Groping towards sexism: boys’ sex talk

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O, what men dare do! What men may do!
What men daily do not knowing what they do.

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The centre

Sexuality is a ‘notoriously elusive subject’ (Barrett 1980, p. 42). It is suffused in everyday life: ever present yet, somehow, ever absent. It is not always possible to say what is sexual about a particular experience. For these reasons it would be wrong to laden sexuality in itself with the responsibility of explaining all our motivations. Sexuality has no essence, nor can it be put in a field all of its own. Rather, in our society, it is channelled into many areas, into leisure, consumption and work. It may be possible to investigate how this channelling contributes to the moral regulation of people if we pay close attention, first, to the actual practice of genders.

The chance to gather the information on which this article is based came from an individual research project that I did in a school ‘sin bin’. The centre was a small on-site unit for ‘disruptives’ in a London, co-educational, secondary school. It may well be that there were specific features of the institution that helped to facilitate the behaviour described, and so I will sketch in the salient features of the place. It was set up, mainly on the initiative of the head, essentially to remove ‘problem’ children from the school and re-educate them into a position where they could once more ‘benefit from what the school had to offer’ (as well as re-introducing into them the habit of attendance). The staff (one male head of...
centre, one male assistant teacher and one female assistant teacher) saw their brief as more pastoral than academic. They wanted to help the kids *individually* to overcome what the staff defined as a rejection of adults and the adult world. The curriculum consisted mostly of basic maths and English with some craftwork and lots of recreation time. The centre was quite like the school it served except that some of the more rigid controls on movement, posture and language had been relaxed in order to avoid excessive conflict. Nevertheless, there was a constant struggle by the staff to stop the older kids using the centre as what the staff termed a ‘day-time youth club’. It was important for the overall work of the centre, and especially for the elusive goal of re-integration, that the kids should be subject to definite, if not authoritarian, adult restraint.

The centre was located in an old terraced house next to the school grounds. At times, I confess, it reminded me of nothing so much as a primary school classroom with its school-like smell, its painting-covered walls, its rows of textbooks and its tiny, plywood chairs. There was one organisational feature that contributed to differentiating the centre from the main school and that was the lack of strict age divisions or ‘years’. The centre took kids from twelve up to the school-leaving-age (no one would stay on as a sixth former) and usually they took the same lessons together. It is a feature of such centres that the numbers attending fluctuate, with lots of kids coming and leaving, around a core group. Although the average stay was two to three years this is not a very useful statistic because the long-term kids, who usually became informal leaders, could be there for their whole secondary careers. (The staff recognised that this made nonsense of the ostensible purpose of re-integration.) Because of these patterns of fluctuation around stability the centre went through various different phases.

One of the most important dimensions along which the state of the centre could be measured was the overall balance of power between the genders. In terms of friendship groups, particularly outside school, and in terms of unspoken understandings, the boys related primarily to the boys and the girls to the girls. For convenience I shall write as if the boys formed one cultural grouping and the girls formed another. However, this stresses the cultural separateness of the genders in a way which does oversimplify lived relations. What needs to be captured here is a series of moods present in the centre about relations between the genders. For