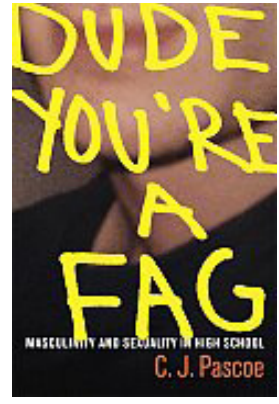
Dude, You're A Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School. C.J. Pascoe: University of California Press (2007). ISBN: 0520252306, 240 pp.



Reviewed by CHRISTINE SHEARER

What is masculinity? While answers may vary, C.J. Pascoe's *Dude, You're A Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High Schoo*l identifies high school as an important site where masculinity is consistently defined, asserted, and defended. The book's exploration of high school daily life shows male students consistently assert their masculinity by attacking those seen as embodying its lack, namely "fags," illustrating how current conceptions of masculinity are tied to heterosexuality. Pascoe reveals how constructing and upholding masculinity is important not just to the students, but to the institution itself, helping foster an atmosphere permissive of sexual harassment, homophobia, and gay bashing. While the book accepts the unfortunate equating of masculinity with dominance, particularly unwanted dominance, it also lays the seeds for a reconstruction of the concept.

Pascoe brings an interdisciplinary approach to the topic, and begins the book with a concise literature review on the evolution of feminist, gender, and later masculinity studies, while highlighting its intersections with critical racial and queer theory. It works as a nice primer for anyone new to the subject, integrating theorists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler in accessible, clear language. It also deconstructs high school from a non-sexualized institution of learning to one highly invested in rituals that reaffirm gender norms, heterosexuality, and, as the book illustrates, stereotypical notions of masculinity.

Pascoe spent 18 months researching high school life in a small, suburban working class city in north central California. The book weaves student interviews with the author's ethnographic observations—ranging from everyday classes to "highly gendered moments" such as school plays, rallies, and Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) meetings—to get at both the social and individual ideas and practices thought to constitute masculinity.

The book is arguably at its best when laying out the students' own thoughts on and impressions of masculinity through interviews. How the students think about their use of the word "fag" and "gay" is particularly rich, as it is layered with contradictions and reveals masculinity as a site of contested meaning, but one that is primarily maintained through the collective assertion and attacking of what it is not. The book offers many

instances in which students discipline one another through what Pascoe terms "the fag discourse." As one student explains, being called a fag is "the lowest thing you can call someone."

In a story that is all too familiar, the brunt of the stigma of being insufficiently masculine is put on Ricky, an "out" gay student. The book aptly captures how male students, primarily white, chastise Ricky for being weak and/or feminine and thus inflate their sense of masculinity by denying his, even though it is Ricky who has the strength to stand alone and assert his own unique identity in the face of constant, intense harassment by students and inaction by the school personnel.

Less insightful is the discussion of male-female interactions, in which Pascoe consistently offers her own interpretations of student actions and gives little of the students' own perspectives. For example, nearly every episode involving groups of boys flirting with girls was made sense of as patriarchy: girls become objects for boys to dominate, which Pascoe concludes is the primary way masculinity is asserted. Largely lacking in this discussion are the students' impressions of their actions, leaving unexplored their own meanings and motivations and thus a deeper understanding of the dynamics.

Pascoe's analysis is understandable, however, given the many descriptions of incidents that bordered on or were clear cases of sexual harassment. Yet Pascoe never saw school administrators punish anyone for it, although black male students were policed more heavily on their interactions with female classmates than white male students. The implication is clear: already in high school, young white men are given the message that sexual advances toward females, even if unwanted, are not only socially permissible but expected.

The book also explores girls and masculinity, primarily by contrasting a group in basketball and one in the school's GSA. Both groups engage in behaviors typically seen as masculine. However, the basketball girls, who were quite popular, "act" more along stereotypical notions of masculinity and succumb to hetero/sexist ideas, while the GSA girls, who were socially ostracized, were much more likely to interrogate and question such norms and ideas. Thus, Pascoe seems to conclude, displays of masculinity are acceptable for girls as long as they uphold patriarchal norms. Less explored are the limits placed upon girls as to how "masculine" they can act before being called out on their behavior, and how such limits work to keep girls "in their place."

Pascoe concludes her research by offering policy recommendations to make high schools more aware of and tolerant of the diversity of gender and sexual expression, and more proactive in preventing the harassment of girls, gay students, and "effeminate" boys. While highlighting the need

for institutional change, Pascoe also stresses the importance of gender play among young people so that they may express themselves freely, even if – especially if – it means acting in ways that challenge social norms.

The book nicely illustrates how masculinity comprises thoughts and ideas that are collectively defined and asserted, and how salient such issues are for high school students. It also reveals how school personnel often permit the sexual and verbal harassment of students on the basis of being seen as an acceptable expression of [white] heterosexual masculinity. While the book defines masculinity as dominance, particularly unwanted dominance, it lays the groundwork for a re-exploration and redefinition of masculinity through the idea of gender play and institutional change. Indeed, unwanted dominance and harassment should not be socially sanctioned as a sign of masculine strength but instead seen and treated as an unacceptable weakness of character. As the book illustrates, high school is an important site for such social transformation to begin, not only among the students but the institution and its norms as well.

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