

Rogue males? Approaches to study and academic performance of male psychology students

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Abstract

This three-year longitudinal study explored the approach to study and academic performance of a group of male psychology undergraduates. In induction week, 112 new psychology students completed the survey. Later in the year, some of the males were interviewed in small groups. Performance was measured from marks at the end of Years 1 and 3. In Year 1, compared with their female contemporaries, male respondents had higher self-esteem ($p < .01$), expected higher marks ($p < .001$) and anticipated performing better than their peers ($p < .05$). In interviews, males described themselves as being less motivated and less organised than females, but did not consider this a problem. The only difference in marks showed males doing worse in coursework at Year 1 ($p < .05$). However, significantly more males failed to complete the course. These findings are set in the context of concerns about under achievement of males and discussed in relation to research into transition to university.

IN THE LAST DECADE there has been a considerable moral panic in the media about the academic underachievement of males (Smith, 2003). Chris Woodhead, then Chief Inspector of Schools in England, argued that this is one of the most disturbing problems facing the education system (Dean, 1998). Whilst much of the interest has focussed on boys achieving poorer examination grades than girls at both GCSE and A-level, the differential spans the educational system. The difference is apparent in performance as early as Key Stage 1 (National Statistics Online) where girls' marks are consistently higher than boys for 5–7 year olds. It remains evident at A-level where females achieve higher grades than males in all but four subjects. This differential inevitably affects university applications where, by 2006/7 only 41 per cent of successful applicants were male, compared with 54 per cent in 1995, (Higher Education Statistics Agency, HESA).

A breakdown of the HESA statistics for the 2006–7 shows that, whilst females predominate in the UK HE cohort as a whole, the gender distribution of all students varies

across subject areas. Some traditionally 'male' areas retain a male majority: engineering (85 per cent male), computer science (78 per cent), architecture (71 per cent), maths (63 per cent) and (58 per cent). However, these courses account for less than one fifth of the HE population and in the remaining areas, males represent the minority. This is the case not only in traditionally 'female' disciplines such as languages (32 per cent), education (25 per cent) and subjects allied to medicine (17 per cent male), but also in some disciplines that until recently were perceived as predominantly 'male'. These include medicine and dentistry (42 per cent), law (40 per cent) and veterinary science (25 per cent). To be in a minority is now a relatively common experience for male students in HE.

One subject where this is particularly marked is psychology where the UK ratio of males to females is 1:4, one of the 10 per cent lowest ratios across the sector according to HESA data 2006–7. This gender ratio in psychology concerns the British Psychological Society and as such, is part of its Widening Access and Participation remit (Turpin &

Fensom, 2004). The predominance of female students in psychology is not restricted to the UK; a similar phenomenon has been noted in the United States, where the subject has had a greater increase in the number of females graduating than in any other course including other social sciences (Harton & Lyons, 2003). Different explanations have been proffered for this phenomenon. Harton and Lyons suggest that empathy may be the intervening factor. Their respondents reported that empathy was a prerequisite for a career in psychology, and that females are more likely than men to believe themselves to be empathic. If this perception of the discipline is a stereotypical view of psychology it may prevent the discipline being readily perceived as a science. This, in turn, may have detrimental effects on not only on male recruitment but also on retention for both sexes. The linking of degree choice with empathy in the lay representation of the discipline would also explain sex ratio in other disciplines perceived as 'caring' such as subjects allied to medicine or other 'helping professions'.

Thus males are less likely to come to university, and those who do are unlikely to choose psychology. This means that male psychology undergraduates are a relatively rare species and worth investigation. This paper aims to explore the approaches to study and academic performance of one male minority – psychology students – in one university. The data needs to be considered in the context of research into the academic performance of males generally at university.

Approaches to study

Research into sex differences in attitudes to university level study (as neatly summarised by Hartley, Betts & Murray, 2007) outlines the profile of a rogue male. Compared with females, male students are less likely to be anxious about speaking in tutorials (Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003), and will speak more and interrupt more (Somners & Lawrence, 1992; Sternglanz & Lyberger-Ficek, 1997). Male students may have higher

levels of self-efficacy (Garcia et al., 1995), are less preoccupied with failure (Greasley, 1998), and are more likely to rate their academic abilities highly (Workman, 2004). Males are less likely to experience a decline in academic self-concept through the transition into HE (Jackson, 2003) and generally experience less academic stress at university, (Abouserie, 1994). This may be, in part, because male students are more self-centred and less attuned to social interaction issues (Jackson, 2003; Bornholt, Goodnow & Cooney, 1994). It has been argued that males do not generally lack academic confidence (Stables, 1995; Newstead, 2000; Leman, 2004; Robson, Francis & Read, 2004). Their confidence can remain higher than females' into the second half of the final year as demonstrated by Mellanby, Martin and O'Doherty (2000). They found males scored lower on negative emotions, but higher on academic self-efficacy, self-esteem and risk-taking strategies just before their final examinations (although none of these predicted examination outcome). In short, this evidence paints the picture of a confident male student.

Possibly as a consequence of this confidence, or the tendency to risk take, some research has suggested that males have a reputation for relatively poor attendance. For example, it is evident that males are more likely to be absent from taught sessions and to under-report their absenteeism (Woodfield, Jessop & McMillan, 2006). Woodfield and colleagues argue that poor attendance is linked to poor performance, although it is acknowledged that motivation may underlie both factors. Furthermore, there is an expectation amongst students that males, as a group, will have a poor attendance record (Sander & Sanders, 2007, Sanders & Sander, 2007). It may be that males' poorer attendance relative to females is partly attributable to their lack of diligence and conscientiousness, which are traits that Francis, Robson and Read (2001) have argued are characteristic of female students. This might also explain why males have been

found to be irregular and disorganised in their study habits, (Smith & Miller, 2005) and to place less emphasis on effort and achievement than did their female counterparts (Garcia et al., 1995).

This apparently cavalier approach to studying may be a continuation of what Stephen Byers, then Minister for Educational Standards, called a 'laddish' approach in schools. He argued that boys' attitudes to schooling and education lay at the root of boys' relatively poor performance (*The Guardian*, 1998). He suggested this approach militated against learning and placed little emphasis on academic achievement. Francis (1999) has argued that this type of behaviour, considered problematic in the classroom, is a product of the male traits admired in society such as humour, defiance, strength, bravery and competition. She suggests that we cannot expect a change in boys' classroom behaviour until we review our traditional constructs of masculinity. Further support for this notion of 'laddish' behaviour comes from Younger, Warrington and Williams (1999) who analysed the dynamics in the classroom through survey and observation and found that although teachers believed they treated both sexes equally, observation suggested otherwise. The researchers noted that the males received proportionately more negative attention (reprimands and direct questioning), and females proportionately more positive attention, a finding that accorded more closely with the pupils' description of events than with the teachers'. They also argued that boys are less likely to seek help and work with others, strategies which the girls successfully deploy in their learning.

There is evidence that this 'laddish' behaviour is carried into university (Warin & Dempster, 2007). Their respondents described a 'laddish' approach which they adopted as part of the adaptation process on arrival at university. Interestingly this appears to be a transitory phase which they were later able to drop in order to become 'themselves'. The authors note that whilst the

notion of 'laddish behaviour' is a well understood social representation, its polar opposite had no clear label amongst their participants other than 'non-lad'. However, it is possible that 'laddishness' is a stereotypical construct, a homogeneous identity to which males may revert in times of challenge. It is then unsurprising that the polar opposite has no clear identity as it represents individual selves, necessarily idiosyncratic and heterogeneous.

Warin and Dempster's study supports the proposition that in times of transition, there is a stronger sense of gender identity. It may be that this strategy of resorting to gender stereotype during the transition to HE helps preserve the sense of true self, and consequently the academic self-concept, as identified by Jackson (2003). Conversely, a prolonged adoption of such behaviour would have adverse consequences on academic performance.

Academic performance

It has been evident for some time that a gender gap in performance is now emerging in Higher Education (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2003; Rusillo & Arias, 2004; Skelton 1998; Warrington & Younger, 2000). Until recently males were awarded more first class degrees than were females. It was suggested that one advantage that males have is that they tend to be more confident risk-takers, which enables the more competent to achieve in the highest grade boundaries, (for example, Francis, Robson & Reid, 2001; Hartley, Betts & Murray, 2007; Woodfield & Earl-Novell, 2006). This is an appealing suggestion as it would also explain why males were disproportionately represented in the third class boundary as well meaning that in these cases risk-taking and competence are not well-matched. Woodfield and Earl-Novell (2006) explored data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency for the period 1994 to 2002 to examine the predominance of males in first class awards. They found that this was largely explained by what they termed the 'compositional effect'. This

refers to the fact that males are over-represented in disciplines where first class degrees are more common. Then again, it may seem difficult to identify cause and effect in this finding; were more firsts awarded because of the nature of the material or because there are more males amongst the student group? It was evident that even during the nine years under scrutiny, the ratio of male to female first class graduates was dropping and indeed by 2005-6, for full-time students, the percentage was similar for males and females achieving a first class degree (12 per cent and 11 per cent respectively). Moreover, the percentage of each sex awarded unclassified degrees is similar (7 per cent and 6 per cent). The difference lies in the mid-ranges where a smaller percentage of males achieve an upper second (41 per cent as opposed to females' 49 per cent) and commensurately more are awarded either a lower second (32 per cent compared to 29 per cent) or a third class degree (8 per cent compared with 5 per cent). The overall differences in performance are not striking but the contrasts in the middle ranges are interesting, suggesting that it is here that males are now at a disadvantage.

Other potential key performance indicators are assessment type and course completion. Suggestions that females were better at coursework and males at examinations were refuted by Woodfield, Earl-Novell & Solomon (2005) In contrast, Cook (2003) found that being male was one of the significant predictors of non-completion.

The first aim of this study was to compare the perceptions of studying behaviours and beliefs of male and female undergraduates on arrival at university (quantitative data). The second aim was to explore the experiences of male undergraduate psychology students after they had settled in to their first year of the course (qualitative data). The third aim was to compare that initial quantitative data with performance using marks achieved at the end of the first year (Year 1) and at the end of the course (Year 3).

Method

Design

An analytical survey was used to collect quantitative data which were then matched with assessment marks. Semi-structured small group interviews were conducted to collect the qualitative data.

Participants

A first year psychology class (N=137) at a new university in south Wales was asked to participate in this study during Induction Week at the beginning of their university career. Male students represented 25 per cent of the cohort, which is slightly higher than the 20 per cent that HESA report for all psychology students (undergraduate and post-graduate) in the UK in 2006/7. Male students in this cohort were then approached at the beginning of the second term and asked to volunteer to take part in interviews about their experiences of studying psychology.

Materials

In order to measure learning styles the Revised Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs, Kember, & Leung 2001) was selected, which measures two approaches to learning: Deep and Surface. This has been used to examine sex differences in learning approaches with contradictory results: males being less (e.g. Magee et al. 1998) or alternatively more (e.g. Paver & Gammie 2005) likely to adopt a Deep approach. As global self-esteem has been shown to be associated with intrinsic motivation to learning (Murphy & Roopchand, 2003) the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was used. The Adult Dyslexia Checklist (Vinegrad, 1994) was included in the test battery as it seemed appropriate to monitor the incidence of dyslexia for two reasons. HESA statistics show a ten-fold increase in the incidence of reported cases of dyslexia in higher education from 1994-2006, (although this may not reflect a rise in the number of cases) and in psychology courses there is a slightly higher ratio of males to females among students with dyslexia compared to the cohort as a

whole (1:4 and 1:5). Secondly, there is a suggestion that dyslexia affects academic confidence (Barrett, 2005; Asquith, 2008).

To measure their perceptions of their own anticipated behaviour, the Academic Behavioural Confidence (ABC) Scale (Sander & Sanders, 2006a) was used. This uses a five-point scale where respondents rate how confident they feel that they will be able to engage in behaviours that can contribute to successful studying. The ABC comprises four subscales: Grades, Verbalising, Studying and Attendance. The final tool was the Performance Expectation Ladder (PEL, Sander & Sanders, 2003) which uses the ladder as a vertical visual analogue of potential marks. Against a clearly indicated but putative national average of 57 per cent, respondents are asked to indicate both their own expected average mark and that of their year group for the end of their first year and for their final year.

A semi structured interview schedule was used as a guide in the small group interviews. Questions were asked about their choice of degree and topic, sex differences, their individual experiences of studying at university and involvement in non-academic areas.

Procedure

During Induction Week tutorials at the start of their first academic year, new Year 1 students were asked to volunteer to complete the battery of tests. Volunteers were also assured that the data were for research purposes only.

All males who were in attendance at a series of compulsory research methods workshops were approached at the beginning of the second term. Seventeen agreed to take part and three declined. Of the 17, three turned up at the wrong time for the interview; hence the final number interviewed was 14. This represented approximately 70 per cent of the males in the cohort (accounting for those who had withdrawn by this stage). They were awarded course credits for taking part. Four interviews were conducted with small groups of either three or four par-

ticipants in each. A male, final year psychology student facilitated the interviews. The interviewer's brief was to explore with the students their experience of studying psychology, their views on their year group and on the social side of university life.

To measure performance assessment marks were taken following the end of year Year 1 examining board, and again at the final examining board at the end of Year 3. These students' grades were matched with each participant's psychometric data

Method of analysis

Nonparametric analyses were used throughout the psychometric data which were largely ordinal and had not been demonstrated to be normally distributed in the population, (Independent Chi Square, Mann Whitney and Wilcoxon Matched Pairs); parametric analyses were used on the assessment marks, (Independent t-tests) and analyses were conducted on SPSS v 12. Two-tailed probability levels are reported unless stated otherwise.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis using a qualitative thematic analysis (Kvale, 1996). The interviews were read a number of times to identify salient and common features and highlight illustrative quotations. Categorisation then took place, where the main themes were identified, categories named and data condensed and organised to represent and support these themes. This allowed for the narrative structuring that can be found within the results section.

Results

In Year 1, data were collected from 111 students (87 females) making an 81 per cent response rate overall. No student who attended their induction week tutorial refused the request to take part, but a greater percentage of the females (85 per cent) than the males (71 per cent) attended this session. The average age of the females was 20.4 (SD 5.01) and for males it was 19.7 (SD 4.57). Of the females, 16 (18 per cent of female respondents) could be classed as mature stu-

dents with an age range of 21-47. For males, there were only 2 in this category, aged 23 and 41, (8 per cent male of respondents).

Approaches to study

Quantitative data

There was no indication that learning styles differed between the sexes, with both scoring higher for Deep than for Surface Learning. The dyslexia score was slightly higher for males, but this difference was not significant (Table 1). However, the Self esteem score was significantly higher for the males, ($z=2.689, p<.01$).

The responses to the Performance Expectation Ladder showed a clear sex difference in students' own expected marks, at both Years 1 and 3 (Table 2). In each case the males expected significantly higher marks than the females, ($z=3.81, p<.001, z=2.40, p<.05$ respectively). This effect did not appear to be a result of general tendency amongst the males to use higher ratings overall as there was no sex differences evi-

dent in the ratings they gave for their year group; in each case this figure lay very close to the females' own mean ratings and below the males'. In fact, the males expected to do significantly better than the year group at both Year 1 ($z=2.245, p<.05$) and Year 3 ($z=2.362, p<.05$). Both groups reported higher expected marks at the end of Year 3 than Year 1 but only for the females was this effect significant, ($z=5.274, p<.001$).

Although the males appeared to score higher on three of the four ABC subscales, (not Studying) these differences were not significant ($p>.05$), (Table 3).

Two of the salient themes to emerge from the interview data were 'the female organiser' and 'the relative importance of the social aspect of university life'. These are explored in more detail below with extracts from the transcripts as supporting and illustrative evidence.

The female organiser

The male participants' readily acknowledged that they managed and organised studying

Sex	Learning styles		Dyslexia	Self esteem	
	Deep	Surface			
Female	Mean (SD)	31.3 (6.37)	19.8 (4.90)	7.1 (4.81)	34.8 (7.60)
Male	Mean (SD)	31.3 (5.60)	20.3 (5.42)	7.7 (4.98)	38.9 (9.26)

Table 1: Learning styles, dyslexia and self-esteem

Sex	Own mark at Year 1	Own mark at Year 3	Year group at Year 1	Year group at Year 3	
Female	Mean (SD)	59.2 (6.54)	63.5 (7.57)	60.8 (5.23)	63.5 (6.13)
Male	Mean (SD)	66.2 (7.60)	67.9 (8.90)	61.2 (4.93)	61.8 (4.71)

Table 2: Performance Expectation Ladder (PEL)

Sex		Grade – ABC factor	Verbalising – ABC factor	Studying – ABC factor	Attendance – ABC factor
Female	Mean	3.7	3.0	3.7	4.4
	SD	0.56	0.99	0.64	0.56
Male	Mean	3.9	3.5	3.7	4.5
	SD	0.55	0.88	0.66	0.56

Table 3: ABC scores by sex

very differently from the females. They were able to offer many examples of ways in which the behaviour of the females within a lecture and class room setting was different from theirs, for instance:

Group 3

...but a look around the lectures and it's like, 'cos you can print off your notes for the lectures on blackboard which I sort of I feel I have to do because I can't listen and write at the same time (laughter) I can't. I have to either listen or write and so I'll just sort of have the notes and listen, but when I look around um all the girls have like written everything and listening

Yeah that's true actually

But all the guys that I'm sitting next to can't (laughter)

Yeah

Initially the females here are being constructed as more efficient than them and, it could be argued, more able with their capacity to do two things at once. However, as the extract develops it can be seen that their behaviour is actually viewed as unnecessary:

I mean they've already got it down for them, which I'll maybe do afterwards, but they're just listening. But the girls can

I don't think those notes are needed really

The statement that *they've already got it down* for them relates to the Powerpoint slides for the lecture being made available to students before the session. The idea that the female students do not need to take notes of their own indicates, (from a lecturer's perspective at least), a misunderstanding of the role of the slides.

The shift away from viewing the females as more able continued in the latter part of the extract, where the discussion turned to the ways in which the females organise their lecture notes:

*And then you see them bringing **their files** (group laughter) and it's all highlighted*

Yeah, yeah the highlighters (laughter)

I haven't got anything. I was out on the raz last night and they've got files open...ah man

As is revealed above, this caused great amusement, and led the interviewer to further question the group on this issue:

Interviewer: *So what do you think this represents about girls?*

It's weird. It happened all through school. They just seem to have a higher drive to, the motivation to work. Not necessarily smarter than boys but their drive to work and keep plugging away it's so, it's more in tune than boys. Boys tend to leave it 'til the last...

I think they have a bigger need for order, you know 'cos today we had uh sort of a lesson today and we, we had to write ideas down and in our group we gave all the writing and the organising to put it

down on paper to the girls. 'Cos we knew to be honest they'd be neater. They'd plan it out better (agreement from the other group members) but all the ideas and things to write down came from us, but they could present it really well, but I think we were sort of turning up all the ideas

Yeah that's true actually I never thought about that, yeah

Their responses again reveal an acknowledgement that the females possess many skills which would often be viewed positively when considering what makes a 'good' learner. However, the disclaimer *not necessarily smarter* is later corroborated by another participant in the group claiming that it was the males who were *sort of turning up all the ideas*. In this part of the extract the females were seemingly being positioned in a role as minors for the task in which they were engaged, with the males being the ones producing the all important ideas.

Despite openly admitting that they are less organised, the males do not appear concerned about this. This is revealed in the next extract in response to a question about how they felt the females perceived them:

mmm. I'd say I am like pretty disorganised in like getting notes together and stuff. But like I've never really felt I have to be organised 'cos I'm doing... Yeah in a funny way being disorganised has worked, so far (group laughter) so to a certain extent it's worked

Yeah so don't need to change it

So it appears that there is an acknowledgment that females may be more able in certain aspects of managing their learning, but this is not perceived as something that the males need aspire too. In fact, as the statement *don't need to change* reveals, ultimately these skills are not viewed as essential for progression.

Similar opinions were expressed by other groups also, for example:

Group 4

Yeah girls have better time management (laughter)

Yeah girls are so organised ... well most of them are

They seem to have more highlighters (laughter)

Yeah, I think they do use their time more efficiently though

Again this discussion begins with the males attributing superior organisation and time management skills to the females. Moreover, when further questioned on this a familiar discourse emerges:

Interviewer: and what do you base that on?

Just the girls that I live with 'cos they do psychology as well

Yeah this year I've got two girls in my flat and they always hand in their stuff in on time it's like if you've got a problem I ask the girls (background yeahs)

They just tend to write everything down, and what they need to do and what time so everything's more organised, where as we leave it, leave everything 'til the last minute

But we can do it, we can organise it and....

We hand everything in on time, but just last minute (Yeah from others)

We get the same end result, it's just kind of how we go about it

Yeah I suppose so

The males allude to many of the skills that females possess which have also been reflected in the literature surrounding sex differences in education, providing explanations for females' better academic performance (e.g. Hartley, Betts & Murray, 2007).

Yet, what these extracts reveal is that they do not perceive them as necessary skills for academic success when displayed by females. They appear to view their own behaviours, including being less efficient and organised, as equally (if not more) conducive to achieving the same end result. Thus the skills and behaviour of ‘the female organiser’ was something which these participants were not motivated to develop or integrate into their own learning trajectories.

The relative importance of the social aspect of university life

The second theme to be discussed within the context of this research relating to perceptions about performance in university study relates to the importance attributed to attending. Within the interviews the participants did not appear to have generally attended well (although some individuals felt that they had):

Group 1

Interviewer: *How well did you attend last term?*

I wasn't, I wasn't as constructive with my time or um lectures or well my activities on the previous evening shall I say, it didn't suit me well for some days (laugh) so no I'd say poorly if I was being honest

It seemed that many had to juggle the often conflicting demands of their social activities with attendance. Although as the downward comparison offered by the next participant reveals, there were some well defended rationales and reasoning used to defend ones lack of attendance:

Group 4

...well I see other people and think well I'm a lot better off than him or her (laughed)

Yeah you're right. Some people I know I've spoken to people who say 'oh I've been here 6 weeks and I haven't been into uni yet', it's like, do you know what I mean? I'm like ok

When asked directly to weigh the impor-

tance of one up against the other, some participants attempted to quantify them in terms of percentages

Group 2

Interviewer: *How important for you is the non academic aspect of being a university student, for example social life, new friends, clubs?*

Uh about 40 per cent

I think it might be a little bit more than that

Oh actually

That's your foundation like

If you're not happy socially you're not going to do well

It's going to affect your life like

It seems perfectly viable that the initial term in university involves establishing social networks and that this would be an important part of the transition to university and undergraduate life. What these discussions reveal, however, is that for some this is greatly affecting attendance, and leaves one questioning the priority placed on engaging in the course across the initial year at least. As the following participant's quote reveals, academic work might not be perceived as priority in the initial stages of the degree:

Group 3

'Cos like some of my mates who have been to university say that the first year is like a proper like leary, you won't do any work and you'll just get hammered, second year will be half half, third year, you'll be a hermit, you won't go out (laughs).

Lack of attendance is an area that has been highlighted in the literature as typically being under-estimated by males and affecting their behaviour (e.g. Woodfield et al., 2006). Whilst from this data it is not possible to make any comments about males in comparison to females, it does seem evident that

Table 4: Year 1 marks by sex

Sex		Coursework mark **	Examination mark	Overall mark
Female	Mean	54.0	55.9	54.9
	SD	5.11	14.61	17.81
Male	Mean	50.0	54.9	50.1
	SD	5.95	12.54	17.87

** $p < 0.1$

for these groups of male undergraduates ‘the relative importance of the social aspect of university life’ is high.

Academic performance

There are three outcome variables, representing Performance at the end of Year 1, (Table 4): Coursework Mark, (averaged across all five essay style summative assessments in Year 1), Examination Mark (averaged across all 11 tests and examinations in Year 1) and the overall mark which takes account of the differential weightings of individual assignments. Although all three marks appear higher for the females, it is only for the coursework that a significant difference is found: ($t_{109}=3.254, p < .005$). Overall marks at the end of the third year, that is the marks that determined the degree classification, showed very little difference between the sexes; Males $M=58.0$ (SD 4.94), Females $M=58.1$ (SD 4.02). Unfortunately a change in the way that marks are stored within the university meant that breakdowns

for examination and coursework were not available. Nonetheless, the largest substantive component of the degree is a piece of Year 3 coursework (accounting for 30 credits), namely the dissertation, for which a breakdown of marks was available. Again no sex differences are apparent here: Males $M=56.9$ (SD 9.35), Females $M=57.3$ (SD 7.95). It would seem therefore that any disadvantage the male students may have shown in performance at the end of Year 1 is no longer apparent by the end of the degree.

It should be noted that these Year 3 data are taken only from those who complete the course. Of greater concern to us, as educators, is the overall outcome measure at the end of the third year for that original cohort of students. Table 4 shows those who completed their degree in the three years of the course with those who did not, either by deferring or by leaving.

From this it is evident that whilst the majority of females have completed, the majority of males have not. Low expected

Table 5: Degree outcome (within three years) by sex

Sex	Completed	Not completed	
		Deferred	Left
Female	61	7	19
	70%	8%	22%
Male	10	6	9
	40%	24%	36%

frequencies preclude a reliable interpretation of chi square test here, thus the two non-completing categories were collapsed into a single category (as indicated by the borders in Table 5). A significant association was then found between sex and outcome after three years ($\chi^2=6.35, p<.01$). Given the concern this raises, the males' psychometric data for completers and non-completers were compared to see if any of these measures could predict completion, but there were no observable differences on self-esteem, dyslexia, learning styles, academic confidence or performance expectations.

Discussion

It would seem that males' long established tendency to optimistic ratings of their own performance, in this group at least, remains unaffected by recent news coverage of females outperforming males. It appears that it is also unwarranted judging by the performance data. Whilst the outcome for those who graduated showed no sex difference, it remains a possibility that males may have used less effort, and possibly organisation, to achieve a comparable outcome to their female counterparts.

In this study, compared with their female counterparts the male respondents had higher self-esteem, expected higher marks and also anticipated performing better than did their peers. It is possible that getting to university in a climate of male under-achievement may result in males being able to distance themselves from this prevailing image. They may see themselves as being part of an elite group, university students, and as such, the bad press associated with male academic performance in recent years does not apply to them. This is a possible explanation given that it has been shown that males are able, individually, to distance themselves from generally held negative perceptions of male students to which they themselves subscribe, (Sander & Sanders, 2006b).

Whilst self-esteem and performance expectations showed significant differences between males and females, it is noteworthy

that no such effects were apparent in the subscales measuring academic confidence. It would have been reasonable to expect that Grades and Verbalising would show males scoring higher. Examination of the subscale Grades reveals that it comprises items relating to ability and endeavour. Whilst males are scoring higher on the ability items, they show no such advantage on those related to endeavour. We would have expected Verbalising scores to be higher for males, given the evidence from Read, Archer & Leathwood (2003), Sommers & Lawrence (1992), and Sternglanz & Lyberger-Ficek (1997) among others, and from our own anecdotal observations. Again this lack of effect may be the nature of the items in this subscale which imply an element of academic involvement: Respond to questions asked by a lecturer in front of a full lecture theatre, Give a presentation to a small group of fellow students, Engage in profitable academic debate with your peers, Ask lecturers questions about the material they are teaching, during a lecture. Responses on this scale may be influenced by the 'laddish' requirement to appear 'cool' and disengaged from active studying (Francis, 1999).

In the interviews, when asked about being in a numerical minority, it was common for participants to view this as an advantage. Perhaps the superior status afforded to being male within western society generally counteracts the low status and esteem often associated with being a member of a minority as has been suggested by Francis (1999).

The qualitative findings also showed some of the males in this cohort openly admitting to poor attendance and a disorganised approach to studying. This would seem to be part of the 'lad' culture identified by Warin and Dempster (2007) as a transient phase in the transition process. It could easily be a continuation of the 'laddish' culture identified in the schoolroom by Francis (1999) and by Younger, Warrington and Williams (2001). From these data, we cannot conclude how long this transient phase lasted. Could this be a contributory explanation

tion to the higher attrition rate for males? Maybe those who failed to move away from this phase were those who left the course. Alternatively, it is possible that the phase was not transient, that it remained part of the male students' culture. If this were the case, then it would seem plausible to suggest that males may get away with less work and yet achieve a comparable outcome. This needs further examination.

Transient or not, this phase was not construed by the male students to be problematic; they made good use of social comparison theory to demonstrate they were not the worst offenders. Their dismissal of the females' 'unnecessary' work also served as a reinforcement for the safety and common sense of their own position. Moreover, the suggestion that in group work females will make a neater job of presentation, but the intellectual input came primarily from the males can be seen as another incidence of confidence in their own academic ability.

Despite this confidence, the only substantive difference in performance showed males doing worse than females in coursework at Year 1. It would seem that the males' relative optimism may be misplaced. This accords with the findings of Mellanby, Martin and O'Doherty (2000) that high self esteem and academic efficacy are not predictors of academic success. This may provide some insight into the gung-ho hypothesis suggested by Sander and Sanders (2003). As originally stated, gung-ho described the observation that Academic Behavioural Confidence scores decreased during the first year of university study. The data presented here suggest a qualification to the original gung-ho proposal, namely that male students are more gung-ho than female students as they come in with significantly higher self-esteem and performance expectations. This raises the obvious question of what happens to these male self-perceptions once they are shown to be unfounded. Are they affected, or does some other form of self-protective mechanism provide a form of defensive mediation between

these perceptions and the harsh evidence of performance measures? Some of the male participants did profess an intention to work harder in the later years of the degree.

Starting their academic year with this optimistic view of their own capabilities, may in turn actually lead male students to a decrement in performance. Such positive self-beliefs may result in lack of effort in their studies, which in turn would mean poorer marks. It is apparent from the response rate here that a larger proportion of male than female students did not attend their Induction week tutorial; this might be the first symptom of a more cavalier approach to studies. This suggestion would also accord with the evidence here that the decrement for males is in the Year 1 coursework marks, which arguably require a more sustained effort over time than examinations. Feedback on coursework marks largely occurs before the examination period, which might serve to stimulate the under-achiever into 'cramming' for examinations, thereby reducing the differential. Given that the examinations mark showed no sex difference, it could be that they recover themselves in time to progress. As it is possible to cram for an examination (especially at Year 1), the lack of organisation and last minute work which they talk about in the interviews is more conducive to examination success. Such strategies have been exposed as ineffective within their coursework grades. To establish whether this is the case, it is necessary to follow a cohort through the course, monitoring both perceptions and performance. This would necessitate the continued use of a multi method approach.

Utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods within this study seemed to work well, and would be a profitable approach in future studies. Indeed many of the trends identified by the psychometric data were corroborated and enhanced by the further insight into the males' perceptions that a qualitative technique affords.

Some might suggest that offering course credits for taking part in the interview ses-

sions might lead to an unrepresentative sample. This seems unlikely given that only three of twenty present during recruitment declined to take part. Moreover, if the inducement were in any way to bias the sample selection, it would be towards conformity with course requirements, rather than towards rebelliousness. Whilst we expect students to collect a requisite number of such credits during the first year, there is always a small minority who do not even attempt to do so. Thus the sample interviewed appear to be responding to course requirements, not a very male characteristic according to Francis, Robson and Reid (2001). This would suggest that if there were a bias in this sample, it was away from the most 'laddish' element of the cohort.

Some might argue that in a group interview an element of male bravado could occur, as being 'one of the lads' is an easy and familiar way to establish group membership and cohesion (Warin and Dempster 2007). We would like to point out that it is in groups that all of our teaching takes place. If this did colour their narratives in any way, then it is likely that similar bravado prevails in the majority of the teaching and learning situations in which these male students find themselves.

Given the lack of difference in examination and overall Year 3 marks, at first glance the males' approach to their studies seems

justified; maybe leaving it to the last moment 'has worked'. On the other hand, more telling and of greater concern is the sex difference in completion rates. The lack of difference between male completers and male non-completers on any of the psychometric measures is disappointing but not unexpected. The search must continue for a simple psychometric tool that could identify those most at risk of dropping out. We consider that it is possible that Warin and Dempster's transient 'laddish' phase (2007) for which our qualitative data provide further evidence, may in fact only be transient for some. Could the non-completers be those for whom the phase becomes a way of life, leading to alienation and disengagement from academia as it had done for their classmates in earlier phase of education?

It would seem from these data that our male psychology undergraduates may at least in the early days of university be considered rogue males: confident, cavalier and non-compliant. As teaching staff we need to consider ways to help them through the transition process towards academic success.

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