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Review for Journal of Education Policy

The male in the head: young people, heterosexuality and power by Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson, Tufnell Press, London (1998), 231pp, price [not given], ISBN 1 872767 95 8.

The Male in the Head is an account of how young people in England construct heterosexual sexual relationships, and an argument that the process, for both women and men, is controlled by male interests. The book is based on two major interview projects carried out in London and Manchester between 1989 and 1992 and these, in turn, arose out of a concern to investigate 'risk-taking' in sexual relationships in the wake of concerns about AIDS. The authors argue that the privileging of male bodily pleasure and the lack of a speaking space for an 'independent female sexuality' not only reproduces the power inequalities of men and women, but contributes to a culture of sexuality in which 'safe sex' is difficult to consistently enact.

The chapters of the book quote lavishly from large numbers of lengthy interviews, to show how young men and women reported on their experiences of first sex, using condoms, sex education, desire, etc. The interview findings are neither presented in overview summary, nor left to speak for themselves. Instead they are used to illustrate a case being made by the authors about the power and effects of 'the-male-in-the-head' in sexual practices. The rationale for the approach is explained in two initial theoretical chapters, and in an appendix discussing in more detail the methodology of the project. In its theoretical framing, the book discusses different and contenting theories of identity and sexuality, both inside and outside feminism. It argues that some of the differences in the theories can be accounted for by considering the different 'layers' that make up heterosexual power: language and discourse; agency and action; social institutions; embodied practices; and historical specificity and change. Methodologically then, the study wants to not restrict itself to the interpretations made by the young people (who will necessarily have a more limited perspective on some of the broader layers), but nor does it want to discount these (since they are essential to understanding embodied practices within a particular discursive and historically specific context).

There was much in this study that I admired, and it will be an important addition to the literature. However I also had two somewhat paradoxical reactions to the case it offered. On the one hand I felt that it was a rather wordy account of something that is fairly well known (the sexual double standard); and on the other hand, I felt that I was not entirely convinced by its arguments.

In terms of the micro levels of interpretation in the body of the book, I sometimes felt that the authors' argument was presenting a more exaggerated and unitary case than the quotations themselves suggested (though it is of course a strength of the book that those quotations are there to be judged in this way). One of the problems here is that at times the authors are happy to take statements at face value (eg that males are not so concerned about their body, or about how women judge them), but at other times they are prepared to see statements as not so transparent, and as a form of code.

In terms of the overall argument too, there did seem to be a sense that the book was framed by the assumptions that Foucault and others have identified as the everyday commonsense of professional discourse today: that good sexuality is that which is most openly talked about, most openly debated. I would have liked to see some critical attention to this assumption. There seemed to be a sense too that empowered female sexuality would take the form of a unified rational subject who would insist on condom use, and this too is an assumption that warrants some greater interrogation.

The Male in the Head provides a wealth of material for courses on sexuality, public policy and education. This book shows very clearly that risk-taking and condom-use need to be understood in the broader context of how sexual relations are defined and negotiated and enacted. It shows too that the issue of power, of the privileging of a particular set of masculine meanings to define what matters, is a central issue in this and a central and difficult problem for policy to confront and change.

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