

## The Cultural Production of English Masculinities in Late Modernity

*Máirtín Mac an Ghail*

Students enter schools today amid difficult, rapid social change, their sexuality and gender partly formed by family, peers, and the media. We are only beginning to understand the complex articulation between schooling, wider learning networks, and sexual/gender subjectivities. Current empirical and theoretical work in masculinity, sexuality, and education in England enables us to go beyond critiques of the New Right and re-engage critically with emerging social democratic models of education and to reconnect education with wider theoretical debates in the social sciences and political movements in civil society.

Aujourd'hui, les jeunes entrent à l'école dans une période difficile, marquée par des changements sociaux rapides; leur perception de la sexualité et du sexe est déjà partiellement formée par leur famille, leurs pairs et les médias. Nous ne faisons que commencer à comprendre la jonction complexe entre l'école, les réseaux plus vastes d'apprentissage et les subjectivités ayant trait à la sexualité et au sexe. Les travaux théoriques et empiriques actuels sur la masculinité, la sexualité et l'éducation en Angleterre nous permettent de dépasser les critiques de la nouvelle droite, de réanalyser de façon éclairée les nouveaux modèles d'éducation de la démocratie sociale et de relier l'éducation aux débats théoriques plus vastes suscités par les sciences sociales et les mouvements politiques dans la société civile.

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State schooling, child-centred pedagogy, and anti-racist and anti-sexist interventions are central elements of the modernist project, which is informed by such values as collectivism, humanism, rational progression, and social justice. In "radicalised modernity" (Giddens, 1991), critical theorists are no longer sure what schools are for. We are a long way from the post-war education settlement in England. Earlier radical attempts to reconstruct a "common culture curriculum" have been important in providing an alternative to mainstream conceptions of schooling. However, we are now more aware that social oppression in state schools is multifaceted and historically contingent. We are also more aware that schools contain contradictions, ambiguities, and tensions tied to a severe long-term economic and industrial recession. Weeks (1990) captures the current dilemmas for progressive theorists:

[T]here are difficulties for the Left in an all-embracing humanism. As a philosophical position it may be a good starting point. But it really does not tell us how to deal with difference . . . If ever-growing social complexity, cultural division and proliferation of identities are indeed a mark of the postmodern world, then all the appeals to our common interest as humans will be as naught unless we can at the same time learn to live with difference. This should be the crux of modern debates about values. (p. 92)

The Left's material and ideological gains in society are important when historical amnesia resulting from a collective lack of confidence prevails among progressive activists. In response to reductionist accounts of schooling in terms of class, gender and "race" moved to the centre of education debates in the 1970s and 1980s. Questions of sexuality were not similarly taken up. More recently, even where the academy has focused on sexuality — for example, in gay and lesbian studies and queer studies — schools have tended not to be seen as a key site of intervention. This neglect of the study of sexuality in schools can be seen as part of a wider process that desexualizes schools. It is also important to see sexuality not "simply" as personal but as part of the "bigger political picture." The role of the state is particularly significant.

#### THE PATRIARCHAL STATE AND STATE SCHOOLING POLICY

Connell (1987, 1990) has written extensively on the patriarchal state's key functions of sexual regulation and the "generation of sexual order through the legislative production of categories" (1990, p. 509). At the same time, as Ballard (1992) points out, Connell stresses the need to maintain a complex view of state action as it inevitably produces "conflicting rationalities" (p. 106). Stacey (1991) explores this non-determinative perspective of the patriarchal state in England, especially as expressed by Section 28 of the Local Government Act:

The construction of sexuality in Thatcher's Britain must be seen as a constant struggle, where the attempts to control and repress produce the opposite effects. The challenge to Section 28 [which prohibits the "promotion of homosexuality" by organizations funded by local authorities] and the cultural and political activity which surround its opposition took place on an unanticipated scale. Had the initiators of the section had any idea of the extent of the response they would meet, they may have thought twice before proposing a piece of legislation to ban the promotion of homosexuality which achieved just the opposite. (p. 303)

The rise of the New Right in the 1980s gave the moral high ground to its agenda and to atavistic representations of a consumer-based acquisitive

individualism, the patriarchal family, the strong state, and a patriarchic British nation. Kelly (1992) captures very well the background to this New Right moralism:

What the last decade has demonstrated is the skill of small groupings within the Conservative party to exploit local controversies, generate enormous media support and have MPs then respond with speedy legislative fixes — a number of these local controversies have been initially located in education and have focused on sexuality and race. Each of these interventions has fed a specific construction of family and nation that lies at the heart of the New Right philosophy: their creation of a “traditional way of life,” which they then become defenders of. (p. 22)

Over the last decade, schools and more specifically sex education policy have been key sites for New Right cultural restorationist attempts to impose their version of how we should live. England’s Local Government Act (1988) and Education Acts (1986, 1988, 1992) reinforced the exclusion from discussion of forms of sexual expression other than familial heterosexuality. Schools’ responses to sexual issues have also been highly circumscribed by wider moral prescriptions. Lees (1994) examines those behind current education debates, citing an incident in which a teacher responded to students’ questions about oral sex. The incident prompted then-Secretary of Education John Patten to demand that teachers “deal with precocious questions outside class provided they had consulted with parents” (Lees, 1994, p. 282). She points out that Department for Education guidelines for sex education published in May 1994 stress “that sex education be presented in a moral context, promoting marriage and fidelity” (p. 282). As of now, the new Labour government has not signalled any intention to make a fundamental shift from the ideological legacy of the New Right.

#### SCHOOLING: INDIVIDUALIZED, INVISIBLE, AND PRIVATIZED (HETERO)SEXUALITY

Schools treat student sexuality as a latent by-product of emerging adult status. When it breaks into the public arena, it is conceptualized as natural and normal. Wolpe (1988) reported teacher responses when a group of secondary school boys sexually harassed a girl in a corridor. Their behaviour was (re)defined by one teacher in terms of normative sexual development: “Our reaction should just show disapproval. Touching up girls is very normal” (p. 138). Hence, the incident was not subject to disciplinary measures. At the same time, sexuality in school remains in the private sphere, reflecting a popular conception of sexuality as “special” or “exceptional” and drawing on essentialist conceptions of sexuality as individual. All expressions of sexual desire are thought to be physiologically based and so acquire a single normative value. As part of the desexualizing

of schooling, certain areas of the curriculum are sexualized. Health Education and Personal and Social Education become one limited curriculum space in which sex is officially discussed. However, sexuality is discussed in schools in terms of a problem, a biological fact, and/or a guilty secret. It often remains abstract, and desire is off the agenda (see Fine, 1988). The visibility of sex remains highly regulated within an ideology of familial heterosexuality.

In contrast, critical theorists suggest that sexuality in schools is all-pervasive, manifest in teacher-student relations (Skeggs, 1991), student-student relations (Mac an Ghail, 1994b), disciplinary practices, teacher typifications, and the curriculum (Wolpe, 1988). For example, sex and sexuality appear in an extensive repertoire of student-student interactions including name-calling, flirting, classroom disruption, harassment of girls, homophobic abuse, playground conversations, desk-top graffiti, and dress codes. These wide-ranging school activities are central in making available to students the hegemonic and subordinate sexual subject positions they come to occupy.

Equally important, cultural theorists identify sexuality as part of a wider schooling process, which re-conceptualizes sexuality as a key element of a public agenda that structures school experiences (see, for example, Frank, 1993). Presenting sexuality as enmeshed in a set of power relations, rather than individualizing sexuality, highlights domination and subordination. Stressing that sexuality is part of a process suggests that sexual oppression, violence, and discrimination are everyday phenomena and not confined to extraordinary incidents or specific parts of the curriculum. Sexual power relations are an inherent part of everyday schooling experiences. The sexual harassment of subordinated groups illustrates how these experiences embody normalized hegemonic masculine (hetero)sexualities.

Throughout the 1980s, feminist studies of the sexual politics of the curriculum provided invaluable insights into the structural and phenomenological conditions that underpin girls' differential schooling experiences (Brittan & Maynard, 1984) and a critique of class reductionist accounts that makes patriarchy a central constituent of female schooling experience. Lesbian and gay theorists have argued that sexuality is a key element in the construction of our identity, both internally, as a significant dimension of the self, and externally, as a social category imbued by others with cultural expectations and as a primary marker of difference. There is much evidence in lesbian and gay literature of the physical, psychological, and verbal abuse that lesbian and gay people systematically experience in homophobic and heterosexist societies. However, except for Trenchard and Warren's (1984) study of gay and lesbian young people's experiences of schooling, little has been written on this form of sexual oppression in schools. In

contrast, during the late 1980s there was increased recognition of the school's crucial role for female students in relation to sex and sexuality, highlighting their relative lack of power in the sexual economy (Jones & Mahony, 1989; Wolpe, 1988). For Holly (1989, p. 5), relationships between teachers and students can be understood in terms of sexualized exchanges. By sexualizing relationships, teachers control students. Wolpe (1988) too identified ways that teachers can act paternally and familiarly to get female students to do what they want them to do. These studies expose the sexual politics of the curriculum, more specifically, the underpinning patriarchal, heterosexist, and homophobic values that systematically close off sexual diversity and choice. Feminist studies established that female students and teachers experience widespread sexual harassment. There is a growing awareness of how heterosexual males use sexuality to control and subordinate females. It is argued that schools reflect wider social divisions inside a sexual dynamic based on ideological constructions of normalized male and female sexualities. However, much of this work remained undertheorized, often maintaining a split between gender and sexuality in which the latter is included within the former.

At the same time, a number of studies have suggested the need to examine how men experience masculinity and the ways it is problematic for them (see Metcalf & Humphries, 1985). Askew and Ross (1988) assessed the formation of young men's subjectivities, focussing specifically on their experience of pressures in school to be male. In much of this work, however, the dynamics of the curriculum's sexual politics are also inadequately analyzed because of a failure to focus on male sexual subjectivities. My own studies illustrate the ambiguities, contradictions, and confusions that surround male sexuality and in particular sexual desire. There is an urgent need to explore "sexuality and its discontents" for heterosexual male and female students (Mac an Ghaill, 1994b).

#### HETEROSEXUAL FEMININITIES/MASCULINITIES: POWER AND DESIRE

More recently, feminist and queer theorists drawing on poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies have provided new ways to think about the formation of sexual subjectivities (Dollimore, 1991; Frank, 1993; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984; Kitzinger, 1990; Sedgwick, 1991). This work has made visible the complexities surrounding sexual desire and has highlighted the need to analyze together the social and psychic structures through which individuals make sense of their sexual realities. Writing of the current discourses that offer subject positions, Hollway (1984) identified three major ones — the "male sex drive discourse," the "have/hold discourse," and the "permissive discourse" — and

using the concept of “investment” to refer to a process of making the self, examined why individual heterosexual men invest in one rather than another. She suggests that investments signal affiliation with subject positions that bring rewards. This investment is not always conscious: It may be submerged or out of reach of rationality. Some positions have more power than do others, and some are less accessible than others. For example, by taking on the oppressive male sex drive discourse, a male is able to construct for himself and demonstrate to others his masculinity and his heterosexuality. She suggests that individuals occupy available subject positions because they help to resolve unconscious conflicts, albeit partially and temporarily. Her work highlights the difficulty of deconstructing heterosexuality at the school level, where individuals have complex social and psychic investments in dominant discourses of sexuality (see also Buchbinder, Burstgu, Forbes, & Steedman, 1987; Valverde, 1985).

In contrast to Hollway, who sees psychic structures as affiliations, Butler (1993) emphasizes rejecting certain subject positions in order to become a particular subject. Appropriating Lacan’s (1977) notion of identification, Butler argues that identifications are complex processes which address simultaneously fear and desire. By repudiating particular identities, one can form one’s own identity. Embedded in identification is repudiation. Identifications are thus made through a process of disidentification. “Identifications, then, can ward off certain desires or act as vehicles for desire; in order to facilitate certain desires it may be necessary to ward off others; identification is the site at which this ambivalent prohibition and production of desire occurs” (Butler, 1993, p. 100). The contradictory elements in this “logic of repudiation” are reconciled: The construction of identity requires some awareness of “not being” as a significant sign of “being.” Dollimore (1991) termed this the “perverse dynamic”: Identities that claim legitimacy have to legitimate other identities to consolidate their own. The rejection of femininity by males who use their sexuality as a means of control also reflects male uneasiness with female sexuality. Within sexual cultures, amplification of particular masculine traits makes possible disidentification with those elements, and definition and stabilization of people’s own identities.

These theoretical accounts were of particular value in the theory-led empirical research my colleagues and I have conducted. Seeking a framework for exploring sexuality in schools, we examined the constitutive cultural elements of heterosexual secondary-school male students’ subjectivities (Mac an Ghaill, 1994b). These elements consisted of contradictory forms of compulsory heterosexuality, misogyny, and homophobia and were marked by contextual ambivalence and contingency. The focus of our research was the complex interplay of these institutionally specific forms

of gendered and sexual power, more particularly, how they operated in key defining processes in sexual boundary maintenance and in policing and legitimizing male heterosexual identities. Understanding how students learned the sexual/gender codes that conferred hegemonic masculinity required bringing together social and psychic structures. Butler (1993) points out that heterosexuality does not gain its form by virtue of its internal qualities but rather defines itself in contrast with abjected (dissonant) sexualities, particularly homosexuality. Especially salient was how heterosexual male students were involved in simultaneously traducing the “other,” including women and gays (external relations), and expelling femininity and homosexuality from within themselves (internal relations). By these complex and contradictory processes, heterosexual male student apprenticeships were developed in secondary schools (Mac an Ghail, 1994a). A group of dominant heterosexual males rejected those males who concentrated on their schoolwork, redefining them as gay and “poncy.” Disidentification with them enabled the heterosexual males to establish their own identities.

Examining male compulsory heterosexuality, misogyny, and the masculine processes of dissociation from femininity, Arnot (1984) argues that in a male-dominated society femininity is ascribed, whereas masculinity and manhood have to be “achieved in a permanent process of struggle and confirmation” (p. 145). Externally and internally, males must attempt to reproduce themselves as powerful in social circumstances that they do not control. Haywood (1993) gives an example of the problematic nature of male power. Each afternoon, Colin and Nik, two sixth-form students, hid the school bag belonging to Louise (a female student).<sup>1</sup> Louise was forced to search for her bag, as Nik and Colin stood by, watching. Louise would find her bag, usually above the ceiling tiles or hanging out the window. Once found, the bag was immediately taken from her and held out of reach as the male students continued to tease her. Initially Louise humoured the male students, but she became more angry each day, which in turn gave more scope for the male students’ humour. Eventually, the start of the next lesson would prompt the return of the bag. The teacher appeared to remain ignorant of these incidents and on one occasion reprimanded Louise for standing on chairs as she tried to retrieve her bag. Haywood said that the male students involved and those who stood around saw this behaviour as flirting, an attempt to get close to females. Initially, this seems wrong: The main motivation was to make Louise reciprocate their sexual interest, whereas Louise increasingly resented their behaviour. But Colin and Nik did project heterosexually competent and capable masculinity. Like many male students in the sixth form, they could not show their interest directly because rejection and failure were seen as too great a threat. However, they

could make their desire inadvertently visible, and one way to do this was through misogynous responses to female students. They displaced their anxieties and took on masculine attributes by controlling a female and displaying their supremacy. By not publicly articulating their desire, they remained in control.

This incident also raises questions concerning Louise's position in relation to dominant forms of heterosexual masculinity. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1992), among others, have explored the complexity and contradictions of female heterosexualities and noted young women's limited contesting of the normalization of masculinity through compulsory heterosexuality (Jones & Mahony, 1989). In her study of White and Black young women, Griffin (1985) found that heterosexuality was experienced as a freely chosen sexual preference: It was seen as "natural" and inevitable. Alternatives (e.g., bisexuality, celibacy, and lesbianism) were seen as "deviant, abnormal, and pathological" (p. 59). Recent work in schools reveals similar comments, with some middle-class young women discussing lesbianism as a "passing phase, sometimes chosen by women when they are between male partners" (Mac an Ghail, 1994b). Female students have reported that lesbianism is never mentioned in school lessons, whereas informally "lezzie" is a major term of abuse. Cockburn (1987) described the discursive power of the term in young women's self-policing of sexual boundaries:

Beyond "slag" [boring] and "drag" [promiscuous] of course is another damaging label that can be attached to the girl who steps out of line: that of lesbian. It appears that it is only since the emergence of the new women's movement and active politicised lesbianism in the 1970s that "lezzie" has become a term of abuse in school culture. Now "lezzie" has joined "poofter" in the lexicon of insults used in classroom and playground. The universal slur on lesbians drives homosexual feelings underground, makes attachment to men compulsory and makes close and enduring friendships between girls difficult. (p. 41)

However, these theorists suggest, it is important not to present an overly deterministic picture of female students' lives in school. For example, writing of the racialization and class-specific nature of compulsory heterosexuality for young women, Griffin (1993) emphasizes that "despite the institutional, cultural and ideological force of such definitions, young women continue to 'deviate' from the straight and narrow path, to forge their own routes through the traps laid by heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood, to challenge and subvert 'common-sense' definitions of 'normality' and 'deviance' " (pp. 241–242).

Recent theoretical work provides a comprehensive critique of the underlying assumptions and contradictions of anti-oppressive curriculum change. These include an insistence on the complexity of identity formation



in different sexual cultures; the reconceptualization of power relations to include seeing them as productive as well as repressive; a critique of narrowly rationalist approaches that serve to exclude will, feeling, emotional responses, repression, displacement, and irrationality; and the need for a subtler, more open, and inclusive understanding of the interconnection of different forms of oppression in local contexts such as schools, staffrooms, classrooms, and playgrounds. This recent theorizing about sexuality could usefully inform curriculum in masculinity and sex/sexuality education.

#### MASCULINITY AND SEX/SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Sex/sexuality education is underresearched. Meredith (1989) maintains that the classroom remains almost totally hidden in sex education. Most studies of sex education have adopted a quantitative analysis, focussing on measuring effectiveness (Allen, 1987; Farrell, 1978). More recently, a few qualitative studies have been carried out (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Mac an Ghail, 1991). In them, students suggest that sexual issues are ever-present in schools but that this is not necessarily recognized by teachers. Furthermore, much evidence suggests that traditional conceptions of male and female sexuality inform sex education, acting as a means of social control (Fine, 1988).

Feminist theory enables us to go beyond the historical sex/gender essentialism and determinism of sex-role theory to acknowledge that young people cannot simply be constructed with the ideology of the day. Connell (1987, pp. 173–174) and Arnot (1984) have persuasively argued that biology-based and sex-role theories are inadequate to explain the complex social and psychological processes in the development of sexual/gendered subjectivities in the context of institutional and wider material powers. Such work critiques the dominant theoretical and “common-sense” discourses of sex/gender differences that underpin much sex education in schools, education that often takes for granted definitions of femininity and masculinity as ahistorical, unitary, universal, and unchanging categories.

Within sex-role theory, the conventional approach, which shapes much sex education, erases issues of sexuality by including sexuality within gender. In contrast, Butler (1993) suggests that the discourse of gender is often a “heterosexual matrix” with heterosexuality presupposed in “real forms of masculinity and femininity” (see also Davies, 1993; Skeggs, 1991):

Although forms of sexuality do not unilaterally determine gender, a non-causal and non-reductive connection between gender and sexuality is nevertheless crucial to maintain. Precisely because homophobia often operates through the attribution of

a damaged, failed or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals, that is, calling gay men “feminine” or calling lesbians “masculine,” and because the homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts, where it exists, is often also a terror over losing gender (“no longer being a real or proper man” or “no longer being a real or proper woman”), it seems crucial to retain a theoretical apparatus that will account for how sexuality is regulated through the policing and the shaming of gender. (p. 238)

Butler provides a useful framework for exploring the interconnectedness of gender and sexuality in schools both inside and outside sex-education lessons. The attributes of a “real boy”/“real girl” in the hegemonic forms of masculinity/femininity in schools are crucial in policing the boundaries of heterosexuality and “proper” masculinity/femininity. For example, to be a “real boy” is publicly to oppose and to distance oneself from the feminine and “feminized” versions of masculinity. At an institutional level, student identities are shaped by categories made available in the academic/vocational, arts/science, and academic/sporting divisions of the formal curriculum. These categories have a history of being highly gendered, with the “soft feminine” academic and arts subjects opposed to the “hard masculine” vocational, scientific, and sporting options. So, involvement in sport can be a cultural index of a “real boy”; not to be involved in sport and the subculture associated with “being one of the lads [boys]” is to be a “bit of a poof,” an expression which, in “denoting lack of guts, suggests femininity — weakness, softness and inferiority” (Lees, 1987, p. 180).

Sexualized and racialized terms such as “poof,” “lezzie,” and “paki” are key discursive resources in homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality in schools (Cockburn, 1987). However, important contradictions affect lesbians and gays. Complex contingencies exist in how social relations of gender, sexuality, age, class, “race,” and ethnicity combine and interact at the school level. In our study of Asian and African-Caribbean gay students (Brah, Hickman, & Mac an Ghail, 1999; Mac an Ghail, 1994a), students discussing the links between institutional and male peer-group surveillance, regulation, and control of female and male gender and sex reputations expressed surprise at how male teachers and students conflated assumed gay behaviour with femininity to traduce the former. As one said, “the worst thing a teacher could call a boy was a girl.” The identification of non-macho masculine behaviour with feminine behaviour was most evident in the ubiquitous term “poof.” Furthermore, students linked this form of “gay-bashing” to “paki-bashing.” Both poof and paki have several meanings: Sometimes they have a specific sexual or racial connotation, other times they are general terms of abuse. The notoriety and frequency of these labels made them major mechanisms for policing gender and sexual boundaries, with specific implications for Asian and African-

Caribbean heterosexual and gay young people. Further work is needed to explore how a school's race relations simultaneously "speak" gender and sexuality (for example, the way in which to be a paki is also to be a poof, a non-proper boy).

#### CONCLUSION

There is a danger, in these recent theoretical debates, of reconstructing new limiting binary positions: On the one hand, we are enjoying New Times, in which we should be celebrating the plurality of new diverse identities; on the other hand, recent cultural and economic changes are better explained within the logic of late capitalism and its attendant social exclusions (Jameson, 1991; Mac an Ghail, 1999). We need to reconnect schools to these wider theoretical debates in the social sciences. Equally importantly, we need to reconnect to old and new social movements outside the academy to explore the conditions for bringing about social and political change.

For example, since the early 1990s we have had theoretical frameworks enabling us to analyze systematically and document coherently the material, social, and discursive production of sexualities (Butler, 1990; Dollimore, 1991; Weeks, 1990). These frameworks reveal a tension between materialist, deconstructive, and psychoanalytic critiques of sexual/gendered identity formation. In materialist accounts, gender and sexuality are viewed as power relations. In contrast, deconstructive accounts emphasize that the living of sexual/gender categories and divisions is more contradictory, fragmented, shifting, and ambivalent than the dominant public definitions of these categories suggest. And psychoanalytic accounts offer highly productive explanations of the complex psychic investments that individuals have in dominant sexual and gendered discourses (Butler, 1993; Klein, 1948) and illustrate the limits of narrowly rationalist accounts of sexual politics that fail to acknowledge that what we *feel* is as important as what we *know* in the maintenance of dominant gendered and heterosexual discourse and social practices. Sex/gender categories can also be seen as shaped by and shaping the processes of colonization, racism, class hegemony, male domination, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression.

In short, sexuality can be seen as a crucial point of intersection of different forms of power, stratification, desire, and subjective identity formation (Mac an Ghail, 1994a). I have found recent theoretical debates between materialist, deconstructionist, and psychoanalytic accounts of masculinity and sexuality of particular value in my empirical research: Without resolving the contradictions between them, I have held on to the tensions in an attempt to provide a framework to explore sex and sexuality in schools.

## NOTE

1. Participants' names are fictitious.

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