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'It comes with more baggage than prestige': deferred culpability and disavowal among elite boys' school alumni

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ABSTRACT

Research investigating elite schools has highlighted how students within these learning environments embody and naturalise their privilege through discourses of merit, hard work, and innate talent and skill. However, relatively little is known about how privilege, and its associated discourses, moves with students beyond the school gate and into adulthood. In this paper we present accounts from elite boys' school alumni to interrogate how they mediate representations of Self as morally 'good and sincere'. The active disavowal of the elite education experience, and deferral of culpability from the cultural practices of these institutions feature in these accounts. In particular, the paper explores the strategies used to reconcile aspects of the elite boys' school experience. We argue that these practices of disavowal and deferred culpability provide a degree of personal and professional mobility, from which the cultivation of a positive sense of self as a 'good' man emerges.

KEYWORDS

Elite schools; privilege; disavowal; deferred culpability; identity; old boys

Introduction

Steven: I'm not one of those former students that prides myself on being an old boy ... It's not the sort of thing that I would offer up in conversation about myself. Normally, I'm very reluctant to name the school I went to, mostly because I feel it comes with more baggage than prestige.

Steven¹ is 38 and attended *Bridge Academy*, an elite boys' school in Australia. After completing a dual degree in arts/law at a prestigious university, he worked for a global management consultancy, before completing graduate rotations at a multinational law firm. After gaining a postgraduate qualification, he has held various advisory and executive roles across government and the not-for-profit sector. Key moments in his life trajectory have been marked by *privilege*.

Steven was one of nine old boys² who shared stories about their experiences of attending elite boys' schools in Australia and the continuing influence this exerted in their day-to-day

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lives. The participants were initially engaged as part of a study that explored how old boys discursively mediated their subjectivities in the context of their prior schooling experiences. The study sought to respond to the question: How do old boys feel about their schooling and talk about this experience in adulthood? The study utilised semi-structured interviews with a group of 12 old boys conducted between 2020 and 2021. In this paper, we give attention to how these participants have worked to reconcile aspects of their schooling experiences, especially those considered problematic within the context of shifting cultural standards.

Previous studies have investigated the identity formation of students from elite educational contexts (e.g. Ayling, 2019; Howard, Polimeno, & Wheeler, 2014; Meadmore & Meadmore, 2004) and the ways in which the experiences of elite schooling invoke a sense of inter-subjective unity between former students (Howard & Nguyen, 2018). Central to these studies were investigations of concordant life trajectories and enactments of privilege that emerged from the elite school experience (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a; Khan, 2011). Studies that adopt a life-histories approach have revealed how privilege and power are implicated in the lives of ruling class men. Through a close examination of individual lives, these studies have provided valuable insights about the contradictions and limitations of masculinities, the intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity, but also how a multiplicity of masculinities diverge and converge across an individual's life (Connell, 2010). Poynting and Donaldson (2005) observed how elite boys' schools in Australia cultivate a 'masculinity of success', which is then transported into prestigious universities, and eventually, corporate boardrooms. However, Connell and Wood (2005) noted that while business managers in Australia continue to exist in male-dominated work environments, where there is a pre-occupation with power and money, there is also evidence of shifting attitudes, especially surrounding diversity and tolerance. Emergent masculinities and changes in gender dynamics have also been observed elsewhere. For example, Madrid (2013) emphasised the role of elite private education in the shaping of ruling class masculinities in Chile, while also exploring how interactions between family, school, and work developed practices that were both classed and gendered. This paper works with these themes by considering how mediations of identity and self-representation translate into adulthood to inform accounts of the self as a former student.

The interviews analysed in this paper reveal how the participants navigated key life stages, with references to their schooling experiences providing important prompts for explaining their current positionality and understandings of self. Attention was given to defining the meanings of elite boys' schooling and how each participant discursively constructed a sense of self through this accounting of their schooling experience. As a way of reflecting on, and re-evaluating, what it meant to attend an elite boys' school, the interviews offered a means to consider the elite school as a site of continued identity formation.

The positionality assumed by the old boys generated complex renderings of the *prior* self – the self as 'student' – which were often in contrast with declarations of the current self. This negotiation (and negation) of the old boy identity required the mediation of what it meant to have attended an elite school and to be identified as an 'old boy'. This was especially prevalent where aspects of the prior self were considered problematic and prone to challenge in contemporary contexts. Considering recent, high-profile reports of antisocial and problematic behaviours involving students from elite boys' schools, the participants relayed how their elite schooling experiences were now

associated with personal shame, guilt, or embarrassment. The participants negotiated aspects of their prior selves through processes of differentiation, distancing, and rationalisation, which we cast under the broader heading of 'disavowal'. We expand on examples of this enactment of 'disavowal' in the discussion that follows and demonstrate how conceptualisations of the old boy self were rationalised in ways that distanced the current self from problematic associations with a normative old boy identity.

What is an elite boys' school?

The characteristics inherent to elite schools and schooling have been developed across specific geographic contexts including Ireland (Courtois, 2020), North America (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b), and Australia (Saltmarsh, 2016). However, recent accounts have also extended these localised understandings of elite schools by highlighting how these institutions are constituted through global flows of privilege and power (Koh & Kenway, 2016).

Elites have been defined as those who are in 'possession of resources allowing for the hoarding and monopolisation of desired positions, opportunities, and honours' (van Zanten, 2015, p. 4), with this providing a useful definitional prompt for this paper. Describing elite schools in Britain, Green and Kynaston (2019) extended this conceptualisation to describe these institutions as 'engines of privilege' that enable their members to convert economic and social resources into motion along desirable life trajectories. In this way, elite schools hoard and restrict access to those resources that provide students entrée to opportunities and outcomes that are inaccessible to others. However, these resources are not 'fixed' (Kenway & Koh, 2015) but are 'produced through an intricate array of practices, which adjust, over time, to suit changing economic, socio-cultural, and geo-political circumstances' (Koh & Kenway, 2016, p. 1). Therefore, while elite schools (especially those that have been modelled on English Public Schools) might share similar characteristics, they also express privilege in diverse ways (Kenway et al., 2017). The cultural, economic, and social dynamics inherent to a given social milieu necessarily shape the characteristics of privilege provided by individual schools (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2016; Poynting & Donaldson, 2005).

The cultural and historical background of elite boys' schools in Australia can be traced to the English Public School system.³ Traditionally, these institutions were concerned with moulding boys into men by emphasising the masculine traits of strength, prowess, and intellectual superiority (Crotty, 2001). Within the Australian context, these institutions can typically claim membership of the Great Public Schools (GPS) Association in their respective state or territory.⁴ Within Australia, the GPS Associations have historically been the mechanism through which member schools have asserted their status, social prestige, and class specific values (Sherington, 1983). With few exceptions, these schools are in the capital cities of Australia, often in wealthy, inner-city suburbs. Drew (2013) has indicated that the 'elite ideological narratives' (p. 180) utilised by these schools specify exclusivity through the economic, social, and cultural capital required of students, their families, and those associated with the wider school community. As a result, the ideological narratives deployed by elite schools establish criteria for entry by suggesting that 'the elite school [is] more exclusive and discerning than non-elite public schools' (p. 182).

Elite schools, identity, and social justice

We draw from these conceptualisations of elite boys' schools to consider the intra-personal experience of being an 'old boy'. Some scholars have utilised a poststructuralist lens, among others, to highlight how the interactions and relations engaged by elite school students proceed as *performances* (Chase, 2008; Khan, 2011). From this perspective, these studies conceptualise students as individual actors who produce and respond to relations across various contexts. Drawing on the theoretical work of Butler (2006), it is suggested that rather than revealing an 'essential' self, these performances correspond with different settings and situations to create a cohesive but contextually contingent characterisation of self. In short, through performative enactments, a 'durable' representation of self emerges as responsive to (and contingent on) prescribed social settings.

This understanding of identity construction as a 'performance' revealed how students at an elite boarding school in the United States internalised their gender (Chase, 2008). Another study analysed, among other aspects, how students performatively embodied and naturalised their privilege (Khan, 2011). As Khan revealed, privilege becomes 'obscured' in the elite school context to advance the appearance that success is linked to students' meritorious hard work, innate talent, and skill. Continuing, Khan (2011) explained:

Being an elite is not a mere possession or something 'within' an actor (skills, talents, and human capital); it is an embodied performative act enabled by both possessions and the inscriptions that accompany experiences within elite institutions (schools, clubs, families, networks, etc.). Our bodily tastes, dispositions, and tendencies are not simply something we're born with; they are things that are produced through our experiences in the world. Not only do they occur in our minds, but they are things we enact repeatedly so that soon these performances look less and less like an artificial role we're playing – a role that might advantage us – and instead look more like just who we naturally are. (p. 136)

A study by Charles, Black, and Keddie (2021), which investigated the identity work of undergraduate scholarship recipients at an Australian university, indicated how notions of meritocracy were produced differently based on social background. In this instance, scholarship recipients from wealthy, high achieving families, operationalised merit to justify their academic success, but also entitlement to its benefits and rewards. Adopting this perspective, this paper considers how the culture of elite boys' schools exerted a continuing influence over the participants' representation of Self; both as old boys and as members of wider society. Specifically, the interviews revealed that understandings of self were often conflicted, uncertain, and inconsistent.

Conversations with the participants revealed how a sense of needing to create 'distance' from the elite school experience were underpinned by realisations that elite boys' schools provoked behaviours, attitudes, and capacities that were considered problematic on reflection. Although being an 'old boy' *produced* privilege, the participants revealed complex accounts that suggested a troubling entanglement of resistance and reproduction of their old boy identity.⁵ While unsurprising, especially given that prior research has highlighted an ambivalence among students about their privilege, and how internal contradictions and inconsistencies can become manifest in feelings of discomfort surrounding achievements and success (French, 2017; Gaztambide-Fernández,

2009a), the complexity in these re-tellings of Self nonetheless prefigured the accounts offered by each participant.

During the interviews, our participants demonstrated awareness of, and responsiveness to, their privilege via acts of resistance and associated 'strategies' of avoidance. As we report in the analysis below, the participants enacted a process of 'disavowal' to distance themselves from aspects of their schooling experience and prior selves. The presence of these knotted expressions of disavowal within the interviews indeed *confirmed* the participants' awareness of the more problematic aspects of their schooling, and how it 'might advantage' them. But by downplaying the role of advantage, such assertions towards disavowal minimised the associations between these students and privilege, and the advantages and opportunities that this promulgated for the participants into adulthood. As Kenway and Lazarus (2017) argued, it is the outward appearance of egalitarianism, demonstrated through values of care and honour, and diligence and fairness, which provide the impetus for these enactments.

Methodology and analytical framework

The data presented in this paper was collected through semi-structured interviews with old boys from elite boys' schools in Australia. This field work was undertaken as part of a project that aimed to develop insights into the discursive mediation of masculine subjectivities negotiated by old boys at the intersection of elitism and privilege. As the project was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were completed via Zoom.

Twelve respondents, who had attended nine all-boys' schools in Australia were selected during the recruitment phase. Three of these respondents were later excluded, after screening questions revealed they had attended schools that did not meet the criteria to mark them as 'elite'. Interviews were completed by the lead author between 2020 and 2021. The interviews were directed by a series of narrative prompts that were focused on the experience of the participants and how they negotiated identity work into adulthood. The prompts were organised thematically, with a deliberate focus on schooling, as follows: (1) School – Experiences and impressions of elite boys' schooling; (2) Graduation – Imagined post-school trajectories; (3) Adulthood – Study, work, and relationships; and (4) Contemporary Society – Thoughts and observations on gender equality, social inclusion, and workplace diversity.

Although the subject matter and associated analysis of this project necessitated an emphasis on the actions of the participants, we stress that the findings of this paper are not presented as criticisms. Throughout the interviews, and subsequent analysis, the sincerity of the participants was evident, specifically surrounding their awareness of, and resistance to, privilege. This paper makes visible, the discourses at play, for the purposes of addressing how they were mobilised, often unintentionally, in the sharing of stories about elite schooling and subsequent life trajectories.

As this suggests, rather than understanding the interview data as a set of transparent accounts of events and instances, the experiences were analysed and interpreted as complicated and tangled accounts of advantage, opportunity, and privilege. In making sense of these accounts, it was necessary to recognise the discursive provenance of the accounts and how these ordered the reflections of the lived experience of the participants. As such, these accounts functioned within a 'process of representation' (Clandinin

& Rosiek, 2007, p. 49) where the narratives shifted and morphed as reflection on past events and past experiences informed new experiences through the process of retelling (Davies & Davies, 2007).

This paper specifically features the accounts of five old boys – *Chris, Joe, Neil, Steven, and Todd* – who were drawn from the larger study and ranged in age between 25 and 44. The selection of these participants provided an important contrast between social backgrounds, as well as pathways into, and out of, elite boys' schooling. Chris had received a full academic scholarship, while Neil, the son of a teacher, was enrolled through a generous tuition discount offered to staff members. Similarly, Joe had his tuition fees paid for by contributions from extended family members. Steven and Todd emerged from more affluent social backgrounds. Chris, Neil, and Todd were the first-in-family to attend an elite school, while Joe and Steven had multi-generational associations with their respective schools. Apart from Joe, each old boy had at least one undergraduate qualification from an Australian university, while Neil and Steven had postgraduate qualifications. Further, the participants have divergent employment histories, and are engaged across various labour market sectors including creative industries, education, and social policy. Additional biographical details about the participants are included within the data provided below.⁶

The role of elite boys' schooling in shaping identities

A theme evident across the discussions centred on the use of disavowal to demonstrate moral goodness and sincerity. Through the obscuration of the advantages and opportunities acquired from elite schooling, the participants cultivated a sense of personal propriety, and where disavowal was enacted to discursively mitigate personal culpability, the participants felt for their former selves. In relaying accounts of their schooling experiences, the participants also constructed reflexive descriptions of self that rationalised later career and lifestyle choices in contrast to a 'typical' old boy persona. An example was provided by Steven, who relayed how his career trajectory had developed since school:

I've kind of eschewed the corporate, like career path. I felt there was that same sort of, sense of self-prestige and exclusivity, that I saw at Bridge Academy. So, I didn't like those sorts of workplaces. In a sense because they kind of reminded me of Bridge Academy ... in a negative way. It reminds me of school, and I don't want to have a part of that.

Similarly, Neil had indicated his aversion to large institutions and organisations, equating the 'big feeling' of these environments to an elite school. He explained that within large organisations:

You don't have any influence over anything. I don't like feeling like I could drop off the face of the earth and no one would bat an eye. I don't like feeling like I don't have any influence over a place that I spend every day at. I don't like that feeling.

These statements reveal the contradiction and entanglement of privilege; a simultaneous resistance and reification of privilege where unearned advantage was disavowed while a sense of the prestige and exclusivity it afforded was celebrated.

The participants deployed a variety of techniques to disavow the outward appearance of their privilege and the role that their schooling played in providing economic and social advantage beyond the school gate. In particular, the participants relayed a sense of *shame* in the behaviours and conduct of their prior selves, which in turn prompted a process of *deferring culpability* for the more problematic aspects of their schooling experiences. From this, the participants worked to *rationalise* the positionality of the current self, typically through explanations of the prior self as a product of a schooling system that provoked these behaviours. In combination, this process provided the basis for discursively enacting the disavowal of the prior self.

Shame

The participants indicated that the process of reflecting on the problematic practices and traditions of their schools provoked a fracturing in their identification as old boys. Despite having shared stories about being engaged in the ‘culture’ of their schools as students, it became evident that any affinity towards their school community had faded in adulthood. *Shame* defined this sense. For example, Todd shared that his belief in the quality and excellence of an elite education had been productively challenged by time and experience and that his pride in having attended an elite school had dissipated. In gaining an awareness of his privilege, he shared that he was now ‘ashamed of going to a private school’. Similarly, Neil indicated that he was ‘embarrassed’ about his education and was not ‘proud’ to be an old boy.

For several participants, negative associations with the school they attended now defined their remembrances. Indeed, the participants felt that revealing an elite school background caused assumptions to be drawn from others about their identity. The participants felt such an identity would subsequently disqualify them from certain social groups and activities. For example, Steven explained how he felt a need to distance himself from his elite schooling:

You can be seen as very entitled. A wanker. You know, you can be seen as arrogant. You come from a very rich, privileged background. I don’t feel that it tends to be seen warmly that you’re an old boy ... It cues eye rolls and people forming assumptions about you based on that.

This sentiment was shared across much of the participant group, with many expressing that their association with an elite boys’ school was something to be obscured. Todd stated that ‘I don’t want to be identified as a *Bourke College* old boy because I don’t want people’s opinion to be that, because he went to a private school, that’s where he got his success from’. Joe, highlighted the possible implications of revealing his elite schooling experience:

I don’t want to be seen as some, you know, a bratty rich kid from the rich school. The rich, racist school. I think that [*Foveaux Grammar School*] makes my reputation worse, because it associates me with an economically exclusive, and exclusive as in it excludes, organisation that has some real problems with racism and has some real problems with homophobia.

While old boys have historically used their education and social background to maintain and expand access to esteemed destinations (Reeves, Friedman, Rahal, & Flemmen, 2017), the participants revealed a more self-consciously *negative* awareness of this identity. This

reidentification parallels wider shifts in public sentiment surrounding elite boys' schools and the men they produce (Verkaik, 2018).

Distorting and obscuring the educational background offered a means for transforming a sense of self. Echoing the findings of Kenway and Lazarus (2017), although in this instance among elite school alumni, these men demonstrated how they felt compelled to distance themselves from their elite schooling and enact personae that assuaged any semblance of elitism or entitlement. We argue that being an old boy comes with 'baggage' in this regard, and that negative associations define elitism within some social contexts. By sharing their past experiences, the participants revealed how they had been implicated in the cultural practices of elite boys' schooling, fostering an acknowledgement of, and resistance to, any perceived entitlement and privilege in adulthood. The experience of having attended an elite school caused self-awareness based on what the participants felt others perceived of them. This awareness indicated that the old boy association carried negative connotations, which in turn necessitated the presentation of a carefully defined current Self to mitigate feelings of shame and embarrassment.

Deferring culpability

Through the deployment of a morally 'good' and 'sincere' persona, the participants identified how they positioned themselves in contrast to the problematic behaviours of their schooling. However, this required the careful negotiation and rationalisation of the continuing economic benefit and social advantage that their schooling provided. While making claims against material wealth and institutionalised privilege, the participants invoked views that they had always been 'outside' the elite boys' school culture, and subsequently, had never benefited from privilege as a result.

As a student, Steven shared that he had been 'shy and unsure' of himself, and was always 'sensitive, and wore my heart on the sleeve'. Unlike the typical student who was 'brave, and fearless, and good at sport', Steven defined himself as someone who was 'nerdy ... didn't live up to the hype ... and [was] just softer and nicer as far as human beings go'. Similarly, Todd indicated that he had always been quiet, as opposed to the typical student who was 'loud and always taking up space'. Neil had been a 'socialist', which placed him in opposition to the 'incredible arrogance' of most students who were 'holier than thou' and 'felt that they were better than you'. In this way, the participants cast themselves in contrast to more 'typical' students, enabling them to differentiate their own educational experience.

By discursively configuring this differentiation, the participants both resisted and reproduced the characteristics that normatively defined the old boy identity. Although the practice of talking about their educational background positioned the participants as old boys, the unease associated with being implicated by this identity location was discursively allayed through differentiation. Todd downplayed his elite school association by differentiating his own innate capacities and talent as a student. This allowed individual talent, as opposed to economic advantage and social connections, to be the differentiating factor in career success. Todd indicated that:

Bourke College hasn't really contributed to my life in any formal way ... Because none of my success can be attributed to Bourke College. Like, it was all just attributed to my life outside of school. And in fact, I wonder in what ways [Bourke College] has actually inhibited me.

Similarly, Steven shared that he had never benefited from the old boy network to gain employment or business opportunities. Instead, he indicated that any professional opportunities had been attributable to his ‘university degree and marks’ and the ‘track record I built up’ through job performance and references. The implication of this is evident in terms of the deferred culpability it suggests. By constructing a normative conception of elite boys’ schools, and the men they produce, it became possible for the participants to differentiate themselves and defer any culpability that might accrue with their status and positionality. While being elite school products, the participants were able to defer the more problematic association of this identity and any perceptions of unfair advantage.

This process of deferral was especially evident in discussions on employment and career trajectories. Like Todd, Chris declared that he had never benefited professionally from his elite schooling, nor procured employment or business opportunities by virtue of this association. Like Todd, he argued that his trajectory beyond the school gate had been prompted by:

forging my own path in a way that I don’t think school has in any way contributed to ... I don’t think school actually helped in any way. Like, I didn’t use a single contact from my school days. No one from my school had anything to do with it, and none of my schooling itself had anything to do with how I would end up turning out.

By engaging personal stories about deserved, earned, and fair success, Chris was able to detach himself from any association with elitism and privilege, simultaneously reifying his individual capabilities whilst deferring the advantage accrued from the old boy persona.

Discussion: undoing old boy through deferred culpability and disavowal

Elite school research has revealed an ambivalence among students about their privilege, and how internal contradictions and inconsistencies can become manifest in feelings of discomfort surrounding personal achievement and success (French, 2017; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a). Specifically, an awareness of privilege can generate feelings of guilt and shame (Case & Rios, 2017; Wise & Case, 2013). As Keddie, Jacobs, and Nelson (2020) identified, internal feelings of conflict and contradiction, and associated strategies of avoidance and resistance, reflect an anxiety that elite school students can feel about their schooling. From this, a sense of shame and guilt surrounding the unearned nature of privilege and the prospect of not having earned one’s place in the world correspond.

Rejecting elite boys’ schooling

Reports about antisocial and problematic behaviour (e.g. Gilmore, 2017; Milligan, Cronau, & Carter, 2020) and investigations into elite boys’ school culture (e.g. Baker, 2022; Henriques-Gomes, 2019; O’Brien, 2022; Pearson & Foster, 2020) have prompted greater awareness of the cultural practices and traditions inherent to elite boys’ schooling. In turn, and as the experiences of the participants reported here demonstrates, this scrutiny of elite schooling has caused some alumni to question characteristics they maintain.

In discussing their attendance at an elite boys’ school, the research participants were aware of, and directly engaged with, these larger social discourses. Further, the participants

displayed an awareness of the material advantage that accrued from attendance at an elite boys' school. Notably, this awareness of the advantages and privilege provided by the elite school provoked the participants to differentiate themselves from the more problematic aspects of a normative old boy persona. It was during these recounts that a process of rationalising and re-evaluating the former self occurred. Specifically, the participants deployed techniques of downplaying the effects of their privilege, with several old boys actively disavowing the advantage that this provided. These practices aligned with the disavowal strategies of Kenway and Lazarus (2017), in which disavowal provided a way to 'lessen any negative associations with ... unfair power, status and privilege' (p. 268).

Elite school scholars have highlighted that elitism, privilege, and educational advantage remain entangled in the perpetuation of inequality. As Gaztambide-Fernández and Howard (2013) asserted, social inequality necessitates that those who emerge from economic privilege must address a 'set of moral, social, and political questions, not least of which is the question of how to preserve a sense of being a "good" human being' (p. 1). From this perspective, we set out to understand how men who emerged from elite boys' schools in Australia reconfigured their schooling experiences to rationalise their senses of self within contemporary contexts that asserted the importance of often very different values and moral virtues.

Conclusion

This paper highlights that the practice of disavowal extends beyond a basic rejection of having attended an elite boys' school. For the participants reported here, disavowal required a more complete repudiation of the advantages and opportunities that were generated from the schooling experience. It emerged during our discussions that our participants' conceptions of Self emphasised achievement through individual effort and moral virtue. Being 'good' men was fundamental to the participants' conceptualisations of their current selves and provided a tangible basis from which to distance themselves from normative conceptions of the old boy.

In sharing how they have been active in processes of self-reidentification since moving beyond the school gate, the participants worked to present themselves as morally *good*. While being acutely aware of the hostility surrounding the negative aspects of the old boy persona, the participants highlighted aspects of their current selves that demonstrated a differentiation from the prior self. They rejected the elitism and privilege that they emerged from, while simultaneously obscuring any sense of the economic, cultural, and social capital that continued to ensure their financial and social security. The act of disavowing the old boy persona and identifying as 'good' men enabled the participants to rationalise the positionality of their current selves and to avoid being defined negatively by others. Disavowal and deferred culpability also enabled these participants a degree of mobility and the capacity to shift career trajectories, contributing to the cultivation of a positive sense of self as a 'good' man.

Notes

1. Steven' is not his real name. Names and other identifying details of research participants have been changed.

2. The term 'old boy' emerged during the 1860s to identify graduates from a small set of schools in England that were widely considered to be the 'chief nurseries' of the British elite. These schools prepared their male-only alumni – the 'old boys' – to take up positions of power across business, culture, law, the military, and politics (Reeves et al., 2017). The term has now become widely used, especially in countries that are former colonies of the British Empire.
3. The best-known English Public Schools were founded in the late Medieval and Renaissance periods and include: Charterhouse School; Eton College; Harrow School; Merchant Taylors' School; Rugby School; Shrewsbury School; St Paul's School; Westminster School; and Winchester College.
4. The Great Public Schools Associations were established to provide students from member schools with opportunities to participate in a range of inter-school cultural and sporting activities. Members of these associations are predominantly elite boys' schools.
5. As an example, on becoming aware of their privilege, White students can generate feelings of guilt and shame surrounding issues of race (Case & Rios, 2017), leading many to avoid discussions on privilege, racial justice, and class inequality (French, 2017). As Case and Rios (2017) argued, feelings of guilt and shame associated with White privilege may lead students in elite settings to 'shut down, feel targeted, get defensive, and exhibit greater resistance to learning' (p. 140). For Keddie et al. (2020), internal feelings of conflict and contradiction, and associated strategies of avoidance and resistance, reflected the anxiety of students at elite schools and the difficulties they had confronting and justifying privilege. As such, social justice initiatives within elite schools typically reproduce privilege (Howard, 2013; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010), perpetuating the interests of a predominantly White and wealthy client base (French, 2017; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a). In turn, students become apathetic as opposed to developing a genuine awareness of social justice and opportunities to challenge economic, political, and social privilege (Howard, 2013; Keddie et al., 2020).
6. Given these characteristics, the participants diverge from popular conceptions of the 'typical' old boy, both regarding their social background and life trajectories. The absence of participants from prestigious employment destinations in finance, law, and politics, suggests that the most influential and powerful old boys are not included in the presented data. Further, the small scale of this study also limits the strength of any claims made about the disavowal strategies of old boys in Australia. These are important caveats in the presentation and analysis of the data that follows.

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Ethics approvals

Ethical Clearance for the project reported in this paper was issued by the host university, Human Research Ethics Approval Number: H19REA287. Informed consent of all participants was secured to conduct this research as part of the programme discussed in this paper.

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