Young White British Men and Knife-carrying in Public: Discourses of Masculinity, Protection and Vulnerability

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Abstract

Whilst quantitative research to date gives us some indication of the prevalence at which knife-carrying occurs among young British men, there have been few explanations for *why* it occurs, and for what the relationship might be between broader social issues of control and power and the behaviours of young men themselves. Drawing on interviews with 16 young white British men, the present paper explores the ways in which the sample accounted for knife-carrying. Two interpretative repertoires were identified: 1) attributions of blame to authorities for a lack of protection and a subsequent justification of knife-carrying, and 2) discussions of masculinity in relation to knife-carrying. The findings suggest that what is required are policy and practice responses that take into account the symbolic functions of knives for young white men, and which recognise the dilemmatic bind that such men are caught in when they attempt to negotiate competing demands of protection and control.

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Introduction

With almost 14000 victims taken to hospital annually in the UK for injuries caused by bladed and sharp instruments (Owen, 2008), tackling the problem of knife-carrying has become a top priority for the British government. According to the British Knives Act 1997, it is illegal for any shop to sell a knife of any kind (including cutlery and kitchen knives) to anyone under the age of 18. It is also illegal to carry any sharp instrument – even a screwdriver – in public without a good reason (Directgov, 2012). Whilst in the past first-time offenders under 18 tended to be given a caution (Home Affairs Committee, 2008), now anyone aged 16 or over caught carrying a knife can expect to be prosecuted (HM Government 2008). Yet despite such legislation, the number of fatal stabbings in England and Wales was as high as 270 people in 2008 (Travis, 2009). UK government statistics indicate that almost one in four 16-year-old boys carry a knife, and nearly every fifth of these boys report assaulting somebody with the intent to harm (Beinart, Anderson, Lee & Utting, 2002). The fact that knife crime grew by 8% in 2010 compared to 2009 prompted British Home Secretary Theresa May to commit more than £18 million to tackling crimes involving knives, guns and gangs over the next two years (Wesley, 2011).[1]

Perhaps surprisingly, whilst British legislators and law enforcements bodies have adopted a tough approach to knife carrying, research on the meanings attributed to knife-carrying amongst young British men is rather scant, leaving the impact of anti-knife crime initiatives and their perception by young men generally unexplored (Eades et al., 2007). This, it could be argued, hampers the introduction of effective counter-

[1] For a complete statistical list of crimes detected in England and Wales 2010/2011, go to: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/crime-research/hosb1111/hosb1111?view=Binary.

measures that Ang, Huan, Chua and Lim (2011) describe as vital in crime prevention and early intervention work. The available findings suggest that a ‘zero tolerance’ approach to weapon possession is ineffective in reducing crime or changing attitudes, yet other counter-measures have to date been lacking, or those that have been developed have yet to be assessed for their efficacy (Lipsey & Wilson, 1998; TFCPS, 2005).

What we do know from the existing body of research on both targets and perpetrators of knife crimes (e.g., Eades, Grimshaw, Silvestri & Solomon, 2007) is that knife-carrying stems mainly from a fear of crime, a perceived need for protection, and a desire for social status (Lemos, 2004). Quantitative research, such as that conducted by Barlas and Egan (2006), found that adolescent weapon carriers are more irresponsible, delinquent and aggressive than their non weapon-carrying peers, but that they had only implicit interest in status display. Importantly, however, Seale, Gobo, Gubrium and Silverman (2004) caution that quantitative research tends to reflect the ideas that researchers already have in mind when designing experiments and questionnaires (that include pre-determined responses that participants are forced to choose from). Such approaches isolate the findings from a more natural context, and limit respondents’ self-expression and potential complexities that may be missed altogether.

How knife carrying is constructed in language, and how a fear of crime, need for protection, and desire for social status are evaluatively bound up with knife-carrying, has to date been ignored. In the analysis presented below we attempt to address this shortfall in exising research by focusing specifically on how a sample of young white British men account for knife carrying. Utilising Wetherell and Potter’s (1992) approach to analysing ‘interpretative repertoires’, we explore in close detail two aspects of the data: 1) how the young men legitimated knife-carrying through a repertoire of

justifiable defence in the face of the supposed lack of protection offered by authorities, and 2) how a repertoire of knife-carrying as a symbol of masculinity is worked up to normalise this behaviour. As such, the objective of this paper is not to simply lift the lid on street perspectives about knife-carrying. Rather, the paper responds to calls for the advancement of applied discourse analytic work (Willig, 1999) by mapping out the discursive strategies deployed amongst young men who are at risk of being involved in knife-related incidents. We argue that such strategies may inhibit the efficacy of public awareness campaigns that are intended to reduce the knife crime.

Previous Research

A starting point for increasing our understanding of violence amongst young men (such as that related to knife-carrying) and the outcomes that arise from it is to focus on research exploring rhetorical justifications for particular versions of masculinity, although we are mindful that masculinity is not inextricably linked to violence (Beesley & McGuire, 2009). This research, we would suggest, is useful for the fact that it explores how particular identities and their attendant actions are rendered intelligible within a given social context, and how this can be seen to legitimate a very narrow range of options for young men in particular in terms of their constructions of masculinity.

Wetherell and Edley (1999), for example, identify three distinct ways in which men self-position. *Heroic positioning* evokes imaginary characters that are usually associated with a conventional masculine ideal, so that the self can be aligned with it and bask in its reflected glory. This can be epitomised in the archetypal virtues of the

soldier, including aggression, strength, courage and endurance (see also Dawson, 1994). *Ordinary positioning* can be more complex and ambiguous. It separates the self from traditional concepts of masculinity that become disavowed, caricatured and then reconstructed as stereotypes so that it is ordinariness and normality that come to the fore as manly and genuine. Whilst this position potentially repudiates that caricatured by the heroic position, it nonetheless treats masculinity as an inherently assumed property of men. *Rebellious positioning* emphasizes unconventionality and non-conformity, allowing for the celebration of men who engage in traditionally non-masculine activities. Such a position is perhaps the most open of the three identified by Wetherell and Edley, yet it is nonetheless reliant upon the assumption that 'rebellious' men are still very much men: it affords them an intelligible identity *as men* in a society where gender differences are made to matter.

As such, and despite the significant differences between the three positioning styles outlined above, Wetherell and Edley (1999) suggest that all three positions instantiate a form of hegemonic masculinity that is always already constructed in opposition to a normative femininity, or which at the very least takes masculinity as a taken-for-granted category. Moreover, the flexibility afforded by movement between any of these categories allows for a wide range of ways in which men can legitimate behaviours that may be seen by others as oppressive. In terms of young men's constructions of knife-carrying, then, the malleable nature of masculinities as identified by Wetherell and Edley means that there are a broad range of (often contradictory) rhetorical resources that young men can draw upon by which to legitimate knife-carrying behaviours.

In their interviews with 11-14 year old boys in which they discussed masculinity, Phoenix, Frosh and Pattman (2003) found that possessing attributes like hardness, physical fitness, fashionable looks and antagonism to the school system signified the criteria of belonging to the likable in-group and being properly 'masculine'. Importantly, social class and race were identified as moderators of such masculinity. For example, for black working class boys, masculinity was primarily all about demonstrating strength, attracting girls and looking 'cool'. Thus, boys of African Caribbean descent, who were associated with toughness, rebelliousness and authentic male style in talk and dress, were seen as more manly than Asian boys who were constructed as less physically powerful and less sexually attractive, and hence more liable to be subjected to homophobic name-calling. Despite these racialised differences, Pheonix, Frosh and Pattman found relative uniformity across their sample (that included white British youth) in terms of the construction of masculinity via a discourse of 'hardness', and in the capacity of boys to protect both themselves and their female counterparts.

Complementing the picture of how masculinities are constructed amongst young men, is research examining how school and popular cultures play a determining role in constituting which particular masculinities are rendered intelligible. Daiute and Fine (2003), for example, suggest that certain established social structures and institutions may impugn the dignity of youth, create a sense of alienation, and contribute to the normalization of violence through value-laden and taken-for-granted social relations. This may indeed be the product, they suggest, of the patronizing and condescending character of adult-centred policies. Bearing in mind, then, the frequently counter-effective practices of policies such as zero tolerance and the demonisation of offenders,

research such as that conducted by Daiute and Fine emphasises the need for new perspectives on youth violence and responses to violence *in context*, that in so doing acknowledge the impact of determining factors such as school and popular culture and their role in perpetuating top-down methods of engaging with young men and the implications of this for warranting power-laden modes of social engagement.

The effects of certain constructions of masculinity and their warranting of violence is further highlighted in research by Andersson (2008), who explains how self-presentation and use of sequentially coherent narratives can serve the construal of violence as rational and morally justifiable. This construal can be achieved by avoiding the position of the instigating party and thus transcending the classic victim/perpetrator dichotomy. This process, which also implies that a potentially violent man is not man enough to face physical threats unarmed, was identified by Andersson as minimising accountability for unprovoked violence 'without [the individual] being categorized as either violent or non-violent' (p. 148). The logic of such argumentation renders violence that occurs in self-defence as non-violent, non-agentic and emanating from the environment. Since unprovoked aggressiveness from others can be cast within this construction as both illegitimate and immoral, the implication is that countering such aggressiveness is perfectly warranted and may stay that way even when one is 'forced' to reach for a weapon to even the odds and make an unfair encounter fair. The question of how such balance redressing in violent situations is constructed via specific rhetorical constructions, however, requires closer examination (as we do in the analysis that follows).

Given, then, the fact that offenders have been found to engage in a number of discursive strategies, such as the aforementioned minimization of their agentic role and

the presentation of their actions as unplanned or stemming from the features of a situation they happened to encounter (Auburn & Lea, 2003), it is important to take into account research examining the ways in which men deny violence. A key example of this is provided by Stokoe (2010), who identifies a range of strategies used by men to deflect charges of assault by creating category-relevant interactional environments, and thus a sense of mundaneness. Specifically, Stoke found that her participants managed accusations of violence by claiming a position within the category 'men who do not hit women', which was constructed as being in direct contrast to the category of men who do (i.e., not them).

Although the discursive literature on violence and masculinities - which includes the perspectives of youths (e.g., Daiute & Fine, 2003; Farrington, 1998; Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2003; Messerschmidt, 2000; Stoudt, 2006) - is steadily growing, there is still a large gap in knowledge about constructions of knife-carrying behaviours. The analysis that follows thus aims to fill this gap by examining discourses of knife-carrying. Further, we also analyse how social institutions (such as the police and schools) are construed as failing to provide a sense of security, the outcome of this being that young men can position themselves as vulnerable people whose right to self-defence appears to 'blend morality with logic' (Sneijder and Molder, 2005: 675) so that knife-carrying may become both ethically-justified and responsible.

Method

Participants

Following institutional ethics approval, recruitment, as described next, took a rather circuitous route, as a previous pilot study indicated that a direct approach asking

straightforwardly about individual knife-carrying behaviours tended to elicit refusals from potential participants. The fact that projective questions have already been found effective and insightful in the exploration of other sensitive issues (such as in relation to ideas of how to commit fraud and get away with it, see Palasinski, 2009), leant further support to the circuitous route adopted. With the outcomes of the pilot study in mind, 52 ethnically-diverse young British men were approached informally by the first author to participate in the present study via five different inner city youth centres – which were relatively deprived of resources in comparison to the more affluent outskirts - located in a large British city. The centres were mostly similar in the provision of non-religious services aimed at keeping youth off the streets through sports, musical and learning activities, as well as personal and professional guidance. Although their informal members were predominantly white, some of them were also black and South Asian.

All of our participants were asked if they knew of someone who carried a knife with them in public. 27 of them answered yes, 5 answered no and 20 declined further participation at this point. Of the 27 who answered yes, 21 then confirmed that they knew such a person well and were thus eligible to continue in the study (which required a degree of working knowledge about knife-carrying). The 21 remaining participants were then asked hypothetically whether they thought it would be fair if such a person were prosecuted for carrying a knife in public, and specifically how they would feel if it were them. 16 of the 21 remaining participants responded and noted that at least on one occasion they had ‘accidentally’ left the house carrying a knife but that they had not been prosecuted for this. These 16 participants, all white and aged between 16 and 17 years, constitute the sample for the present paper.

Procedure

Each interview lasted 25-35 minutes and was preceded by a 5-10 minute ice-breaker, in which the interviewees were provided with basic information about the study. Having been assured that their anonymity would be protected, participants signed a consent form that involved giving permission for the interview to be audio recorded. All interviews took place before the Summer Riots of 2011.

The interviews then began by asking the participants very general questions about the community centre, their college, and their friends, and then gradually this general focus narrowed down to questions about street violence. Sample questions from this section include: *'How safe is your neighbourhood?', 'how do your peers find personal safety in their neighbourhoods?', how do men protect themselves in rough areas?, 'why do some men carry knives in public?', 'what functions might carrying a knife in public serve?', and 'how can our culture, schools and authorities shape attitudes to knife-carrying?'.* At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were thanked for their time and advised how they could learn more about the study.

Data analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed orthographically (Mayeda & Pasko, 2011), with a pseudonym allocated to each participant. Interviews were then examined utilising Wetherell and Potter's (1992) now 'classic' approach to analysing discourse. As they note, there can be a tendency for Foucauldian analyses to fall somewhat short of analysing the social and linguistic practices through which discourses are (re)enacted. This is particularly of concern where the discourses under examination have serious implications (such as in their case, racism, and in the case of the present paper, street

violence). More latterly, Potter (with Edwards, 1992) has of course developed this approach to include a close focus on the semantic level of the text, and this has much to recommend it. However, in the context of the present paper, it was felt that an approach that took the middle ground of neither overemphasising discourse at the broader social level nor at the micro level of interaction would be most fruitful.

With this in mind, the concept of interpretative repertoires was employed to identify what Wetherell and Potter (1992) refer to as 'broadly discernable clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images" (p. 90). As they go on to note, identifying and examining interpretative repertoires is "a way of understanding the *content* of discourse and how that content is organized" (original emphasis). Thus in the context of the present paper, whilst the overall discourse to be examined is one that involves how young men account for knife-carrying – what may be termed a broad discourse of protection, or lawfulness, or public behaviour – it is in the interpretative repertoires identified that we can see just how this discourse is deployed.

To that end, the entire dataset was read and re-read, looking for coherent patterns of argumentation, rhetorical and semantic moves, and any broadly similar shapes that these took. Of the data, two main repertoires appeared evident: 1) involving an attribution of blame to authorities for a lack of protection and a subsequent justification of knife-carrying, and 2) involving discussions of masculinity in relation to knife-carrying. To some extent, it could be argued that these repertoires are a product of the interviews questions (which, as outline above, rendered gender and protection salient in the context of knife carrying). At the same time, however, we would note the very specific ways in which these concepts were taken up by our participants. As such,

whilst the findings are certainly shaped by our research interests (and hence are not inductive in the true sense of the word), they certainly reflect the specific accounts of gender and protection evoked by this particular sample of young white British men.

The two repertoires outlined above are now discussed in turn via a sample of representative extracts. As the extracts are relatively self-explanatory, and in order to protect the anonymity of the participants, no contextualising information is given for each extract. Rather, each is taken as representative of the repertoire under examination. As will be demonstrated, whilst each extract has something unique to offer, it is their shared force that positions them collectively as a synecdoche for the interpretative repertoire in which they are located, and for the broader discourse on knife-carrying itself. As such, whilst the number of extracts analysed are small, they can be taken as indicative of the two key narratives that ran across all of the interviews in terms of the samples' constructions of gender and protection in the context of knife-carrying.

Analysis

Repertoire 1: Authorities, surveillance and knives

In the first repertoire, knife-carrying is constructed as a legitimate response both to potential threats, and to the lack of management of such threats by those in positions of authority. In the first extract below, Andrew provides an account in which *not* carrying a knife - given the failure of police to provide adequate protection from harm - is constructed as a recipe for disaster:

Extract 1

> Andrew: They need to carry 'cos the police just prefer to stroll down the well-lit posh neighbourhoods. But they won't go on patrol where the turf is rough and nasty you know. If your attackers turn you into a veg then they will be free in 1 or 2 years' time anyway. I know it from the news. They will play their time away and laugh at your eating through a straw.

Andrew juxtaposes police visibility in areas where class, geography and security are made salient, claiming that protection is only guaranteed in 'well-lit posh neighbourhoods', not in 'rough and nasty' neighbourhoods. Furthermore, an by drawing a distinction between 'strolling' and 'patrolling' (with the latter evoking a much more professional, community-safeguarding, police presence), Andrew appears to indicate that 'strolling' is sufficient in 'well-lit posh neighbourhoods', whilst it is more active patrolling that is required in the areas he inhabits.

Through his focus on the apparent lack of police presence in 'rough and nasty' neighbourhoods, then, Andrew provides a warrant for knife-carrying. The terms 'veg' and 'eating through a straw' emphasise the supposed peril of staying unarmed, accentuating the gravity, immediacy and likelihood of being the victim of an attack. Furthermore, the derogatory description 'veg' can be read as presenting the potential victim as deserving his lot if he disregards the injunction to carry a knife.

In the following extract Bryan also emphasises the lack of protection provided by others in the community, and the requirement this produces to carry a knife:

Extract 2

> Bryan: Your neighbours will ignore your shouts for help. And nobody's bothered about CCTV. I doubt if anybody cares to watch their footage. Perhaps they do in court after someone gets shanked. Y'know the gangs usually attack in packs and you need something to balance the odds. You won't just pray to Jesus innit?

Extending Andrew's focus on the police, in this extract Bryan refers to 'neighbours' and 'nobody' to indicate the extent to which care or concern for the safety of others is lacking in his area. Indeed, the term 'nobody' must be read as 'everybody': if 'nobody' is bothered, then, in fact, everybody is complicit with a failure to protect. As Bryan notes, the only time anybody *is* concerned with CCTV footage is *after* the event: when litigation occurs. Here, then, Bryan constructs institutionalised protection as a solely reactive response to violence, rather than as a proactive measure aimed at preventing violence. In making this point, Bryan echoes Andrew's construction of knife-carrying as an important preventative measure, where the latter suggested that non-carrying can potentially lead to 'eating through a straw'.

Indeed, Bryan's mocking evocation of praying reinforces the argument that staying unarmed may be as irrational as believing in miracles in terms of protection from violence. Not only does the statement act to denounce a religious turn-the-other-cheek approach, but it also serves to justify knife-carrying as 'balanc[ing] the odds': a 'defensible inference' (Auburn & Lea, 2003: 288) that positions knife-carrying as necessitated by the reality of a big city street. Such survivalist language thus dismisses anti-weapon laws as obsolete, and legitimates violating them.

In the following extract, James places the lack of protection squarely upon the shoulders of the educational system:

Extract 3

> James: At school they teach you about holes and poles but they won't show you the injury that a knife can cause. So perhaps if you took somebody to the morgue or something. Perhaps then they would think twice before reaching for the blade.

In this extract, James presents a paired contrast between sex education ('holes and poles') and education about knife-carrying. In this contrast, sex education - which itself is often treated by the media and right-wing commentators as a site of contention – is treated as innocuous or unremarkable, whereas education about knife-carrying is treated as an exception to the rule, and one that would require an extreme response (i.e., taking someone to the morgue to show them what knives can do). This extreme contrast between the two is notable as it constructs sex education almost as banal (and by implication constructs sex – or at least 'holes and poles' – as non-injurious) whilst constructing investments in knife-carrying as only potentially responsive to an extreme example (i.e., a dead body).

Also interesting in this extract, is how James speaks in reference to knife-carrying. He uses the pronoun 'they' (i.e. potential knife carriers), but not in the standard format. Rather, 'they' here functions to place a distance between James and the claims he is making. This is notable given the topic under discussion (i.e., knife-carrying), which is illegal in the UK. The pronoun acts to distance the speaker from an accusation of engaging in illegal acts. Yet the distancing effect also creates a gap

between him and the vulnerability or lack of knowledge. This, it could be suggested, is a hallmark of how young men talk about themselves, a point we now take up in terms of the second repertoire.

Repertoire 2: Masculinities and Knife-Carrying

As noted above in terms of the use of the pronoun 'they', issues of masculinity construction potentially lie at the heart of how young men talk about knife-carrying. Talking about knife-carrying as warranted by the lack of protection afforded by institutional others (i.e., police, educators, neighbours) is warranted in the three previous extracts by the construction of young men who move in public without a knife as not simply foolish, but moreover as potentially vulnerable. Yet such an admission of vulnerability brings with it a threat to masculinity (if young men's masculinities are expected to be impervious to assault). This highlights the dilemmatic nature of the accounts examined here: the young men must present themselves both as 'hard', but at the same time as vulnerable, in order to construct their knife-carrying as a justifiable form of proactive protection, rather than as an unwarranted illegal act.

In the following extract, Mark highlights this dilemma well when he discusses the difference between being a 'nice guy', being a 'gangsta' and being 'streetwise':

Extract 4

> Mark: The girls that I know, they wouldn't say it but they want you to be nice, smart and rich. Not crude and rough. Right? But you don't have to be gangsta. Like if you and your missus were about to get mugged by some scumbags in a back alley or something. Then she wouldn't mind if you had something. I mean

> if you managed to talk them out of it. With some piercing argument hahaha. But it's not about being macho or seeking trouble. It's about being streetwise. Girls don't fall for thumb-sucking wimps do they? But sometimes it might be better to hand your wallet over to them rather than to argue. Especially when their arguments are longer and sharper than yours. Or when you feel that they can use them quicker than you. That would also be streetwise. Y'know what I mean?

The contradictions outlined above are neatly exemplified by Mark. In part he knows what girls want ('they want you to be nice, smart and rich'), but at the same time he asserts that *he* knows what girls *need* (i.e., protection with 'something'). Being streetwise, then, as Mark constructs it, is about both knowing what the potential threats are (i.e., being 'mugged by some scumbags in a back alley') and being prepared to address the threats (either with a 'piercing argument' or 'hand[ing] your wallet over').

Supplementing his use of the pronoun 'they' to distance himself from knife-carrying and the threat of violence, Mark also uses double entendres to both make reference to knife-carrying, but to avoid stating that he carries knives. So the notion of a 'piercing argument' references both a witty comment and also the knife as an object that pierces. Similarly, further in the extract, when talking about it sometimes being better to 'hand over your wallet', Mark again uses a double entendre to suggest that doing so might be appropriate if 'their arguments are longer and sharper than yours. Or when you feel that they can use them quicker than you', where 'arguments' can be read 'knives'. Furthermore, this particular sentence is interesting both for the double entendre in regards to knife-carrying, but also for the metonymy that is evoked between arguments, knives and manhood. In other words, that young men may talk both about knives and

sexual prowess in terms of 'longer' and 'quicker' is a pertinent observation given that the entire extract is framed in terms of a heterosexual desire for knowing what girls want and need.

The metonymy between masculine 'performance' on many levels is again demonstrated in the following extract from Craig:

Extract 5

> Craig: If you found that college is not for you and there are no jobs to be found, then some try to command respect in other ways. Playing a tough guy whose path should not be crossed is one of them. But most knife carriers, they don't actually intend to spill blood. When they find themselves in trouble, it's usually enough for them to take it out y' know. And then after a while they don't even have to carry it anymore.

Here Craig is clear that in order to 'command respect' sometimes it is necessary to 'play the tough guy' – an evocation of a very particular form of masculinity that denies any vulnerability, yet at the same time references the vulnerability that sits behind any 'playing' or performance that is an attempt to emulating an ideal. The 'play' aspect of such a performance is emphasised in Craig's statement that 'most knife carriers, they don't actually intend to spill blood', where knife-carrying is just a performance of being a 'tough guy' rather than actually 'being' a tough guy (who, it is presumed, would actually intend to spill blood).

Yet this point about intent is also of interest in terms of the claims in earlier extracts about the protective aspects of knife-carrying and the failure of police and

others to adequately provide protection. In other words, whilst as Craig notes, there may be no intent to spill blood if someone carries a knife in order to ‘play a tough guy’, this doesn’t mean that blood isn’t spilled. The word ‘spill’ manages this gap between intent and action by constructing actions as accidents: a ‘spill’ is unintentional and unplanned. This claim by Craig, then, maintains an image of knife-carrying as an innocuous preventative measure that only becomes connected to harm by accident.

In terms of the metonymic relationship between knife-carrying and masculinities, it is interesting to note the final claim by Craig, namely that ‘after a while they don’t even have to carry it anymore’. There is an implicit paired contrast here between revealing and hiding, between being and having, that evokes an image of knife-carrying as an evocation of a normative masculinity. For Craig, access to the knife, at least for some young men, only needs to be alluded to in order to function as actually *having* a knife. Yet as we will return to in our discussion, this gap between having and being is potentially one of the key sources of anxiety for young men in terms of protection, anxiety that functions precisely to warrant the need to *continue* to carry a knife.

In the following and final extract, Harry renders clearly visible a relationship between masculinity and knife-carrying:

Extract 6

Harry: On my way to college I always have a laugh with my mates at what our culture throws at us. The public buses and billboards. There is no shelter from them. I mean those gory adverts they carry. Promoting the latest blockbusters and beat ‘em up games. You know with dismembered body parts and stuff.

> There's little difference between knife-carrying today and club wielding in the Stone Age, is there.

In this extract, Harry appears to evoke a notion of 'culture as a cause' (Hanson-Easey & Augoustinos, 2010: 314) to warrant his relationship to knife-carrying. Yet whilst he is 'hav[ing] a laugh' at the 'gory adverts' he sees, it is still 'our culture' that he is viewing: Harry is as much constructed as a card-carrying member of a culture that displays 'dismembered body parts' as is any other person. As such, this statement to some degree stands in contrast to the points made previously about the attribution of blame for knife-carrying to broader institutional forces that are *outside* of or fail young men.

Yet, at the same time, the ownership of the culture Harry refers to is managed via the evocation of an analogy between 'knife-carrying today and club-wielding in the Stone Age'. This analogy functions to suggest that, just like the assumption that Stone Age men had no choice but to wield a club, young men today have no choice but to carry a knife. Thus whilst Harry is part of 'our culture', he is nonetheless at its mercy, or at the very least a passive recipient of the forces of culture that have continued since time immemorial. Harry's comments thus perfectly epitomise the challenge presented to young men: they must both assert their own agency and choice around issues, but they must do so in ways that legitimate their actions in the context of state control that would seek to manage their decisions. As we now discuss, this has very specific implications for any policies aimed at changing knife-carrying behaviours amongst young men.

Discussion

Instead of considering narratives of knife-carrying from a cognitive angle of maladaptive beliefs or distorted thinking - which despite over 20 years of use in the offender treatment literature is still beset by a lack of definitional clarity (Maruna & Mann, 2006) - this paper has treated such narratives in terms of argumentative resources that the young white British men in the sample drew upon. What this produces is a complex account of vulnerability and 'hardness', of (self)protection and a purported failure to protect, that highlights the dilemmatic nature of knife-carrying for these young men.

Our findings, of course, should be interpreted with caution for several reasons. First, interviews were not conducted with ethnic minority group members. The specific ways in which such group members might account for knife-carrying warrants attention in the future. Second, it must be acknowledged that admitting to regular knife-carrying to a researcher with a voice recorder might be quite risky - raising the possibility of undesired police attention and potential legal problems - which probably had some inhibitive and self-presentational effects despite the conversational warm-up and assured anonymity. Yet despite this, and given the fact that research on such sensitive topics is by its nature difficult, our reasoning was that it was better to study those few who were willing to speak, rather than to ignore the topic altogether. Future studies focusing more on personal history might be particularly illuminative in addition to studies that include a more diverse sample. Furthermore, particularly lacking in our study were the views of young *women* and knife carrying. Although males appear to be more direct in enacting physical aggression than females (Björkqvist, 1994), female

aggression is higher towards intimate partners than towards other targets (Cross & Campbell, 2011), and tends to be predominantly indirect (Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004). Yet despite this, the issue of female aggression, let alone female weapon-carrying, is under-explored (Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005; Firmin, 2009), leaving the question about what discursive strategies young women might engage requiring attention.

Acknowledging these limitations, however, what our analysis demonstrates is that whilst in general the sample claimed to disapprove of violence, in the specific notions of self-defence violence was not simply tolerated, but rather encouraged in favour of the idea that it is better to be the hammer than the anvil should the need to be the hammer arise. Yet, perhaps most interestingly, this 'need' was constructed as an 'accident', albeit one that was in all likelihood waiting to happen. Again, this highlights the dilemmatic nature of the data, where the young men spoke of having to be prepared for something that might happen, but that in being prepared they were potentially enacting a self-fulfilling prophecy. Doing otherwise, however, was not seen as a viable option amongst the sample, who depicted those who go out unarmed as implicitly deserving of negative outcomes. Such an account transforms a possible victim identity into the identity of a heroic and righteous law-breaker who would be simply irresponsible to trust in the generally accepted rule of law. Since following the legal and social conventions was consistently and repeatedly interpreted as irresponsible, it must be acknowledge that some public awareness campaigns that aim to challenge such 'heroic' discourse by creating simple associations between knife-carrying and immaturity or deviance might potentially further distance young men. In other words, their contents and relative popularity in mainstream media might enact a 'self-fulfilling

prophecy' and persuade them that pathology lies in the carrier, rather than broader issues of protection and control (Maruna & Mann, 2006; McKenedy, 2006). On the other hand, there is some tentative evidence that initiatives which draw on a 'hot spots' theoretical framework (i.e., focusing on areas where young people gather and crime tends to occur) - like the British Government's *Tackling Knives Action, Operation Blunt and Operation Shield* - are more effective, however is it is not clear by how much and for how long (Squires, 2009). Despite the Governmental announcement in October 2008 that over 2,200 knives had been seized following targeted stop and search operations, it has not been even estimated what impact those operations have had on levels of carrying and use. Similarly, no evidence is available about whether knife amnesties have an impact on changing attitudes or behaviour, or on reducing crime (Eades et al., 2007).

In light of the lack of intervention assessment, we would encourage an ongoing emphasis upon exploring the relationship between constructions of masculinity and knife-carrying. That knives were seen as active agents capable as functioning in a synechdochal relationship to the young men themselves is perhaps unsurprising. But as per the points made above, that this relationship could encourage, rather than discourage, knife-carrying, requires continued attention. Of course, and as we noted in our analysis of the second interpretative repertoire, the operation of knives as signifiers of power and as agentic objects will never actually serve the purpose of providing young men with a standpoint where they truly occupy an uncontested position of power. Rather, as the participants note, their authority will continue to be challenged both by the law, and also by those others who demand of their masculinity in certain, prescribed ways (such as their girlfriends). Our point here, of course, is not to say that young men

(and here particularly young white British men) are victims of power. Rather, our point is that attempting to address knife-carrying behaviours by simplistically emphasising the complicity of young men with a violent broader society will fail to truly apprehend how knives function as signifiers of power and protection in and of themselves, and that despite the claims of one of the participants, it is unlikely to become the case in the near future that letting go of knives is a viable option.

So where does this leave us in terms of challenging knife-carrying behaviours? The key response suggested by the data is that the young men in this sample perceived those in authority as both having no perception of the need to teach about the dangers of knife-carrying (and thus no injunction to even acknowledge the existence of knives as an issue), nor doing anything to address perceptions of violence or a lack of felt security amongst young men. Extrapolating from this suggestion from our participants, and taking into account the discussion of masculinity above, would suggest that part of what is required is an approach that both attempts to address the two shortfalls listed in the previous sentence, but which does so by refusing to adopt either moral posturing or a benevolent paternalism that denies young men's agency and the pressures of masculinity that they experience.

Such an approach, whose general principles have already proven illuminative in substance use (Wenter et al., 2002; Hallfors & Van Dorn, 2002) and inner-city gang violence (Palmer, 2009; Toy, 2011) may involve opening up discussions with young men that centre upon the symbolic meaning associated with knife-carrying, in conjunction with a discussion of how young men themselves become complicit with a society that marginalises and enacts violence against them. In other words, in the context of a society that *does* seek to control its citizens, but which fails to recognise the

tension between inadequate institutional security (on many levels) and the prohibitions on undertaking personal safety measures, it is vital that young people in general are recognised as having contradictory demands placed upon them. To do otherwise is to perpetuate precisely the operations of power that place young men in positions where they feel they must take the law into their own hands. To speak honestly of social control but, following Foucault (2006), to challenge young people to examine how they become apparatus of the state, may represent a way forward that neither condones knife-carrying, nor condones the social contexts that give rise to it.

That young men must negotiate an increasingly complex set of positions which traverse vulnerability and active agency presents an ongoing challenge both to young men and those who work with them. Responding by either denying these complexities or reducing them to well-meaning affirmations will only serve to perpetuate the issues of power and control that place young men at risk for breaking the law in the first place. Responding instead by taking their concerns as legitimate, and acknowledging the role that the broader society plays in perpetuating images of normative (white, hegemonic, heterosexual) masculinities that lie behind knife-carrying behaviours for young men such as those in our sample, may represent a way forward that can assist young men in juggling the competing demands placed upon them, and even work towards deconstructing the demands (i.e., social norms) themselves.

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