ABSTRACT

MASCULINE IDEALS AND MALE PRACTICE AMONG A GROUP OF PAKISTANIS IN NORWAY – INITIAL THOUGHTS FROM A RESEARCH PROJECT

Thomas Michael Walle, Norwegian Social Research (NOVA), Norway

Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference
August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

I would like to present some thoughts from my in-progress research on Pakistanis in Oslo, Norway. The fieldwork period will have started, but not been completed in time of the conference.

The paper will address some overall issues related to the study of gender, in general, and masculinities, in particular, in a minority situation. The first issue centres on the contradiction between an individualistic and holistic structuring of society. If we are to understand this properly, it extends beyond the mere discussion of individual rights vs. group rights, to address the fundamentally different perception of the person. It has been argued that the concept of the self of a Punjabi person is not to be equated with the western concept of ‘one self, one body’, but is rather constituted through its relationship with a plurality of bodies. How does such a perspective fit with the increasingly individual approach to gender identity in the western world? Do we miss something crucial in our failure to acknowledge the potential influence a more holistic mindset may have on the construction and perception of gender identity and gender relations?

The second issue is related to the first, in focussing on the potential generation gap among immigrant groups regarding the extent to which holistic or individualistic perceptions are predominant. How does different adoptions to a more individualistic perceptions effect perception of gender in different contexts? A continuing migration to Norway has as its consequence that the concept “generation” encompasses both a division of people regarding age and a division regarding years of dwelling in this individualistic oriented state. This complicates the issue, since two persons of same age with the same ethnic background, in some respect may be said to belong to different generations.

The third issue focus on the need to acknowledge that the general image of the ‘ethnic masculinities’ in media and among people in general, often an image of violent, socially maladjusted men, serves a role in the support for white, hegemonic masculinities. Being regarded the bearers of unwanted, hyper-masculinity, the image of immigrant men as the “folk devil” draws attention away from the structural dominance of white, middleclass men in so many areas of society. However, this doesn’t imply that male domination is not an important issue within immigrant groups and regarding immigrant men in general. Ethnic masculinities must be studied in its own right, rather than being positioned uncritically as ‘subordinated’ to hegemonic ideals. This will allow for the dual purpose of anthropology: 1) to document and valorise the richness and diversity of human ways of life, and 2) to expose, analyze and critique human inequality and domination.