physicality* (e.g., physically imposing, "cool" deportment). Although scholars, including Connell (1998, p. 5), write: "[masculinities] are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given milieu", the terms "resource" and "strategy" can sometimes be conflated, and the boundaries can become blurred and indistinct. Taking our lead from the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1986), we refer to resources as forms of capital, assets, or stocks that relate to types of differential resources of power, and strategies as the processes that individuals use to apply them as they are put to productive use. Concisely: resources and strategies are the "what" and "how", respectively.

Methodology

This was an ethnographic study where the researcher sought to understand how a particular cultural way of life functioned; to discover how the guiding principles, rules and codes worked that made up its specific practices and identifications. The main research question was: What resources and strategies do young Black men use in constructing their masculine identities to gain and maintain peer-group status?

The author, King, is a White male who grew up on Maxwell in the 1980-the 90s and, after a break of about 20 years, returned in 2017 to live in an adjacent neighbourhood, about 100 metres from the boundary of the estate. His interest in this area of research grew when he was employed by a youth mentoring project that aimed to reduce knife crime. Maxwell was a dangerous place to visit alone, and so he worked alongside youth workers, who knew the adolescents and young men on the estate and helped in participant recruitment. They also accompanied him to private spaces, such as homes, which are often off-limits to most researchers. Because of the risks, it was difficult for the researcher to speak with those occupying the most powerful positions on the estate – those identified by the youth workers as gang leaders and being involved in violence or drug dealing.

Despite his erstwhile association with the estate Maxwell – where he was previously known affectionally as WB (White Boy) – and his working-class credentials providing him with a certain level of credibility and trust, his positionality, as a conspicuous 'White guy', with its associated privileges, in a Black community, meant that when he was seen taking photographs or taking field notes, he had to be wary of not raising suspicions of being a police officer or perhaps conspiring with other official agencies of the state. This also meant that many young men were unwilling to be recorded by or to be seen 'colluding' with him, and this had an effect on how the data was generated.

The two principal methods used were unstructured observations (both passive and active) and interviews in the form of participatory, informal conversations, which were often the only available method of data generation and happened on about 100 occasions. When data was relevant to his research questions, they were recorded in

fieldnotes, which happened on 16 occasions. Four young men, and two youth workers, were also interviewed more formally (and audio-recorded) using a semi-structured format.

The sample of 48 young Black men was divided into three concentric layers: six primary participants – including two youth workers - (PP) whom he interacted with frequently and were most involved; 16 secondary participants (SP) whom he met less often but still contributed to the data; and 26 tertiary participants (TP) whom he infrequently met, perhaps only once. The average age of the PPs (excluding the youth workers) was 19.9 years old, and the SPs (when it was disclosed) were 19.6 years old. There was insufficient age information for TPs.

Analysis

The study used a type of thematic analysis called a hybrid approach (Swain, 2018), which combines deductive and inductive approaches and was carried out by King, who was, in many ways, an 'insider', and knew Maxwell relatively well. This involved constructing both *a priori* (or pre-empirical) codes from the research aims, observational themes, and interview questions and a series of *a posteriori* (post-empirical) codes that emerged from the data themselves. The *a priori* codes included codes and themes such as *masculinities, power, resources and knife-carrying*, while the unanticipated *a posteriori* codes that arose during the fieldwork included *respect, digital technologies, authenticity, vulnerability* and so on.

Findings: Resources and Strategies and Attempts to gain Status

We organize our findings around four resources: *economic, social and linguistic, cultural, and physicality*, although we are aware they often merge and overlap.

Before presenting the data, we introduce the three young men, whom we use as exemplars of ways of performing formations of masculinity to reinforce our arguments.

Bankz

During fieldwork, Bankz embodied many of the dominant and hegemonic qualities that others sought to replicate. He was 19, a muscular 6'0 tall, and identified as Black ethnicity. After finding she could no longer tolerate his misbehaviour and lifestyle, his mother asked him to leave, and he lived in a tiny flat with his older brother, Mo, 22, who was a powerful and fear-inducing presence on Maxwell. Bankz had an abundance of street capital and had a “celebrity” status around the estate owing to his (somewhat mythopoeic) reputation for violence and his knowledge of drill music (defined by violent and threatening content); his music dominated his life, and he often appeared on the street playing his own music with a small group of copy-cat young men surrounding him. He was also an authority on mobile technologies, which he used to create a wide-ranging presence on social media. Bankz was rarely seen alone and spent much of his time regaling boastful stories, emphasizing his authenticity, exerting his dominance, and derogating many others of any status - thereby highlighting his competencies in ‘The Game’.

Azeez

Azeez aspired to join the dominant and hegemonic groups but lacked the resources and therefore, often performed a complicit masculinity. He was 18, shaven headed, of a slight build, about 5'6 tall, and identified as mixed Black and European. His father had left, and he lived with his mother and two younger siblings (who had a different father) in a small flat. Azeez was violent at school, left at 16, and has since

worked in several low skilled and low-wage jobs. His mother had found knives in his room, which he claimed he was “looking after for a friend”, and youth workers were concerned about his involvement with the wrong people. Generally, Azeez and his friends engaged in “banter” with each other and spent time browsing social media, although without the same level of commitment as Bankz. While Bankz had many captive online followers, Azeez seemed satisfied with his small circle of friends.

Charles

Charles was originally part of the dominant and hegemonic groups but had since re-invented himself as a practicing Christian and now performed a more egalitarian and progressive masculinity. He was 22 and identified as Black African ethnicity. Charles is tall, over 6’0 tall, athletic-looking, highly intelligent and reflective, and with highly developed interpersonal skills. In his interactions with the researcher, he also appeared charming. He lived with his mother, her partner and his younger sister. Some time ago, Charles was a leading figure in Maxwell’s street “ecosystem”, with a reputation for excessive violence, and was given the nickname “The Devil”. Subsequently, many on the estate still looked up to him as someone to respect and even fear. Many of the youth workers would also seek Charles’ counsel on community matters, particularly about the troubled young men on Maxwell. A few years ago, a close friend was murdered, and he is now, in his words, a much calmer, mature, and reformed character and was studying business at college. In many ways, Charles seemingly swapped one fraternity (his gang) for another (the church), and it appeared to offer a similar sense of belonging (Nyhagen, 2021).

Economic Resources

Like many individuals of the same age all over the world, living in areas of disadvantage, most on Maxwell were struggling to get by and trying to have a good time (Fraser, 2015), and those who had money, or appeared to have money, were invariably admired. Money was equated to success, and as Azeez ruminated, it was the look of being successful that comes from demonstrating competence in, or at, something:

Man's gotta look good on-road ... It shows everyone ... that you're successful, that you're good at what you do ... whatever you're doing. Having money it's important.

All three of the young men lived in small or modest accommodation, and although, at the time of fieldwork, none had a well-paid job, all knew the symbolic value of displaying wealth, wherever it came from.

The body is sign-bearing and sign-wearing, and the clothes we wear make a highly visible statement of how we wish to present ourselves to the world: who we think we are, or who we would like to be (Goffman, 1959). The clothing (including training shoes) worn on Maxwell were more than commodities but was an integral part of the young man's street identity and constructed a way of being. There was a hierarchy of brands/labels – Balenciaga, DSquared and Trapstar were among the most esteemed - and it was crucial to know the order of those most esteemed if you wanted to belong. For the fashion leaders, there was also a competitive edge to see who wore the best, which contributed to a higher status. As Charles said: "It was like a game, always pushing each other for more".

Charles (in his former life) and Bankz ostentatiously brandished the latest, high brand fashions in clothes and expensive-looking jewellery and watches. While the extract from Azeez above shows his awareness of the significance of looking good, he practiced a form of complicit masculinity and could only afford mid-range clothing labels (e.g., sportswear brands like Nike and Adidas), although he said that he always tried to wear clothes looking “fresh out of the packet”. He nonetheless understood the connection between wearing fashionable designer brands and gaining status and the importance of the body in the presentational performance:

It's all for the swagger, innit. I gotta look good, my boys gotta look good too, y'know. If I dress in rags, or look shabby or whatever, I ain't gonna get any props [status] on-road. Mans gonna think I'm a wasteman or something.

However, this was not only for himself but to show others that he was someone who, in the absence of a father, could provide for his family, a point we will return to under cultural resources.

Many young men were tempted by the easy seductions of crime (Katz, 1988), and when Azeez was asked about the link between making money a higher status, he replied:

Who wouldn't want good clothes, a good car? Someone without their education could work £30 a day grafting at Tesco's. Or you can hustle for a couple of hours and just catch all the rest of the day and earn £300. Which one would you do?

In his previous incarnation, Charles had also flaunted wealth: he drove an expensive (and modified car); wore exclusive labels; bought lavish material possessions, including expensive weapons (knives), to keep up with others. Moreover, as he alludes to below, he also indulged in a “competitive spending” with others to show his family and peers that he was “somebody”, an individual who was successful and had “arrived” but also belonged:

It was kinda like “keeping up with the Jones’s”, you know? If someone I knew had a £300 watch, mine needed to be £500 or whatever. If someone wore expensive TNs [sports shoes], I needed something more exclusive – a rare colourway or something that no one else had. I wanted to stand out, like a lot of the kids on the block. I did it with what I wore, kinda like I was building my own brand, what the “hood” knew me for [...] It felt good, you know, owning nice things. I paid for a new car – a Lexus, I think it was – in cash. It felt good owning something nice and not a hand-me-down. I was trying to show off a bit, I guess. I wanted to show people, my family too, that I was making something out of my life. Of course, they didn't know what I was doing or where I was getting the money from. But it was enough to be making money – besides, the friends around me were like family. I wanted to impress them, get their acceptance.

Since Charles’ involvement with the church, he began wearing less brash designer labels; drove a modest car; was more benevolent with his time and money and was

investing in his future by studying at the local college, which he saw as a passport to higher status and security.

Social and Linguistic

One of the characteristics of group leaders like Bankz was their well-developed interpersonal skills and their abilities to befriend, influence, and control a wide social group by engendering a sense of belonging. Both Bankz and Charles (in his previous life) had a close circle of associates they commanded; both were socially at ease, although they also issued threats if followers stepped out of line.

One of the youth workers said that he never saw Bankz alone. He viewed Bankz's followers as being offered protection and able to bask in his status as one of the leading figures on Maxwell:

In my opinion, that's one of the reasons that he's always got his cronies around. His boys. They're loyal to him as they're riding on his coattails.

Bankz's circle of friends also gained some infamy by appearing in some of his drill videos. He was also a conduit to his brother, Mo, who was the estate's "main face" or "head honcho":

Researcher: He [Mo] seems to look out for a lot of people around here?

Bankz: Any beef needs squashing, then Mo's on point. He's got connections, you know what I mean.

Researcher: Would you say that Mo makes Maxwell a safer place for lots of people?

Bankz: Kinda, I suppose. Mans come to me first, though, innit. They speak to me before they speak to him.

Many of Maxwell's young men felt vulnerable and travelled in groups for protection. When Azeez was asked about his movements through Maxwell's spaces, he admitted his feelings of apprehension and his perpetual expectation of danger:

Whenever I leave [Maxwell], I never go alone. You never know when next mans around the corner. Even on Maxwell, people looking for trouble ... chasing beef and status.

Azeez never travelled far alone, and when he did, there were generally "three or four boys" with him, which spoke of the need for safety in numbers. The above excerpt also demonstrates Azeez's tacit acknowledgement that people "chase trouble" to foster their street status.

There were similarities between Bankz and Azeez in terms of their group of friends, but practicing a complicit form of masculinity, the latter had a more restricted circle of friends, fewer interpersonal skills to be able to influence and persuade people, and was less socially confident in groups, mixing with his peers or adults. He was conversant in fashionable street parlance and capable of issuing threats and undertaking relatively low-level muggings but was largely an unthreatening influence to Maxwell's masculine hierarchy above him. Charles used to have a wide circle of friends, but his recent associations were mainly centred around the church.

Maxwell's main leaders were also aware of and used the latest figurative language (e.g., "Buki" to mean something strange or weird) and tropes, and Bankz and (previously) Charles possessed all the vocabulary of the street. The language represented a mixture of the dominant and hegemonic forms of masculinity: dominant when it was hostile and full of violent imagery, and hegemonic when replete with inequitable, misogynist, and homophobic references. Leaders also created a new street vocabulary that diffused through the hierarchy and was readily adopted by peers (including "... reh, reh, reh" to mean etcetera at the end of a list). Charles' language today was more positive, optimistic (sometimes evangelically) and non-confrontational except for in matters concerning the church – his new fraternity – where he became more partisan, defensive, and reluctant to offer any critical perspective.

Another strategy employed to gain status was creating mythopoeic narratives around past triumphs - and Bankz was a talented storyteller. He would regale dotting followers about his risk-taking and how frequently he was prepared to carry out daring acts and deeds. These episodes included the stories that he told to the researcher during a recorded interview about how violent he was and how he held little fear of combat:

Researcher: Can I ask you about the time the gang from "X" confronted you. The time you were speaking about last week?

Bankz: [laughing] Yeah. I made them shit themselves, innit. Fuckin pussies [3] ain't gonna mess with me no more. They think they oh so ghetto [4] and shit, fuck that. I'm ghetto.

Researcher: You didn't explain last week why they confronted you in the first place?

Bankz: I reckon they beefin' with Mo [Bankz's brother] and can't get at him, so they gonna try me, innit? Think mans a pussy tho. They don't know that I ain't playing games. I'll fight any mans. So, I did.

Researcher: It was a fistfight?

Bankz: It started like that. I knocked some prick out. Switched off his lights [laughing]. Then mans pulled a shank. But they ain't got the balls to wet [5] mans. I ain't gonna hesitate to knock mans out or wet him if I gotta. Fuck it. I kinda get a buzz from that shit.

Firstly, the data also how bodies are used as instruments, even weapons, which can lead to violence and against it. Secondly, the dialogue represents an example of both dominant and hegemonic masculinities being constructed simultaneously. It is dominant because, through the fight, Bankz demonstrates he is able to command respect, that he is "someone", and that he uses violence like a "real" man; and also hegemonic because Bankz subordinated—that is feminized—his opponent by "switching off his lights," thus legitimating gender inequality.

This way of life undoubtedly had its own fragility, unpredictability, and vulnerability. If a leading figure lost a fight, he would quickly fall down the pecking order. Bankz was also particularly keen to tell others of his own struggles, which verified his street credentials and gave an added authenticity to his travails: it was not enough to be successful; he had to be successful *and* struggling, like the rest of them. It was also

part of his working-class and, particularly, Black identity; those struggling were more 'Black' than those who were not, since being 'comfortable' was considered something afforded to White folk (like the researcher). An off-the-cuff comment from Bankz provides an example of this: as one young man declared he was going home for dinner, Bankz stated:

Ah man, I bet you got some three-course meal, innit. Mans belly is rumblin' fam, but that's the struggle, innit ... brothas be hungry ... as long as I got my blaze [6], I'm cool.

Despite him wearing clothes and jewellery seemingly worth several hundred pounds, his peers nodded approval, validating Bankz's "struggle".

Cultural

The ultimate aim for many young men was to gain respect and perform the most esteemed, dominant version of masculinity. For some, like Azeez, the search for respect began early when, as adolescents, they began their apprenticeship and indoctrination as roadmen – "foot soldiers" tested with carrying out small tasks for the estate "elders" from the higher echelons of Maxwell's hierarchy.

I got into shottin' stuff for some people. Around the time, I was robbing. Mans would try and take your stash, thinking you were pussy and would give it up. Even people who you were tight [friends] with. You gotta be prepared [as a roadman] to fight, cos you lose your stash and man's gonna be pissed. But some of these kids are making papers ... like £200 a day.

BK: Why do they get involved?

Azeez: They want respect from the streets, other mans on-road. They ain't gonna make that stacking shelves at Tesco, are they?"

Being Successful and being "Someone"

We have already described the economic link to displaying success, using the strategies of buying and using the body to show off high-end fashions, or possessing an expensive car, although, as Azeez recounted:

Everyone knows there's mans 'round here with a [Mercedes] Benz parked outside but no money for petrol. For people on the streets, that doesn't matter. It's all about the look.

It was all about image and "the look", which Azeez referred to in the economic section; nonetheless, these symbolic markers were actually connected to more than being successful - it was about being "someone", someone unique, who had "arrived" or "made it", who was respected. It also needed to be right now – in this moment – and there was no looking forward or thinking about the consequences of any actions. As Charles explained, this particular brand of street masculinity was about being independent and being a man and enacting the body to display accomplishments. Although, it was also associated with preparedness for risk-taking, which subsequently made them more vulnerable.

People around here wanna be somebody, they wanna be notorious for something. Most of us deal with the risk [being caught with a weapon] of getting caught as something that comes as part of the game. 'Cos everybody wants to "be somebody" right here right now, ain't nobody thinking about next year, next month, whatever. The money that people can make, some people

around Maxwell, kids younger than me, £300-400 per day, easy. They can take that money and buy the newest shit out there: clothes, creps [7], jewellery whatever, and they don't have to ask for things that they know that their parents or whoever doesn't have or can't give. That makes guys around here feel like a man, standing on their own two [feet] by themselves.

Other attributes, or qualities, of the street masculinity included: living life in the fast lane; proving oneself; being trustworthy; and showing loyalty to the group. It also involved one of the most important resources for achieving status: using violence and the need to broadcast this for others to know about.

Using Violence and Carrying a Knife

We have already seen Bankz bragging about (and possibly exaggerating) his fighting prowess and courage in the face of putting his body in danger. Charles also disclosed how, in the past, peer pressure made it difficult to back down, however frightened the individuals involved actually were. Again, the anticipation of danger and sense of fragility and vulnerability, as characteristics of the dominant masculinity, are palpable:

We got word that [group] was coming too. Someone mentioned it on Snapchat, and when I saw it, I was like, "it's gonna go off at this place". I didn't wanna go, and I was just waiting for an excuse, someone to say there's something better somewhere else, some girl to invite me to her place – anything I could've used as an excuse. But, cos of who I was, I was expected to front up and be there. The closer it got to the day, I was looking for a way out, anything. People were talking about bringing arms

'cos there would be no security. I knew then I couldn't back down. No way! I was the devil! Can you imagine turning up somewhere, carrying whatever, knowing that there are people there ... intent on harming you? They're just looking for that spark, you know, one tiny thing. I remember loads of times, clearly, like we would roll into somewhere like 10-15 men deep. There would be loads of eyeballing people, screw facing, you know, waiting for someone to make a wrong move then we would rush them, everyone. Bottles, knives, fists, whatever it took.

The last three words suggest that the stakes for success were high, and the use of extreme violence was always an option.

One strategy used to look hard and tough was knife-carrying, even though it was often concealed (usually within a jacket or trousers) and rarely used. However, the majority of the young men on Maxwell admitted that they possessed a knife for their own protection rather than to threaten anyone (see Brennan, 2018; Harding, 2020). Thus, although knife-carrying is a means of generating admiration and status not afforded by society, and provided advancement through street hierarchies (e.g., via robberies or kudos-enhancing assaults, which gained notoriety and status) (Thompson, 2019; Whittaker et al., 2020), it is essentially a self-defensive reaction to vulnerability and the anticipation of danger.

As Charles recalled, knife-carrying also linked to the need for independence and being able to stand up for oneself despite a lack of protection from one's family and/or from the much-maligned and distrusted police:

... for a lot of these young men around here [Maxwell], knives keep them safe 'cos there's no one else who can. It was the same for me when I was younger; nothing's changed ... parents can't protect them 'cos they're in the dark about their behaviour. The police feel like a negative presence for the Black community, and there's little that's being done to reverse that.

This is not to say that knives were not used for threatening violence and as scare tactics during other “opportunity-related benefits” (Marfleet, 2008, p.16). Peer pressure to show bravado and not be seen to be “pussy” was also a contributory factor.

However, very few of the young men ever actually used knives and “the threat” was usually enough. At the time of fieldwork, Bankz had no criminal infringements on his record for possessing a knife and appeared not to carry one. However, as one of the youth workers contended, he did not need to as his peers guarded their greatest asset – someone who, through association, provided them with the status and street capital they wanted (Densley, 2013; Harding, 2020). Thus, many young men who owned knives were, like Azeez, practicing a complicit form of masculinity; the elite group to which Bankz belonged did not need knives as their followers protected them.

Protecting Friends and Looking after Family

Another quality the young men needed to exhibit to procure street status was the ability to protect his followers and look after his family. This is seen above with Bankz but was also a quality sought by Azeez. When Azeez was asked what else he wanted apart from money that could buy top of the range clothes and a nice car, he

again mentioned the need to be successful and have self-respect but also the need to think of his family and the respect accrued when he provided for them, particularly in his father's absence. This was again associated with being a "real" man as can be seen in the following two quotations:

Azeez: Respect! People see you're successful, and they respect you. I know my family would respect me if I make money. It's not just for me; I wanna be a man and provide for my family.

... I wanted the money. I wanted to get stuff, sell it, and buy myself and my mum things. I saw this Louis Vuitton scarf for her birthday. I needed to make money! [...] Some mans have things given to them by their mum or dad or whatever. I know we ain't broke or nothing like that, but my mum works hard to put food on the table, and I wanna let her know it's appreciated.

Social media and drill music

Another resource used to acquire status is social media, which is linked to the comparatively recent phenomenon of the "digital street" (Irwin-Rodgers and Pinkey, 2017). Bankz used online and mobile technologies to create a wide social media presence that validated his street authenticity, which was noticeably absent for Azeez. Many of the images that Bankz circulated were centred around the body, and sometimes it needed to be shown to be as powerful and intimidating as possible. Bankz proudly showed the researcher his hundreds of online *Instagram* followers, while his *YouTube* videos had thousands of views. He also had multiple social media accounts, which centred on many epithets of street culture, including street fashion, drugs, and sites for buying and selling weapons.

Bankz used this strategy to promote his drill music. Although drill music is not necessarily associated with knife-carrying *per se*, and while being cautious not to demonize the genre, there was a clear symbolism of violence and the videos that Bankz showed the researcher, which were suffused with violent imagery and calls to bear arms.

In one recorded interview, Bankz recounted that *"people had been chatting shit"* about him or his drill collaborators online:

Fuckin bait shit. Just mans callin' me and my boys out. Sayin' they comin' for us, gonna bring mandem to Maxwell and shoot up the place or shanking people. They always beefing these pussies ... throwin' up gang signs like pop [gun sounds] ... they just chatting shit tho, aint no one coming to Maxwell, 'cos they knew we prepared.

Bankz's response echoes the themes of peer pressure and the responsibility of protecting the peer group, an important feature of the dominant masculinity. However, his confrontational use of "pussy", combined with his homophobia, also confirms his derogation of these masculine forms are intended to enhance his heterosexual credentials. Thus, although his drill music – awash with violence - was part of the dominant pattern of masculinity, it was also replete with homophobic epithets, which led to the construction of unequal gender relations and so overlapped the hegemonic form.

Having Local Knowledge

A further resource to draw on and exploit was the possession of specific indigenous knowledge and becoming the 'go-to' man. For example, where a person could procure drugs or weapons, or where and when a local party was being held, but it also included proclamations on which consumer brands were best to display. This knowledge was also linked to the digital street, and Bankz, and many others, used mobile and online technologies for the production and circulation of cultural information. These new technologies also meant that the knowledge could also be of global interest and significance.

Physicality

The body is an integral part of masculinity construction, and Maxwell's young men experienced themselves simultaneously *in* and *as* their bodies (Lyon & Barbalet, 1994, p. 54). They were conscious of its significance, both as a personal (but unfinished) resource and as a social symbol, which communicates signs/messages about whom they wished to be. It was a fundamental part of their biographies, for the process of making and becoming a body also involves the project of making the self (Shilling, 1993).

We have already seen how the body plays a key role in the construction of masculinity and the attempts to secure status, and it transcends the resources in the data presented above. For example, we have seen how the body became a sign-bearing and wearing display of material signifiers of wealth such as designer-brand clothing or jeweller under economic resources; how it travels through time and across social spaces under social resources; and how it is used to look hard and tough under cultural resources, where image and "the look" are fundamental strategies used to show that the individual is some *body* (Swain, 2003). Bankz's way

of talking, his actions and his way of moving, such as "the strut", were performances of masculine "swagger" and style. They involved certain presentational skills of self and impression management techniques (Goffman, 1959), were carefully prepared and choreographed with a distinctive dramaturgical quality like the 'cool pose' of the "Black man" identified by Majors and Billson (1993). These bodily gestures not only relate to locally specific norms of taste and style but are also drawn from wider forms of global culture and consumption, associated with particular classed and racialized norms of masculinity.

The body's size and shape are also vital, and need to be kept fit, looked after, and maintained. Bankz and Charles were physically imposing but also lean and athletic looking. Charles recounted appearing larger and more physically powerful was another personal project he undertook to fit in and belong:

Then I felt like I had to be more like them, that it would bring me more respect from them if I did. With the little money I had, I'd try and buy nice things, clothes, trainers. I'd smoke cigarettes to be more like them. I hated smoking! [laughing] ... I remember doing push-ups at home to try and get like these guys! I was just this skinny guy from the block trying hard to fit in, so they'd respect me ... and I'd do anything for [them] ... When I started hitting the gym, that's when I got bigger and started to get more respect. I went from being mouthy and barking at people to just getting up in their face. Sometimes, just being the bigger guy – you know, physically – was enough. Especially in DTB, [a rival gang] when people say that you're frontin, it's mainly because they think you

haven't got the power, the strength to back it up. When you get to the size that I was, when I was hitting the gym, they don't accuse you of frontin anymore!

Although Azeez said he "ate tons" and attempted to appear bulkier by wearing baggy clothes – and doing press-ups every day - he would never be physically imposing enough to become part of the dominant, elite group. For Azeez, looking fit and athletic but also neat and well-groomed were also important assets that he envied.

There's a few guys around here. You know they're the real players 'cos they're in the nice cars, looking fresh all the time, fresh haircut, the works. Most of them spend a lot of time in the gym - you can see they look after themselves. No need to dress in layers.

Conclusion

This study's analysis shows how the topical and contemporary social issue of violence by young men (including knife crime) is inextricably linked to constructions of masculinity, class and race in an area of high deprivation.

The paper makes an empirical and theoretical contribution to the field of critical masculinities studies via in-depth data showing how the dominant and hegemonic formations of masculinity are constructed through performances that draw on different resources and which are mobilized through strategies available in a specific geographical setting to create a specific (often violent) street masculinity. The acquisition and effective deployment of these forms of capital is bound up with achieving peer group status, and Swain's (2004) paper - based on his doctoral thesis

on young schoolboys - aside, we found no other studies that demarcate the resources and strategies used to gain status, particularly for young men around the age of 20 living in an area of disadvantage.

The economic resources used strategies that included wearing expensive, high-brand clothes and adornments and, for some, having a car; the social/linguistic resources used strategies that included telling stories with the latest exalted street vocabulary, boasting about toughness, risk-taking and how independent and authentic you are; the cultural resources used strategies that included using violence, possessing and carrying a knife, protecting and looking after people (including family), using social media and creating drill music videos, and having specific local knowledge; the physical resources used strategies that included trying to look tough and imposing, but also athletic, well-groomed, and cared for, and acting “cool”. We have categorized the resources under four headings for analytical reasons, although we are aware that many frequently intersect (particularly the economic and cultural assets). At the heart of these resources and strategies is the material body, which is viewed as both an agent and object of the practices through which the young men’s masculinities were produced and performed.

It was not enough for an individual to draw on only a few resources and use only a few strategies: to become part of the elite group of Maxwell's dominant and hegemonic street masculinity, they needed to access and mobilize a full array. The features of this specific brand of street masculinity also included a yearning to belong, but also constant anticipation of danger, and a pervading underlying feeling of fragility and vulnerability.

The study illuminates the difficulties some young Black working-class men experience in avoiding “the intersecting effects of class disadvantage, racism, deprivation and violence in some urban communities” (Harris, 2020, p.10). Thus, their scope for their agentic expression was often limited or curtailed, and the research shows how some marginalized adolescents and young men can become drawn into a life of violence. However, Charles demonstrates that, despite the constant need to resist in-built structural issues of systemic racism, it is also possible to exercise agency and create new identities and lifestyles, which can be more progressive, inclusive, and egalitarian. Finally, we believe that the paper also has methodological originality by giving a greater voice to those on the margins. As Bottrell et al. (2010) paraphrase: by ignoring these voices, we neglect those with a significant contribution to understanding knife crime: those most at risk.

Notes

[1] We categorised participants as working class, which we define as a group who tends to have a low level of education and social status, be non-property owning, and whose intermittent work is frequently low paid and low skilled and involves physical labor rather than intellectual skills.

[2] The titles of these works have been shortened for brevity.

[3] Pussy/ies refers to people who are deemed weak and/or effeminate.

[4] Ghetto means tough and hard.

[5] Wet means to stab with a knife or blade.

[6] Blaze refers to smoking weed/cannabis/skunk.

[7] Creps are sports shoes.

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