

Project Summary

The "Constant Arm Wrestle": Young Men's Construction of Masculinities within a Sexualised Culture.

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Introduction: Sexualised culture in contemporary Australian society is a subject of considerable scholarly attention. The majority of existing research explores the impact of this culture upon girls and women, while less is known about how it may impact young men. Focus is often drawn to the normalisation of male sexual entitlement by sexualised popular culture instead of examining the ways young men 'do gender' within this context.

Context and Research Aims:

To orient group discussion toward the topic of sexualisation a music video montage and advertisement images were used as stimulus. Popular media systems are one of the most important places where young people learn to make sense of the self/others. Popular media often depict men as 'sex-driven studs' whose individual desires and dominance are subsumed in their gender role and identity. Men are consistently framed as insatiable beings, with the sexualisation of women not only condoned but admirable, and framed as desirable by women. Our broad goal was to examine factors that may constrain, enable, facilitate and shape the ways young men make meaning of, and 'perform' masculinities within a sexualised context. Specifically, the aims were: (1) to ascertain what subject-positions young men have available to them within a sexualised context; (2) to establish whether the sexualisation of women is a way to 'perform' masculinity; and (3) to explore men's construction of masculinity using Connell's hegemonic masculinity (1995) and an intersectional approach.

Methodology:

This study was conducted from a social constructionist perspective and used a Discourse Analysis framework developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987; 1992). This approach enabled us to examine the ways young men make meaning of their masculinities and then contextualise and interpret findings. Three 90 minute focus groups were conducted with 11 young men ranging in age from 18 to 29 (M = 22) years old. Discussions were audio-recorded and later transcribed generating a total of 50 pages of transcribed material. To conceptualise and interpret findings Connell's Hegemonic masculinity Theory (1995) and Hollway's Sexuality Discourses (1984) were used.

Results:

Analysis identified three main discourses; the 'Malleable Man', 'The Hunter' and the 'Deep Down man'. These were all interwoven in complex and contradictory ways. Results indicate that young men have to continually suppress one aspect of the 'masculine self' in order to attain another. This dissonance exposed an insecure and anxious masculinity, with the threat of rejection and ostracism resulting in fear and conformity. Male counterparts hold the power to sanction/deny young men's 'manhood' and as such, male-interaction is both necessary and precarious. The male social structure is depicted as powerful and punitive with no space for opposing morals of behaviours.

Implications:

The sexualisation of women is used and sustained as a form of "capital" within the male-group. It provides status, recognition and admiration for young men. At the same time it is

contingent upon female-reciprocity which exposes masculinity as inherently dependent. Hegemonic masculine behaviours are adopted by men as a means of asserting a 'masculine self' that is camouflaged from its dependence on the 'other'. Results indicate that men engage in the sexualisation of women first and foremost as a means of demonstrating masculinity to other men. This highlights an oversight in the research and literature on sexualisation as the voices of men and masculinities remain largely on the periphery. This study posits sexualisation originates, operates and is sustained within and by the male-social structure.