Asian and White Boys' Competing Discourses About Masculinity: Implications for Secondary Education

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Research examining boys' notions of masculinity is on the rise, but little attention has been given to those of Asian Canadian boys. This interview-based study explores 10 Asian and White high school boys' discussions about masculinity in the context of their gender, culture, and "race." Feminist poststructuralist analysis reveals these boys' complex negotiations with hegemonic masculinity and suggests that gender, culture, and "race" play a significant role in considerations of masculinity. These boys' discussions challenge hegemonic notions of masculinity and have implications for secondary education, particularly boys' schooling.

Les recherches sur les notions de masculinité chez les garçons se multiplient, mais peu d'attention a été accordée aux garçons canadiens d'origine asiatique. Cette étude fondée sur des entrevues explore des discussions entre 10 élèves du secondaire, blancs ou asiatiques, de sexe masculin sur la masculinité dans le contexte du sexe, de la culture et de la « race ». L'analyse féministe poststructuraliste révèle les négociations complexes de ces garçons avec la masculinité hégémonique et laisse entendre que le sexe, la culture et la « race » jouent un rôle important dans les considérations relatives à la masculinité. Les discussions entre ces garçons remettent en question les notions hégémoniques de la masculinité et ont des implications pour l'enseignement au secondaire, surtout auprès des garçons.

In recent years, feminist and other scholars have begun to examine topics such as masculinity (Connell, 1995; Segal, 1990), sexuality, and boys' schooling (Connell, 1996; Frank, 1994, 1996; Jackson & Salisbury, 1996; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). This research shows that an aggressive male heterosexuality went unchallenged in Canadian, American, English, and Australian secondary schools. Studies of boys' masculinity have focused primarily on White working-class (Connell, 1989) or White middle- and upper-class (Frank, 1994, 1996) boys' notions of manhood. A few empirical studies of masculinity have looked at South Asian boys' understandings of manhood (Mac an Ghaill, 1994) and adult Asian men's experiences with masculinity (Chen, 1999; Cheng, 1999). However, little attention has been paid to how teenage boys, in particular Asian boys, make sense of their masculinity.[1]

This article helps fill the gap by exploring how the discourses about masculinity of a small sample of Asian and White boys are mediated by their gender, culture, and "race."[2] My feminist poststructuralist analysis reveals the complexity of these boys' negotiations with hegemonic masculinity. For instance, all the boys challenged the hegemonic masculinity perpetuated in Canada and the United States. Some also articulated their struggles with this dominant notion. For certain Asian boys, the transition between acting as a hegemonic male and resisting this masculine role was somewhat influenced by their cultural understandings of gender. By contrast, for the Canadianized Asian boy and his White peers, relationships with hegemonic masculinity were determined largely by their efforts to establish their masculinity in terms of their heterosexuality. The themes emerging from this analysis have significant implications for boys' secondary schooling.

THEORIZING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

According to feminist and other scholars, masculinity is historically and socially constructed (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Segal, 1990). The form practiced by the dominant group in a culture is called "hegemonic masculinity" (Cheng, 1999; Connell, 1996). Because other forms of masculinity can coexist with it, a boy can draw on multiple masculinities in his efforts to develop his identity both as an individual and as a male. Connell (1996) asserts that although the hegemonic form of masculinity may be what many boys aspire to achieve, it is not necessarily talked about or practiced by most boys.

The current construction of hegemonic masculinity in North America is characterized by male heterosexuality and physical, social, and economic power (Connell, 1995; Segal, 1990). This version legitimizes White heterosexual men's dominance over women, gay men, and ethnic minorities (Connell, 1995, p. 77), making femininity and marginalized masculinities inferior. Several White boys in my study stated that speaking and acting aggressively towards girls and other boys was an important way to display masculinity. Thus boys' "performance" of manhood is validated when they dominate others through their talk and practices.

Several feminist scholars have written about the power of these "commonsense" discourses (Miller, 1993; Weedon, 1997). For instance, Miller (1993) asserts that "commonsense discourses [are] descriptions of reality that 'go without saying' . . . and give people ways to understand the world" (p. 361). She believes that the "hegemonic power" of everyday discourses, such as those about masculinity, stems from their being seen as "unchallengeable, natural orders." A few Asian and White boys in my

study identified male heterosexual prowess, a significant part of hegemonic masculinity, as a rarely disputed standard of masculinity. Their discussions revealed their active attempts to negotiate with dominant discourses about manhood.

My feminist poststructuralist analysis recognizes that boys are active in their resistance or conformity to hegemonic masculinity (Davies, 1993), that masculinity has multiple meanings, and that the category of "boys" is problematic due to boys' cultural and social differences (Davies, 1993). So, boys draw on different and often competing discourses about masculinity. There were differences between Asian and White boys' talk about masculinity as well as differences within both cultural groups. Feminist poststructuralism presents masculinity as socially constructed and mediated by gender, culture, "race,"and class. For instance, in many Asian cultures, public expressions of one's sexuality are perceived as causing shame or dishonour to the family, and several U.S. studies found that many Asian American teenagers are aware of their parents' expectations and the importance of tradition and self-discipline (Chan, 1994). Because feminist poststructuralism suggests that young men formulate their ideas and expressions of masculinity in part according to the cultural options available to them, it is necessary to examine their culture to understand fully the meanings they attach to masculinity. Feminist poststructuralism further acknowledges that not all individuals have access to alternative, nonhegemonic discourses (Weedon, 1997). Hegemonic discourses about masculinity pervade North American culture — including school texts and talk — and limit boys' and girls' understanding of gender. Feminist poststructuralist analysis can explain where Asian and White boys' notions of masculinity manifest themselves in their lives, how these notions are expressed through discourse, why these discourses may be contradictory or incoherent, and how these discourses can change.

METHOD

I interviewed 10 male students from two secondary schools in a predominantly middle-class, culturally diverse city in British Columbia. The interviews were part of a larger set of 32 interviews conducted in these schools with 12 male and 14 female students, and 3 male and 3 female violence-prevention program instructors. Students who participated in the program were told about my study. After taking the program, the 12 male and 14 female students volunteered for interviews with me, once in a focus group (males and female groups separately) and once individually. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes. Interview questions were semi-structured and focused on students' beliefs about masculinity, femininity, sexuality,

and male violence. I analyzed two focus groups and 10 individual inter-
views. Four students were Asian (one each of Japanese Canadian, Chinese
Filipino Canadian, Chinese, and Taiwanese origin), and 6 were White (1
from South Africa, 1 from the United States, and 4 from Canada). The 2
male students not included were American Caribbean and Indo-Canadian.
All the boys were in Grade 10 and aged 15 or 16.

There is growing concern, particularly among feminists, about posi-
tioning oneself in one's research. As an Asian woman studying Asian and
White teenage boys, I could not conduct same-sex and, in several cases,
same-culture interviews. Yet, it would have been inappropriate for me to
ask two men (one Asian, one White) to do the interviews because a shared
culture or gender identity does not necessarily equalize power differentials
inherent in the research relationship (Rhoads, 1997). Such a strategy might
be useful for other researchers, but I believe that interviewing these boys
myself allowed me to achieve consistency and accuracy in my data col-
lection and interpretation. The boys chose to talk to me because of their
desire to challenge negative male stereotypes and their openness to alter-
native understandings of masculinity.

BOYS' DISCOURSES ABOUT MASCULINITY

Hegemonic Representations of Male Power

All the boys in my study said that dominant masculinity, whether in North
America or in other societies, depicts certain men as having power over
women and other men. Both Asian and White boys believed this power
continues to be expressed in a man's physical build and strength. Here is
how two White boys responded when I asked them "What image comes
to your mind when you hear the word 'masculine' or 'masculinity'?"

JKM:[3]   The first thing I thought of when you said "masculinity" was the big
          beefy guy . . . just a big guy . . . who has a lot of self-respect, is fairly big
          in size . . . and also a lot of what society thinks . . . all the girls like him.
          He's big. He has muscles. He's athletic.
Pazooki: Some big-ass guy, just harsh-ribbed, like huge biceps, 6 pack [with very
          well-defined abdominal muscles] . . . that's masculinity.

By contrast, when asked about the insights he had shared about hegemonic
masculinity, one Asian (Julio) stated that in Asian cultures, masculinity is
characterized primarily by a man's familial responsibility.

The personality of a Chinese guy is to basically keep face, I think. I've heard [it]
lots of times. Like if the Chinese man was like to lose his business, he loses face

basically . . . he loses his status in society . . . of being a rich guy and stuff like that. Yeah, basically they feel like they should be the ones supporting the family, like feeding the children. The wife should be at home, helping them out with school and stuff, being a housewife. But I don't think it's too important. I think it should be shared out equally 'cause I don't want to be the one to push around the family, saying I earn the money around here so you should listen to me, 'cause I don't want my kids to hate me for that. I want it to be equal, like me and my wife share the bills, not only the man paying for it. Really depends where your status is in society, like, maybe your wife's a bank manager and you're just an employee at the bank. So, it doesn't really matter as long as you guys get off well in life. You both succeed. Doesn't really matter if the wife earns more or the man earns more.

Significantly, he shared his feeling that he himself did not care who earned the family income, as long as they were financially secure. Julio identified himself as Chinese Filipino Canadian earlier in his interview, but he did not take up the stereotypical Chinese masculinity associated with male social status and familial responsibility that he described. His talk suggests that boys who are aware of cultural stereotypes of gender do not necessarily draw on them to formulate their own identities as males.

The face-saving that Julio mentioned is central to Asian cultures and not only achieved by a man's social status but also expressed in his quiet demeanour. For instance, Chua and Fujino (1999) found that many American-born men of Chinese and Japanese descent associated their masculinity with "caring characteristics such as being polite and obedient" (p. 408). These Asian men saw nurturing qualities as part of their male power. Yet, Western hegemonic masculine readings of these men would label them effeminate and passive, and thus unmanly.

Three White boys I interviewed believed that although the bread-winning model of masculinity was fading in Western society, it continued to be important for many males. They said that men no longer held financial power over women because of women's increased education and status in the workforce. This is illustrated by two White boys' responses when I asked them to give me an example of a Canadian or American view of a man's role:

Antonio: Women aren't staying at home. They're going out and getting — well, of course they have education, but they put it to use and go out and get jobs . . . it's not the tea party at home while the man works.

Dante: I don't think anymore there's really a man's role. I think it's just like to do with your self-esteem. It's basically been portrayed that the man's role is to get a job and bring home the money . . . but since it's changing, like the man won't work and the woman will go out and work. But, among his friends might be this, it might be diminishing. Like degrading to your self-esteem, that a girl is bringing home the money.

Antonio's statement "it's not the tea party at home while the man works" appears to harbour a sexist attitude toward traditional, middle-class marital arrangements. However, his discussion also illustrates his belief that many women today do not depend on men financially. According to Dante, the image of the economically powerful man is losing momentum in Western society. Yet he also believes that many men still associate their manhood with their ability to earn money. In addition, when asked what image came to mind when he heard the word "masculine" or "masculinity," Dante responded that masculinity included having a "macho" attitude towards women.

Probably like a big, big huge strong guy . . . physically big . . . I'm not saying that it's good but he probably walks around like all big, like walks around all hefty and stuff. He probably, like he's probably got a huge ego, like "Yo, baby" . . . that kind of view. And he's probably doing, like he's probably the one yelling all those phrases like "Yo, baby, you've got nice legs" or whatever.

These interviews suggest that certain males who do not have economic control but desire it may resort to other means of achieving power. Jackson and Salisbury (1996) argue that "with the demise of the traditional model of the male breadwinner, in regular work, bringing home a 'family wage,' the old incentives to become a respectable, working man — status, pride, security — are collapsing" (p. 104). They believe that many boys today are then left with an aggressive and (hetero)sexist masculinity that hurts other boys and girls, and fuels their own academic underachievement.

Sports and Hegemonic Masculinity

When I asked the Asian boys what type of man they wanted to become, their responses indicated that their ambitions centred primarily on nonathletic pursuits:

Tom: I don't like sports . . . I really want to be in the movie business and I like art . . . drawing. And I like acting. But I've changed my mind about painting recently because I think that . . . I cannot make tons of money so I was . . . kind of stuck on the movie business . . . I would like to be someone that's surprising. It's like you think of that person, you don't think he can do certain things and then you surprise them. I want people to amaze [sic].

Polo: . . . I would like to be self-confident. I probably rather be more mentally strong than more physically. And I want to be like a cook or like maybe, I want to have some of those kinds of skills.

For Tom, being a man was about astonishing people with his artistic or acting abilities rather than with his athletic performance. His struggles with masculinity appeared to be between his creative endeavours and his desire to "make tons of money." Earlier in the interview, Polo said that Japanese culture, like Canadian culture, values boys' participation in sports. However, his discussion indicated that he played sports for fun rather than to express his athletic competence or mental skill, or to establish his male power. He did not identify his manliness with athletics.

All the Asian boys played sports, but only one participated in competitive school sports. By contrast, all the White boys were involved in competitive school sports such as soccer, hockey, basketball, and football. For them, whether in gym class or on the schools' athletic teams, sports were not only a male activity but also an important means of expressing their masculinity. In answer to my question, "A lot of adults think that teenage guys are aggressive [but] what do you think?" JKM replied:

[Guys] are more aggressive in sports . . . I was on the football team because I wanted to be . . . I've always been considered . . . more quiet [pause] not stays out of fights, more avoids fights. I was always tall but I was more the weak tall person, and I wanted to be viewed differently because I really didn't have a ton of friends then. So I joined the football team and I was always on the ground, always. And now, like just halfway through the new semester, we started up a new semester [sic] and we, we're having football in class. And some of the people who I was going against, who I would have run away from before, like just playing football in class we were allowed to play tackle. They ran away from me. I was more mowing them down because I've learned to use my size to my advantage and my strength more.

He struggled to gain peer acceptance by proving his physical strength and athletic skill.

When I asked Willy, another White student, about his views on gender-separate and co-ed violence-prevention workshops, he replied:

It's like P.E. class, I don't think girls and guys belong together. Like if I'm playing hockey with a girl, I really don't want to be there because I don't want to have to hit her. Like in hockey, there's bumping and stuff . . . I don't take my aggression out in fighting, I take it out in sports. You know, if I hit you and you're hurt, well hit me back. But don't punch me, hit me back in the game. I don't want to hurt anyone. But . . . if I hit someone and you're upset about it, you should hit me back in the game, won't upset me, but don't, let's not fight over it.

Willy sees sports as a stage where he can act out his physical aggression legitimately. White boys' discussions indicate that they draw on a dominant

masculinity discourse that values certain sports as conduits for displaying physical skill and toughness. By playing these sports, they enter the masculine world of athletic prowess and gain peer acceptance.

Significantly, although certain Asian boys placed less importance on their athletic ability than did their White peers, two named professional athletes when asked who their male role model was. Here is what one Asian boy, Kolo, shared:

[Kobe Bryant] played on the L.A. Lakers. He's a basketball player. He got money and he got fame, so that's why I think guys would, at least I would, want to admire him. And his education isn't that bad. I don't remember his score on the SAT, but it's pretty high. I think it said in the newspaper that he can enroll in almost any school in the States if he wants to. He plays on the Lakers, but at the same time he still goes to school. He worked hard for [everything] and he got it.

Like his White peers, Kolo looked up to a professional male athlete, but his emphasis was on this basketball star's work ethic and intellectual strength. That is, one of the things Kolo most respected about this man was that he worked hard not only at his athletic skill but also his at educational pursuits. By contrast, when naming their male role models, White boys who selected a professional athlete tended to focus on the athlete's fame, fortune, or popularity with women. JKM said:

Michael Jordan. He's just tall. He has money. He has lots of respect from other people. He's got like, you see people with like these T-shirts on, his name is written on. You can almost find it anywhere. He's just known really well.

This talk suggests that certain Asian boys identified a strong work and academic ethic as key ingredients in being a man, whereas White boys focused more on popularity. The literature on ethnic masculinity reports that Asian cultures attach less meaning to Western notions of sport due to their strong cultural education/work ethic (Flemming, 1991).

Negotiating With Hegemonic Masculinity

Both Asian and White boys' discourses about masculinity problematize the concept of a single, hegemonic masculinity. However, their discussions also show the tensions they feel in relation to the dominant version of masculinity. Julio, an Asian boy who appeared to struggle with it more than did his Asian peers, echoed the discourse of his White peers. I asked him to elaborate on the images that came to mind when he heard the word "masculinity":

I read basketball magazines but nothing to do with your image. But you see basketball players and they're all muscular, so you kind of want to be like them. 'Cause there's not really any magazines that focus on guys should look like this basically . . . and like in ads too. You never see a fat guy advertising cologne. It's always a real muscular guy advertising Calvin Klein or Polo or whatever . . . yeah it's like the world saying you have to look like this in order to get a girl, 'cause it always shows a muscular guy with a beautiful girl. If you're not muscular, you won't get a beautiful girl. That's what it's trying to impose on people, I guess.

Julio's discourse unveils many young men's complex negotiations with choosing between refusing or playing hegemonic masculinity. He is able to articulate an awareness of the media image of the ideal man as having both an athletic physique and beautiful women. Yet his struggles with this ideal are also apparent from his talk: "I read basketball magazines but nothing to do with your image. But you see basketball players and they're all muscular, so you kind of want to be like them." Julio realizes that these magazines portray an ideal of the male muscular physique, although within the context of sports, and admits that many boys feel pressured to take it up. His talk is especially important because it shows one way that many boys reach outside themselves to gain acceptance as males.

Another example of boys' negotiations is evident in the critique by a White boy, Willy:

There might be some pressure to be big and strong but I think it's impossible. No one's perfect. If you're perfect, you'll be on a magazine cover . . . If you're big and strong and you know, you look decent, average marks, have a nice car, everything's going for you. That's my vision of a man.

Willy's talk about the impossibility of achieving this ideal illustrates his desire to adopt aspects of hegemonic masculinity. Although he believes this is an unrealistic image that can only be seen in magazines, he aspires to it: "That's my vision of a man." What keeps him from striving to embody it is that he believes it to be out of his reach, not that he sees it as problematic.

When I asked what boys wanted out of dating relationships, several Asian and White boys challenged the stereotype that males are sex-driven maniacs.

Julio: Well, it's a stereotype that guys look for stuff in girls like big breasts and like a nice body.
Kolo: It's not all we want.
Dante: I think guys and girls want more of a sexual relationship, like equally . . . like it's made up that the guys think about sex like 24-7, 24 hours a

> day, 7 days a week, right. I don't think a lot of guys do that. I think we're stereotyped that way. Like after we had the [violence-prevention program], I had girls coming up to me and say "Oh, you guys think of sex like every 8 seconds," which is totally not true. Like we're not like some sex maniac. It's like a total stereotype that guys are just out there for sex. Guys want meaningful relationships and they're not just out there to get some.

Arlo: Yeah, I get pissed off at a lot of girls because they put it out like we're the bad guys in it, right . . . they kind of sit back and say the guys are bad, but a lot of times it's the girls who are initiating.

Julio: [Girls] like do something to you . . . like give you signs that they want something to happen, but when [guys] do something, they say like you're moving too fast or whatever.

Asian and White boys' talk challenges prevailing stereotypes of teenage males as hormone driven while revealing their negotiations with the heterosexual prowess aspect of hegemonic masculinity. One Asian boy and a few of his White peers also argued not only that many boys resist a discourse about masculinity that involves heterosexual conquest but also that girls often initiate sexual relationships. These boys' discussions show that we need to reconsider the interplay between gender, culture, "race," and masculinity within the context of boys' schooling.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BOYS' SCHOOLING

Unlike most research on masculinity and boys' schooling, this study included Asian boys' discourses about masculinity. Although the themes that emerged may not be generalizable, my findings suggest that the interaction between boys' notions of masculinity and their gender, culture, and "race" is multifaceted. Both the Asian and the White boys identified the dominant notions of masculinity in Canada and the U.S.A. However, they also struggled in their negotiations with this dominant view. Certain Asian boys, for instance, were less likely than their Asian and White peers to identify their masculinity with their athletic ability. Furthermore, several boys were aware of the problems with taking up a hegemonic discourse of manhood yet able to understand to some degree the benefits of "acting" the role of a hegemonic man.

Research examining masculinity and boys' schooling has shown that schools serve as one major site for producing and transmitting dominant notions of masculinity. Kenway (1995) argues that "masculinities associated with class, ethnic and sexual groupings . . . intersect with the dominant discourse of schooling" (p. 63). In recent years, Canadian and U.S. schools have experienced an increase in the number of students from

various Asian cultures, some born and raised in Canada and the United States, others recent immigrants. Many possess a mix of Asian and Western cultural ideals that affect how they become gendered beings. New ways of reading boys' notions of masculinity are therefore needed.

The boys I interviewed had participated in a school-sponsored violence-prevention program that dealt with hegemonic masculinity and offered an alternative, nonviolent masculinity. Although the program did not draw on a feminist poststructuralist approach (which addresses cultural notions of masculinity), it did give the boys in my study an opportunity to challenge hegemonic masculinity. In addition, these boys' positive experiences with this program suggest that certain secondary education programs, such as violence-prevention workshops, may serve as a place for some boys to discuss their negotiations with hegemonic masculinity. Lingard and Douglas (1999) assert that pro-feminist programs are more likely than masculinist programs to address boys' negotiations with hegemonic masculinity within the context of their relationships with girls and other boys. Providing access to programs that both acknowledge boys' ability to possess multiple masculinities and validate their struggles with their masculinities will help boys understand their experiences better. For instance, a gay boy may be simultaneously marginalized for his "unmanly" sexual practices and celebrated for his muscular physique and athletic aggression on the field.

Although boys play an active role in their relationships with hegemonic masculinity, there is little social support for or understanding of their struggles. Many parents and adults working with boys and many boys remain heavily invested in dominant discourses about manhood and are likely to discourage the use of feminist poststructuralism in education programs to destabilize conventional gender or cultural story lines. More research on boys' — particularly Asian boys' — discourses about masculinity will help teachers and counsellors working with these boys to understand the gendered and cultural meanings that Asian and White boys give to masculinity.

NOTES

1. The boys in Mac an Ghaill's study were of South Asian descent (from India, Pakistan, etc.). Some researchers use the term *Asian* to refer to a broad range of Asian cultures — grouping people from Pakistan and East India with those from

Mainland China and Taiwan. For simplicity, I use *Asian* to refer only to Chinese (Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Taiwan), Filipino, and Japanese cultures. I use *White* to refer to a range of White ethnic groups (including White South African and French Canadian).

2. The term *race* suggests that biological differences exist between different groups of humans (Fine & Weis, 1996). Some researchers replace the biological *race* with *culture* and ignore the distinctions between these terms. For example, assertions that Asian males have smaller bodies than White males tap into "race," whereas assertions that Asian teens are less likely to begin sexual relationships than their White peers are cultural. In this article, I use "race," in quotation marks, to indicate the racist roots of the notion of *race.*

3. Participants chose their own fictitious names.

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