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## **YOUNG MEN'S VULNERABILITY IN CONSTITUTING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN SEXUAL RELATIONS**

### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a qualitative analysis of the accounts of young men on their experiences of heterosexual encounters. Based on data collected in Ireland using 17 focus groups with 124 young men aged 14-19 years (a subsection of a wider study), the manner in which intricate peer group mechanisms acted as surveillance strategies in regulating the young men towards presenting themselves in ways consistent with hegemonic manifestations of masculinity is explored. However, there were also elements of resistance to such a culture in the way in which sexual pleasure for some young men was derived relationally through giving pleasure rather than merely through mechanical, emotionally-detached sexual acts that characterize hegemonic masculinity. In emphasizing male vulnerabilities such as uncertainty, fear, and rejection in the realm of sexuality, it is proposed that one must not lose sight of the broader context of male sexual dominance for which, as data indicate, men themselves pay a price.

Sexual health is inherently connected to gender and sexuality. It is not only concerned with the physical . . . but also with the social/cultural (for example, how young people behave with each other and with the opposite gender; how they negotiate their sexual and relationship desires), and with the emotional (for example, how young men and women develop in their social context and how they feel about themselves) (Blake 2004, p. 155).

With this broad definition of sexual health in mind, a qualitative analysis of young men's accounts of their experiences in negotiating heterosexual liaisons in a peer culture of compulsory male-dominated heterosexuality is presented. A focus on peer

influences on the development of a masculine identity is particularly important during adolescence as masculinity may be referenced by virtue of career success and one's capacity as a breadwinner in adulthood, and in a more flexible way in older years (Diamond, 2006). In particular, what Measor et al (2000, p. 101) have coined 'the price [men] pay for their dominance,' that is, the vulnerabilities and pressures that young men face in trying to live up to ideals of gendered normative expectations are foregrounded in this article. Male vulnerabilities are accentuated in the course of the analysis in an effort to move away from traditional notions of male dominance and to lay bare more complex notions around male sexual perspectives that include uncertainty, apprehension, disquiet and rejection. One of the themes that will be explored is the way in which the young men's quest to be adept at sexual technique is not merely rooted in self-serving motives to achieve sexual mastery, but is linked to an aspiration to please a sex partner.

In emphasising the costs of masculinity to individual men in terms of pain and hurt, the notion that men as a group benefit from institutional privileges at the expense of women as a group must be borne in mind (Messner, 2000). Indeed, feminist work since the 1960s has focused on sexuality as a site of patriarchal relations, with women suffering through sexual violence, pornography, sexual coercion, and in the face of economic dependency, sexual servicing of men's needs. However, since the 1990s there is a developing genre of work on the flip side of male sexual dominance that draws attention to the manner in which boys are socialized into outward displays of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) necessitating manifestations of toughness, power, and authority, while just beneath the surface lie anxiety and insecurity (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Sewell, 1997; Measor et al., 2000; Frosh et al., 2002).

The problem of 'the real man trap' (Blake and Brown, 2004), or as Pollack (1999) puts it the 'boy code' - the notion that young men are regulated and controlled towards displays of macho behaviour - has featured in scholarship on sexuality for the past few decades. Holland et al (1998, p.150) have analysed the cultural imperative towards sexual dominance among young men, noting the vulnerability that boys can experience in the process of becoming 'real' men. In particular, they consider the manner in which the peer group makes demands and pressurizes young men towards manifestations of hegemonic masculinity against the backdrop of the risk of ridicule. Based on focus groups and in-depth interviews involving young men in the 14-16 year age bracket, Wight (1994) similarly described how interactions between

boys were mediated by talk about sex, often taking the form of insults and taunts. He noted (1994, p.p. 719-20) that, 'To avoid ridicule the boys not only conform to a conventional and rather restricted norm of masculinity but . . . they actively affirm and reproduce this norm to avoid being targeted for jibes.'

In a British study of secondary school pupils, Mac an Ghail (1994, p. 91) writes that the 'pervasiveness of the categorical imperatives to act like heterosexual men circumscribed the peer groups' everyday cultural practices.' Mac an Ghail noted that young men's sex talk functioned to validate their sense of masculinity, for example, through sexual performance stories. Yet his analysis documents the loneliness and confusion experienced by the young men, particularly in relation to the limited outlets for emotional exchanges. Indeed Mac an Ghail identifies as a central difficulty of the research the contrast between the public confidence about masculinity displayed by the young men, and their private anxieties and insecurities revealed to him in private.

A number of writers have drawn attention to the manner in which young men embrace some aspects of masculinity on the one hand, whilst resisting others. Korobov (2004), for example, analysed how adolescent boys conform to heteronormative masculinity whilst simultaneously dissociating themselves from a homophobic position. Korobov and Thorne (2006) found that, in casual conversations between young men, the latter mediated between distancing and intimate positions when talking about romantic relationships. Distancing positions enabled the young men to conform to traditional masculine norms, while manifestations of intimacy facilitated a push towards an emerging adult identity. In a similar vein of research challenging uni-dimensional constructions of masculinity, Chu (2005) found that while the male peer group culture mitigated against boys developing close male friendships, boys in her study were actually capable and indeed desired emotional friendships. Furthermore, these boys demonstrated both self-awareness and insight into the dynamics of the peer group. Tolman (2005) similarly observed a tension in the narratives of young men in her study between their longing for intimacy and attachment in the context of a heavy social pressure to display macho behaviour to buttress a masculine identity. In a British study, McDowell (2002) observed that among young men, hegemonic versions of working-class masculinity were multifaceted, with manifestations of sexism and at times boisterous street behaviour

co-existing with aspirations of future domestic conformity (being employed and being the breadwinner in the family).

The data on which this article is based is part a wider study of adolescent sexuality in Ireland that aimed to explore post-primary pupils' perspectives on sexuality, sex education and the factors that impact upon their sexual knowledge and behaviour (Hyde & Howlett, 2004; Hyde et al., 2005a). While a range of themes emerged, this article focuses on young men's vulnerability in heterosexual encounters. Other themes arising from the study that are published elsewhere include the complexities involved in meeting young men's sex-education needs (Hyde et al., 2005b); how young men make sense of risk associated with sexual behaviour (Hyde et al., 2008a); and the experiences of interpersonal and social coercion by the young women and men in relation to sexual conduct (Hyde et al., 2008b).

This study was the first of its kind to be conducted in Ireland at a time in which the country was experiencing a late and rapid industrialization by European standards, and had recently experienced a historical shift from a heavy Catholic influence on state laws to a more secular society. (Divorce was introduced as late as 1996, and abortion continues to be illegal.) While a variety of competing discourses on sexuality are manifested in the current period in Ireland, the impact of changes associated with modernization have seen the emergence of a secular discourse on sexuality consistent with liberal individualism (Inglis, 1998). As Sugrue (2002, p. 58) notes of Irish culture, 'Sexuality has, in a very short span of time, lost its forbidden and unspeakable nature.' One would not, therefore, expect boys in the present study to differ from those in Britain or the USA.

## **Methods**

It was decided that the focus group method, with data subjected to a qualitative analysis, was the best strategy for addressing the aims of the study. The overall sample of 226 young people (102 females and 124 males) was accessed from 3 girls' schools, 4 boys' schools and 3 co-educational (mixed-sex) schools in Ireland. These schools were identified using the Irish Department of Education and Science's website and were located in both

middle-class and working areas. The sample included participants at both the senior cycle (17-19 year olds) and junior cycle (14-16 year olds) levels. Ten schools agreed to facilitate focus groups, 5 in rural areas and 5 in urban areas, with each school (with one exception) organising three focus groups, bringing the total number of focus groups to 29. As this article is based on the experiences of young men, data are drawn from 17 of the 29 focus groups. All but one of these 17 focus groups were single-sex male; one focus group was mixed-sex comprising one young man and four young women. Data from the latter is included in this analysis because all 5 participants stated that they were friends and felt comfortable discussing sensitive issues in each others' presence.

Following the invitation to participate in the study, where more pupils were willing to participate than the size of the groups allowed, schools were advised to hold a draw to ensure fairness. In focus groups involving children, the literature usually suggests a maximum group size of 8 (Charlesworth & Rodwell, 1997; Vaughn et al., 1996). However, to avoid excluding potential participants who were willing to take part, and in view of the fact that participants in the present study were adolescents (all were 14 years or more), it was decided to try out focus groups with larger numbers. Group sizes of up to 12 were permitted, which actually just one of the 29 groups reached. The groups were carefully monitored in terms of their atmosphere and degrees of comfort. The larger groups appeared to be more relaxed and worked very well, although in these, the young people tended to talk together to a greater extent, at times creating difficulties in transcribing audio-recordings.

In all 17 focus groups involving the young men, pupils were in the same year at school. Exactly how the groups themselves were formed by the pupils was difficult to establish, since teachers were the intermediaries between the pupils and the research team, and we were reluctant to ask teachers to monitor exactly how groups were formed. In agreeing to facilitate focus groups, schools were already being inconvenienced, and making too many demands on staff time during the delicate negotiation process might have jeopardized the access process. The authors have noted in a separate publication (Hyde et al., 2005a) the likelihood that at least some participants observed who else in their year was likely to be in the group, and opted in or out on that basis. In addition, it was not feasible to establish whether those who participated in the study differed in their sexual attitudes and experiences from

those who declined to participate. A great deal of diversity in the data that subsequently emerged was noted, suggesting that participation was not confined to any particular type of adolescent, but rather encompassed a great variety of attitudes and behaviours, although with some more dominant than others.

Each focus group was facilitated by a moderator, and supported by an assistant moderator who oversaw the audio-recording and noted the order in which participants spoke. Moderators were graduates in social science subjects, and had been exposed to supplementary information on focus group interviewing, including written guidelines. These guidelines detailed the role of the moderator in communicating ground rules, ensuring a safe environment for participants, the importance of adopting a non-judgmental stance, putting group members at ease, and controlling dominant group members. An interview guide, reflecting the study's objectives, was used by moderators to facilitate consistency across interviews. The guide was intended to trigger discussion rather than to prescribe structured questions; this guide is presented in Table 1.

Focus groups with young people, particularly on a delicate topic, demand considerable sensitivity and thought. In particular, issues of confidentiality arise since the group leader cannot completely control what group members might reveal to others after they leave the interview (Smith, 1995). While this is of concern also with adults, it is particularly so in the case of children and adolescents, who may not fully appreciate the meaning of confidentiality in a culture of increasing openness about sexuality. There is also the possibility of causing distress by the sensitive nature of the topic (Hill, 1988). In order to minimize the possibility of upsetting people, all participants were given written information prior to the interviews of their freedom to leave the interview at any time should they so wish, without needing to give a reason. In addition, each focus group began with a clarification of the ground rules concerning confidentiality, mutual respect, the importance of honesty and so forth. It was also necessary for the moderators to reassure participants of their independence from the school, and of the guarantee that the audio-recording would not be heard by anyone beyond the immediate research team. Prior to the focus groups, the study had been approved by the Ethics Committee at the university where the research was conducted. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant and at least one parent/guardian.

Data analysis used the central techniques of Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory, namely the constant comparative method and theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992). Initial minor provisional hypotheses were generated from research team members' experiences of living in the culture and from previous work (these were similar to sensitising concepts) and formed the basis for early questions. Implications were then deduced from these in order to verify or refute them. Hypotheses that were generated were frequently refuted as familiarity with the data grew, and new hunches and questions, previously unforeseen, emerged. The process of analysis, as expected, was very fluid, with a great deal of movement between the development of initial concepts and the identification of broad themes. A large volume of earlier themes were later merged into a smaller number when the most salient issues began to be recognised. After 29 interviews had been conducted, the most central issues had been saturated, that is, incoming data ceased to contribute anything new, but rather reflected the diversity hitherto identified.

## **Results**

### **Narratives of pleasure and sexual dominance**

The aim in this paper is to foreground the issue of male vulnerability in heterosexual encounters in order to consider this in depth, and the bulk of the data to be presented forthwith will focus on this. However, the young men's heterosexual encounters were not merely a site of vulnerability and anxiety; narratives of pleasure were also present, as were accounts of sexual dominance and elements of 'acting-out' of traditional masculinities. Before considering some accounts where participants displayed manifestations of sexual dominance, an example of a pleasure narrative is presented, since this co-existed with other constructions of sexual intimacies.

P: It's [having sex] is just a pleasure, really.

Mod: Do you think that that makes you – changes you in any way?

P4: Makes you feel more like a man I think, but then you have the pleasure of it really. .

Like the first time really you are a bit shy about it when you got it first, and then you just feel deadly and you just want more of it.

(Male, Rural, School 10/Focus Group 1)

With regard to sexual dominance, many of the young men seemed to be exposed to a hegemonic version of masculinity where one's success as a sexual predator was a central dimension. Sexual prowess, sexual performance, and exhibiting a strong interest in sex are key dimensions of this identity (see Giddens, 1992). Homophobia is also a central component, with a distancing of oneself from any association with homosexual masculinity. One's place in the peer hierarchy is heavily determined by success at sexual conquests, by sexual adroitness and by leadership in sexual encounters (Measor et al., 2000). In an earlier publication, the authors concentrated on unpacking aspects of this hegemonic masculinity in detail (Hyde et al., 2005b); here, the intention is to give merely a flavour of narratives where it was emphasised, since the focus of this paper is on *vulnerabilities* and the boys' own descriptions of the type of culture within which their sensibilities are framed.

Examples of accounts of sexual conquests are as follows:

P: There is no point in being too fussy if you are going out and you want to have sex at the end of the night or it is not going to happen. . .

P3: Yeah. The plainer [less pretty] bird [woman, derogatory] is easier [more willing to have sex] really.

P2: The plainer don't get around as much really, ....don't get as much attention, and then, they are real easy. Whatever they do get they go all the way then.

(Male, Rural, Senior Cycle, School 2/Focus Group 1)

P3: ... take her down an ally way and... [general laughter] ...give the bar [penis] a shock.. [general laughter]. As far as you can go like, no big deal.

(Male, Rural, Junior Cycle, School 2/Focus Group 3):

There were also junctures where the young men entered into a roll of excessive displays of sexual conquest with (most likely fabricated) descriptions of sexual experiences that boasted of erotic heights beyond the ordinary. In other instances, the young men taunted one another about their penis size and relative sexual prowess as they attempted to jostle for position in the hierarchy of masculinity. Sardonic remarks and gibes were directed at one another as they debased each other with insults. An example is as follows:

P: [indicating to another] He's a living sex machine.

P. Oral sex.  
[P7 pointing at P6] He practises on his pillow.  
[Laughing]  
P: You use a magnifying glass and a tweezers you told me.  
P: He had to get a magnifying glass and tweezers.  
P: See him there he has one of them blow up dolls.  
Int: He has a blow up doll? Tweezers?  
P: Tweezers he cannot find it [his penis].  
P: He has a telescope.  
P: He's [pointing at another participant] the hairiest I'd say.  
P: You're thinking about that [insinuating that the participant might be gay].  
P: Your brother told me.  
(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 7 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 1)

These are blatant accounts of hegemonic masculinity that give insight into the cultural processes and the normative dialogue of the peer group, an issue that we have expanded upon elsewhere (Hyde et al., 2005a). Space limitations prevent an elaboration of the sexual double standard that was revealed in the narratives of both the young men and women, and the accounts of sexual coercion that the young women reported as being a pervasive feature of their experiences (Hyde & Howlett, 2004). Attention now turns to the mainstay of this article, namely, to narratives that elucidate the young men's vulnerability and that provides further insights into the repressive culture within which these vulnerabilities are nested.

### **Compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia as a means of social control**

A strong feature of data was the influence of a discourse on sexual behaviour that prescribed specific expectations of young men within their social nexus. Data indicated that these youths were subjected to social control within the peer group through discursive representations of acceptable sexual practices and the reinforcement of hegemonic sexual identities. Although this was a feature of the accounts of the young men across the focus groups, it varied in strength, with some groups of boys more than others using stronger and more crude language to express their association with hegemonic masculinity. In particular, young men attending schools in severely socially deprived areas were more explicit in expressing machismo than those in less deprived locations.

The elements of this discourse proposed that young males were expected to be ready and willing to engage in sexual activities whenever the opportunity to do so arose. A range of derogatory labels was used to construct and communicate the group's views, such as 'faggot', 'bottler', 'wimp', and 'queer', strongly reinforcing a culture of compulsory heterosexuality, and promoting a clear notion of homosexuality as something abject. In this way, traditional notions of masculinity and heteronormativity were reproduced and maintained among male peers, through sneering and slugging.

P2<sup>1</sup>: If you said 'No' [to sex] and all your friends find out you'd be slugged.

P1: They'd probably say you were a bottler, a wimp.

P3: Like I said 'No.' and the first thing that happened was that three or four of them turned around and said "You're just a wimp".

Int: Really.

P2: They'd say "Oh you're a queer" or something.

Int: Is that what you'd say to each other?

Various: Yeah.

P1: They'd say you're a faggot or something.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 9/Focus Group 3)

P1: If a girl like came up to you and said like "Let's have sex" it would be a bit weird but if you didn't do it you'd get a lot of stick over it because you're the fella and you're supposed to be the one that wants to do it, so there's pressure like. Fellas are expected to want to do it more than girls, so if the opportunity came up and they didn't take it they'd get a lot of stick over it.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 9/ Focus Group 1)

One young man who reported a belief that penetrative sex should occur only in the context of a loving relationship, indicated that to save some face, he would need a good excuse to decline sex, or risk being labelled 'a bottler'.

P: If someone wants to have sex and you don't have it, then you can say, 'I've no contraception I'm not going to,' so they have to back down, but if you have it [a condom] you don't really have an excuse and some people might give you pressure. It's easier.

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<sup>1</sup> 'P' indicates that a participant is speaking, and 'Int' that the interviewer is speaking. Participants were each identified by a number, so that their contribution could be traced throughout the interview. However, on transcribing the tapes, it was not always possible to distinguish which participant was speaking, and this is so where 'P' appears in the absence of a number. Adolescents in focus groups have a tendency to speak with the same level of voice maturity and with similar accents, making it very difficult to track each one. Furthermore, they sometimes talked across one other, making it challenging for the assistant

Int: Do . . . do you need an excuse, say you are with a girl and she wanted to have sex, at this stage would you want an excuse?

P: Yeah, because you'd be called 'a bottler' [someone who 'bottles out' or renegues through a lack of courage].

P1: You'd want an excuse.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 9/Focus Group 2)

Some young men reported a greater sense of pressure to have penetrative sex by their late teens because not having had sex with a woman by then could threaten their masculine identity and confer on them labels such as 'poof' and 'gay'.

P1: It's a bigger issue later on, once you turn 19 or 20 and you're still a virgin you'd be considered like ...

P2: A poof.

P1: ... gay.

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 10/Focus Group 1)

These findings mirror those of existing studies of how displays of homophobia functioned to constitute young men's heterosexual identities (see Epstein, 1997; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Nayak and Kehily, 1996; Frosh et al., 2002).

### **Slagging: the dominant sexual control strategy**

Data indicated that young men were found to regulate their peers primarily through a cultural practice known widely as 'slagging', that is, drawing attention to an aspect of a person through teasing. Slagging is an interesting discursive mechanism of social control, because it ranged from lighthearted 'messaging' that drew positive attention to a young man, for example, in the form of covert admiration, to more hurtful sneers and put-downs. Thus a 'total player' – the term used to describe a male who conquered many female sex partners – might secretly enjoy getting slagged for his inordinate successes at conquest, while slagging might secretly demoralize a young man who suffered the humiliation of rejection by a woman. Whatever dimension of slagging was used, it was a powerful discursive element that served to communicate the norms and standards in the group. The slagging that exposed the young men to vulnerabilities was largely negative teasing and occurred

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interviewer to keep track of the order in which people contributed. Where moderators also transcribed a tape, there was greater success in identifying the individual voices.

when peers seemed to slip from expected standards of sexual interest and achievement.

P2: Or you could slag your mates, I know a fella who I hang around with he's 16 and he still hasn't met [kissed] a bird [derogatory word for woman] yet.  
(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 9/Focus Group 3)

A dominant fear for many young men was that their sexual abilities would become fodder for slugging within the peer group if such abilities were deemed to be somehow lacking. This discourse of sexual inadequacy provoked a dread for many young men that their sex partners would reveal details about their anatomy or technique that seriously threatened their masculine identity. (This issue will be elaborated on later.)

Other evidence of males slugging and jeering each other because of apparent sexual deficits are suggested in the following extract, which refers to an acquaintance of a participant who was reportedly unable to ejaculate.

Int: How seriously did he take it ?  
P6: Seriously embarrassed. Every body was getting at him.  
(Male, Rural, Junior Cycle, School 2/Focus Group 3)

Thus, through the practice of slugging, discursive practices with the male culture served to maintain masculinist norms around sexuality.

### **Knowing what to do in heterosexual encounters**

For many young men in this study, the experience of sexual intercourse for the first time, or with a new partner, could be laden with insecurity. They expressed anxiety about their sexual performance, concerns about the difficulty in obtaining information about what was expected of them, and a fear of rejection. The basis of much of this disquiet was a perception that they ought to know what to do in a sexual encounter, and live up to a normative standard of competence in sexual performance.

P3: . . . what would the girl think ...if you didn't know what to do?  
(Male, Rural, Junior Cycle, School 2/Focus Group 3):

P2: It would be worse if she wanted to [have sex] and you couldn't perform.  
(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 9/Focus Group 3)

P: You would feel nervous hoping you are doing it right . . .

P: Hope you're not making a fool of yourself.

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 4/Focus Group 2)

Some young men suggested that they delayed having penetrative sex for the first time because the prospect frightened them.

Int: So most of you seem to have decided that you're not ready to have sex, would that be true?

Various: Yeah.

Int: Do you think you're too young . . . ?

P1: A mixture of everything.

Int: What kind of things?

P2: Well nerves for, your nerves or bottle [bravery] for it.

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 7 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 1)

Traditional codes of masculinity indicate that men are expected to control matters when it comes to sexual performance. Consider the following extract that emerged when one boy described to others in the group a sex position that he had seen in a magazine directed at a female audience. This information, he suggested, would be lost on women, since (it is insinuated here), men are the ones to direct sexual positions.

P2: But it was in a girls' magazine, what's the point in having it in there? Do they want people to go out and try it? . . . Are fellas expected to be reading girls' magazines to find out these things? . . . but you're the one that's meant to start all the movements.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 9/Focus Group 2)

At a different point in the same interview, the notion that men should know what to do also emerged in a rather contradictory way. It relates the difficulty that one young man experienced in obtaining information about sexual techniques. Although the boys in the study indicated that they would like more information about performance and sexual technique in sex education classes (Hyde et al., 2005b), the following extract suggests that to be discovered looking for tips on sex might give the impression that one's performance was not up to scratch and invite slagging from peers.

Int: Are there any magazines for your age group?

P: No, not for our age group. You'd be murdered if you were caught reading a magazine for different positions.

Int: Would you yeah?

P: Well you'd be absolutely slagged if you were looking for tips out of a magazine.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 9/Focus Group 2)

The possibility of being rejected and demoralized through perceived incompetence was part of the discourse to which young men were exposed. In the following extract, the young men consider the longer-term damage that the experience of early humiliation might bring.

P: Depressing so there is a lot of things that could happen with a young one at this age that could eh, damage you mentally about having sex [laughs].

P3: That's why by having it [sex] at this age, if someone did say something, it could damage you from having it ever, when you're older, you'd be afraid.

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 4/Focus Group 2)

In positioning themselves within the dominant discourse of their peer group, young men became extremely fragile and vulnerable in terms of sexual prowess, and very sensitive to how their performance would be evaluated.

Int: And say someone said something a little bit negative what would that do?

P: Put you off I would say.

P: Yeah, it'd put you off and you'd never do it again for the rest of your life.

P2: It would make you more nervous the next time.

P4: Yeah it would put you off and you would feel more nervous the next time.

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 4/Focus Group 2)

Since this cultural representation of masculinity proposes that the male must be seen to be in charge and competent, in the discursive sphere of the young men, sexually experienced females posed a threat to the self of neophyte male lover. Women who controlled and led sexual encounters and displayed a strong interest in sex were heavily criticized and labeled. In the following quotation, the young man suggests that it would be easier to negotiate sexual pleasure with an equally inexperienced sex partner. The participant felt that a more sexually-experienced woman might somehow undermine his performance.

P3: If you're saying, 'Do you want to talk,' to a girl after her first time it would be easier like to say "Was that alright?" or 'Was I doing something wrong?' or 'Should I put it in a different place?' Cos then she would just be the same way you know. "It'd feel better if

you put it there” or whatever she could just say. But doing it with someone who has experience they would just slag you or something and you’d just get down.  
(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 4/Focus Group 2)

Young men indicated that alcohol intoxication was a means of reducing the stress, anxiety and fear that they experienced about sexual performance. Thus, sexual inadequacy, an insecurity about not living up to normative ideals, and an associated fear of rejection were part of the young men’s experiences in the realm of sexual relations.

### **The discourse of distrusting women**

Part of the discourse around heterosexual relations invoked by the young male peer group centred on a fear that their female sex partners would gossip with their (the young women’s) friends about perceived deficits in their sexual performance, and that this information would trickle back to their own peer group. In the following extract, one young man reveals the impact of this discourse on young men – creating a fear and mistrust of young women. It produces intense pressure and fear about being the subject of ridicule by women if they are judged to be unable to perform according to the normative social script:

P6: ...if you weren’t able to come [ejaculate], ha ha, [nervous laughter], you would be afraid she would tell your friends, her friends or something and you would be marked for life. I know a friend that happened to and he was really sick, for quite a while. It’s all dying down now.  
(Male, Rural, Junior Cycle, School 2/Focus Group 3)

Indeed, the young men appeared to be very heavily reliant upon the feedback of their sex partners to gauge their sexual skills. In the following extracts, again the influence of this discourse is evident in reinforcing this oppressive version of masculinity through public humiliation. Much of the anxiety coming through in the narratives centers around how penis size would be evaluated, indicating the cultural significance of phallocentrism (dominance afforded to the symbol of the phallus). While this kind of anxiety appears to be genuinely experienced by the individual young men, it is fuelled by a need to define real sex as penetrative sex, with primacy afforded to a large erect penis as a central and necessary feature of having sex. In

this way, the costs of masculinity to individual men are evident against a background of the need to reproduce patriarchy in the realm of sexuality.

P: If you do go to try something you might feel stupid then she'll start saying things about you.

P: She might say no and then . . .

Int: She might start saying things about you? And you would maybe get a reputation?

P: Yeah that's it

P: 'He has a little willy'.

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 7 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 1)

P5. Some girls yap on.

Int: They complain?

P1: It just spreads around the whole group and then all over the estate [neighbourhood].

Int: So what kind of things would girls say about boys do you think?

P6: 'Small willy.'

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 4/Focus Group 1)

P3: And if you were embarrassed about your size or whatever. No seriously.

P1: She'd go off and tell her friends.

P: They tell their friends more.

P3: Well you probably wouldn't think about that.

P4: But if she would kiss and tell.

P2: They'd probably end up telling one of their friends in secret and her friend would go off gossiping and before you know it everyone would know, but you'd be telling your friends that you were an absolute beast or something.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 9/Focus Group 3)

An element of the discourse that permeated young men's culture was that their sex partners might indicate a sense of satisfaction in the private encounter, yet go on to humiliate them in encounters with others with criticisms of their performance.

Int: Would you talk to your girlfriend? Like would you say like, "Did you enjoy that?" is that -

P3: They could even be lying. Like go over to their friends and say, "He was rotten".

Int: You wouldn't trust them?

P4: They'd tell you you were great and then be gone the next day.

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 4/Focus Group 2)

The young men perceived that young women had the capacity to insult and denigrate them by casting aspersions on the central embodiment of their masculinity

- their sexual anatomy and performance. In the cultural milieu of the young men, participants' accounts suggested that male peer groups co-operate in socially controlling their peers by systematic verbal assaults and put downs. As each young man fell several rungs in the sexual prowess ladder, it simultaneously enabled others to claim a superior position. Data presented here also displays the manner in which young women are perceived to regulate and control male sexual practices, and contribute to the reproduction of a limiting discourse.

### **Female responsiveness and sexual pleasure**

Many of the accounts from the young men in the study indicated that they relied upon positive feedback from their sex partners to engender self-confidence in their capacity as lovers. In the following extract, the significance of the responsive female in buttressing a particular masculine identity emerges.

P8: Yeah. There is a lot of hype about it ..but it's not all it's hyped up to be.

P9: All the women are supposed to be screaming like and then they are just lying there...

Various: Come on [no 9], ...lighten up... its not that bad..

[A little later in the same focus group]

P9: : It's disappointing and after the first time but... you try a few things here and there but...

Int: Do you put that down to the fact that you are not doing it right or that she's not wakened up or...

P9: You get a kind of bad response and you are afraid to do it again.

P1 : You think that you are not doing it right if you don't get a good response, that you are going wrong somewhere.

(Male, Rural, Senior Cycle, School 2/Focus Group 1)

While some participants admitted that their own pleasure took priority, a number of individual young men reported that they were anxious to please a sex partner.

Int: And what do you think people worry about when they are having sex?

P3: Are you not pleasuring the girl.

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 4/Focus Group 2)

Some indicated the pride and confidence that would result from succeeding pleasing a female sex partner.

P1: That is what most fellas go for to pleasure a girl because it is so hard to pleasure a girl.

P8: It is a challenge.

Int: How do you know she is being pleased?

P6: Noises.

P: No, but I mean...

P: Even I can fake one of them.

P: Just saying..

P5: You don't know . . . that is the thing.

P: You have to trust her to be honest.

P: If she told you, you'd be all proud – strutting.

P6: Yeah you would if she told you . . . you would feel really good.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 7 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 3)

Traditional accounts of male sexuality have centred on the notion of men being focused on their own self-interest in seeking sexual pleasure. Yet here male sexual pleasure seems to be constructed around pleasing their sex partner, a notion usually reserved for explaining how females respond sexually. This affective and emotional basis – a concern with pleasing the other - contravenes the usual stereotypes about males as self-centred and egotistical. Moreover, it is at variance with much of the discursive components of the culture to which they were exposed, namely, the notion of crude and detached colonization of the female body. Indeed the young men's caring attitudes to their sex partners constitutes a form of private resistance to the public culture that framed their presentation of self within the peer group.

This is not to suggest that caring dispositions were entirely based on altruistic motives; rather they appeared to simultaneously enable the young men to feel positive about their masculinity and sexual prowess. Contemporaneous with a care and concern with giving pleasure was a sense, emanating from the discourse of hegemonic masculinity to which they were exposed, that being a good and pleasing lover was associated with having a large penis, succeeding in penetrating the vagina without clumsiness and taking control of the intimacy. This emphasis on penetration may be part of the young men's mythologies of good sex that does not necessarily benefit young women (see Holland et al., 1998).

Thus, although the young men were anxious that their sex partners would experience sexual pleasure, their definitions of what constituted good sex were bound up with the cues available to them and promoted within the cultural milieu. In

this sense, the means through which good sex might come about centered on a male-controlled, phallogentric version of sex promoted within the peer group. Thus, while manifestations of female sexual pleasure could serve to reinforce male self-definitions of their skills, the young men's concern about their partners' pleasure simultaneously constituted a resistance to the detachment associated with hegemonic masculinity.

## **Discussion**

For the purposes of this analysis we have underscored the costs of masculinity for young men in the realm of sexuality. As indicated earlier, the focus in this paper is specifically on narratives where manifestations of vulnerability are in evidence. The analysis highlights the manner in which dominant notions of heterosexuality, in which 'real' men are cast as sexual predators who lead and control sexual liaisons, are played out in the discourses invoked by the male peer group, and in some respects, resisted. Data indicated that masculinities were shaped through the cultural resources available to the young men and, out of a fear of group sanction, their positioning of themselves within prevailing discourses promoted by the peer group.

It was noted that in the process of trying to sustain a status in the peer group, young men were under pressure in heterosexual encounters to master a controlling position, with potentially negative psychosocial consequences for themselves. A masculine identity for these young men is constantly negotiated in how they present themselves to their peers, and continually remains vulnerable to destruction by the social dynamics of the group. Impression management (to draw on Goffman, 1963) in presenting themselves, and sustaining an intact identity as heterosexual males requires their engagement in particular social practices consistent with hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously distancing themselves from practices that might spoil that identity.

Part of the culture of the young men in the study centred on the esteem afforded to the phallus in reinforcing a masculine identity. In analyzing the importance and cultural significance of the phallus, Potts (2002, p. 137) notes:

The focus on hardness, strength, activity and endurance in hegemonic masculine sexuality determines how a man measures his own 'success in sex'; it centralises sex

around the penis, and universalizes penises, constricting the possibilities of heterosexual and limiting what counts as enjoyable male sexual experience.

These cultural prescriptions that preserve a dominance-orientated version of masculinity put individual young men under pressure and created anxieties for them in heterosexual encounters. In such encounters, they were expected to lead, take control and know what to do – an expectation similarly observed among young men in Measor et al's (2000) study. The social organization of adolescent intimacy and sexual regulation of young people is therefore contingent upon a nexus of social interactions in the adolescent cultural milieu. Hegemonic masculinity was continually being constituted and re-constructed by the social practices of the young people themselves within that milieu.

In this study, rules of conduct, conveyed in a discourse of male dominance in sexuality reproduced this phallocentrism and sexual mastery, as young men invigilated, or kept a regulatory watch over each other, with various interactive strategies, such as castigating or slagging off the sexual attitudes and experiences of other men in the social group that fell short of dominant masculinist ideals. This normative practice has been identified in other studies: Haywood and Mac an Ghail (1997) noted how boys in their study harassed their peers who did not outwardly assert their heterosexuality. Similarly, in the present study, deviant categories such as 'bottler' and 'wimp' were constructed within the cultural milieu of the adolescents to regulate the young men's sexual behavior. The analysis draws attention to the cultural context in which the sexual behaviour and attitudes of individual young men are monitored and controlled through normative peer expectations, and reinforced by intricate group practices. This type of group behaviour buttresses a cultural version of masculinity where sexual conquest and control of men over women are highly valued and encouraged. Findings in this regard mirror those of Measor et al (2000, p. 77) who found that during sex education classes, for example, young men monitored those who failed to match the blueprint for the status of 'proper male.'

An element of the discourse of hegemonic masculinity that kept young men alert and conforming was a fear of the possibility that their sexual performance would be denigrated by a previous sex partner, and that this information could subsequently be used to ridicule and ostracise them by those within their own peer group. In this way, a discursive mistrust of women was created. The young men appeared to feel pressure from their female counterparts to perform well, and at a discursive level at

least, the perceived actions of their sex partners contributed to the young men's fears and anxieties. This potential for young women to contribute to the disquiet of the young men, and in doing so to reproduce a repressive version of masculinity that is counterproductive to both their own and young men's development merits further research. In the wider study that included focus groups with young women (Hyde and Howlett, 2004), accounts of male sexual prowess and performance were conspicuously absent from the narratives of the young women; rather the latter were far more likely to comment negatively about male sexual pushiness, their lack of emotional engagement, and their capacity to label them as 'sluts' and 'slags' than on their sexual technique. That said, it is quite likely that the actions of even a few young women in this regard are sufficient to foster a collective mistrust of women within the male peer group.

Data indicate that participants relied on female sexual responsiveness to evaluate their own sexual prowess and to reinforce male self-definition. Thus, male sexual pleasure was not just about the physical sensations associated with erotic acts, but also socially constructed in the context of positive reinforcement about their partner's evaluation of the performance. Thus, notions of 'good sex' or 'bad sex' were discursively produced through retrospective accounting of the experience and the processing of these accounts served to reinforce, develop or disturb particular masculine heterosexual identities. In this sense 'good sex' is not something out there waiting to be discovered, but rather, at least in part, symbolically created relationally through the process of discursive recounting and dialogue.

As indicated, a number of the young men were anxious that a partner would enjoy the experience. This care and concern for their sex partners' feelings about the experience of sex is at variance with stereotypical notions of males conquering females without much emotional engagement in the process. Although gender prescriptions propelled the young men towards taking the lead and being able to control the sexual encounter, their own pleasure was to some degree derived in relation to that of their partners, something that has hitherto been associated with a female approach to sex. We propose that the young men's stance in this regard constitutes a resistance to emotional disconnectedness associated with hegemonic masculinity,

whereupon women are constructed as the passive objects of male sexual desire. Thus, this finding contributes to the genre of work on masculinity that elucidates the endorsement by young men of some aspects of hegemonic masculinity on the one hand, whilst resisting others.

As was clear from data, another component of the social processes of the focus group was the young men's willingness to admit their fears and vulnerabilities to others in the group, an issue that we have expanded upon in a separate publication (Hyde et al., 2005a). Although this openness on the part of participants in the focus groups constitutes a form of resistance to dominant versions of masculinity that encourage toughness and stoicism, the scope for resisting hegemonic masculinity in the cultural milieu that they described was limited for the young men. According to participants' accounts, such resistance would risk taunting, ridicule and bullying.

In this paper, male vulnerabilities have been foregrounded in an effort to move away from traditional notions of male dominance and to uncover more complex processes around male sexual enactments that include male uncertainty, fear, vulnerability and rejection. However, we argue that data where the young men revealed their vulnerabilities should not be read in narrow terms solely in terms of the individual men but must also be read sociologically in relation to the social context within which such individual anxiety is produced. The young men, in revealing their insecurities are also revealing details of a culture where hegemonic masculinity is reproduced by some peer group members, (and possibly some young women also) though this culture is not fixed and static. Hegemonic masculinity is a repressive version of masculinity that subordinates other masculinities, most especially gay masculinities, and femininities, and sustains male dominance in sexuality (Connell, 1995). In highlighting the vulnerabilities and anxieties of young men in this study, it is important not to theorise out of existence the sexual dominance that men as a group enjoy.

The analysis presented in this article is intended to better understand how masculinist constructions of heterosexuality are sustained and re-constituted in the cultural context. Young men are under peer pressure to sustain dominance, and

suffer adverse consequences within the group if they do not, possibly with little emotional support. This happens at an age when they are trying to establish an identity in the shift from being boys to being men.

### **Limitations of this work**

There are inherent difficulties in conducting focus groups with adolescents. Group interaction can impact upon the kind of knowledge produced in the study. At times during the interviews, for example, while the performance of the group may be a valid representation of sub-cultural group processes, it may pose a dilemma to an analyst faced with attempting to unpack which components of the interview reflect normative group dynamics of the culture, and which can be taken at face value as actual experiences (see Hyde et al., 2005a). In addition, focus groups may also constrain the expression of what might be considered to be the unusual or embarrassing perspectives or experiences of individuals.

### **Implications of this research and future directions for research**

We emphasise that while institutionalized male privileges and gender inequality should continue to be problematised and visibilised in research, an understanding of the costs to individual men in terms of pain and hurt that pertain contemporaneously should continue to be developed within social science scholarship. In addition, the development and evaluation of educational materials designed to raise consciousness among young men about the restrictions of their socialization and ways to overcome these at the group level should inform future research agendas.

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### **Table 1. Interview guide**

**['Trigger' list for interviewer to invite discussion rather than a 'question' list]**

## **Sex education**

- Are sex education classes given at this school? Tell me about them? [Content, and who teaches it; how are they conducted and what the main message is; how satisfied they you with them?]
- How/where did you first learn about sex?
- Where have you learnt about sex since then? [Media etc.]
- Have you ever discussed sex with your parents, brothers/sisters? [When, where, what was said etc.]
- When you girls (or boys) get together do you ever mention sex? [In what context – jokes, serious discussion etc.]

## **Sexual practices**

- What do you think about people having sex with each other? [How long should they know each other, what should they know about each other, is there a 'right' age, what does it depend on etc.]
- What do you think about people of your age having sex with a number of different people? Do you think that it is different for boys and girls? [Indirectly ask about the sexual double-standard.]
- Do you know of people your own age who have had sex?
- Is there a pressure hanging over people to 'do it' (have sex), so that they are no longer virgins?
- Do people of your age have oral sex? How do you know? [A lot of people say that young people have oral sex [head/blow job] these days – is that true?]

- If people of your age are having sex, where (location) and when do people of your age have sex?
- Do alcohol/drugs influence sexual behaviour?
- Would you ever be afraid of losing a boyfriend/girlfriend by not having sex?
- Do you think some boys/girls can be pushy?
- Who usually makes the first moves (making passes, kissing, feeling) nowadays?
- Do you have a sense of what you would or would not do in a situation with a boy-girl?
- What are your views about people abstaining from sex until they are older? [What's the right age/circumstances do you think?]
- [If it comes up that some have had sexual intercourse] What is sex really like? Was it *really* all that it was cracked up to be? Before you had sex, what did you expect it to be like?
- Do you think that having had sex or not having sex makes a difference to how you feel about yourself?
- Is there a pressure nowadays for boys/girls to feel that they should have sex? Where does this pressure come from?
- Have you heard about the notion of 'date rape'. What do you think of it? Why do you think that it happens?

## **Contraception**

- Who do you think should be responsible for using contraception? [Boy/girl/both.]
- What do you think about people carrying condoms? [Boys carrying condoms, girls carrying condoms.]
- Do you think that you would ever have sex without a condom? If so in what circumstances?
- Why do you think that crisis pregnancies happen?
- Do you think that you have enough knowledge about contraceptives? Where did you get your information on contraception?
- What contraceptives have you heard of?
- How easy is it to get contraceptives?
- Where would you get them?
- How would you feel about going to a doctor, nurse, or pharmacy for contraceptives?
- Do you know how contraceptives work?
- What do you think of condoms? At what point should on a condom be put on?
- Do you think that people your age might be tempted to 'take a chance' the odd time?

## **Pregnancy and STIs**

- Do any of you worry about getting pregnant? [For the boys, their sex partner getting pregnant.]
- If you (for boys - someone they had sex with) got pregnant now or in the next couple of years, how would it affect your life?
- How do you think that your parents would respond?
- What other things might you consider about having sex? [AIDS/STIs.]
- How might you prevent STIs/HIV?
- Would you know where to go if you were concerned about AIDS/STIs?
- How do you think that things might be improved so that girls/boys of your age can prevent crisis pregnancies/STIs and feel better about themselves with regard to sexual matters? Do you think that people who work in health care could make things better for young people? [How etc.]

### **Factors influencing sexual attitudes and behaviour**

What do you think has made a difference to how you think and behave about sex?  
[The following are prompts if interviewer needs them.]

- What your friends/other young people say
- What parents/teachers have told you
- Fear of consequences
- Fear of parents' responses to a crisis pregnancy
- Knowledge of people with a crisis pregnancy

- Religious beliefs
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- AIDS
- Magazines/the media