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# Boys will be boys: an example of biased and exclusive usage

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Steven M. Kaplan

***Boys will be boys:*  
an example of biased and exclusive usage**

**Abstract**

*Boys will be boys* encapsulates most of what is wrong with patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, gender roles, victimisation of females, and the gender binary, all of which play crucial roles in the continued subjugation and oppression of females in our society. Although most general English dictionaries provide a definition for this expression, this paper will demonstrate how they mischaracterise it, and therefore legitimise the repressive, destructive, and violent manifestations of this cultural mindset. After a brief review of the literature, the paraphrases of meaning that several popular dictionaries provide for this expression will be scrutinised. These will be contrasted with a bias-free and inclusive paraphrase of meaning, to be followed by a discussion and conclusions<sup>1</sup>.

**Keywords**

article structure, bias-free and inclusive usage, biased and exclusive usage, biased lexicographical coverage, boys will be boys, culturally-aware lexicography, dictionary culture, female oppression, gender binary, gender roles, hegemonic masculinity, inclusive lexicography, patriarchy.

**Supplementary lexicographical note**

At the end of this paper there is a glossary with paraphrases of meaning for select expressions appearing in this article. All such expressions are identified by being in italics (unless they also appear between quotes.)

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on content from my doctoral dissertation, Kaplan (2020).

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## 1. Introduction

*Boys will be boys* is again and again heard, spoken, read, and written. Beyond this, it is so often kept in mind and is so pervasive and entrenched in English-speaking territories, that for many people what *boys will be boys* represents is an integral part not just of their language, but also of their society and culture. *Boys will be boys* might serve, so to speak, as a “poster child” for all that is wrong with *patriarchy*, *hegemonic masculinity*, gender roles, victimisation of females, and the *gender binary*. The paraphrases of meaning given by all the general English dictionaries have basically the same recurring message: boys and men can behave any way they want since they are “wired” to be “rambunctious,” and that their “harmless” behaviour will never change, so there is no point in even addressing it. While a couple of paraphrases of meaning have words like “aggressive” or “rough,” none of them even hinted at the rape, oppression, violence, typecasting, gendering, etc., that the *boys will be boys* mindset embodies in real life. Therefore, as a group, these dictionaries perform an inadequate job on this expression, since they are saying one thing, while the literature and reality are proving another. Conversely, the treatment a bias-free and inclusive usage dictionary provides, describes things as they truly are. Paraphrases of meaning that are accurate and free of bias are socially responsible, and the trustworthy information they make available to users promotes a *dictionary culture*.

## 2. *Boys will be boys* – a brief survey of the literature

Before examining the paraphrases of meaning the regular lexicons provide for *boys will be boys*, which will then be contrasted with how an inclusive and bias-free expression dictionary might deal with this concept, here is a brief view at what the literature has to say about *boys will be boys*, in order to have a more comprehensive picture of the real-life use of this expression, as opposed to how these well-known general English language dictionaries portray it.

## **2.1: To downplay and trivialise violence against females, including sexual harassment and violence, and rape**

Sanday (2007) identifies any number of ways in which the *boys will be boys* mentality is utilised to encourage and defend male sexual violence on college campuses, and how it helps rationalise gang rape perpetrated by fraternity brothers. Other societal factors, such as the use of this expression as a mantra to excuse gang rape in middle-class environments, are also employed to analyse this abominable behaviour. Scales (2008) also emphasizes the role played by the “hard-wiring” defence to rape provided by *boys will be boys* in court cases.

Mansfield/Beck/Fung/Montiel/Goldman (2017) furthermore stress that *boys will be boys* is so often utilised to excuse “subtler” forms of sexual harassment, that it becomes ingrained in people’s minds to the extent that acts of this ilk are considered natural or acceptable. As such, this dissuades victims from saying anything about these incidents, and in cases where an aggrieved person does report about it they are usually told they are being too sensitive.

Bialowas/Cheek (2019) highlight how the “societal trope” of *boys will be boys* serves to “justify” and encourage both verbal and physical male violence. They go on to point out that males bond over physical violence, and that such relationships include vulgarity of a sexist and demeaning nature.

## **2.2: To promote *policing of masculinity* among boys to help insure that *boys will be boys***

Reigeluth/Addis (2016) looked into how the *boys will be boys* mindset serves as a mechanism to enforce normative behaviour in teenage boys. They observed that there is a pervasive *policing of masculinity*, in which “non-conforming” boys are insulted with misogynistic and homophobic insults, such as “bitch,” “pussy,” and “fag,” among other compliance measures. This leads to most of these teenagers living in fear and anxiety, constantly having to prove themselves to other boys and men. This “gendered social learning

system of reinforcement and punishment” (Reigeluth/Addis (2016:74) promotes and forces *hegemonic masculinity*, with its misogynistic, homophobic, and violent consequences.

### **2.3: To foster an uncaring, exploitative, and destructive perspective on nature**

Blenkinsop/Piersol/Sitka-Sage (2017) show in their study within a scholastic setting, how young boys who care about nature are not considered “masculine” enough by some other boys, with the *boys will be boys* type boys getting their point across with violence against nature, in addition to harming nature in order to hurt a caring person. They coin the expression *splash violence* for this latter type of behaviour, similar to the way water can be splashed on others. Such violence is seen as so commonplace by surrounding adults, that they simply regard it as a part of *boys being boys*. So, even where nature is concerned, young males must make a choice between being accepted by acting like they don’t care about it or even destroying it, or being rejected if they show empathy or even an interest in nature other than from a destructive or exploitative perspective.

### **2.4: Getting off to a bad start: *boys will be boys* in early childhood educational settings**

Bhana (2009) analyses several interviews with South African early childhood teachers, where it is found that *hegemonic masculinity* is promoted from an early age, based on stereotypical gender roles. She highlights the part that teachers play in promoting the *boys will be boys* mentality among their students, through an analysis of the interviews conducted with four South African teachers. These teachers don’t just allow some boys to police how “masculine” the behaviour of others is, said teachers even encourage this policing. Through these interviews it is seen that boys are generally divided into “rigger buggers,” and “smoothies.”

She goes on to explain that *rigger bugger* boys are encouraged to be competitive, disruptive, attention-getting, and the like, at the expense

of *smoothies* and girls. Insensitive teachers gush over such children, further exacerbating an already violent and exclusive academic environment. These teachers, who should be providing a safe and nurturing learning environment for all students, are instead promoting the patriarchal established order by rewarding behaviour that promotes gendering, along with the maintenance of *hegemonic masculinity*. On account of their *boys will be boys* approach to education and life in general, they “set” what boys must be at an early age, in order to be “real” men later. In any case, they firmly believe that males are so wired

Bhana (2009) urges South African teachers to challenge these dominant forms of masculinity that they themselves take for granted, in order to deconstruct male power and thus help fight the violence, rape, and an unsafe environment as a whole that *boys will be boys* and “rigger buggger mentality” foster, with the prime victims being females and “non-conforming” males.

## **2.5: An egalitarian perspective to counter the *boys will be boys* mentality**

Wilke (2014) sums up various aspects of the *boys will be boys* mindset from the perspective of a responsible parent and of a generally ethical person who has respect and regard for all people. She can do the talking, through these selected passages:

- “*Frankly, I’m sick of that phrase, “boys will be boys.” I have a boy, now a man, and I can’t remember a time when that boy’s “being a boy” included slamming another kid’s head to the ground, making repugnant sexual comments about a teammate’s sister...*”
- ...“*that kind of behavior is not only too often dismissed by that idiotic meme, it’s behavior that appears to be metastasizing in a global culture that continues to move the bar of what’s acceptable.*”

- ... “when does the toxicity of all this thuggery reach a saturation level that is no longer forgivable, no longer something to brush aside with weary tropes and deflective winks? Now. Right now.”
- “But whatever the gender, the issue of bullies doesn’t seem to rise to a level of concern for enough people. Someone said to me recently, “It’s the way of the world, the way of culture. There will always be bullies, there’s nothing we can do about it.”
- “There is something we can do about it and, like so many other things, it starts in the home. In the early environment where core values are embedded and honorable behavior is both modeled and expected. Children can and must be taught empathy... in fact, **empathy is the antidote to bullying.**” (Emphasis hers).

### **3. An analysis of how ten popular general English dictionaries define *boys will be boys***

The paraphrases of meaning given for *boys will be boys* by ten well-known and habitually utilised general English dictionaries will be presented and discussed in the next subsections<sup>2</sup>.

#### **3.1: The *Oxford Living Dictionaries online*, as permalinked from their website on 18 March, 2020<sup>3</sup>**

“Used to express the view that mischievous or childish behaviour is typical of boys or young men and should not cause surprise when it occurs.”

**Additional items in the dictionary article:** The lemma is identified as a phrase, no usage notes nor other such indications are given, the

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that although some of the lexicons here evaluated have example sentences which might help to contextualise a given sense, the focus in this paper is on the paraphrases of meaning of the expressions. When a lexicon provides example sentences for any given expression, it is noted, however.

<sup>3</sup> Permalink:

[https://web.archive.org/web/20200318203116/https://www.lexico.com/definition/boys\\_will\\_be\\_boys](https://web.archive.org/web/20200318203116/https://www.lexico.com/definition/boys_will_be_boys)



provided paraphrases of meaning for their *British and World English* and *North American English Dictionaries* are identical, and there are example sentences.

Brief analysis of *Oxford's* paraphrase of meaning:

- “Mischievous or childish behaviour” sounds rather harmless, and if the expression were to always be used exclusively for that, then that would be one thing. The reality, however, is that this expression is habitually utilised to “justify” all sorts of atrocious behaviours of males of any age; this latter aspect is not even hinted at.
- “Typical and should not cause surprise when it occurs” are meant to convey that:
  - it happens a lot
  - there is no need to make a “fuss” when it does happen
  - boys and young men are “wired” to “inadvertently” cause “harmless” trouble, so there is no point in addressing this conduct in any manner.
- One possibly positive aspect of this paraphrase of meaning might have been found in the word view, which could imply that there are those who disagree, but since they did nothing further with this, no insight into any othering or biased usage is offered.

In all, even though it might not have been meant this way, this paraphrase of meaning unequivocally supports patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, gender roles, the victimisation of females, and the gender binary.

### **3.2: The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*<sup>4</sup>**

“said to emphasize that people should not be surprised when boys or men act in a rough or noisy way because this is part of the male character”

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<sup>4</sup> Permalink:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200318203906/https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/boys-will-be-boys>

**Additional items in the dictionary article:** The lemma is identified as a *saying*, and no usage notes nor other such indications are given. *Cambridge* offers example sentences for many articles, which is especially helpful in a learner's dictionary, but none are provided for this lemma.

Brief analysis of the paraphrase of meaning:

- “Because this is part of the male character” pre-emptively renders all men and boys innocent from any harm done because they are born as males...
- “Boys or men act in a rough or noisy way” ...owing to the fact that “that is the way the male gender is.”
- “People should not be surprised” is there to be sure that no one makes a big deal out of whatever happens, since it is anyway what is expected from boys and men.
- “emphasize” is added to be extra certain that there will be no misunderstandings: boys and men are that way, whether anyone likes it or not. “Boys or men” acting in a rough or noisy way may also imply that “girls and women” do not, since this is “part of the male character.”

As already seen with the *Oxford* usage, this paraphrase of meaning supports the stereotyping of each sex with an emphasis on gender double standards, in addition to the maintenance and promotion of a patriarchal society. There is nothing at all in this paraphrase of meaning which would alert the user to what may lay behind this seemingly innocuous saying. As patriarchal as the *Oxford* paraphrase of meaning is, the *Cambridge* version manages to outdo it.

### 3.3: The online version of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*<sup>5</sup>

“used to indicate that it is not surprising or unusual when men or boys behave in energetic, rough, or improper ways”

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<sup>5</sup> Permalink:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200318203154/https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/boys%20will%20be%20boys>

“You shouldn’t be too hard on them for staying out so late.  
Boys will be boys.”

**Additional items in the dictionary article:** The lemma is identified as an idiom, no usage notes nor other such indications are given, and an example is included along with the paraphrase of meaning. *Merriam-Webster* offers example sentences for many articles, but no additional ones are provided for this lemma.

**Brief analysis of the paraphrase of meaning:**

- “Not surprising or unusual” informs that “that’s the way things are,” so there is no need to even take notice.
- Their qualifying of the expression goes from:
  - “behave in energetic” (neutral)
  - “rough” (questionable)
  - “or improper” (deleterious ) “ways,” suggesting that anything should be tolerated.

The provided example is also a typical *boys will be boys* representation, where two components are usually present: 1) it is something relatively minor, and 2) you should not do much, or preferably anything about it.

As with the other lexicons, although a dictionary user would have scarcely a clue as to what lays behind the concept of *boys will be boys*, to *Merriam-Webster*’s credit they did include the words *rough* and *improper*. Nevertheless, as seen in the previous paraphrases of meaning, theirs promotes standardised conceptions, and therefore expectations, of each gender.

**3.4: The online *Macmillan Dictionary*<sup>6</sup>:**

“used for saying that some types of behaviour are typical of boys and men, and that they will never change”

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<sup>6</sup> Permalink:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200318203225/https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/boys-will-be-boys>

**Additional items in the dictionary article:** The lemma is identified as a *phrase*, no usage notes nor other such indications are given, and their British English and “American” English paraphrases of meaning are identical. *Macmillan* does not provide example sentences.

**Brief analysis of the paraphrase of meaning:**

- “Used for saying that some types of behaviour are typical of boys and men” again informs the reader that this “non-specified” (therefore “whatever”) conduct is to be expected.
- “they will never change” firmly establishes the finality and permanence of this, which again implies that nothing can or will be done to change this.

Once again, the paraphrase of meaning does nothing to inform the users about male/female categorisation and bias, and how even from a young age males get to do what they want; period.

**3.5: The *Chambers Dictionary*<sup>7</sup>:**

“said especially when referring to childish or foolish behaviour in men rather than in boys: boys cannot help behaving like boys, it is in their nature (so one must expect and put up with it).”

**Additional items in the dictionary article:** No usage notes nor other such indications are given. *Chambers* does not provide example sentences.

**Brief analysis of the paraphrase of meaning:**

- “said especially when referring to childish or foolish behaviour in men rather than in boys” This explanation starts with the “innocent” (childish or foolish) behaviour of men.
- “boys cannot help behaving like boys, it is in their nature” They then just switch to saying something about boys. Yet again, the

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<sup>7</sup> Please note that no permalinks (nor regular ones) may be made from the Chambers site.

“biological” explanation for any and all behaviour means that no matter what, “the boys are innocent.”

- “(so one must expect and put up with it).” They “wrap it up” with the stale message that since you have been warned it is coming, to just keep your trap<sup>8</sup> shut when it happens.

### **3.6: The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*<sup>9</sup>:**

“used to say that you should not be surprised when boys or men behave badly, are noisy etc.”

**Additional items in the dictionary article:** No usage notes nor other such indications are given. There are example sentences.

#### **Brief analysis of the paraphrase of meaning:**

The message, yet again, is that we should expect males to do whatever they want. This is the patriarchal and orthodox way of seeing “the two genders<sup>10</sup>,” as per the gender binary.

### **3.7: HarperCollins:**

#### **3.7.1: The *COBUILD Advanced English Dictionary*<sup>11</sup>:**

“If you say boys will be boys, for example when a group of men are behaving noisily or aggressively, you are suggesting in a light-hearted way that this is typical male behaviour and will never change.”

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<sup>8</sup> The mouth can be referred to as “the trap,” and in this instance “keep your trap shut” is a rude way of saying to not say anything.

<sup>9</sup> Permalink:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200318204950/https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/boys-will-be-boys>

<sup>10</sup> As far as *patriarchy* is concerned, there are two, and only two, clearly defined genders.

<sup>11</sup> Permalink:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200318205412/https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/boys-will-be-boys>

**Additional items in the dictionary article:** the lemma is identified as a phrase, no usage notes nor other such indications are provided, and there are no example sentences.

### **Brief analysis of the paraphrase of meaning:**

- “group of men are behaving noisily or aggressively” already sets an “anything goes” stage.
- “light-hearted way” There are many established orders, one of which is that set by masculine hegemony. Since such things “must not be questioned,” any possible commentary must be made in an amusing or otherwise non-threatening manner.
- And even then, it may only be indirectly stated, as seen by their need to add “suggesting.”
- “typical male behaviour” clearly indicates that this is the way males are. By implication, any such behaviour by females might therefore be regarded as “deviant,” which further promotes the gender binary and gender double standards.
- Finally, in case there was any doubt that the established order will continue to reign supreme, “will never change” sets the record straight: male behaviour is not to be constrained, now or ever<sup>12</sup>.

*HarperCollins*, the publisher of this dictionary, is making sure that any learners of the English language who read this paraphrase of meaning will understand, unequivocally, that males can do whatever they want, whenever they want, and that there is and never will be any point in questioning anything. As uninspired and uninspiring as the other paraphrases of meaning are from the exclusion and bias perspectives, they pale in comparison with the *COBUILD Advanced English Dictionary*.

### **3.7.2: The Collins English Dictionary<sup>13</sup>:**

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<sup>12</sup> Even if this means raping, pimping, murdering, plundering, dehumanising, objectifying, *othering*, etc.

<sup>13</sup> Permalink:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200318205412/https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/boys-will-be-boys>

“youthful indiscretion or exuberance must be expected and tolerated”

**Additional items in the dictionary article:** no usage notes nor other such indications are provided, and there are no example sentences.

### **Brief analysis of the paraphrase of meaning:**

Since they used “youthful,” which can refer to “either” gender, that aspect is not biased, but the paraphrase of meaning nonetheless has very little to do with what *boys will be boys* means. It just seems like they threw in a related expression. This expression does, however, connote the usual a) you can expect it, and b) don’t bother doing anything about it.

It is worth noting that two prominently utilised general English dictionaries did not have articles for *boys will be boys*, namely: the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, and the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*.

### **3.8: Recap of these dictionaries with a lemma listed for *boys will be boys***

Both *Oxford* paraphrases of meaning warn users that this behaviour “should not cause surprise,” the *Cambridge* paraphrase of meaning had “should not be surprised,” *Merriam-Webster* has “it is not surprising,” and *Longman* has “should not be surprised.” That’s a “surprising” 50% of the dictionaries. In addition, words like *typical* and *expected* were employed, leading to all dictionaries telling its users that that is the way it is, so there is no need to be astounded or anything like that when any such conduct is afoot. That is, *boys will be boys* is a part of the established order, and must not be questioned. Males are “wired” to be this way, so any “childish,” “rough,” “noisy,” “energetic,” “improper,” “foolish,” “aggressive,” “bad,” “indiscreet,” or “exuberant” manifestations are perfectly “normal” and must be expected and therefore tolerated. From these paraphrases of meaning it seems to be clear that it has been that way, continues to be that way, and will always be that way.

While a couple of paraphrases of meaning had words like “aggressive” or “rough,” none of them even hinted at the rape, oppression, violence, typecasting, gendering, etc. that the *boys will be boys* mindset can embody in real life. So, as a group, these dictionaries did an inadequate job on *boys will be boys*, since they are saying one thing, while reality is proving another. The cited literature backs this up.

### **3.9: An inclusive and bias-free expression paraphrase of meaning for *boys will be boys***

#### **boys will be boys – phrase**

##### **Meaning:**

Utilised to indicate that rowdy behaviour is not just characteristic of boys (and often men), but is to be expected and tolerated, since males are “wired” to be “rambunctious.” This stereotype serves to reinforce hegemonic masculinity, gender roles, the victimisation of females, and the gender binary.

##### **Insight into the bias:**

This mindset promotes harmful behaviour in boys and males of any age, while girls and females in general are encouraged (likelier forced) to be subservient and willing to be victimised. As such, it unequivocally nurtures and promotes a patriarchal society, along with sharply defined gender double standards. This expression has been employed countless times to mitigate and trivialise actions ranging from horseplay through gang rape.

##### **Toward a heightened inclusive awareness:**

There is no corresponding expression for females. *Girls will be girls* would likely evoke clichéd images related to shopping, gossiping, dressing up or talking about fashion, parading around the beach or pool in bikinis, giving each other makeovers, giggling in a bar, mall, or other setting where males are on the prowl, etc.



As seen, the bias-free and inclusive usage treatment of *boys will be boys* goes beyond an accurate and unbiased paraphrase of meaning. As a part of its socially responsible and culturally relevant lexicographical content, it also provides additional insight and illustration into the *othering* and oppression.

### **3.9.1 Key aspects of the microstructure seen in this article, including where users can expect to find what**

#### **3.9.1.1: The lemma**

As shown here, the lemma appears with a *sans-serif* typeface<sup>14</sup> (here Helvetica/Arial in **bold**), which after a dividing hyphen is followed by a *serif* typeface<sup>15</sup> (here the one utilised is non-bold, non-italic Roman/TimesRoman/TimesNewRoman) for the part of speech.

#### **3.9.1.2: Search Zone 1:**

*Search Zone 1* is explicitly identified, and provides a *paraphrase of meaning* that is not only free of bias, but is also squarely situated within the realm of bias and exclusion. It describes things as they truly are. All search zones utilise the same serif typeface.

#### **3.9.1.3: Search Zone 2:**

*Search Zone 2, insight into the bias*, describes further where the bias and exclusion are present. Since *boys will be boys* encapsulates so many harmful social and cultural manifestations, a generous sample of such instances is given, so that users can get an authentic feel for the concept.

#### **3.9.1.4: Search Zone 3:**

In *Search Zone 3, toward a heightened inclusive awareness*, yet another significant manner in which all females are othered is given.

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<sup>14</sup> More here:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20190422131321/https://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia/term/50800/sans-serif>

<sup>15</sup> More here:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20190422131124/https://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia/term/51149/serif>

*Search zone 3* is for those who enjoy digging even deeper into things, to further enhance their awareness of reality and the needs of others.

### **3.10: Discussion and conclusions**

#### **3.10.1: Contrasting biased and unbiased paraphrases of meaning for *boys will be boys***

As a group, the paraphrases of meaning seen in the general English dictionaries for the expression *boys will be boys* have several recurring messages:

- Boys or men behave any way they want to, including being rough and improper.
- Such conduct is biologically programmed and should therefore be expected.
- Boys and men will never change this “harmless” behaviour.
- There is no point in trying to change this, nor even addressing it at all.

And by possible implication, this could mean that:

- All behaviour of girls and women must be controlled, be it by themselves or others.
- There is no point in trying to change this, nor even addressing it at all.

As seen through the review of the literature, there is plenty of room for improvement among the general language and learning English dictionaries from the “biased usage” perspective. Only the suggested paraphrase of meaning provided by a bias-free and inclusive usage dictionary described things as they truly are, the way a dictionary is supposed to. The main objective of a bias-free and inclusive usage dictionary is to promote a more egalitarian society by identifying (lemmas appear), describing (paraphrases of meaning are given), and illustrating (real-life examples and consequences are provided) how inequality, *othering*, oppression, and victimisation work through language.

The analysed general English dictionaries are not doing a proper job where bias and exclusion are concerned, mostly on account of their not identifying, describing, nor illustrating their presence in the language. By keeping their users mostly in the dark, they are preserving and furthering many of the deleterious manifestations of the established order.

### **3.10.2: Within the general context of the use of dictionaries and lexicographical resources as a cultural activity and cultural science**

Unlike those offered by the regular English dictionaries, bias-free and inclusive paraphrases of meaning reflect real usage and the real consequences of bias and exclusion. Such paraphrases of meaning and illustrations are necessary in order for dictionaries and lexicographical resources as a whole to provide users with information that is trustworthy, culturally aware, and socially responsible. In doing so, such resources also promote a *dictionary culture* by addressing the unfulfilled needs of several target user groups, which encourages their consultation on a regular basis.

### **3.10.3: Lexicographical content within the users' societal and dictionary culture contexts**

As seen in the brief review of the literature, many scholars are aware of the truth about *boys will be boys*. They are willing to expose it for what it is, and are doing so in an eloquent and compassionate manner. This can be contrasted with the biased and exclusive treatment these general English dictionaries give this expression. This mischaracterisation serves to legitimize its continued biased and exclusive use, along with the repressive, destructive, and violent manifestations of this cultural mindset. The bias-free and inclusive paraphrase of meaning is aligned with the literature and real life.

Lexicographers should understand their role in a society that is dependent on reliable information. Wiegand (1997) goes into detail on the responsibility that dictionaries have to users, society, and a dictionary culture. Paraphrases of meaning that are accurate and free of bias are socially responsible, provide users trustworthy

information, and promote a dictionary culture by addressing the unfulfilled needs of several target user groups, thereby encouraging their consultation on a regular basis. Within a dictionary culture supported by Gouws (2018), lexicographical resources should not be limited to “just” regular dictionaries that provide paraphrases of meaning, but also extend to specialised lexicons, other various lexicographical tools, and to make users aware of these myriad resources in order to better utilise them.

This means that lexicographers have primarily two tasks where *boys will be boys* is concerned<sup>16</sup>: 1) to provide bias-free and inclusive paraphrases of meaning, and 2) to find ways to get the egalitarian message across. Point 1) is addressed through the preparation of bias-free and inclusive usage dictionaries, and point 2) by lexicographical contextualization and personalization.

#### **3.10.4: Contextualisation and personalisation**

Tarp/Gouws (2019) emphasise that lexicographical contextualisation and personalisation have existed for millennia, regrettably with diminishing importance. They go on to highlight, however, that new information technologies facilitate again giving contextualisation and personalisation the prominent place they deserve in contemporary lexicography.

A fitting instance of contextualization would be the providing of a bias-free and inclusive paraphrase of meaning for *boys will be boys* when this expression appears in a journal or a textbook. This could be provided as a gloss in the margin, as a footnote, or it can be noted that expressions in bold and/or italics appear in a glossary at the end of a chapter or book. Electronic mediums offer even more possibilities, including paraphrases of meaning obtained by hovering the mouse over a given expression, or by clicking or tapping. In the case of textbooks, for instance, the book introduction might alert

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<sup>16</sup> This also applies to all expressions that are currently not being given paraphrases of meaning that are bias-free and inclusive.

students and instructors on how lexicographical resources are seamlessly incorporated.

An apt example of personalization would be the providing of a paraphrase of meaning for *boys will be boys* in a sociolinguistic textbook, when dealing with topics related to this expression, without it being named explicitly. For instance, in a chapter focused on patriarchy, policing of masculinity, or on the gender binary, to name a few. Users could be alerted to this in the front matter, where the additional resources, including those of a lexicographical nature, would be enumerated, such as at those provided at the end of each chapter.

### **3.10.5: Final thoughts**

If the linguistic othering and oppression that characterise our “civilisation” are to be eradicated, not only are the lexicographers preparing general English Dictionaries going to have to start paying more attention to what is truly going on, but there is also going to be a need for lexicons that are specifically tailored to the identification, explanation, and exemplification of how inequality, othering, and victimisation work through language. In this manner, the expressions users need will be able to be found, and they will be given the treatment they deserve. In their indispensable and highly influential work, the lexicographers preparing these general dictionaries are making a lot of decisions for all of us, but not taking into account the needs of many of us. This paper has shown that they should consider refocusing their lens a bit, in order to bring the needs of those who are othered and oppressed much more to the forefront.

Bias-free and inclusive paraphrases of meaning reflect real usage and the real consequences of bias and exclusion. Such paraphrases of meaning and illustrations are necessary in order for dictionaries and lexicographical resources as a whole to provide users with information that is trustworthy, culturally aware, and socially responsible. In doing so, such resources also promote a dictionary culture by addressing the unfulfilled needs of several target user groups, which encourages their consultation on a regular basis.

### **3.11: Paraphrases of meaning for selected expressions appearing in this paper<sup>17</sup>**

**contextualization** – “to provide solutions to users’ information needs directly in the situation or context where these needs occur.” (Tarp/Gouws (2019:251-252).

**dictionary culture** – Gouws (2018:1) provides this summary:

“It is indicated that within a comprehensive dictionary culture, users need to be familiar with a variety of dictionary types and need to be able to execute a successful retrieval of information from the data on offer in dictionaries. A comprehensive dictionary culture has both general language and specialised dictionaries in its scope. Users need to be made aware of these dictionary types. Lexicographic training can be directed at three groups, namely dictionary users (who need to become familiar with dictionary using skills), future lexicographers (who need to master those aspects of meta-lexicography needed for the compilation of dictionaries) and future trainers of lexicography (who need a sound theoretical basis). The contents of a tertiary course in lexicography could commence with a broad context of the development of both the lexicographic practice and the theory of lexicography. A second focus could be on the contents, the different lexicographic tools, as well as the medium – printed or online format. ”

**gender binary** – The cataloguing of all humans into two mutually-exclusive genders; a determination based on the visible genitalia at birth. Once assigned, there is the expectation that a person will then “be” either female or male, the expression of which is determined by prevailing social and cultural norms. That is, a person must comply with a gender role, as opposed to following their own gender identity. Patriarchy cannot function without the gender binary, since the males cannot subjugate and oppress the females if they can’t be sure of who is what. For patriarchs, anything other than male or female, including

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<sup>17</sup> Unless otherwise noted, paraphrases of meaning are mine.

that which may be ambiguous in any fashion, is “wrong” and must be punished and preferably eradicated, “for their own good and that of society.” The gender binary incorporates heteronormativity and the heterosexual imaginary, and is enforced through gender policing, especially policing of masculinity.

**hegemonic masculinity** – “refers to the normative ideology that to be a man is to be dominant in society and that the subordination of women is required to maintain such power.”  
(Smith/Parrott/Swartout/Tharp, 2015:161)

**othering** – The classification of people as superior or inferior, based on dogmatically categorizing them as a part of an in-group or out-group. The discriminators consider themselves to belong to the superior-dominant-similar in-group, while the others are relegated to the inferior-subordinate-different out-group. For example, a religiously intolerant person may view people who have different (or no) religious beliefs as being immoral, savage, unenlightened, or otherwise inferior. This othering may have deleterious consequences, such as exclusion and violence, and serves to “justify” their intolerance and oppression of others, since to them they are “lesser” beings. Those victimized by othering are others. Othering may also be applied to the relationship humans as a whole have to non-human animals.

**patriarchy** – An ideology and societal structure in which males have most or all of the power, at the expense of females and nature. Females are subjugated from the liberty, moral, cultural, social, educational, sexual, reproductive, legal, religious, leisure, labour, political, economic, and ownership perspectives. In a patriarchal society females and animals are objectified and commodified, with the concomitant lack of regard for their needs and well-being. The institutionalised system of male dominance over females is embodied in patriarchy

**personalization** – “means that the provider of information in one way or another knows when a particular user has or is expected to

have an information need and also how to prepare the corresponding lexicographical data and adapt them to the user's particular profile so he or she can effectively make use of them in order to meet his or her particular need." (Tarp/Gouws (2019:251-252).

**policing of masculinity (POM)** – the observation and regulation of the activities, conduct, and expression of those perceived to be males, in order to ensure compliance with masculine gender-role norms within the gender binary. Desired behaviours and mindsets may include homophobic manifestations, aggressiveness, disregard for others (extending as well to animals and nature in general), competitiveness including “winning at any cost,” combativeness, arrogance, heedless risk-taking including reckless driving and “overindulgence” of alcohol, violence, bullying, sexual pursuit, relational aggression, and any kind of misogynistic attitudes or acts including sexual harassment and rape. Any person, regardless of gender, can perpetrate POM, and enforcement measures may include (depending on the respective power relations and settings of any “forbidden” deeds) disapproving gestures, critical comments, strong reprimands, ostracising, ridicule, harassment, and/or physical violence up to and including murder. Self-POM is also employed to gain and/or maintain status as a normative male among peers, parents, teachers, and anyone else monitoring. Similarly to races, genders are a social and cultural construct. The end result of POM is to maintain the patriarchal established order of male hegemony, at the expense of females and the environment. Also called *masculinity policing*.

**rugger bugger** – “A boorish, aggressively masculine young man who is devoted to sport.” From the *Oxford Living Dictionaries online*. Permalink: [https://web.archive.org/web/20200319002250/https://www.lexico.com/definition/rugger\\_bugger](https://web.archive.org/web/20200319002250/https://www.lexico.com/definition/rugger_bugger)

**smoothie** – A male who is intelligent, aware of others, and self-assured, which are found to be undesirable traits by those who want all males to be rugger buggers.



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