

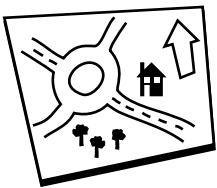
UNCERTAIN MASCULINITIES:

YOUTH, ETHNICITY AND CLASS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

Mike O Donnell and Sue Sharpe

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CONTEXT



There is an increasingly strong trend both in society and in sociology to see boys and men as a problem. The evidence to support this view is strong: they do less well in school, they commit more crime and their suicide rates are high in comparison with females of the same age. Furthermore, the under-performance of males in a whole range of social areas makes many of them poor-value as life partners for women and economically problematic for society as they progress from failure to failure.

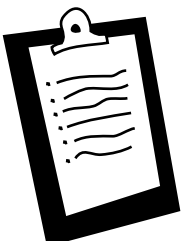
Whilst a large amount has been written about male friendships and male youth culture, much of this work is very dated or is framed within a social context in which males are seen as the dominant and more interesting gender. Furthermore, there is an intense social debate in which masculinity has been claimed to be in crisis due to the challenges issued by the feminist movement and the rise in the social status of women. This type of view is typical of masculinist and right-wing thinking but also has a following among left-wing writers such as Bea Campbell (1993) – who claims that the loss of males from the family has led to an over-aggressive notion of masculinity in young men based on media icons such as Arnold Schwarzenegger in the *Terminator* films.

O'Donnell and Sharpe are therefore exploring masculinity as it is in the context of a process of change and redefinition. They are concerned with the way that young men on the verge of adulthood construct their notions of what it is to be a man in modern society. They further acknowledge that there are a variety of notions of masculinity available to young men that relate to ethnicity and social class. They see that some themes of masculinity are cross-cultural (such as an overwhelming interest in sport and popular culture) but that ethnicity plays a part in shaping male identities.

The aims of the study were to:

- look at key areas of male lives to discover how boys develop an identity that they can conceive of as masculine
- investigate the extent to which men find discovering their own male identities problematical and difficult
- explore the widespread perception that boys are problems for society.

METHODS

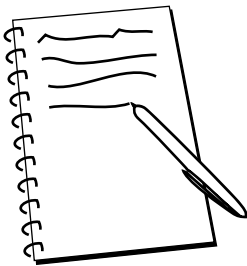


The research was conducted in the mid-1990s. Questionnaires were completed by 262 boys in four London schools. The boys were aged between 15 and 16 and were generally in Year 11. Three of the schools were in Ealing and were the same schools that Sue Sharpe had used as the basis of her 1994 study into femininity. A fourth school from Hackney, a deprived London borough, was added to the sample. The largest ethnic groups in the study were white, African-Caribbean and Asians, including Sikhs and Moslems. There were a variety of boys from different social

classes, but some patterns did emerge: African boys tended to be middle class whereas African-Caribbean boys were more likely to be from working-class homes.

From this initial sample, a further 44 boys were interviewed. Three senior teaching staff were also interviewed. Interviewing techniques would appear to have been largely flexible. In most of the material quoted the interviewer seems to be clarifying the responses of the boys to the line of questioning by simply repeating or rephrasing the previous final statement that the boys had made. This study did not make use of classroom observation and rejected this methodology. The authors suggested that classroom observation studies often lead to accusations of negative labelling of students by teachers, and that few boys actually felt that they were unfairly treated. They also claimed that teachers who do label would, in reality, find themselves disciplined.

KEY FINDINGS



There are five chapters discussing findings, each of which explores an element of masculinity and the lives of the boys who participated in the study.

GENDER AND RACE EQUALITY

Schools were discovered to have strong and visible policies about gender equality, however, despite the equalising effect of the National Curriculum, some gendering of subject choices still occurs. This was particularly significant in the case of sport where football is not just a game but a key part of the creation of a male identity and male culture. Many of the boys were sympathetic to school attempts to support gender equality and race equality in their questionnaires.

Boys seemed to see teachers as 'advocates and enforcers of anti-racism' (p29). Although the researchers were unwilling to discount racism on the part of teachers, racism was more likely to be a feature of peer groups than a feature of the schools studied. Often this racism took the form of unpleasant joking. Racism was not necessarily white on black either; Indian and Pakistani boys engaged in racist behaviour towards each other, with Sikhs and Hindus engaged in conflicts with Moslems. Serious racism occurred outside school and boys would feel vulnerable in neighbourhoods that were not their own.

Some boys were harming themselves through being troublesome and difficult both in school and out of it. However, masculine posturing and macho behaviours were less likely to be aimed at women than at other boys. Many of the boys made statements supporting equality and condemning racism but their daily behaviours showed that what they said and what they did could be different. This is a significant finding of the study – the way that boys were able to hold contradictory attitudes – and is reflected in the word 'uncertain' in the title.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF YOUTHFUL MASCULINITIES

This chapter tends to focus on peer groups and ethnicity in the formation of notions of masculinity. However, the authors note that there are a variety of other factors that influence men in their creation of social identities: class, location and the ethos of the school itself. Sharpe and O'Donnell are at pains to point out that schools operate according to stated anti-racist and anti-sexist policies, and that boys often express these views in school but use a different set of moral values at home and at leisure.

Interestingly, the authors did not discover the strongly developed, class-based anti-school cultures such as those described by Willis (1977) and Hargreaves (1967). The boys usually referred to individual trouble-makers and to one small group that was self styled as the 'underachievers'. Masculinity among boys was still notable because of the desire of boys to dominate social situations. Many boys were confused because they had learned something from the equality agenda but also retained significantly sexist and racist attitudes. The authors claim that these views derive from the home and the media more than they do from the schools, but this remains an unanswered question because the home attitudes were not studied.

MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND RELATIONSHIPS

This is an important chapter in the light of moral panics about the status of marriage in our society. Some interesting social shifts are noted, with boys expecting traditional marriages and having positive views of what marriage will mean for them, and girls being far more cautious in their views about married relationships and less willing than men to consider that they will marry. This leads to male insecurities. Increasingly, there is a less consistent view of what it is to be a man in our society, so men are required to be macho as well as sensitive and caring. This is an uneasy path to tread for a boy, because there are 'contradictions stemming from the continuing power and the increasing fragility of masculinity'. This, the authors feel, accounted for the existence of a clear distinction between the views that the boys expressed and their actual behaviour. Boys who did not express the appropriately masculine norms of the groups were the victims of bullying and homophobia. There was an implicit assumption that sporting types could not be homosexual and that quiet and intelligent boys were prone to homosexuality. Rejection of homosexuality was particularly notable among African and Asian boys.

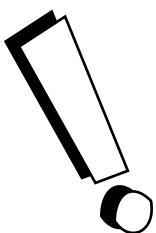
WORK

One of the most significant changes in the structure of British society has been to the type and nature of work. Women are more significant in the workplace and unskilled labour is not needed, so unemployment is high among the unqualified. Boys cannot leave school and be assured of jobs as they once were. They still tend to aim for work that is traditionally seen as male work, but this may be logical since male employment is generally higher paid than female work. There has been a shift from manual labour as the main aspiration of boys, to high-tech occupations such as design or computing. Significantly higher numbers of Asian males chose futures in business and finance. Middle-class boys had higher career aspirations. Boys felt that life is harder for them in terms of employment than it was for their fathers. There are still significant differences in terms of aspiration and employment for boys because of existing social inequalities of class, ethnicity, and gender.

CULTURE, LEISURE AND CRIME

Boys seemed to wish to avoid the world of adults and there is a significant market of clothes and items aimed at the youth market. Masculinity and conceptions of masculinity drive much of the culture of young males and this youth culture feeds on crude images and depictions of aggression, racism and sexism. The edge of much of this material is softened by its presentation as humour. Some boys realised that girls were dismayed by masculine dominant behaviour and interested in sensitivity but this recognition was not enough to put them off crude displays of 'macho'. Boys are attracted to and desire girls, but still need to define themselves as 'not feminine' by rejecting the social changes that females require of them. Men are not adjusting to changes in gender patterns as quickly as women, and their reactions are defensive. Although those reactions are marked by ethnic and class differences, 'laddishness' is a feature of these responses. This, however, is a more gentle and mocking naughtiness than the aggressive posturing of some earlier youth sub-cultures such as the skinheads and punks.

IMPORTANCE



This study has a large sample-frame which makes it reliable and it clearly has a great deal of validity in terms of representing the culture of young men because their words are used so often as supporting evidence. The picture of masculinity offered is one that is more commonplace and recognisable than that normally provided by the intense ethnographic studies of small groups of the disaffected. We have a pen portrait of a generation of men who are adjusting to a world where their traditional rights as males are being challenged, but at the same time where the pace of change is not as fast as some commentators would have us believe.

EVALUATION



This study has a far wider brief than many ethnographic studies. There is less exciting reference to episodes or relationships that the researcher experienced during the research process than in some similar studies, and this gives the material a cooler and more measured feel. The size of the sample offers the opportunity to discuss trends and patterns discovered in the data, but because interviews were used, the voices of the boys can be heard in the discussions.

The authors note that although the boys are slow to respond to some of the social changes occurring as a result of changes in the role of women, the picture is one that is generally positive. It is clear that the authors liked and responded to their subjects but with a degree of emotional detachment that enabled them to present a positive picture of young men. They are able to distance themselves by calling their subjects 'boys' and 'young people'. This language is significant because the sociologists are clearly studying a group of which they are not a part.

The terms of reference are wide ranging and although we are not told how long the questionnaires and interviews took to conduct, they must have been very detailed to elicit the information that was eventually gathered. The findings are not easy to summarise, simply because of their complexity and breadth.

This study is considerably more sympathetic to the aims of schools and of teachers than much sociology over the past twenty years or so. There is a genuine sense that all parties were of interest to the research team and that the voices of those who have some influence over the young were of value to the team. Although not within the scope of the study, it would have been interesting to hear from parents of young men to consider to what extent the views they expressed are generated from their peer groups rather than their homes.



QUESTIONS

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

- 1 Why was it considered necessary to study boys and young men?
- 2 What were the aims of this research?
- 3 How large was the sample frame used by the researchers?
- 4 Suggest reasons why the researchers chose to focus on boys in their final year of compulsory schooling.
- 5 To what extent do schools encourage racism and sexism among young men?
- 6 Suggest reasons why boys are less reluctant than girls to consider conventional married relationships.
- 7 Suggest reasons why such large-scale projects are so difficult for the individual researcher to carry out.

ANALYSIS

- 1 What practical problems did the researchers face in conducting this study?
- 2 Are studies of one gender alone justified in the light of our present sociological understandings of the nature of sexism?
- 3 To what extent can the findings of Sharpe and O'Donnell be considered to be relevant to studies of gender patterns in the early 2000s?
- 4 Evaluate the work of Sharpe and O'Donnell under each of the following headings: practicality, reliability, ethics, validity, and representativeness.

- References** Campbell, B (1993), *Goliath*, Lime Tree, London
Hargreaves, D (1967), *Social Relations in a Secondary School*, Routledge, London
Sharpe, S (1994) *Just Like a Girl*, (second edition), Penguin, Harmondsworth
Willis P (1977), *Learning to Labour*, Ashgate, Aldershot