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# ‘Bitchy girls and silly boys’: Gender and exclusion from school

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## Introduction

This paper is concerned with findings about gender which form part of a larger ethnographic study. The study was undertaken during my employment as a local authority (school district) Pupil Support Officer, where my work involved the support of young people who had been permanently excluded (expelled) from school for a variety of reasons, including sexual assault, violence against their peers or teachers, and what was known as ‘persistent disruptive behaviour’. It focussed on the effects of instances of actual or threatened permanent exclusion from secondary school on pupils, families and professionals in an urban local authority: ‘Enway’.

The focus of the paper is the effects that professionals’ assumptions about gender-identity and sexuality can have on effective support planning for young people at risk of or subject to permanent exclusion; and the lived experience of these young people with regard to their gender-identity and sexuality, with particular regard to how this can contribute towards exclusion. It begins with a story about Nama, a young woman of Iraqi Kurdish heritage, who had been excluded for aggressive language and behaviour. Nama’s story introduces some of the complex gendered issues experienced by students at risk of or subject to a permanent exclusion and how these interact with issues of class and ethnicity. I will also briefly discuss the connection between habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), embodiment and (what I call) the ‘extended body’ as a theoretical background to a discussion of sexuality, gender and identity, through three cases of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’. This is where the title, ‘Bitchy Girls and Silly Boys’ comes from: I was helping a young person at risk of permanent exclusion get started in a new school, and the head of year explained to the boy sitting in front of him: ‘when you start here, you’ll see lots of bitchy girls and silly boys’: an example of gender roles being described in a way congruent with ‘compulsory heterosexuality’. The conclusion will clarify some of the links between gender normativity and instances of threatened or actual permanent exclusion.

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## **Nama's story**

Nama came to the UK from Iraq with her family when she was little. A Kurdish Muslim family, they were fleeing violence in the country. At the age of fourteen, Nama was already used to school inclusion/exclusion procedures. She was one of the only pupils I worked with who made her own phone calls to ask what was happening with her school place. She was discussed – for the second time- at the Enway 'Hard to Place' Pupil Placement Panel at the beginning of January 2008. This Panel consisted of around fifteen head teachers and specialist professionals, and was held every two weeks. Each time, we discussed around 25 students who were moving between schools due either to their being at risk of permanent exclusion or having other needs that made them what was termed 'Hard to Place'. This included refugee and asylum seeker children, young people who were chronic non-attenders and who were sometimes termed 'school phobic', and young people who had moved into the borough because of a change in foster carer. Nama had moved schools for the first time after losing her temper and screaming at a classroom of teachers and pupils and throwing a desk across the room. She had a reasonably settled start at her new school, but sat through several weeks in consistently sulky disengagement. One day she exploded into a single lightning outburst of swearing and screaming in class. The Panel's Safeguarding and Social Care (social services) representative, a senior social worker, updated the rest of us on what may have instigated the event: 'Her brother found her with two boys in her room- he beat her up...she was taken under police protection because of ongoing violence towards her; ...we accommodated her (with a foster carer)...she's scared of her family but was still talking to them on the phone...'

'That's very manipulative', volunteered Enway's Head of School Admissions '...she's now with her uncle back in Enway...' continued the social worker, '...we will follow up with an assessment of the uncle and family and do a core assessment to look at safety in her life...'

'She's a very, very manipulative girl...' added the head teacher at the Pupil Referral Unit (a school for excluded children) who had previously worked with Nama, '...this is a person running the adults in great numbers...'

'...and there is still an unevaluated and difficult-to-quantify risk to this child...' explained the social worker, adding that there had been talk within the Safeguarding team of her being at risk of either a

forced marriage or an 'honour killing', in punishment for the incident in her bedroom.

The concept of 'manipulation' seemed to me to be strangely incongruous when applied to a young person who was both lacking in control over her life choices and living with such a high level of apparent risk from her own family. I wondered if it had its roots in a stereotyped view of girls belonging to what was seen as Nama's culture and of gender-appropriate behaviour.

My manager, the Head of Inclusion, told me that she thought a boy would not have been called 'manipulative' as Nama was. I sought advice from a trusted colleague who sometimes sat on the Pupil Placement Panel: a senior education psychologist, and a thoughtful practitioner.

I gave him the background, and then asked, 'What does this word 'manipulative' really mean in terms of Nama's actual needs and the delivery of the most appropriate support?'

He replied, 'The 'manipulative' thing is a red herring...', and explained that Nama's ambivalence was something everybody demonstrates at one time or another. He suggested that there was a possibility that Nama was seeing her family as both good and bad, dealing with this by imagining that there are two families- a friendly, nurturing family, and a persecuting family. It was a Kleinian perspective he offered and I was struck by the potential level of understanding and empathy that this kind of interagency collaboration between myself, a teaching professional, and an education psychologist could engender. I felt this way of thinking was missing from the Panel, where delegates had colluded to describe her as 'manipulative'. This collusion had happened within what I call the 'extended body'.

## **The 'extended body'**

In seeking to understand the complex forces involved in the assessment, placement, reintegration and ongoing support of the pupils with whom I was working, I turned to Foucault (1977), who discusses authoritarian control of people's physical bodies in institutions such as prisons, hospitals and schools. He includes 'educationalists' in a list of those through whom authoritarian power is channelled, along with psychologists, judges, and members of the prison service (p.21). When pupil support officers, heads of

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year, learning mentors, social workers, attendance advisory officers and education psychologists are faced with support planning for pupils with behaviour management issues, aspects of the pupil's 'attitude'; 'behaviour'; 'intention'; and 'mental state' become subject to a similar authoritarian power. Unlike Foucault's 'docile bodies' locked physically into prison cells, hospital beds and school timetables, these aspects are not to do with the physical body, but are extensions of it, and fall within what I have termed the 'extended body'.

The vulnerability of the extended body is in its ability to be extended further, providing more space within which a person can be described, stereotyped, 'supported', controlled, or discussed. These discussions transform the student-subject's extended body into a constituency of 'contested space': a space in which a young person's agency can be expressed. This contested space of the extended body is where people can project their own classed, raced, gendered readings of someone – sometimes described as labels – but is also what the anthropologist Jafari Sinclair Allen (2009) calls 'a space of critical enunciation'. This means that just as negative assumptions are made about a young person's 'attitude' or social class, the extended body provides a space in which young people can re-narrativise themselves – tell their own story – to counteract or run alongside the multiple pathologising stories told about them in official behaviour logs, social services documentation, and exclusion panel paperwork.

### Language and Power

Butler (1999) explains Wittig's conception of language as '...a set of acts, repeated over time, that produce reality-effects that are eventually misinterpreted as "facts" (p.147). I had a sense that the 'manipulative' quality ascribed to Nama, originally invoked by the interjection of a senior administrator at the Panel, had been taken on as a 'fact' by the other professionals, and that this (as well as the reasons for the danger Nama was in with regard to her family) had something to do with the fact that she was a girl. If I was right, what effect could a gendered label of this kind have on a pupil's chances of being kept included, safe and emotionally supported at school?

I am reminded here of the idea that the '... power of language isn't purely abstract...it enacts physical and material violence on our bodies' (LeBesco, 2001, p.76). Thus, the label 'manipulative' had the power to

undermine the professionals' belief and understanding of the actual danger Nama was in to the point at which something terrible could happen to her. It was this label which prevented Safeguarding staff – before it was too late – from planning a visit to check on Nama and to find out if she was in danger of a forced marriage.

### Habitus and embodiment

According to Hoy (1999), Bourdieu '...sees comportment as predominantly configured by the social structures (the 'habitus') that individuals acquire through their upbringing in a particular culture or class' (p.4). Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' can thus be employed to explain how a girl, for example, will have learned from her family and her culture from a very early age what the normed way of being a girl looks like (in other words, the '...internalization of the principles of a cultural arbitrary capable of perpetuating itself...' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.31). Csordas (1999) explains that '(e)mbodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience...' (p.143). So a person's 'comportment', whilst deriving from its habitus, can embody, or is made up of, the *experience* of that habitus. Nama's anger – arguably a psychological (and biological) process<sup>1</sup> – did not appear out of nowhere 'in a pure and unmediated form' (Blackman, 2001, p.210); that is, it was not simply 'manipulative', but was related to lived experiences involving her family, history, religion, gender, and peers.

In the context of thinking about schooling, I understand all this to mean that there is an expected, normed, and stereotyped way that teachers and other professionals expect a girl, for example, to embody 'girlness'. Nama's anger did not fit into this.

### Habitus, embodiment and the 'extended body'

The vulnerability of the 'extended body' can be seen when a mother is given a prison sentence as a sanction for her child's non-attendance at school. This demonstrates the reach of the extended body: a person's physical body can be locked up because of something their child did.

The link between the concept of embodiment and that of the 'extended body' is that professionals' normed *expectations* of 'appropriate' (and, in this instance, gendered) embodiment are projected inside the

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**contested space** of the extended body. Assumptions about gender do not just affect the way people *talk about* children; they *act directly on the child*<sup>2</sup>. The relationship between ‘embodiment’ and the ‘extended body’, then, is that the ‘extended body’ describes the contested space within which arguments about ‘appropriate’ forms of embodiment – in other words, normed ways of being – are conducted. One of my hopes on starting my ethnography study was that if the situation was documented and explained, teachers and the other professionals working with young people at risk of exclusion might begin to ‘...deflate the tendency to think that there can only be one set ...of normal, socially-normed ways to exist...’ (Hoy, 1999, p.9). Talking about the ‘extended body’ constitutes an effort to deconstruct the effects and problems of assumptions made about embodiment with regard to the interaction between a person and the multifarious cultural, gendered, biological, theoretical, and social pressures at play. The extended body is where pronouncements on embodiment occur and where they are contested. It is also where the one-that-embodies engages in the task of proving him or herself worthy of inclusion. Is this a space for the exercise of ‘agency’, or ‘the plasticity of habitus’(Hoy, 1999, p14)?

I want to look now at this theory in action, applying it to ethnographic examples.

### **Sexuality, gender, and identity: ignored, invisible, or pathologised**

‘Compulsory heterosexuality’ (Francis, 2005, p.14) is a device of institutional norming which refers to the way in which young people are required to exist according to stereotyped gender expectations. It exerts its own specific pressures (including economic pressures) on those young people who find themselves transgressing the boundaries of what is expected of them in terms of their gender identity. When a young person in Enway who is permanently excluded or is at risk of being excluded demonstrates concerns regarding sexuality-identity issues, the matter tends to be ignored, invisible, or pathologised<sup>3</sup>. I worked in Enway for almost three years, and during this time, I came across just three cases where there was an overt sexuality-identity component to the case as well as a risk of permanent exclusion. This in itself is concerning, as with around four hundred case-files in my battered grey filing cabinet, I should have met many more gay young people. However, the three cases I have seen and which are described below are significant in themselves.

### **(1)The Appledown ‘Lesbians’**

Vicky, 14, was at risk of a foster care placement due to conflict with her mother. Her papers appeared at the Pupil Placement Panel after she kissed an older girl in the school foyer and ran down the corridor shrieking ‘We’re lesbians!’

The school’s Inclusion Manager (the senior teacher in charge of pastoral care) immediately separated the girls, and wrote up their behaviour as ‘disturbing’. Vicky was not given the chance to discuss her sexuality and was placed at an off-site placement for six months- a small unit for young people who have been excluded or suspended. Most young people stay at this unit for one to three weeks.

Stepping into a young person’s extended body (and the gendered aspects of this, subject to heteronormativity as they are, are particularly vulnerable to description) and labelling the embodiment of sexuality ‘disturbed’ effectively renders that aspect of her ‘invalid’. Normative lines have been drawn in the contested space of her extended body, and she has not been given support to develop the ‘psy’ techniques (Rose, 1999) (such as self awareness, resilience, or a safe way to express emotions) and the self-management tools to embark on a self-mapping (or a self-identifying) enterprise.

### **(2) ‘Bizarre, disturbed and weird’**

At age 14 Kate, like Vicky, was at risk of being placed in foster care. Her social worker brought her case to the Pupil Placement Panel seeking an alternative to mainstream education. At the Panel meeting the social worker reported that Kate had shaved her head and had said she felt she was ‘a girl stuck in a boy’s body’. As an afterthought, the social worker told the Panel that Kate had threatened to drown her baby brother in the local canal.

The social worker had described head-shaving as ‘bizarre, disturbed and weird’, only mentioning the threat to drown the sibling as incidental information. Discussing the case in more detail, I realised that the possibility that Kate could be considering her gender identity and that she could be transgendered was not being accepted by her social worker as important.

Seeking to investigate and challenge the apparent inexorability of sexual difference, this young person had transgressed the normed borders of ‘acceptable behaviour’. Kate’s mental state (distressed), and her

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intent, attitude, and behaviour (for example, the shaving of her head), being conducted as they were both on the physical body and inside the porous skin of the extended body's contested space, became vulnerable to description as 'bizarre', and therefore invalid.

### **(3)'Over my dead body...'**

Michael, aged 12, was a heavy-set British boy of Caribbean heritage<sup>4</sup> with a shaved head. He had a history of truanting and risk-taking (climbing on the school roof) and was unable to focus in class. His headteacher described him as 'a thug' - a word with racist overtones - and told me, 'over my dead body is he coming back here'. When I met Michael and heard him talk, using my body as '...a tool for research...' (Csordas, 1999, p.149) with '...somatic modes of attention...' (*ibid*, p.153), I paid attention to my 'gaydar'<sup>5</sup>, perceiving that Michael seemed to be 'camp'<sup>6</sup>.

No other professional noticed Michael's 'campness', and did not take it seriously when I suggested that he may be distracted from succeeding in school due to possible sexuality-identity issues that needed to be explored. Having been placed in a small, supportive school for young people struggling to fit in at mainstream school, Michael has since 'come out' as gay. But even before he came out, professional attention to Michael's struggling with his sexuality/identity might have explained some of what was behind his lack of focus, and at least warranted investigation. It could even have prevented his exclusion from school. Butler (1999, p.147) argues that heteronormativity, or 'compulsory heterosexuality', is so pervasive as to prevent observers, such as two (usually excellent) inclusion managers and a headteacher, in Michael's case, from seeing the possibility of someone, especially a black boy described as 'a thug', with all the masculine overtones that go with his image, as possibly being gay.

The stories of Vicky, Kate, and Michael, above, challenge heteronormative comprehensions of sexuality. Even where issues of sexuality and gender identity were only a possible source of anguish, in all cases, the young people were displaying emotionally distressed behaviour that could have led the professionals working with them to at least *offer* information and support on issues of sexuality and sexual/gender identity. Until Michael's placement in an alternative school, I could not find one other

professional among them (they included a social worker, a family therapist, a headteacher, and two 'inclusion' managers) who seriously considered that these three young people might be gay or transgendered.

There is still a long way to go before issues of sexuality/identity are open for discussion in all British schools. I think that some permanent exclusions could be avoided if this were not the case.

### **Other aspects of gender and exclusion from school**

In addition to the stories of sexuality and gender/sexual identity, the ethnography discovered a range of other issues around gender. One of these concerned the capacity of mixed and single-sex schools to offer a crystallised understanding of some of the broad accepted understandings about gender identity and sexualised behaviour within the Enway context. For example, it was found that in all-boys' schools, teachers tended to use more physical contact with the students than in mixed or girls' schools. In one school, the headteacher, wandering the corridors in search of an untucked shirt-tail, would pick up the offending boy by his waistband and shake him down into his trousers.

An overview of gendered class reproduction through GCSE choices<sup>7</sup> (for example, the over-promotion of Design and Technology for boys, and Social Care for girls and encouragement into vocational qualifications such as plumbing and childcare) revealed a focussed effect of gender-related pressures on young people. These were especially problematic in the midst of the transition between schools which is often forced as a result of a permanent exclusion or a risk of permanent exclusion, as subject choices were often made in the pressured environment of a school entry interview made by a suspicious pastoral team leader, rather than over the two weeks of thought-provoking activities usually provided to enable a careful choice to be made.

'Horizontal violence' (Friere, 1996) in schools was found to often be manifested as sexual aggression, and linked with young people's experiences of domestic violence. Many cases of permanent exclusion from school have involved young people who have demonstrated sexual aggression or violence following the witnessing of domestic violence, usually perpetrated by men on women. Friere has labelled

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'horizontal violence' as that which peers inflict on each other to gain a modicum of power within an oppressive system. If we see the pressure exerted by a school system that engages heteronormativity as a form of oppression along with other kinds of cultural normativities, it can be seen how this 'jostling for position' can result in sexual or gendered violence.

The ethnography also gives account of the work already being done in Enway to develop support strategies and self-management skills designed to tackle the negative effects of gender-normed understandings. For example, in his new alternative school Michael (above) was able to attend a boys' group run by a 'learning mentor'<sup>8</sup> which encouraged discussion about role models, sexuality, motivation and health.

### **Gendered assumptions**

Because of the range of pressures due to perceptions about gender and gender normativity discovered in the ethnography, I suspect that some permanent exclusions from school occur because of habitual negative assumptions about pupils, most of which are seeded within the contested space of pupils' extended bodies. Gender is a useful prism through which to investigate this problem because its inexorable 'biological' reputation stretches the limits of stereotype deconstruction and ideas about the 'extended body'. Normed, fixed and essentialised understandings about gender and its interaction with culture, ethnicity, and sexuality/identity have a profound and complex effect on judgments made about the extended bodies of pupils at risk of or subject to a permanent exclusion. Because of this, the contested space of the extended body becomes populated with normative pronouncements about pupils' genders and gendered behaviours.

### **Gender and the extended body**

When the behaviour, intention, attitude and mental state of the extended body of a permanently excluded pupil (or a pupil at risk of permanent exclusion) is considered with reference to gender, the contested space of that extended body can become contested because of its gender. Thus the invoking of an appropriate level of empathy and practical support for Nama in the face of her being labelled 'manipulative' was conducted within the contested space of her 'femaleness'. The perceived 'fact' of the gender-identities of Nama, Vicky, Kate and Michael (and the interactions between this and their perceived

ethnicities and cultural backgrounds) was a normed state – one *expected to be* embodied in a certain way – against which criticisms could be made on the basis of relativity, undermining or screening appropriate assessment and support planning procedures behind a fog of misconceptions.

### **Agency and the 'plasticity' of habitus**

I would maintain that understandings about gender derive from the inevitable habitus (Bourdieu, 1997), the habits of class, style, belief and assumption reproduced in us by our families and cultures. I do not think that most of the teachers and other professionals who are involved with inclusion and exclusion at school reflexively or purposely make negative judgements about pupils on the basis of their gender identities. If, for example, a teacher has never met or thought about a transgendered person, it is less likely that students' thoughts on the flexibility or dysphoria of their own genders would be taken seriously, or even noticed. The 'fixed biology' of our genders might make 'changing gender' seem impossible, if it has not yet been confronted as a possibility. However, as Hoy (1999) states, as a result of the 'all-pervasive' quality of habitus, '(w)e tend to prefer the familiar that we have already coped with and we build up non conscious, unwilling strategies for avoiding the perceptions of other possibilities...' (p.15) Teacher fatigue in the face of multiple administrative, financial and emotional pressures must play a part in the development of this habit of avoidance. But this is not an inevitable state of being, and I think that there is a space for the exertion of professional agency in the idea that habitus does have '...a degree of plasticity...' (*ibid*, p.14).

### **Conclusion**

If schools are understood to be institutions which reproduce the social order (Bourdieu, 1977; Freire, 1996; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003), then they must be understood as institutions which are bent towards reproducing the 'normed' gendered aspects of this. And, I would argue, part of the expression of administrative power through this normalising process requires recourse to '...performative exclusions that mark the threshold of the abject' (Weiss, 1999, p.50; Kristeva, 1982). Those working to support pupils at risk of or subject to a permanent exclusion from school need to take into consideration the idea that they will be especially vulnerable to abjection through the inequitable results of this (often gendered) norming process.

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## Notes

- 1 Depending on your theoretical background
- 2 The Panel delegates' naming of Nama as 'manipulative', for example, opens her up to the risk of further violence against her.
- 3 My use of the words 'gay' and 'lesbian' as opposed to 'homosexual' here was a conscious choice because I dislike the pathologising implications of that word.
- 4 I acknowledge that these ethnicity labels are problematic and run the risk of essentialising experience based on assumptions about a person's experience with regard to their perceived ethnicity
- 5 The sense or 'vibe' that lesbian, gay and transgendered people and their families and friends can have that someone may be lesbian, gay or transgendered
- 6 'Camp' should be understood here specifically from a positive and non-heterocentric point of view and can refer to people of varying sexualities including heterosexuality
- 7 Compulsory examined courses in all subjects running over two years from age 14 to age 16
- 8 Learning Mentors have been instituted in English schools in order to deal with what is termed 'barriers to learning'. These may be social, behavioural, emotional, or learning-related.