



Dude you're a fag: masculinity and sexuality in high school

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Dude you're a fag: masculinity and sexuality in high school

CHERI JO PASCOE, 2011 (second revised edition)

Berkeley: University of California Press

227 pp., ISBN 978-0520271487, £18.00 (paperback)

Through a picturesque ethnographic description, Pascoe's *Dude, you're a fag: masculinity and sexuality in high school* gives a fly-on-the-wall experience of sexuality in high school. Informed by an interactionist approach to gender, the book unveils taken-for-granted ways in which masculinity is constructed through interactions, discourses and traditions like prom, sports and drama. The study was conducted at River High, a high school in California. I found the descriptions of setting, characters, discourses and events so archetypical that I was reminded of my own high school experiences in an African context. The setting is indeed a helpful case to think through contemporary constructions of masculinity, sexuality and inequality.

The book explores five central themes regarding constructions of masculinity: repudiation, confirmation, race, homophobia and girls' gender strategies. Through repudiation, Pascoe shows how boys reject femininity; confirmation rituals posit masculinity as eroticised male dominance; masculinity is shown to vary with race; homophobia is enacted through hetero-normative practices; girls' gender strategies show how girls deal with repudiation and confirmation rituals.

Pascoe's greatest contribution is in contesting the idea invested by masculinity theorists that masculinity is akin to male bodies. Her empirical work dislodges masculinity from the male body, building on the 'multiple masculinities' model that views masculinity as a socially constructed constellation of practices enacted by male and female. The book is highly successful in the nuanced ways it engages with and merges theory and practice to explore a broad spectrum of issues traversing masculinities.

Pascoe is critical of the role of schools in constructing hetero-normative masculinity by rewarding hetero-normative practices enacted through school traditions, while policing and punishing non-normative practices. Teachers are shown actively participating in hetero-normative ways in which boys lay claim to masculinity. Except for the Black boy suspended for calling another a 'fag', student sexist behaviour was ignored, in essence normalising it as expected discourse.

However, using a pragmatic stance, I depart from Pascoe and contemporary queer theorists' emphasis on parody and play as central to social change in school (Butler 1990, Lugones 1990 as cited in Pascoe 2011). Pascoe foregrounds parody and play as ways of constructing the social world to allow students to express gender fluidity, challenge gendered power, highlight the importance of institutional spaces for gender play and call into question the opposition of categories of gender. She cautions though that playing with gender is not progressive in and of itself and could reinforce differences in the sense that 'boys who dress up as girls on Halloween ... don't challenge the gender order. Rather, they highlight exactly how much they are *not* girls' (Pascoe 2011, p. 164). Pascoe reaffirms that 'playing with gender is an answer. But is not *the* answer' (Pascoe 2011, pp. 164–165). This resonates with Butler's (1990, p. 139) contention that 'parody by itself is not subversive'. Yet, Pascoe posits parody and play as central to social change with regard to sexuality in school, which I find troubling. While I do not dispute its potential role, I challenge its *centrality* given the potentially ambivalent effect on audiences.

I would propose a more pragmatic approach underscored by broader issues of changing how people think about power and inequity. Therefore, rather than foreground gender play, the agency of 'deviant' groups such as those who attempted to subvert hetero-

normativity should have been of primary focus. The basketball girls and gay–straight alliance (GSA) girls are examples from Pascoe’s work: they identified and were named by others as ‘girls who act like guys’ (p. 115). Although the former were loud and popular, the latter, who formed a support group for gay students, were socially marginalised and less well known. Similarly, the agency of Black boys whose masculinity was precariously defined by race and social structure would need reclaiming and redefining. Pascoe’s recommendations should have grappled with how to buttress the strengths of groups which had resisted hetero-normativity, as well as, with how to empower marginalised groups to reclaim their subjectivity. As the women’s and civil rights’ movements have shown, victims of hetero-normativity can do it for themselves through consciousness raising.

Furthermore, while I concur that ‘schools . . . can be places of intense homophobia and sexism, they can also be places for anti-discriminatory responses to marginalization’ (Pascoe 2011, p. 167), I continue to question the locating of *gender play* as central to averting hetero-normativity *in schools*: I draw on scholarship highlighting the key role of teachers in gender socialisation in schools (Paechter 2007, Sanders 2000) to make a case for teacher training to take centre stage in advancing social change *sustainably* in schools.

Pascoe concludes the book advocating activism through practical steps to promote equitable conditions in schools; examples include curriculum redesign, posters, support for GSAs, counselling and reform of school traditions. However, given that her findings highlight teachers as key players in perpetrating hetero-normativity, these recommendations should have considered how teacher attitudes and behaviours can be addressed. Tsvi-Mayer (1993 as cited in Tatar and Emmanuel 2001, p. 22) asserts that ‘teacher awareness is thought to be the most important anti-sexist intervention in schools . . . Change will not occur unless teachers take a strong interest in those issues.’

Apart from this point of dissent, I found the book captivating and humorous. It gives invaluable insights into methodological, thematic and theoretical concerns around sexuality in schooling. I highly recommend it for researchers, teachers, practitioners and students interested in tackling the issues of sexuality.

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