

C.J. Pascoe on “Fag Discourse”

C.J. Pascoe conducted ethnographic research in a California high school on “fag discourse,” i.e., the way the term “fag” is used by high school boys as they do masculinity.

Although “fag” refers to homosexuality, fag discourse is not just about homophobia. “Fag” is the opposite of masculine. “A boy could get called a fag for exhibiting any sort of behavior defined as non-masculine (although not necessarily behaviors aligned with femininity) in the world of River High: being stupid, incompetent, dancing, caring too much about clothing, being too emotional or expressing interest (sexual or platonic) in other guys.”

The term “gay” is used to mean “stupid” and is used by both boys and girls without the gender-loaded meaning of “fag.”

Some boys said they wouldn’t use “fag” around a homosexual peer. “According to this group of boys, gay is a legitimate, if marginalized, social identity. If a man is gay, there may be a chance he could be considered masculine by other men.”

“Fag” is not a static identity that sticks to particular boys. It is a “fluid identity” that boys struggle to avoid by passing it to others. Anyone can be labeled a fag.

“In imitative performances the fag discourse functions as a constant reiteration of the fag’s existence, affirming that the fag is out there; at any moment a boy can become a fag. At the same time these performances demonstrate that the boy who is invoking the fag is *not* a fag. By invoking it so often, boys remind themselves and each other that at any point they can become fags if they are not sufficiently masculine.”

Through joking about each other being fags boys “assure themselves and each other of their masculinity through repeated repudiations of a non-masculine position of the abject.”

“Differences between white boys’ and African- American boys’ meaning making around clothes and dancing reveal ways in which the fag as the abject position is racialized.”