

Title

Reframing AFAB Gender Policing: A Comparative Analysis of “Tomboy” and “Boyish” Discourses in Western and Japanese Contexts

Research Overview (within 50 words)

This study comparatively examines “tomboy” discourse in Western contexts and “boyish” discourse in Japan to develop an analytical framework for AFAB (Assigned Female At Birth) gender policing at the level of intelligibility. It theorizes how these discourses conditionally construct deviance and regulate the intelligibility of femininity.

Purpose of Study

This study aims to advance research on gender policing in educational spaces by focusing on AFAB (Assigned Female At Birth) subjects. It comparatively analyzes Japanese “boyish” discourse and Western “tomboy” discourse in order to systematically examine their meanings and functions.

Gender policing refers to the processes through which children monitor and regulate one another’s behaviors according to gender norms, thereby reproducing gender order. Earlier research, rooted in the hidden curriculum framework, conceptualized schools and teachers as primary agents of gender socialization. Subsequent studies shifted attention to children’s agency and peer interactions, conceptualizing gender as a performative and ongoing process.

More recent scholarship has extended this line of inquiry by asking not only how individuals become gendered subjects, but also what counts as intelligible as “female” or “male.” However, many studies still presuppose gender categories and deviance to varying degrees, leaving insufficiently examined the question of how deviance is constructed and how it delineates the boundaries of gender norms.

Pascoe (2007), drawing on Butler’s theory of performativity, addressed this issue by analyzing “fag discourse” as a mechanism through which these boundaries are produced. However, comparable analyses at the level of AFAB gender regulation remain limited.

Armstrong’s (2014) study of “slut discourse” represents a significant contribution, often regarded as an AFAB counterpart to Pascoe’s work. It illuminates dynamics of hierarchy and conflict among girls. However, Armstrong’s analysis primarily focuses on regulation within already intelligible femininity, rather than interrogating how femininity itself becomes intelligible. In other words, it does not fully address how deviance constitutes the category of “female” itself.

This study builds on this gap by re-examining “tomboy” and “boyish” discourses at the level of the boundaries of intelligibility. While these discourses are often understood as temporarily legitimizing gender-nonconforming practices among AFAB individuals, existing research suggests that they may also function as that which ought to be abjected under specific conditions and temporal constraints, thereby reorienting AFAB subjects toward heteronormative femininity. under specific conditions and temporal constraints, ultimately reorienting subjects toward heteronormative femininity.

Thus, this study explores the possibility that these discourses may function in ways analogous to “fag discourse” among AMAB (Assigned Male At Birth) subjects. However, this potential has not yet been systematically theorized, and these discourses have not been sufficiently developed as analytical frameworks for AFAB gender policing.

Accordingly, this study aims to provide a systematic conceptualization of “tomboy” and “boyish” discourses through a comparative review of research in Western and Japanese contexts, and to establish a theoretical foundation for analyzing AFAB gender policing at the level of gender intelligibility.

Research Methods

This study is a theoretical inquiry based on a comparative literature review of sociological and educational research on “tomboy” discourse in Western contexts and “boyish” discourse in Japan.

Specifically, it examines: differences in semantic meanings and conceptual scope, their relationships with sexuality and temporality, and their discursive functions in relation to AFAB gender regulation.

Through this analysis, the study explores how gender intelligibility is constructed.

Results and Discussion

The analysis suggests that “tomboy” discourse in Western contexts becomes closely associated with lesbian labeling particularly during adolescence, and that this stigmatized labeling functions to reorient individuals toward heteronormative femininity.

In contrast, Japanese “boyish” discourse encompasses a broader range of meanings, including personality traits, appearance, and cultural practices, and is less directly tied to sexuality. However, this ambiguity should not be interpreted as simple tolerance. Such forms of acceptance may be predicated on the unintelligibility of non-heterosexual modes of being, grounded in the presumption of heterosexuality. This is exemplified in discourses such as those surrounding athletic girls, where gender-transgressive practices are publicly sanctioned under the assumption of heterosexuality, and in the discourse of otokoyaku (male-role performers) in the Takarazuka Revue. This comparison suggests that while AFAB gender regulation at the level of intelligibility shares certain cross-cultural dynamics, it also involves locally specific mechanisms of regulation. These differences may be understood in relation to processes of modernization, including the incorporation, adaptation, and hybridization of Western sexual norms.

By systematically analyzing “tomboy” and “boyish” discourses, this study contributes to the development of an analytical framework for AFAB gender policing that has thus far remained under-theorized, and provides a foundation for future research in global gender and education studies.

Keywords

Gender policing; AFAB; Tomboy; Boyish; Gender intelligibility