MASCUINITIES AND WHITENESS:
THE SHAPING OF ADOLESCENT MALE
STUDENTS' SUBJECTIVITIES IN AN
AUSTRALIAN BOYS' SCHOOL

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Murdoch University.
2003
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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June 2003
ABSTRACT

In my thesis I explore ways in which adolescent male students negotiate and interrogate discursive ideologies relating to hegemonic masculinities and to the normality of ‘whiteness’, specifically within one English classroom in an Australian private single sex boys’ school in Perth, Australia. A feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework is employed to explore how gendered and racialized positions available to adolescent males contribute to the shaping of their subjectivities, and how the social constructions of masculinities and femininities contribute to the ways in which adolescent males represent themselves. A qualitative approach, which included classroom observations, questionnaires and interviews, provided me with tools essential for examining the complexities of the effects of social constructs such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity on masculinist positionings at school. The study reveals the complexities surrounding discourses of hegemonic heterosexual masculinities and privileges of whiteness on the situationally specific formation and negotiation of subjectivities in adolescent males’ lives in one school.

Central findings of the study show that adolescent males in this single sex boys’ school easily maintained socially constructed ideas surrounding the feminization of females and masculinization of males, with notions of homophobia embedded in discourses of hegemonic masculinities. A resistance to alternative masculine discourses shows the impact and maintenance of hegemonic heterosexual masculinities for adolescent males. However, through the use of particular texts, female teachers in the all boys’ classroom were able to open up spaces for male students to interrogate hegemonic forms of masculinities, to interrogate power relationships, and to access alternative masculinities. In a similar vein, my findings show how easy it is for students to ignore social injustices in relation to racism and stereotyping of Indigenous Australians, and to retain notions that reinforce these injustices.

A major conclusion of the study is that social injustices are easily maintained through educational institutions as active agents of reinforcing ideas and ideologies, particularly when changes mean disruption of privileges, such as privileges associated with hegemonic masculinity or with whiteness. Although this study was
conducted within a middle class milieu, and thus students were from an advantaged position in life, this does not justify their ignorance of issues of social justice. Indeed, the findings highlight the importance of this kind of critical approach with middle class boys in single sex schools. Important implications of this study are that findings contribute to the discovery of ways of changing deeply ingrained ideologies such as perceived gender dichotomies, the masculinization of males and the feminization of females. My findings also contribute to ways in which privileges, such as the privilege of whiteness, can be deconstructed and interrogated by those in privileged positions. My findings have potential significant implications for pedagogical practices. Education provides a means by which tools can be utilized to deconstruct and interrogate notions which maintain privileges, and in this study particularly white male privileges. Within the educational system, an understanding relating to how subjectivities are shaped within a classroom setting will also lead to greater educational insights into how specific texts and classroom interactions affect students’ self-representation and understanding. Thus a gender equity and social justice curriculum committed to interrogating the ways in which male students subscribe, invest and negotiate hegemonic masculinities is advocated and has particular relevance to those males already in privileged class positions in terms of working towards a more socially just society.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to give special thanks to the teachers, students and the school for their warm welcome and support throughout the period of my research. Although they remain anonymous, their participation was crucial to the direction and focus of my research.

I am extremely grateful to my supervisors, Dr Wayne Martino, Dr Nado Aveling and Associate Professor Jan Currie, for their continual support, encouragement and guidance throughout my study. I also thank them for their on-going challenges through intellectual debate and for their friendship during this long but rewarding journey.

My appreciation is extended to Associate Professor Don Smart, who provided friendship and intellectual exchange particularly during the countless coffee breaks throughout my PhD journey.

Finally, I give special thanks with love to my children, Liam and Esme, for their unconditional support and for just being there.
PREFACE: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE

When I talk to myself now, I talk in English. English is the language in which I’ve become an adult, in which I’ve seen my favorite movies and read my favorite novels, and sung along with Janis Joplin records. In Polish, whole provinces of adult experience are missing. I don’t know Polish words for “microchips,” or “pathetic fallacy,” or The Importance of Being Earnest. If I tried talking to myself in my native tongue, it would be a stumbling conversation indeed, interlaced with English expressions... Occasionally, Polish words emerge unbidden from the buzz. They are usually words from the primary palette of feeling: “I’m so happy” ... The Polish phrases have roundness and a surprising certainty, as if they were announcing the simple truth.

(Hoffman, 1989, p.272)

I begin with a ‘critical autobiography’ (Griffiths, 1995) because I believe that including the status, site and position of a speaker is important within any specific context. As a female from a non-English speaking background, I am researching and writing on masculinities and whiteness in a multicultural society. My life experiences led to a distancing of my own language and culture similar to that of Hoffman’s exposition (above) through assimilation into the English language. I found that some of the students in my research made similar complex journeys. The significance of my personal story is that I was brought up within a dominant masculinist, Eurocentric schooling system where there were often little or no allowances for differences. My understanding of differences was experienced through living in and among various cultures around the world and, although my understanding was enhanced through these experiences, I also feel that it is crucial not to trivialize different lived realities. Coming from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, I grew up simultaneously with and interweaving between two cultures. Expectations from these two cultures were equally important, but sometimes contradictory and at other times complementary.

I grew up in England in a large Polish family with five brothers and one sister. The values reinforced while I was growing up were that academic and professional
success was important for males whereas success for females was confined to private spheres. Males often experienced privileges, while females often experienced invisibility and insignificance, a situation that strengthened notions relating to the dichotomous nature of gender. Moreover, it appeared that 'white' Anglo males remained empowered with more privileges and significance than other males. I felt there remained a need to disrupt the continual reinforcement of normalized values in society, and a need to acknowledge and be critically aware of the hegemonic masculinist society in a manner that would lead to greater social justice.

As a single parent family, my two children and I are fairly recent migrants to Australia. Arriving in Perth, after spending approximately sixteen years travelling and living in many parts of the world, I suddenly found myself in a fragile, vulnerable position, because of my new situation. Separating from my (now ex-) husband, the disadvantages of being a female and a single mother became obvious. Following a lifetime of being categorized as a father's daughter, a brother's sister, a husband's wife, or a son's mother, there was also a struggle to find 'me'. The structure of society appeared to advantage males. Female roles of motherhood are often at the expense of work experience resulting in far-reaching consequences. Marriage itself is a power relationship (see for example Dempsey, 1997; MacInnes, 1998). The divorce process revealed how easily females became disadvantaged, with the structure of society reinforcing these disadvantages. For example, divorced females, particularly if they are also mothers, are often immediately disadvantaged due to lack of paid work experience. In addition to the emotional upheaval, for females there is also a "downward mobility ... that commonly follows divorce" (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner, 1994, p.206). If changes are to be made to improve gender equity in such areas in society, then males need to be included and to be part of the solution.

My experiences were significant to the 'choices' I made, although the use of the word choices does not clarify to what extent choices are possible in reality. For example, once I was married, and more significantly once I had children, my real choices were reduced substantially. Thus I find it necessary to explore to what extent research is coloured by experiences. Nothing can be objective. Experiences are contextual so that for this research, for me, it was within the context of Australia. A pertinent example of how experiences are significant relates to my own children, a girl and a boy, who until migrating to Australia exhibited no prevailing notions that female toys were different to male toys and they played with 'their' toys. A
favourite, vivid image that comes to mind is of one warm and sunny Saturday afternoon at an international school where my older child attended. My (at the time) seven-year-old playing baseball while my (at the time) three-year-old was, with a friend, pushing a ‘baby’ doll in a pram around one of the playing fields. This scene was not in any way perceived unusual by the large crowds around this school. However, my seven-year-old playing baseball was a girl, and my three-year-old and the friend playing with the ‘baby’ were both boys.

Another related image that springs to mind—again contextual—is when very suddenly at the age of eight, very shortly after settling down in Australia, my son refused to play with certain toys because his ‘new’ friends considered them as girls’ toys. In a parallel vein, my daughter (then aged twelve) suddenly was made to feel she was no longer ‘good’ at science and thus she ‘decided’ she would no longer continue with science subjects at school although her up-until-then interests were always in the science area. I was able to help my daughter in this instance, partly through changing schools and moving her to a single sex girls’ school where she was encouraged to pursue science subjects. Greater encouragement enabled her to continue her education into university, receive a first class honours degree in genetics and thus enter employment in the scientific research field. However, these and other similar experiences led me to ask myself: was my son becoming a boy and my daughter becoming a girl as conceptualized\(^1\) within Australian society? Why were issues like this so important to get ‘right’ within school and with their peers? It appeared that my children were not too concerned about their ‘reality’, but wanted to fit in with dominant discourses and expectations of being a ‘boy’, a ‘girl’, or an ‘Australian’, even though they did not initially fit the ‘mould’.

My choices to send my children to private schools in Australia led to unanswered questions as to why my own children ‘fitted’ in private schools better than state schools. By sending them to private schools did I become “part of the problem and not the solution” (Cochran-Smith, 1995, p.85)? I moved my son to a private boys’ school because he would receive many academic, sporting and social advantages, which he was not receiving at a state school. Yet I understand that this presented me with a dilemma: I did not want him disadvantaged but how could I ensure that he obtained benefits yet also understood the power embedded and reproduced in

\(^1\) My hybrid background led to my hybrid spelling. I use mainly English Australian spelling with a sprinkling of Americanisms, for example the use of z instead of s in words like ‘conceptualize’ and ‘analyze’. Is this the result of my migration patterns, global media or American hegemony? I leave this speculation to the readers to determine.
schools. As Arcana (1983, p.2) recognizes, “whether we choose to challenge the power structure or not, we all can see it”. Accepting normative male cultures of private boys’ schools and accepting the associated privileges as unproblematic, reinforces hegemonic masculinist discourses. My experiences led me to believe that one site where the interruption of hegemonic discourses—which reinforce advantages for specific groups of males—can be effectively addressed is at a private boys’ school at a site where hegemonic masculinist culture is often normalized.

I find subjective and autobiographical accounts to be significant in research. These accounts form the basis of research, what is chosen to write about, and the approach used during the research process. My own background played a significant role in my approach and choice of research. My early experiences as an ‘other’ and as living on the margins or the borders of dominant cultures played a significant role in the development of my ideas and thoughts and in how I have come to view ‘the world’. For example, I was part of an ethnic minority during my school life in England and entered school speaking Polish. However, I was expected to learn to read, write and speak English in a school culture that required children to work quietly and not speak in the classroom. On the other hand, I also experienced living in many ‘non-white’ countries where again I was one of a ‘minority’ but in a ‘privileged’ position as an expatriate. This life-style meant that I experienced many different school cultures, both as a teacher and as a parent where, during their school-lives, my daughter attended nine different schools around the world and my son attended six different schools. Throughout my life I moved between different cultures, and through my writing I am able to interweave between significant theoretical perspectives to negotiate a space of my own. My story, however, is not only embedded in my history, but also in other people’s stories, so that the story I tell is historically situated and is only one fragment of a whole.
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