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Managing masculinity: young men's identity work in focus groups

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ABSTRACT Displays of hegemonic masculinity within research contexts are often perceived to inhibit the collection of 'good' data and present a problem which the researcher must overcome. Instead of being seen as hindering the research process, this article takes such moments as 'data', which provide first hand insights into the way male sexuality is made within focus group settings. This environment is seen as constitutive of male sexual subjectivities in the way that it provides a public forum for young men's presentation of self. Through their talk about sexuality young men engage in the management of their own sexual identities, fashioning these through what they reveal and conceal about their sexual selves. In order to meet the objective of the focus group and discuss sexuality 'seriously' yet also preserve masculine identity, young men deploy discursive constructions in complex ways. Such demands render the maintenance of an identity which conforms to traditional constructions of masculinity precarious, so that constant slippage between projections of 'hard' and 'softer' versions of male sexuality occur.

KEYWORDS: *focus groups, (hetero)sexualities, male sexual subjectivities, masculinities*

In the course of writing a book about young people's sexual subjectivities, knowledge and practices, I have recently revisited the transcripts of focus groups I conducted during my doctoral research. Having trawled over these more times than I can remember, this reading was different in its concentration on groups comprised almost exclusively of young men. What struck me on this reading was a pronounced sense of young men engaging in the management of their sexual identities. I began to think that, in previous analyses of what young men thought about male sexuality, I had underestimated the way in

which such talk facilitated a 'performance' of their own sexual subjectivities in the research context. This article, then, seeks to analyse the ways in which young men manage their own sexual identities through their talk about sexuality in focus groups. It is concerned with the 'identity work' young men undertake in front of their peers and myself as a female facilitator.

The concept of 'identity work' contains ontological assumptions about masculinities as constructed through experience and as being linguistically coded. Within this framework, masculinities are not simply biologically determined but inextricably made through gendered practices which are multiple, contradictory and relational (Connell, 1987). The relational nature of masculinity means that it is only knowable through its inherent reliance on its difference from femininity and other subordinated masculinities. This difference is a product of power relations which give ascendancy to certain expressions of masculinity while relegating others and femininity. These esteemed ways of being male are produced, supported and contested through everyday practices which Connell conceptualizes as 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 2002). 'Identity work' encapsulates the idea of young men's sexual subjectivities being made within focus group discussion, not simply as an accomplishment of will, but through access to culturally available resources which promote particular versions of being male/sexual (Edley and Wetherell, 1999). The ways young men signify male sexual subjectivity as a consequence of these discursive resources represent their undertaking of 'identity work'.

My curiosity about young men's identity work in this setting stems from a broader interest in the reproduction of the gender order and the accomplishment of masculinities in wider social contexts. Understanding how young men signify their sexual identities within a research situation may offer insights about how masculinities are constituted elsewhere. This work is also motivated by a desire to critically engage with the argument that displays of hegemonic masculinity inhibit the collection of 'good' data. This perspective renders masculinity a problem which prevents male participants from 'being in touch with' and able to share their 'real' feelings about the issue(s) under investigation. The hyper-masculine participant becomes an obstacle which the 'good' researcher can overcome through the application of techniques which minimize his effect on data. For example, it has been suggested that one way of dealing with men's nondisclosure of emotions is to inadvertently probe for them in a way that does not 'threaten' the masculine self (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2001). This might be achieved by enquiring about how a participant thought about something rather than asking directly 'How did you *feel* in that situation?'

One of the things I find problematic about this approach is the assumption that behind the bravado of identity work lies men's real feelings or true thoughts about the topic at hand. Here, the performance of masculinity is constituted as masking the real man, an idea which smacks of the flaws of

essentialism. Not only does one wonder what the real man behind the mask might look like, but this crudely simplifies the complex and multifarious processes by which masculinities are constituted. Instead of clouding our insights about what men think, these performances are important data in themselves, providing an opportunity to study masculinities in the making. These are not performances in the traditional understanding of the word (i.e. an 'act' which men might choose to put on). Rather this idea draws on Butler's proposal that gender is produced through the performance of repetitive acts which give the impression it is something constant which individuals possess (Butler, 1993). Within the context of this research such performances provide not only an occasion to learn about what young men think about male sexuality but how they do it. This production of masculinity within the focus group setting offers a valuable first hand glimpse of male sexuality in action.

In examining the kind of identity work young men undertake, I aim to show how they struggle to fashion masculinities through what they do and do not reveal about sexuality. This objective contributes to a plethora of work by theorists concerned with the social and structural processes by which young men become discursively constituted *as men* (Connell, 1995; Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Redman, 1996a). In their findings from the Men Risk and AIDS Project, Holland and her colleagues have demonstrated that 'sexuality is a central site in men's struggles to become masculine' (Holland et al., 1993: 1). This article's consideration of how young men manage their sexual identities provides further insights into what it means to be male and sexual. It also continues to shed light on the way expressions of sexuality provide a vehicle for hegemonic forms of masculinity. Much of the masculinities literature, especially from a sociological perspective, highlights the role context plays in the ways masculinities are variously produced. These studies have concentrated on its constitution in sites such as the labour market (Connell, 1995), schools (Mac an Ghail, 1994), families, (Heward, 1996), the pub (Kraack, 1999) and sports field (Parker, 1996). The current research adds focus groups to this list, revealing how masculinities are performed within one research context.

As focus groups are the site for this study, this article also makes contribution to methodological concerns when female researchers work with predominately male participants. Feminist researchers who have broached this issue have tended to concentrate on the power differentials and vulnerabilities they experience when working with men (Foster, 1994; Hutchinson et al., 2002; Lee, 1997). They have drawn attention to issues of sexual harassment and the kind of self-surveilling practices researchers undertake in dress and manner to minimize the likelihood of unwanted sexual overtures or objectification from male participants. This article enters this conversation in its attempt to understand the effect my gender had on young men's sexual identity work.

Focus group composition

The four focus groups discussed here are drawn from a larger project concerned with understanding what is conceptualized as a 'gap' between what young people learn in sexuality education and what they do in practice.¹ These focus groups have been selected because they were comprised exclusively or predominately of young men. In total, 20 young people aged 17–19 years took part in groups containing 4–10 participants. Two of these four groups were male only, in another a single female was present, while the final group was an impromptu session with equal numbers of each gender (this session included 5 male participants who had already participated in an all male focus group). This was established at the request of young women from their school who had participated in a discussion following this all male group and expressed disappointment at being separated from them. The decision to have single gender groupings was made on the basis of feminist concern that young men's presence may be repressive or inhibit young women's voice (Duelli Klein, 1983). However, young women's declaration that they would 'prefer if the guys were here too, because we want to hear what they've got to say about this stuff' indicated mixed groupings presented them with an opportunity for assertive questioning. This focus group is included because it provides an interesting comparison of identity work undertaken by one group of men in both mixed and single gender contexts.

Participants were recruited from secondary schools and community training programmes aimed at providing those with few or no qualifications with skills to enhance their employment prospects. Including those still at school and school leavers attempted to capture some of the diversity within the youth population. Subsequently, drawing participants from these diverse sites meant young men appeared to vary across focus groups. As the research had been designed to focus on how female and male heterosexual identities were produced as inherently relational, there was no comprehensive collection of data on factors such as socio-economic status, ethnicity and career aspirations. To systematically assess the impact of these factors on young men's identity work would have necessitated a different research design – for example, one which could tease out the complexities in labelling students from a decile 1 school working class.² Other research reveals how contextual influences such as educational aspirations, ethnicity and socio-economic status affect the production of masculinities, with the work of Connell (1989), Frosh et al. (2002) and Mac an Ghail (1994) notable examples here. What this article is able to offer is my impression of diversity amongst the young men who participated in this research, and the similarities I witnessed in their management of masculine identity during focus groups. Below I share this impression in the form of a description of the young men from the two schools and one community training programme from which participants were recruited.

Young men from Ruru³ College

It was the five young men from Ruru College who participated in the single and mixed gender group sessions. This group was ethnically diverse comprising Asian, Samoan, Maori and Pakeha⁴ members, a mix which reflected the multicultural composition of the suburb in which their school was located. By Ministry of Education standards Ruru College was designated a decile rating of 2, indicating that parents of students were generally working class. In New Zealand, schools with low decile ratings are often erroneously represented as deprived of adequate resources, innovative teachers and dedicated students. However, the teacher with whom I had arranged my visit was clearly committed to progressive sexuality education and had shoulder tapped students who were articulate, enthusiastic and mature. This was evident upon meeting Lita who, while escorting me from the school office to the counselling rooms where the focus groups were held, mentioned her plans to study law at university.

To foster their comfort in talking about sexuality issues, I had proposed that participants take part with friends, although those who volunteered weren't always from the same peer group. In the Ruru College group the familiar banter of three of the young men indicated their close friendship and the emergence of a 'leader'. This young man, whose pseudonym is Tawa and who described himself as Maori, had a stature that appeared physically more mature than the others. Through his use of mock humour and encouragement of others to express their opinions (e.g. 'Come on bros, you started off cool'), he demonstrated his exercise of authority over the group. Tawa was also the only one to explicitly identify himself as sexually active by talking about his use of condoms, although disclosures about previous girlfriends and personal anecdotes from others implied experience of relationships. Before the young men's session, I had facilitated the focus group with young women and my field notes record a feeling that discussion was more stilted with the young men. While conversation certainly didn't lag, I found myself entering the discussion more frequently in order to maintain its momentum.

Trainee farmers

I had some difficulty locating the meeting place for this focus group, which was a sports hall in a paddock in rural Northland. When I finally arrived, the five young men and one young woman I met wore mud encrusted farm boots, jeans, T-shirts and bush shirts.⁵ Several of these young people had been up since 4.30am attending to farm duties and had assembled at the hall for their daily training session with their tutor. They were enrolled in a community programme to learn farming skills that would enable them to gain employment in this industry. Most lived in surrounding rural districts which were predominately working class and characterized by relatively high rates of

unemployment. They had also agreed to fill out a questionnaire which they did prior to the focus group, and several appeared to struggle with language like 'gender' inquiring what it meant. During the focus group and informal smoko⁶ conversation, it was apparent that issues of unplanned pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse and violence were familiar realities in these young people's lives. Jim, for instance, confided he'd only been in one short relationship that didn't work out because his girlfriend 'was a bit messed up' due to her addiction to drugs. The unfocused eyes of one of the participants, which caused his mate to declare 'he looks like he is fucking stoned', indicated that drug addiction may also have been a personal problem for some of the group. In describing their leisure time the young men talked about driving fast and 'getting wasted' at parties, pastimes which they explained helped to ease the isolation of farm work.

Young men from Kiwi College

In contrast, the final group of four young men came from a decile 10 school with a reputation for high academic and sporting achievement. This school was situated in a middle-class suburb of Auckland and at the time of the research undergoing refurbishment to accommodate new sporting and cultural facilities. The sense of school wealth was also apparent from the senior common room which had tea and coffee-making facilities and fact that many students owned or had access to cars they drove to school. The majority of students were of European descent and this was echoed in the composition of the focus group where all participants described being born in either New Zealand, England or South Africa. As a group, these young men appeared studious and articulate with one young man declining to fill out the questionnaire because he didn't want to miss his physics lesson. With one exception, these young men expressed an altruistic desire that their involvement in the research would engender improvements in the design of sexuality education programmes. However, this sentiment was not shared by Gerry who explained his participation was motivated by a need to get out of double maths. While the other young men appeared conventional in their non-uniformed attire, Gerry had a purple streak in the middle of his hair and wore clothes which demanded attention. He implied having less relationship experience than the other participants, one of whom had been with his girlfriend for over three years. Like the focus groups at Ruru College, this discussion took place in an unoccupied classroom assigned to the counselling department.

Issues of ethics and conduct

While participants were volunteers, it should be noted that the notion of voluntary consent in school environments is problematic. This is due to the way that authority operates in schools, so that any form of endorsement of

the research can be interpreted by students as an expectation to participate. If teachers approach particular students to gauge their interest in volunteering for the research (as described earlier), the pressure to take part may be intensified. In addition, researchers have a captive audience in schools where students are typically confined to a classroom for each lesson. In these circumstances taking part may become necessary rather than actively desired, especially when class time has been pre-allocated to research involvement without provision of alternative activities. This means that, while the sample might be described as voluntary, it is possible that some who took part did so out of some feeling of compulsion. A consequence of the students being pre-selected by the teacher⁷ to volunteer for the research, was that they were unlikely to be atypical of the wider student body. Data collected may therefore not be representative of all the perspectives and ideas held by students at the school. Filtering the potential pool of participants to those who will make a good impression or who are more articulate is a common form of sampling bias noted by those who conduct research in schools. Including participants from community training programmes was one means of counteracting the effects of this selection bias.

All participants were provided with a participant information sheet which gave details about their involvement prior to research participation. Ethics approval was granted by the Auckland University Human Ethics Committee and in accordance with their regulations each participant signed a consent form and had an opportunity to ask questions before taking part. Those who consented to participate were given the choice of remaining anonymous when the research was written up. All participants chose this option, and pseudonyms have been employed throughout to help protect their identity. No participants exercised their right to have the tape recorder turned off at any time without needing to provide an explanation, nor to withdraw information before the project's completion.

Focus groups commenced with my facilitating a discussion around a series of loosely structured open-ended questions about young people's heterosexual relationships. The purpose here was to determine how young people conceptualized these relationships in terms of their joys, problems, benefits and their construction and articulation of these in a group setting. In the second half, an activity was conducted utilizing media images of heterosexuality collected from teen magazines, greeting cards and books. These reflected a mixture of dominant and resistant discourses about heterosexual relationships in order to encourage young people's critical engagement with the messages they communicated. One of the images offering a dominant construction of heterosexuality represented a couple in a passionate clinch, while a more alternative discourse was captured by a picture of two pensioners embracing on a park bench.⁸ After choosing an image, participants were asked to describe what they thought it conveyed about relationships and whether they believed this to reflect the experiences of young people their age.

As I wanted to provide participants with as much scope as possible to direct the conversation, my role was facilitative in several ways – for example, asking questions which delved further into particular aspects of conversation, reiterating the sentiment of comments to confirm understanding, monitoring equal ‘air time’ for all and asking participants what they thought about various ideas as proposed by research and other speakers. As will be seen in ensuing sections, this type of facilitation which gave weight to participants’ own ideas may have influenced the types of masculine identities young men produced in this context.

How focus groups facilitate identity work

Focus groups involve participants discussing a chosen topic collaboratively rather than engaging in a two-way conversation with the researcher. It is this collective interaction which characterizes this method and generates a rich source of data about the ‘public’ production of discourse (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). This occurs because focus groups reveal information about ‘how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms’ (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999:5). When participants question each other, ask for clarification, laugh at or contest a remark, it is possible to see how knowledge is constituted in a group context. In these moments of interaction young men engage in the identity work referred to earlier and masculinities are made.

There are several aspects of this interactive component of focus groups which make them a prime site for the constitution of masculinities. Their public nature (i.e. the way in which talk is directed at an audience) and the fact that in this instance participants were male friends. This meant they could function like the male peer group context where talk serves as a means of creating and producing a certain image of themselves. As Holland et al., note, discussion about sex in male peer groups is less about an exercise in information gathering (as is more likely with groups of young women) and more about demonstrating ‘individual progress towards masculinity, to gain status’ (Holland et al., 1993: 13). Subsequently, the composition and interactive element of these focus groups provided young men with a forum to signify masculinity.

The preservation of a particular image of masculinity was made more difficult by the fact that the purpose of the focus group was a ‘serious’ discussion of sexuality, a task at odds with usual expressions of masculinity. Young men’s awareness of this objective was indicated by comments like ‘nice answer’, ‘that’s a [hard] question that one’ revealing another layer of self-consciousness to their talk. In a situation where questions posed by a facilitator made masculinity vulnerable, a certain deftness was required to maintain an appropriate presentation of the masculine self. Subsequently,

focus group interaction served precariously as an opportunity to signify masculinity, yet also provided an encounter in which masculinity's vulnerability was heightened.

Having explored some of the facets of the research context in terms of the sample and how focus groups were conducted, the next section explores how young men managed their sexual identities within them.

Identity work: signifying masculinity and managing vulnerability

Through their talk about sexuality young men engaged in identity work which involved presenting a certain image of themselves as sexual subjects. What they revealed and concealed from other participants served as a vehicle by which they managed their sexual identities. Rather than an individual strategy to obtain dominance, this linguistic posturing can be understood as an effect of hegemonic masculinity where the need to achieve ascendancy over subordinated others is part of a broader network of social structures and cultural processes.

This function of talk as a means of achieving and preserving the masculine self highlights an intimate relationship between language and subjectivity, one in which young men are both the subjects and the objects of language in that their utilization of it produces them as types of sexual subjects which are not of their own making (i.e. which they did not author). Willig explains this relationship with reference to the way that subjects are constrained by available discourses because 'discursive positions pre-exist the individual whose sense of "self" or (subjectivity) and range of experience are circumscribed by available discourses' (Willig, 1999: 114). This means that the sexual identity which young men work to produce is a consequence of the discursive resources they have access to. Young men, however, are not bereft of agency because they can 'actively' and 'purposively' 'deploy discursive constructions which afford positionings that help them meet objectives within a particular social context' (Willig, 1999: 114). For instance, within the focus group setting they can deploy discursive constructions with the objective of preserving masculinity in front of male peers thus undertaking identity work. The qualification I would add to Willig's theorization in relation to these young men's use of language is that this occurs within the context of the operation of hegemonic masculinity. The notion of 'active' and 'purposive' is not unregulated by the processes and structures of hegemonic masculinity which further decreases the sense of this use of language as being a simple 'choice'. In the following sections we will see how young men's discussions of sexuality serve as a means of signifying masculinity and the concomitant need to manage vulnerability.

One of the ways in which young men enacted masculinity was to signal their sexual interest in and desire for women with throw-away remarks which

usually generated laughter from others. For instance, in a discussion during the Ruru College mixed gender group about which celebrities had attractive bodies, Elle Macpherson's⁹ name surfaced and Vaughn remarked in a longing voice 'Elle Macpherson, yes please'. In expressing his approval of and desire for Elle Macpherson's body, Vaughn is positioned as a red blooded male whose sexual urges are biological and pervasive. This comment ensued shortly after Vaughn disclosed that he felt pressure to live up to images of muscle bound men with 'perfect pecks', something his awkward body language suggested he was embarrassed about divulging. Given the context of this remark, such an assertion might be interpreted as damage control for preservation of the masculine self. Grogan and Richards (2002) reveal that the young men in their study viewed worrying about appearance and being concerned about body image as feminine pastimes. Disclosing these insecurities renders masculinity vulnerable and may necessitate the reinstatement of a hegemonic masculine self.

In a more detailed example, a similar management of male sexual identity occurs below. Here, young men from Kiwi College were viewing a 'Hey Sister' lingerie advertisement, where a woman standing in her underwear reaches through the man beside her and drops his heart. This piece of advertising seeks to appeal to young women by conveying the message that wearing this lingerie offers them the power of breaking men's hearts. The following reveals one man's reaction to this image:

Gerry: That's cool.

Louisa: Why do you like that?

Gerry: Because she's like ripping out his heart and dropping it on the ground [laugh].

Louisa: Is that the main thing you like about it?

Gerry: Oh you mean other than the naked chick? Uhm [others laugh].

In making this remark Gerry is constituted as a heterosexually desiring male who is aroused by the lingerie model. This is achieved through his sexualization of her as 'naked', a representation which is more sexually revealing than her actual state as lingerie clad. This masculine identity is also achieved through his objectification of her as a 'chick', a description which demotes her status as the active subject who is dismissing a man's heart, to the passive object of (his) desire. As in the example above, this remark occurs after Gerry's initial assertion that what he likes about the picture is the way the model is 'ripping out the [guy's] heart and dropping it'. His appreciation of the inversion of dominant discourses of heterosexuality where an active/dominant male sexuality is coupled with a passive/subordinated female subject threatens the masculine self. Subsequently, Gerry successfully salvages an appropriately masculine identity with his next comment. In both of the examples above, the constitution of a hegemonic masculine identity necessitates the sexualization and objectification of a feminine subject, a situation

which other researchers have noted contributes to the maintenance of gendered inequality (Redman, 1996b). Engaging in this identity work has repercussions beyond young men's sense of sexual self and for gendered power relations within (hetero)sexual relationships.

Expressing sexual interest in women was coupled with some young men's displays of emotional detachment regarding relationships. Remarks which implied their indifference to relationships which offered more than sexual gratification suggested a masculine identity that was emotionally aloof and nonchalant. This was conveyed when young men gave the impression that relationships were something that they could take or leave, an idea captured by one trainee farmer when his immediate response to the question 'Why do young people get involved in relationships' was 'to pass time'. An emotionally remote sexual identity was also cultivated by Jack, another trainee farmer who explained that, while spending a bit of time with a girlfriend was okay, this wouldn't be as fun or as important as spending time with your mates, '... like I'd rather spend time with my mates going surfing and then just having a bit of time with ya missus'. By prioritizing male friendship over a relationship with 'ya missus', Jack projects an image which is loyal to his mates (who were sitting beside him) and invulnerable to the kinds of emotional ties an intimate relationship might pose.

Displaying indifference towards heterosexual relationships was another way in which young men conveyed an emotionally remote sexual identity. One such instance was during a conversation about romance which had been initiated by a male participant to illustrate how masculinity finds diverse expressions in different contexts:

Nicholas: Your partner sort of sees the romantic side of you and your mates see the scruffy side of you sort of thing.

Louisa: What sort of stuff would you do if you were going to be romantic in a relationship?

Brent: Flowers.

Richard: Have a shower and a shave, change my clothes [*others laugh*].

Here Richard suggests a lack of interest in being romantic, a sexual subjectivity which sits uneasily with hard versions of masculinity because of the way it draws on qualities constituted as feminine, such as sensitivity and care. By dismissing any notion of forethought or extra effort Richard also signals a lack of personal emotional investment in relationships. Other researchers have argued how sexual relationships make masculinity vulnerable because of the way 'they engage their [young men's] emotions, connect them to their need for affection, and render their dependence on women visible' (Seidler cited in Holland et al., 1998: 160). Seeing 'too much' of a girlfriend, enjoying a relationship for more than its sexual benefits or investing thought and energy into being romantic, involve young men 'engaging their emotions' and 'recognizing their need for affection'. This

vulnerability may be managed through comments which suggest an indifference towards relationships and lack of emotional investment in them.

Young men's identity work saw the signification of masculine identity as intimately tied to managing vulnerability. Protecting a particular projection of masculine self involved policing the details young men revealed about themselves as sexual subjects. This was acknowledged in the emergence of a theme that ran across focus groups where young men described how they behaved and talked differently in front of their (male) friends as compared to when they were alone with their girlfriends. Nicholas alluded to this in his earlier comment about 'your girlfriend and mates seeing different sides of you', and it was periodically raised by other participants across single gender and mixed focus groups. This talk implied recognition that what was said to male peers needed to be censored in case its character was perceived too feminine and subsequently masculine identity was risked. Angus explained how if young men did not police their words and behaviour they may be ostracized by their friends:

Angus: Sort of if you say something about something . . . like . . . I dunno what. They [blokes] could think don't like him any more and that, so you don't want to tell them that, but you'd tell your girlfriend she doesn't really matter. (Trainee Farmers)

When this theme arose in the all male Ruru focus group, I attempted to explore it further by asking if anyone could think of an example of a conversation that was unlikely to occur with male peers but which could transpire with a girlfriend. The silence which ensued was so long that one participant was prompted to say 'Hey we are going to waste your tape'. Despite further probing young men did not proffer an example until the mixed gender focus group. The significance of this response being given in a mixed gender environment is discussed later in this section. Given that the dynamics of the all male focus group mirrored the peer group context which young men explained they could not voice particular issues in, it is unsurprising that an example was not supplied. Providing one would have rendered participants' masculine identity vulnerable and risked the kind of alienation that Angus described earlier. It is also possible that this question posed a problem because giving an example of a conversation that is appropriate with a girlfriend, but is 'risky' with your mates exposes hegemonic masculinity in a way which opens it to scrutiny. While these young men could articulate the constraints of hegemonic masculinity, actually transcending them by revealing their vulnerability in front of other young men was too dangerous in this instance. It meant risking masculine identity by, as Tawa put it, entering 'a forbidden place, where you can get yourself in trouble'.

Another instance where young men could be seen to explicitly manage their vulnerability through the details they offered about their sexual selves was towards the end of the discussion about romance quoted above.

Interestingly, while Richard entered the conversation with a statement which demonstrated his lack of effort when it came to being romantic, a later comment revealed his romantic gestures had inspired his girlfriend to return them. This was disclosed in the following conversation which begins with my question 'Have you guys ever had a girl do anything romantic for you?'

Angus: No.

Richard: Oh sort of.

Louisa: Can you tell us?

Richard: Oh no [*laugh*]. It sort of feels good though aye like cause if you know you are doing that sort of shit for them and then they come back and do it to you. Makes you feel real good.

Louisa: You're not going to tell us?

Richard: No.

Louisa: Okay. Darren you said kinda what was your one? [Referring back to a previous comment Darren had made about romance]

Here Richard reveals that he has expended enough romantic effort to warrant a reciprocal gesture from his girlfriend. This disclosure, however, is delivered in hardened masculine tone as 'doing that sort of shit for them' with the word 'shit' having the effect of separating this behaviour from any insinuation of 'softness'. As with the previous example, Richard manages his masculine identity through silence, or rather by not elaborating on his description of this event. While he acknowledges that he has experience of romance, he may have seen that sharing these details would make him vulnerable to his peers in a way that he did not want to risk. This is because the question 'Have you guys ever had a girl do anything romantic for you?' challenges the notion that young men are the initiators of action in relationships and young women their recipients. Richard provides a clear example of what the Ruru group did not/could not articulate in their single gender session – the fact that some things such as young men having a romantic 'side' can only be acknowledged amongst male peers when conveyed in a particular manner (i.e. expressed in hard speak). Here Richard undertakes a sophisticated management of his identity by meeting the focus group objective of talking seriously about sexuality but without losing face.

Deploying discourses: the slippery nature of masculine identity

Young men's signification of their sexual identities in ways that conformed to dominant discourses of heterosexuality was not all encompassing. In fact the preservation of a sexual identity that was confident, predatory and driven by 'innate' desires was a precarious undertaking. This is because even the most staunchly masculine subjects made comments that presented a 'softer' masculine self in which they were not immune to feelings of inadequacy and indicated they harboured aspirations of romance and emotional attachment. Richard, for instance, the young trainee farmer quoted above cultivated a

'hard man' identity through appearance and language (e.g. 'seven days a week on a farm mate, you don't fucking see any sheilas') but spoke in ways that revealed his own vulnerabilities and need for love. One of these moments was when he responded to a question about the importance of sex in a relationship with 'Yeah it's part of it aye but it's not you know just what you are there for'. This decentring of the importance of sexual activity implied the presence of a masculine self that appreciated and prioritized emotional attachment.

A common way in which young men demonstrated a less traditional masculine identity during focus groups was through their descriptions of the pleasures they derived from love and romance. This was conveyed in their frequent choice of a card showing a couple dancing alone 'cheek to cheek' as their favourite depiction of a relationship. With its sepia finish and portrayal of two people lovingly engrossed in each other, it was easily the most romantic picture amongst the selection. When talking about what he thought this image communicated about relationships, Tawa (the leader of the Ruru College group) became enthusiastic and impassioned saying 'This is just pure love aye. Love here, this is love. Love that's real love. Equal. This is equal. This is equal love man. This is cool.' He then intimated that this was what he desired from a relationship 'They are in love. That's just love there. That's enough for me . . .' In another example below, Peter from Kiwi College talked about his current relationship in a soul felt way, producing a chain with half a heart on it which he explained symbolized the importance of this romance:

Just being with somebody and knowing somebody just so well that, you know you can guess what they are thinking and what they are thinking all the time, it's just, yeah it's like, I feel like when we are together we are a whole person, when I am apart I am a half person. I mean it's what this signifies [he reaches for the chain, his girlfriend wears the other half of the heart around her neck]. When we are together we are whole, but apart just half a person. (Kiwi College)

Redman documents that romance figured strongly in the imaginations of the young men aged 15–18 in his British based study and played an important role in shaping what they wanted from relationships. It also provided these young men with a means of constructing a heterosexual masculine identity offering a 'route into a new form of masculinity' (Redman, 2001: 189). The way young men in this study signified their investment in romance indicates this is a legitimate male sexual identity in the New Zealand context also. The emergence of this romance based male sexuality has been facilitated by an increased number of media depictions of 'sensitive types holding babies, or [men] expressing emotions other than anger, or engaged in other so-called "unmacho" activities' (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000). Changes within the labour market and other social structures may have also enabled romance to be more common currency in the talk of some young men in these studies.

What was noticeable about these less traditional expressions of masculine identity was the fluidity with which they were deployed and discarded. A young man might project a multiplicity of sexual selves sliding from confident sexual predator to apprehensive and inexperienced in any one moment or conversation. An example of this occurred during a conversation about experiencing sexual pressure from girlfriends. This topic was raised spontaneously¹⁰ by each of the focus groups and, in articulating this, young men portrayed a sexual identity that ran counter to dominant perceptions of them as the perpetrators of sexual pressure. In the following extract the trainee farmers explain why some young men may not want to have sexual intercourse:

- Louisa:* What reasons would guys have for perhaps not wanting to?
Richard: The same reasons some girls don't want to maybe they don't want to get AIDS or something like that. If they don't want to get them pregnant or. . .
Harry: Scared that it's not going to be good enough. [*others laugh here*]
Richard: Or if they don't do it right probably. [*laugh*]
Louisa: Is there like a pressure then for guys to feel like they have to uhm . . .
Richard: Satisfy the girl or. . .
Louisa: Yeah that they have to what's that term . . . perform? Is that a thing that guys feel?
Gail: yeah.
Harry: Not me.
Richard: Oh you're just a studly. [*laugh*]

What I find interesting about this extract is the way Harry swiftly changes from declaring that young men may feel anxiety about not living up to their sexual partner's expectations, to denial that this is a personal concern for him. While Harry makes a generalized statement about possible feelings of 'inadequacy', it is seen by other participants to reflect his own thoughts about himself. Their laughter appears to signal that he has risked masculine identity and subsequently he hastily attempts to redeem a 'studly' persona by insisting he is not afflicted by such concerns (Kehily and Nayak, 1997). This identity work occurs in direct response to the mocking reaction of his peers and might be understood as an example of what Willig calls the purposive deployment of discursive constructions to meet a specific objective. In this instance the discourses deployed are those which constitute a traditional masculine subjectivity in order to counteract the damage incurred by a less hegemonic constitution of self. What this extract clearly indicates is the fluidity of young men's sexual identities and way in which they are constantly under modification.

The gendered researcher and participant's presentation of masculine self

Each time I have presented this kind of data at seminars and conferences I have been asked whether I believe that my being female meant that young men were more likely to constitute themselves in ways that were less traditionally masculine. Put another way, would these sorts of discourses have been deployed if the focus group facilitator had been male? Underpinning this question is the notion that the researcher's gender impacts upon the types of narratives or in this case the constitution of masculine subjectivity produced in the research context. As this section reveals, young men's perceptions of me as a woman enabled them to fashion their heterosexuality through this identification – for example, by seeing me as more likely to desire/tolerate softer versions of masculinity and sexualizing my role as researcher. However, I would argue that it is too simplistic to suggest that my being female produced more examples of particular portrayals of masculine self, as male researchers have also elicited these narratives from young men.

Considerable disparity exists about the extent and type of effect the researcher's gender has on participants' responses and the subsequent data produced. For instance, in their exploration of men's experiences of becoming lone fathers (i.e. parenting after separation), McKee and O'Brien document that participants talked more easily and engaged in more self-disclosure with female investigators. This was explained with reference to how male participants indicated they were most likely to share personal feelings with their wives and this conjugal relationship was mirrored in the research context by virtue of the interviewer being female (McKee and O'Brien, 1983). The male participant's perception that because of her shared gender a female interviewer will be more like their wife, and thus easier to talk to than a male, may have a bearing on the type of data a study can produce. Following this course of thought, it could be argued that evidence of young men's constitution of more flexible masculine identities may have resulted from my representing a surrogate 'girlfriend' whom they felt they could reveal these to.

Additional support for the idea that a researcher's gender dictates the presence or absence of less traditional male sexualities can be found in an Australian based study. In this research, focus groups exploring sexual health issues with young men aged 14–16 years were conducted by a male facilitator. Harrison argues in her analysis of this project that the male facilitator encouraged 'joint identity work which actively reproduced heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity as the norm' (Harrison, 2000: 28). On this occasion the male facilitator inhibited the expression of softer versions of masculinity through his engagement in hyper-masculine patterns of communication. This may suggest that a male facilitator can encourage traditional male identity work due to his own implication as a subject within

the operation of hegemonic masculinity. Even if this is undertaken as a means of establishing rapport with participants, the effect of such identity work is to submerge other expressions of male sexualities.

As a female researcher I could not engage with participants in the production of a joint hegemonic masculine identity. However, my gender could contribute to the portrayal of hyper-masculine forms of masculine identity in two ways. Firstly, young men defined themselves as appropriately masculine against my feminine identity, by separating themselves from this through hyper-masculine talk/behaviours. This occurred when in the course of collecting contact details from those who wished to participate in the research further, one of the trainee farmers suggested that the real reason I was getting his phone number was to arrange a date with him. This comment constituted him as attuned to potential sexual relationships with women, while his tone of voice communicated his interest in such opportunities. This talk also positioned him as attractive to women, characteristics which are all esteemed within traditional versions of heterosexual masculinity. Had the facilitator been male, it is unlikely that this constitution of conventional male subjectivity would have manifested in quite the same way. It was because of being a woman, and the possibilities of sexualization that this confers, that such a production of heterosexual masculinity occurred.

Secondly, although I couldn't generate a shared hyper-masculine identity with young men like the male researcher in Harrison's (2000) study outlined earlier, as a woman I could still (unknowingly) collude in its production. My sense of what young men are like, which is partially constituted through dominant discourses of male heterosexuality, facilitated this positioning on occasion. If we return to Gerry's earlier comment about liking 'the naked chick' in the 'Hey Sister' lingerie advert, this was precipitated by my enquiry as to whether the girl ripping the guy's heart out was the main thing he liked about the image. The construction and delivery of this question implies that the inversion of traditional heterosexuality that Gerry identifies may not be the picture's central appeal for him. It is almost as if I cannot fathom that this would be the sole or main reason why Gerry is attracted to the image. Without being consciously aware of it, my own comment constituted a space in which the operation of hegemonic masculinity can seize, and a traditional male sexual subjectivity be taken up. I remain unconvinced, however, that this is purely an effect of my gender and rather a consequence of the social constitution of heterosexuality.

My own sense of the influence gender played in male participants' constitution of 'softer' versions of sexual identity is that there is little inherent within it that produced these kinds of masculine identities. As Padfield and Procter (1996) explain, certain features of our selves are crucial to the identities participants display and the knowledge which is produced in the research context, and these are not simply dictated by gender. In my work with these young men I tried to communicate my genuine interest in their ideas and

opinions, to take them and their discussion about sexuality seriously, to demonstrate sensitivity about what they were saying and to create an environment in which they could speak freely. I would argue that it was this style of investigation which was more conducive to the emergence of less traditional male sexualities than these qualities being a direct consequence of simply being female. If it were only my gender which provoked this kind of identity work, then it might follow that such identities would be missing in research conducted by men. This clearly is not the case with male researchers like Redman (2001), Barker (2000) and O'Donnell and Sharpe (2000) noting the presence of counter-hegemonic masculinities within their studies. The researcher qualities I projected are not the sole preserve of women and have been described as capturing the style of male researchers with similar results for young men's presentation of self. This can be seen in the description of methodology in Frosh et al.'s study of young masculinities in Britain:

It seems clear that at least some boys were enabled to be 'softer' in the individual interviews because the interviewer himself was informal and boy-centred, asking questions about feelings and relationships. Some of the boys who expressed a strong preference for the individual interview and enjoyed being able to talk more 'seriously' about themselves, seemed to like the interviewer for being serious, caring and interested in them, and like being able to 'confide' in him. (Frosh et al., 2002: 33).

Nor do I think that my being interested in young men's alternative presentations of sexual self are responsible for the constitution of such subjectivities in their narratives. While I certainly 'probed' for less traditional expressions of male heterosexuality, these enquiries were generally not met with the demonstration of masculine identity they sought. As seen in the earlier excerpts, this direct questioning was just as likely to provoke 'hard' masculine responses due to the way it risked masculine identity as to engender an alternative discourse of heterosexuality (see my question about romance to Richard and request for an example of the difference in conversation between male peers and a girlfriend).

If we follow the idea that the presence of women makes a difference to the prevalence and emergence of less traditional expressions of masculinity, then I might have expected to see more examples of this within the mixed gender Ruru focus group. In fact, the types of identity work this group of young men engaged in were similar in form and prevalence in both single sex and mixed gender contexts. While demonstrations of hegemonic masculine identities were more likely to be met with disapproval (from the young women) in the mixed gender environment, their incidence was not diminished. While the presence of more female participants did not seem to influence the type and occurrence of particular masculine sexual subjectivities, further investigation is required to determine if the presence of female subjects alters the modes by which they are produced.

Talk did seem to flow more easily in the mixed gender group but this may have been a consequence of more participants and an increased familiarity with me as the facilitator and the topic under discussion a second time round. However, this leaves the issue of why young men were able to produce an example of a conversation that was less likely to be discussed amongst male peers than with a girlfriend in a mixed but not single gender group. A response required them to expose the operation of hegemonic masculinity in the very context they were participating (e.g. an all male peer group) and this may have been too 'risky' amongst males only. On this occasion, young men may have found the presence of young women in the mixed gender setting relieved this intensity to project an appropriately masculine identity, just as they described the experience of talking to their girlfriends did.

Summing up

While focus groups can provide valuable information about the way in which young men think and talk about male sexuality, as a method they also offer much more. The focus group context is constitutive of male sexual subjectivities in the way that it provides a public forum for the presentation of self. The nature of focus group interaction offers young men opportunities to fashion their masculinity through what they choose to reveal and conceal about their sexuality to other participants. This type of engagement can be conceptualized as 'identity work' and enables us to study masculinities in the making. From this perspective lewd remarks or boasting about sexual conquests are not behaviours which hinder the collection of 'good' data, but offer insights into how male sexuality is constituted.

Focus groups comprised of young people of similar ages can often mirror the dynamics of the peer group and the types of pressures to 'perform' these invoke. In this research this setting served precariously as a means of signifying masculinity and creating an environment in which masculinity's vulnerability was heightened. This was partly attributable to the way in which the focus group's purpose of 'serious' contemplation about sexuality challenged dominant expressions of masculinity. Talking about sexuality with other young men in a manner that did not predominately involve humour or derision transcends common forms of male interaction and subsequently posed a disruption to it. These demands saw young men having to undertake the management of their sexual identity in a sophisticated way in order to meet the focus group's goals while concurrently preserving masculinity.

Subsequently, young men's talk about sexuality served as a means of signifying masculinity and simultaneously managing vulnerability. Such identity work took the form of presenting a public image of themselves which conformed to dominant discourses of male heterosexuality. This was achieved through remarks which signalled sexual interest in women and a sense of emotional detachment and indifference towards relationships. Young men

also appeared to carefully police the information they revealed about their sexual selves, giving acknowledgement that what they said and how they said it differed according to context. There was also recognition that what was not said was as crucial to their 'successful' identity management as what was spoken. In their silences and through their omissions of detail, young men provided further demonstrations of this surveillance of masculine self.

The preservation of a sexual identity which mimicked traditional constructions of masculinity was a fragile undertaking with young men revealing 'softer' versions of masculinity throughout these focus groups. These expressions of masculine identity were not confined to the middle-class men of Kiwi college but also frequently displayed by those who appeared more staunchly masculine, such as Richard, one of the trainee farmers, and Tawa from working-class Ruru College. A common way in which these less traditional masculine identities were revealed was in young men's talk about their desire for, and the pleasure they gained from, love and romance within relationships. This finding supports other research revealing the way in which romance acts as a new currency through which contemporary masculine identities are constituted. There was considerable fluidity in the signification of traditional masculinities with, for example, one young man expressing his fears of sexual inadequacy and declaring his sexual potency in the same breath. This slippage might be characterized by the way in which young men deploy discursive constructions to meet a specific goal – in this case the preservation of an appropriately masculine sexual identity. Often displays of hard masculinity followed moments in which young men had revealed a less hegemonic constitution of self and served to salvage that which had been risked. Such findings indicate that young men engage in identity work in which their presentation of self is constantly in flux and intimately regulated by the operation of hegemonic masculinity.

These findings have several methodological implications for conducting focus groups with young men. They suggest that, instead of engaging in techniques that attempt to circumvent or deter young men's hyper-masculine behaviour, researchers view such phenomena as indicative of how masculine identities can be produced in research environments. The focus groups involve young men not just giving their opinions about male sexuality but the constitution and management of their own sexual identities within the focus group setting. Being aware of this dynamic means that researchers can take it into account during method design. From this perspective focus groups offer another site for observation of the constitution of male sexual identities and add a layer of possible data collection and analysis that moves beyond what young men directly report about their sexual subjectivities.

These findings also shed light on the impact that the gender of the facilitator has on participants' identity work when the group is predominately male. Given that other male researchers have elicited alternative or softer versions of masculinity from young men, it would seem that participants do

not simply reserve these narratives for women facilitators. Factors such as the participants' perceived sense of comfort in talking about masculinity in unconventional ways, and the attitude and approach of the facilitator (as well as other participants) are likely to be influential here. The research findings also show that, while a female researcher can not engage with participants in the production of a shared hyper-masculine identity, she is not immune from colluding in its constitution (despite an explicit wish not to). The power of discourses which reproduce the gender order organize our thoughts and reactions in conventional ways even when we are aware of their potential to do this. My discussion with Gerry about the 'Hey Sister' advert is a good example here, where my seemingly innocuous comment created discursive space for the production of a traditional male sexual subjectivity. Subsequently, it would seem that the presence of a female facilitator (or other female participants) is not a guarantee that these expressions of masculinity will be curbed, or that young men will offer a 'softer' presentation of masculine self.

NOTES

1. Some of the findings from this project have been published elsewhere (see Allen, 2001, 2002, 2003).
2. Decile ratings are given to schools by the Ministry of Education to denote the extent to which a school draws its students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 1 schools have the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 10 have the lowest proportion of these students. However ratings do not reflect overall socio-economic diversity of the school (Ministry of Education, 2003).
3. Ruru is the Maori word for owl.
4. Non-Maori New Zealanders of European descent.
5. A bush shirt is a checked long sleeved shirt that is stereotypically associated with farm workers in New Zealand.
6. A break in the work day usually at morning or afternoon tea.
7. This was not a recruitment technique I had discussed with teachers or was often even aware of until the focus group had been conducted. However, it was sometimes a strategy employed by teachers to secure participant numbers.
8. Images offering dominant discourses of heterosexuality consisted of a couple dancing romantically; two young people laughing while riding a bicycle in tandem; a couple in steamy embrace. Alternative messages of heterosexuality were conveyed by cards which revealed: a woman reaching through a man and dropping his heart on the floor; two elderly people kissing on a park bench; a woman shown as the initiator of an embrace.
9. Well known Australian model nicknamed 'the body'.
10. Sexual pressure was not a topic on my question schedule, but rather raised by participants of their own accord.

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