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One of the Boys: Masculinity, Homophobia, and Modern Manhood

David Plummer
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“Poofter” is hardly a common term in American English, but “faggot” is. Both refer to an effeminate homosexual male. More importantly, while one is British and the other is American, both derogate the male at whom they are thrown. Australian researcher Plummer traces the recognition and use as one of the homophobic ways that the self-conscious male asserts his own masculinity by putting down another.

Homophobia is the term Plummer selects as the prime research objective, noting its earliest use in kindergarten, the increased incidence throughout pre-pubertal development and the crescendo of use and effect through adolescence. It is only with the development of independent identity in early manhood that it tends to decline. One of Plummer’s most important discoveries is that the nature and effects are fluid. The most important point of fluidity is the shift of emphasis in the meaning of “poofter.” With sexual maturity in the teen years, it becomes an accusation of homosexuality. It is as though the supposed sexual preference shifting from the opposite sex to other males is the crowning insult. Earlier, when the term is used to put down any other male for any difference deemed to be un-male, such as liking academics over sport, with adolescence, sexual orientation is the prime characteristic.

Plummer has interrogated thirty volunteers who answered many questions ranging from family religious affiliation through political persuasion. The volunteers were sure of their sexual orientation, and as a matter of fact, chose a number from one to ten to register their general attitude toward anyone being straight or gay.

Though the author is careful to theorize on the effects of homophobic insult on character and homosocial development, it is in the quoted testimony that the most valuable matter lies. For example, about sexual education, one volunteer testifies “I remember … in year eight, having the most appalling attempt at sex education … pretty awful teacher.”

Though Plummer is a medical doctor, no other qualification is given about him. Nevertheless, the care he applied to conducting the research for this book and the relevance of the testimony mark it valuable in a field little explored.

MARTIN SHAW (November / December 1999)

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