ARTICLE 11

C. J. Pascoe

"Dude, You're a Fag": Adolescent Masculinity and the Fag Discourse

"There's a faggot over there! There's a faggot over there! Come look!" yelled Brian, a senior at River High School, to a group of 10-year-old boys. Following Brian, the 10-year-olds dashed down a hallway. At the end of the hallway Brian's friend, Dan, pursed his lips and began sashaying towards the 10-year-olds. He minced towards them, swinging his hips exaggeratedly and wildly waving his arms. To the boys Brian yelled, "Look at the faggot! Watch out! He'll get you!" In response the 10-year-olds raced back down the hallway screaming in terror. (From author's fieldnotes)

The relationship between adolescent masculinity and sexuality is embedded in the specter of the faggot. Faggots represent a penetrated masculinity in which "to be penetrated is to abdicate power" (Bersani, 1987: 212). Penetrated men symbolize a masculinity devoid of power, which, in its contradiction, threatens both psychic and social chaos. It is precisely this specter of penetrated masculinity that functions as a regulatory mechanism of gender for contemporary American adolescent boys.

Feminist scholars of masculinity have documented the centrality of homophobic insults to masculinity (Lehne, 1998; Kimmel, 2001) especially in school settings (Wood, 1984; Smith, 1998; Burn, 2000; Plummer, 2001; Kimmel, 2003). They argue that homophobic teasing often characterizes masculinity in adolescence and early adulthood, and that anti-gay slurs tend to primarily be directed at other gay boys.

This article both expands on and challenges these accounts of relationships between homophobia and masculinity. Homophobia is indeed a central mechanism in the making of contemporary American adolescent masculinity. This article both critiques and builds on this finding by (1) pointing to the limits of an argument that focuses centrally on homophobia, (2) demonstrating that the fag is not only an identity linked to homosexual boys[1] but an identity that can temporarily adhere to heterosexual boys as well and (3) highlighting the racialized nature of the fag as a disciplinary mechanism.

"Homophobia" is too facile a term with which to describe the deployment of "fag" as an epithet. By calling the use of the word "fag" homophobia—and letting the argument stop with that point—previous research obscures the gendered nature of sexualized insults (Plummer, 2001). Invoking homophobia to describe the ways in which boys aggressively tease each other overlooks the powerful relationship between masculinity and this sort of insult. Instead, it seems incidental in this conventional line of argument that girls do not harass each other and are not harassed in this same manner.[2] This framing naturalizes the relationship between masculinity and homophobia, thus obscuring the centrality of such harassment in the formation of a gendered identity for boys in a way that it is not for girls.

"Fag" is not necessarily a static identity attached to a particular (homosexual) boy. Fag talk and fag imitations serve as a discourse with which boys discipline themselves and each other through joking relationships.[3] Any boy can temporarily become a fag in a given social space or interaction. This does not mean that those boys who identify as or are perceived to be homosexual are not subject to intense harassment. But becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with a sexual identity. This fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the specter of the fag such a powerful disciplinary mechanism. It is fluid enough that boys police most of their behaviors out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it.

The fag discourse is racialized. It is invoked differently by and in relation to white boys' bodies than it is by and in relation to African-American boys' bodies. While certain behaviors put all boys at risk for becoming temporarily a fag, some behaviors can be enacted by African-American boys without putting them at risk of receiving the label. The racialized meanings of the fag discourse suggest that something more than simple homophobia is involved in these sorts of interactions. An analysis of boys' deployments of the specter of the fag should also extend to the ways in which gendered power works through racialized selves. It is not that this gendered homophobia does not exist in African-American communities. Indeed, making fun of "Negro faggotry seems to be a rite of passage among contemporary black male rappers and filmmakers" (Riggs, 1991: 253). However, the fact that "white women and men, gay and straight, have more or less colonized cultural debates about sexual representation" (Julien and Mercer, 1991: 167) obscures varied systems of sexualized meanings among different racialized ethnic groups (Almaguer, 1991; King, 2004).

Theoretical Framing

The sociology of masculinity entails a "critical study of men, their behaviors, practices, values and perspectives" (Whitehead and Barrett, 2001: 14). Recent studies of men emphasize the multiplicity of masculinity (Connell, 1995) detailing the ways in which different configurations of gender practice are promoted, challenged or reinforced in given social situations. This research on how men do masculinities has explored gendered practices in a wide range of social institutions, such as families (Coltrane, 2001) schools (Skelton, 1996; Parker, 1996; Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Francis and Skelton, 2001), workplaces (Cooper, 2000), media (Craig, 1992), and sports (Messner, 1989; Edly and Wetherel, 1997; Curry, 2004). Many of these studies have developed specific typologies of masculinities: gay, Black, Chicano, working class, middle class, Asian, gay Black, gay Chicano, white working class, militarized, transnational business, New Man, negotiated, versatile, healthy, toxic, counter, and cool masculinities, to name a few (Messner, 2004). In this sort of model the fag could be (and often has been) framed as a type of subordinated masculinity attached to homosexual adolescent boys' bodies.

Heeding Timothy Carrigan's admonition that an "analysis of masculinity needs to be related as well to other currents in feminism" (Carrigan et al., 1987: 64), in this article I integrate queer theory's insights about the relationships between gender, sexuality, identities and power with the attention to men found in the literature on masculinities. Like the sociology of gender, queer theory destabilizes the assumed naturalness of the social order (Lemert, 1996). Queer theory is a "conceptualization which sees sexual power as embedded in different levels of social life" and interrogates areas of the social world not usually seen as sexuality (Stein and Plummer, 1994). In this sense queer theory calls for sexuality to be

From *Sexualities*. Copyright © 2005 Sage Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, and New Delhi). Vol. 8(3):329–346.

looked at not only as a discrete arena of sexual practices and identities, but also as a constitutive element of social life (Warner, 1993; Epstein, 1996).

While the masculinities' literature rightly highlights very real inequalities between gay and straight men (see for instance Connell, 1995), this emphasis on sexuality as inhered in static identities attached to male bodies, rather than major organizing principles of social life (Sedgwick, 1990), limits scholars' ability to analyze the myriad ways in which sexuality, in part, constitutes gender. This article does not seek to establish that there are homosexual boys and heterosexual boys and the homosexual ones are marginalized. Rather this article explores what happens to theories of gender if we look at a *discourse* of sexualized identities in addition to focusing on seemingly static identity categories inhabited by men. This is not to say that gender is reduced only to sexuality, indeed feminist scholars have demonstrated that gender is embedded in and constitutive of a multitude of social structures—the economy, places of work, families and schools. In the tradition of post-structural feminist theorists of race and gender who look at "border cases" that explode taken-for-granted binaries of race and gender (Smith, 1994), queer theory is another tool which enables an integrated analysis of sexuality, gender and race.

As scholars of gender have demonstrated, gender is accomplished through day-to-day interactions (Fine, 1987; Hochschild, 1989; West and Zimmerman, 1991; Thorne, 1993). In this sense gender is the "activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West and Zimmerman, 1991: 127). Similarly, queer theorist Judith Butler argues that gender is accomplished interactionally through "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1999: 43). Specifically she argues that gendered beings are created through processes of citation and repudiation of a "constitutive outside" (Butler, 1993: 3) in which is contained all that is cast out of a socially recognizable gender category. The "constitutive outside" is inhabited by abject identities, unrecognizably and unacceptably gendered selves. The interactional accomplishment of gender in a Butlerian model consists, in part, of the continual iteration and repudiation of this abject identity. Gender, in this sense, is "constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, on which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (Butler, 1993: 3) This repudiation creates and reaffirms a "threatening specter" (Butler, 1993: 3) of failed, unrecognizable gender, the existence of which must be continually repudiated through interactional processes.

I argue that the "fag" position is an "abject" position and, as such, is a "threatening specter" constituting contemporary American adolescent masculinity. The fag discourse is the interactional process through which boys name and repudiate this abjected identity. Rather than analyzing the fag as an identity for homosexual boys, I examine uses of the discourse that imply that any boy can become a fag, regardless of his actual desire or self-perceived sexual orientation. The threat of the abject position infuses the faggot with regulatory power. This article provides empirical data to illustrate Butler's approach to gender and indicates that it might be a useful addition to the sociological literature on masculinities through highlighting one of the ways in which a masculine gender identity is accomplished through interaction.

Method

Research Site

I conducted fieldwork at a suburban high school in north-central California which I call River High.[4] River High is a working class, suburban 50-year-old high school located in a town called Riverton. With the exception of the median household income and racial diversity (both of which are elevated due to Riverton's location in California), the town mirrors national averages in the percentages of white collar workers, rates of college attendance and marriages, and age composition (according to the 2000 census). It is a politically moderate to conservative, religious community. Most of the students' parents commute to surrounding cities for work.

On average Riverton is a middle-class community. However, students at River are likely to refer to the town as two communities: "Old Riverton" and "New Riverton." A busy highway and railroad tracks bisect the town into these two sections. River High is literally on the "wrong side of the tracks," in Old Riverton. Exiting the freeway, heading north to Old Riverton, one sees a mix of 1950s-era ranch-style homes, some with neatly trimmed lawns and tidy gardens, others with yards strewn with various car parts, lawn chairs and appliances. Old Riverton is visually bounded by smoke-puffing factories. On the other side of the freeway New Riverton is characterized by wide sidewalk-lined streets and new walled-in home developments. Instead of smokestacks, a forested mountain, home to a state park, rises majestically in the background. The teens from these homes attend Hillside High, River's rival.

River High is attended by 2000 students. River High's racial/ethnic breakdown roughly represents California at large: 50 percent white, 9 percent African-American, 28 percent Latino and 6 percent Asian (as compared to California's 46, 6, 32, and 11 percent respectively, according to census data and school records). The students at River High are primarily working class.

Research

I gathered data using the qualitative method of ethnographic research. I spent a year and a half conducting observations, formally interviewing 49 students at River High (36 boys and 13 girls), one male student from Hillside High, and conducting countless informal interviews with students, faculty and administrators. I concentrated on one school because I explore the richness rather than the breadth of data (for other examples of this method see Willis, 1981; MacLeod, 1987; Eder et al., 1995; Ferguson, 2000).

I recruited students for interviews by conducting presentations in a range of classes and hanging around at lunch, before school, after school and at various events talking to different groups of students about my research, which I presented as "writing a book about guys." The interviews usually took place at school, unless the student had a car, in which case he or she met me at one of the local fast food restaurants where I treated them to a meal. Interviews lasted anywhere from half an hour to two hours.

The initial interviews I conducted helped me to map a gendered and sexualized geography of the school, from which I chose my observation sites. I observed a "neutral" site—a senior government classroom, where sexualized meanings were subdued. I observed three sites that students marked as "fag" sites—two drama classes and the Gay/Straight Alliance. I also observed two normatively "masculine" sites—auto-shop and weightlifting.[5] I took daily field notes focusing on how students, faculty and administrators negotiated, regulated and resisted particular meanings of gender and sexuality. I attended major school rituals such as Winter Ball, school rallies, plays, dances and lunches. I would also occasionally "ride along" with Mr. Johnson (Mr J.), the school's security guard, on his battery-powered golf cart to watch which, how and when students were disciplined. Observational data provided me with more insight to the interactional processes of masculinity than simple interviews yielded. If I had relied only on interview data I would have missed the interactional processes of masculinity which are central to the fag discourse.

Given the importance of appearance in high school, I gave some thought as to how I would present myself, deciding to both blend in and set myself apart from the students. In order to blend in I wore my standard graduate student gear—comfortable, baggy cargo pants, a black t-shirt or sweater and tennis shoes. To set myself apart I

carried a messenger bag instead of a back-pack, didn't wear makeup, and spoke slightly differently than the students by using some slang, but refraining from uttering the ubiquitous "hecka" and "hella."

The boys were fascinated by the fact that a 30-something white "girl" (their words) was interested in studying them. While at first many would make sexualized comments asking me about my dating life or saying that they were going to "hit on" me, it seemed eventually they began to forget about me as a potential sexual/romantic partner. Part of this, I think, was related to my knowledge about "guy" things. For instance, I lift weights on a regular basis and as a result the weightlifting coach introduced me as a "weight-lifter from U.C. Berkeley" telling the students they should ask me for weight-lifting advice. Additionally, my taste in movies and television shows often coincided with theirs. I am an avid fan of the movies *Jackass* and *Fight Club*, both of which contain high levels of violence and "bathroom" humor. Finally, I garnered a lot of points among boys because I live off a dangerous street in a nearby city famous for drug deals, gang fights and frequent gun shots.

What Is a Fag?

"Since you were little boys you've been told, 'hey, don't be a little faggot,' " explained Darnell, an African-American football player, as we sat on a bench next to the athletic field. Indeed, both the boys and girls I interviewed told me that "fag" was the worst epithet one guy could direct at another. Jeff, a slight white sophomore, explained to me that boys call each other fag because "gay people aren't really liked over here and stuff." Jeremy, a Latino Junior, told me that this insult literally reduced a boy to nothing, "To call someone gay or fag is like the lowest thing you can call someone. Because that's like saying that you're nothing."

Most guys explained their or others' dislike of fags by claiming that homophobia is just part of what it means to be a guy. For instance Keith, a white soccer-playing senior, explained, "I think guys are just homophobic." However, it is not just homophobia, it is a *gendered* homophobia. Several students told me that these homophobic insults only applied to boys and not girls. For example, while Jake, a handsome white senior, told me that he didn't like gay people, he quickly added, "Lesbians, okay that's *good*." Similarly Cathy, a popular white cheerleader, told me "Being a lesbian is accepted because guys think 'oh that's cool.' " Darnell, after telling me that boys were told not to be faggots, said of lesbians, "They're [guys are] fine with girls. I think it's the guy part that they're like ewwww!" In this sense it is not strictly homophobia, but a gendered homophobia that constitutes adolescent masculinity in the culture of this school. However, it is clear, according to these comments, that lesbians are "good" because of their place in heterosexual male fantasy not necessarily because of some enlightened approach to same-sex relationships. It does however, indicate that using only the term homophobia to describe boys' repeated use of the word "fag" might be a bit simplistic and misleading.

Additionally, girls at River High rarely deployed the word "fag" and were never called "fags." I recorded girls uttering "fag" only three times during my research. In one instance, Angela, a Latina cheerleader, teased Jeremy, a well-liked white senior involved in student government, for not ditching school with her, "You wouldn't 'cause you're a faggot." However, girls did not use this word as part of their regular lexicon. The sort of gendered homophobia that constitutes adolescent masculinity does not constitute adolescent femininity. Girls were not called dykes or lesbians in any sort of regular or systematic way. Students did tell me that "slut" was the worst thing a girl could be called. However, my field notes indicate that the word "slut" (or its synonym "ho") appears one time for every eight times the word "fag" appears. Even when it does occur, "slut" is rarely deployed as a direct insult against another girl.

Highlighting the difference between the deployment of "gay" and "fag" as insults brings the gendered nature of this homophobia into focus.

For boys and girls at River High "gay" is a fairly common synonym for "stupid." While this word shares the sexual origins of "fag," it does not *consistently* have the skew of gender-loaded meaning. Girls and boys often used "gay" as an adjective referring to inanimate objects and male or female people, whereas they used "fag" as a noun that denotes only un-masculine males. Students used "gay" to describe anything from someone's clothes to a new school rule that the students did not like, as in the following encounter:

> In auto-shop Arnie pulled out a large older version black laptop computer and placed it on his desk. Behind him Nick said "That's a gay laptop! It's five inches thick!"

A laptop can be gay, a movie can be gay or a group of people can be gay. Boys used "gay" and "fag" interchangeably when they refer to other boys, but "fag" does not have the non-gendered attributes that "gay" sometimes invokes.

While its meanings are not the same as "gay," "fag" does have multiple meanings which do not necessarily replace its connotations as a homophobic slur, but rather exist alongside. Some boys took pains to say that "fag" is not about sexuality. Darnell told me "It doesn't even have anything to do with being gay." J.L., a white sophomore at Hillside High (River High's cross-town rival) asserted "Fag, seriously, it has nothing to do with sexual preference at all. You could just be calling somebody an idiot you know?" I asked Ben, a quiet, white sophomore who wore heavy metal t-shirts to auto-shop each day, "What kind of things do guys get called a fag for?" Ben answered "Anything . . . literally, anything. Like you were trying to turn a wrench the wrong way, 'dude, you're a fag.' Even if a piece of meat drops out of your sandwich, 'you fag!' " Each time Ben said "you fag" his voice deepened as if he were imitating a more masculine boy. While Ben might rightly *feel* like a guy could be called a fag for "anything . . . literally, anything," there are actually specific behaviors which, when enacted by most boys, can render him more vulnerable to a fag epithet. In this instance Ben's comment highlights the use of "fag" as a generic insult for incompetence, which in the world of River High, is central to a masculine identity. A boy could get called a fag for exhibiting any sort of behavior defined as non-masculine (although not necessarily behaviors aligned with femininity) in the world of River High: being stupid, incompetent, dancing, caring too much about clothing, being too emotional or expressing interest (sexual or platonic) in other guys. However, given the extent of its deployment and the laundry list of behaviors that could get a boy in trouble it is no wonder that Ben felt like a boy could be called "fag" for "anything."

One-third (13) of the boys I interviewed told me that, while they may liberally insult each other with the term, they would not actually direct it at a homosexual peer. Jabes, a Filipino senior, told me

> I actually say it [fag] quite a lot, except for when I'm in the company of an actual homosexual person. Then I try not to say it at all. But when I'm just hanging out with my friends I'll be like, "shut up, I don't want you hear you any more, you stupid fag."

Similarly J.L. compared homosexuality to a disability, saying there is "no way" he'd call an actually gay guy a fag because

> There's people who are the retarded people who nobody wants to associate with. I'll be so nice to those guys and I hate it when people make fun of them. It's like, "bro do you realize that they can't help that." And then there's gay people. They were born that way.

According to this group of boys, gay is a legitimate, if marginalized, social identity. If a man is gay, there may be a chance he could be considered masculine by other men (Connell, 1995). David, a handsome white senior dressed smartly in khaki pants and a white button-down shirt said, "Being gay is just a lifestyle. It's someone you choose to sleep with. You can still throw around a football and be gay." In other words there is a possibility, however slight, that a boy can be gay

and masculine. To be a fag is, by definition, the opposite of masculine, whether or not the word is deployed with sexualized or non-sexualized meanings. In explaining this to me, Jamaal, an African-American junior, cited the explanation of popular rap artist, Eminem,

> Although I don't like Eminem, he had a good definition of it. It's like taking away your title. In an interview they were like, "you're always capping on gays, but then you sing with Elton John." He was like "I don't mean gay as in gay."

This is what Riki Wilchins calls the "Eminem Exception. Eminem explains that he doesn't call people 'faggot' because of their sexual orientation but because they're weak and unmanly" (Wilchins, 2003). This is precisely the way in which this group of boys at River High uses the term "faggot." While it is not necessarily acceptable to be gay, at least a man who is gay can do other things that render him acceptably masculine. A fag, by the very definition of the word, indicated by students' usages at River High, cannot be masculine. This distinction between "fag" as an unmasculine and problematic identity and "gay" as a possibly masculine, although marginalized, sexual identity is not limited to a teenage lexicon, but is reflected in both psychological discourses (Sedgwick, 1995) and gay and lesbian activism.

Becoming a Fag

"The ubiquity of the word faggot speaks to the reach of its discrediting capacity" (Corbett, 2001: 4). It is almost as if boys cannot help but shout it out on a regular basis—in the hallway, in class, across campus as a greeting, or as a joke. In my fieldwork I was amazed by the way in which the word seemed to pop uncontrollably out of boys' mouths in all kinds of situations. To quote just one of many instances from my fieldnotes:

> Two boys walked out of the P.E. locker room and one yelled "fucking faggot!" at no one in particular.

This spontaneous yelling out of a variation of "fag" seemingly apropos of nothing happened repeatedly among boys throughout the school.

The fag discourse is central to boys' joking relationships. Joking cements relationships between boys (Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Lyman, 1998) and helps to manage anxiety and discomfort (Freud, 1905). Boys invoked the specter of the fag in two ways: through humorous imitation and through lobbing the epithet at one another. Boys at River High imitated the fag by acting out an exaggerated "femininity," and/or by pretending to sexually desire other boys. As indicated by the introductory vignette in which a predatory "fag" threatens the little boys, boys at River High link these performative scenarios with a fag identity. They lobbed the fag epithet at each other in a verbal game of hot potato, each careful to deflect the insult quickly by hurling it toward someone else. These games and imitations make up a fag discourse which highlights the fag not as a static but rather as a fluid identity which boys constantly struggle to avoid.

In imitative performances the fag discourse functions as a constant reiteration of the fag's existence, affirming that the fag is out there; at any moment a boy can become a fag. At the same time these performances demonstrate that the boy who is invoking the fag is *not* a fag. By invoking it so often, boys remind themselves and each other that at any point they can become fags if they are not sufficiently masculine.

> Mr McNally, disturbed by the noise outside of the classroom, turned to the open door saying "We'll shut this unless anyone really wants to watch sweaty boys playing basketball." Emir, a tall skinny boy, lisped "I wanna watch the boys play!" The rest of the class cracked up at his imitation.

Through imitating a fag, boys assure others that they are not a fag by immediately becoming masculine again after the performance. They mock their own performed femininity and/or same-sex desire, assuring themselves and others that such an identity is one deserving of derisive laughter.

The fag identity in this instance is fluid, detached from Emir's body. He can move in and out of this "abject domain" while simultaneously affirming his position as a subject.

Boys also consistently tried to put another in the fag position by lobbing the fag epithet at one another.

> Going through the junk-filled car in the auto-shop parking lot, Jay poked his head out and asked "Where are Craig and Brian?" Neil, responded with "I think they're over there," pointing, then thrusting his hips and pulling his arms back and forth to indicate that Craig and Brian might be having sex. The boys in auto-shop laughed.

This sort of joke temporarily labels both Craig and Brian as faggots. Because the fag discourse is so familiar, the other boys immediately understand that Neil is indicating that Craig and Brian are having sex. However these are not necessarily identities that stick. Nobody actually thinks Craig and Brian are homosexuals. Rather the fag identity is a fluid one, certainly an identity that no boy wants, but one that a boy can escape, usually by engaging in some sort of discursive contest to turn another boy into a fag. However, fag becomes a hot potato that no boy wants to be left holding. In the following example, which occurred soon after the "sex" joke, Brian lobs the fag epithet at someone else, deflecting it from himself:

> Brian initiated a round of a favorite game in auto-shop, the "cock game." Brian quietly, looking at Josh, said, "Josh loves the cock," then slightly louder, "Josh loves the cock." He continued saying this until he was yelling "JOSH LOVES THE COCK!" The rest of the boys laughed hysterically as Josh slinked away saying "I have a bigger dick than all you mother fuckers!"

These two instances show how the fag can be mapped, momentarily, on to one boy's body and how he, in turn, can attach it to another boy, thus deflecting it from himself. In the first instance Neil makes fun of Craig and Brian for simply hanging out together. In the second instance Brian goes from being a fag to making Josh into a fag, through the "cock game." The "fag" is transferable. Boys move in and out of it by discursively creating another as a fag through joking interactions. They, somewhat ironically, can move in and out of the fag position by transforming themselves, temporarily, into a fag, but this has the effect of reaffirming their masculinity when they return to a heterosexual position after imitating the fag.

These examples demonstrate boys invoking the trope of the fag in a discursive struggle in which the boys indicate that they know what a fag is—and that they are not fags. This joking cements bonds between boys as they assure themselves and each other of their masculinity through repeated repudiations of a non-masculine position of the abject.

Racing the Fag

The fag trope is not deployed consistently or identically across social groups at River High. Differences between white boys' and African-American boys' meaning making around clothes and dancing reveal ways in which the fag as the abject position is racialized.

Clean, oversized, carefully put together clothing is central to a hip-hop identity for African-American boys who identify with hip-hop culture.[6] Richard Majors calls this presentation of self a "cool pose" consisting of "unique, expressive and conspicuous styles of demeanor, speech, gesture, clothing, hairstyle, walk, stance and handshake." developed by African-American men as a symbolic response to institutionalized racism (Majors, 2001: 211). Pants are usually several sizes too big, hanging low on a boy's waist, usually revealing a pair of boxers beneath. Shirts and sweaters are similarly oversized, often hanging down to a boy's knees. Tags are frequently left on baseball hats worn slightly askew and perched high on the head. Meticulously clean, unlaced athletic shoes with rolled up socks under the tongue complete a typical hip-hop outfit.

This amount of attention and care given to clothing for white boys not identified with hip-hop culture (that is, most of the white boys at River High) would certainly cast them into an abject, fag position. White boys are not supposed to appear to care about their clothes or appearance, because only fags care about how they look. Ben illustrates this:

> Ben walked in to the auto-shop classroom from the parking lot where he had been working on a particularly oily engine. Grease stains covered his jeans. He looked down at them, made a face and walked toward me with limp wrists, laughing and lisping in a in a high pitch singsong voice "I got my good panths all dirty!"

Ben draws on indicators of a fag identity, such as limp wrists, as do the boys in the introductory vignette to illustrate that a masculine person certainly would not care about having dirty clothes. In this sense, masculinity, for white boys, becomes the carefully crafted appearance of not caring about appearance, especially in terms of cleanliness.

However, African-American boys involved in hip-hop culture talk frequently about whether or not their clothes, specifically their shoes, are dirty:

> In drama class both Darnell and Marc compared their white Adidas basketball shoes. Darnell mocked Marc because black scuff marks covered his shoes, asking incredulously "Yours are a week old and they're dirty—I've had mine for a month and they're not dirty!" Both laughed.

Monte, River High's star football player, echoed this concern about dirty shoes when looking at the fancy red shoes he had lent to his cousin the week before, and told me he was frustrated because after his cousin used them, the "shoes are hella scuffed up." Clothing, for these boys, does not indicate a fag position, but rather defines membership in a certain cultural and racial group (Perry, 2002).

Dancing is another arena that carries distinctly fag associated meanings for white boys and masculine meanings for African-American boys who participate in hip-hop culture. White boys often associate dancing with "fags." J.L. told me that guys think "'nSync's gay" because they can dance. 'nSync is an all white male singing group known for their dance moves. At dances white boys frequently held their female dates tightly, locking their hips together. The boys never danced with one another, unless engaged in a round of "hot potato." White boys often jokingly danced together in order to embarrass each other by making someone else into a fag:

> Lindy danced behind her date, Chris. Chris's friend, Matt, walked up and nudged Lindy aside, imitating her dance moves behind Chris. As Matt rubbed his hands up and down Chris's back, Chris turned around and jumped back startled to see Matt there instead of Lindy. Matt cracked up as Chris turned red.

However dancing does not carry this sort of sexualized gender meaning for all boys at River High. For African-American boys dancing demonstrates membership in a cultural community (Best, 2000). African-American boys frequently danced together in single sex groups, teaching each other the latest dance moves, showing off a particularly difficult move or making each other laugh with humorous dance moves. Students recognized K.J. as the most talented dancer at the school. K.J. is a sophomore of African-American and Filipino descent who participated in the hip-hop culture of River High. He continually wore the latest hip-hop fashions. K.J. was extremely popular. Girls hollered his name as they walked down the hall and thrust urgently written love notes folded in complicated designs into his hands as he sauntered to class. For the past two years K.J. won first place in the talent show for dancing. When he danced at assemblies the room reverberated with screamed chants of "Go K.J.! Go K.J! Go K.J.!" Because dancing for African-American boys places them within a tradition of masculinity, they are not at risk of becoming a fag for this particular gendered practice. Nobody called K.J. a fag. In fact in several of my interviews boys of multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds spoke admiringly of K.J.'s dancing abilities.

Implications

These findings confirm previous studies of masculinity and sexuality that position homophobia as central to contemporary definitions of adolescent masculinity. These data extend previous research by unpacking multilayered meanings that boys deploy through their uses of homophobic language and joking rituals. By attending to these meanings I reframe the discussion as one of a fag discourse, rather than simply labeling this sort of behavior as homophobia. The fag is an "abject" position, a position outside of masculinity that actually constitutes masculinity. Thus, masculinity, in part, becomes the daily interactional work of repudiating the "threatening specter" of the fag.

The fag extends beyond a static sexual identity attached to a gay boy. Few boys are permanently identified as fags; most move in and out of fag positions. Looking at "fag" as a discourse rather than a static identity reveals that the term can be invested with different meanings in different social spaces. "Fag" may be used as a weapon with which to temporarily assert one's masculinity by denying it to others. Thus "fag" becomes a symbol around which contests of masculinity take place.

The fag epithet, when hurled at other boys, may or may not have explicit sexual meanings, but it always has gendered meanings. When a boy calls another boy a fag, it means he is not a man, not necessarily that he is a homosexual. The boys in this study know that they are not supposed to call homosexual boys "fags" because that is mean. This, then, has been the limited success of the mainstream gay rights movement. The message absorbed by some of these teenage boys is that "gay men can be masculine, just like you." Instead of challenging gender inequality, this particular discourse of gay rights has reinscribed it. Thus we need to begin to think about how gay men may be in a unique position to challenge gendered as well as sexual norms.

This study indicates that researchers who look at the intersection of sexuality and masculinity need to attend to the ways in which racialized identities may affect how "fag" is deployed and what it means in various social situations. While researchers have addressed the ways in which masculine identities are racialized (Connell, 1995; Ross, 1998; Bucholtz, 1999; Davis, 1999; Price, 1999; Ferguson, 2000; Majors, 2001) they have not paid equal attention to the ways in which "fag" might be a racialized epithet. It is important to look at when, where and with what meaning "the fag" is deployed in order to get at how masculinity is defined, contested, and invested in among adolescent boys.

Research shows that sexualized teasing often leads to deadly results, as evidenced by the spate of school shootings in the 1990s (Kimmel, 2003). Clearly the fag discourse affects not just homosexual teens, but all boys, gay and straight. Further research could investigate these processes in a variety of contexts: varied geographic locations, sexualized groups, classed groups, religious groups and age groups.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Natalie Boero, Leslie Bell, Meg Jay and Barrie Thorne for their comments on this article. This work was supported by the Center for the Study of Sexual Culture at University of California, Berkeley.

Notes

1. While the term "homosexual" is laden with medicalized and normalizing meanings, I use it instead of "gay" because "gay" in the world of River High has multiple meanings apart from sexual practices or identities.

2. Girls do insult one another based on sexualized meanings. But in my own research I found that girls and boys did not harass girls in this manner with the same frequency that boys harassed each other through engaging in joking about the fag.

3. I use discourse in the Foucauldian sense, to describe truth producing practices, not just text or speech (Foucault, 1978).

4. The names of places and respondents have been changed.

5. Auto-shop was a class in which students learned how to build and repair cars. Many of the students in this course were looking into careers as mechanics.

6. While there are several white and Latino boys at River High who identify with hip-hop culture, hip-hop is identified by the majority of students as an African-American cultural style.

References

Almaguer, Tomas (1991) "Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior," *Differences* 3: 75–100.

Bersani, Leo (1987) "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43: 197–222.

Best, Amy (2000) *Prom Night: Youth, Schools and Popular Culture.* New York: Routledge.

Bucholtz, Mary (1999) "'You Da Man': Narrating the Racial Other in the Production of White Masculinity," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3/4: 443–60.

Burn, Shawn M. (2000) "Heterosexuals' Use of 'Fag' and 'Queer' to Deride One Another: A Contributor to Heterosexism and Stigma," *Journal of Homosexuality* 40: 1–11.

Butler, Judith (1993) *Bodies That Matter.* Routledge: New York.

Butler, Judith (1999) *Gender Trouble.* New York: Routledge.

Carrigan, Tim, Connell, Bob and Lee, John (1987) "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity," in Harry Brod (ed.) *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies,* pp. 188–202. Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin.

Coltrane, Scott (2001) "Selling the Indispensable Father," paper presented at *Pushing the Boundaries Conference: New Conceptualizations of Childhood and Motherhood,* Philadelphia.

Connell, R.W. (1995) *Masculinities.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cooper, Marianne (2000) "Being the 'Go-to Guy': Fatherhood, Masculinity and the Organization of Work in Silicon Valley," *Qualitative Sociology* 23: 379–405.

Corbett, Ken (2001) "Faggot = Loser," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 2: 3–28.

Craig, Steve (1992) *Men, Masculinity and the Media.* Newbury Park: Sage.

Curry, Timothy J. (2004) "Fraternal Bonding in the Locker Room: A Profeminist Analysis of Talk about Competition and Women," in Michael Messner and Michael Kimmel (eds.) *Men's Lives.* Boston, MA: Pearson.

Davis, James E. (1999) "Forbidden Fruit, Black Males' Constructions of Transgressive Sexualities in Middle School," in William J. Letts IV and James T. Sears (eds.) *Queering Elementary Education: Advancing the Dialogue about Sexualities and Schooling,* pp. 49 ff. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield.

Eder, Donna, Evans, Catherine and Parker, Stephen (1995) *School Talk: Gender and Adolescent Culture.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Edly, Nigel and Wetherell, Margaret (1997) "Jockeying for Position: The Construction of Masculine Identities," *Discourse and Society* 8: 203–17.

Epstein, Steven (1996) "A Queer Encounter," in Steven Seidman (ed.) *Queer Theory/Sociology,* pp. 188–202. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Ferguson, Ann (2000) *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Fine, Gary (1987) *With the Boys: Little League Baseball and Preadolescent Culture.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, Michel (1978) *The History of Sexuality, Volume I.* New York: Vintage Books.

Francis, Becky and Skelton, Christine (2001) "Men Teachers and the Construction of Heterosexual Masculinity in the Classroom," *Sex Education* 1: 9–21.

Freud, Sigmund (1905) *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud,* (translated and edited by A.A. Brill). New York: The Modern Library.

Hochschild, Arlie (1989) *The Second Shift.* New York: Avon.

Julien, Isaac and Mercer, Kobena (1991) "True Confessions: A Discourse on Images of Black Male Sexuality," in Essex Hemphill (ed.) *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men,* pp. 167–73. Boston, MA: Alyson Publications.

Kehily, Mary Jane and Nayak, Anoop (1997) "Lads and Laughter: Humour and the Production of Heterosexual Masculinities," *Gender and Education* 9: 69–87.

Kimmel, Michael (2001) "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," in Stephen Whitehead and Frank Barrett (eds.) *The Masculinities Reader,* pp. 266–187. Cambridge: Polity.

Kimmel, Michael (2003) "Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia, and Violence: Random School Shootings, 1982–2001," *American Behavioral Scientist* 46: 1439–58.

King, D. L. (2004) *Double Lives on the Down Low.* New York: Broadway Books.

Lehne, Gregory (1998) "Homophobia among Men: Supporting and Defining the Male Role," in Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner (eds.) *Men's Lives,* pp. 237–49. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Lemert, Charles (1996) "Series Editor's Preface," in Steven Seidman (ed.) *Queer Theory/Sociology.* Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Lyman, Peter (1998) "The Fraternal Bond as a Joking Relationship: A Case Study of the Role of Sexist Jokes in Male Group Bonding," in Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner (eds.) *Men's Lives,* pp. 171–93. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Mac an Ghaill, Martain (1996) "What about the Boys—School, Class and Crisis Masculinity," *Sociological Review* 44: 381–97.

MacLeod, Jay (1987) *Ain't No Makin It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low Income Neighborhood.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Majors, Richard (2001) "Cool Pose: Black Masculinity and Sports," in Stephen Whitehead and Frank Barrett (eds.) *The Masculinities Reader,* pp. 208–17. Cambridge: Polity.

Messner, Michael (1989) "Sports and the Politics of Inequality," in Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner (eds.) *Men's Lives.* Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Messner, Michael (2004) "On Patriarchs and Losers: Rethinking Men's Interests," paper presented at Berkeley *Journal of Sociology* Conference, Berkeley.

Parker, Andrew (1996) "The Construction of Masculinity within Boys' Physical Education," *Gender and Education* 8: 141–57.

Perry, Pamela (2002) *Shades of White: White Kids and Racial Identities in High School.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Plummer, David C. (2001) "The Quest for Modern Manhood: Masculine Stereotypes, Peer Culture and the Social Significance of Homophobia," *Journal of Adolescence* 24: 15–23.

Price, Jeremy (1999) "Schooling and Racialized Masculinities: The Diploma, Teachers and Peers in the Lives of Young, African-American Men," *Youth and Society* 31: 224–63.

Riggs, Marlon (1991) "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! Queen," in Essex Hemphill (ed.) *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men,* pp. 153–260. Boston, MA: Alyson Publications.

Ross, Marlon B. (1998) "In Search of Black Men's Masculinities," *Feminist Studies* 24: 599–626.

Sedgwick, Eve K. (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sedgwick, Eve K. (1995) " 'Gosh, Boy George, You Must be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity!' " in Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (eds.) *Constructing Masculinity,* pp. 11–20. New York: Routledge.

Skelton, Christine (1996) "Learning to be Tough: The Fostering of Maleness in One Primary School," *Gender and Education* 8: 185–97.

Smith, George W. (1998) "The Ideology of 'Fag': The School Experience of Gay Students," *The Sociological Quarterly* 39: 309–35.

Smith, Valerie (1994) "Split Affinities: The Case of Interracial Rape," in Anne Herrmann and Abigail Stewart (eds.) *Theorizing Feminism,* pp. 155–70. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Stein, Arlene and Plummer, Ken (1994) " 'I Can't Even Think Straight': 'Queer' Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology," *Sociological Theory* 12: 178 ff.

Thorne, Barrie (1993) *Gender Play: Boys and Girls in School.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Warner, Michael (1993) "Introduction," in Michael Warner (ed.) *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory,* pp. vii–xxxi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

West, Candace and Zimmerman, Don (1991) "Doing Gender," in Judith Lorber (ed.) *The Social Construction of Gender,* pp. 102–21. Newbury Park: Sage.

Whitehead, Stephen and Barrett, Frank (2001) "The Sociology of Masculinity," in Stephen Whitehead and Frank Barrett (eds.) *The Masculinities Reader,* pp. 472–6. Cambridge: Polity.

Wilchins, Riki (2003) "Do You Believe in Fairies?" *The Advocate,* 4 February.

Willis, Paul (1981) *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Wood, Julian (1984) "Groping Toward Sexism: Boy's Sex Talk," in Angela McRobbie and Mica Nava (eds.) *Gender and Generation.* London: Macmillan Publishers.

ARTICLE 12

Daniel Farr

Sissy Boy, Progressive Parents

Gender is part of our lives from the very beginning. From early on, children begin to conceptualize and integrate an understanding of gender into their identities and actions (Jordan and Cowan 1995; Rogers 1999; Thorne 1986). Families, the media, and other children continually recreate, develop, and perpetuate regulating behaviors both within and between individuals that work to legitimize and maintain the dichotomous nature of gender. One is either a boy or a girl, a man or a woman. When gender is not evident in this conventional way, there can be disapproval, concern, and even loathing. These responses may torment both girls (tomboys) and boys (sissy boys) who do not conform to dichotomous gender characteristics. Some research suggests that tomboys may be less stigmatized than sissy boys (Martin 1995), but the experience of growing up as a "too masculine" girl does have lifetime implications (Carr 1998).

In adulthood, many of the gendering events that shape one's life have been forgotten or minimized. For most, the act of fitting into one's socially approved gender feels natural—seamless and simple. The social rules about how to behave in the spheres of work, education, and recreation or in the private sphere of the family are so deeply imbedded into our persona we can be unaware of their existence. Not only does one learn how to behave, but how *not* to behave. These rules and norms unwittingly limit us in our daily lives in how and to whom we should speak, how we should dress, perhaps even how we should think if we wish to adhere to our "natural" gender.

From *Couples, Kids, and Family Life*, edited by Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (NY: Oxford UP, 2006). Used by permission of the author.

Our introduction into a gendered world is so deeply ingrained that individuals who do not seem to support the gendered norms of appropriate masculinity and femininity stand out in stark relief. We can be ill-at-ease if we are unable to neatly allocate individuals the appropriate slots of man or woman (see Lucal 1999). Without being able to categorize individuals, we don't know how to interact or interpret the behaviors, situations, and interactions we are encountering.

Looking Back at Childhood

Applying an autoethnographic analysis of my experience growing up as a gender non-conforming boy—yes, a "sissy boy"—offers insight into the social construction of gender and the manner in which gender is incorporated into the various social organizations and structures that guide our lives. As a sissy boy, I seldom interacted with tomboys so I cannot offer insight into their experience, but I will explore facets of my own early experience as an effeminate male to describe the way gender dichotomy affects those who don't readily fit into one gender category or the other.

Critically evaluating and looking back at one's experience offers a rich tapestry of information about the social world. Informed in part by Arlie Hochschild's concept of the "magnified moment" (1994: 4), I explore several of the key moments and events of my life that have reverberated through my memories. These are happenings which, at the time they occur, seem to tell it all, so to speak. In the process, I point to the many threads of gender socialization and related power dynamics at play in our society, which, oddly enough, work themselves out in the smallest ways,

such as through toy selection and favored books. Setting out to examine my own social history in terms of magnified moments has been both challenging and insightful. These memories, while sometimes painful or embarrassing, offer a glimpse into the moments when experience can telescope our understanding of our selves and society. Clearly, my perception and interpretation of these moments are not representative of the experience of all sissy boys, but they do offer insight into the experience of growing up as an effeminate boy in a culture, where the two words—"effeminate" and "boy"—are considered anomalous terms of reference.

Looking back to being children, we all can probably recall being called a cruel name or feeling out of place. Fortunately, most of us do find a place or group in which to fit and we learn to cope with those with whom we don't fit. Sometimes we cope by setting ourselves apart from the groups that treat us poorly. Sometimes we cope by demeaning the group that we are apart from. Sometimes we pretend the others are unimportant and don't matter. Sometimes we cope by reaffirming the importance of our own group. Regardless of how we deal with this, we've all experienced these varying social mechanisms at play as we grew up. The scary reality is that we can experience these mechanisms our entire lives if we aren't careful, perhaps without even noticing it.

Looking to childhood, one is likely to recall a quiet boy who never quite fit in. Maybe he was shy. Maybe he was socially awkward with boys but comfortable with girls. Maybe he liked music and art too much. Maybe he was too smart. Maybe he was too fat or too skinny, or not athletic. Perhaps he was a bit too effeminate (girly acting)—who knows what specifically marked him as different, but surely you knew this boy. This boy was probably picked on and teased, perhaps even physically assaulted in some manner, but he was clearly marked as the outsider, the one you knew you didn't want to be—even if he was you. This chapter will examine some of the experiences of one such boy, the trials and tribulations that he experienced, the pains felt, and the victories that can be won. Examining the various moments that have shaped my early life will allow us to explore the numerous manners in which the notions of gender and sexuality are taught, learned, lived, and challenged.

Growing up I was what many might call a precocious child. I was intelligent, creative, imaginative, and "too" sensitive to fit into the social conception of boyhood. I was the boy who was constantly picked on by my peers for being unmanly, for being a sissy, and later for supposedly being a faggot. I don't know that I can pinpoint when I first realized I was unique and different, but I certainly recognized I was not just unlike other boys, but other children in general, at any early age (at least by first or second grade). The path of my unique childhood is not the same as all other effeminate boys or even other outsider boys in general, but the various experiences I will examine are ones to which we can all relate in one way or another.

Boy versus Girl Toys

As children of the late 20th century, many of us have a collection of toys and other recreational and educational objects. Coming from a middle-class background, I was fortunate to have a respectable assortment of toys and tools at my disposal, to help ward off childhood boredom. Looking back to my childhood, I don't think my parents took too strongly to the idea that there were specific toys for boys and specific toys for girls. I know my sister got dolls and I got teddy bears, but at the time I only saw this as their giving us what we each liked.

Is this a matter of what we instinctively prefer or is it what we are taught to prefer? Had I been more like other "normal" boys of my age group, maybe I would have received more action figures and appropriately masculine toys. For example, *Transformers* were all the rage at the time. I don't recall ever expressing desire for, or interest in, them. My one friend had a large collection of these

types of toys, but I never found them especially interesting. The time I spent playing with this friend and his toys was more the result of neighborhood proximity than strong feelings of camaraderies. Fortunately, my parents were able to step away from some, though of course not all, of the categorization of toys by gender. Despite the frequent gender stereotyping of toys by parents (see Campenni 1999), my own parents were more open about the types of toys my siblings and I could play with. I was thus able to enjoy "masculine" toys, such as Legos™ and Construx™, as well as "feminine" toys like looms and cooking kits. My parents were exceptional in this way. As far as I knew, they never stereotyped my interests. They never discouraged what my peers viewed with disdain as sissy boy inclinations. To my progressive parents, I was simply their son—the one who was good at so many things and who loved his family—not the boy child in their lives.

One of the favorite toys I received as a child was a Fisher-Price™ loom. It's used to weave yarn into fabric, to make scarves, for example. I didn't view it as a girly type of gift; I saw it as a cool new crafty toy. I still recall the circumstances of receiving the loom; it was an unexpected gift, unassociated with a holiday or birthday. It was new and exciting. As I look back, I can still vaguely see the box. It seems that there was a boy on the box cover. I have unsuccessfully searched online trying to locate a picture of this box. I believe it was a boy on the cover, but it may have been a girl with a "masculine" haircut. This led me to assume that this was a gender-appropriate gift. It there was a boy on the cover, it must have been okay for me to also play with the loom.

The freedom of toy selection I experienced at home was not something I would experience in school. One winter, in second grade, my class had a holiday party and a gift exchange. On the day of the big party, we each drew numbers for the gifts that were sorted as being either a masculine toy or a feminine toy. I was lucky in that I drew the number for the biggest box! After all the boxes were distributed, the tension grew as we all opened our gifts at the same time. My initial excitement of receiving the biggest box was squelched when I opened it to find a Nerf™ football. I was disappointed; I had no clue about what to do with it. I had grown up in a household where sports were rarely, if ever, watched on TV. I promptly made a trade for a cool dinosaur kit where you could put the bones together to build a T-rex. I loved building that T-rex and kept it for many years, but the boys of my class branded me a "wuss" because I didn't want the football. One would think that bones and dinosaurs would be adequately masculine, but a football superseded this in the toy-related hierarchy of masculinity in the classroom.

Hobbies and Books

Through much of my childhood I had an interest in artistic endeavors. Despite my parents' lack of concern for gender-appropriate toys and interests, I soon became aware of the gendered division of hobbies and how to regulate and manage the public (school) and private (home) side of this. I had grown up with parents who both enjoyed arts and crafts. From as back as I can remember, my mother had sewn, quilted, crocheted, and cross-stitched. My father also had interest in crafts, particularly working with wood and stained glass. Given the dangers innate to a wood shop, I was primarily exposed to the fiber arts my mother was working with. From an early age, I found her hobbies intriguing and was eager to learn. I was six or seven when my mother showed me how to cross-stitch. Her efforts to teach me didn't work out very well. I had a hard time emulating what she was doing. I ultimately did learn to cross-stitch from a book. I can still remember the first piece I stitched of a little brown bear.

Looking back, I now know that my interest in cross-stitch must have been challenging for my parents. Sewing is culturally regarded in our society as a craft for women. I feel it was quite progressive of my parents to not have told me "cross-stitch is for girls" and push me toward

stereotypical masculine pastimes. I even recall my father's positive support for my first little project. My parents never instilled shame or embarrassment in me because of my "feminine" hobbies.

Early in my school years, I found great joy in the world of books. I became a hungry little reader, taking out as many as three books a week from the library—a heavy stack for such a little person. At the pace I worked through the library books, it was inevitable that I would hit upon books that boys "shouldn't" read. I recall one series of books where a doll traveled to different places around the world. I don't recall ever having an interest in dolls as a child, but I enjoyed those books because of the travel aspect and the exposure to different cultures and places.

The other children in my class did take notice. Since boys aren't supposed to read books about dolls, I used to hide them from my classmates. I don't recall if they teased me about this, but I knew, even at that age, that these were books for girls. Further reflection upon these books makes me wonder about my parents' response. I don't remember any. As far as I can recall, my parents never made any negative or derogatory comment about it; they simply supported my interest in reading, even if my books weren't really boy books.

Later, in this same library, I discovered a children's series of biographies where I was exposed to individuals such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thomas Jefferson. These books were most certainly appropriate for a boy. I checked out a new one every week. One week, I got one about a woman, for which I received a great deal of harassment from my male classmates. Over and over, I heard, "Why would you want to read about a girl?" I was embarrassed and dejected. Helen Keller remains the only woman from the series I ever read about. It's odd how a simple act of reading about a woman can put one's masculinity at risk.

A growing interest in arts and crafts, combined with my love of books, led me to borrow various arts books. Initially, I was vaguely familiar with the craft of crocheting, having seen my mother working with the funny hooked needle. I was curious, so this was the topic of the first of these books I borrowed. I took the book home and taught myself how to crochet, making a white washcloth.

I was proud of that little project, so I took it to school for show-and-tell. This led to another magnified moment, in which I learned one of the harshest lessons of my gender socialization. My classmates picked me on endlessly. I was beginning to see that there were certain hobbies and activities that I might be interested in and had talent in doing, but which could never be shared with the kids at school. The teacher was supportive and said what a nice job I had done, but the kids were cruel. I was confused. After all, we all took the same art classes. How was this different? I had no idea that this wasn't stuff I was supposed to be doing. I had two options: give up this hobby entirely or continue it at home and keep it secret from my peers. I chose the latter.

At first blush, the library would seem to be gender-neutral territory, a place of knowledge and entertainment. But this is gendered too. A boy must be careful not to overstep the boundaries that define appropriate masculinity. One is constricted by the gendered information we are taught by peers, teachers, and families. While adults certainly have a profound influence upon youth, it also seems that much of the gender policing of boys is accomplished by their male peers. Girls, who may participate in taunting and harassment in conjunction with other boys, are unlikely to police and taunt boys for feminine behaviors or interests on their own (Zucker et al. 1995). In my experience this was true. Girls were much more willing to accept my interest in art and the books that they may have also read, and they enjoyed discussing them with me. This probably helped lay the groundwork for my ability to establish friendships more readily with girls than with boys.

Moving Along in School

The lesson learned about what constitutes an appropriate book extended beyond the library to

schooling. There is an expectation that both girls and boys in our culture will attend schools, but the types of involvement and the interest demonstrated by the differing genders is regulated differently. Subjects and information taught and presented to children help to reinforce conceptions of masculinity and femininity, as well as power, in our culture. Subjects that have the connotation of being of "lesser" importance, such as handwriting, tend to be associated with the feminine. Thus, it may be socially expected that girls will earn higher grades than boys in such subjects. People notice the "girly" writing of a man who writes nicely. The social construction of gender also reaches out from the books of the classroom to suggest that there are subjects, topics, and careers that are for girls and others that are for boys.

By the fourth grade, I was selected to join my school district's Academically Gifted Program (AGP). This became another nail in the coffin of my popularity. It's strange how as children we tease and insult both the over-achievers and the under-achievers. I yearned through those years to merely be "average." Alas, I was not, as I was in a special program where I was permitted to leave my regular school one whole day a week and ride a bus to another school to interact with other "gifted" students in a special class. We had access to various academic and activity-experience opportunities. It was a good experience while I was at AGP, at least initially. This was the first time that I had a chance to mingle with peers who seemed to be at my own intellectual level. I also was no longer the main target of harassment in my class. I was grouped with those who I can only assume were also targets in their own schools. In a funny kind of way, it was rewarding to be grouped up with the other nerds, geeks, sissies, and weirdos, one of the first times I didn't feel alone.

Children can be incredibly cruel and I was an easy target, being in a gifted program, being a bit pudgy, being too effeminate, and wearing glasses. It was in fourth grade when I first tried to go on a diet in hopes of fitting in better with my classmates. I knew to hide this from my peers, because, as with so many other things in my world, being on a diet was something girls did, not boys. So even in my aim to fit in better, I was trying to get there by way of non-masculine approved routes (though as adults we know that both men and women go on diets).

During those years of fourth through sixth grade, I found myself becoming increasingly isolated and distant. I was a sad child in many ways. I spent a lot of time reading and doing artistic projects by myself. I struggled with the emotional limitations of schooling, with my inability to fit in with my peers. I spent many nights hiding under my quilt in bed crying about it. I simply could not understand why my peers held such a negative view of me. I tried to reason the circumstances away as being the result of superior intellect, but this didn't work. I'm sure it was not an easy thing for my parents to see me so sad, so I also tried to keep it hidden from them. (Isn't that what boys are supposed to do?) I sought to reconcile some of the emotional strain of the situation by withdrawing and convincing myself that I was fine alone.

Having relocated to a new town towards the end of sixth grade, I merged into the life of junior high school much like my peers. We were all new to the school, with an equally low status in the grade hierarchy, all seeking to establish our standing in the local scheme of things. I was placed in all the advanced classes that were offered. While this was great in that I was with a group of intellectual peers, I also was separated from the majority of my classmates, who I only met in gym, chorus, and maybe in the cafeteria.

During the seventh grade, all students were required to take a home economics class. For the first time, I was able to flaunt my domestic abilities with a needle and thread as well as in the kitchen. From a young age, I had learned to cook, in part because of personal interest, but also in part because I was a Cub Scout. I no longer had to hide the fact that I could cook and sew from my peers, but I did have to be careful in showing how much I knew and how much I enjoyed these activities. I ended up being at the head of my class for home economics and even started helping other students

with some of the sewing and embroidery assignments. It was the first time that the feedback I was receiving from peers was not reinforcing the negative associations of my gender identity in connection with stereotypically feminine activities.

Because the course was required and I was part of a class of high achieving students, I wasn't seen as a boy participating in feminine activities. Instead, I was just a student who was doing well in class. But as soon as the semester in home economics ended and I entered the wood shop class, I had to send my domestic abilities and interests into the gender closet. This produced another magnified moment, this time highlighting how quickly valued abilities in one context can become a source of embarrassment and taunting in another.

Heading into wood shop, many of my peers expected that I would be uncomfortable and fall flat on my face. I surprised them when they learned that I actually knew as much or more about the tools and equipment as they did. All the time I had spent with my father in the garage had paid off. I was a competent woodworker and did just fine in making the semester's big lamp project. One might think that the ability to fulfill both the roles and tasks traditionally classified as feminine and those classified as masculine would have been regarded positively by my peers. Unfortunately, this was not the case, because the dichotomous nature of gender reared its head once again. While both my feminine and masculine skills required similar abilities—precise measurement, the operation of machines (be it a sewing machine and mixer, or a table saw and drill press), envisioning how differing parts or different ingredients work together to create a final product—the incongruity of being a boy who was successful in the feminine tasks was unacceptable. We seem more likely to recognize difference while remaining blind to the similarity that is demonstrated by differently gendered youth (Messner 2000). This is especially true for boys who demonstrate "feminine" skills.

I was never blessed as a child with good hand-eye coordination or balance; I was a "big ol' klutz." Early on, I learned to dread gym class, in part because of a disinterest in athletics and in part because of my peers' responses to my lack of athletic prowess. There were, of course, some things I loved about gym class, such as the little wheelie carts for scooting around, dodge-ball, playing with the big parachute, and square-dancing, which I adored. Another magnified moment unfolded at this time. It was a Wednesday and we had gym in late morning, right after lunch. My second tooth was loose. It had gotten to that cool stage where you could spin the tooth round and round, but it held tight by a single thread. It was climb-the-rope day. To me, the rope was the very worst part of gym classes. I did not have the upper body strength to climb the rope; I even had problems with the interval knots. I was waiting in line, spinning the tooth with all my might, and it finally came out when there was just one person remaining between me and the dreaded rope. I felt tremendous relief in being able to avoid the rope and go to the nurse's office. But I also knew this could have been a gender-defining moment.

In those early years, in addition to scouting, my parents also offered me the opportunity to join various local youth sports teams, like baseball. My one sister and I had both taken swim lessons when we were young and enjoyed that greatly, but the thought of an organized team sport didn't appeal to me. As it was, I was already spending enough time figuring ways to get out of gym class. But my parents never forced these opportunities on me. They surely knew that I was not the most masculine boy, but they never demeaned me for lacking an interest in sports. Actually, in contrast to many of my classmates' parents, my own parents weren't very interested in sports. Organized sports were rarely, if ever, seen on television in my house. One could argue that this could have "caused" me not be interested in sports, but this is unlikely considering that both my siblings participated in various sports in their youth.

When I was about six years old, I had another of those eye-opening experiences (another magnified moment) during which I began to understand some of the "real world" differences between males and females. I had mastered riding my bike with training wheels and was finally ready to move on to riding without them. At the time, I was only allowed to bike back and forth on the sidewalks on either side of my house. Two sisters, Ann and Stella, lived in the house on the left and had a driveway that was perfect for turning around. In the transition to riding without training wheels, one of the hardest parts is learning to turn, continue to stay upright, and keep going where you want to go. At the side of Ann and Stella's driveway was a large bush. During one of my first efforts to turn around, I turned abruptly, crashed into their bush, and simultaneously learned what happens when a hard object—like handle bars—hits a boy in the groin. I was stuck, entangled in both the bush and bike, and in tremendous pain. I cried and was very upset, of course. Who knew that such an occurrence could hurt so badly? As I was a modest child, I was embarrassed by the entire incident. I knocked on Ann and Stella's door to apologize for breaking branches on their bush. They took me very seriously, inspected the bush, and actually thanked me for having broken out the branch that had some rot on it. (At least, that was their story.) I was so relieved. I eventually mastered the act of turning on my bike with not too many scars to my ego or body, but my neighbors' support and understanding stayed with me.

Third grade brought my first regular visits to the playground. Of course, we had gone outside to play in the past, but it had been intermittent, as the big kids in higher grades were "too wild" and might hurt us. While it is common for children to create single-sex play groups (Martin and Fabes 2001), I found I was more comfortable playing with the girls. They were less violent and didn't always talk about the stereotypically masculine toys about which I had little knowledge or interest. I didn't fit in well and was picked on and posited to the lowest boy status. However, with the group of girls, I was able to be one of the leaders and had a lot of social support from them. I learned how to play cat's cradle at lunch, got to just relax and sit and talk in the sun at play time, and compete on the swings for who could go highest and jump off.

The dread of gym class persisted throughout my junior and high school years. My gym class loathing was reinforced one year when I was placed with students two years my senior because of my academic and choral schedule. That was a very rough year of gym class for me. As one might suspect, my classmates (who seemingly comprised the majority of the football team) were not pleased to have to count me among them. Making matters worse, the gym teacher "inadvertently" mentioned that I was in a class of seniors "because of chorus." Involvement of any male in choir was regarded with disgust by most of the boys of my school.

I had learned to deal with the psychological harm accompanying this masculine departure, but that year I understood that gender violations could also result in physical pain. That fall, one of the games of flag football, which was supposed to be non-contact, resulted in my first cast. This was the first concrete example of my life in which the disapproval of my gender portrayal by my peers, together with the bolstering disapproval of adults (my gym teacher), caused me real harm. I had always wanted to believe that each of my classmates felt different and out-of-place to at least some degree, but from that point on I became increasingly critical and distant from my peers and even wary of the adults of my school. I was disappointed that adults would not present a better example for students, but I now recognize that deeply imbedded categories of masculinity are not only part of youth culture but of adult culture as well.

Athletic interest and involvement have long been held a bastion of masculinity. Being a successful athlete enables men/boys to affirm and define who and what they are, especially in opposition to femininity (Connell 1995; Messner 1992). Having had little athletic interest or skill as a child (and I still don't today), my experience of masculinity was problematized in this regard by my peers as well as the adults of my world. I had

become a large-bodied, strongly built youth, with the quintessential football figure. The idea that I was disinterested in the football and wrestling teams seemed utterly foreign to my athletics teachers.

Cub Scouts and Masculinity

While I didn't participate in organized sports in my youth, I did become involved in an organization that is commonly regarded as a cornerstone of masculine childhood socialization, the Cub Scouts. I do not recall if I joined of my own volition or if I had been encouraged to do so by my parents. Looking back, I can see how I might initially have perceived Cub Scouts as the "in thing" to do, but I can also see how my parents, like many other parents, may have been encouraged to involve their sons in activities such as this. My scout troop was small because of the area where I lived. It was just me, Gus (a boy who was even more of an outsider than myself), and Brian (whose dad was our pack leader). Such a small pack was limited in the activities it could undertake. I remember the occasional craft projects and the emergence of my competitive nature as I sought various beads and patches that marked one's ranking and skill as a scout. As the years passed, I obtained quite a few badges, but I did not find the overall experience fulfilling.

While "character development" is the first purpose of scouting, I do not know if I experienced much of this within the Scouts or if, instead, I was encouraged to regard certain behaviors, activities, and characteristics as masculine and thus appropriate, or feminine and thus inappropriate. There were many conflicting messages in this regard. While we primarily participated in "masculine" activities such as woodworking, nature and environmental appreciation, and various competitions such as the building and racing of small wooden cars, we also had an annual cake bake contest. Fathers and sons were to bake cakes without the help of a mother to raise funds for the troop. At the time, I did not understand why my mother wasn't allowed to help with the cake. I felt that since my mother did most of the cooking and baking at home, she would be the appropriate parent for the task. In other scouting tasks, such as seeking patches, my mother was able to help, so why couldn't she here? The annual cake-baking contest was in many respects a magnified moment, an affirmation for me that men and women were in opposition in our society. To be a real man meant to be separate and independent of girls. Any task a woman could do, a man could do better—if he wanted to.

I eventually left the Cub Scouts, just before advancing to Boy Scouts. My parents encouraged continued participation, but I asserted that I was not enjoying the activities, especially given the shortcomings that resulted from my troop's small size. My parents sympathized and allowed me to make the final decision; I always appreciated the choices they allowed me to make.

Cooking and Clothing

While there were conflicting messages conveyed in the cake baking of Cub Scouts, it didn't reduce my interest in cooking. I found I loved mixing and making things in the kitchen. It amazed me that you could put various ingredients together, add heat, and presto! I first learned the miracles of kitchen chemistry through the use of *Bisquick*. I would get up early on the weekend, not only for the cartoons, but to make pancakes for the family. I became quite skilled at it, even though it took many bad pancakes to master the timing. My parents were always encouraging and around the age of 7 or 8, I received my first cookbook. I loved that book and have kept it. The first real thing I ever made from it was potato salad, which was a hit with the family. Despite all the comfort and praise I received from my family for my cooking, and despite my cookbook having pictures of both boys and girls, I somehow knew that this was not something I should mention at school. I was already labeled an outsider; no need to add fodder to my peers' ammunition.

It is odd how, as children, we receive such mixed messages about what establishes various tasks as masculine and feminine. We often see our parents completing similar tasks, at least on occasion. If raised in the home of a single parent, with all the adult tasks needing to be accomplished by that one parent, how is it that certain tasks and skills are then demarcated masculine and feminine? I recall most cooking and kitchen tasks being done by my mother, but I can also vividly recall occasions when my father cooked and worked in the kitchen. We probably all experience childhood in this way, but at the same time we create a cultural understanding of gender through the subtle messages surrounding us, such as that while both men and women cook, kitchen and cooking are gendered feminine.

During my early adolescence, like most of my peers, I became fashion conscious. I aspired to dress in style and to fit in. I was never quite able to pull it off. When I was in junior high, I had a pair of jeans that caused me problems and sparked a new wave of taunting. When I sat, the jeans would bunch up in front, causing the zippered area to visibly bulge. At the time, we were having our first big sex education sections in health class. All the sex talk combined with my bulging jeans led one of my male classmates to ask me loudly whether I was gay because I was allegedly looking in his direction while sexually aroused. I was completely embarrassed and angered, prompting another magnified moment.

Regardless of my response, I was branded. No longer was I just a nerd, geek, and sissy boy, but I was to become the gay boy of the class. The months that followed were horrendous. Despite assertions to the contrary, no one listened. Being regarded as gay was the worst thing anyone could be branded.

Dating, Sex, and College

In time, I became increasingly aware of dating and sex. However, unlike many of my peers, I did not date. There were some girls who I had crushes on, but given my outsider and stigmatized status, it did not seem likely that I could get a date. The combination of rumors that I was gay, my participation in music, art, and theater, and my academic achievements put me in a tough spot. Socially, I did spend some time with a small group of my classmates, much of it during lunch. It was reassuring to have some bonds with a group of other nerds, sissies, and outsiders of both genders. Few members of this group dated or were sexually active as far as I knew, and we were all disparaged to varying degrees by the "populars."

High school is not an easy journey. It is particularly difficult if you do not adhere to established gender norms. Even though those norms are sometimes unclear, and the ability to cross the borders of gendered behavior is occasionally warranted, there is privilege associated with adhering to normative gender behaviors. In our society, we privilege those who clearly demark their homosexual status by having a romantic partner of the opposite six. This affirms one's gender identity as appropriate. An appropriately masculine male should be emotionally and erotically oriented to appropriately feminine females. Sexuality especially seems to supersede the other gendered markers that we take into account when viewing another person. Had I been more inclined to date or establish a heterosexual relationship in my teen years, perhaps my journey would have been less painful.

College offered me a clean slate on which I hoped to write a new story. After years of being labeled and taunted for not being masculine enough, I found college to be a liberating experience. I had visions of being a new person, a man who would be masculine and free of taunts and labels, someone who would leave behind gender-bending attributes. But I found I could not be anyone other than who I was—a man who enjoyed sewing and quilting, a man who loved to cook, a man who enjoyed art and music, and a man who became immersed in the soap operas the girls would watch at lunch time. College was a world away from the one I had known. Not only was I

no longer picked on, teased, or taunted, but I was finally accepted by my floormates, classmates, instructors, and co-workers. With this new freedom, I became more confident and outgoing. Those unique "non-masculine" activities and interests that had confined me as a youth now worked to my benefit, making me special. I reveled in newfound popularity with my peers and found the obstacles that had impeded dating in the past were now all but gone.

Then and Now

As the years have passed, I have often reflected on my past and contrasted my own experience with that of other men with whom I've spoken. I have realized my parents were far more progressive than I had imagined, providing me with a regular refuge at home to be myself. In our culture, the acceptable expressions of masculinity are quite restrictive, but my parents somehow managed to establish an environment that offered flexibility. My parents are not psychiatrists; they had not even acquired college degrees when I was growing up. But they supported my own, as well as my sibling's, choices to live our lives as we chose, to be the individuals we preferred. I believe it is their acceptance and support that made my childhood successful despite the odds.

Today, I am proud to admit that I still partake in many feminine stereotyped activities. I no longer feel shame for the ways that I challenge the stereotypes of gender. Yes, I am clearly a man. I dress in appropriately masculine clothes. I wear my hair in a masculine style. I am "masculine" in many ways. Yet, I suspect my sexual orientation is often in question. Many may wonder—am I gay or am I straight? Were all those taunts and teases of my youth correct? I actually find this to be humorous, something reflecting the need for clear dichotomies. Perhaps some readers did not question my sexuality as they read this chapter, but I suspect that most did, given the "demasculinizing" title of the chapter and the various masculinity-challenging behaviors exhibited throughout my life. I know that I challenge the conceptions of masculinity in numerous ways, but nearly every man challenges our stereotypical beliefs of masculinity in some manner. In practice, gender for many is an endless range of grays.

Yes, many gay men do express recollections of a childhood in which they experienced masculinity in problematic and stigmatizing manners (Savin-Williams 1998). There also are many gay men who experienced a fairly non-problematic masculine gender identity as they grew up. We see little problem in questioning the experiences of gay men, presuming that somehow their gender inclinations are clear, but we rarely question the gender of heterosexual men whose gender depictions challenge our conceptions of masculinity.

Does it matter? Why do we tie together gender and sexual orientation—are they really the same thing? Don't you, yourself, know individuals whose gendered behavior and depiction do not align with our stereotypical beliefs about homosexuality and heterosexuality? Why do we stigmatize and label the sissy boys of our culture as gay, but are more accepting of tomboys? There are tomboys who grow up to be heterosexual women and there are tomboys who grow up to be homosexual women. The same is true for sissy boys. Is masculinity so much more valuable than femininity? This sissy boy has grown up, and I have been fortunate to find a wonderful person to share my life—a progressive individual like my parents who supports my interests and abilities and loves me for the sissy boy I am.

Summing Up

Based on my own social history, I have examined the experience of growing up as a boy/man who embraces stereotypically feminine activities. Through this autoethnography, some of the complexities of socialization have been examined for those who are different. Looking at the education system, one of the primary socialization environments for youth, we can readily recognize the mechanisms of peer policing and gender regulation, which are further linked with society at large. Individuals who do not adhere to dichotomous definitions of masculinity or femininity are often stigmatized, considered polluted, and suspect. Negative responses often conflate sexuality and gender, whose magnified moments showcase difference.

References

Campenni, C. Estelle. 1999. "Gender Stereotyping of Children's Toys: A Comparison of Parents and Nonparents." *Sex Roles* 40: 121–138.

Carr, C. Lynn. 1998. "Tomboy Resistance and Conformity: Agency in Social Psychological Gender Theory." *Gender & Society* 12: 528–553.

Connell, Robert W. 1995. *Masculinities*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1994. "The Commercial Spirit of Intimate Life and the Abduction of Feminism: Signs from Women's Advice Books." *Theory, Culture & Society* 11: 1–24.

Jordan, Ellen, and Angela Cowan. 1995. "Warrior Narratives in the Kindergarten Classroom: Renegotiating the Social Contract?" *Gender & Society* 9: 727–743.

Lucal, Betsy. 1999. "What It Means to Be Gendered Me: Life on the Boundaries of a Dichotomous Gender System." *Gender & Society* 13: 781–797.

Martin, Carol Lynn. 1995. "Stereotypes about Children with Traditional and Nontraditional Gender Roles." *Sex Roles* 33: 727–751.

Martin, Carol Lynn, and Richard A. Fabes. 2001. Research cited in Marianne Szegedy-Maszak's, "The Power of Gender." *U.S. News & World Report* 130(22): 52.

Messner, Michael. 1992. *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*. Boston: Beacon.

Rogers, Mary F. 1999. *Barbie Culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Savin-Williams, Ritch C. 1998. . . . *And Then I Became Gay: Young Men's Stories*. New York: Routledge.

Thorne, Barrie. 1986. "Girls and Boys Together . . . but Mostly Apart: Gender Arrangements in Elementary Schools." Pp. 167–221 in *Relationships and Development*, edited by W. W. Hartup and Z. Rubin. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Zucker, K. J., D. N. Wilson-Smith, J. A. Kurita, and A. Stern. 1995. "Children's Appraisals for Sex-Typed Behavior in their Peers." *Sex Roles* 33: 703–725.