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Impact of peer group in the development and construction of masculinity

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Abstract

Peer group plays an important role in the construction of masculine identity or masculinity. The impact of peer group culture torments during adolescence where boys construct their notions of masculinity by participating in the peer group culture. The present paper explores how notions of masculinity are constructed by interaction with the peers at a school in South Kolkata. The paper uses the technique of 'mixed methodology' in order to survey of thirty adolescent boys (aged 16-17 years) who study in an English medium school (Class XI and Class XII) of South Kolkata. The findings indicated that the adolescent boys mix and interact with both male and female friends based on certain grounds They interact with those male peers who conform to the notion of hegemonic masculinity ----- those peers who are straight, powerful, strong and masculine. However, the adolescent boys tend to ostracize those peers who do not conform to the notion of hegemonic masculinity and are regarded as 'effeminate'. These boys interact with their female peers in order to attain greater status among his peer group since most men treat women as objects of sexual pleasure and entertainment.

Keywords: Masculinity, peer group, hegemonic masculinity, homophobia, fag, locker-room culture.

Introduction

It was mainly during 1990s that research in masculinity emerged and developed in academics in Western societies. This was due to the impact of feminism which questioned the stereotypical conceptualization of masculinity 'as the norm' and regarded masculinity as a gendered category². As a result of this, various debates took place challenging its stereotypification in order to get an in-depth understanding of men and masculinity and also to understand the way gender identities are formed. This was followed by important changes which took place in traditional gender roles in Western societies during the last decade of 20th century which led to the construction of masculinity².

Peer group is regarded as one of the most important agency of socialization which helps to regulate culturally acceptable notions of masculinity and femininity. It is mainly through peer group that boys and girls learn to accept their gender-roles after family and school. The impact of peer group begins in school and continues as the child progresses and extends beyond the social world. Schools are important institution where boys negotiate and practice masculinity by being engaged in its different activities. The impact of peer group culture increases as boys step into their adolescence where boys construct their notions of masculinity by their participation in peer group. Peer group is an arena which requires absolute collusion. By identifying with the group norms and accepting its styles and values, one affirms one's membership in the group which enhances one's sense of belonging and well-being. If any man in the peer group violates or fails to abide by the group's norms, he is bound to face social sanctions or social humiliation and is often ostracized by the group members². In other words, masculinity is determined by the status that a boy enjoys in his peer group. Moreover, male peer group acts as a powerful context to promote gendered selves often involving compliance and engagement in hegemonic heterosexual identities and relationships².

Masculinity is constructed by the peer groups which torments during adolescence. Peer pressure increases during adolescence since it's a critical phase where most boys rely more on their friends or close peers for the purpose of seeking decisions rather than on their parents⁶. Peer group serves as an arena where most boys feel a sense of belonging with their peers which helps them to practice hegemonic masculinity. It is this male peer pressure which has been recognized as a major social concern for adolescents. Within a peer group, peers use their dominant discourses in order to prove to each other their 'manhood'³. However, peer group is often cited as a treacherous place for boys since they are under continuous pressure and threat from the other members of their own group to renegotiate in order to prove their masculinity³.

Though there has been immense research on peer group and masculinity in Western societies, India is a country where hardly any such research has been carried out regarding the impact of peer group on the construction of masculinity. Due to such lack of research in this arena, the present paper explores how adolescent boys construct their notions of masculinity by interaction with their peers at a school at South Kolkata.

Literature review

Current views on masculinity:

Since research on men's studies and masculinity began from 1990s, so the notion that masculinity and femininity are not dichotomous but they emerge in relation to each other was also acknowledged². This made studies on masculinity more essential for an in-depth understanding as to how gender identities are formed².

There were two major approaches in masculinity which relied on theoretical background:

a. Celebratory approach: This approach regards men as major victims or sufferers due to the changes in gender relations and emphasizes on the restoration of their previous status. It blames feminism and feminist ideas due to which men or masculinity is in a state of crisis².

b. Critical approach: This approach conceptualizes masculinity as a social construction which is constructed in different context and in different ways through various discursive practices².

Redefining hegemonic masculinity:

The term masculinity signifies tendencies and attitudes associated with men. The concept of hegemonic masculinity originated in Australian high schools in a debate over the role of men in Australian labor politics which discussed issues like men's bodies and making of masculinities¹. Raewen Connell was the first sociologist who conducted extensive research on men and masculinity which became one of the most cited source for the concept of hegemonic masculinity¹.

During 1970s, there was an urge to write about the 'male role' by criticizing the role norms as the major source of oppression of men's behavior¹. Research indicates that there are certain forms of masculinity which are regarded as more dominant and socially acceptable than other forms¹. This notion is affirmed by Raewen Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity which signifies the configuration of gender practice which justifies the dominant position of men and subordinate position of women¹. The concept of hegemonic masculinity was first used in education (school) in order to understand how adolescent boys practice masculinity at school (through co-curricular activities and their treatment of male peers)¹. It was also used to understand the ways in which boys negotiate different forms of masculinity in the classroom followed by the issue of bullying that takes place among male peers¹.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is used as a major tool to understand masculine identities and gender relations which inspired various studies that revealed the ways in which hegemonic forms of masculinity are formed, enacted and negotiated around features like strength, toughness, powerful, heterosexuality and homophobia¹. The idea that there are specific forms of masculinity that are regarded and socially constructed as more powerful than others helped to understand the power relations within which masculinity operates and debunk other (marginalized) forms of masculinity¹. The cynosure of most of research has now been turned to peer group along with other social institutions like family, school and sports in order to understand how masculinity is negotiated and socially constructed in these spheres.

Role of peer group in socialization (school):

Peer group which signifies groups of friends, cliques, seniors plays a significant role in the process of socialization. Adolescents learn to abide by the group norms also through the process of socialization. Adolescent boys learn to relate to themselves and to others within the context of peer group relations and dynamics which takes place in one of the major agency of socialization, school⁵.

During adolescence, peer group provides major support for boys as they assimilate into the adult society by decreasing dependence on parents and increasing self-sufficiency and group affirmation and group conformity regarding attitude and behavior⁵. Most of the adolescent boys under the impact of peer pressure are forced to change their behavior in order to abide by the group norms and are pressurized to listen to their peers. This results in engagement in illicit activities like smoking, sexual intimacy with girls⁵.

Understanding the problem of homophobia:

Homophobia which signifies dislike for homosexual boys or men is a central concept to understand masculinity of adolescent boys. The kind of meanings that heterosexual and straight boys attach through the use of 'homophobic language denotes that homophobia has become a gendered notion⁴.

Adolescent boys who portray hegemonic masculinity often ostracize and bully those boys from their peer group who fail to conform to the notion of hegemonic masculine identity ----- those peers who takes an interest in music (especially dancing), who are neither straight nor powerful, who does not take much interest in sports or other masculine activities in school. Adolescence being the last stage of childhood is regarded as one of the crucial phase where peer pressure torments and affects a boy's future. School is one of the major institution where hegemonic masculinity is carried out and enforced. Hegemonic masculinity positions some boys as inferior to others through the avenue of 'bullying' in which teenage boys assert their dominance over boys whom they ridicule as 'feminine others' or 'effeminate'. Those boys who display hegemonic masculinity mostly marginalize the 'feminine' boys by throwing them into categories where they are stigmatized as 'fag', 'faggot', 'sissy', 'nerds', 'geeks', 'wimps'⁴.

Those men who fail to perform their masculine tasks of physical competence, heterosexual prowess, strength and sexual assertiveness are often stigmatized as 'fag' or 'faggot'. Fag or faggot serves as the discourse with which boys discipline themselves through ridicule or joking relationship with their male peers⁴. Those who are labeled by 'fag identity' are often bound to face humiliation and harassment from their male peers which goes to the extent of marginalization of such boys from the peer group. Historical and cultural research indicates that homophobia is a modern phenomena since there are certain social and cultural settings where homosexual practice is allowed without inciting homophobia. Homophobic violence has been highly reported in some parts of Europe, America and Australia which indicates that the problem of homophobia is prevalent in contemporary society but traditional values are exploited to justify the problem⁴.

Bullying among adolescent school boys:

Bullying can be defined as a form of aggression in which disparity of power is involved between the victim and the perpetrators. Adolescent bullying can range from physical bullying (hitting, pushing, kicking) to verbal bullying (name calling, teasing in order to ridicule the person)⁹. Such forms of bullying are highly common among school boys than girls as boys are directly involved in both physical and verbal bullying. Boys who are either incompetent, does not possess heterosexual prowess, and are not aggressive become more targets of bullying by their male peers who are masculine⁹.

Locker-room culture:

At times, discussion of adolescent boys with their peers take place in locker rooms since such discussion involves sexually aggressive and explicit talk about women. Such discussions can range from relationships with girlfriends to treating them as objects of sexual conquest. If such discussion is discovered by the peer group, the speakers often have to face humiliation or are ridiculed and even taunted so that the speakers can reveal details about women's sexuality⁸. Due to this, the discussion at locker room usually takes place silently or in hushed tones. This is known as the locker room culture. The result of this is that most boys discuss about women or their girlfriend's sexuality with their male peers while they keep their emotional attachment with their girlfriend confidential. Thus, boys don't reveal about their emotional intimacy with their girlfriend due to the fear of facing humiliation, criticism and even sarcasm or being ostracized by their peer group⁸.

It is in the light of this context that present paper explores the impact of peer group on the construction of masculinity among high school boys of Kolkata.

Nature and scope of research

The present paper explores how adolescent boys develop and construct their notions of masculinity by interacting with their peers at a school located at South Kolkata.

Research methodology

Research methodology is a science of studying as to how research is carried out scientifically.

The research has been carried out by using the technique of mixed methodology and studies 'thirty' adolescent boys (aged 16-17 years) who belong to both upper and middle classes and study in English medium school (Class XI and XII).

Quantitative research: It is a method which is used in gathering, analysis followed by interpretation and presentation of data in numerical terms⁷.

Qualitative research: This method involves techniques used to gather, analyze, interpret and present narrative information⁷.

Mixed methodology: Mixed methodology integrates both Qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to collect and analyze data, and also to draw inferences in a single program of inquiry⁷.

The research is carried out by Non-Probability Purposive sampling which is based on researcher's judgement followed by Snow-ball sampling where and XII) of Kolkata where research begins with few respondents who suggests few other respondents who are known to them and who can meet the criteria of the research. This continues until a chain of respondents are formed who can furnish proper information about the issue and help to carry out the research.

Data analysis

AGE: All the respondents (school boys) are within the age group of 16-17 years.

GENDER: All the respondents are high school going boys.

SCHOOL: All the boys study in Class XI and XII of English Medium school of South Kolkata.

DESIGNATION: All the school boys are students studying in an English medium school of Kolkata.

- 1. MEANING OF BOYHOOD OR MASCULINITY:** Majority respondents responded that traits like muscular, strength, physical and sexual assertiveness, competence, aggression portrays one's boyhood or masculine identity with the absence of any 'feminine' traits which appears to be unmanly. On the other hand, the remaining boys regarded that meaning of masculinity depends on the way society assigns meaning to it.
- 2. ASSOCIATION OF MASCULINITY WITH MALE-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES:** Out of 30 high school boys, 24 (80%) of them affirmed that involvement in male-oriented activities like sports along with sexually explicit discussion about their girlfriends or friends helps to express their masculinity. On the other hand, the remaining 6 (20%) school boys expressed that masculinity signifies involvement in all kinds of activities irrespective of any gender discrimination. (Table 1 and Figure 1)
- 3. TYPE OF TOPICS OR ISSUES THEY DISCUSS WITH THEIR FRIENDS:** Out of 30 respondents (high school boys), 18 (60%) of them asserted that they mainly discuss sports-related issues (football, cricket, volleyball, wrestling) with their friends. On the other hand, the remaining 12 (40%) boys discuss about issues like girlfriends, body-building and academic topics with their peers. (Table 2 and Figure 2)
- 4. WAYS IN WHICH BOYS TREAT THEIR PEERS (MALE AND FEMALE):** Majority of the adolescent boys affirmed that they interact and mix with both male and female friends based on certain grounds. They tend to interact with those peers who do conform to heterosexual hegemonic masculinity--- they mix with those male friends who are straight, strong, capable, masculine and powerful but ostracize those peers who do not conform to notions of hegemonic masculinity and are regarded as 'effeminate'. Adolescent boys' rapport with their female peers helps them to attain greater status and reputation among his peer group since women are mostly treated as objects of sexual pleasure and entertainment by men.
- 5. TREATMENT OF BOYS BY PEERS OR PEER GROUP:** Most of the adolescent school boys expressed that they are also accepted by their peer group based on whether they conform to the notion of hegemonic masculinity ----- strong, muscular, powerful, sexually assertive, brave. This contrasts with the remaining boys who responded that they are ignored and even ostracized by their peers or peer group as they take interest in activities like dancing (which is regarded as feminine) and are neither muscular nor aggressive which are important markers of masculinity.
- 6. FACTORS WHICH ARE REQUIRED TO CHOSE FRIENDS:** Majority of the school boys mentioned that they chose those friends (male peers) who possesses the traits of masculinity ----- straight, power, violence, competitiveness.
- 7. ROLE OF PEER GROUP IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY:** Out of 30 high school boys, 27 (90%) of them have agreed that peer group always play a significant role in the construction of masculine identity or masculinity since they regard that peer group through its rules and norms constructs an ideal masculine identity. By affirming to the peer

group norms and being accepted by the peers as a part of their group exerts pressure on the boys to abide by the socially constructed norms of masculinity (strength, power, aggression, straight). If the boys are marginalized by their peers or peer group, they are highly criticized for being unable to conform to notion of hegemonic masculinity which produces adverse effects on their future. This contrasts with the remaining 03 (10%) school boys who does not regard peer group as playing an important role for the construction of masculinity. (Table 3 and Figure 3)

Conclusion

Masculinity is socially constructed by the peer group which plays a significant role in developing masculine identity among high school boys. The possession of masculine traits like muscular, strength, powerful, straight help to develop notions of masculinity among adolescent high school boys.

Adolescent boys are mainly involved in male-oriented activities like sports, body-building and also discuss sexually explicit issues about their girlfriends with their peers which also help to construct masculinity.

These boys treat their male peers based on whether they are able to conform to the notion of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity ----- they mix with those male friends who are **straight, strong, capable, masculine and powerful** but ostracize those peers who do not conform to notions of hegemonic masculinity and are regarded as '*effeminate*'. Adolescent boys' rapport with their female peers helps them to attain greater status and reputation among his peer group ***since women are mostly treated as objects of sexual pleasure and entertainment by men.***

Adolescent boys chose those friends (male peers) who possess the traits of masculinity ----- straight, power, violence, competitiveness. This combines with other factors like friendly behavior, helpful nature which are also taken into account while interacting and mixing with both male and female friends.

Thereby, adolescent school boys regarded that peer group always play a significant role in the construction of masculine identity or masculinity since they regard that peer group through its rules and norms constructs an ideal masculine identity. By affirming to the peer group norms and being accepted by the peers as a part of their group exerts pressure on the boys to abide by the socially constructed norms of masculinity (strength, power, aggression, straight). If the boys are marginalized by their peers or peer group, they are highly criticized for being unable to conform to notion of hegemonic masculinity which adversely affect their future.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: ASSOCIATION OF MASCULINITY WITH MALE-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES

ASSOCIATION OF MASCULINITY WITH MALE-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES:	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE (%)
a. Sports (cricket, football, rugby)	24	80
b. Sexually explicit discussion about girlfriends	06	20
TOTAL	30	100

- a. Sports (cricket, football, rugby)
- b. Sexually explicit discussion about girlfriends

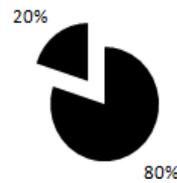


Figure 1: ASSOCIATION OF MASCULINITY WITH MALE-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES

Table 2: TYPE OF TOPICS OR ISSUES THEY DISCUSS WITH THEIR FRIENDS

TYPE OF TOPICS OR ISSUES THEY DISCUSS WITH THEIR FRIENDS	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE (%)
a. Sports	18	60
b. Girlfriends	06	20
c. Body-building	03	10
d. Studies	03	10
e. Others	00	00
TOTAL	30	100

- a. Sports
- b. Girlfriends
- c. Body-building
- d. Studies
- e. Others



Figure 2: TYPE OF TOPICS OR ISSUES THEY DISCUSS WITH THEIR FRIENDS

Table 3: ROLE OF PEER GROUP IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY

ROLE OF PEER GROUP IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE (%)
Yes	27	90
No	03	10
Total	30	100

- Yes
- No



Figure 3: ROLE OF PEER GROUP IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY