

RACE, MASCULINITY & SCHOOLING: MUSLIM BOYS AND EDUCATION

LOUISE ARCHER, 2003

CONTEXT In the 1990s girls were rapidly overtaking boys in terms of educational success. The education of boys became a serious political concern, almost to the point of becoming a moral panic.

The debate tended to follow one of three lines of thought:

- Boys as victims of the changing social system – this ‘boys in crisis’ perspective is associated with the work of Connell.
- The feminisation of schools – there is a shortage of male role models and the examination structure favours females (coursework for example).
- Boys rejection of education and schoolwork is due to their mental structure.

Archer suggests that the debate is not as clearcut as the government and the media seem to think. For her, the issue that needs to be addressed is male identity and how schools reproduce masculinity.

Muslim masculinity has been viewed as threatening thanks to media reporting following the incidents of September 11, 2001. Negative views of Muslim masculinity have spread into the professional concerns of teachers and Muslim boys are seen as under-performing. They experience high rates of exclusion and low rates of progression in education after the age of 16.

The study is part of a much larger project exploring identity among Muslim boys and girls in an unidentified north-western town, given the false name of Mill Town in this book. Mill Town is economically poor with high unemployment and deprivation following the decline of the textile industry. The majority population is white but there is a large Asian population made up primarily of people from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds.

LINKS TO KEY DEBATES

This study shows how identities are constructed in relation to age, ethnicity, gender and nationality in contemporary British society. In addition, it provides insight into differential educational attainment in relation to gender and ethnicity. Methodologically it uses feminist research techniques where the participants are seen as equal partners and have the opportunity to talk freely about their experiences. This represents an interesting approach to the study of masculine identity.

METHODS

The aims of this study were to:

- Consider how Muslim boys constructed religious, racial, ethnic and cultural identities
- Explore how Muslim boys constructed masculine identities
- To reveal the way in which Muslim boys talked about racism
- To consider how the boys thought about education and occupation.

The methods used were influenced by a feminist approach. Students were drawn from one of four mixed-sex schools. Each school had a different proportion of minority ethnic pupils. Only one school had above average GCSE attainment. 31 Muslim boys from year 10 were studied, 19 were Pakistani, eight were Bengali and four were of Pakistani/Kenyan origin. Most were born in Britain and were working class. These boys were interviewed in discussion groups using a semi-structured interview schedule.

There were three interviewers: a white middle-class woman and two females of non-academic Asian British origin. The use of researchers who were different to the boys was a deliberate decision. It was felt that researchers from a similar background may over-identify with the respondents and interpret comments in the light of their own experiences. The use of interviewers that required the boys to explain themselves meant that they would have to clarify their comments.

Two discussion groups took place in each school, one using an Asian British interviewer and one the author. Discussion groups were held in English and lasted about one and a half hours. The discussion group method was seen as appropriate because participants could negotiate a shared meaning and the interviewer could become part of this process. The interviewers set challenges to the boys in order to make them clarify their thinking and explain their ideas fully. In addition, a small photographic exercise – ‘A day in my life’ – was conducted with two pupils.

KEY FINDINGS

All of the boys saw their ethnic distinctiveness as being less important than their religious identity. Boys did not regard themselves as British, instead they identified with umma (the global community of Muslims) which was seen as more important than other loyalties. Western thinking has sometimes associated this global network with terrorism and fundamentalist Muslim opinion. However, there is an alternative reading that offers a sense of strength in brotherhood that counters white views of Asian maleness as weak and passive.

Males were defensive about their masculinity and were more likely to identify with their religious roots than girls because they felt more threatened. Girls admired boys who had a strict religious commitment, seeing them as mature and responsible. Despite the allegiance that the boys felt to Islam, few were active in terms of religious practices such as praying, fasting and abstaining from tobacco and alcohol. They experienced conflict between the demands of their religion on one hand and the demands of western hegemonic masculinity on the other.

Many Asians identified themselves as ‘black’. They were attracted to American street culture and ‘gangsta’ masculinity. Teachers found this threatening but, to the boys, membership of a gang acted as a form of protection against potential aggression. They valued education but felt that teachers favoured girls. However, rather than copy the girls, they presented themselves to teachers as having low aspirations. They adopted ‘laddish’ poses which entailed being popular, ‘hanging out’, playing sport, having the right clothes and not being seen to work. They felt that they had higher intelligence but failed to do well because of ‘slacking’. They took this position to challenge stereotypes of Asian

boys as effeminate. Some were cushioned by family businesses or the ability to work for cash in hand so did not feel pressure to gain qualifications. Many felt their chances would not be the same as those of a white person anyway, while others saw educational success more positively as a way to challenge racism.

Many of the boys had white girlfriends but still saw their role as patrolling Asian girls and maintaining a watch on their behaviour. Traditional clothing was seen as correct for females but not for boys. The boys challenged one of the Pakistani interviewers for not wearing traditional dress although she wore modest western clothing. However, in reality Muslim girls were as assertive as any other young people and the boys could not control them as they could each other through hitting and violence.

In Muslim families the traditional gender roles of nurturing female and breadwinning male were more common than among white families. Boys felt responsibility to their parents and intended to care for them in old age as part of izzat or family honour. Many rejected arranged marriage but accepted that their family would help choose a partner. Muslim views of the adult male saw him as assuming responsibility, so fathers regulated sons and provided a strong male role model.

The boys felt safer in Asian areas but recognised that racism diminishes if people have contact with each other. Racism was explicit in school but this was a form of bullying that could be fought against. White boys who were friendly in school would often ignore them out of school when with their family. The Asian boys challenged this behaviour but the white boys did not acknowledge it. Teacher racism was evident but subtle and consisted of ‘ignoring’ or ‘talking over’.

FIND OUT MORE

Archer, L. (2003) *Race, Masculinity and Schooling: Muslim Boys and Education*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

There is a review of the book at www.multiverse.ac.uk

Connell, R. W. (1995) *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press

EVALUATION

The sample was relatively small so there are question marks about the extent to which the study can be generalised to other Muslim boys, especially those in other parts of the country. There is considerable discussion of home and domestic life and this allows the reader to see the participants as fully rounded people. There is a depth to this study in that a wide range of aspects of the boys’ lives are considered.

An interesting methodological issue is the boys’ willingness to discuss racism. They were willing to talk about it with the Asian interviewers but too polite to raise it as an issue with the white interviewer. Archer realised that her own whiteness silenced the boys in some of the discussions.