



## Pathways to Manhood:

The social and sexual ordering of young men's lives

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*Boys' and young men's lives are shaped by powerful social and sexual relations, which limit their ability to form healthy relationships and to nurture their own and their sexual partners' sexual and reproductive health. Typical social constructions of manhood and masculine sexuality inform males' risk-taking behaviour, constrain their access to health services and thwart health promotion efforts. Such constructions increase the likelihood of boys' and men's participation in unplanned pregnancy, disease transmission, and sexual violence.*

This paper outlines key aspects of the current ordering of young men's sociosexual lives. I focus on practices, discourses and relations of gender and sexuality among boys and young men which shape their sexual behaviour, social interactions and sexual relationships. These patterns influence boys' and young men's involvements in a range of health issues, including contraception and pregnancy, bodily health, unsafe sex and disease transmission, (Flood, 2000), violence, and sexual and familial relationships more broadly. Therefore, in order to understand both health-related behaviour and the possibilities for health promotion among young men, it is crucial to 'map' their social and sexual relations. It is to this exercise that I now turn, beginning with a brief explanation of the terms I use.

The lives of boys and young men, like those of men and women in general, are structured by intersecting constructions of gender, sexuality and other forms of social differentiation such as class, race and sexuality. Defined simply, "gender" refers to the meanings given to being female or male, and the social organisation of women's and men's lives and relations. "Sexuality" refers to bodily practices

experienced as sexual, sexual orientations and sexual identities, sexual relationships, sexual communities, and beliefs or discourses regarding sexuality. (I return to the influence of other forms of social differentiation later.) In any particular society or context, there will be specific constructions of gender and sexuality in operation: particular meanings will be given to being male or female, and males' and females' lives will be shaped by both the personal and institutional orderings of gender. And these will overlap and intersect with the ways in which sexual relations, identities and so on are organised. (See Connell (2000) for a succinct account of such processes.)

From a now very substantial scholarship, we know that certain forms of gender and sexuality are dominant (culturally celebrated and socially sanctioned) in any context, while other forms are stigmatised, silenced or punished. Boys and young men may live up to dominant forms of masculinity and heterosexuality or may resist and reject them, and they do either in the shadow of collectively structured gender relations (in peer interactions, school cultures and other social institutions) and discourses of gender (in media and popular culture). The patterns I describe below do not fit every boy's life, but they are widespread and typical enough to be of interest to anyone concerned about boys, masculinities and gender relations.

**Proving yourself:** For boys and young men, one of the most significant influences on their social and sexual interactions is male-male competition, surveillance and discipline. Particularly at school, many boys experience the pressure to prove themselves amongst other boys (and to a lesser extent with girls). Through

boy's participation in culturally celebrated forms of masculinity, they can prove themselves as men, in effect getting 'manhood points' for their efforts. Such patterns are an expression of the fact that men's lives are highly organised by relations between men. The performance of manhood is often in front of, and granted by, other men (Kimmel, 1994: 128-129). Boys can gain status among male peers by demonstrating their prowess in stereotypically masculine traits and pursuits, such as toughness and interpersonal dominance, sporting ability and physical skill, heterosexual sexual achievement and popularity, and humour and banter.

Boys' lives at school involve a constant watching of themselves and others, an intense gendered and sexual surveillance. Boys who are perceived as 'sissies', 'wimps' or 'girlish' are punished and ridiculed. Masculine banter, including name-calling, jokes and teasing, positions and repositions each other in hierarchies of power and status, and this relentless barrage produces a hardening and toughening of each other. This banter can be extraordinarily creative, playful and humorous, but it can act also to put others down and 'do' power. In the context of dominant cultural ideologies of what it means to be male, boys and young men may focus on power and competition and the need to be in control.

Male peer groups involve both pleasures and perils. This same compulsory and competitive proving of one's masculinity can make them a lonely and unsupportive place. It is difficult to reveal vulnerabilities and sexual difficulties to other boys, and there is a constant effort to create and maintain an image of acceptable masculinity (Holland, Ramazanoglu & Sharpe, 1994: 14).

**Feeling shy:** Research among young men finds "a picture of complex inner-dramas of individual insecurity and low self-esteem" (Mac an Ghaill, 1994: 102). Many feel shy, inadequate and unable to cope with demands of initiating and maintaining a relationship, and feel under enormous pressure from their peers. They experience being unable to make (sexual) contact with young women, which fundamentally contradicts dominant masculine prescriptions and their constant banter about 'getting girls' (ibid: 102; Wight, 1994: 717).

A central dichotomy in many young men's lives is between their projection of a public confident masculinity and their experience of private anxieties and insecurities (Mac an Ghaill, 1994: 99). This relates to a more general contradiction in society between men's collective position of power and many men's sense of personal powerlessness (McLean, 1996: 29). This is especially the case in the arena of sexuality, and this is a site of both men's perpetuation of power and men's emotional vulnerability and dependence (Segal, 1990: 212).

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**Talk about sex:** Young men show a general awkwardness in discussing sexual behaviour explicitly. With each other, boys distance themselves, through exaggerated talk, sexual insults, silence, or most commonly, jokes (Wight, 1994: 718). Boys' same-sex conversations often involve insults and put-downs of each other, which can make boys defensive and isolated, and heterosexuality is a compulsory norm. Sex is often used as material for insults, and much boys' talk about sex is insulting banter, which encourages certain expressions of sexuality and inhibits others. In some boys' talk, girls are positioned as essentially strange, and there is a distancing from and devaluation of the feminine world (Wight, 1994: 719-721). There are significant contrasts between boys' talk and behaviour when with other boys, and their behaviour when one-on-one with a girlfriend or female friend, and to a lesser extent when with just one other male friend.

**Where boys learn about sex:** Boys are less likely than girls to rely on parents and teachers for information, and more likely to rely on friends and television. Other sources of information include teachers and pornographic magazines (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998: 100-101; Wight, 1994: 715). Young men and women are increasingly turning to the internet for information on issues of health, relationships, and



sexuality, and for other sexuality-related purposes such as viewing pornography or making contact with others with similar sexual orientations. The internet has clear benefits for sexuality education (Goldman, 2000: 16-17). Yet I am particularly concerned about the role of the internet in enhancing access to and consumption of pornography, particularly among boys and young men.

Pornography is an important influence on boys' and young men's understandings of sexuality, and the rapid growth of the internet is likely to increase its presence. While there are significant disagreements among feminists over pornography, pornography is often criticised for depicting women in objectifying and unrealistic ways, eroticising forced sex and violence, and harming women in its production. Thus internet-based pornography may play a part in encouraging sexist attitudes and coercive sexual practices among males.

**Heterosexual ambivalence:** On the one hand, boys make comments such as "What's wrong with you, ya woman", "You're a girl", "You're playing like a girl" and so on to put down other boys. Femaleness and femininity here are negative terms which should be avoided and repelled. Male teachers and male students may conflate assumed gay behaviour with femininity in order to slander the former, thus using femininity to put down gayness (Mac an Ghail, 1994: 164).

At the same time as many boys show contempt for femaleness and the stereotypical qualities of femininity, they also show attraction to girls. Girls are objects of sexual desire, fascination and even obsession. Many young men develop relations with girls with a contradictory mix of pursuit and disinterest, fear and fixation (Mac an Ghail, 1994: 102). Mac an Ghail refers to this as the 'ambivalent misogyny' in straight male culture. For example, when boys describe particular girls as "sluts", they may position these girls as both sexually despised and sexually desired (ibid: 132).

**Sex for status:** In dominant constructions of masculine sexuality, sexual experience is positioned as a marker of masculine status: the more sex you have had, with the largest number of women, the more of a man you are. Penis-vagina intercourse is seen as real adult sex. 'Losing one's

virginity' is one of the only rites of passage for men which signals their entry into adulthood and manhood in Western societies (Wilton, 1997: 34). In other words, males achieve adult male status by gaining access to women's vaginas.

At adolescence, the question of sexual experience is a particularly powerful one among boys and young men. Among many boys there is a compulsion to lose one's virginity. Talking with each other, boys will imply or claim that they are sexually experienced. At the same time, exaggeration is widely assumed to be practised (Wight, 1994: 721). There is pressure to have sex, from male friends, older brothers, occasionally fathers' banter, and the mass media. Boys routinely overestimate the proportions of their peers who have had sexual intercourse, giving figures well above national averages (Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal: 1997: 9, 26).

This emphasis on sexual experience as a source of status may decline over the period from adolescence through to men's late teens and early twenties, probably simply because a growing proportion of men will have had intercourse. In addition, in comparison to male-male friendships, heterosexual relationships begin to receive greater emotional investment and social time. Nevertheless, male/male peer relations continue to structure and give meaning to adult men's heterosexual sexual relations. My research among young heterosexual men aged 18-26 finds that for some men, male-male relations take priority over male-female non-sexual relations, sexual activity continues to be a key path to masculine status, and story-telling about one's sexual exploits takes place among male audiences.

**Studs versus sluts:** Another troubling construction of sexuality which continues to be highly influential among young men and women is the sexual double standard. The sexual double standard refers to two standards of sexual behaviour, one for men and one for women. Put simply, females who are sexually active or seen to be so are labeled as "sluts" (or "tarts", "whores", "loose", "easy", etc.), i.e. negatively, while males are labeled as "studs", "legends", "gigolos" or "players", i.e. positively. Males are allowed or even encouraged to have sex early in their lives, to have a series of

sexual partners, and their infidelity may be tolerated, while females who are sexually active are judged harshly. More generally, women's sexual behaviour is highly policed and controlled, while men's sexual behaviour is freer of social constraint.

The sexual double standard is a powerful presence throughout Australia's high schools and colleges. It is clearest in the contrasting names, sexual reputations and statuses given to women and men who practise (or are believed to practise) the same sexual attitudes, desires and behaviours. "Slut" is also used as a common general term of abuse for women, which may have nothing to do with their alleged sexual behaviour.

The threat of a negative reputation is a very powerful influence on young women, controlling their social and sexual relations and practices, steering them into acceptable forms of behaviour, and limiting their power, assertiveness and sexual autonomy (Hillier et al., 1998: 26; Holland et al., 1996: 242; Kitlinger, 1995; Moore & Rosenthal, 1993: 96-99; Rosenthal & Reichler, 1994: 49; Stewart, 1996). Young men gain a sexual licence which is denied to young women. But men also pay a price; in that they receive this licence at the expense of gentleness, intimacy, passivity and emotional dependence (Holland et al., 1996: 247). My PhD research found that small numbers of young women also apply the term "slut" to men, signaling a slight weakening of the sexual double standard, but unequally gendered constructions of sexual reputation and unequal power relations remain powerful influences on heterosexual sexual interactions.

**Take no for an answer:** Typical constructions of masculinity and sexuality, as well as gendered power relations, also feed into some young men's practice of sexual violence. While most males are not violent, when violence does occur it is largely men who commit it. Physical and sexual violence is a significant barrier to women's sexual and reproductive health (Heise, 1995). Young women experience levels of violence three to four times greater than among women overall (Young et.al, 2000: 1). Nineteen percent of women aged 18-24 experienced an incident of violence in the last 12 months (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996: 5). Among young women aged 18-

23 (in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health), 12 percent report that they have been in a violent relationship with a partner or spouse. Half of these women had been beaten, choked, or shot at, and close to three-quarters had sustained injuries (Young et.al, 2000: 1-3).

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**At an individual level, men who identify with traditional images of masculinity, have hostile and negative sexual attitudes towards women, see violence as manly and desirable, and believe in rape stereotypes are more likely to be sexually aggressive, sexually harassing and physically violent to women.**

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Men's physical and sexual violence against women is more likely in cultures in which manhood is culturally defined as linked to dominance, toughness, or male honour (Heise, 1998: 277). At an individual level, men who identify with traditional images of masculinity, have hostile and negative sexual attitudes towards women, see violence as manly and desirable, and believe in rape stereotypes are more likely to be sexually aggressive, sexually harassing and physically violent to women (Heise, 1998: 277-278; O'Neil & Harway, 1997: 192; Scully, 1990; Warshaw, 1988).

It is worrying therefore that significant proportions of boys and young men in Australia - between one in three and one in seven - express beliefs supportive of sexual violence. In a Brisbane study of Year Nine boys, nearly one in three believed that it is "okay for a boy to hold a girl down and force her to have sexual intercourse" if she has "led him on", while one in five boys were unsure. One quarter of the boys thought that it was acceptable to force a girl to have sex if she gets him sexually excited, and another fifth were unsure (Domestic Violence Resource Centre, 1992). In a 1997 survey by Family Planning Australia, nearly a third of the 15-25 year old males interviewed agreed that it was "okay for a male to force a female to have sex" in one or more of a range of situations (Golding & Friedman, 1997). Finally, a national survey of 5000 young people aged 12-20 found that one



in seven young males agreed with the statements that "It's okay for a boy to make a girl have sex with him if she has flirted with him or led him on" and "It is okay to put pressure on a girl to have sex but not to physically force her" (National Crime Prevention, 2001: 64-70).

**Homoeroticism:** Boys often experience powerful feelings of sexual interest in other boys' bodies, have regular exposure to each others' bodies, and some will engage in same-sex sexual activity such as mutual masturbation (McLean, 1995: 32). A recent national survey of secondary school students found that 8-9 percent said that they had experienced sexual attraction to the same sex (Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal, 1997: 27). However, the overriding influence of homophobia (the fear and hatred of homosexuality) makes it impossible to admit to feelings of curiosity or sexual interest. Feelings of affection between boys can only be expressed in hard and jokey ways, with the only legitimate forms of physical contact being body-contact sports, rough-and-tumble play and fighting (McLean, 1995: 32-33).

**Homophobia and heterosexism:** Homophobia exerts a fundamental influence on boys' lives, and especially on male-male relations. Males show stronger allegiance to homophobic attitudes and emotions than females (Herek, 1986). More fundamentally though, masculinity is defined as essentially heterosexual and defined against or in opposition to homosexuality, as well as femininity. "Real" men are heterosexual men, and the dominant model of masculinity is of a heterosexual masculinity.

Growing up, males are faced with the continual threat of being seen as gay and the continuous challenge of proving that they are not gay. In short, boys and men are kept in line by homophobia. Step outside the boundaries of masculine behaviour and you are immediately faced with verbal and physical attack.

Homophobia leads males to limit their loving and close friendships with other males. The fear of being identified as a "poofter" leads men to behave in hypermasculine and aggressive ways and to close up emotionally. Homophobia thus functions as the dragon at the gates of an alternative masculinity, policing the boundaries of conventional masculinity (Flood, 1997). On the one hand,

homosexuality is perceived as gender betrayal. On the other, deviation from dominant masculinity is perceived to be homosexual. Homophobia goes hand in hand with heterosexism, the privileging of heterosexuality which pervades our culture (Epstein & Johnson, 1994: 198; Nickson, 1996: 161-163). Given the pervasive influence of homophobia and heterosexism in young men's social relations, challenging their power is a key task.

**Diversities and hierarchies:** While I have identified a series of gendered and sexual patterns in boys' and young men's lives, it is critical to note also the fact of diversities among boys. In schools, typically there are multiple and contradictory masculinities and different male peer groups with different masculine subjectivities and practices. There are diverse identities and sub-cultures among boys in schools, such as the "cool guys", "swots" and "wimps" documented by Connell (1989, 1993, 1994, 1996) and the Macho Lads, Academic Achievers, New Enterprisers and Real Englishmen described by Mac an Ghail (1994, 1996). School masculinities and male peer groups are shaped by class, race, ethnicity, the official curriculum and patterns of authority of the school, families, and a host of other factors, and there are contests for cultural dominance between rival versions of masculinity.

There are different norms of sexuality in different male peer groups, particularly in all-male social circles compared to more mixed-sex ones. Scottish research finds that young men in male-only peer groups are more likely to subscribe to notions of 'two types' of women, 'nice girls' and 'sluts' or 'slags'. Among young Glaswegian men Wight (1995) found two sets of peer groups, one mixed sex, geographically dispersed and characterised by successful schooling and commitment to career, the other almost entirely male, parochial, and largely unemployed or unskilled. While the moral dichotomy of "nice girls" and "slags" or "cows" was highly salient in the latter group, along with entrenched gender divisions and the norm of a predatory male sexuality, in the former it was largely absent and the men expressed ideals of companionate relationships.

Multiple forms of social differentiation and categorisation, such as class, race and

ethnicity, are likely to structure young men's social and sexual relations. While there is little Australian research on this question, we do know that these axes of difference are related to varying patterns of sexual activity. Among young people the average age of first intercourse varies with class, education, culture and ethnicity (Roker and Coleman, 1998: 7). Female students from non-English-speaking backgrounds are less likely to be sexually active than Anglo female students (Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal, 1997: 26). Young people who adhere to religious values, whatever the religion, are less likely to be sexually active (Moore and Rosenthal, 1998: 46). Young people in rural locations are more likely to be sexually active than urban young people, and this is especially so for young rural women (Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal, 1997: 26). Finally, homeless youth practise

higher levels of risky sexual behaviour and do so with more sexual partners (Hillier, Matthews & Dempsey, 1997). Further research is needed on the intersections of masculinities and sexualities with other forms of social differentiation.

If health education efforts among boys and young men are to be effective, they must be based on a thorough understanding of the social relations which characterise their lives. Intersecting constructions of gender, sexuality and other social divisions are the context for both boys' health-related behaviour and the health promotion strategies which aim to engage boys. In mapping key features of boys' and young men's sociosexual lives, this paper contributes to health education on masculinities and to the broader project of theorising and indeed changing gendered and sexual relations.

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