



‘Girls do this, guys do that’: how first-in-family students negotiate working-class gendered subjectivities during a time of social change

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Abstract

Despite efforts to foster a more equitable gender representation, Australia’s higher education sector and workforce continue to be highly segregated. This article focusses on the gendered experiences of first-in-family (FIF) students—many who are from low-socioeconomic communities—transitioning to Australian universities. In terms of the gendered nature of widening participation, we know students who are FIF will often study disciplines which align with traditional gender norms. Drawing on the *First-in-Family Project* ($n=48$), we present the analysis of our findings in two parts. First, we provide an overview of the cohort where we analyse the gendering of degree choice of FIF students. Second, underpinned by theoretical work focussed on student gendered and classed subjectivities, we address how FIF young people negotiated classed and gendered norms during the transition to university. Our data suggest that young people engage in ‘gender work’ and ‘class work’ which informs their identities and how they make choices about their futures. Based on our research, we argue that to achieve social justice there is a need for a renewed attention to gender within the widening participation agenda.

Keywords Aspirations · Gender · Social class · First-in-family · Subjectivities · Widening participation

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Introduction

The widening participation agenda in Australian higher education is focussed on increasing opportunities for students from a broad range of backgrounds, identified in the literature as ‘non-traditional’, ‘underrepresented’ or ‘equity groups’. While we have seen progress in terms of a more diverse student representation in higher education, Australia is still a long way from achieving its goal. The most recent review of the university sector commissioned by the Australian government, the Australian Universities Accord (2024), highlights a vision for a more equitable and socially just society with a focus on equity groups receiving the same opportunities as more privileged students within Australian universities. The research we present in this paper speaks to ongoing efforts in widening participation as well as efforts around gender equity within disciplines. We see this research in conversation with economic change in post-industrial knowledge economies which is contributing to social change and, to varying extents, the reframing of gender relations.

As we investigate students who are first-in-family (FIF) to attend university, many who are from low-socioeconomic communities, our analysis focusses on how the convergence of gender and social class influences their higher education experiences and informs the realisation of their aspirations. We know students who are FIF will often study disciplines which align with traditional gender norms. Research has highlighted how gender plays a stronger role in career choice than socioeconomic status (Gore et al., 2017). We are interested in ‘how gender and class dynamics intersect and can shift over time’ and the ‘sense of new possibilities’ (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 189) that may come as students transition from working-class communities into higher education, though we also recognise how gender norms can be powerful, and thus limiting. Our research captures the gendered experiences of FIF young people and their engagement with ‘gender work’ as they are asked to breach traditional conventions of gender and social norms. Higher education in Australia today is dominated by women who account for 58% of the domestic student intake with the highest concentrations in discipline areas associated with society and culture, health, management and commerce (see Larkins, 2020). Men, in contrast, dominate only two fields: IT and engineering. Recent reports on Australian employment trends by SBS News (2021) highlight how despite increased participation in the workforce since the 1980s, women remain highly underrepresented in industries such as STEM, construction and mining. Similarly, less men enter the caring industries such as nursing (Australian College of Nursing, 2019) and teaching (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Women generally study caring careers (Chesters & Baxter, 2011; O’Shea et al., 2017) and careers such as primary school teaching have become increasingly gender segregated in recent years (SBS News, 2021).

This gender segregation is interesting considering Australia was once at the forefront globally on gender equity in schooling, especially increasing opportunities for girls during the 1980s and 1990s (Gilbert, 1996; Lingard, 2000). Policies which were particularly promising during this era were *The National Action Plan*

for the Education of Girls 1993–97 and the 1993 Gender and Violence Project. Both policies worked from the premise that gender is socially constructed where there is 'no "essential" character that is masculine or feminine', and that 'men and women can take up a range of different masculinities and femininities, often in contradiction to each other' which are influenced by social structures such as education (Ollis & Tomaszewski, 1993, p. 15; see also Lingard & Mills, 1997).

While we acknowledge this vibrant history of gender reform in Australian education, it is important to note the neoliberal agenda has, for the most part, silenced gender in recent years (Gannon & Robinson, 2021). We also highlight that reforms around gender equity have been directed at the primary and secondary schooling level while, for the most part, higher education has not been a part of these efforts. Our interest is in gender equity and the widening participation agenda. While the widening participation agenda has led to more people in Australia attending university than ever before, these efforts have not translated into less gender segregation in terms of disciplines of study. Gender norms and societal beliefs regarding appropriate behaviour, reinforced through schooling, remain an important factor in how young people make career choices (Chambers et al., 2018; Scholes & McDonald, 2022). However, within educational research focussed on widening participation, gender plays only a small role. We feel there is a need to document the role gender norms play in informing the trajectories of young people and how these norms are often particularly pronounced for those from non-traditional backgrounds (Stahl & McDonald, 2022a; Teese, 2000/2013).

This paper draws on data from a longitudinal study of 48 FIF students in one Australian city documenting how they transitioned from secondary school into university life (Stahl & McDonald, 2022a). When we first met our participants, they were completing their compulsory schooling and were enmeshed in the gender and class discourses of their working-class school and familial environments. As they transitioned to higher education, they arguably became exposed to a wider diversity of gender subjectivities within new 'communities of practice' (Paechter, 2003, 2006) which resulted in 'gender work', negotiating gendered expectations. As we consider the experiences of FIF young men and women, we draw on theories of gender and class to investigate their experiences as an equity group. We are interested in how the selection of one's degree choice (e.g. a 'feminine degree') may contribute to a validation of gender identity or reaffirm traditional gendered norms (Stahl & McDonald, 2023). However, our analysis highlights not only their gendered experiences in higher education but how these experiences *often informed* their discipline choice and *were informed by* their discipline choices. Furthermore, we consider the impact on individuals of choosing degrees which transgress gendered norms which research in widening participation largely fails to address.

The article is organised in five parts. First, we recount our post-structuralist feminist approach to analysing gendered and classed subjectivities which foregrounds how subjectivities are produced within/through educational contexts. Second, drawing on research, we outline how gender and class continue to exert a powerful influence across higher education where, despite efforts to widen participation, striking inequality remains across many disciplines. Third, we recount the methodology of the three-year longitudinal study, the *First-in-Family Project*, before presenting a

broad overview of the research findings. Fourth, we document how our FIF participants negotiated the gendered and classed subjectivities present in higher education. To conclude, we present an argument where we address that while previous gender-focussed policies have fallen from favour, there is a need to recognise the role of gender in the widening participation agenda as the nexus of gender and class informs young people's identities and how they make choices about, and experience, their futures.

Theorising gendered and classed subjectivities in education

Gendered subjectivities in education

Our research aligns with gender-focussed scholarship which conceptualises the role of gender as a social structure, deeply embedded in everyday life as well as in the operation across social organisations and key institutions in our society (Risman, 2004; Sikora & Biddle, 2015). As individuals pursue educational and occupational goals, many are in a process of asserting gendered identities which are impacted by, and often aligned with, traditional and essentialist beliefs about gender (Davies & Gannon, 2005; Francis, 2011). As Sikora and Biddle (2015, p. 3) note, gender essentialism 'involves a wide range of deeply embedded assumptions that women have a natural aptitude for tasks involving care for and communication with other humans, while men are naturally better suited to abstract reasoning and solving problems related to technology' which can and often do influence how young people make decisions about their futures. Studies of the role that 'gender work' plays in university pathways remain limited. Few studies have attempted to determine the degree to which gender stereotypes and gender norms shape educational and occupational choices, especially for those students from non-traditional backgrounds (with the exception of Archer et al., 2020; Piatek-Jimenez et al., 2018; Wyn et al., 2017). When gender is discussed in terms of widening participation, it tends to be in the context of encouraging girls to aspire to the male-dominated field of STEM; we have seen little effort to encourage aspirations in other segregated professions such as traditionally masculine trades for girls or caring professions for boys (Scholes & McDonald, 2022).

Although there have been societal shifts highlighting a need for increased gender diversity and a breaking down of gender binaries, research on the effects of socially taught behaviour shows how gender norms remain embedded in society, schooling and familial structures (Chambers et al., 2018; Scholes & McDonald, 2022; Stahl et al., 2021). Many may seek to reaffirm the gender identities of past generations, and it remains difficult to extricate oneself from the social, cultural and historical discourses which 'generate universalities, binaries, forums of truth and specific ways of being human' (Davies, 2006, p. 78). Schooling experiences, as a form of secondary socialisation, contribute significantly to how students come to perform and enact their gender identities (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Weiner & Arnot, 1987) and, furthermore, how they become classed individuals (Archer et al., 2020; Reay, 2002; Stahl, 2014). We have argued elsewhere that education experiences can offer opportunities

for redefining or reimagining gendered identities (Stahl & McDonald, 2022a). Yet, while there exists a range of gendered and classed performances and subjectivities, this range occurs within certain limitations (see Davies, 1993) which directly influence student aspirations and post-school pathways.

Our research investigates the aspirations of a diverse cohort of FIF young people as they transition from their secondary schools to university, mapping how the intersections of gender and class contribute to their student experience. We see investigating the production of gendered subjectivities as an exploration of how 'socially and culturally produced patterns of language, known as discourses, construct people and the power relationships among them in particular ways' (Francis, 2011, p. 78). Or, as Arnot and Mac an Ghaill (2006) astutely write: '...gender relations are portrayed as a product of substantial identity work, constructed, policed and challenged on and in and through various discursive positionings, such as those pertaining to sexuality, ethnicity, religion as well as through time, space and locality' (p. 4). We have previously drawn attention to how gender identities are negotiated within discursive norms (Stahl & McDonald, 2023). As a result, young men and women are in a continual process of producing and reproducing gender (e.g. 'doing boy' and 'doing girl') in relation to their experiences, including education, all of which is shaped by dominant gendered discourses (Davies, 2006). Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013) write about the ways in which individuals engage in 'class work' where there is both a conforming to and reinforcing of class distinctions in an effort to avoid perceived threats to identity. We argue that as young people enter into post-school transitions, they are also engaging in 'gender work'. However, we also see how post-school transitions become a liminal time—a period of questioning the normative—where there are possibilities for new patterns and performativities of gender and class to be negotiated (Stahl & McDonald, 2022a).

Classed subjectivities

Research on social class and social mobility has focussed strongly on classed social practices and experiences, capturing the ways social class is internalised and embodied. Influenced by either a Bourdieusian or Foucauldian approach, this scholarship highlights how classed subjectivities do not simply reflect current socioeconomic conditions. Instead, classed subjectivities are formed through historical and modern discourses which, in turn, inform the agentic practices of individuals, which may differ depending on social class with significant implications (McDonald, 2024). In terms of policies and university outreach regarding widening participation, much of the focus has been on 'raising' the aspirations of young people from low-socioeconomic communities (Jaremus et al., 2022); research has critiqued the problematic assumptions associated with widening participation specifically with regard to supposed 'low' aspirations (Gore et al., 2023; Stahl, 2015).

We find the work of Walkerdine et al. (2001) useful here where, drawing on research conducted in the United Kingdom, they highlight how 'middle-class' subjects are often aligned with notions of the entrepreneurial self—e.g. individualistic, neoliberal subjects. As the middle-class self is often conceptualised as educated,

financially sound, career-oriented (see Lawler, 1999; Power & Whitty, 2006), we can assume they are also adaptable and fluent in navigating differing discourse communities. In contrast, scholars like Skeggs (1997) and others have focussed on the classed subjectivities of working-class young people in relation to respectability where they highlight the cultural resources which are drawn on as an aspect of self-making and self-production which remain constrained by class. Skeggs (2004) highlights the long history in Britain, where ‘the working-class have been (through representation) continually demonized, pathologized’, resulting in the presentation of subjectivities which tend towards “‘fitting in” rather than standing out’ (p. 10; see Reay, 2001). Class pathologisation occurs in a similar fashion in Australia (Pini et al., 2012), though there is often more attention to a certain working-class pride (Whitman, 2013).

Returning to our research on FIF students, foundational to our thinking is how understandings of social class are ‘constituted in relation to historically constructed sets of “truths”, allows for a conceptualisation of schools as particular sites where classed subjectivities are (re)produced’ (O’Flynn, 2010, p. 433). For the students in the *First-in-Family Project*, the majority resided in post-industrial low socio-economic areas and attended disadvantaged schools. Their conceptions of class and gender were deeply tied to working-class cultural norms (Charlesworth, 2000). Reay and Lucey (2000) have demonstrated how working-class children express the desire not to be seen as different as they transition into secondary school environments (see also Stahl, 2014). As young people cultivate their student subjectivities over the course of their adolescence, there is evidence that some upwardly mobile working-class young people engage in a series of negotiations in order to fit in rather than stand out (Stahl, 2022). These efforts can influence their success at university (Reay, 2001).

Our analysis draws on ‘the myriad ways in which an individual’s ability to deploy knowledge, skills and competences successfully is powerfully classed’ (Reay et al., 2005). Feminist research, in particular, has highlighted how class is an affective process where ‘shame and the fear of shame’ (Reay, 2005, p. 923) complicate one’s sense of self-worth (Skeggs, 1997). Within this research, the classed hierarchies within various social spaces are shaped by unequal recognition and exploitation leading to what Reay (2005) refers to as ‘psychic costs’ which are endured by working-class people, particularly those who are upwardly mobile. To conclude, differences in terms of social class are often understood by researchers through affective dimensions whereby individuals work to construct the self as a ‘subject of value’ as they navigate wider repertoires of classed hierarchies (see Skeggs, 2004).

Methodology of the study

We believe in the importance of foregrounding the voices of young people in research and value how our participants are engaged in reflexively developing their sense of self and their own perspectives on gender and class as they encounter new experiences (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). Funded by the Australian Research Council (DE170100510), the *First-in-Family Project* focussed on the identity processes of

FIF students ($n=48$) as they transitioned from their secondary schools into Australian university life. In collecting the data, we explored not only the lifeworlds of the young people who took part in our research, but also sought to make connections to wider social change in terms of understandings of gender. During the data collection, issues related to gender and sexuality were part of a wider national conversation as the data were collected during a time when Australia was witness to the gay marriage plebiscite, a rise in media attention to toxic masculinity, as well as the highly publicised #MeToo movement.

After gaining ethics approval, we recruited participants in their final year of secondary school (aged 17–18 years) who were the first in their immediate family to attend university. We then followed their trajectories over a three-year period between 2017 and 2020. In total, we recruited 48 participants who identified as cis-gender, 22 girls and 26 boys (Stahl & McDonald, 2022a, p. 42). Recruitment took place through schools and social media. We made contact with all state-sector schools within specific council areas and contacted non-state schools through visits, email and personal networks. Participants came from a range of independent ($n=21$ participants), faith-based ($n=6$) and state-sector ($n=21$) school sites. The participant cohort draws from historically socioeconomic disadvantaged regions of the southern and northern suburbs of one Australian city which has three major universities. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) defines socioeconomic disadvantage according to people's economic and social conditions such as income, education and employment. Important to access, these suburbs are within a one-hour commute of a prestigious 'Group of 8/Sandstone'¹ university and closer to less prestigious universities.

Data collection took place through individual semi-structured interviews, which were one hour in length on average, at sites chosen by the participants such as their universities or local libraries. Participants were first interviewed during their final year of schooling and then approximately every six months during their first 2 years at university. The interviews predominantly focussed on university experiences; however, participants were invited to discuss a wide range of topics—for example, we were also interested in how participants thought experiences prior to university had influenced their aspirations and experiences during university. During this period we were able to document how our participants transitioned to university and how they chose their areas of study. We developed positive relationships which contributed to a high retention rate of participants (96%) over the years of the study. There were many examples in the data of students struggling with university and changing their discipline choice as they progressed through the first and second year at university (Stahl & McDonald, 2021, 2023).

A professional transcription company was used for all interviews. Transcripts were uploaded to and analysed through NVivo to organise data according to themes. We then engaged in content analysis to understand participant experiences of university. The participants' stories required nuanced analytical work as their gendered

¹ Australia's oldest universities, which are associated with prestige, are referred to as the Group of Eight, or more informally, 'sandstone universities' due to being primarily constructed of sandstone.

and classed identities often experienced many different and overlapping transitions, informing their subjectivities and their shifting aspirations. Through regular meetings, we refined the coding scheme while searching for further patterns to deepen the analysis.

In the next section, we provide an overview of the degree choices made by the FIF young people who participated in our research, highlighting the gendered nature of their aspirations, before presenting portions of our discussions which highlight how they negotiated gendered and classed subjectivities in relation to their educational experiences.

Findings

Overview of discipline choice and retention

Table 1 provides an overview of the degrees that the participants aspired to when they were still in secondary school. We grouped the students according to how their aspirations are broadly viewed as feminine or masculine, and this analysis was informed by patterns of gendered employment (Arnot, 2002; Friedman, 2015; Yavorsky & Dill, 2020). Rather than reduce employment to binary categorisations, we focussed on these categories to highlight how employment remains socially stratified. Most degree and career aspirations were easily categorised, although at times with increased deliberation and research as a team. For example, as highlighted earlier, a Bachelor of Education may be categorised as feminine because most teachers are female. Yet, this categorisation did not neatly align with femininity for one participant who was majoring in Education and Design and Technology due to the association of the discipline with ‘masculine’ careers such as building, carpentry and engineering. So, in this instance, we categorised the degree as masculine. Similarly, while Australian Government data (Jobs & Skills Australia, 2023a, 2023b) show that the gender divide is fairly even for Law (55% women) and Journalism (52% women), we categorised both as masculine due to the uneven representation of women across these professions. For example, only 29% of women are partners in law firms in comparison to 54% of men (College of Law, 2022), and 59% of by-lines in print media belong to men (SBS News, 2023).

What is apparent in Table 1 is that although a majority of participants were aspiring to employment in what we have categorised as professional roles, there was a trend in the data regarding both male (34.6%) and female participants (45%) aspiring to professions which are considered caring professions, especially health and teaching, which largely remain female dominated (Stahl & McDonald, 2023). In terms of social class, very few of our participants aspired to elite universities or professions which offer Southgate et al. (2014) call ‘extreme social mobility’ with the critical mass ending up in institutions with lesser prestige. For a more detailed class analysis see Stahl and McDonald (2023). Understanding how FIF young men and women transition from secondary school requires documenting the ‘gender work’ including their shifting, discursive, and intersecting masculine and feminine subjectivities in relation to the institutional ethos, the family dynamic, etc. We are interested in how

Table 1 University Degree Choices

| Participant | Post-compulsory aspirations |
|---|---|
| Boys—masculine aspirations (65.4%) | |
| Theo | Bachelor of Information Technology (Games & Entertainment Design) |
| Adam | Bachelor of Science ^a |
| Tobias | Bachelor of Human Movement |
| Isaac | Bachelor of Sport Science & Sports Psychology |
| Logan | Bachelor of Science (Ecology & Evolutionary Biology) ^a |
| Oliver | Bachelor of in Human Movement & Teaching (Secondary) ^a |
| Avery | Bachelor of Business ^a |
| Fred | Bachelor of Exercise & Sport Science |
| Jeremiah | Bachelor of Software Engineering |
| Jacob | Bachelor of Law |
| Samuel | Bachelor of Software Engineering |
| Dominic | Bachelor of Civil Engineering |
| Vithu | Bachelor of Education (Design & Technology) |
| Mal | Bachelor of Mechanical & Mechatronic Engineering |
| Elim | Bachelor of Business (Entrepreneurship & Innovation) |
| Vuong | Bachelor of Mathematical Sciences (Pure Maths) ^a |
| Johnny | Bachelor of Journalism |
| Mason | Bachelor of Education (R-7) |
| Haafiz | Bachelor of Theatre |
| Charlie | Bachelor of Education |
| Tommy | Bachelor of Psychology |
| Leo | Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood & Special Education) |
| Archie | Bachelor of Fine Arts |
| Hoang | Bachelor of Nutrition or Psychology |
| Khuyen | Foundation Studies in Health Sciences (Psychology) |
| Maadai | Foundation Studies (Health Sciences) |
| Boys—feminine aspirations (30%) | |

Table 1 (continued)

| | Participant | Post-compulsory aspirations |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Girls—masculine aspirations (36.3%) | Kate | Bachelor of Chemical Engineering ^a |
| | Oriana | Bachelor of Space Science & Astrophysics ^a |
| | Christina | Bachelor of Laboratory Medicine |
| | Tabitha | Bachelor of Health & Medical Science—medicine pathway ^a |
| | Yael | Bachelor of Journalism |
| | Serena | Bachelor of Exercise Science |
| | Bella | Bachelor of Criminal Psychology |
| | Selita | Bachelor of Science & Chemical engineering ^a |
| | Aisha | Bachelor of Tourism |
| | Ella | Bachelor of Education (R-7) |
| Girls—feminine aspirations (63.6%) | Kelsey | Bachelor of Tourism |
| | Chloe | Bachelor of Music ^a |
| | Gabbi | Bachelor of Occupational therapy |
| | Kirsten | Bachelor of Social work |
| | Holly | Bachelor of Nursing |
| | Stella | Bachelor of Speech Pathology |
| | Agnes | Bachelor of Arts—art gallery or museum curator pathway ^a |
| | Corinne | Bachelor of Nursing |
| | Tia | Bachelor of Animal Behaviour |
| | Rosie | Bachelor of Nursing |
| Nafisa | Bachelor of Nursing | |
| Kendall | Bachelor of Education (Secondary)/Bachelor of Arts | |

^aParticipants who aspired to study degrees at Group of 8 universities

the interplay between class and gender contributes to both the FIF experience and the formation and maintenance of aspirations. For analytical purposes, we draw on a post-structuralist feminist approach to discuss how our participants experienced gendered and classed subjectivities within the higher education space.

Results from semi-structured interviews

Previous scholarship drawing from this data set has highlighted how, for many participants, higher education functioned as a site for alternative performances of masculinities and femininities (Stahl & McDonald, 2022a). As highlighted in Table 1, the participants' degree and career aspirations often reflected gendered norms. Participants were aware of these dominant understandings when reflecting on their choice-making experiences during interviews (see Stahl & McDonald, 2023). When Kate, who was studying mechanical engineering, discussed generational changes in attitudes about gender and career, she spoke about how her mother and grandmother held particular ideas about the kinds of career choices available to girls:

My mum didn't ... like she's fine with it now, but she was originally under the impression that girls really couldn't do engineering or something like that, she would always be like, "You're going to be a secretary or some sort of office work, or like a dancer." She was predetermined that guys do this, girls do that, and my grandmother was definitely like that. She was like girls do this, guys do that. (Kate, Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering)

While Kate did not feel that these attitudes had dissuaded her from studying engineering, a stereotypically masculine degree, other participants did feel that gendered norms played a role in their decision making. When asked whether she thought gender had impacted on her choice to study a teaching degree, Ella said:

Um, probably. I know in primary school all my teachers were girls and yeah, a lot of the girls in the degree, and a lot of people in the degree, are girls. So, I think a little bit, but yeah. That's really all I could see myself doing... (Ella, Bachelor of Education)

Corinne had embarked on a nursing degree, and similarly saw her choice as related to her gender.

I like the idea of Nursing, and like, yeah, if I was a male, I probably wouldn't pick Nursing to be honest. Like I have a few like, guy friends who are doing [nursing] you know, but yeah, I personally wouldn't find it a good option. I'd probably go for more doctor or like, paramedics. (Corinne, Bachelor of Nursing)

Corinne described nursing as a feminine career—"Nursing is quite a feminine job"—and spoke about how she did not recall seeing depictions of male nurses in the media. Research continues to document how in higher education 'men are over-represented in the degrees with the highest labour market value' (Garcia-Andreu et al., 2020, p. 4). However, participants like Corinne did not discuss

career choice in terms of wages but spoke about how she felt that depictions of doctors were more likely to be men, and that these depictions were likely to inform the career choices of boys and men. Corinne's and Ella's beliefs align with research which shows that the aspirations and career choices of children and young people are highly influenced by gender (Chambers et al., 2018; Gore et al., 2017; Scholes & McDonald, 2022). Indeed, Gore et al. (2017) found in their survey of Australian school students that gender was a stronger predictor of career choice than socioeconomic status. Both Ella and Corinne recognised that their career choices had been informed by gendered norms, and both also saw this in the gendered ratios within their degrees.

Participants studying STEM degrees similarly noted gender disparities in their discipline areas. The *STEM Equity Monitor* (Australian Government Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2023) reports that women remain underrepresented in STEM at Australian universities, although there was a 31% increase in the number of women enrolling in STEM degrees between 2015 and 2021. Two participants studying science degrees, Kate and Adam, discussed how their degrees were dominated by males. Kate told us, 'I mean [mechanical engineering] is almost 90% guys. Like you look into lecture halls and it's like, "Ooh"'. Adam was studying a Bachelor of Science and highlighted that not all courses were dominated by males but that there were differences depending on specific scientific fields.

Interviewer: Also, you have the stereotype that, on your science course, it's mostly guys, or is it a 50–50 split?

Adam: It depends on the field. Physics and ... we were actually counting this the other day. Physics is more males. Chem was 50–50. Biology, it depends on what biology, but it was about 50–50 as well.

Interviewer: Interesting

Adam: It's interesting. I've had a few tutorials in second year where I was the only male.

Adam and Kate's insights are confirmed by the *STEM Equity Monitor*, which shows that enrolments in the natural and physical sciences, such as biology, are more evenly split between genders while engineering degrees remain dominated by men (Australian Government Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2023). Moving beyond gender binaries in terms of ratios, Adam discussed the representations of masculinities he saw across different STEM degrees, especially those which were largely dominated by young men: 'There's more of a masculinity culture around people doing engineering and stuff, I find, where it's larger groups of

just guys'. Dominic, who was studying Civil Engineering, similarly spoke about the types of masculinities which he saw as especially prevalent amongst those studying engineering degrees.

[T]here's definitely one type of people [in engineering] that is the biggest group, which is like the masculinity type of people, like the sporty people. There's a lot of them... (Dominic, Bachelor of Civil Engineering)

In reviewing their experiences of masculinities in STEM, both Adam and Dominic discussed examples of gender and its influence on group identity. Paechter (2003) calls these gendered group performances 'communities of practice' where '[m]embership of such localised communities of masculine and feminine practices are important components of individual and group identity' (p. 73). Adam and Dominic named the dominant behaviours associated with these groups of men as 'masculinity culture', 'masculinity type of people' and 'the sporty people', engaging in the type of classifying or 'naming' aligned with particular actions which play a role in producing and reinforcing gendered subjects (Davies, 2006). While it was unclear whether Dominic or Adam saw themselves as members of these groups, we note that, while communities of practice are often discussed in terms of the ways that individuals embody gendered performances according to group membership, young people are able to recognise and discuss localised dominant behaviours from both inside and outside of these groups (see Stahl & McDonald, 2022b, 2023). In some respects, we see here how the naming of gendered discourses opens up possibilities for the take-up or rejection of those gendered norms (Francis, 2011; McLeod, 2009).

Although Adam was forthright about the presence of dominant representations of masculinities within different STEM fields, he also found a sense of fit within his more generalised science degree because the young men he encountered were different to many of those he had known in working-class secondary school.

Interviewer: How would you describe the general guys that are on these courses?

Adam: Better than people from high school. I don't know if that's mean, but ...

Interviewer: Well, they're more closely aligned to you Well, they're more closely aligned to you.

Adam: Yes. Yeah. They have more purpose in life, I feel like. Not to say that some people don't have purpose in life, but more driving ... Yeah.

Interviewer: Driven.

Adam: Yeah. More driven than people in high school.

Adam's depiction of young men at university as ambitious is also indicative of how working-class young men who are highly focussed on their studies during secondary school can sometimes feel out of place, especially where their masculine performances appear at odds with others within dominant groups (Stahl, 2022). It may also be that as Adam navigated the middle-class space of higher education, he was also encountering overt examples of middle-class strategising (Stahl & McDonald, 2022c) for the first time. Jacob, who was studying a law degree, was more forthright in describing the boys he encountered at university as aligned with a middle-class masculinity, typically 'centred on competitive achievement' (Whitehead, 2003, p. 290).

Jacob: Yeah. I guess, but the boys I've met in studying law, they've kind of up themselves, kind of posh.

Interviewer: Okay. Talk a little... What makes you think that?

Jacob: Oh, not up themselves, that's probably a bit harsh. Just the way they approach the room. You're in a room with them and they're the most, they're always engaging, they're always the loudest, they always want to be seen, but that could just be the people I've got in my class. I can't speak for everyone in law.

While Adam and Jacob did not specifically discuss feeling pressure to take on performances of middle-class masculinities, we do know that universities largely function as sites for re/producing middle-class norms and identities (Stahl & McDonald, 2022c). Yet, for many of the working-class boys, higher education represents a time where 'a plethora of masculinities are enacted and experienced as young men shift from their secondary schools into university study' (Stahl et al., 2021, p. 1). Experiencing masculinities in terms of multiplicities, within wider 'communities of practice' (Paechter, 2003), allows for the opportunity for young working-class men to engage with and enact different performances where there may not be the same kinds of pressures to perform particular anti-intellectual masculinities the young men experienced during their secondary school years.

In high school, I feel like, in terms of masculinity, people were more worried about that kind of stuff. I guess, now, I don't really think about that kind of stuff, I don't think. It's not something that's on my mind. (Adam, Bachelor of Science)

Although Adam had highlighted the dominant 'sporty' masculinities within STEM, we see here how, within the higher education space, the diversity of masculine performances meant that Adam felt less pressure to take on particular facets of masculine identities. However, we do note that this was not the experiences of all of our participants, where others did experience a pressure to perform

particular masculinities, especially those related to a 'sporty' masculinity (See Stahl & McDonald, 2022b).

Resisting gendered constructions

While some boys discussed the dominant masculinities they witnessed at university (Stahl, 2022), as well as the way they felt more able to engage in alternative performances of masculinity than they had during secondary school, girls within the study who were studying in the same male-dominated degrees were sometimes frustrated by how they were perceived and positioned through a gender lens (Stahl & McDonald, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). For example, Kate spoke about her experience at a 'Women in STEM' event where her friend felt a sense of guilt for engaging in stereotypically feminine pursuits:

So, I feel bad for one of my friends, because she's an artist, and she was like with me at that Women in STEM thing- And...they were having that opinion on equality that she was... letting down females for being an artist, which is apparently like the stereotypical girl career. And she, like, she felt horrible after that, and I was like that's not how it should be. You should be supporting her for being an artist, whether she chose science or not. Like, that was m- I was sad that she walked out of there feeling like she let down an entire gender. (Kate, Bachelor of Chemical Engineering)

The language Kate uses here—'letting down an entire gender'—highlights how girls are positioned by the considerable attention paid to the lack of women in STEM pathways through education policy agendas (Lloyd et al., 2018; Office of the Chief Scientist, 2020) and extensive public and private investment (Murphy et al., 2019). Slattery et al. (2023) report how Women in STEM initiatives can be perceived negatively by young women: 'When female students are already in a minority and feel undermined by male peers, such initiatives may serve to further emphasise their "otherness"...' (p. 14). In response, it was common amongst our cohort for the young women to resist these kinds of gendered discourses in terms of their decision to enter male-dominated fields. For example, Oriana was adamant that her gender had not played a role in her decision to pursue a STEM career.

[Astrophysics is] more a male based industry but I'm just, I've just come to university because that's what my brain tells me to do. I've, I want to come to the university because I want to come to the university, not because I'm a female and you need to change the waves. Even though we do. But I came to university for my own reasons, and not other people's reasons. I chose the career because I want to learn more about space and being able to understand space more and help solve mysteries that have been going on for decades, not because I'm a female and we need to show diversity. Because if I didn't like Astrophysics, I wouldn't have picked Astrophysics. (Oriana, Bachelor of Space Science and Astrophysics)

Oriana's reticence to describe herself within STEM in relation to gender was not uncommon across the cohort and echoes some of the views of the 'exceptional' physics girls in Archer et al.'s (2016) findings, who were sometimes frustrated by gendered discourses and sought to distance themselves from 'girly' heterofeminine identities. Yet, in contrast to how the predominantly middle-class 'exceptional' physics girls recognised the strategic advantages of how they were positioned by the underrepresentation of women in STEM, many girls within our cohort rejected, at least initially, this positioning all together. Instead, as we see in the example of Oriana, they tended towards describing more personal and individual reasons for choosing their STEM career pathways.

Oriana also did not believe that she experienced discrimination within her degree based on her gender, telling us, 'Even though there's more males in the course, I don't feel like it's more male dominated, per se. I feel like they're just, if you're doing the course, you're doing the course. Everyone's an astrophysicist, and that's pretty much it. It doesn't matter'. In contrast, Selita did see her engineering degree as being male dominated but chose to view this as motivational.

They just hear engineering, and they're like 'male dominated area'. And they're like, "Wow, that's a lot of males, good on you." It's encouraging, but it's kind of a reminder. I guess it depends how you take it. You could take it as a motivation or like a, "Oh wow. Yeah, you are right. There's a lot of males." But for me personally, I've learned to take it as motivation, motivational message. Like yes, that is a male-dominated area, and I am proud to say that I am a female wanting to study that. (Selita, Bachelor of Science & Chemical Engineering)

Our analysis highlights how these experiences *often informed* their discipline choice and *were informed by* their discipline choices. With this in mind, our analysis considers how the policing of norms leads to patterns of gendered practices and subjectivities; as subjects are both policed and do the policing, a normative conception of what is possible is reinforced (Davies, 2006). Considering gender as both relational and constructed through multiple competing discourses offers us a way of understanding how young people encounter and engage in producing gendered subjectivities (Francis, 2011; McLeod, 2009).

Discussion and conclusion

Through exploring how FIF young people experience and negotiate gendered and classed identities during the transition from secondary school into Australian universities, we have addressed how gender continues to play an important role in how FIF young people experience university. While our research is small scale, our findings show how FIF students recognise the ways in which they are positioned by gendered and classed discourses and how, at times, they engage in the 'gender work' of mediating or resisting particular positionings in order to diminish the multitude of ways in which they are transgressing norms. Our findings align with the

work of Teese (2007) who highlights how young people are differently impacted by social norms, writing 'Girls from high-status families trump gender with class, and through this assert their individuality' while working-class girls 'are demoted on academic grounds and end up in segregated areas of the curriculum complete with a gender rationale and identity which dominate their horizons' (pp. 11–12).

Within the higher education space, our participants encountered diverse gendered performances which sometimes compelled them to evaluate the gendered performances present in their working-class communities of origin. Much of young people's identity work of the gendering and classing of subjectivities is informed by family, their secondary school experience and their immediate peer group (Chambers et al., 2018; Stahl & McDonald, 2022a). Our data suggest that our participants were actively *doing gender* in their secondary schools, producing their subjectivities aligning with what is/was normative within working-class community contexts. Once at university, we saw how they were able to engage in alternative gendered performances or discourses either embracing or resisting them. We are reminded here of how liminality is part of 'gender work'.

The data indicate that as young FIF men and women transition from secondary school, their subjectivities are shifting as discursive frames shift and they interact with different masculine and feminine subjectivities, with new patterns and performativities of gender and class to be negotiated (Stahl & McDonald, 2022a). And depending on discipline and career choice, some FIF young people are engaging in multiple imaginings as they consider their aspirational futures (Gannon & Naidoo, 2020; Stahl et al., 2021). For example, we see how boys studying degrees within the caring professions and girls studying engineering degrees at elite universities must 'go against the grain' in terms of *both* their social class and their gender (Stahl & McDonald, 2023). For the engineering girls, it appears that, to some degree, rejecting discourses associated with women in STEM minimises the sense that they are transgressing gender norms. We note how Women in STEM projects rarely acknowledge how working-class girls in particular are being asked to breach social norms at multiple levels where they experience university not only in terms of social mobility but are also engaged in 'gender work' in terms of gendered norms.

Although there may exist 'multiplicities and fluidities of gender identity formation' and 'tensions *within* each gender category' (Arnot & Mac an Ghail, 2006, p. 4), career and pathway norms in terms of gender and social class suggest social change remains a slow process (see also Scholes & McDonald, 2022; Southgate et al., 2014). Yet, we note that as these FIF young people seek to become socially mobile, their aspirations are mediated by what seems possible, or what they perceive as feasible. Engaging in a journey of social mobility is a significant shift in perceptions what is possible. So too does gender represent a shift in perceptions, often informing understandings of what is possible. As FIF young people go against the grain to embark on a journey into higher education, they often find comfort in gender norms, in the professions they are familiar with and in professions that have a greater likelihood of employment success. When we consider how neoliberalism foregrounds policies that downplay the role that gender plays in the forming of subjectivities and instead focuses on individual self-sufficiency—and individual blame when things go wrong—it is little wonder that young people choose the more certain

path. We agree with the Australian Universities Accord (2024) that the scope of the widening participation agenda needs broadening beyond getting equity groups ‘in the door’ of universities. Instead, we call for a widening participation agenda which engages in serious effort towards breaking down gender binaries across disciplines. These efforts, while recognising the gendered segregation occurring *within* universities (and beyond Women in STEM), must also consider the intersecting burdens experienced by young working-class people who transgress gendered and classed norms simultaneously.

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Declarations

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