Debating Childhood Masculinities

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Praise for *Debating Childhood Masculinities*

> How are boys taught to be boys and girls taught to be girls? This simple question is deeply political, power-laden and possibly even unsettling [. . .] Through a critical feminist, queer and anti-colonial approach to gender and childhood, this important book provides us with the tools and frameworks to start thinking about this question.
>
> **—*Shannon Philip*, Lecturer in Sociology, University of East Anglia**

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Debating Childhood Masculinities: Rethinking the Interplay of Age, Gender and Social Change

EDITED BY

UTSA MUKHERJEE

Brunel University London, UK

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Contents

List of Contributors *ix*

Foreword *xi*

Debating Childhood Masculinities: An Introduction *1*
Utsa Mukherjee

Emotions and Affect

Chapter 1 Contradictory Narratives of Masculinity, Emotions and Personal Relationships Among Boys in Finland *9*
Marja Peltola

Chapter 2 Emotional Expressions Shaping Boyhood Identities Among Elementary School Students in India *27*
Shailly

Bodies and Materialities

Chapter 3 Materialisations of Masculinity in Childhood: Theoretical Perspectives on Being a Boy in Childhood *49*
Judith von der Heyde, Florian Eßer and Sylvia Jäde

Chapter 4 Envisioning Trans Studies in Early Childhood Education: Implications for Rethinking Boys, Men and Masculinities *71*
Wayne Martino, Jennifer Ingrey, Shailja Jain and Malcolm Macdonald

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Violence and Exclusion

Chapter 5 'They Wanted Us Out': Young Masculinities and School Exclusion in England *95*
Roma Thomas

Chapter 6 'I Thought That I Am Girly, Girlish Because of All That': Effeminophobia as Violence in the Context of Child Sexual Abuse and Hegemonic Masculinity in India *115*
Alankaar Sharma

Privacy and Inclusion

Chapter 7 Masculinity and the Inclusion of Girls and Boys With Refugee Backgrounds in Swedish Sports Clubs *133*
Peter Carlman and Maria Hjalmarsson

Chapter 8 At the Nexus of Gender and Generational Order: Constructions of Childhood Masculinities and Femininities in Negotiating Individual Privacy in Türkiye *151*
Hamide Elif Üzümcü

Chapter 9 Concluding Thoughts *169*
Utsa Mukherjee

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List of Contributors

Raewyn Connell	University of Sydney, Australia and National Tertiary Education Union, Australia
Hamide Elif Üzümcü	University of Padua, Italy
Peter Carlman	Karlstad University, Sweden
Florian Eßer	University of Osnabrück, Germany
Judith von der Heyde	Fliedner University of Applied Sciences Düsseldorf, Germany
Maria Hjalmarsson	Karlstad University, Sweden
Jennifer Ingrey	Western University, Canada
Sylvia Jäde	University of Osnabrück, Germany
Shailja Jain	Western University, Canada
Malcolm Macdonald	Western University, Canada
Wayne Martino	Western University, Canada
Utsa Mukherjee	Brunel University London, UK
Marja Peltola	Helsinki University, Finland
Shailly	Gargi College, University of Delhi, India
Alankaar Sharma	University of Wollongong, Australia
Roma Thomas	University of Bedfordshire, UK

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Foreword

When I was growing up in settler colonial Australia in the 1950s, the prevailing view about boys and girls was summarised in a little rhyme, almost a proverb, that everyone knew:

> What are little boys made of?
> Frogs and snails, and puppy-dogs' tails!
> What are little girls made of?
> Sugar and spice, and everything nice!

No wonder it was boys who grew up to scheme, fight and rule the world, while the girls practiced their niceness!

Of course gender difference appeared more complicated if you gave the matter serious thought. For instance, my father was a gentle and courteous man who never hit his children and despised flag-waving politicians. Nevertheless, when the war against fascism came, he joined the Royal Australian Navy and went off to hunt Japanese and German submarines and try to kill their crews. (As far as I know, his ship never found any.) My aunt, who was definitely more spice than sugar, joined the army and went off to the same war. However, she went as a nurse, not as a combatant, and ended up caring for sick prisoners in an internment camp. The prevailing view remained that combat was natural for boys and men, while caring work was natural for girls and women.

By the time I had grown up and began to do research with boys and girls, such ideas were changing. The women's liberation movement arrived, ideas of gender equality were in the air and there was strong criticism of the idea of fixed, natural characteristics separating girls from boys. Increasingly, the prevailing view – at least among those who were not busy defending the patriarchy – was that masculinity and femininity were *learnt*. There was a 'male role' and a 'female role' in society. The norms for these roles were taught by agents of socialisation such as parents, role models, mass media, churches and peer groups. Under this pressure, children gradually internalised the roles and so acquired the characteristics (aggressiveness, dominance, passivity, niceness, etc.) that society thought appropriate for men and women.

The idea of sex roles mattered for education, providing a kind of map of how young people learnt gender. For those critical of gender inequality, it also provided a strategy of change. Change the role norms, and the process of

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socialisation would move the world in another direction. Many educational programmes attempted to do just that – with limited success.

Sex-role theory is still around but is not now the cutting edge. It was never very good at understanding power, or dealing with diversity or explaining change. Other things have happened in social research that have pushed our understanding of masculinities and femininities in new directions. Post-structuralism offered subtle ideas of discourse and subject position. Queer theory invited us to question taken-for-granted ideas about embodiment, especially sexuality. More attention has been given to the multiple forms of gender, including the diverse forms of masculinity from which ideas of hegemonic, marginalised and hybrid masculinities arose. A strong revival of post-colonial thought (perhaps better, anti-colonial thought) has challenged the way ideas from the global North – and mainly about the global North – have provided the framework for social science across the world. We now look to the majority world for intellectual resources, as well as to Harvard, Oxbridge and the Sorbonne.

These changes have posed serious challenges to studies of childhood and studies of gender, but they have also opened new pathways. This book responds to the challenges and shows how to use new perspectives. Its chapters present research and practical experience from seven different countries, and they use a variety of theoretical frameworks. The research participants range from relatively privileged youth in stable family and school situations, to refugees and other migrants, and youth expelled from schooling. Some of the studies include girls as well as boys, giving a valuable point of reference, though the main concern throughout is with boys and masculinities.

In this book, the reader will find fresh evidence about familiar concerns, such as the learning of gender hierarchies, the significance of sports, boys' concealment of fear or anxiety and the gendered relationships between boys and their fathers and mothers. You will also find evidence about violence – fighting among boys, sexual abuse of children by adults, pressure to 'play hurt' in sports – and about the impact of disciplinary practices in schools and families. You will see the material side of childhood interacting with social relations: the equipment of informal sport, the forms of dress, the household rooms allocated to boys and girls, their differing possibilities of privacy and the spaces in which children are, and are not, allowed to move.

The book is notable for its attention to the emotional dimension of gender. A particular strength is the authors' recognition of what psychoanalysis calls 'ambivalence', or what we might call the contradictory character of emotional life. We have examples of boys who acknowledge social conventions about masculinity but also reject them or find them uncomfortable. We have discussions of 'effeminacy' among boys and negative, abusive or sometimes supportive responses from adults. We see social controls, and also resistance to controls, or evasions and silences.

All this comes into view because the studies on which this book is based have a close focus. Most of the authors worked with small groups, using interviews, focus groups and field observations. These methods, well used, provide vivid pictures of children's social worlds, in their intricacy, uncertainty and flux. Children are

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active makers of their social worlds, including gender identities and gender relations. However, they do not make them out of thin air. They work with materials mostly from the societies around them, which are still (though in varying ways) gender-divided and patriarchal. And young people are indeed young: their capabilities and their funds of experience are limited, though both grow through childhood and adolescence.

This said, *Debating Childhood Masculinities* provides strong warnings against the common habit of underestimating children's capacities. Children from very early are inventive in their use of materials, in their relations with adults and their views of themselves. They create stories; they may supply themselves with imagined friends or imagined lives. By adolescence, they are able to conceive utopias, other ways of ordering society: we see this today in the environmental movement among youth. This is not just a matter of fantasy. To the extent it shapes young people's practices, it becomes ontoformative, making new social realities.

Good social research has the capacity to surprise us, and there are surprises to look for in this book. The surprises include the marked ambivalences in some boys' responses to conventions of masculinity; the resistance by girls to family surveillance, at least in one of the studies; and the striking finding that some youth who are already stigmatised as troublemakers actually believe that taking responsibility is a key part of masculinity.

There are other surprises, but I leave them to the readers. There are lots of interesting details about children's worlds in this book, and there are serious conceptual arguments to engage with. My best wishes to the research participants, authors and readers in building our shared understanding of childhoods and masculinities.

Raewyn Connell
Sydney
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