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Title: Doing Respectable Heteromasculinities in Boys and Young Men's Interview Talk on Sexual Encounters

Year: 2023

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Aho, T., & Peltola, M. (2023). Doing Respectable Heteromasculinities in Boys and Young Men's Interview Talk on Sexual Encounters. *Men and Masculinities*, 26(2), 210-228.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x221145959>

Doing Respectable Heteromasculinities in Boys and Young Men's Interview Talk on Sexual Encounters

Men and Masculinities
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–19
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DOI: 10.1177/1097184X221145959
journals.sagepub.com/home/jmm



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Abstract

Recent studies on boys and young men's heterosexual practices point in contradictory directions. On the one hand, boys and young men seem to be placing less value on "hard", overtly aggressive masculinity and compulsive heterosexuality, in keeping with their adoption of more egalitarian attitudes in their sexual relationships. On the other hand, the hegemonic masculine notions that associate "real" men with sexual prowess persist as well. In this article, we argue that this contradiction indicates careful (re)calibration in doing respectable heteromasculinities. We draw on a small-scale qualitative study located in Helsinki, Finland, in illuminating how cis-gendered boys and young men with less privileged backgrounds construct their heteromasculinities as respectable, which requires context-specific balancing between distancing themselves from and embracing hegemonic notions of manhood. Through this balancing, the boys and young men reconfigure not necessary the substance but the style of respectable heteromascularity; therefore contributing to sustaining masculine hegemony by attuning it according to the claims of the "#MeToo era".

Keywords

heterosexuality, boys, young men, sexual encounters, youth, respectable masculinities

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Introduction

In youth sexual cultures in the Global North, the norm of active male heterosexuality has worked as a hegemonic way through which hierarchical relations among young men and between young men and young women are reproduced. As boys and young men seek to prove their manhood through heterosexual prowess, they easily consider girls and women's rights to physical integrity as second to their access to girls and women's bodies (Hearn 1998; Holland et al. 1998). Although Feminist Studies and Critical Masculinities Studies have highlighted problematic aspects of hegemonic male sexuality for decades (Plummer 1999), recent social movements such as #MeToo have amplified public discussions on gendered inequalities and the borders of boys and men's un/acceptable sexual conduct.

The #MeToo movement has also intensified public debates around "bad"/"traditional" and "good"/"new" masculinities, and the potential for change in boys and men that would put an end to the sexist practices (Hearn 2021; Nilsson and Lundgren 2021). As part of this development, boys and young men experience public pressure to abandon "toxic" masculine practices (Harrington 2021) and embrace a "new" egalitarian manhood that emphasizes reciprocal and consensual heterosexual relationships (Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason 2018; Ólafsdóttir and Kjaran 2019). Recent studies point to contradictory trends in how boys and young men respond to such pressures: while some young men seem to adopt more sensitive and egalitarian attitudes toward women, hegemonic notions of manhood as heterosexual prowess continue to shape young men's homosocial relations and interactions with women (e.g., Ólafsdóttir and Kjaran 2019; Roberts et al. 2021; Setty 2020). In both academic studies and public discussions, the assumptions concerning the shifts toward more progressive masculinities tend to take classed and racialized forms: it is often white, middle-class young men who are expected to be the vanguard of change, while working-class and racially minoritized young men's masculinities are imagined as more "traditional" and more "problematic" in terms of women's bodily integrity (Roberts and Elliott 2020).

In this article, we examine how cis-gendered boys and young men with diverse but mostly little class-privileged backgrounds navigate the contradictory demands of modern manhood to be sexually active and considerate at the same time. We utilize a small-scale interview data conducted in Helsinki, Finland, to investigate how boys and young men aged 15 to 20 present themselves as engaging "respectable heteromasculinities" when discussing with us their sexual encounters with girls and women, and how they position themselves, other young men and young women in doing so. Drawing from the analysis of respectability by Skeggs (1997), we understand "respectable masculinities" as the boys and young men's ways of claiming oneself a valuable position in relation to contradictory masculine norms. Our analysis suggests that boys and young men cannot bypass issues of consent and girls and women's bodily boundaries if and when they wish to present themselves as respectable heterosexual boys or men. Engaging meaning-making that acknowledges the increased responsibilisation of boys and men for their sexual conduct but retains sexual activity as a male norm, the participants ultimately present themselves

as “progressive” without really challenging the longstanding association between manhood, heterosexual desire, and masculine agency. This *balancing act* means that they are able to distance themselves from “toxic masculinity” often associated with working-class young men in popular and academic discussions. At the same time it shows that the small shift that we see in masculine performances may still take place in the wider frame of hegemonic gender norms. The participants reconfigure not necessary the substance but the *style* of respectable heteromascularity; therefore contributing to sustaining masculine hegemony by attuning it according to the claims of the “#MeToo era”.

Young Men’s Sexual Relationships and Heteromascularities

Compulsory heterosexuality has been one of the most powerful mechanisms through which hegemonic masculinity works and the “normal” man is (re)produced (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1994; Montemurro, 2021; Pascoe, 2007; Plummer, 1999). Studies published in the 1990s and the 2000s established that, in the process of conducting masculinity appropriately, boys and young men feel pressured by “real” or imagined homosocial audiences to prove that they are constantly pursuing sex with girls or women while simultaneously displaying disinterest towards “effeminate” things such as emotional commitment, care, love, and romance (Allen 2003; Flood 2008; Holland et al. 1998, Hyde et al. 2009; Kimmel 1994; Pascoe 2007; Wight 1994). This is performed through sexual storytelling, “girl watching”, and bragging about sexual experiences with and conquests of women (Holland et al. 1998; Quinn 2002; Wight 1994), and it manifests in the fear of being ridiculed as “gayish” if not conforming to aggressive expressions of heterosexual behavior (Pascoe 2007). Remarkably similar findings can be found in studies published in the 2010s, in which young men perform heteromascularity and establish their position in peer hierarchies by watching, evaluating, and “picking up” women with other men (Kalish and Kimmel 2011; Thurnell-Read 2012), and through the practices of sharing and “rating” sexts received from girls and women (Ringrose et al. 2013).

As boys and young men attempt to meet the normative masculine demands related to compulsory heterosexuality, there is a tendency for them to display aggressive macho behavior in encounters with girls and young women (Hyde et al. 2009), and to prioritize their pleasure over women’s (Setty 2021). This may lead to boys and young men bypassing consensuality as a serious issue as they consider their own heterosexual desires more important than girls and women’s desires, and their right to physical integrity (Hearn 1998; Holland et al. 1998; Setty 2021). In its portrayals of heterosex, popular cultural media also advocates compulsory heterosexuality and overtly macho performances of heteromascularities through the “male sexual drive discourse” (Hollway 1989), making boys and young men feel pressure to present themselves as sexual subjects who are active and virile—always ready for sex (Allen 2003, 225; Holland et al., 1998; Montemurro, 2021). Public debates and educational campaigns on young people’s sexuality reproduce this naturalized idea of active and virile male heterosexuality, often depicting boys and young men with no limits in terms of their

heterosexual desire (Ringrose et al. 2013). Women and girls, by contrast, are assumed to be responsible for giving consent or setting the limits on boys and men's sexuality since they presumably cannot do it themselves (Ólafsdóttir and Kjaran 2019).

Changed Demands for Respectable Heteromasculinities

Feminist discourses and calls for gender equality have influenced how boys and young men perceive different forms of masculinities, and their place and role within changing gender relations (Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason 2018). The #MeToo movement not only highlighted sexual violence and abuse perpetrated by boys and men but also challenged them to act against gender-based violence and sexist culture, and to find ways to change the "toxic" male role (Hearn 2021; Nilsson and Lundgren 2021). The "toxicity" in masculinities is associated not only with men's abusive practices against women but also with the regulatory force of hegemonic masculine norms that limits boys and men as well, for instance by hindering their expressions of emotions (Nilsson and Lundgren 2021, 19). While sexual repression and harassment have far from disappeared from everyday lives of girls and women, overt sexism, vulgarism, and "toxic" macho behavior are now more likely to be publicly condemned and subjected to ridicule (Ravn et al., 2021; Setty, 2020). For instance, in Hess and Flores' (2018) study on *Tinder Nightmares*, an Instagram page featuring failed attempts at hooking up, young women promote a culture of counter-discipline against men's "toxic" masculine performances through the public display of men's hypersexual and misogynist masculine performances, and by showcasing witty responses by Tinder users. Hess and Flores (2018, 1098) argue that while women are subjected to misogynist performances by men in online environments, sharing these experiences publicly in social media provides a collective space for women to challenge the heterosexist masculine norms inherent in hookup culture. Resistance against sexual harassment may also manifest in girls' collective mobilization in "off-line world"; for instance, in schools, where they fight back and stick together to form a sense of sisterhood and opposition to boys' sexist behavior (Odenbring and Johansson 2019, 267–268).

In the midst of these changing conditions and expectations, boys and young men renegotiate their heteromale subjectivities with new discursive strategies. In their study on young men's sexting practices, Roberts et al. (2021) argue that the ability to demonstrate heterosexual prowess still helps in achieving status and value in young men's homosocial peer groups, but the way in which this is acted out appropriately is becoming more complex. Young men may share intimate pictures and their sexual experiences with women in peer groups, but they also police and condemn each other if someone is "bragging", oversharing, or sharing images without consent (ibid., 29–31). Setty (2020) further remarks that although boys and young men still extract masculine capital through homosocial practices of sexting, they have to balance "being pursuers" with "just letting things happen" in order to avoid looking desperate (570).

Some scholars have found that young men now put considerable emphasis on consent, mutuality, trust and respect in their intimate heterosexual encounters both in

“real” life (Gottzén 2019; Ólafsdóttir and Kjaran 2019) and in virtual worlds (Ravn et al., 2021; Roberts and Ravn, 2020; Setty, 2020). Ravn et al., 2021 describe how young men in their sexting practices regulate themselves so that they would not appear to girls and women as proceeding to fast and aggressively—they want to avoid being perceived as “creeps” or “pushy” (Roberts and Ravn 2020, 11), which would lead to diminishing of their sexual attractiveness in the eyes of future possible partners (see also Liong and Chan 2020). Yet, in the process of doing heteromascularity appropriately, “[b]eing ‘in control’ as ‘pursuers’ seemed paramount”, as Setty (2020, 570) puts it. Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason (2018, 8), for their part, found that some Icelandic young men welcome gender equality initiatives, but others feel increasingly insecure about their masculinity as they constantly fear being portrayed as sexist.

In the midst of the changing gendered expectations, appropriate performances of heteromascularity cannot be accomplished through overt display of male dominance, sexual prowess, and otherwise “macho” behavior. It has to be, at the very least, “softened” by incorporating elements of mutuality, consideration, and consent. Parallel to what scholars have discussed under the concept of hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe 2014), however, these adaptations may be rather manifestations of the flexibility in hegemonic masculinities that enables reproducing the patriarchal order than mark a real change in gender hierarchy. For boys and young men, the changing societal context means demands of adjusting their masculine performances, but meeting these demands does not necessarily question or alter the masculine hegemony, or even seek to do so.

To further understand these adaptations and the nuanced “making” of heteromascularities as a morally loaded balancing act, we apply the concept of respectability. Claiming respectability is an attempt to claim value for the self in regard to gendered, sexualized, classed, and racialized expectations circulating in the society that contribute in making an individual’s value questionable (Skeggs 1997). According to Skeggs (ibid., 1), “(r)espectability is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it”. This raises the question of whether it is legitimate to apply the concept in an analysis of a group of cis-gendered boys and men, whose respectability is shielded by male privilege. Scholars have studied respectability as a central element in constructions of masculinities by looking at especially working-class boys and men (e.g., McDowell 2002; Nayak 2006) and migrant and racialized minority men (e.g., Markussen 2020; Pasura and Christou 2017). Negotiating masculine respectability seems thus to be especially important for boys and men whose positions are marginalized in terms of social class and/or race. This highlights the intersections of masculinities with other social categories, and is in line with Skeggs’ observation on respectability being a concern for “those who are not seen to have it”.

There is a long-term tendency for scholars and public media to imagine working-class and racialized minority boys and men as prone to problematic practices like sexual violence, and thus to locate them outside respectable masculinity most easily accessible to white and middle-class boys and men (Collins 2004; McDowell 2002; Phipps 2009; Ravn 2018; Roberts and Elliott 2020). Gottzén (2019), for instance, has shown how young privileged Swedish men utilize discourses on sexual violence as a resource

through which they affirm their “morality” and respectability against supposedly sexually violent working-class men. Scholars themselves sometimes explain sexually violent behavior among working-class men as a class-specific, compensatory practice through which marginalized men attain status in situations where other gender and class resources are not available to them (e.g., Groes-Green 2009; Messerschmidt 2020). Such explanations reify problematic notions on marginal masculinities by overlooking possibilities for transformation that emerge among marginalized communities and by implicitly assuming privileged men as paragons of progressive change (Roberts and Elliott 2020, 88).

The participants in this study were young, differently racialized and from diverse but mostly less-privileged class backgrounds; therefore, the considerable emphasis they laid on constructing their masculinities as respectable may be understood not only in regards to the contradictory contemporary demands for masculinities in general but also in regards to the classed, racialized, and age-related forms these demands take. In this article, we analyze how moral judgements and complex cultural expectations about being a “decent” young man frame their narratives on heterosexual encounters. In particular, we explore how constructions of respectable masculinities emerge through the *acts of balancing* when these boys and young men define the borders between acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior with girls and women.

Study Context and Data

In this article, we draw on small-scale interview and focus group data produced as part of the research project *Contested Consent*, focusing on meanings of sexual consent in young people’s lives¹. This study is located in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, Finland; thus the backdrop to the study is one where national identity has been found to be strongly attached to notions of Nordic welfare egalitarianism and high achievements in gender equality. As feminist scholars have repeatedly pointed out, understanding gender equality as a “finished project” in Finland is highly problematic: it serves to obscure how gender inequalities continue to manifest in many spheres of life, such as in the prevalence of gender-based violence. Further, in (some) media and political discourses this notion is used in racist ways to other racialized minority men by representing them as a threat to women’s rights and “Finnish” gender equality (Keskinen 2011; Norocel et al. 2020). A further element in egalitarian national self-identity is imagining social class as relatively insignificant in Finland. While this is not the case, such projections in the Finnish news media, popular culture and policy discourses mute discussions of class (Anttila et al. 2016), including those that we had with our study participants.

The purpose of the data production was to investigate young people’s everyday understandings of sexual consent. In most sociological studies on sexual consent, the primary focus has been on heterosexual sex and sexual intercourse (e.g., Beres 2007; Fenner 2017). In the interviews and focus groups, we sought to broaden this perspective by approaching consent also as an issue relevant in many everyday encounters, such as commenting on others’ bodies and touching or showing interest in other people in

physical or virtual environments. In order to grasp such everyday experiences, we encouraged interview participants to discuss what they considered “normal”, wished-for, and acceptable or unacceptable behavior in their intimate encounters.

We discussed these themes in individual interviews and in focus groups (with 2–5 participants) with young people aged 15 to 20. Young people in this age group are differently positioned, but they are all transitioning towards adulthood, and as a part of this process, experimenting and adjusting ideas and practices concerning intimate relationships, which has potentially longstanding effects for their practices and relationships in future. In terms of potential for change in traditional thought patterns, the possible shifts that take place in this age are therefore particularly interesting. A total of 36 young people participated in the research, 23 of whom were girls and young women and 13 boys and young men; in this study, we focus on the latter. This allows us to capture the nuanced voices of boys and young men themselves; those viewpoints that [Hearn \(2021\)](#) claims often being “absent present”, or target of criticism by public commentators when discussing consent and in/appropriate sexual practices in the #MeToo era.

Following their own wishes, the boys and young men were interviewed in pairs and in focus groups, one of which was mixed-gender, while three were all-male. All participants were cis-gendered. All of the pairs and focus groups were mixed in terms of the participants’ ethnic and racial backgrounds, with slightly more than half of the participants being white and slightly less than half ethnically Finnish. The background countries of the participants, besides Finland, were Kosovo, Mongolia, Russia, Somalia, and Vietnam. Two of them were studying in the final, 9th grade of comprehensive school, (nine-year comprehensive education being obligatory to everybody, and normally completed at the age of 15), and based on their narratives, were academically oriented in their study plans. Eleven were studying in vocational upper secondary school, which is considered less academic, prestigious, and middle-class when contrasted with general (academic) upper secondary schooling, the other option after the comprehensive school ([Brunila et al. 2011](#)). This suggests that besides the two 9th grade boys, the participants were leaning more towards working-class than middle-class trajectories; the information we have on their parents’ education and occupations suggests the same. We encouraged discussion on young people’s lives “in general”, leaving it up to the participants to decide whether or not to integrate elements from their own lives into our discussion.

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were all recorded and transcribed. We started the analysis by reading all of the transcriptions, separating the sections where the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable (sexual) behavior was discussed and then analyzing what kinds of masculinities emerged in the narratives. During this process, we found that an overarching theme in the data was that the participants’ presented themselves as “decent” boys and young men, and that this respectability ([Skeggs 1997](#)) was largely accomplished by distancing themselves from hegemonic masculine practices and by expressing consideration of girls and young women’s perspectives, consensuality and reciprocity.

From then on, the analysis took the shape of abductive content analysis (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), where we built theoretically on the concept of respectability as a tool that informed the analysis and sensitized our reading of the data but did not determine the scope of the findings (173). We further identified two “audiences”—besides ourselves as interviewers—in the eyes of whom the participants wished to be seen as respectably heteromascuine: girls or young women on the one hand, and male peers and friends on the other. In reporting our findings below, we concentrate on the narratives on encounters with these two audiences. While the number of research participants in our study is small, a close reading of their narratives of everyday life allow us to explore how “doing” respectable heteromascuinites takes place in small and seemingly trivial acts and evaluations; thus adding nuance to the theoretical discussions on contemporary masculinities and sexual consent.

We acknowledge that our presence—as academic and middle-class researchers—may have shaped how the participants constructed respectable masculinities through moral valuation and judgments of “other” (e.g., overtly “macho”) masculinities, and that in other social situations their reference points may have been different. A further observation on the nature of the data is its heteronormativity. We do not assume that all of the participants identify heterosexual; we did not enquire about their sexual orientation since it could have put them in unsafe and unpleasant positions in the focus group situation or afterwards – but even though we tried to pose questions in gender-neutral and open ways, they expressed assumptions that intimate encounters did or would take place between them and girls or women.

Balancing Between Active Heteromascuinity and Sexual Harassment

In the process of performing respectable heteromascuinity, the boys and young men we studied positioned themselves as knowledgeable heterosexual subjects who were aware of—and who distanced themselves from—problematic masculine practices that bypassed the perspectives of women or girls. One such reference point was sexual harassment. They not only recognized the gendered nature of sexual harassment in general but also discussed the sexual harassment as latently present – as a possibility and, for girls and women, a threat – in all encounters between girls or young women and boys or young men, including themselves. While this observation shows a degree of awareness of gendered power imbalances, the participants also remained attached to the notion of heterosexually active man, a position via which they ended up defining girls and women as objects of their desires and actions.

The participants explained that girls and women often receive various unwanted and unpleasant “suggestions” and “compliments” from (other) boys and men, which influenced how girls and women interpreted any interaction between themselves and boys and men. Against this backdrop, the participants cautiously identified (in)appropriate ways of acting towards girls and women in different social situations. The following excerpt from a paired interview with 16 and 17 year-old Michael and Daniel²,

both with minoritized ethnic backgrounds, illustrates how respectable heteromascularity emerged in narratives where the participants strove to inhabit the celebrated position of an active and dominant heterosexual male subject while simultaneously distancing themselves from the negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity of aggression and going “too far too soon” (see also [Roberts et al. 2021](#)):

Interviewer: What do you think, if you see a “good-looking” woman in the metro. Is it okay to go tell her that you’re good-looking, or something like that?

Daniel: Well, if you do it smoothly, then it’s okay.

Michael: It just depends on how she takes it. And for some (women), it may be a really distressing experience [...] It also depends on you yourself, how you express it [...] women hear and receive those kinds of comments much more (than men).

Int: How can you be sure that the comment is a positive compliment or not?

Michael: One has to be assertive, that’s for sure. But if you are a bit too macho, then it may turn oppressive [...] you constantly have to interpret the girl’s signs and gestures. But sometimes it can be really tricky. I’d anyway panic if I said, if I complimented some girl and then she’s totally silent and stares, that did I do something wrong.

Although Michael and Daniel were aware that women may find boys and men’s comments on their appearance disturbing, they did not consider that such comments would be categorically inappropriate. Instead, they attempted to nuance their (assertive) behavior based on the woman’s responses, or according to what they assumed to be appropriate (“smooth”) behavior. Thus, their narrative followed the lines of gendered configurations whereby boys and young men perform as active boundary-testers seeking ways of making heterosexual advances, while positioning girls and young women as gatekeepers of consent ([Ólafsdóttir and Kjaran 2019](#); [Setty 2021](#)), responsible for communicating whether their actions are unpleasant or not.

Softening the display of heterosexually aggressive masculinity was a necessary balancing act through which the boys attempted to position themselves as respectable—as both meeting social norms of active heterosexual masculine behavior while expressing respect toward girls and women at the same time. Without this respect, they would risk to get associated with the unrespectful “creepy guy” by girls or women they would like to build relationships with ([Ravn et al., 2021](#), 324–325). Yet, they did not want to appear as lacking appropriate “flirting” or “hooking up” skills in their eyes, either. Similarly to sexting practices ([Roberts and Ravn 2020](#)), flirting requires situational awareness from the boys and young men, which makes it both a risky and rewarding practice in their attempts of seeking heteromascularity respectability.

To maintain respectability, however, it was necessary for the participants in certain social environments and situations – school and the gym are mentioned as concrete examples – to refrain altogether from making sexual advances towards girls or women. The following discussion, again with Daniel and Michael, was prompted by the

interviewer's question on whether it was possible for young people to approach someone with romantic interests for instance by chatting at school:

Daniel: Not for me.

Michael: It's a bit weird. It's almost an unwritten rule that you can't approach anybody at the gym. It is weird.

Int: Okay. Why is it weird?

Michael: Well, people go to the gym to train, not actually to socialize. I mentioned the gym just because I go there regularly. I can imagine that if I was a girl, it would be a bit weird if some sweaty bloke came up to me asking for my contact information.

In contrast to their narrative on heteromasculine performance on public transport, here Daniel and Michael did not align with the notion of an active heteromasculine boy who sees every social situation as a potential opportunity for hook-ups. Instead, they appeared to have an eye for the social situation when expressing that it was an "*unwritten rule*" that it was inappropriate to "*approach*" anyone at places people visit for a particular reason, and not for socializing. This "rule" seems to be learned through peer socialization and especially by observing or anticipating girls and women's reactions in different contexts. It became apparent again that it was the risk of being regarded as "*weird*" if failing to respect the personal boundaries of girls and women, that controlled the boys' heterosexual behavior. In this example unlike the previous one, Michael's respectable masculinity emerged also through construction of a discursive-cultural other (Roberts et al. 2021, 37), the "*sweaty bloke*", who goes too far in the wrong place.

The ways how Daniel and Michael balanced between being pursuers and in control of their sexual desires (Setty 2020, 570) in encounters with girls and women echoes what Montemurro, 2021, 14) writes about the expectations of compulsory heterosexuality for young men who "[g]rapple with seeing women as both objects and agents of affirmation—with knowing that men are supposed to dominate in sexual situations but also that women's reactions and satisfaction can signify something important about them as men". While Montemurro discusses mainly the context of committed intimate relationships, Michael and Daniel suggested above the importance of girls and women both as *agents of affirmation* and *agents of denial* (Montemurro, 2021, 9) within the spheres of casual encounters in public as well, seeing girls and young women as possessing considerable power to validate or invalidate the respectability of their heteromasculine performance. While this may look like a shift in gendered power relations, girls and women's viewpoints still appear interesting to Daniel and Michael only so far as they can act as resources in consolidating the wished-for respectable masculinity. Further, for Daniel and Michael as racially minoritized boys, white Finnish girls and women's acceptance or disapproval may have a greater power to define their respectability than if they were white and Finnish boys.

Navigating With the Pressures of Homosocial Audiences

Being seen as “properly heterosexual” or not to other boys and young men perpetuate hierarchical relations amongst boys and men (Connell, 1995; Flood, 2008; Kimmel, 1994; Montemurro, 2021; Pascoe, 2007). In the process of performing manhood appropriately, other boys and young men served as a real or imagined audience for whom our participants were being accountable to perform. The need to balance respectably between the norm of an active heterosexual boy or man, and considerate and respectful attitude towards girls and women extended to the sphere of boys and young men’s homosocial relations as well. While the participants recognized some of their friends and other male peers engaging practices objectifying girls and women, such as bragging about conquests over them (Holland et al. 1998), in the focus group settings they largely supported each other’s view on this issue in distancing themselves from them.

In a focus group comprising five 16–20-year old boys and young men, four of them white Finnish and one with minoritized background, the participants co-constructed themselves as boys and young men who were not looking for heterosexual experiences for the sake of peer pressure (Flood 2008; Hyde et al. 2009), for the masculine capital (Ringrose et al. 2013), or for the affirmation of manhood (Montemurro, 2021) that such experiences might offer. In the following extract, white Finnish Greg (16 years) responds to Peter, who has just explained that in his age (also 16 years) and life situation he does not seek having sex, since without plans of a marriage, it would not be acceptable due to his (Muslim) faith.

Greg: I’m not in any hurry either, or I don’t think about it in terms of getting laid or such like. Some of my friends are just like that. If we go to someone’s place or to a party, then some of them immediately try to find some good-looking chick there. They’ve sometimes even tried to persuade me by saying, “look for someone as well”, and then I’m just, like, this isn’t an emergency, I’m not in a hurry and, like, maybe I’ll meet someone sometime but I’m not on the lookout there.

Int: There’s that sort of assumption by default when you go to a party?

Greg: The party ends with you being with a chick somewhere, hooking up.

Int: What do you think about that sort of behavior?

Greg: Well, it’s maybe not the smartest (thing), but I’m just, like, everybody can do what they want, so if that’s what they want to do, then they’re free to do so.

Sam: And then if you are only after that (sex), like you got to the party and then just leaves the thing there, then you are like quite a dick I think.

Respectable heteromascularity was built here by Greg and Sam in a shared narrative by constructing a category of over-sexed predatory boys or men (Ringrose et al. 2013)

whose actions are described as driven by both masculine self-centredness and homosocial affinity, with the needs or wishes of women being secondary. Against this backdrop, Greg refused to utilize girls or women as a means for affirming his manhood (Montemurro, 2021) and solidarity between men (Flood 2008), and positioned himself as morally superior to his friends who aligned themselves with this compulsory masculine ritual. While he rather took for granted than questioned his friends (and even his own) interest in hetero sex, in order to appear as respectable to Greg, masculine subjects cannot let such a self-centered interest in sex determine their behavior. If they do, they may prove masculinity to each other situationally, but not necessarily achieve respectability outside the circle of their themselves and in the eyes of girls and women. For Greg, sex was possible and even wished-for (in future), but by saying that “*maybe I’ll meet someone sometime*”, he implied passivity, romanticism (Allen 2007) and that having sex was not solely on his control but required reciprocal understanding of “the right time” between him and his partner (Roberts and Ravn 2020).

De Ridder’s (2017) study on young people’s sexual values and social media shows how young men are making strong moral judgements about the sexual behavior of their peers as they distinguish “good” sexual practices from “bad” ones. Here, to align himself with the shared considerate heteromascuine narratives of his co-interviewees, Greg expressed disapproval of the behavior of his heterosexually active male friends. At the same time, he avoided making too radical a break from his friends and the valorized masculine values of active seeking of heterosex by engaging individualized discourse where “*everybody*”—but really supposedly men—are free to behave how they wish. This balancing that took the form of criticizing his friends “in a not so straightforward way” (Roberts et al. 2021, 35) was perhaps Greg’s attempt to overcome the tensions between the two different masculine audiences – his fellow research participants and his friends. While Greg used his relative distance from his friends’ sexual behavior to construct his heteromascuinity as more respectable than that of his friends, he ultimately left it up to the individual to choose whether to engage girls or women in a predatory way, thus becoming complicit (Connell 1995, 79) in problematic, normative heteromascuinity.

In the last comment of the extract, also 16-year-old, white Finnish Sam further implied that respectable heteromascuinity cannot be achieved through sexual conquests of women alone but needs to be, at the least, balanced with “soft” components. His comment, “*if you are only after that (sex), like you got to the party and then just leaves the thing there, then you are like quite a dick I think*” indicated that having or seeking sex with girls or women was acceptable if followed by some sort of longer, maybe emotional commitment. In this way, Sam echoed what Allen (2007) calls “romantic masculinity”, where aspects of macho behavior (e.g., active seeking of sex) are combined with elements of romantic sensitivity to create a category of man that does not fit neatly either to the category of a hard macho or that of a sensitive romantic. This allowed boys and young men to enjoy the pleasures of romantic experiences without fear of being effeminated by other boys and men, instead being considered by

his friends as a “lady’s man”, gaining masculine status due to his sophisticated skills with girls (Allen 2007).

Seeking masculine affirmation from other boys and men involves practices of listening, sharing, watching, and discussing heterosexual pursuit stories both face-to-face (Flood, 2008; Montemurro, 2021; Thurnell-Read, 2012) and via digital images (Ringrose et al. 2013; Setty 2020). Participants in all focus groups recognized recounting hook-ups and sharing intimate photos sent by girls or women with male friends as part of everyday practices in their peer groups. While they participated in these practices themselves, too, they were not responsive to all kinds of sexual exposure, but attempted to control the kind of exposure they wanted to be a part of, where, how and with whom (see also Liong and Chan 2020; Roberts et al. 2021; Setty 2020). The following extract is from the same focus group of five young men, and the discussion is prompted by the interviewer’s question on whether having several sexual experiences with girls or women was used to achieve status in their circle of friends.

Sam: Well, I don’t know really. I have so few friends who would really, like, brag about that.

Peter: Well, I’ve had that, usually some friend of a friend who you hang out with a lot, so then he comes to tell you about all these cases related to girls and everything like that. It’s so pointless listening, especially when he even says their names and all that. I think it’s really childish. Like, someone really lives in such a world where they have to say what they did with this person and that person. [...] The one who talks (about sexual relationships), he starts to think, like really, that these (people) respect me because I did this and that. Then he comes again, and nobody cares to tell him that we’re really not interested, and we don’t want to hear (about that).

Greg: It’s happened to me sometimes as well, that someone has started showing off like that, but I’m not that interested. I just say something like “good for you”, then they normally quieten down after that or something. I don’t know whether they think it’s so fine then or what.

Sam’s initial response, that he had few friends who would “*brag about that*”, indicated a practice of balancing sexual prowess with various things related to respectable heteromascularity; that his friends had sexual experiences with girls or women, that they possibly shared some parts of these experiences in some situations, that they had some sort of norm through which they controlled themselves against going too far (“*bragging*”), and that there might be bragging among other boys and young men. Although it remained unclear what the term “bragging” means here precisely, Sam associated it with negative meanings such as a lack of heteromasculine respect.

Peter continued by associating bragging about sexual experiences with other boys or young men from whose non-consensual behavior he distanced himself. His comment, “*especially when he even says their names and all that*”, suggested that this sharing was regulated by norms that limited the amount and type of details that can be shared with

male friends, and that without “going too far” with the details, he considered sharing acceptable. Peter also constructed himself as mature by describing those who over-share as “*childish*”. This is parallel to Roberts et al.’s (2021, 35–37) findings on young men’s sexting practices, where age and maturity figure in young men’s constructions of respectable masculinities, showing again their intersections with multiple categories.

While the participants co-constructed respectable heteromascularity by distancing themselves from the homosocial practice of bragging about sexual experiences, none of them directly intervened in other boys or young men’s behavior. Sam implicitly hinted about the issue, whereas Peter explained that “*nobody cares to tell him*” to stop telling such stories, and Greg reported employing an ironic comment “*good for you*” to bypass serious discussion about problems related to this heteromascularity norm. Thus, simply refusing to get excited about the stories of sexual experiences that others use for showing off seems here to be enough for maintaining respectability. In this way, the three boys were able to hold onto their self-representations as respectably masculine heterosexual young men in the focus group situation, where distance from hegemonic homosocial practices was emphasized; but they also avoided directly criticizing hegemonic masculine norms in front of their male peers in their everyday environments outside of the research setting. Given the importance of “proper heterosexuality” in homosocial policing practices of young masculinities, such criticism could make them vulnerable to ridiculing and risk their position in their friendship group (e.g., Hyde et al. 2009; Pascoe 2007; Wight 1994).

Discussion

With heightened public awareness of sexual harassment of girls and women in the wake of the #MeToo movement, increasing public calls for gender equality and the condemnation of “toxic” masculine practices (Hess and Flores 2018), boys and young men face complex demands concerning their masculine performances and appropriate heterosexual expression. In this article, we examined how an ethnically and racially diverse group of mostly working-class boys and young men respond to these demands to validate their masculine respectability. This analysis has concentrated on their position as *boys and young men*, but the classed and racialized aspects of this position would still require much more thorough analysis.

The participants emphasized their ability to control their sexual behavior and to consider the perspectives of others besides their own, thus departing from ideas that young men cannot control their libidos (Holland et al. 1998; Hyde et al. 2009). Yet, while elements that depart from the hegemonic masculine norms, such as consideration and romanticism, duly existed in the boys and young men’s performances of respectable heteromascularity, they did not subvert the very basis of hegemonic heteromascularity rooted in the gendered hierarchy with man at its top; and so they left intact the roles of a sexually active man and a woman who is the object of his desire.

We have interpreted the participant boys and young men’s narratives as acts of balancing through which they pursued respectable heteromascularities. The

participants softened the display of macho sexual prowess by considering girls and women's presumed interpretations on sexual advances by boys and young men and by emphasizing the importance of consensuality and emotional attachment in heterosexual relationships. This reflects their awareness of public claims for greater gender equality along with the complex demands of contemporary "romantic" (Allen 2007), "hybrid" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014), "new" (Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason 2018; Nilsson and Lundgren 2021) and "vigilant" (Liong and Chan 2020) masculinities; whereby boys and young men are increasingly expected to abandon masculine practices that are harmful for girls, women and for boys and men themselves, but in a way that still adheres to notions of "proper" heteromascularity. Boys and young men are still expected to live up to the heteronormative expectations of being heterosexually active and dominant, but they also engage popular ideas that boys and men who are "too assertive" are a social problem and lack respectability (Gottzén, 2019; Ólafsdóttir and Kjaran, 2019; Ravn et al., 2021; Setty, 2020). In contrast with Bridges and Pascoe's conceptualization of hybridity, whereby heterosexual boys and men's borrowing from performances of femininity and marginal masculinities contribute to both obscuring and entrenching the gendered orders (2014), we do not regard the balancing act in which the participants engaged as a qualitatively new form of masculinities, but rather as a way to update the constellation associated with hegemonic masculinities to meet the changed societal demands.

Roberts and Elliot (2020), in their review on the representations of young working-class and minoritized men in the field of Critical Masculinities Studies, argue that boys and men "in the margin" are too often simplistically and wrongly depicted as more regressive than more privileged men. The participants in this study comprised a heterogeneous group that nevertheless cannot be considered very privileged or middle class. Despite their differently racialized positions and some class differences, the discourses they engaged with, combining sensitivity to gender equality with adherence to hegemonic norms, were relatively similar. It is possible that the culture context in Finland, where gender equality is sometimes imagined as a "finished project" influenced how the boys and young men in our study engaged with gender equality discourses by accepting girls and women's right to safety and bodily integrity as legitimate goals, even when some of their other discourses set these goals again secondary. It is also possible that the ways the boys and young men with racially minoritized backgrounds emphasized their masculine respectability through gender equality were also part of efforts to distance themselves from the stereotypes of Black and Brown men as "dangerous" and hypersexual, a threat to the "Finnish" gender equality (see Keskinen 2011). Yet, at the very least, the boys and young men in this study quite easily engaged with "spoken egalitarianism" (Roberts 2018) that is typically considered as a skill specific to middle class. In this respect, our analysis diverges from the stereotyping of marginalized men as "situated as unable to shake off the stigma of being regressive" (Roberts and Elliott 2020, 98).

It is further noteworthy that while we produced the overall project data in both middle-class contexts (general upper secondary schools) and in more working-class

contexts (vocational schools), in the former we did not manage to recruit male participants; it thus seemed that boys and young men geared towards working-class trajectories were more readily willing to engage with the study than their middle-class peers. This again counters the stereotypes on boys and men in more marginal positions as unable or unwilling to reflect on and engage with issues related to sexual consent, gender equality and “new masculinities”. Their comparatively marginal positions may, however, explain why they were so invested in representing themselves as respectable.

Ravn’s study of 17–25-year-old men’s discourses on risk-taking and violence (2018) shows that being a “proper” man requires mastering the tensions between accomplishing masculinity through violence and abstaining from violence. In our case, we argue that respectable masculinity—as a narrative construction— is about avoiding “falling into the wrong side of heterosexual pursuit” (Setty 2020, 570), that is, being too assertive, self-centered, open and detailed in heterosexual pursuits, while still conforming with the norm of an active heterosexual man. This requires that the boys and young men carefully calibrate their masculine performances in the interview situation and outside of it, context-sensitively balancing between performing heterosexual virility and passivity, condemnation and indifference, interest and disinterest in encounters with girls and young women. And ultimately, while we know very little from this data about how these narratives of respect for women and willingness to reject peers’ sexist behavior actually shapes the boys and young men’s everyday relationships, we can see that the critique of hegemonic heteromascularity remains feeble as many hegemonic norms are, in a close view, reproduced rather than questioned.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Academy of Finland (324094).

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Notes

1. The project is funded by the Academy of Finland (no. 324094).
2. All names appearing in the text are pseudonyms.

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