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Author(s)	Kehler, Michael; Davison, Kevin; Frank, Blye
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Contradictions and Tensions in the Practice of Masculinities in School: Interrogating Embodiment and 'Good Buddy Talk'

Michael D. Kehler

The University of Western Ontario

Kevin G. Davison

Mount Saint Vincent University

& Blye Frank

Dalhousie University

Introduction

Masculinity, and gender more broadly, has been theorised as a series of performative and discursive acts (Butler, 1990) which are constituted contextually and culturally. Not only are masculinities enacted differently *across cultures*, they are also performed differently *within groups of the same culture*, and by *individuals*. Contemporary theorizing on young men and masculinities suggests that the life of young men in high schools is complex (Frank, 1997; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Recognizing that all discourse, knowledge, and practice is interwoven with and composed of agencies of power and privilege, we want to make visible the contradictions and tensions of the lived lives of young men in high school. The voices of the young men in this paper demonstrate that it may no longer be possible to assume that 'boys' and 'men' are unified categories. The intent is to highlight the practices of young men who have engaged counter-hegemonic masculinity in school. Of particular interest is not simply the act of resistance, but rather the various ways the contradictions and tensions of masculinities are (re)negotiated.

This begs a number of questions, not only for the young men, but also for teachers, schooling, and for educational policy development. For example, how might teachers support non- and counter-hegemonic practice by boys in schools? How are school policies, such as anti-harassment documents, supporting non- and counter-hegemonic practices?

Masculinities and Methodologies

The authors of this paper have been involved in a number of qualitative research

projects investigating the lives of young men in high schools using in-depth interviews and participant observation of students between the ages of 16-20, in Canada and the United States. These projects have focused on masculinity as a complex discursive performance. The data is taken from all three authors' research on masculinities and schooling over a thirteen-year period (see: Frank, 1990; Davison, 1996; Kehler, 2000).

Davison (1996), in *Manly Expectations: Memories of Masculinities in School*, draws on data gathered from interviews with adults who reflect on their experiences of masculinity and schooling. While his sample included men, women and a transgendered participant, the data used in this paper came from those who identified as men. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 52. His analysis highlighted the relationships between the body and masculinity as it engaged the everyday curriculum of schooling. Frank (1990) in his research entitled: *Everyday Masculinities*, engaged young men students (19-21) in conversations about the everyday ways masculinities were understood and practiced by young men in schools. Kehler's interviews helped demonstrate the degree to which young men actively negotiated, contested, and questioned hegemonic masculinity. Kehler (2000) conducted ethnographic research. While shadowing four high school senior young men over a six-month period he recorded daily observations and conversations. In addition he conducted both structured and unstructured interviews. Similar to past researchers (MacLeod, 1987; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Price, 2000) Kehler (2000) identifies the complexities of doing this kind of work. While immersing himself in the school lives of his participants he actively attempted to "move from the external vantage points of an observer . . . to feeling more deeply inside their worlds" (Thorne, 1993, p. 25). This kind of relationship between researcher and the researched is not in itself unproblematic. The ways in which he positioned himself and was positioned by these young men is addressed elsewhere (see Kehler, 2003). This study provides an examination of how and when some high school young men resisted heteronormative masculinity through conversations and physical expressions.

While presenting the voices of young men is methodologically central to this article, we do not assume that the voices of young men are straight forward articulations of truth about masculinity. Rather, we understand the various narratives, in the context of research, as expressions of desire, concern, yearning and hope regarding how they are positioned in relation to the demands of gender in social and educational settings. The young men constructed particular texts for us as researchers; stories that they needed to tell, stories that may offer insight into the complex and ever-shifting terrain of masculinities in schools. Furthermore, the voices of these young men, across three studies, partly illustrate an understanding of how they negotiate masculinities via particular speech acts. Lastly, the words of the participants ground the research in the lives of young men and offer a narrative texture for readers to examine the different ways masculinities shape the student body. This textured text is composed to 'rub against the grain' of what Bob Connell refers to as "the project of a hegemonic masculinity" (1995).

In a recent special issue of *Educational Review* the guest editors highlight the work of numerous researchers who have explored boys, schooling and masculinities. Berrill and Martino (2003) draw attention to a growing number of studies that broaden the theoretical and methodological approaches employed “in an attempt to legitimize and validate the different kinds of insights that different research lenses bring to bear on complex issues of gender construction and performativity” (p. 111). Scholars engaged in this expanding area of research (see Connell, 1995; Kaufman, 1994; Kimmel, 1994; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; MacLeod, 1987) are pushing back on “conventional notions of culture, fieldwork, and interpretation in the anthropology of education” (Foley, Levinson & Hurtig, p. 74, 2001).

More recent research from within feminist and post-structuralist camps of thought have challenged what appeared as a straightforward theory of social reproduction. Cultural identities along with diverse school experiences have become ever-present elements in the examination of students lived school experiences. (see Dillabough, 2001) Both theoretically and methodologically then there has been a significant shift in the study of gender in education, namely the theorizing of gender as a permeable and social construct held together through elements of discourse. (see Francis & Skelton, 2001)

The recurring pattern of particular versions of masculinities both within a single context as well as across contexts suggests the kinds of tensions young men experience in both inter and intra-group settings such as high schools (see Connell, 1995, 1989; Imms, 2000; Kaufman, 1994; Willis, 1977). The authors of this work agree that methodologically the research contained in this article may invite what Martino and Berrill (2003) describe as “a different type of tangle of trouble”. Nonetheless they offer the collective findings and analysis as an opportunity to open up the possibilities of seeing and hearing across studies. This research highlights the lives and voices of young men that may have largely remained obscured or silenced by more dominant discourses. The authors create an intellectual space for making sense of the disjunctures of boy’s lives which are partially underscored by the way privilege operates for some men and not others.

The conglomerate data in this article produce a tension between a multiple masculinities woven together and, at the same time, continually under the threat of being torn apart. The ability to endure the stress and strain of these frictions between masculinities become evident through focusing and refocusing on the relationships to the overall fabric. It is the *tension* and *rupture* that is methodologically and theoretically important.

Drawing on Butler (1990) the authors foreground conversations that illuminate the contradictions and interruptions that operate behind “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 33) This article highlights the bodily practices and the communication of masculinity between young men to build alternate theoretical understanding of masculinities in schools.

Taking Difference Into Account

For several decades now, theories of sex-role socialization and bio-determinism have been used to explain human gendered interactions. These theories have entered popular discourse and the sense-making practices of teachers. For example, “Boys will be boys” and “it’s their hormones” are expressions that are often heard in school staff rooms. The simplification and dismissal of multiple discourses of gender enables practices of hegemonic masculinity to be dismissed as unproblematic (Connell, 1987; Evans, 2001; Frank, 1990). This creates the illusion that the sex categories male and female, and the gender categories of man and woman are ‘natural,’ homogeneous, uni-dimensional, rather than messy, fluid, and contextual (Guterman, 1994). Butler explains that “‘becoming’ a gender is a laborious process of becoming *naturalized*” (1990, 70). Gender is a mimetic performative exercise, which, if ‘successful,’ will be taken for granted. An examination of how some young men understand gender and schooling may collapse rather than control the uncertainty and messiness of the everyday practice as binary (self/social, heterosexual/homosexual, privilege/oppression, gender/sexuality). At the same time, recycled theories of biological and social determinism will be demystified and unsettled. We are suggesting a challenge to the:

grand narratives of men’s lives [which] have resulted in partial and fragmented accounts [that] elevate certain ways of seeing and understanding men and boys over others, in part by allowing some voices to go unheard or to be misrepresented by others. (Frank, 1996, p. 115)

It is therefore critical to acknowledge the conceptual and theoretical shift: that young men practice their masculinity differently in different social contexts (Davison, 2000; Frank, 1996; Imms, 2000; Kaufman, 1994; Kehler, 2004; Kimmel, 1994; Messner, 1997).

Young men manage their masculine practices within sets of gendered relations that involve authority and status. Unpacking the overlapping and competing ways that both individual boys and groups of boys perform their masculinity provides insight into the messiness of the lived practices of masculinity. Acknowledging the complexities and pluralities of masculinities works to challenge the different ways hegemonic masculinities exclude particular gendered performances. As the words of the young men in this article illustrate, they are always thinking about how their behaviour is positioned with regard to hegemonic masculinities. Their stories illustrate the willingness of some of these men to re-negotiate masculinities and to assess the social consequences of doing so. The ability to gauge the social context, including gendered social relations, is a literacy skill that most the young men from our different research projects cultivated. An awareness of the need to re-think masculine performances may have developed in these young men in reaction to their individual histories of marginalization in school. However, the choice to take up counter-hegemonic masculine performances does not necessarily imply a *rejection* of male privilege, but rather, a re-negotiation of privilege that these young men may

be unable to access. They use their privileged position as young men to challenge the rigidity of hegemonic masculinity so that it is more inclusive, most importantly more inclusive of themselves and their individual gendered practices.

Unsettling Stories about Unsettling Masculinities

You can be who you are. You don't have to portray this image in front of people. Like, sometimes when I played football I felt like I had to project this image of myself, at least while I was on the field. But in the arts I can be who I am, I can do what I want and not feel like I have to answer to anybody. I can just be me. (Philip, from Kehler, 2000, p. 128)

I think most of the guys are jerks. Most guys will go out with a girl and say, 'Oh I laid this chick, ha, ha, isn't that funny.' If a whole bunch of guys have slept with the same girl, oh she's a slut. Mum says 'what kind of hero does it make a man to sleep around with every woman?' (Peter, from Frank, 1990, p. 118)

There was sort of a moment in junior high school, I'd be about thirteen, and there was a way to hold your books, and I held them like a girl. Boy did I ever learn fast! (Ed, from Davison, 1996, pp. 85-86)

These three passages illustrate how language, histories, and bodies are implicated in practices of masculinities. "Language does not simply mirror gender; it helps constitute it,—it is one of the means by which gender is enacted" (Johnson, 1997, p. 23). Evan reflects:

I'm very careful not to say or do the wrong thing, even at home. Out on the street and at school I make sure that I sit and stand in a certain way. Sometimes I catch myself. I have a different kind of laugh which I suppose some people think is feminine, so I try to do short laughs like the other guys do. (from Frank, 1990, p. 141)

Language can also be used by students to police peers' gender. Repeated name calling such as 'fag' further solidifies the ideological tainted category and marks some students as inappropriately masculine (Smith, 1998). "One need only to consider the way in which the history of being called an injurious name is embodied, how the words enter the limbs, craft the gesture, bend the spine" (Butler, 1997, p. 159). The physical body is intimately connected to gendered performances (see Davison, 2003; Kehler & Greig, 2005). Connell explains the interplay between bodies and masculinity:

The physical sense of maleness is not a simple thing. It involves size and shape, habits of posture and movement, particular skills and the lack of others, the image of one's own body, the way it is presented to other people and the ways they respond to it, the way it operates at work and in sexual relations. (1987, p. 84)

While an examination of the intersections and overlap between language, histories and bodies arising out of the experiences of the young men may reveal some of the complexities of high school masculinities, as researchers we are cautious about balancing the importance of speaking and writing stories of counter-hegemonic

masculinities into existence (Cameron, 1997; Frank, 1996; Haywood, 1996; Lyman, 1987; Martino, 2000a; Nilan, 2000), and the assumption that an analysis of these stories provides a 'real' or 'true' picture of masculinities in school.

The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original. (Said, 1978, p. 21)

The 'voices' in this paper, while situated, 'interested' and contextual, do however, help to illustrate how, through daily conversations, young men actively negotiate social identities that are both historically, culturally, and, socially embedded (Petersen, 1998). Even marginalized narratives arise from multiple discourses. While the young men from our collective research may be in the minority for seeking ways to renegotiate hegemonic masculinity, we want to point out that such challenges can just as easily reaffirm dominant discourses of masculinity. "No anomaly can be considered simply as a gratuitous exception; rather anomalies confirm the regular structure binding together all members of the same class" (Said, 1978, p. 144). Therefore, strategies to contest narrow gendered practices need to do more than simply *do* masculinity differently. An exploration of how it is young men have begun to renegotiate gender may offer insight into the limitations and possibilities for changing gendered practices that are sexist, homophobic, violent, and restricted both in and outside of schools.

Learning Embodied Masculinity

Young men are *physically* positioned within a repertoire of masculine codes that are read off and enacted by the body. Nayak & Kehily explain that "the way a young man styles his body through gestures and actions is central to the performance of masculinity, where there is always the threat of being labelled gay" (1996, p. 216). Matt stated: "You could be very intelligent as a male student, you could have all kinds of other attributes, but if you don't excel in Gym class then you're not going to have that same status" (from Davison, 1996, p. 58). David, from Kehler's research remarked "Not be(ing) huge but to be bigger would be encouraged, just by what's attractive maybe. I think it is just the way guys compare one another against each other. It's like how much they can bench press... It's different ways of sizing people up" (2000, p. 96). The fact that young men understand the various discourses regarding the embodiment of masculinity is not the central point of analysis. It is the degree to which the young men can negotiate and navigate the multiple, complex, and yet simultaneously often narrow, gendered pathways available. Griffin explains that: "[e]xperiencing the body as powerful and as skilful is an important part of feeling empowered" (1995, p. 56). There is a cultivated awareness in the statements by these young men of how particular discourses of masculinity are saturated with status and privilege. Furthermore, there is tension that indicates a struggle between giving up

some privileges while retaining others. “I’m the biggest guy in school, so I can move around in different circles. I work at my body because it lets me make the choices” (Mike, from Frank, 1990, 143). Young men’s bodies can confer or deny masculine privilege (Drummond, 2003; Wienke, 1998). The recognition of choice by many of the young men across three separate studies is critically important because it illustrates that they are *active participants* in the socially constituted and regulated gender performances. This also indicates that these young men see themselves as actors with various degrees of gender movement available defined by external factors ranging from peer policing to representations in the media.

While some of the young men we interviewed were able to ‘cash in’ on body privilege, others were unable to use or manipulate their bodies to hegemonic standards. Thus, there are competing and conflicting ways masculinities are preformed.

David picks up the magazine as the young man walks away. The glossy covered magazine depicts numerous sculptured, extremely muscled young men. As he looks at the cover David inquires ‘What’s this?’ The girl next to him looks on curiously and comments ‘That’s gross!’ David smiles responding, ‘I know. I don’t think I’d really want to look to look like that.’ (Kehler, 2000, p. 94)

Choosing to display a counter-hegemonic masculine image in school can position some young men against the greater school culture that supports and perpetuates a “hierarchy of forms of masculinity” (Connell et. al, 1982, 96). As Gilbert and Gilbert explain:

To construct and maintain a sense of who they are, boys must draw on the available terms, categories and ways of thinking, acting, and interacting which these various contexts provide, including the specific forms of masculinity associated with them. (1988, p. 51)

The young men who spoke across the three studies demonstrated their acute understanding of how their bodies were implicated in the performance and replication of masculinity. Their counter-hegemonic positioning, however, may not be a clear-cut case of the *rejection* of privilege. Rather, the particular ways some of these young men performed masculinity illustrate inventive ways of retaining masculine privileges that might otherwise be denied to them.

Negotiating “Good Buddy Talk”

Young men engage multiple discourses of masculinity through contextually contingent speech acts (Cameron, 1997; Haywood, 1996). Verbal exchanges between young men are a part of performative masculinities.

If they knew somebody was gay, they’d call him ‘fag’ when they walk by, even if they’d done it with him. But there’s a lot of talk... a lot of gossip behind a certain person’s back. (Luke, from Frank, 1990, p. 212)

I think they are afraid from all different angles. I think they're afraid that they'll get rejected or the girl won't think they're man . . . all the way to their friends making fun of them . . . he is afraid kind of whether he's saying the wrong things or just doesn't know what to say. I think it is out of fear either that she's just not going to accept him. And if he keeps his distance then it doesn't really matter because he's not, he doesn't have to expose himself so he doesn't have to get hurt or lose anything. But if he does then she actually knows him. (Hunter, from Kehler, 2000, p. 214)

The comments by Luke and Hunter suggest that conversations between young men can act to reinforce hegemonic masculinity while at the same time serving as an outlet to work through some of the contradictions inherent in discourses of masculinity. Joking, for example, becomes a vehicle for sex talk and other means for talking about sex (Nayak & Kehily, 1997; Wood, 1984). It gives some young men license to talk about intimate topics that are not typically spoken about in the company of other men.

With Drew asking me about sex. We weren't joking around anymore, it was serious. It was like, if I am in his shoes I would want to know. I mean, like, I was there once. I am going to tell him seriously. But usually it's alone, either one on one or like with Drew, it was three people who were really good friends. Almost always in those situations you are not afraid to really talk about anything. (Hunter, from Kehler, 2000, p. 175)

Bill has told me that he is gay, but he wouldn't tell anyone else even though they all claim to be so liberal. Jim's one of the worst. He's hiding something pretty deep. He's really homophobic and gets really upset if anyone even mentions it. (Trent, from Frank, 1990, p. 211)

Hunter and Trent's words highlight that some young men talk about sex and sexuality in a different manner—one that is supportive and understanding. Discussions about sex and sexuality among young men are quite often positioned within greater sexist, and homophobic discourses (Wood, 1984) that serve to insulate young men from gendered fears of inadequacy and to reinforce their position within male privilege at particular vulnerable moments. However, some of the young men we spoke to cultivated alternate ways to position themselves to allow a 'safe' discussion of sex and sexuality among other young men.

David's friends, for example, used talk among other young men as a way of displaying their sexual interests in women. Routine exchanges such as "Hey David, did you get some this weekend?" or references to who was getting together with whom were not uncommon topics of conversation. Daily exchanges between young men construct specific kinds of social identities that focus on heterosexual and heterosexist desires. Conversations such as these were an opportunity to, in David's words, "get a rise out of [him]." Sex talk also operates as "a technique to police and regulate normative assumptions about gender sexualities" (Haywood, 1996, p. 230 also see Martino, 2000b).

In addition to finding that "particular styles of talk enable young men to locate

themselves inside various positions of heterosexual masculinities” (Haywood, 1996, p. 245) that consolidate their social identities, there is a “lack of opportunities for males to talk seriously or privately about sexuality, emotions and relationships” (Haywood, 1996, p. 245). As a social context schools provide a location in which young men are more likely to talk about ‘acceptable’ and stereotypical masculine topics such as cars, sports and (hetero)sexual exploits. Hunter and Jeff explain that schools are not safe places for “good buddy talk” or intimate and honest conversations. On the contrary, they are often unsafe places where the absence of “good buddy talk” combined with hetero-masculine regulation in school help to create a climate of personal loathing:

Good buddy talk does not occur much in school. At least not in the classroom, maybe in the car...I would almost say not at all in school except maybe at lunchtime. (Hunter, from Kehler, 2000, p. 175)

There would be a whole pattern where I would walk, where there was some safety. I would definitely avoid areas that were dangerous [...] especially in high school, very unsafe. There were just areas that you would avoid. But no one ever beat me up. Ever. They would just verbally taunt me. And I just felt humiliated, ashamed. And I think I would just hold my head down and drag my feet through the hall. (Jeff, from Davison, 1996, p. 74)

Despite the restrictions and limitations of particular kinds of talk in school, many of the young men we interviewed had an ability to read the social. They not only were acutely aware of the consequences of not performing in hegemonic ways, but also were able to seek out spaces where they could act in counter-hegemonic ways.

Like, when we talk I wouldn’t laugh at him or for something serious I wouldn’t go and tell other people. He trusts me and he doesn’t think, you know, I’m going to go “Oh Kevin cried during a movie” or something like that. Like, he knows he can trust me, and that I am here for him and I am not trying to screw him over. (Hunter, from Kehler, 2000, p. 174)

Oh certainly there are issues that I will avoid when I talk to certain people. Certain hand movements I don’t do. Certain things I don’t eat. If I go to the bar with certain people, I’ll have twin stakes. I wouldn’t have a spinach salad. I know how to walk, and depending on the party, I know what to wear. I can’t cross my legs, but if I could, I certainly wouldn’t do it. (Mike, from Frank, 1996, pp. 139-140)

Ways of thinking, speaking, walking, and eating are highly regulated and disciplined in performances of hegemonic masculinity, and most young men, are well acquainted with the discursive practices required by young men.

These young men were aware of the restrictions on masculinity in school and thus would not challenge hegemonic masculinity if the risks were too high. Good buddy-type conversations occurred if (a) their vulnerabilities or weaknesses were respected and not ridiculed, (b) their male counterparts would listen in confidence, and not use the vulnerability as a lever for undermining or questioning his masculinity

more broadly and ultimately, c) there was a considerable level of trust between the young men. The conditions for having good buddy-type talk were consistent among most of the young men in our respective research. In part, the uncertainty of assuring all these conditions could be met might explain why these types of conversations happened so infrequently for these young men in school.

Conclusion

To what extent are these young men *rejecting* and *challenging* hegemonic masculinity, and to what extent are they merely re-negotiating spaces in the school where they too can partake in privileged masculine cultures, albeit in different ways? The various young men quoted in this paper know that counter hegemonic masculine practices are not supported in school. Therefore, they have developed the skill to be able to read and re-negotiate social texts and discourses that exclude them. These young men have taken up, and made visible, the complexity of how gender, their bodies, and their voices are positioned in schools. The persistence of hegemonic masculinity and the reluctance of others to acknowledge the contextual and contingent differences between young men and masculinities may prevent young men from taking a more radical step of *rejecting* masculine privilege in order to expose and effectively challenge the inequities for young men and young women in school.

By denying that there are many different ways to perform masculinity, teachers and teacher educators also deny possibilities among masculinities. The 'normalizing' effect (Butler, 1990) that has glossed over "the boys" as a coherent and undifferentiated category, has left the voices and actions of some young men unheard and unseen. For teachers like ourselves it is not only important, but crucial to hear, recognize and support a polyphony of voices among and between men. It is also necessary to see the ways young men intentionally re-negotiate their masculinities in and outside of the classroom.

If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternate domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. (Butler, 1990, p. 145)

The recognition of differences of performance between and among men may allow teachers to better respond to and support a multiplicity of masculinities in the classroom. It would be helpful if schools supported and promoted a greater degree of gender analysis through in-services, professional development, and the reformulation of institutional policy in a way that takes into account the complexity and daily impact of gender in schools. Feminist education researchers have long since highlighted how unquestioned assumptions about gender has created educational inequities for girls and young women (Kenway & Willis, 1998). Over the last fifteen to twenty years there has been a shift to re-examine school cultures and gendered

practices of boys and young men (Lichter, 2002). These studies point to how hegemonic masculinity is exclusionary, harmful, and quite frequently are implicated in school bullying, violence, harassment, homophobia, and even lower literacy rates of some boys (Frank & Davison, 2000). Despite this, and a recent growing 'panic' over boys' (assumed as a unified group) reported low literacy and overall academic performances, there has been little policy development that reflects a critical examination of masculinities, which highlights the *differences* among boys/young men as a group, and which stresses the importance of how gender impacts the social and educational lives of students. *After more than thirty years of research in gender and education there is still a resistance to acknowledging gender as an important factor in educational settings.* If some young men choose to navigate alternate gender geographies, then there is hope that educators and policy makers may also choose to carefully and critically re-negotiate gender in schools to counter the various ways hegemonic gender regimes may harm students and limit academic achievement due to the side-effects of dominant masculinities in the form of sexism, homophobia, and violence.

Through routine interactions and daily conversations the young men in our respective research have displayed a broader repertoire and more gender progressive set of understandings for being men. They have crossed gender boundaries knowing full well the costs for doing so. And, rather than finding ways to become more hegemonically masculine, some young men have found ways to perform masculinities in a more inclusive and less harmful way. The experiences of these young men have shown the possibilities for unsettling its very foundations to show sensitivity, intimacy, open honesty, and unguarded vulnerabilities. It is our hope as educators that this paper has assisted in illustrating the complexities of masculinities in schools in order to support students who attempt to resist limited, exclusionary, and often harmful practices of masculinity.

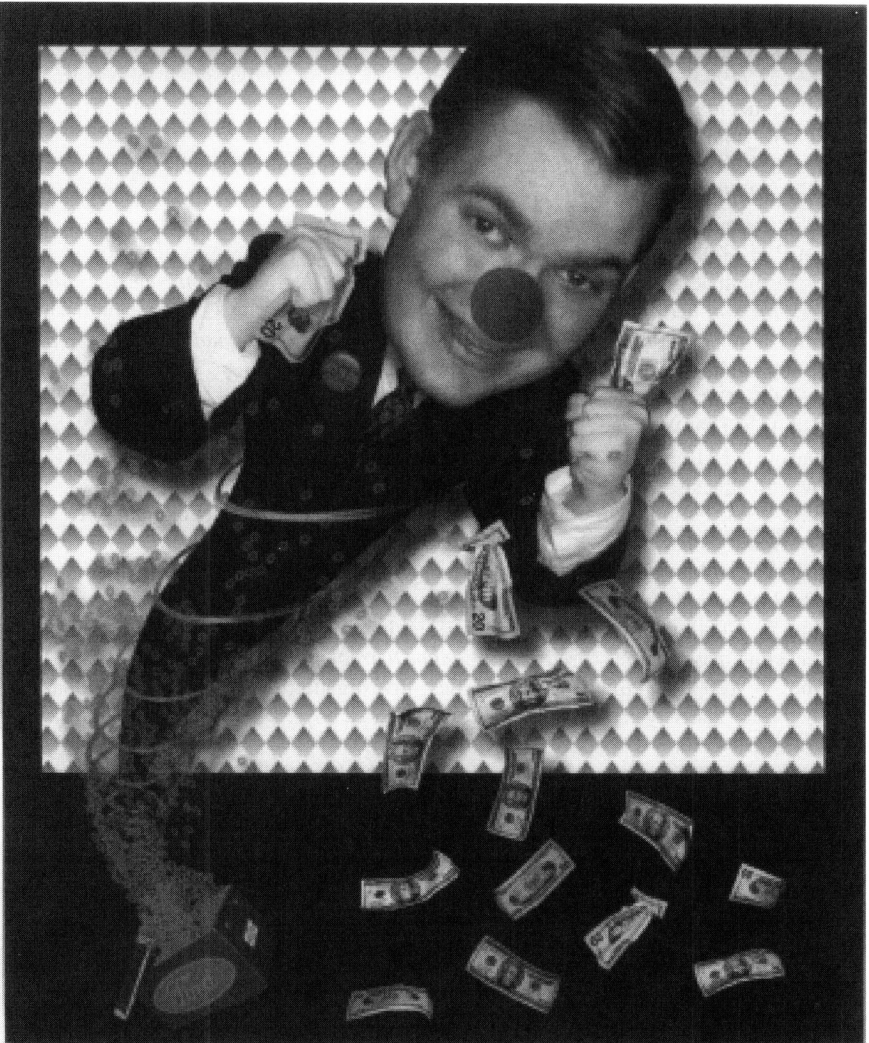
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"Break Out of the Box You're Stuck In," by Amanda Good, Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Georgia.