

Young men's negotiation of hetero-masculinity within the contemporary UK

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Abstract

This thesis draws on feminist theory and critical men and masculinities scholarship to consider young men's negotiations of hetero-masculinity in the contemporary UK. It utilises qualitative data from focus groups and one-to-one interviews with twenty-five predominantly white, heterosexually identified men between the ages of 18 and 24, exploring how young men understand and experience hetero-masculinity on subjective and relational levels. It examines how young men understand and experience gender and sexual norms, and to what extent, and in what ways, young men disrupt and challenge these. The thesis contextualises contemporary shifts of gender and sexuality in relation to wider gender equality and power, through analysis of, gender politics, (hetero)masculine subjectivities, sex and sexuality, which inform the empirical chapters of this thesis. With a focus on power and gender (in)equality, the thesis critically explores how contemporary transformations of masculinity, whilst superficially appearing to signify social change, may, on closer inspection, reveal how power and inequality are reworked and reframed in current times (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). The thesis also seeks to address the absence of theoretical and empirical research on postfeminism (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; O'Neill, 2018) within the field of critical men and masculinities.

The thesis points to a wealth of diverse and often conflicting understandings of gender and sexuality. Whilst gender equality was often favoured, binarised and essentialist understandings of gender endured, ultimately limiting the possibilities of social change as men and women were viewed as inherently different based on biological 'fact'. Where feminism was supported, this was often confined to second-wave projects as more recent feminist politics, which emphasise gender fluidity and the diversification of gender identities, conflicting with essentialist understandings. Notions of 'natural' sex difference also paradoxically coalesced with significant reflexivity of gender and sexual norms and how these come to delineate gender and sexual performances and practices, though participants were often reticent to acknowledge that they were affected by these discourses. Moreover, some interviewees discursively distanced from normative masculinity, whilst simultaneously maintaining investments in traditional masculine identities. Participants articulated choreographing their gendered performances so as to signify 'correct' masculinity. This was closely related to affirming their heterosexuality and avoiding adopting traditionally feminine styles, which were seen to potentially signify same-sex desire. Gender and sexuality were, therefore, regularly conflated as gendered expressions were seen to indicate sexual preference. Despite a desire to transcend gender boundaries amongst many of the young men, gender policing and homophobia remained a prevalent feature in their lives as gender and sexuality were regarded heavily regulated spheres.

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Introduction

'Setting the scene'

This thesis explores young men's understandings and experiences of masculinity and heterosexuality in the contemporary UK, drawing upon qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with twenty-five predominantly white, heterosexually identified young men between the ages of 18 and 24. There is now a myriad of diverse, plural and often conflicting ways of 'being' a man or 'doing' masculinity. Indeed, as Aboim (2016: 2) writes, "any researcher interested in men's lives and discourses rapidly sees just how much diversity lies beyond the inescapable inclusion in the social category of man." Certainly, these sentiments are echoed in this research, and as such, it merely provides a snapshot of the polygonal lives of the young men interviewed. Hence, scholars have asserted that there is no way to fully capture the multifaceted complexity of individual men's lives (Edley and Wetherell, 1996). The difficulties arising from this have perhaps been reinforced by young men's tendency to simultaneously draw upon and utilise "old and new" (Aboim, 2016: 161), "traditional and progressive" (Elliott, 2019: 108) and "traditional and emerging" (Gough, 2018: 59) discourses of masculinity within contemporary times. Though such perspectives run the risk of temporally dichotomising discourses of masculinity, such conceptualisations do emphasise the complexity, contradictions and indeed the paradoxes present in contemporary masculine subject and identity formation. Indeed, Nayak and Kehily (2013: 148) echo this in their assertion that young men can be regarded as "subjects-in-transition" who are positioned by contradictory discourses "in changing times".

Historically, men have been genderless as gender has more readily been equated with women and femininity (Hearn and Pringle, 2006). Masculinity has been unseen, with men's "'invisible' ungenderedness naturalized" (Hearn and Pringle, 2006: 365). Masculinity has, therefore, been an uncontested norm and as such, not regarded a "particularity" (de Beauvoir, 1997 [1949]: 25). More recently, however, discussions around masculinity have exposed men's gendered status, so much so that masculinity "has arguably never been more visible in our history" (Bridges, 2019: 25). Yet, as is discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, mere acknowledgement of structurally advantaged groups on their own rarely undermines existing social structures of power (Pleasants, 2011). Conversely, this recognition often operates in such a way that it merely "alters the *experience* of privilege", whereby masculinity is not undone but "re-done", and whereby power and indeed patriarchy come to adopt "new legitimating stories and strategies" (Bridges, 2019: 25-26 original emphasis). Whilst the increased visibility of masculine privilege has the potential to amplify the need for and bring about reflexive consideration of gender amongst those in structurally

advantageous positions, this too has the capacity to bring about a backlash (Bridges, 2019). Inasmuch as such techniques work to undercut, damage and silence feminist critique, they are a far cry from 'undoing' privilege (Pease, 2000) or undermining existing systems of power (Bridges, 2019). The current social, cultural and political gendered terrain is thus undoubtedly marred with contradictions (Gill, 2017).

Feminism has increased visibility and status at exactly the same moment that misogyny, racism and sexism, as impudently projected on the world stage by political leaders, such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, is rife (Gill, 2017, Banet-Weiser, 2018). Neoliberalism and associated notions of choice, 'empowerment' and individualism have also proliferated and deepened so much so that scholars assert we are now living in a time of intensified "gendered neoliberalism" (Gill, 2017: 609). Amidst other major contemporary shifts, as highlighted by Gill (2017), notably the impact of wars waged by the West; the widespread movement of displaced people migrating to Europe; the cruel and inhumane austerity agenda and associated welfare cuts in the UK; the upsurge of misogynistic, homophobic, racist and xenophobic torrents, which informed the Brexit vote, the election of Donald Trump, as well as the rise of the right in Europe; and the rise of 'fake-news', which "complicate any straightforward recourse to 'reality'", we are undeniably living in "fraught and complicated" times (Gill, 2017:608).

For the purpose of contextualising how these shifts relate to this research, it is arguable that the far-right and men's rights movement are close bedfellows, not least given that they are underpinned by similar essentialist understandings of identity, alongside a discourse of loss, with the central tenet of both movements being that white masculinity is 'under threat' (de Boise, 2018). This marrying of the men's rights movement and the far-right, which coalesce under a narrative of masculine loss, is exemplified by the recent UKIP MEP candidacy of Carl Benjamin, a prominent online men's right activist turned politician who previously, under the pseudonym, Sagan of Akkad tweeted Labour MP, Jess Phillips stating "I wouldn't even rape you" (Walker, 2019). Benjamin's narrative is foregrounded by a perceived threatened masculinity, to which he publically locates feminism as the cause. From mass shootings by 'incels' or 'involuntary celibates', to men's general disenfranchisement from wider society, it is feminism and feminists who are to blame (Walker, 2019). The effects of such rhetoric is no doubt far-reaching, not least given that one participant in this research expressed regularly watching Sagan of Akkad's YouTube channel as a means of informal education, drawing upon many of the discourses Benjamin employs when discussing his own views on feminism and gender politics, as is discussed further in Chapter 3.

Moreover, this trend is worryingly reflected in wider public discourse, alongside some masculinities scholarship which directly speaks to notions of a ‘crisis of masculinity’ (McDowell, 2000), in spite of widespread feminist critique of this discourse (Nayak and Kehily, 2013, Evans and Riley, 2018). Though it would be misleading to suggest that all men adhere to this aphorism, I feel it is important to ‘set the stage’ for this thesis and provide a brief analysis of the current cultural ‘conjuncture’ (Hall and Massey, 2010). Additionally, the relationship between culture and subjectivity and how this comes to shape notions of selfhood alongside the affective dimensions of life has been documented by scholars (Gill, 2017).

The connections and linkages between gender relations and the rise of the far-right, or the current climate of brazen sexism and racism thus warrant a critical eye. Indeed, *Signs* has dedicated its Spring 2019 journal to scholarship specifically exploring *Gender and the Rise of the Global Right*. Though racism and sexism have long-standing ties and histories, and although notions of men as the oppressed and the existence of concomitant movements are not new (see Messner, 1998), it seems as though the current climate is distinct from previous manifestations of racism and misogyny (de Boise, 2018, Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019). Firstly, social media and user-generated content in online spaces have facilitated the proliferation of caustic misogyny, opening up publishing capacity, dissemination potential and readability to anyone with access to the internet (de Boise, 2018). This has given way to newfound and increased visibility of these discourses (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019), producing what Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016: 171) term a new era of “networked” misogyny and patriarchy. Secondly, we see the resurrection of notions of ‘natural’ sex difference (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016) alongside prior mentioned pervasive notions of ‘threatened’ masculinity (de Boise, 2018). Current manifestations of men’s right’s activism, De Boise (2018: 164) argues, have been “accompanied by widespread perception that ‘masculinism’ – as a seemingly inseparably natural function of ‘male biology’ frequently mixed with ideas of white, global Northern supremacy – is being eroded, devalued, replaced or is in crisis.”

In this sense, we are not so much in the midst of an anti-feminist ‘backlash’ (Faludi, 1992), but can posit that these movements sit alongside and inadvertently speak *at* and *from* feminism and wider social justice projects, very much employing their language as a means of complaint against them (Gill, 2017, Banet-Weiser, 2018). In other words, they draw upon feminist discourses of gender inequality, ultimately capsizing these to make their case for the retribution of individualised notions of male injury (Banet-Weiser, 2018). It goes without saying that this implicitly functions to nullify and elude wider gender power relations and women’s continuing gendered oppression. De Boise (2018) further complicates this landscape, highlighting how

men's rights activists are now operating and gaining traction in countries such as the US and the UK, which are paradoxically said to be seeing a 'softening' of masculinity, as purported by scholars such as Anderson (2009). Additionally, that men's rights movements emerge from societies where men still retain considerable power and privilege (de Boise, 2018).

Inasmuch as patriarchy has acquired a new-found confidence, as demonstrated by key world leaders (Gill, 2017) and as illustrated through the dictum of men's rights activism (de Boise, 2018), a feminist analysis of masculinity remains central to furthering social justice projects. As O'Neill (2015b: 2) writes, "in order to successfully challenge gendered economies of power, it is necessary to know as much as possible about the foundations on which they are built." This is perhaps even more pertinent given that we are at a time when feminism is simultaneously increasing its "luminosity" (Gill, 2017: 611). This co-existence as Gill (2017) puts it, makes for a contradictory and somewhat schizophrenic environment. Banet-Weiser (2018) similarly draws attention to how the increasing visibility of 'popular' feminism has been accompanied by equally virulent 'popular' misogyny. The latter, she writes, operates in such a way as to deflect attention away from women towards men, and then back at women (often violently) in what she terms the "fun-house mirror." Here, systematic sexism is contorted and distorted as inequality is presented as a thing of the past.

Further, women are positioned as the beneficiaries and beholders of power, whilst men are positioned as victims who are 'in crisis', whereby masculinity is under threat from both women's increased standing in society and feminism. Using the twinned discourses of injury and capacity, Banet-Weiser (2018) shows how popular feminism and popular misogyny use similar, albeit inverted logic in terms of the causes and solutions to their perceived harms. Popular feminism locates women's *injuries* as due to years of *structural* gendered oppression, but problematically locates their *capacity* to rectify this through *individualised* discourses of confidence, which ultimately limits collective power. On the other hand, popular misogyny asserts that *injury* comes from both *individual* women and feminism, but locates *capacity* to remedy this *structurally* through, for example, the election of heads of state or presidents, alongside Supreme Court justices such as Bret Kavanaugh.

This sitting together of feminism and misogyny reflects the wider push and pull of both traditional and emerging discourses of gender, which is mirrored in the accounts of the young men in this thesis. This is demonstrated, for example, in their support of liberal feminism and structural rights (viewed as having been achieved and thus in line with postfeminist logics), alongside investments in reductionist and essentialist understandings of gender which posit

'natural' sex difference as scientific 'truth', as discussed further in Chapter 3. Indeed, the resurgence of 'natural' sex difference as a key postfeminist sensibility has been pointed to by scholars (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). Writers such as Cordelia Fine have also sought to explicitly unpick these *Delusions of Gender* (2010), and has more recently challenged myths which posit testosterone as pivotal in shaping sex difference in her book *Testosterone Rex* (2017).

Wider public discourse centring upon men and masculinities has also proliferated within recent years. Yet where there have been moves towards more progressive constructions and discussions of masculinities, usually through critiques of so-called 'toxic masculinity', adverse responses to this have underlined the tensions at play between traditional and emerging discourses of masculinity. In advertising targeted at men, for example, while there have been shifts to promoting more gender equitable frameworks of masculinity for some companies, public reactions to this have emphasised that narratives of threatened masculinity also thrive (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). What is more, it is interesting to compare the different responses garnered from different advertising campaigns that portray and employ 'softer' representations of masculinity, as these often speak to and reflect which masculinities' debates are welcomed and which are not.

Consider the response to the Lynx advert series "Men in Progress" (Lynx, 2017), which encourages men to express their emotions, challenging assumptions that, as one clip is titled - "boys don't cry", alongside the recent Gillette campaign (Gillette, 2019), which challenged "toxic masculinity" by drawing attention to campaigns, such as the #MeToo movement. Whilst the former was largely welcomed and applauded, the latter triggered fervent criticism via the press and on social media, with many seeing the campaign as an attack on men and masculinity itself. The celebration of the Lynx advert in contrast to the vitriol aimed at Gillette, I believe, signifies wider frictions relating to public responses as to how and *why* we speak about masculinities. Inasmuch as the Lynx advert focuses solely on men's "wounds" (Messner, 1997: 19), it presents a "personalised and depoliticised" (Pease, 2000: 38) account of masculinity. Given that focus is solely upon how masculinity negatively impacts men by supposedly hindering their ability to express emotions it fails to elucidate wider gendered power dynamics, leaving untouched the adverse effects that masculinity and indeed men have on women. In this sense, it slots comfortably into narratives of the "costs of masculinity" (Messner, 1997: 5-6), which fail to critique men as a social category of power (Hearn, 2019) alongside wider patriarchy and relational systems of power. As Ramazanoglu (1992: 346) highlights, "the exploration of men's

pain is then an area which needs very careful critical consideration if men are not to emerge both as the dominant gender and as the ‘real’ victims of masculinity.”

Contrastingly, whilst the Gillette advert similarly critiques masculinity, it does so in a way that brings into focus the harmful effects of masculinity on both men *and* women. It highlights instances of sexual harassment with specific reference to the #MeToo movement, and explicitly calls for men to be “accountable”, imploring them to “say the right thing. To act the right way” (Gillette, 2019). This invoked widespread and far-reaching criticism and condemnation, inducing a fury on twitter, shaped through the campaign #boycottGillette. Making headline news, the advert was portrayed as not only insulting to men and therefore sexist, but as symbolic of attempts to “appease the political correctness movement” as one tweet stated, or as emblematic of the “global assault on masculinity.” Such statements resonate with García-Favaro and Gill (2016: 388), who argue that such narratives of “reverse discrimination” or the idea that feminism has ‘gone too far’ are key motifs of postfeminism (see Chapter 3).

Conversely, traditional masculinity has been deemed harmful by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2018), which has subsequently suffered a similar prolonged backlash. Psychologist Komisar (2019), writing in the Wall Street Journal, for example, was quick to draw upon popular-scientific claims to criticise the APA. As such, he claims that “masculine traits such as aggression, competitiveness and protective vigilance not only can be positive, but also have a biological basis” (Komisar, 2019: 1). Echoing a wider resurgence of biological essentialism and ‘natural’ sex difference (Fine, 2010, García-Favaro and Gill, 2016), Komisar (2019) asserts that the presence of testosterone and other hormones, which are supposedly specific only to boys and men, results in increased aggression and competitiveness. Though there is a significant lack of evidence-based research to support these claims (Fine, 2010, 2017), the publication of this article in such a well-known paper illustrates the increasingly widespread publication and exposure of popular-scientific essentialist understandings of gender. It is not surprising then that similar claims were made by participants in this research with regard to not only gender, but also sexual practice, sexuality and gender politics (see Chapters 3 and 5). The release of the APA’s guidelines on traditional masculinity and the pro-feminist agenda of the Gillette advert, alongside the backlash and hostile responses they received, highlight current tensions in debates about masculinity. Indeed there is something of a battle between those who assert traditional masculinity is harmful, and those who counterclaim.

It is against this backdrop that the need for feminist research on men and masculinities is underscored. Moreover, that where men and masculinities are studied, that focus is given to

critical analysis of gender power relations (Hearn, 2004), as opposed to an emphasis on men's "wounds" (Messner, 1997: 19). Although it is "wildly inaccurate to see critical men and masculinities scholarships as separate from feminist scholarship and feminist theory" (Hearn, 2019: 56-57), scholars such as Bridges (2019) highlight emergent exclusionary citational practices within the field, which appear problematic. These are said to centre "the work of precious few scholars who share a collection of demographic characteristics" (Bridges, 2019: 22). Indeed, the proliferation and frequent utilisation of "inclusive masculinities" theory (Anderson, 2009), which is discussed further in the next chapter, reflects this. Whereas previous feminist men and masculinities scholarship engaged with diverse interdisciplinary feminist bodies of knowledge and was also cautious so as not to (re)produce androcentric scholarship such prior citations, Bridges (2019) argues, are becoming less and less frequent. At the same time, publishing within the field has increased rapidly, whilst women continue to be underrepresented with regard to journal editorial board composition, comprising only 10% of these positions for three of the top masculinities journals (Bridges, 2019). This is not to say that all women researchers are necessarily feminists, or that scholars writing on men and masculinities partake (perhaps albeit unintentionally) in such exclusionary practices and that this is necessarily something which occurs across the board. It does, however, raise key epistemic questions as to which knowledges are currently being advanced within current men and masculinities scholarship, and which are not (Collins, 2000). It is, therefore, important to keep in mind that as Collins (1989: 751) writes, "scholars, publishers, and other experts represent specific interests and credentialing processes". Indeed, Bridges (2019: 23) drawing upon the work of Ahmed (2013: 1) and her conceptualisation of citations as a "reproductive technology" also highlights how such processes often nuclei particular knowledges, theories and histories. With this in mind, Hearn (2004) incites scholars to think critically about how and in what ways men and masculinities studies engages with feminism. Importantly, he urges "referential reflexivity" amongst "analysts of men" (Hearn, 2004: 62).

Moreover, there are but a few studies which have sought to analyse contemporary masculinities in relation to postfeminism (O'Neill, 2018). Though scholars such as Borkowska (2016) assert that masculinities scholars have, for the last four decades, focused their attention on concerns relating to masculinities and postfeminism, as those put forward by O'Neill (2015a), this in an albeit impossible feat given postfeminism's recent theoretical conception over the last decade or so (McRobbie, 2004, Gill, 2007). As such, O'Neill (2018: 19) asserts that "men are almost wholly overlooked in discussions of postfeminism." What is more, most research here remains confined to explorations of popular culture (Hamad, 2013) and media studies (Gill, 2009), with

there being but one published empirical sociological study (O'Neill, 2018) seeking to explore how postfeminism shapes men's lives. With this in mind, this thesis seeks to address this significant gap in the field. Analysis of the relationship between postfeminism and contemporary masculinities weaves through this thesis, but also provides the main focus of Chapter 3.

The absence of research on postfeminism and masculinities also sits uncomfortably alongside the proliferation of research on "inclusive masculinities" (Anderson, 2009), which this thesis critically explores throughout, but more specifically in Chapter 6. Proponents of inclusive masculinities theory posit rather optimistically a narrative of widespread and significant progressive social change (O'Neill, 2015a), through a perceived reduction in the centrality of heterosexuality to masculine identity formation, the lessening of homophobia and 'homophobia', or the fear of being perceived as gay, and the subsequent "softening" of masculinities (Anderson, 2009, McCormack, 2012a). For this reason, such theorisations have in and of themselves been accused of reflecting postfeminist logics in that they posit that gender equality has been achieved (O'Neill, 2015a), as is discussed further in the next chapter. With this in mind, O'Neill (2015a: 116) states that "where the analysis of postfeminism becomes an imperative of masculinity studies and scholars begin to interrogate the ways in which men and masculinities are imbricated with and implicated in postfeminism, inclusive masculinity theory may be recognized not as advancing the field, but as ceding a critical political imperative." It is from this point that this thesis seeks to critically engage with inclusive masculinities scholarship (see Chapters 1 and 6).

The need for research on masculinity and heterosexuality is more broadly underscored given that there "continues to be a serious under-theorization of male heterosexualities" (Richardson, 2010: 739). The importance of such research is stressed in this thesis, particularly given that heterosexuality continues to bear relevance with regard to young men's masculine subjectivities and identities, as Chapter 5 shows. In spite of this, where men's sexualities are investigated, scholars such as Aboim (2016) argue that research continues to centre on the experiences of men who have sex with men, which has been thoroughly examined. Richardson (2010) echoes Aboim (2016) here, but also notes that research on heterosexuality has tended to focus solely on women. Garner (2012: 328), writing in relation to debates around 'sexualisation', similarly posits that discussions often centre upon women's "ability or inability to resist, re-signify or negotiate (hetero)sexist sexual norms." As such, she writes that "explorations of what or who women and girls are resisting, questions related to men and systems of masculine power, are largely missing from academic and policy discourse" (2012: 329). With this in mind, this thesis tends to this "missing link" (Garner, 2012: 328), providing analysis of how men understand,

negotiate and are interpellated in contemporary gendered and sexual landscapes. I explore how this shapes subjectivities, informs gendered and sexual practices, and also ask what contemporary gendered and sexual shifts means in terms of wider gendered power relations and equality. This thesis also seeks to address theoretical lacuna within the field of critical men and masculinities literature by utilising scholarship on postfeminism to make sense of these difficult questions.

Research questions and chapter overview

This thesis explores young men's negotiations of hetero-masculinity within the contemporary UK. The primary research question informing this thesis asks how young men understand and experience hetero-masculinity on subjective and relational levels. The secondary research questions are as follows:

1. How do young men understand and experience gender and sexual norms?
2. To what extent, and how, do young men disrupt gender and sexual norms?
3. What do shifts in understandings and experiences of masculinity and heterosexuality amongst young men mean for wider gender and sexual equality and power relations?

By exploring young men's negotiations of hetero-masculinity, it seeks to understand how young men make sense of, understand and mediate discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality, and how this informs their gendered practices. Also, how masculine identities are constituted through available discourses and meanings of masculinity and how this shapes ways of 'being' men. In other words, it seeks to investigate how young men are interpellated as men within contemporary times. Importantly, this thesis also looks to young men's resistance to dominant discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality, interrogating what contemporary shifts relating to gender and sexuality amongst young men mean in terms of wider gender equality and power. These modes of enquiry inform and thread through the following chapters of this thesis:

Chapter 1 provides analysis of feminist and critical men and masculinities literature, situating this research amidst lacuna in the field. Chapter 2 explores the research design and strategies underpinning the study, discussing research methods, data collection and analysis, alongside the ethical considerations of the project. This chapter also explores issues around reflexivity and researcher and participant identity, giving particular focus and consideration to conducting research with men as a woman researcher.

Chapter 3 – *Politics and (post)feminism* discusses participants' utilisation of notions of 'natural' sex difference and biological essentialism to understand gender, and often subsequently explain

and validate gender inequality. Such understandings are situated as a key postfeminist “sensitivity” (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016: 393), which can be set against the backdrop of the resurgence of popular-science and evolutionary psychology (Fine, 2010). It next explores the relationship between masculinity and feminism, looking to the various ways gender equality, power and politics are articulated by the young men. It gives focus to participants’ discursive strategies, whereby they paradoxically utilised feminist discourses of equality to undermine contemporary feminist projects, simultaneously aligning with and discrediting feminism at the same time. It then moves on to explore the discursive splitting of feminism, whereby older forms of liberal feminism are accredited as reasonable, whilst more contemporary feminism is positioned as extreme and pursuant of superiority over men. Here, particular focus is given to narratives of perceived threatened masculinity, female tyranny and feminist domination, emphasising how participants’ views reflect wider postfeminist discourses.

Chapter 4 *Gender norms* explores the young men’s subjective understandings of contemporary discourses of masculinity and how this shaped participants’ gendered practices, shedding light upon the dramaturgical choreography young men undertake to signify a ‘correct’ masculine identity. Here, it discusses the enduring significance of the male peer group as a key space in which gender and sexuality is policed and performed. It then moves on to provide analysis how participants discursively aligned *and* distanced themselves with normative discourses of masculinity. It explores how participants drew upon an amalgamation of traditional and emerging discourses of masculinity in their masculine subject formation, highlighting the complexities with regard to contemporary masculine subjectivities. It discusses the lessening significance of work and employment to masculine identity formation, exploring how gender is viewed in increasingly democratised and individualistic terms. Here, it also gives focus to the ways in which notions of ‘success’ are individualised to the exclusion of wider structural factors, and ultimately divorced from occupational status. Finally, it explores the centrality of the body to contemporary masculine identity formation.

Chapter 5 *Sex* discusses participants’ understandings, constructions and practices of (hetero)sex. The first section focuses on the continued centrality of heterosexuality to young men’s masculine identity formation. Whilst highlighting the ways in which sexual conquest and competition amongst young men was critiqued and women were afforded some degree of sexual expression and agency, the chapter also explores the persistent dichotomisation of men and women’s sexual desire, said to be based on ‘natural’ sex difference. This is contextualised as a key motif of postfeminism. Finally, it discusses resistance to these narratives, exploring

investments in communication, emotional connection and reciprocity in participants' intimate relationships.

Chapter 6 "*Homophobia*" and the "*heterosexual matrix*" considers the continuing relationship between effeminate masculinities and same-sex desire. Whilst evidencing support for same-sex relationships and sexual fluidity among participants, the chapter discusses how gender policing and homophobia endure to feature as a key regulating apparatus of gender and sexuality for young men. As such, it offers a critique of inclusive masculinities literature (Anderson, 2009, McCormack, 2012a) through stressing the continuation and embeddedness of the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler, 1990), as well as how gender performance is enduringly seen to result in sexual preference (Fulcher, 2017). This chapter also explores the young men's negotiations of masculinity with regard to their gender presentation and expression. Drawing upon the notion of "hybrid" masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), it problematises understandings which posit men's employment of traditionally feminine styles as necessarily significant of gender equality. As such, it seeks to investigate the processes by which power is subtly reworked and rearticulated within this context.

Chapter 7 *Conclusion* draws together the main themes and threads of this thesis, moving on to provide recommendations for future policy and research relating to young men and masculinities within the UK context.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by discussing literature from the critical men and masculinities field, using Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity as a starting point. It then examines critical men and masculinities scholarship and its engagement with feminist theorisations in relation to the sex/gender binary, before turning to feminist theorisations of sexuality where particular focus is given to scholarship on heterosexuality and hetero-masculinity. After this, it critically examines theories which seek to understand contemporary shifts in formations of masculinity, focussing upon "inclusive masculinities" theory (Anderson, 2009), which posits a decline of homophobia amongst young men, alongside a "softening" of masculinities. It then explores the ways in which "hybrid" masculinities theory (Demetriou, 2001, Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) similarly seeks to address recent transformations of masculinity, but in doing so, and unlike inclusive masculinities theory, captures contemporary nuances of power by providing analysis of the ways in which inequalities are often subtly reworked under the guise of change. Finally, it discusses research on postfeminism and masculinities, interrogating the 'taking up' of literature on postfeminism by critical men and masculinities scholarship. Here it locates lacunae in the field, which this thesis seeks to address.

1.2 Hegemonic masculinity

The critical study of men and masculinities has flourished significantly over the past decade, consolidating and securing its place within the sociological milieu as an established area of research. Focus has been given to formations of masculinity at various stages of the life-course (Eck, 2014), from youth masculinities (Richardson, 2010) through to grand-fatherhood (Tarrant, 2013, Mann et al., 2015). The ways in which class (Willis, 1977, Reay, 2002, Nayak, 2006, Roberts, 2013), race (Archer and Yamashita, 2003, Joseph-Salisbury, 2019), bodily status (Shakespeare, 1999), sexuality (Kehily and Nayak, 1997, Forrest, 2000, Kehily, 2001a, Holland et al., 2004, Richardson, 2010, Ward, 2015) and notions of 'womanhood' (Halberstam, 1998) intersect with masculinity have been scrutinised, opening up space for examination of the complex and contradictory experiences of power, privilege and disadvantage that relate to masculinities. The gendered practices of men have also been studied within the spheres of education (Ghail, 1996, Kehily, 2001a, Renold, 2001, Jackson, 2003, Jackson and Dempster, 2009), sport (Albury et al., 2011, Pascoe and Hollander, 2016), employment (McDowell, 2015), the family (Dolan, 2014), the 'pick-up' industry (O'Neill, 2018), alongside the research setting itself (Allen, 2005a, Sallee

and Harris, 2011). Not only this, but such explorations can be situated within a myriad of theoretical locations, drawing upon neo-Marxian structuralism (Connell, 1995), queer theory (Garlick, 2003, Pascoe, 2005) poststructuralism (Whitehead, 2002, Whitehead, 2006), discursive psychology (Edley and Wetherell, 1995) and discursive-materialism (Hearn, 2014). Moreover, the affective dimensions of contemporary masculinities have been explored (de Boise and Hearn, 2017).

Schrock & Schwalbe (2009) suggest that a significant theoretical juncture within the field of critical men and masculinities studies can be noted by the publication of *Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity* by Carrigan and colleagues (1985). Here, previous sex-role theories were extensively critiqued as a new pro-feminist framework was proposed in which masculinities were multiple and historically specific, emphasising the heterogeneity of men as a group (Wedgwood, 2009). Sex-role theory, largely influenced by functionalism, had dominated sociological thinking on gender prior to this time, whereby 'sex roles' were viewed as complementary and essential to the functioning of society – as opposed to arising from unequal gendered power relations (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Heavily reliant on biological determinism, sex-role theorists alleged that roles simply added to biology gave rise to gender (Brittan, 1989).

Carrigan and colleagues' (1985) publication, alongside *Masculinities* by Connell (1995), thus signalled a new era in studying men (Wedgwood, 2009). Importantly, both publications were inspired by debates around power and oppression, which emerged from feminism, socialism and the gay liberation movement in the 1970s and 1980s (Wedgwood, 2009). Masculinity was now about *power relations*; not only amongst men and women, but between men as well (Connell, 1995). From this, analysis focused on the ways in which hegemonic masculinity not only subordinated femininities, but other masculinities too (Schippers, 2007). Developing from homosexual men's experiences of homophobia as perpetrated by heterosexual men, Connell (1995) placed emphasis upon the hierarchies within masculinities. This focus on the hierarchical positioning of men (and indeed women) and subsequent relations of power was conceptualised by Connell (1995) through the terms "hegemonic", "subordinated" and "marginalised" masculinities. Connell also conceptualised complicit masculinity, whereby hegemony was said to be at its most powerful through the ways men benefited from patriarchy without necessarily enacting masculine dominance (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). From such theorisation, masculinities were now viewed as hierarchical and power laden (Connell, 1995).

Whilst hegemonic masculinity is not viewed as 'normal', insofar as only a small number of men may enact it, it is nonetheless normative (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). For Connell (1995), hegemonic masculinity denotes the most idealised way of being a man at any given time and context, in relation to which all other men are positioned. Moreover, hegemonic masculinity is regarded "not as a trait but as a form of collective male practice that has as its effect, the subordination of women" (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009: 278). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) reflect on the concept of hegemonic masculinity in their paper *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept*. Here, they assert that at the time of its inception, hegemonic masculinity was "understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). The presumed inevitability of men's domination of women was, therefore, problematized as domination came to be seen as a dynamic system that was continuously reproduced and reconstituted through ever-changing and shifting gender relations, whereby resistance from subordinate groups may occur (Wedgwood, 2009). Given that gender relations were viewed as historical, hierarchies of gender were seen to be open to change (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Though Connell's (1995) theory, often regarded as one of the most significant and influential concepts within critical men and masculinities studies, continues to be the over-riding conceptual tool by which scholars analyse young men's lives (Beasley, 2008), it has, however, received some criticism. Whitehead (2002), for example, suggests that the concept is vulnerable to varying interpretation. He argues that the term often functions as a "blanket descriptor of male power [...] as reductionist a term as patriarchy" (Whitehead, 2002: 93). Moreover, though the term endeavours to acknowledge difference and resistance, the conceptual foundations of hegemonic masculinity are built upon an ultimately fixed male structure, whereby the individual is rendered invisible and digression undermined (Whitehead, 2002). In this sense, there are said to be "difficulties in reconciling an attempt to capture historical variability with the presumption of a transhistorical structural notion of men's power over women" (Berggren, 2014: 234). Messerschmidt and Messner (2018) echo this, yet they assert that the issue here may not necessarily lie with Connell's initial conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity. Rather, they suggest that the concept is often utilised by scholars in "structurally and historically decontextualized ways" (Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018: 35).

With this in mind, the term is also often deployed in such a way as to subsume "hegemonic" as a type of masculinity that is the most common or dominant at a particular time, without these forms of masculinity necessarily contributing to men's power over women (Beasley, 2008,

Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018, Waling, 2019). Hence, it is important to maintain focus on the relational aspects of gender and the subsequent legitimisation of gender inequality, whilst avoiding conflating hegemonic masculinity with a character type, or actual groups of men (Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018). As Beasley (2008: 90) writes “the slide to dominant types of men/actual men—even if understandable and related to an attempt to give embodied materiality to the political mechanism of a legitimating cultural ideal—has problematic consequences”. Accountants, for example, though holding significant institutional power, may not necessarily embody hegemonic masculinity. Similarly, though working-class men may not have institutional power, “muscular working-class manhood is commonly employed as a highly significant mobilizing cultural ideal intended to invoke cross-class recognition and solidarity regarding what counts as a man” (Beasley, 2008: 90). Despite emphasis on gender plurality then, men are often stabilised into homogenous groupings (Beasley, 2012). It becomes paramount then, to focus upon the *processes* by which power is ascribed to certain formations and expressions of masculinity, and not others and what this means for wider gender power relations.

Hearn (2014: 10) also critiques the concept of hegemonic masculinity as this often problematically morphs from denoting “a key social process [...] to ‘hegemonic’ as a descriptor of certain masculinities.” As such, he argues that the concept lacks nuance with regard to “deconstructing gender and gender relations” (Hearn, 2014: 10). Given the focus on masculinity and masculinities, Hearn (2019) also asserts that such an analytical framework runs the risk of overlooking or neglecting the structural power of men as a social category. He argues that this is particularly so where masculinities is analytically employed “as a decontextualized, free-floating framework” (Hearn, 2019: 54). With this in mind, he calls for moving analysis away from masculinities to the “hegemony of men [which] seeks to address *the double complexity that men are both a social category formed by the gender system and dominant collective and individual agents of social practices*” (Hearn, 2004: 59, original emphasis). Hearn (2014: 7) also puts forward a “material-discursive” approach to understanding men, that is – analysing “the material contexts of discourse, in understanding discourse as (including) material acts, in focusing on the material effects of discourse – hence the term material-discursive practices.” This brings to mind the threat of material violence faced by those who are gender non-conforming, as a result of normative discourses of gender and sexuality. In other words, that those whose gender presentation is not “culturally intelligible” (Butler, 1990: 17) because they do not adhere to the wider meanings we attach to gender concepts such as masculinity, encounter gender policing as a material-discursive effect.

Connell's analysis of power and its employment by other scholars has also received criticism for its failure to elucidate the multiple and intersecting power asymmetries which may exist between hegemonic, subordinated and marginalised masculinities, as each term appears as though they are mutually exclusive (Berggren, 2013). Such categorisation problematically fails to recognise men who may, for example, be "both gay and sexist, both patriarchal and racialized, or both working class and queer" (Berggren, 2013: 193). Furthermore, although Connell (1995) acknowledges resistance from below and therefore moves away from viewing power in a top-down manner with regard to social structures, power is still regarded as something that subjects hold or resist (Beasley, 2012). This stands in contrast to postmodern theory, whereby power is decentred and *not* something that is imposed upon individuals, in the sense that it is constituted in and through discourses, which subjects are not distinct from (Beasley, 2012). Hence, power as oppression is viewed, by Connell, as though it is imposed upon subjects to produce gendered beings who in turn respond to that very structure. In this sense "the two interact rather than being one and the same thing" (Beasley, 2012: 754).

This section has discussed early sociological theorisations of men and masculinities, giving particular focus to Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity. It has noted how Connell's work importantly places emphasis on power, oppression and hierarchies of gender in contrast to previous sex-role theories. Notwithstanding this contribution, this section has drawn attention to critiques of Connell's conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity, whilst also illustrating how the term is open to varying interpretation and use. The next section explores queer and feminist theorisations which challenge the sex/gender binary.

1.3 The sex/gender binary

Despite the criticisms mentioned in the previous section, Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity alongside his structural analysis of power as "centred and oppressive" (Beasley, 2012: 751), continues to dominate critical men and masculinities scholarship. This is in spite of the turn to post-structuralism seen within the social sciences more broadly, which has seen increased emphasis on matters of subjectivity, micropolitics, difference and everyday life (Petersen, 2003). With this in mind, Chapter 3 gives particular focus to contemporary masculine subjectivities within everyday life. Basic concepts and strategies of investigation have been also critiqued as "the dualistic distinctions that underlie our descriptions of the world (e.g., subject/object, self/other, nature/culture, mind/body, private/public, sex/gender, and heterosexual/homosexual)" (Petersen, 2003: 55-56) have been interrogated. Furthermore, the question of identity itself has been subject to debate as scholars and activists have queried its role in contemporary activism and politics (Petersen, 2003).

The increasing visibility and voices of gender variant, transgender and gender fluid people within recent years, for example, has destabilised and challenged notions that biological 'sex' is inextricably wedded to woman/man-hood, as some trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERF's) continue to problematically assert (Hines, 2019). Scholarly contributions from theorists such as Judith Butler (1990) and her theorisations of gender performativity and the "heterosexual matrix" have also challenged the sex/gender binary. For Butler (1990), bodies are gendered in that there is no pre-discursive, pre-social 'natural' body. Rather, the body is culturally inscribed. Here, gender is something done, rather than something which is. It is a sequence of acts which are habitually performed. As Butler (1990: 33) writes, "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." Different to gendered performance, gender performativity is characterised by the socially endorsed *repeated* performances which create an impression that these acts are inseparable from the sexed body (see Chapter 4). Performative acts or speech acts thus "bring into being that which they name", and as such, performativity is "*that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names*" (Butler et al., 1994: 33, original emphasis). Accordingly, it is at this moment in which "discourse becomes productive" (Butler et al., 1994: 33).

Opening up discussions around the ways in which gender is in effect mapped back onto the body, Butler (1990) brings to light how the sexed body too is socially constructed or laid bare to meanings, which are produced through gendered discourses. For example, the first pronunciation voiced by medical professionals at the moment a human being enters the world is a statement about its supposed gender: "it's a boy/girl" (Butler, 1993). Rather than this being merely observatory, such declarations are constitutive of sex/gender and signify an imposed process of gendering on bodies, which have no pre-discursive reality. Martin (1991), similarly draws attention to how the body comes to be socially constructed through scientific discourse. She offers a compelling critique of reproductive discourses, shedding light upon "the gender stereotypes hidden within the scientific language of biology" (Martin, 1991: 486). Here, she asserts that sperm is often portrayed as militaristic, athletic and as though it is cruising in preparation to triumphantly penetrate the egg, which is presented contrastingly as passive, waiting and flirtatious. However, Martin (1991) problematises these assumptions, highlighting how the egg and the sperm mutually interact on relatively equal terms. Writ large here is the way that understandings about the body, even on a cellular level, are informed by notions of gender.

Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000), a feminist biologist writing in reference to intersexuality also provides an illuminating critique of the sex/gender binary and the idea that there are two opposing sexes. Importantly, she argues that “our bodies are too complex to provide clear-cut answers about sexual difference” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: 51). Noting the prevalence of intersexuality as constituting 1.7% of the population, Fausto-Sterling (2000: 8) states that “since intersexuals quite literally embody both sexes, they weaken claims about sexual difference.” Yet notwithstanding this, the propensity and proclivity to reinforce sex difference is underscored by medical professionals, scientists and indeed parents upon the birth of intersex babies. Given that they fall outside of scientific and medical understandings of ‘male’ or ‘female’, they are ‘fixed’ with hormonal and surgical treatment, but only once doctors have uncovered their ‘true’ sex said to reside “underneath the surface confusion” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: 50). For Fausto-Sterling (2000: 3), “labelling someone a man or a woman is a social decision. We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender—not science—can define our sex.” Fausto-Sterling (1993) also highlights the inadequacy of the two-sex model, putting forward an alternative five sex model. This is said to include not only male and female, but also “herms” said to denote those born with testes and ovaries; “merms” or male psuedohermaphrodites who have both testes and certain aspects of female genitalia; and “ferms” or female psuedohermaphrodites who have both ovaries and certain aspects of male genitalia (Fausto-Sterling, 1993: 21).

Laqueur (1990) similarly asserts that the notion of two sexes is not, as some may assume, a natural occurrence or a biological ‘fact’. Contrastingly, the two-sex model is socially produced due to emphasis placed on characterising bodies in binary ways as male and female. He asserts that this only became prevalent after the 19th century, whilst prior to this, the one-sex model prevailed. Here, women and men’s bodies were believed to develop from one type of body. Indeed, other scholars, such as Richardson (2008), point to this time as a moment in which men and women came to be seen as different yet complimentary of one another. Here, binary identities came to be viewed as though they were “ordained by nature” (Richardson, 2008: 4). Laqueur (1990) also draws attention to the ways in which definitions of sex are subject to change over time e.g onsex/hermaphrodite, demonstrating that bodily meanings and assumptions made regarding the relationship between identities and bodies is subject to change through time.

Halberstam (1998) also offers challenge to the sex/gender binary, inviting the reader to disentangle masculinity from the male body in his book *Female Masculinity*. Interrogating the taken-for-granted and protected position of male masculinity, Halberstam (1998) provides a

genealogical account of masculine women prior to the emergence of lesbianism as a sexual category, from the nineteenth century through to present day drag kings. Importantly, Halberstam (1998) incites the reader to question their assumptions relating to the boundaries and borders of masculinity, dislocating this from the 'male' body.

More recently, Owusu (2018) provides a thought-provoking and timely insight into non-binary black trans masculinity writing in relation to their own journey of transitioning. They highlight how race and (trans)gender intersect to produce certain stereotypes relating to black bodies. However, given the endurance of associations of both black masculinity with hyper-violence and black femininity with masculinity, irrespective of their gender presentation, racialized stereotypes of aggression are ascribed to them regardless of their gender expression. Notwithstanding this, Owusu (2018) draws upon the example of systematic and routine state violence and police brutality perpetrated against black men to emphasise the added racialized dimensions associated with transitioning as a person of colour. They argue that this produces certain affective modalities or "deep fears of both the known responses to black masculinity, and the unknown" (Owusu, 2018: 1). They also note how transitioning involves a deep reimagining of masculinity, particularly given their own experiences of violence perpetrated both directly and structurally by cis men. This involves them "trying to imagine between the four blue walls of my bedroom what the most expansive, daring and beautiful idea of masculinity is" (Owusu, 2018: 1).

Despite these political and theoretical developments, which can be seen and located within the social sciences more broadly, assertions remain that critical men and masculinities scholarship has been slow to adopt some of the advancements seen within some post-structural and queer theory, alongside feminism more widely (Pease, 2002, Petersen, 2003, Hearn, 2004, Beasley, 2012, 2013, 2014, Berggren, 2014, O'Neill, 2015a, Waling, 2019).

A presumed sex/gender or nature/culture dualism provides the bedrock for much work on masculinities (Beasley, 2005). Hence, sex is often viewed as providing the stable and fixed foundations on which the social constructions of gender are effectively ascribed onto the body, which in turn advocates the notion that there is correspondence between biological sex and cultural/social gender (Petersen, 2003, Waling, 2019). Moreover, Nayak and Kehily (2013) argue that there is a tendency within masculinities scholarship to conflate sex with gender by inextricably linking the 'male' body to masculinities. This is said to potentially result in assumption that "masculinity is something all men inhabit" (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 4). Accordingly, those who are gender non-conforming subsequently come to occupy a marginal,

supposedly failing space on the fringes of masculinity (Nayak and Kehily, 2013). Such understandings, though perhaps unintentional, also imply that gender is a result or product of sex, ultimately bolstering the sex/gender binary, which has been critiqued and problematized by various feminist scholars, as previously discussed. As such, analysis of how sex difference becomes naturalised and how such differences then come to underpin definitions of gender remain largely absent from critical men and masculinities studies.

Critical deconstructive work of the sex/gender binary would, however, open up opportunity to examine its supportive relations of power and provide space to destabilise the notion that there are two coherent and complimentary sexes/genders (Petersen, 2003), and also that these coherently relate to corresponding sexual desires (Butler, 1990). Chapter 3 tentatively seeks to somewhat unpick young men's understandings of the sex/gender binary, providing analysis of how, and in what ways, notions of 'natural' sex difference contribute to and shape young men's understandings and practices of gender. This chapter also seeks to explore how the resurgence of notions of 'natural' sex difference, as noted by scholars such as García-Favaro and Gill (2016) and Fine (2010), is (re)produced in young men's narratives around gender, informing inequitable viewpoints and practices.

Beasley (2012) also draws attention to a number of issues within critical men and masculinities scholarship. She writes that there is "a continuing adherence to understanding power as structural, centred and oppressive, a relatively unqualified investment in gender identities, an inclination to privilege gender as determining sexuality, and a tendency to reduce power relations (for example, with regard to hegemony and hegemonic masculinity) to particular social agents such that actual groups of dominant men are seen as 'having' power" (Beasley, 2012: 751). Though acknowledgement of the plurality of masculinities represented a theoretical juncture for critical men and masculinities studies, it also laid the way for masculinity to be defined in relation to a catalogue of lists of attributes deemed characteristically masculine such as aggression, competitiveness and emotional illiteracy, which by implication, are often differentiated against femininity, which is characterised paradoxically (Petersen, 2003). As Peterson (2003: 58) states, "despite scholars' rejection of essentialism, masculinity is often referred to as though it has a definable, distinctive essence." With this in mind, Hearn (2014) advocates using the term men, as opposed to male, arguing that where the latter is employed, the possibility to underpin and reproduce essentialist understandings of men is opened up. Moreover, use of the term male when discussing men serves to undermine the possibility that "*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (Butler, 1990: 6, original emphasis)

This section has explored feminist scholarship which critiques and unpicks the sex/gender binary, whilst also discussing 'the taking up' of this literature within critical men and masculinities studies. The next section moves on to discuss sociological theorisations of heterosexuality, from radical feminist approaches to queer theory. This final part of this section provides discussion of research which focus specifically on hetero-masculinity.

1.4 Heterosexuality and young men

Despite the burgeoning field of critical men and masculinities studies, a relatively small number of studies have sought to analyse hetero-masculinity (Richardson, 2010). Richardson (2010) suggests that this is due to two reasons. Firstly, most developments in understandings of heterosexuality have come chiefly from feminist analyses, whereby focus has been given to the regulatory effects heterosexuality has upon women (Richardson, 2010). Secondly, essentialist arguments which define male heterosexuality as both natural and pre-given have dominated both historically and within present day discourse (Richardson, 2010). Hence scholars in their investigations of contemporary male sexualities, have shone light upon the tacit understanding of male heterosexuality as ordinary (Fischer, 2013), yet simultaneously subject to potent sexual urges said to be powered by raging hormones that are largely viewed as ungovernable (Holland et al., 2004, Richardson, 2010). What is more, Richardson (2010: 740) argues that the "hegemonic logic" of male heterosexuality has often eclipsed potential study of this unexamined norm. As Beasley (2010: 204) asserts, what initially springs to mind for most scholars is "what could be more mundane, more prevalent, more presumed, more naturalized, and therefore customarily exclusionary and uninspiring?" In light of this, most conceptual frameworks rely upon a naturalised, fixed and static conception of heterosexuality, which by implication, serves to ignore, overshadow and hide from view, that very same "unquestioned paradigm" (Richardson, 1996: 1).

The scant attention afforded heterosexuality stands in contrast to this phenomenon's embeddedness and ubiquity within society. Hence, it has been suggested that there is a gap or tension between the proliferation of (hetero)sexuality seen within modern popular culture and the narrowness of contemporary critiques of heterosexuality located within gender and sexuality studies (Beasley, 2015). In this sense, acknowledgement and interrogation of heterosexuality's status as the privileged and unexamined axiom, norm and monolith is crucial to the field of gender/sexuality scholarship (Beasley, 2015). Translating that which is deemed self-evident and obvious as "strange" (Probyn, 1995: 9) thus opens up space for idiosyncrasies

and peculiarities to emerge, rather than foreclosing the erasure of these in advance (Beasley, 2015).

Some scholars also assert that analysis of heterosexuality remains largely confined within the 'sex-critical' approach, not dissimilar to scholarship that dominated the so-called 'sex wars' of the 1980s (Beasley, 2015). Here, notions of predatory men and helpless women are said to prevail, as analysis of male heterosexuality that does not assume that desire equates to harm is near impossible to find (Beasley, 2010). Hence, as heterosexuality and heteronormativity continue to be conflated, this lends little space to reimagine this dominant domain as a site for transgression, it being seen rather as a static, unchanging and homogenous entity (Beasley, 2015). Although the coercive and more negative aspects of male heterosexuality are indisputably vital areas of study in their own right, such a restricted lens runs the risk of obscuring other perspectives which, though perhaps unintentionally, "inadvertently advances a kind of recursive, even naturalized account of hetero-masculine as inevitably oppressive" (Beasley, 2015: 146). The possibilities of social change, transgression and innovation within the sphere of the dominant are undermined when heterosexuality is (under)theorised in such a way, so much so that it becomes wholly cast as a source of domination, orthodoxy and conformity (Beasley, 2015). Notwithstanding this, the findings discussed in Chapter 5 demonstrate significant adherence to normative discourses of heterosexuality in ways which reinforce gender inequality.

Studies into heterosexuality began in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the rise of the gay and lesbian movement, which championed gay pride and visibility, whereby the idea of heterosexuality as an institution was foregrounded (Seidman, 2005). This period saw the appearance of distinct homosexual subjectivities and identities as the movement explicitly sought to rid society of negative notions of homosexuality as abnormal, unnatural and inferior in relation to heterosexuality. Prior to this time, focus had been upon particular acts of harassment and legal disenfranchisement in relation to homosexuality and its subordinate status within society (Seidman, 2005). Hence, this new movement was more radical, critical of mainstream society and its associated institutions and cultural values (Richardson, 2004). Acknowledgement of gay life in relation to an 'institution' of heterosexuality thus shifted the analytical and political spotlight to the ways in which social and cultural institutions enforced and privileged heterosexuality as the correct and preferred organising principle of personal and social life (Seidman, 2005). As Seidman (2009: 18) argues, analysis moved "from the individual homosexual to a social condition of normative heterosexuality."

Notwithstanding this, analysis often focused primarily on the experiences of women, with radical lesbian feminists dominating critiques of the institution of heterosexuality around this time and throughout the 1980s. Rich (1980), for example, not only argued that heterosexuality was an institution imposed upon women which rendered them subordinate, but also challenged the assumption that the majority of women are heterosexual. She argued “that for women heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force” (Rich, 1980: 648). As such, lesbianism was said to pose direct challenge and resistance to heterosexuality as an institution. Other scholars, such as MacKinnon (1989) and Dworkin (1982) also critiqued heterosexuality, asserting its interconnectedness with male domination and women’s subordination. Such radical feminist schools of thought were thus inclined to problematic essentialist portrayals of women as and men as inherently vulnerable and predatory respectively.

The 1990s saw the emergence of queer theory as a means by which to analyse gender and sexuality. Queer theory, following on from Foucault (1998), challenged the idea of sex as a biological truth, or that we are born sexual, suggesting rather, that we learn to be sexual beings (Seidman, 2011). In a similar way, Katz (1996) highlighted that the term heterosexual was first adopted through medical discourse to give new meaning and legitimisation to non-productive sex amongst the middle-classes at the turn of the twentieth century. With this in mind, “it is the discourse of sexuality that [has] created what we know as sex” (Seidman, 2011: 10). Hence, queer theory explicitly problematised the notion of fixed and static gendered and sexual identities whilst stressing the importance of subverting and destabilising the gendered and sexual binaries of women and men and heterosexuality and homosexuality (Jackson, 2005). Thus queer theorists sought to deconstruct essentialist understandings of heterosexuality, which had dominated until this time (Fischer, 2013).

Butler (1990: 151), for example, conceptualises heterosexuality using the term “heterosexual matrix” which specifies the “hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory status of heterosexuality.” Here then, the illusion of stable and fixed gender identities is said to be socially constructed from a discourse of heterosexuality which presumes ‘natural’ male and female difference (Fischer, 2013). From this perspective, heterosexuality, in the same way as gender, necessitates constant daily reproduction and achievement through the routine performance of binarised gendered ideals which link back to heterosexuality. With the performative and socially achieved nature of heterosexuality underlined, this made way for

understanding how individuals *become* heterosexual through social processes. Butler (1990) thus contests the presumed immutability of the sex/gender binary, or assumptions that sex neatly maps onto or informs gender, which results in corresponding desire. Though dominant discourses of gender and sexuality construct and presume a straightforward relationship between the sexed body, gender identity and sexual desire, Butler (1990) argues that these are complexly related and cannot be collapsed together. I take Butler's (1990) theorisations forward throughout the thesis and more specifically in Chapter 3, where I explore young men's understandings of the sex/gender binary. In Chapter 6, I draw upon Butler's work to discuss how gender expression continues to be seen to signify sexual desire, for example, that effeminacy signifies same-sex desire.

Within critical men and masculinities studies, scholars have explored the ways in which heterosexuality is specifically utilised by and is central to young men's construction and affirmation of masculinity (Pascoe, 2005, Kimmel, 2012). Indeed, Garlick (2003) predates this to the Middle Ages when medieval man was defined by his sexual performance and, more specifically, his ability to become aroused and achieve an erection (see Chapter 5). Holland et al. (2004) also view heterosexuality not as based upon masculinity and femininity in opposition to each other, but rather, that heterosexuality is in fact masculinity. Accordingly, "a fundamental component of hegemonic masculinity is heterosexuality [as] it is this unequivocal investment in heterosexuality that is used to construct normative (male) identity" (Lombard, 2016: 242).

With this in mind, masculinity is said to be consolidated through displays of heterosexual prowess and conquest (Holland et al., 2004, Flood, 2008), often through laughter and humour, particularly within the school setting (Kehily and Nayak, 1997). Coy et al. (2013: 2) similarly note the acquisition of "man points" through young men's (hetero)sex, which bolsters masculine capital. Whilst Holland et al. (2004) suggest that some men may resist and challenge this, they argue that young men learn to be men and attain their masculinity within a culture where the demands of hegemonic masculinity are predicated upon masculine violence and competition. Yet where men resist or fail at being a 'real man' and thus experience vulnerability with regard to the requirements of normative masculinity, they are disempowered (Holland et al., 2004). As Holland and colleagues (2004) state, for young men, "the threat of sexual failure can turn a potential gladiator into a wimp" (2004: 145).

The male peer group also plays a significant role in young men's consolidation of 'appropriate' masculinity (see Chapter 4), whereby the pressures to both have sex and vocalise this remains a key aspect of young men's lives (Richardson, 2010), as discussed in more depth in Chapter 5. Yet

Holland et al. (2004) argue that this undertaking is contradictory and fraught with tensions, in that such stories have the capacity to challenge as well as embolden the pursuit of masculinity (Holland et al., 2004). Hence, the peer group is said to produce a context in which young men are pressured to share accounts of sexual dexterity and conquest within a hazardous space typified by competition and possible ridicule from other peer members (Holland et al., 2004). Other scholars reiterate Holland and colleagues' (2004) assertions, emphasising the importance the male peer group has to the construction of masculinity and heterosexuality amongst young men (Bird, 1996, Flood, 2008).

Kehily (2001a), for example, asserts that young men establish and maintain successful masculinity through heterosexuality and participating in sex talk in the company of male peers. Haywood and Mac an Ghail (1996) similarly note that heterosexuality is foregrounded in working class men's performances of masculinity, predominantly through explicit misogyny and sex talk. Flood (2008) correspondingly asserts that young men achieve status through having sex with women, whereby men are their primary audience of these stories (see Chapter 5). Hence Flood (2008: 345) notes the significance of "male peer intragroup completion over sexual experience, surveillance of each other's sexual activities, and encouragement of pursuit." Accordingly, male peer-groups are said to provide the bedrock upon which masculinity and heterosexuality are policed, particularly within schools, arising in both primary (Renold, 2001, Renold, 2007) and secondary education (Kehily and Nayak, 1997). Indeed, Richardson (2010) has cited the ways in which young men are not only compelled to engage in heterosexuality in certain ways, but also, that the ways in which they can speak about this in front of peers is heavily restricted. Accordingly, the privatising and constraining effects of normative discourse of male heterosexuality are said to be far-reaching (Richardson, 2010).

With regard to dominant discourses of heterosexuality amongst young men, other scholars have also noted resistance to these (Allen, 2003). Hence, some of the young men in Allen's (2003) study refuted the notion that sex was the primary reason they entered relationships (see Chapter 5), with a minority stating that they would remain in the relationship if sexual activity was to cease. Furthermore, they also asserted that the way they talked about sex was not the most important aspect of their relationships (Allen, 2003). Nonetheless, Allen's (2003) study does corroborate the literature previously mentioned, as the young men also constructed their sexual selves by drawing upon dominant discourses of heterosexuality, particularly in ways that served to publically authenticate themselves as 'appropriately' masculine (Allen, 2003). Subsequently, this "meant being seen as sexually assertive, emotionally detached, with a voracious sexual desire and a body that guaranteed them satisfaction" (Allen, 2003: 224).

Dominant heterosexual masculinities are also said to be constituted through dis-identifications or “border constructions” (Richardson, 2010). As Richardson (2010: 740) states, “to ontologize that which they consider themselves ‘to be’, heterosexual subjects frequently identify what they are not: ‘I’m not gay’.” Indeed, Butler (1994: 35) also points to the ways in which definition is as much based upon “what one is not as by the position that one explicitly inhabits.” In a similar way, Kimmel (2012) asserts that homophobia serves as a strategy by which young men both perform and bolster their heterosexual masculinity as dominant cultural definitions of masculinity are organised around fears and anxieties of not being seen as a ‘real man’, particularly by those who attribute meaning to performances of masculinity (Richardson, 2010). Hence, such fear often manifests as homophobia and dis-identification with that which is associated as feminine as a means of constructing the masculine self (Richardson, 2010). Accordingly, homophobia and misogyny are cited as central everyday practices amongst young men that are key to ‘doing’ dominant forms of masculinity (Richardson, 2010). Pascoe (2007) also evidences the continuing use of “fag discourse” as a key gender policing tool, whilst Fulcher (2017) similarly notes the use of homophobic language amongst young men through terms such as ‘faggot’ and ‘gay’ (see Chapter 6). For the young men in Fulcher’s (2017) study, homophobic language served as a means by which to bolster masculine gender norms and secure status within the male peer group, particularly amongst popular young men. Where such language was employed, however, the young men were often reticent to acknowledge that they themselves were homophobic in that they distinguished between homophobic language and ‘being’ homophobic. With this in mind, she highlights that despite young men’s support of same-sex relationships, their use of homophobic language within this context continues to serve to reinforce gender norms and broader inequalities.

In contrast, Bragg et al. (2018), in their study on young people’s views on gender diversity within schools, saw the development of peer groups and networks which recognised and accepted a range of gender and sexual identities. Moreover, that members of these groups “were confidently exploring identities such as ‘gender fluid’, ‘agender’, ‘gay’, ‘lesbian or bisexual’ or ‘pansexual’” (Bragg et al. 2018: 425). Notwithstanding this, homophobic insults and judgements, often on the basis of expressions of effeminate masculinities, continued to prevail in some of the young people’s lives. This is echoed by Fulcher (2017), as the young men in her study spoke of how gender non-conformity, or not presenting as masculine resulted in assertions relating to same-sex desire. As gender presentation was seen to directly relate to sexual preference, gender and sexuality were frequently conflated and collapsed together. This finding is echoed in my research and is discussed explicitly in Chapter 6.

Whilst this literature points to the endurance of homophobia and gender policing among young men, the next section critically explores literature under the rubric of “inclusive masculinities” theory, which posits that gender boundaries are blurring and that with this, homophobia and “homohysteria” are decreasing (Anderson, 2009: 7).

1.5 ‘Inclusive’ masculinities

Although writers discussed in the previous section maintain that formations of hetero-masculinity are predicated upon misogyny, sex talk amongst peers and homophobia, other scholars aligned with “inclusive masculinities” theory assert that due to recent social and cultural shifts, notably increased gay visibility, activism and acceptance (Dean, 2013), that men are now rejecting homophobia and also displaying feminised behaviours that were once stigmatised (Anderson, 2009). Contrary to previous men and masculinities literature, which points to men’s almost prolific use of homophobia as a means by which to affirm masculinity (Kimmel, 2012), Anderson’s (2009) inclusive masculinity theory asserts that men’s attitudes have shifted towards widespread acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality and have thus distanced from homophobia (Dean, 2013). The over-arching theme of inclusive masculinities theory as laid out in Anderson’s (2009) book *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*, is that decreased homophobia within society has given way to “softer, more expressive and tactile forms of masculinity” due to decreasing cultural “homohysteria”, or “the fear of being homosexualized” (Anderson, 2009:7). Central to inclusive masculinities theory is the idea that as homophobia has decreased within society, so too has homohysteria. Developing from ethnographic research with largely white, middle-class heterosexual men within sport and fraternity contexts in schools and colleges in both the US and the UK (O’Neill, 2015a), inclusive masculinities theory purports that young men now “reject homophobia; include gay peers in friendship networks; are more emotionally intimate with friends; are physically tactile with other men; recognize bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation; embrace activities and artefacts once coded feminine; and eschew violence and bullying” (Anderson and McCormack, 2018: 548).

Contrastingly, in contexts characterised by increased homohysteria, “orthodox” forms of masculinity flourish (Anderson, 2009). Within this context, men “attempt to approximate the hegemonic form of masculinity, largely by devaluing women and gay men” (Anderson, 2005: 338). For a society to be “homohysteria”, it is characterised by; 1) widespread awareness that there is a gay population within that society; 2) derision of gay men and feminine men alongside a wider conflation of gender and sexuality, or more specifically the marrying of effeminate

masculinities and same-sex desire; 3) and an assumed necessity amongst men that they must affirm their heterosexuality so as to circumvent assumptions that they are gay (Anderson & McCormack, 2018: 548). Hence, it is this environment which is said to produce fertile ground for the propagation of homophobia as a gender policing tool as “people fear the stigma of being socially perceived as gay” (Anderson & McCormack 2018: 548). To this end, Anderson and McCormack (2018) purport that men’s behaviour is only policed by homophobia in settings deemed “homohysteria”. It is within this context, Anderson and McCormack (2018) assert, that Connell’s (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity bears fruit; ways of being a ‘man’ are heavily restricted and narrowly defined; hierarchies of masculinity are emphasised; with there being one hegemonic model of masculinity that is culturally celebrated and revered.

Given Anderson’s (2009) assertion that Anglo-American societies are now supposedly typified by diminishing or diminished homohysteria, it is also from this basis, O’Neill (2015a) notes, that Anderson advances inclusive masculinities theory as the “empirical and theoretical successor to hegemonic masculinity” (2015a: 104). Inasmuch as Anderson (2009) links contemporary shifts in men’s gendered expression and practices with decreased homophobia, he claims that a reduction in homophobia and homohysteria inevitably and inescapably gives way to significant changes in masculinities. Here, Anderson and McCormack (2018) assert, stigma of effeminate masculinities reduces, once narrowly defined and value-laden masculine practices and expressions dilate, and non-normative masculinities are subject to less policing and regulation.

Although as O’Neill (2015a) asserts, this theoretical juncture is said to herald the next generation of masculinities scholarship, and despite its increasing recognition and proliferation within the field, inclusive masculinities theorisations have also received robust criticism. Perhaps most striking is that the majority of Anderson and McCormack’s empirical research remains confined to analysis of middle-class heterosexual men within the context of the US and the UK (O’Neill, 2015a). Yet the theory is often presented as reflecting young men as a population (de Boise, 2015). Moreover, McCormack and Anderson (2010: 856) have themselves omitted analyses of varying axes of oppression, stating in one publication, “we have not focused on class and race in this article because they do not explicitly impact on these participants the way sexuality and gender do.” Seeking to address this, Anderson & McCormack (2018) later acknowledged that earlier research lacked class analysis, but that this has since been developed by other proponents of inclusive masculinities theory (McCormack, 2014, Blanchard et al., 2017).

Inclusive masculinities theory has also been accused of undermining and playing down the central issue of gender and sexual politics (O’Neill, 2015a). As such, analysis comes to “focus on

the burdens of masculinity for men, without any concomitant analysis of men's interest in maintaining unequal gender relations" (O'Neill, 2015a: 107-108). What is more, it produces scholarship, which, though perhaps endeavouring to be critical, not only concretises and reifies masculinity as a 'real' thing, but by implication of this fails to elucidate analysis of men's (inequitable) *practices* (O'Neill, 2015a). With this in mind, O'Neill (2015a) asserts that Anderson utilises only a few, selective texts from the feminist canon. O'Neill (2015a) further problematises inclusive masculinities theory, asserting that it (re)produces and reflects specific logics of postfeminism by endorsing an over-zealous discourse of optimism in terms of both masculinities and social change, particularly with regard to narratives of decreasing homophobia (see Chapter 6).

Ward (2015) goes one step further, suggesting that although instances of explicit homophobia may appear to be decreasing amongst men, straight sex between men though often unnoticed or disregarded, is a constitutive element of male heterosexuality that is being utilised in new ways, predominantly within fraternities within the US. Hence Ward (2015) asserts that heterosexual white men's sex with other heterosexual men, though often framed as inauthentic or a joke, is a practice which *solidifies* brotherhood and manhood, as opposed to signalling a new era of more boundary-crossing, anti-homophobic masculinities. Silva (2017: 68), in their study of rural 'bud-sex', similarly found that heterosexual men who have same-sex sex, "framed their encounters as straight and normatively masculine." Certainly, we must be cautious when examining men's departures from normative hetero-masculinity, that we do not lose sight that in some cases, this may serve to shore up and maintain heterosexual masculine privilege.

In an attempt to refine and reflect upon inclusive masculinities theory and address critiques, Anderson and McCormack (2018) more recently have recognised that whilst they have addressed overt homophobia, they have not investigated the endurance and negative impact of covert homophobia and heteronormativity. As such, they assert that their notion of "inclusivity" only encompasses the inclusion of "gay men and same-sex desire more broadly" (Anderson and McCormack, 2018: 549). They call for further research here, stating that inclusive masculinities theory has "focused more on the benefits of eroding overt homophobia than the problems of continued heteronormativity" (Anderson & McCormack, 2018: 549). Indeed, this acknowledgement of the limitations in their research highlights significant issues with the inclusive masculinities theorisations. It also seems counterproductive to not include analysis of how heteronormativity and homophobia interact given that the two are somewhat dependent on each other and are certainly interwoven.

This section has explored scholarship on inclusive masculinities theory (Anderson, 2009), offering a critique of this body of work. It has drawn attention to limitations with regard to a lack of analysis of power, politics and enduring inequalities, or how these might manifest differently within contemporary times. Building on from this, the next section will explore research on “hybrid” masculinities (Demetriou, 2001, Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), which similarly analyses recent transformations of masculinities, but importantly, and in contrast to inclusive masculinities theory, situates this amidst a broader analysis of power and inequality.

1.6 ‘Hybrid’ masculinities

Scholarship on “hybrid” masculinities (Demetriou, 2001, Messner, 2007, Arxer, 2011, Bridges, 2014, Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, Messerschmidt, 2015) provides analysis of recent shifts in gender and sexuality, furthering understandings of how, and in what ways, power and inequality are reworked, rearticulated and reframed within contemporary times. Demetriou (2001), for example, critiques Connell’s (1995) binary theorisation of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities. Contrastingly, he contextualises hegemonic masculinity as a “hybrid bloc that unites various and diverse practices in order to construct the best possible strategy for the reproduction of patriarchy” (Demetriou, 2001: 348). For instance, a combination of black and white, or heterosexual and homosexual styles and practices may thus constitute a “hybrid masculine *bloc*” (Demetriou, 2001: 348, original emphasis). Yet it is through the amalgamation and appropriation of differing and oppositional elements and practices, rather than the refusal or marginalisation of these, that produces “new, historically novel forms of power relationships” (Demetriou, 2001: 348). Such processes are said to deceptively transfigure that “which appears counter-hegemonic and progressive into an instrument of backwardness and patriarchal reproduction” (Demetriou, 2001: 355). With this in mind, Demetriou (2001) asserts that men’s incorporation of traditionally feminine styles, for example, wearing earrings, should not be seen as indicative that patriarchy has died out.

Hybridised masculine practices are also employed through what Bridges and Pascoe (2014: 250) term “discursive distancing”, which involves men attempting to create space between themselves and hegemonic masculinity (see Chapter 4). However, “as men are distanced from hegemonic masculinity, they also (often more subtly) align themselves with it” (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014: 250). Indeed, Bridges (2010), in his study on men’s anti-violence groups found that whilst working to undermine inequality through walking in high-heels to highlight gender-based violence, members of the march also reinforced gender and sexual inequality in different ways. Hence, they mocked gender non-conformity where men were wearing ‘feminine’ clothes

and also made sexualised comments towards other members of the group who wear wearing dresses. Moreover, such comments were sutured with homophobia, whereby effeminacy and same-sex desire were jokingly mocked throughout the march. As Bridges (2010: 19, original emphasis) states, one member of the march “*was literally pretending to protect himself from sexual assault in jest during a march protesting sexual assault.*” Reinforced here are thus the very cultures and practices which underpin gender-based violence, which the march was supposedly seeking to challenge. Taken together, this is indicative of the ways in which practices that may appear to signify social change, may in fact reaffirm inequality in new ways (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014).

Arxer (2011) echoes this, asserting that although young men in his research on homosociality incorporated practices synonymous with non-hegemonic masculinities alongside more conventional masculinities, that this was not necessarily symbolic of social change. On the contrary, this served to reproduce gender inequality and men’s power over women. Hence, he found that group sharing, cooperation and emotionality was employed in a bar setting to bolster the sexual objectification of women, serving as a means by which to solidify bonds as men and machinate access to women’s bodies (Arxer, 2011). There are also questions as to whether women can so easily hybridise differing gendered elements. Messner (2007) writing in relation to Arnold Schwarzenegger and his run for California governor, for example, draws attention to the use of symbolic masculine imagery which amalgamates toughness and muscularity with compassion and vulnerability for political gain. Where such configurations are employed by women politicians, however, “Strength and compassion [...] appear to clash in ways that set her up for public crucifixion” (Messner, 2007: 461). Yet when embodied by men, this works to solidify existing power (Messner, 2007).

Scholars such as Bridges and Pascoe (2014) have also sought to capture the nuances of power and privilege present in changing contemporary masculinities. For Bridges and Pascoe (2014: 246), hybrid masculinities refers to “the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalised and subordinated masculinities, and – at times – femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities.” Signalling a departure from inclusive masculinities theory (Anderson, 2009), more recent proponents of hybrid masculinities remain critical of accounts which suggest that such transformations necessarily signal that masculinities are moving in a “new, more liberating direction” (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014: 243). Inasmuch as hybrid masculinities scholars assert that such stylistic borrowing is more often than not merely aesthetic (Bridges, 2014) and therefore representative of the flexibility of patriarchy as opposed to a ‘real’ shift towards increased gender equality (Bridges and Pascoe,

2014), this research contrasts with inclusive masculinities theories' assertions of progressive social change.

With a particular focus on the implications of such shifts in terms of gender equality and power then, scholars raise questions as to how prevalent and widespread "inclusive masculinities" actually are (de Boise, 2015), and if such 'borrowing' of feminine, gay and black styles signifies 'real' change (Bridges, 2014, Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Hence, proponents of hybrid masculinities argue that strategies that work to blur gender differences often serve to obscure or camouflage, rather than erode existing systems of power and inequality "through reinvigorating sexual boundaries and recuperating gender and sexual privilege in historically new ways" (Bridges, 2014: 78). As Messerschmidt (2015) argues, the appropriation of traditionally 'feminine' behaviours may blur gender difference, yet this does not mean that such performances undermine and destabilise gender dominance (see Chapter 6). Emphasised in this body of literature is critical analysis of how hybrid masculinities not only reproduce inequalities, but also subtly "obscure this process as it is happening" (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014: 247).

Similarly, whilst metrosexuality may signal that young men are employing practices traditionally associated with femininity, such as self-care and the use of cosmetics, Hall et al. (2012) argue that self-identified metrosexual men reframe their grooming practices to reemphasise their masculinity. Hence it is rearticulated in terms of health as opposed to a concern with appearance, as well as positioned as adding value to their heterosexual status in that it makes them more appealing to women so as to thwart any potential claims that they may be homosexual. Not only does this underscore the endurance of homophobia (Anderson, 2009) and heterosexual men's efforts to dismiss assumptions that they are feminine and thus homosexual, even where they are engaging in traditionally feminine practices such as wearing make-up, it also further underscores the centrality of heterosexuality in young men's affirmation of their masculine status as 'men'. Hall et al. (2012) also interestingly highlight how young men utilise make-up and 'contouring' in an effort to appear more masculine through accentuating cheek bones, jawlines and the nose. With this in mind, Hall et al. (2012: 223) assert that "conventional masculinities are not in decline, but are merely being reworked and repackaged in a more image-conscious consumer-oriented society."

Echoing Hall et al. (2012), Crawshaw's (2007) work on men's health magazines highlights attempts to reconcile and repackage practices historically coded as feminine, such as beautification, fashion and veganism to fit with traditional notions of manhood. Crawshaw (2007: 1616) argues that magazines such as *Men's Health* use "ironic strategies and intertextual

references to dominant hegemonic models in order to resolve the paradox of caring for health within more traditional 'heroic' masculinities." Crawshaw (2007) also importantly contextualises this in relation to neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility and corporeal governance, which advance new masculinities and ways of being men, of which health, self-care and well-being are central tenets, whilst simultaneously reworking these to fit with traditional notions of masculinity.

Whilst Crawshaw (2007) provides analysis of self-care in the context of men's magazines, Jordan (2018) considers how members of father's rights groups conceptualise parental care. Jordan (2018) complicates contemporary theories of 'caring' masculinities, offering a critical analysis of the constructions of care that frame their perspectives on fatherhood, as well as the gender politics that inform these types of groups (see Chapter 4). Here, Jordan (2018) argues that scholars must retain a critical eye on anti-feminist groups which espouse a discourse of care, given that this is often represented in masculinized ways which reassert constructions of masculinity embedded in providing and protecting, ultimately solidifying binary conceptualisations of gender. Given that caring masculinities are often performed and expressed in ways which are at odds with feminism and a feminist ethics of care, such forms of masculinity may problematically "*incorporate, rather than reject, domination*" (Jordan, 2018:17). Though Jordan does not explicitly draw upon or engage with theories of hybrid masculinities, her analysis of caring masculinities does, however, speak to and echo this area of scholarship; her study complicates and critiques contemporary masculinities which incorporate traditionally feminine styles and practices and may therefore appear to espouse and signify a move towards increased gender equality, whilst simultaneously reasserting gender inequality and the gender binary in other ways. Moreover, her study highlights the importance of acknowledging the contextual specificity of constructions and performances of masculinity as and when they come into being. Hence, Jordan (2018: 18) writes, "we should be wary of uncritically advocating a project of caring masculinity in isolation from the context within which it is articulated."

Scheibling (2018), in their study of 'dad bloggers' in North America, argue that this group are unlike father's rights groups inasmuch as they aim to "reconstruct masculinity in society", often in ways that can be regarded as "pro-feminist", whereas father's rights organisations aspire to "remasculinize society" (2018: 13). Scheibling's (2018) study emphasises and praises dad bloggers' rejection of hegemonic masculinity alongside their espousal of feminist beliefs, arguing that this signals a redefinition of masculinity which contributes to positively re-shaping notions of fatherhood. Though somewhat optimistic and lacking analysis of feminist men's appropriation

of power within traditionally feminised spaces, Scheibling (2018) does draw upon the work of Bridges and Pascoe (2014) to note that dad bloggers employ hybrid constructions of masculinities. In this, they are said to invoke notions of care and emotional literacy when discussing fatherhood, whilst simultaneously masculinizing caring practices with narratives of “strength, work, or men’s unique contribution to parenting” (Scheibling, 2018: 12). In this sense, where such constructions of masculinities may on the surface appear to champion more gender equity, they may also reinforce the gender order (Scheibling, 2018).

It is important to note that some masculinities scholarship which falls under the rubric of hybrid masculinities (Demetriou, 2001, Messner, 2007, Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) somewhat corresponds with feminist work on postfeminism, even though it may not explicitly state any associations with this area of research. Inasmuch as hybrid masculinities theory attempts to analyse how contemporary formations of masculinity, which may superficially signify change and the blurring of gender boundaries, may in fact serve to reinforce gender inequality in subtler ways, it does somewhat sing in chorus with postfeminist scholarship which troubles and complicates assertions that gender equality has been achieved. In a similar way, O’Neill (2015a) argues that the logics of postfeminism not only posit that feminism is obsolete and outdated, but in doing so, also works to produce a context in which unequal gendered power dynamics are “reworked and patriarchal gender relations are upheld in new and apparently novel forms” (2015a: 102).

Indeed, it is this political analysis, alongside hybrid masculinities focus upon power dynamics, which I believe importantly situates these fields of scholarship. As such, the following section explores postfeminist scholarship, examining the utilisation of this literature with regard to the field of critical men and masculinities studies.

1.7 Postfeminism

Although there is no consensus on a definition of the term ‘postfeminism’, it can be said to broadly refer to the ways in which the gains brought about by second wave feminism come to be undermined; whereby feminism is effectively “undone” and “cast into the shadows” (McRobbie, 2004: 255). Thus it “positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (McRobbie, 2004: 255). Thus there is a “double entanglement” (McRobbie, 2009: 12) of “both feminist and anti-feminist ideas” (Gill, 2017: 161). In this sense, feminism is presented as though it can be “noted, mourned and celebrated” (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 1). This is fortified by sociological theories

of individualisation, such as the work of Giddens and Beck given that in their writing eludes histories of struggle and enduring gendered power inequalities in their analyses of gender and social change (McRobbie, 2004). Hence, Beck and Giddens assert that the falling away of social structures within modern times has given way to increased choice and reflexivity as individuals are now responsible for their own biography, with little reference to how this process is indeed gendered (see Chapter 4). As McRobbie (2004: 261) stresses, they fail to acknowledge that choice is itself “a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices.”

McRobbie (2009: 57) contextualises postfeminism in what she terms “the new sexual contract” whereby, under the Blair years, the sexual double standard lifted and the gains, rights and opportunities brought about by employment and educational progress were said to bring about gender equality and freedom. McRobbie (2009) asserts, however, that this process was overwhelmingly anti-feminist in that it repudiated feminism and sexual politics, as this was in effect exchanged and omitted for the above rights and opportunities. Moreover, that feminism was ‘undone’ by neoliberal capitalism against the backdrop of political change in that women were encouraged to become consumers

Postfeminism is also understood as a sensibility whereby “notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the ‘wrong’ ‘choices’ (e.g. become too fat, too thin or have the audacity or bad judgement to grow older)” (Gill, 2008: 442). In contrast to being objectified, and inasmuch as the neoliberal discourse of personal choice is central, women become interpolated into ‘freely-choosing’ and autonomous sexual subjects who are ‘empowered’ through processes of bodily surveillance and discipline against the backdrop of postfeminist liberation. As Gill (2007: 153) writes, “the notion that all our bodily practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses, which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever.”

Gill (2017) has revisited the notion of postfeminism 10 years on from her initial analysis (Gill, 2007). She now asserts that postfeminism is no longer decipherable as a “distinctive sensibility; it has become the new normal, a taken-for-granted common sense that operates as a kind of gendered neo-liberalism – and it is all the more troubling for this” (Gill, 2017: 609). Not only this, but that neoliberalism more broadly, as characterised by notions of choice, individualism, competition and meritocracy has deepened and now permeates the affective dimensions of life impacting how we “live, think and feel about ourselves and each other” (Gill, 2017: 608).

Remarkably adept at survival in the face of a series of global economic crises, Gill (2017) draws upon Rottenberg's (2016) description of neoliberalism as "on steroids" within current times. More recently, Gill and Toms (2019) writing in specific reference to UK journalism assert that although we may currently be witnessing some form of "feminist zeitgeist", postfeminism "remains a live force, a dominant sensibility" inasmuch as anti-feminist discourse "remains striking" (2019: 112).

With regard to men specifically, García-Favaro and Gill (2016: 382) write that the logics of postfeminist can be characterised by a "reassertion of notions of 'natural' sexual difference and a reanimated sense of the 'battle of the sexes', boosted by evolutionary psychology; together with the identification of men as confused 'victims' or 'losers' of a new gender order, set within the context of an idea of 'political correctness gone mad'." Their study of online responses to a British feminist campaign to remove 'lad's mags' from store shelves found that within online comments, there was a broad theme of male victimization whereby (heterosexual) men were consistently posited as under attack (most vehemently from feminism). What is more, that there now exists a "gendered double standard" (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016: 384), whereby women are the winners and men the losers, as discussed further in Chapter 3. Other feminist scholars such as Evans and Riley (2018) have also noted a similar logic of "reverse sexism" with regard to online platforms, such as the website TubeCrush. Here, "unsolicited photographs of 'guy candy' taken on the London Underground (subway) are posted" (Evans and Riley, 2018: 996). In line with postfeminist logics, they assert that the arguments surrounding Tubecrush posit that men now are now the bearers of a "heightened-but-invisible sexism" (Evans and Riley 2018: 996). Moreover, that this narrative sits alongside contradicting views that frame society as post-sexist, whereby desire is openly articulated, and as such, both men and women should welcome uninvited compliments and advances like those seen on TubeCrush.

The logics of postfeminism, as put forward by García-Favaro and Gill (2016) and characterised by a re-awakening of 'natural' sex difference which is fortified by evolutionary psychology can also be noted within wider public discourse. This is exemplified by the considerable recent exposure and airtime given to Jordan Peterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto who is a prominent advocate of biological essentialism and fervent opponent of feminism, 'political correctness' and 'white privilege'. This can be noted in not only his academic publications, but also on his widely viewed Youtube channel and in his recent best-selling book titled, *The 12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018). More recently, and in chorus with wider postfeminist notions of threatened masculinity (and men) as discussed in the introductory chapter, Peterson (2019) has criticised the American Psychological Association's new guidelines

on working with men and boys that claims masculinity is harmful to men. Peterson (2019: 1) responded by calling this an “all-out assault on masculinity, as such — or, to put it even more bluntly, on men.” Writ large here is the amalgamation of notions of ‘natural’ sex difference propped up by popular-scientific discourses, alongside wider constructions of white, heterosexual men as being under attack.

O'Neill (2018), also notes how ‘pick-up artists’ in her ethnography of the ‘seduction industry’ articulated and validated their approaches to seducing women by utilising popular-scientific discourses closely aligned with evolutionary psychology, which posit ‘natural’ sex difference. Moreover, that such discourses are utilised to refute gender equality projects as these are subsequently positioned as though they repudiate nature itself. She asserts that even where gender equality projects are supported among men, the supposed biologically predetermined difference between men and women are positioned as though they “cannot be submitted to the ideological demands of gender equality” (O'Neill, 2018: 129). Indeed, Donaghue (2015) similarly argues that the dictum of evolutionary psychology produces accounts of the sex/gender binary, which embolden the supposed immutability of ‘natural’ sex difference so much so that it foregrounds postfeminist logics assuming that gendered differences are a product of biologically based ‘choice’. Due to this, political investigation or action is rendered obsolete (Donaghue, 2015).

O'Neill (2018) also draws attention to how sex differences between men and women are naturalised by seduction industry practitioners. She highlights how they maintain a “shared belief in the existence of a universal ‘truth’ of sexuality” (O'Neill, 2018: 114). In this, women’s actual opinions and experiences are subsumed by unsubstantiated claims pertaining to the ‘truth’ of female sexuality, said to have been discovered by the seduction industry, bolstered by evolutionary psychology. The rise in evolutionary psychology and its utilisation by heterosexual men is further underscored in the work of Van Valkenburgh (2018). He notes that within the context of the Red Pill, an online anti-feminist community space frequented by heterosexual men, that they are increasingly endeavouring to enhance their capacity to seduce women by utilising discourses underpinned by this strand of thought.

Van Valkenburgh (2018), echoing O'Neill (2018), goes on to assert that such discussions are often infused with neoliberal logics which apply economic principles to intimate relationships, noting the commodification of sexual relations alongside the ascription of value to gaining ‘skills’ with regard to men’s efforts to seduce women. Van Valkenburgh (2018) asserts that online discussions in the ‘manosphere’ suture together economics and evolutionary psychology,

resonating with O'Neill's (2018) assertion that neoliberalism has permeated intimate life. Van Valkenburgh (2018: 16) states that the manosphere "finds in neoliberal discourses a convenient framework for stripping intimacy from human relationships, such that commodified women no longer threaten any emotional boundaries established by hegemonic masculinity." With this in mind, both scholars call for understanding neoliberalism as a mechanism which not only structures economics, but also permeates intimate life.

Masculinities scholars have largely failed to engage with postfeminism as a point of analysis, even though this is regarded by feminist scholars "as the remaking of gender and sexual inequality in new and more insidious forms" (O'Neill, 2015a: 115). Except for a small number of exceptions located largely within cultural studies (see Agirre, 2012, Kolehmainen, 2012, Hamad, 2013, Clark, 2014, Gill, 2014, Zimdars, 2018) and interestingly, management studies (Rumens, 2017), the notable dearth of analysis of postfeminism in relation to the sociology of masculinities also worryingly sits alongside the scholarship of Anderson (2009) and inclusive masculinities theory. Such theorisations, O'Neill (2015a: 107) asserts, are actively infused with the logics of postfeminism given their propensity for "happy talk". She argues that this ultimately serves to empty out issues of sexual politics from academic analysis and thus depicts a concerning trend within the field. Indeed, this has impelled her to call into question the political direction of masculinities scholarship, motivating her to ask "*whiter critical masculinities studies?*" (O'Neill, 2015a: 115, original emphasis).

García-Favaro and Gill (2016) similarly highlight the lack of empirical research on postfeminist masculinities conducted within the social sciences, noting that most scholarship on this is confined to cultural analysis of popular media and texts (see Agirre, 2012, Kolehmainen, 2012, Hamad, 2013, Clark, 2014, Gill, 2014, Zimdars, 2018). As such, Clark (2014) provides analysis of US television programmes such as *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*. She notes how figures in *Mad Men* simultaneously express postfeminist sensibilities in that they advocate and support the gains of (second-wave) feminism by, for example, encouraging women colleagues to take up positions of seniority in the workplace, whilst also conveying grievances with feminism. Moreover, that within these shows, the past is presented as "nostalgic retreat for a wounded man" whereby they can "retreat from a postfeminist present defined by the gains of women and the established victories of second-wave feminism" (Clark, 2014: 460). Agirre (2012) similarly argues that the temporal effects of *Mad Men* are such that it legitimises the palpable sexism of the 1950s, whilst also positing this as having been victoriously quashed in the wake of second-wave feminism.

At a different turn, Kolehmainen (2012) demonstrates how postfeminist logics can be found in modern makeover shows. Here, masculinity is constituted through practices such as “consumption, ‘choosing freely’ and bodily management” (Kolehmainen, 2012: 194). She asserts that the blurring of gender boundaries and the employment of conventionally feminine practices by men within this context, may in fact serve to *rearrange* rather than ‘undo’ gender. As Kolehmainen (2012: 195) writes, “the commodities that could be classified as feminine may be used to reinforce the participants’ heterosexuality.” As such, this reasserts the gender binary against the postfeminist backdrop that equality has been achieved (Kolehmainen, 2012). Zimdars (2018) also provides media analysis of postfeminist masculinities, showing how in the television programs *Two and a Half Men* and *Entourage*, masculinity is represented as both “sensitive and casually sexist” producing a space in which men can “have it both ways” (2018: 278).

Within the context of contemporary US film, Hamad (2013) provides powerful analysis of postfeminist fatherhood. Here, emotional literacy, domestic competency and other traditionally feminine practices are incorporated into men’s fatherhood practices in ways which fail to destabilise or de-legitimise men’s power, working in some instances to actually reiterate gender equality and undermine women. For Hamad (2013: 2), postfeminist fatherhood is thus “dually articulated through a mutually constitutive binary of strong-sensitive, patriarchal-postfeminist masculinity, with a correspondingly circuitous relationship to feminism.” In this sense, postfeminist fatherhood is configured in a way which seemingly overlaps and competes at the same time, reframing parenting gender norms in such a way as to allow men to acquire status in a previously feminised domain, without relinquishing masculine privilege (Hamad, 2013). Hence they are able to reap the rewards of both worlds, whilst women are contrastingly portrayed in ways which subtly reiterate old gendered tropes.

Hamad (2013) utilises the docu-film *March of the Penguins* to illustrate the anthropomorphic narrative of postfeminist fatherhood. Here, given that the male penguin nurtures the penguin egg whilst the mother penguin goes to hunt for food, fatherhood is narrated in such a way that it is idealised; the power of the father-son bond solidified. Contrastingly, the mother penguin is portrayed so as to deploy old tropes of female hysteria, particularly where a chick dies and the mother attempts to steal another penguin’s egg. As Hamad (2013: 3) states, “grieving mothers are thus pathologized as deranged baby snatchers, in contrast to the stoic and steadfast fathers.” Hence although the roles are reversed so to speak, men still come out on top. Similarly in *Finding Nemo*, the depiction of the widowed, lone male parent idealises fatherhood through

a mode of emotional melancholy, marginalising motherhood “through affective appeals to victim-status” (Hamad, 2013: 3).

In spite of the few media-related texts to explore postfeminist masculinities, there is a distinct lack of empirical sociological research relating to this area. Hence, at the time of writing this thesis, O’Neill’s (2018) work on the seduction industry represents the most prominent piece of empirical sociological research on postfeminism and masculinities, with there being a significant absence of scholarship on this topic. Against this back drop, this thesis seeks to address this gap in research throughout, whilst Chapter 3 provides more in-depth analysis of the relationship between postfeminism and men’s subjectivities, practices and wider understandings of gender relations and politics.

1.8 Conclusion

To summarise, this chapter has provided an analysis of feminist theory and critical men and masculinities literature in relation to gender, sexuality and, hetero-masculinity. Whilst emphasising the important contribution of Connell’s (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinities, it has drawn attention to critiques of Connell’s theorisation, as well as how the term is open to varying interpretation and use. Furthermore, that some critical men and masculinities scholarship has the tendency to reproduce a sex/gender dualism by assuming an underlying correspondence between sex and gender (Petersen, 2003, Beasley, 2005, Nayak and Kehily, 2013, Waling, 2019). With this in mind, focus was given to feminist theorisations and queer theory which trouble the sex/gender binary (Butler, 1990, Halberstam, 1998, Fausto-Sterling, 2000, Owusu, 2018). As such, the importance of Butler’s (1990) theorisation of gender performativity and the “heterosexual matrix” was emphasised, which I take forward in the empirical chapters of the thesis. The chapter has also given focus to scholarship on hetero-masculinity, which posits that heterosexuality remains central to young men’s masculine identity formation, particularly in the context of the male peer group (Flood, 2008), whereby heterosexuality is performed through sexual conquest and sex talk amongst peers (Richardson, 2010). Moreover, it has drawn attention to scholarship which demonstrates young men’s dis-identification with femininity and same-sex desire and also how these are conflated (Fulcher, 2017). With this in mind, it highlighted how homophobia continues to operate a key regulating apparatus of gender and sexuality (Pascoe, 2007, Fulcher, 2017, Bragg et al., 2018), which is discussed at more length in Chapter 6.

Following on from this, the chapter critically discussed inclusive masculinities theory (Anderson, 2009), which posits a lessening of homophobia, homophobia and a subsequent softening of

masculinities, in contrast to the aforementioned studies on hetero-masculinity. Inasmuch as inclusive masculinities theory not only reflects postfeminist logics of social change (O'Neill, 2015a), but also lacks analysis of gendered relations of power, the chapter highlighted the significance of scholarship on hybrid masculinities (Demetriou, 2001, Messner, 2007, Arxer, 2011, Bridges, 2014, Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, Messerschmidt, 2015), which provides a more nuanced analysis of power and inequalities. Finally, this chapter discussed feminist theorisations of postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004, Gill, 2007), said to refer to the ways in which feminism is historicised in that it is simultaneously acknowledged, presented as having been achieved and disavowed (Tasker and Negra, 2007). Moreover, that notions of 'natural' sex difference coalesce with perceived gender equality and feminist gain (O'Neill, 2018). It has also discussed how notions of masculinity under threat and feminist tyranny are regarded as key postfeminist motifs (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). Noting a significant absence empirical sociological research on postfeminist masculinity, the following empirical chapters of this thesis contribute to this gap, with more in depth discussion of this in Chapter 3.

2. Methodology

This chapter begins by detailing the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis, providing an overview of feminist post-structuralism. It then discusses the research design and strategy of the thesis, noting the sampling and recruitment methods utilised. After this, focus is given to the research methods used, notably focus groups and one-to-one interviews and why these methods were beneficial to this study. It then explores the importance of communication style for both of these methods before going on to discuss the how the data produced was analysed. Lastly, the chapter explores the ethical considerations of this project, giving particular focus to issues of power, reflexivity and researcher identity, as well as issues arising from researching sensitive topics with young people.

The primary research question informing this research seeks to explore how young men understand and experience everyday heterosexuality on both subjective and relational levels. A series of sub-questions also inform this thesis. They are as follows:

1. How do young men understand and experience gender and sexual norms?
2. To what extent, and how, do young men disrupt gender and sexual norms?
3. What do shifts in understandings and experiences of masculinity and heterosexuality amongst young men mean for wider gender and sexual equality and power relations?

2.1 Theoretical framework

This project is underpinned by a feminist post-structural theoretical framework. It seeks to explore how subjects are positioned and constituted by competing and often contradictory discourses, and how this gives way to certain subject positions and not others (Berggren, 2014). This allows for analysis of the complexities at play in young men's understandings of themselves via discursive categories such as masculinity and heterosexuality, which can be said to "establish the conditions of possibility for the emergence of different forms of subjectivity" (Berggren, 2014: 237). Similar to the way in which individuals do not have a pre-discursive 'essence', the categories 'man' or 'heterosexual' equally do not represent a pre-discursive reality as some may assume (Berggren, 2014). As such, subjects do not exist prior to or independently of discourse, but rather are said to be discursively positioned (Berggren, 2014). From such a perspective, this allows us to think through and challenge the presumed 'naturalness' of notions of masculinity and heterosexuality and how certain ways of 'being' come about in relation to these discourses. With this in mind, post-structuralism seeks to investigate how discursive categories are constructed, sustained, and importantly, disrupted. Hence, consideration is given to the

“practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 2002: 54). What is more, it is thought that such categories of ‘man’ or ‘heterosexual’ can be rejected, undone and reworked in rejection of the expectations of normative hetero-masculinity. As subjects are constituted through discourses which are always “partial, contested and shifting... with rival discourses struggling to ‘fixate’ meaning in an unambiguous way” (Berggren, 2014: 237-238), subjectivity is perpetually at risk of re-articulation. It is against this backdrop that this thesis aims to explore young men’s understandings of gender and sexuality, but also the processes by which certain discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality are either legitimised or undermined. In this sense, I endeavour to explore issues of “power and how it operates through discourse and subjectivity” (Strega, 2005: 200).

2.2 Research design

The primary aim of this research is to explore how young men understand and experience everyday masculinity and heterosexuality on subjective and relational levels in the contemporary UK. It aims to investigate how young men understand and experience gender and sexuality within contemporary society and to what extent, and how, young men resist or disrupt dominant discourses of hetero-masculinity. Focus is also given to what this means for wider gender relations and power.

2.3 Sample

This thesis draws upon empirical data from a qualitative study of twenty-five predominantly white young men aged 18-24, who self-identify as heterosexual, using face-to-face methods including focus groups and one-to-one interviews to explore the research questions. Three focus groups were conducted with young men, comprising between two to five participants, all of whom were friends. These lasted between approximately 80 to 110 minutes in length. Fifteen one-to-one semi-structured interviews were also undertaken, lasting between 30 to 80 minutes in length. Data regarding the research participants is detailed in the table below:

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Relationship status	Occupation	Education
Adam	23	White British	Single	Unemployed	Degree
Alex	18	White British	Relationship	Student	At sixth form
Andy	24	White British	Single	Copywriter	Degree
Ben	24	White British	Single	Teacher	Degree
Bill	20	White British	Single	Student	At university

Carl	18	White British	Single	Apprentice	---
Dan	23	White British	Single	Musician	BTEC
Dave	23	White British	Single	Student	At university
Dom	21	White British	Single	Student	At university
Jack	23	White British	Single	Barista	GCSE
Jacob	18	White British	Single	Student	At sixth form
Jim	19	White British	Relationship	Student/Carer	At university
Justin	22	White British	Single	Unemployed	College
Kai	21	White British	Relationship	Student	At university
Ken	22	White British	Single	Student	Studying PhD
Leon	20	White British	Single	Bike courier	--
Mat	18	White British	Single	Student music teacher	At sixth form
Mike	24	White British	Single	Teaching assistant	Degree
Pat	24	White British	Single	Unemployed	College
Rob	24	White British	Relationship	Temporary administrator	Degree
Ryan	21	White British	Single	Engineer	--
Sahib	18	British-Bangladeshi	Single	Student	At sixth form
Sean	20	White British	Single	Student	At university
Tim	18	White British	Relationship	Student	At sixth form
Tom	22	White British	Relationship	Student & musician	At university

2.4 Recruitment

Using purposive sampling (Mason, 2002), twenty-five young men were recruited via the use of both online platforms and more traditional methods of recruitment, such as posters located in student unions, colleges, community centres and local businesses frequented by young people. I initially set out using printed posters primarily, yet found this to be a less successful method of recruitment than I had first envisaged. Given young people's increasing use of online social media, I moved my methods of recruitment online. Participants were recruited online via a

number of social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter, as well as through a website specific to the research project. A dedicated Facebook page, Twitter account and website were thus created, all of which were entitled “Everyday Masculinities”. Facebook proved to be a particularly fruitful method of recruitment, with the dedicated page accruing over 400 followers within a few weeks. On this platform, I shared digital versions of the two recruitment posters I had distributed in person around Leeds and the surrounding areas. To maximise the reach of the project I shared the page to Facebook groups frequented by young people and also utilised Facebook’s targeted advertising tool, promoting the “Everyday Masculinities” page and recruitment poster amongst young men in the North of England who were aged between the ages of 18-24. At the time of writing this, the Facebook page has nearly 500 followers, most of whom fit the sampling demographic of 18-24 year old men.

Potential participants were encouraged via recruitment posters to contact me by either phone, email, Twitter or the Facebook page if they were interested in participating in the research, or if they wished to find out more study information. They were also able to view the participant information sheet and find out more about the research from the dedicated website, which was linked to the Facebook page. I found that the preferred method of contact for participants was Facebook Messenger, and due to this, I used this form of communication to share information, participant information sheets and informed consent forms, as well as organise research participation and interview times and locations. I initially endeavoured to move participants that had contacted me on Facebook messenger to my university email as this felt more ‘professional’. However, I quickly found that participants preferred to use social media messaging systems and therefore endeavoured to accommodate this preference. On contacting me to express interest, I then signposted participants to the dedicated website, which acted as both an initial recruitment tool as well as an online participation information sheet. I felt this gave participants an extra, initial opportunity to find out more about the research before I sent along Word copies of the participant information sheets and informed consent forms.

Participants were given the option to take part in either an individual one-to-one interview or a focus group with friends. This was stated on both recruitment posters and participants were also asked their preference upon contacting me to express initial interest. Where participants wanted to take part in a focus group, they were asked to invite friends who may be interested in attending. These participants were then asked to contact me, so as to ensure they genuinely wanted to take part of their own accord and to prevent any pressure to participate from my part, or were I to have received a list of names and contact details from the participant who had initially made contact. With regard to other friends then, only upon contacting me would I then

send along information about the research in the same manner as recruiting for the aforementioned interviews. All participants were reimbursed £10 for their time and travel costs. I decided that this amount was in line with current travel costs, and therefore did not coerce or compel participants to take part for financial gain.

2.5 Research Methods

2.5.1 Focus groups

Focus groups were chosen as they enabled initial exploration of the experiential and subjective aspects of hetero-masculinity (Frith, 2000), acting as a space where the young men's own subjective definitions, meanings and experiences of masculinity and heterosexuality could be foregrounded (Barter and Renold, 2000). Given that focus groups are often used in order to achieve a depth of understanding around a particular issue or topic, as opposed to producing generalizable findings that are applicable to a wider population, snowballing was used as a sampling method by which friendship groups were actively welcomed and encouraged (Stewart and Williams, 2005). Although some commentators suggest that it is more appropriate to draw from a sample of strangers as opposed to a group of friends, because "the level of things taken for granted, which remain implicit, tend to be higher in the latter" (Flick, 2009: 203), this sampling strategy was advantageous given that discussion focused on topics which some may deem sensitive. Utilising friendships groups thus enabled a relaxed and comfortable environment for the young men. Focus groups thus provided a supportive and permissive space amongst peers, facilitating discussion around sensitive topics in a non-threatening environment (Punch, 2002). Hence the young men were able, within this environment, to gain confidence from one another, answering questions as, when and if they felt comfortable (Punch, 2002).

Though it was beneficial to utilise friendship groups, participants were also informed that there were limits to confidentiality due to other participants being present within focus groups. As such, I made it clear at the beginning of the focus group that although I would endeavour to ensure participant confidentiality, there were limitations here due to the scale of the research and that I could not guarantee that "confidences shared in the group" would necessarily be respected by other group members (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 17). This is particularly the case where participants are from the same social network and may therefore be more prone to 'gossip' (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999). Moreover, as Barbour and Kitzinger (1999: 17) assert, "vicarious disclosure" may occur, whereby one participant may disclose information about another member of the group that they did not wish to be revealed. In an attempt to tackle such ethical issues, I set out ground rules at the beginning of each focus group (Barbour and

Kitzinger, 1999). These were that all members of the group should be respectful of each other and of each other's opinions, even where there may not necessarily be agreement. Also, that it would be beneficial if participants were sensitive with regard to disclosing discussions from the focus group to anyone not present. With this in mind, though I expressed that I could not guarantee this, I stated that to help protect others' privacy, participants should endeavour to not discuss details of the focus group with anyone outside the group. Notwithstanding these limitations to confidentiality, focus group discussions produced rich data and were a particularly advantageous research method for this research.

Accordingly, using focus groups comprised of existing friendship groups enabled exploration of how masculinity and heterosexuality are negotiated within the context of the male peer group - a key theme cited in various literature (Kehily, 2001b, Holland et al., 2004, Allen, 2005a, Allen, 2007), as discussed in Chapter 1. Hence, utilising friendship groups provided fertile ground for exploration of how masculinity and heterosexuality unfold and 'play out' within the research setting itself where young men are amongst male peers. What is more, by using existing friendship groups within focus groups, we are "able to tap into *fragments* of interactions which approximate [...] 'naturally occurring' data" (Kitzinger, 1994: 106, original emphasis). Additionally, given that participants are already known to each other, they were able to relate the discussion to real life experiences in their shared everyday lives thus enriching the data (Kitzinger, 1994). This also enabled participants to openly challenge one another on what "they are *professing* to believe and how they actually behaved" (Kitzinger, 1994: 105, original emphasis). As such, it foregrounded the space as a site for collective remembering.

With this in mind, this method created a conducive environment for group interaction amongst the young men, allowing for a variety of opinions and experiences to be explored (Morgan and Krueger, 1993). Given that focus groups can be said to somewhat emulate and produce interaction analogous to everyday life, this method foregrounded the investigation of collective meaning and group dynamics as well as how viewpoints are produced, articulated and exchanged within the context of a group exchange (Flick, 2009). It generated rich data on the ways in which discourses are publically produced through collective interaction (Allen, 2011). What is more, focus groups are advantageous when exploring how "masculinities are produced through struggle and interaction" (Allen et al., 2015: 4). The ways in which participants question one another, ridicule or challenge a comment thus provides an opportunity to explore how norms are sanctioned or policed within a group context amongst men (Allen, 2011). In this sense, it allowed for analysis of how power plays out in the group context in relation to discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality.

Given that there is little empirical research on how young men understand and experience everyday heterosexuality on subjective and relational levels, focus groups also proved useful in that the relatively unstructured nature of this method allowed for the emergence of unforeseen topics, which I had not previously considered (Frith, 2000). Focus groups provided a conducive space in which the young people were able to “introduce their own themes and concerns” (Espin, 1995: 228), therefore unearthing areas of interest that I may not have thought to ask in one-to-one interviews. With this in mind, the focus group facilitated the discussion of issues which were of importance to the young people, enabling me to draw out new and emerging themes, returning to them in more depth during the one-to-one interviews.

The focus groups also facilitated what Barbour and Kitzinger (1999: 18) term a “new politics of knowledge” through inspiring “the sociological imagination in both researchers and participants.” Hence, the focus groups seemed to create a space in which participants not only talked through and reflected upon their understandings and experiences of masculinity and heterosexuality, but also saw participants challenge their own and each other’s views and opinions relating to gender and sexuality, often in ways which promoted more gender equitable perspectives. However, it seems important to note that it appeared as though this was the first time many of the participants had spoken about gender, relationships and sexuality in so much depth.

Throughout the focus groups, my role was one of guidance, facilitating discussion by recommending topics of discussion and broad questions, interjecting and asking for additional information only when this was necessary or when the discussion was going off topic. I often took a “step back” utilising “medium-level moderation” (Cronin, 2001: 167) as a means by which to enable the discussion to flow and develop organically amongst the young men.

2.5.2 One-to-one interviews

Fifteen young men also took part in one-to-one semi-structured interviews. One-to-one interviews with the young men aimed to provide a more in-depth understanding of how the young men understand and experience everyday masculine and heterosexual subjectivities and relationalities. These interviews were somewhat informed by unforeseen themes that arose from the focus groups, but were also similar to the initial interview guide of the focus groups. Owing to these interviews taking place after the focus groups had been conducted, it allowed for themes that had emerged during focus groups to be unpicked further in depth in these one-to-one interviews.

Given that some young men may not have felt as comfortable elucidating their experiences and viewpoints amongst male peers, one-to-one interviews proved beneficial for these young men and thus provided a space in which they could voice their opinions without fear of judgement from other men. As highlighted in Chapter 1, young men are often policed within the male peer group, and may thus fear ridicule for expressing their opinions within this context where these are non-concomitant with 'successful' hetero-masculinity. Hence, one-to-one interviews offered an opportunity for the young men to voice their opinions in a context different to that where the pressures to engage in identity work amongst other men may be higher. Nonetheless, I was also aware that the young men could potentially undertake a different kind of identity work given that I am a woman researcher, which will be discussed later on in this chapter (Allen, 2005a, Sallee and Harris, 2011).

The structure of the interviews with the young men were semi-structured and flexible, allowing for the emergence of topics and issues to be spontaneously raised by interviewees. (Legard et al., 2003). Major themes were kept the same for all of the interviews, but I freely altered the sequence in which these were raised and also changed my phrasing where appropriate (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). Where I felt a particular topic or question I discussed had particular importance to the interviewee, I provided space for the participant to delve deeper here, with the possibility of omitting or leaving out other questions which I had planned to ask (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). I also endeavoured to personalise themes and topics by asking about personal experiences, being cautious not to ask questions which were too abstract (Fielding and Thomas, 2008).

2.5.3 Communication style

I used accessible, colloquial and idiomatic language throughout the research process to not only ensure understanding by participants, but also to create a relaxed feel to interviews in order to elicit frank and free-flowing discussion. For both the focus groups and the one-to-one semi-structured interviews, in order to make participants feel comfortable and at ease I presented myself as laidback and "unself-conscious" (Fielding and Thomas, 2008: 249). I felt that it was important at the beginning of each interview to 'set the scene' and feel of the interview by explicitly stating that it was a relaxed discussion rather than an 'interview' per se, that there were no right or wrong 'answers' and that I was interested in their viewpoints, ideas and experiences. The importance of early clarification of the interviews' focus in order to foster open discussion has been noted by scholars (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). Questions were open-

ended, which as Fielding and Thomas (2008: 269) write, is advantageous in terms of gaining “spontaneous information rather than rehearsed positions.”

Fielding and Thomas (2008) also note that participants may be prone to what they term “rationalisation”, whereby reflexive and emotional aspects relating to a topic are withheld from answers, and where interviewees only put forward logical motives for their actions. With this in mind, I often asked how certain phenomena or experiences made participants ‘feel’, more so within the context of the one-to-one interviews given that participants are more likely to reveal feelings and more personal insights here due to the pressures associated with peer groups and due to the more confidential nature of this method (Michell, 1999). This proved beneficial for eliciting deeper insights to the topics we were discussing and often gave way to respondents articulating feelings at odds with ‘successful’ masculinity such as shame, inadequacy and failure, which they would have been less reticent to reveal had I not directly asked this question.

I used probing and prompting frequently throughout the interviews and focus groups and also asked for examples relating to initial responses. This produced rich data by enabling participants to reflexively articulate their own experiences in relation to wider phenomena such as gender and sexuality. On occasion, I would also ask participants to specifically remember key moments in their lives. For example, in order to gain insight into the temporal aspects of masculinity, I asked the young men if they could think of or “remember a time or moment when they felt like a man and not a boy?” This produced interesting responses which enabled me to explore how age and gender intersects for young men and also gendered aspects of youth transition. I would also ‘sit with’ the silence sometimes present after answering an initial question, a skill which became easier over the course of the interviews.

Both the focus groups and interviews were regarded as guided ‘conversations’, whereby the knowledge produced was created and negotiated as opposed to ‘given’ (Legard et al., 2003). In this sense, both the focus groups and interviews were regarded as social processes, whereby both the participants and myself were involved in the production of knowledge, albeit in differing ways (Gaskell, 2000). Using what Kvale (1996: 4) terms the “traveller metaphor”, I regarded myself and my role as interviewer as a “traveller who journeys with the interviewee” (Legard et al., 2003: 139).

All interviews were closed with a final question, asking participants “what an ideal world would look like for a man,” so that the session finished on an upbeat and positive note. I also asked participants their thoughts on the interview so as to inform good research practice in the future and to garner what had worked well and what had not for participants. I also thanked

participants for their time and for their invaluable insights so as to leave interviewees with a feeling of achievement upon closing the interview (Arksey and Knight, 1999).

2.6 Data Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim so as ensure that “all possible analytical uses are allowed for” (Fielding and Thomas, 2008: 257). Though verbatim transcription is often thought of as time-consuming, it guaranteed that no data was lost or omitted that may have become significant later on (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). It also meant that I was able to listen through each interview slowly, hearing phrases and sentences a number of times, as well as *how* participants articulated and voiced their opinions in relation to different topics. This enabled me to listen for participant hesitation, pauses and also, respondent enthusiasm and interest relating to certain themes, thus producing rich data from this starting point of analysis. It also meant that unexpected themes were uncovered and that my analysis was solely guided from the interview audio recordings from this early stage. In this sense, it enabled me to immerse myself in the interview data. I also took additional notes whilst transcribing the data and marked points of interest with time stamps within transcription documents, which informed my subsequent data analysis. Certainly, this initial in-depth analysis would have been lost had I utilised transcribing software. With regard to participants’ grammar and language, I chose not to ‘neaten’ this, feeling that this could potentially take away and diffuse meaning from participants’ responses (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). I also wanted to avoid suffusing the raw data with my own linguistic assumptions and was wary of potentially ‘correcting’ the way the young people spoke or articulated their thoughts. I checked through each recording and subsequent transcription document after I had completed this to ensure that I had accurately transcribed the audio recordings (Fielding and Thomas, 2008).

The names and identities of participants were changed to ensure anonymity with regard to any data gathered and was thus in line with the Data Protection Act (1998). The names and identities of participants were anonymised within a 24 hour timescale of data collection and all data and anonymised transcripts were stored on the Leeds University M: Drive, which is encrypted and password-protected.

I used thematic analysis and discourse analysis in order to make sense of and analyse the data produced throughout my fieldwork. I initially analysed each transcript as a whole, writing down any initial thoughts as well as any over-arching themes that came to mind. I would then go back and read through the transcript line by line, taking note of themes as and when they arose. After this, I noted the main themes that had arisen from that segment at the bottom of the page and

then brought these together at the end of the transcript (Bryman, 2016). Following this initial analysis, I began to amalgamate data from different transcripts which represented and 'spoke to' these key themes (Bryman, 2016). Here, I would look for similarities and differences, exploring how participants articulated responses in relation to these themes, looking at the ways in which the data either sang in chorus or discord (Bryman, 2016). I also considered what was missing from the data in terms of what participants had omitted or excluded from their responses (Bryman, 2016).

After this initial thematic coding, I then moved on to more in-depth analysis using discourse analysis. By using discourse analysis, this project did not aim to uncover or reveal over-arching 'truths' and was, therefore, unconcerned with the truth value of participants responses (Willig, 2014). Rather, I aimed to "analyse the constitution of the subject in its historical and social context" (Jager and Maier, 2009: 38). Focus was thus given to processes of subjectification, or rather, how the discourses available to young men frames and positions their possibilities of subjectivity. In other words, how young men seek to fashion themselves in relation to contemporary discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008). Utilising discourse analysis also enabled exploration of how different discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality produce different ways of seeing and acting that either legitimise or challenge power relations (Wooffitt, 2008). As Zitz et al. (2014: 220) state, "discourses are situated within particular social, historical or cultural conditions and ideologies and make available subject positions, which allow individuals' ways of being, feeling and seeing."

Given this, I gave particular attention to the regulatory frame of discourses of 'successful' masculinity and heterosexuality and explored how the young men's constructions of these were either achieved or undermined (Silverman, 2014). With this in mind, I sought to explore the relationship between categories such as 'normal' and 'abnormal' and of the ways in which difference is constructed and regulated (Shildrick, 2009). I also investigated how dominant discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality came to be seen as 'truths' or 'norms', and how these were undermined or resisted through digressive strategies and discourses, whereby the young men sought to subvert or challenge gender and sexual norms or grand narratives of truth (Zitz et al., 2014). Nonetheless, I maintained a cautious and observant eye on how potentially subversive acts could indeed reaffirm and re-entrench existing power dynamics and privilege (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014).

2.7 Limitations

A key limitation to this research is that it draws upon data from a relatively small sample. Due to the limited time constraints of a project this size, which has restricted the amount of time able to collect and analyse data, it does not attempt to make generalizable claims about young men as a population. As such, the findings of this thesis cannot be used to make sweeping generalisations about *all* men, or about masculinities more generally. On the contrary, it provides an in-depth exploration of the young men's lives whom I interviewed. Moreover, given that this thesis seeks to explore processes of power and the ways in which certain discourses of gender and sexuality are either legitimised or undermined, the importance of generalisability comes to have less significance.

Another major concern relating to this thesis is the lack of sample diversity given that all but one participant identified their ethnicity as white British. This was by no means deliberate, and on coming to my attention towards the latter stages of data collection, I made attempts to recruit Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic participants so as to have a more racially and ethnically diverse sample. Given the late stages at which I endeavoured to do this, and given the time constraints with regard to collecting data, I was largely unsuccessful here. That I had only recognised the lack of sample diversity at such a late stage in data collection prompted me to acknowledge my own white privilege and how this had negatively impacted my recruitment strategies. On reflection, I noted that the posters I disseminated only portrayed men who were white, and thus did not welcome participants from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. Indeed, as McIntosh (1993: 111) argues, oppression takes "both active forms that we can see and embedded forms that members of the dominant group are taught not to see." As I note in the concluding chapter of this thesis, research which looks more specifically at the intersections of masculinities and race and ethnicity within the context of postfeminism is an important area of potential further study.

My identity as a woman researching men may have also contributed to limitations with regard to this research inasmuch as I may not have been partial to certain knowledges which may have been produced or elicited if I were of the same gender as participants. Indeed, scholars have noted how young men in qualitative research often enact and display more dominant models of masculinity when interviewed by other men (Sallee and Harris, 2011). However, as I note further in this chapter, my positionality as an outsider, may have also conversely been beneficial in the production of different types of data. My positionality as a woman researching men, who are a socially dominant category, has also raised some interesting political and epistemological

questions relating to giving consideration to men's individual feelings of powerlessness, without disconnecting this from men's power as a dominant category. As such, I believe my positionality may be regarded as a limitation, but also potentially a methodological strength.

A further potential limitation to this research is that I did not initially set out to analyse men and masculinities in relation to politics and postfeminism. As such, this point of analysis was only able to inform part of this research as the data corresponding to this arose organically during interviews. However, this also highlights the advantages of conducting research which encourages new and emerging ideas and topics amongst participants, such as focus groups, that are then able to inform more in-depth discussion in one-to-one interviews. Hence, participants were not asked explicitly about gender politics, feminism or gender equality, rather this theme developed through discussions around masculinity and heterosexuality. With this in mind, it was an important, naturally occurring theme for these young men.

A final limitation I wish to highlight is that participants were self-selecting. Thus participants may have been more reflexively adept in relation to contemporary debates around masculinity and heterosexuality, as indicated by their interest in this research. Whilst this thesis does not attempt to make generalizable claims, this concern does, however, highlight that these young men may have been particularly aware of constructions of gender and sexuality given their desire to participate. As such, this may have produced certain types of data, which indicates reflexivity and awareness that may not be representative of other men.

2.8 Ethics

2.8.1 Informed consent

This project received ethical approval from the ESSL, Environment and LUBS (AREA) Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds (reference AREA 16-018). Ethics were of central importance throughout the entirety of this project, and with this in mind, I regarded research ethics as a continual and ongoing process warranting consideration, thought and reflection at every stage of the research (Edwards and Mauthner, 2012). In light of this, I viewed informed consent not as something to be 'gained' and secured upon the signature of a one-off form, but rather saw this as a practice which necessitated constant and ongoing negotiation (Miller and Bell, 2012). As a starting point, however, I ensured that participants were fully informed about the research project before they agreed to take part.

As has been previously mentioned, participants were initially signposted to a dedicated website for the project which allowed them to view an online participant information sheet upon

expressing interest. Once participants had read this, I then sent Word copies of the participant information sheet and informed consent form. These detailed the project aims and the nature of the research, what the research involved in terms of their participation and time, as well as participants' rights regarding anonymity and confidentiality. Here, I noted that confidentiality could only be guaranteed where participants did not disclose physical, mental or sexual harm were they under the age of 18 and also that this could not be wholly guaranteed with regard to focus groups as I have previously mentioned. The informed consent form also included information about data recording and storage, and that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time. These were written in clear terms which were accessible and participants were encouraged to contact me if they had any questions through either phone, email or Facebook messenger. After receiving these forms, potential interviewees were then given a two week period to decide on their participation to ensure that they had had adequate time to consider taking part. At the beginning of interviews, the forms were also verbally read by myself, allowing for questions from participants and further explanation of any issues that were not clear or where participants had poor reading skills. To ensure full understanding, checks and repetition were utilised throughout. Paper documents, such as informed consent forms were transported only where absolutely necessary and were otherwise locked in a file in a secure office at the University of Leeds to ensure participant anonymity.

2.8.2 Considering 'vulnerability'

Given the possible sensitive nature of topics, notably gender and sexuality, and because young people generally lack power, status and voice, I felt there was an added duty of care to carry out ethical research imbued with feminist values and ethics. However, I was mindful that despite young people's classification as 'vulnerable', particularly within the context of ethics committees, that this did not mean that they were not active social agents (Allen, 2009). Throughout the research then, the young men were considered competent social actors, who were worthy of study in their own right (Christensen and James, 2008, James et al., 1998, James and Prout, 2015). Hence they were regarded as "expert witnesses to their own lives and critical contributors to the research" (Elley, 2013: 8). Notwithstanding this, there is a noteworthy tension between research ethic processes, which are often adult-centric and subsequently query young people's capacity and capability to take part in research, and "young people's right to participate in research as a central principle in youth research" (Lohmeyer, 2019: 5).

Downes et al. (2014), for example, assert that it is paramount to view participants deemed 'vulnerable', in their case sexual violence victim-survivors, as active agents at all stages of

research. They offer a compelling critique of ‘vulnerability’ narratives with regard to qualitative research ethical review processes with victim-survivors specifically, arguing that they not only undermine agency, resilience and historic adeptness at managing risk, but also situate victim-survivors as lacking in capacity to make decisions about their participation in research. They also underscore that research with so-called ‘vulnerable’ groups on sensitive topics, can be an empowering and meaningful experience given that the researcher effectively bears witness to the participants’ story by listening to their account where participants may not normally be ‘heard’. Certainly, participants within this research at points voiced having enjoyed taking part in interviews and talking about their experiences of masculinity and heterosexuality. Moreover, and in contrast to wider assumptions that young men are emotionally illiterate or reticent to ‘speak’ about their personal lives, I found most participants to be forthcoming and open when discussing their lives and experiences. This echoes other research on young men which notes participants’ engagement and nuanced and fluent discussions in interviews (Frosh et al., 2001).

2.8.3 Sensitive topics

Similar to the ways in which the previous section reflected upon notions of participant ‘vulnerability’, it is also beneficial to consider what we mean by ‘sensitive’ research, prior to contemplating the potential sensitivity of a given research area or topic (Farquhar and Das, 1999). As Farquhar and Das (1999: 51) assert, “the assumption that sexuality constitutes a sensitive topic is not surprising.” However, they suggest that this is open to challenge, given that that which is deemed sensitive is constructed and situated within the context of norms and taboos (Farquhar and Das, 1999). What is more, whilst one topic or area of discussion may be deemed sensitive for one person, this may not for another. In this sense, I remained mindful of the heterogeneity of individual’s interpretations of what topics are sensitive and what are not, particularly given that part of this research aims to explore how young men challenge and disrupt gender and sexual norms.

Nonetheless, I planned the research as sensitively as possible aiming to minimise any distress or harm by avoiding topics which may cause participants to feel uncomfortable (Mauthner, 2002). When designing the interview schedule, I also made efforts to construct this so that I could gauge when and if to delve deeper with regard to discussions around sex and sexuality. For example, participants were initially asked indirect questions (Fielding and Thomas, 2008) about wider societal views on sex, as well as those of their friends before I would ask them about their own thoughts on sex. This allowed me to ‘test the water’ and assess how comfortable interviewees were in responding to these questions, enabling me to navigate whether or not it was

appropriate to probe further within the interview. What is more, as Fielding and Thomas (2008: 250) state, “not knowing others’ views, respondents will offer their own” at this point. Participants were also offered frequent breaks with the tape-recorder off and I was mindful to check in regularly to ensure that participants were happy to continue the interview. With this in mind, I would often ask questions such as “I’m aware of your time, are you OK to carry on with the interview?” Participants were also reminded throughout the interviews that their participation is voluntary and that it is their right to withdraw at any point without consequence (Oliver, 2003).

2.8.4 Power and reflexivity

I endeavoured to take a non-hierarchical approach to the research at all times, aiming to make the distinction between myself as a researcher and the participants as interviewees less stark (Legard et al., 2003). I took aim at this through not only the research design, but also how I presented myself as a researcher, to where interviews took place. I chose clothing that was informal, opting for jeans, trainers and a t-shirt so as to create a relaxed feel to the interview and to minimise power dynamics (Arksey and Knight, 1999) and for the most part conducted interviews in cafes and bars of participants choice. Yet given that knowledge is co-constructed and co-produced between the researcher and participants as previously mentioned, I maintained a reflexive eye on my own positionality (Tarrant, 2014). For Skeggs (2002: 171), this involves paying “attention to power relationships, attention to the representation of research participants and attention to issues such as ethics, reciprocity and responsibility.”

Given both the power differentials between young people and adults, and researchers and interviewees then, attention was given to power positions which may affect both myself and the research participants. With the historically limited power and influence of young people (Punch, 2002), I also remained reflexive of my position as being both older than the young men as well as being a researcher, viewing the young men as active agents throughout the research process (Harris et al., 2015). Reciprocity was emphasised as I communicated at the beginning of the interviews that participants were free to ask me any questions about myself or the research topics if and when they wished (Oakley, 1985). In this sense, I was open to stepping “outside the formal role of the neutral asker of questions” (Legard et al., 2003: 140) in order to minimise any power dynamics, which may have been present due to my age and being a researcher.

The importance of choice of locality and place in terms of minimising power differentials also became particularly apparent to me when I conducted one focus group with a group of young working-class men from Chapeltown who were visibly uncomfortable with the grandiose of the

university setting. This was further underscored when one of the young men stated “it’s like fucking Hogwarts here innit”. From this point, I was aware that I had not provided a conducive space for a relaxed discussion for these young men. Though I usually offered to meet participants at a place convenient to them, with most of the young men choosing cafes, pubs or bars, in this instance I had offered to hold the focus group at the university given that the young men were unsure where to meet me upon me asking for a suggestion. This was the first and only time I used the university due to this. It also emphasised the importance of holding interviews in a place not only geographically convenient to participants for financial reasons, for example, but also to foster a comfortable environment in a familiar place. Moreover, and as Skeggs (1994: 80) similarly found in her research on working-class women, this instance also brought to the fore and “reminded me of my changed history.” As such, it highlighted the unforeseen temporal class differences which I had failed to recognise. Similarly to Skeggs (1994), where class similarities in background with participants were still present, these had significantly shifted due to me being university educated.

Class also played out in terms of participants’ different communication styles and self-reflexive language and dialogue. Not surprisingly, and echoing the research of Skeggs et al. (2008), it became apparent to me that participants from working-class backgrounds were often less forthcoming with answers to questions, which stood in sometimes stark contrast to more middle and upper-class participants. Indeed as Skeggs et al. (2008: 6) write, “self-reflexivity itself depends upon access to resources and concomitant forms of capital that are classed, raced and gendered.” This is not to say that working class participants had less to say or were less adept at self-reflection, but rather that within the research setting, middle-class participants were more “able to operationalize their capital” (Skeggs et al., 2008: 12).

2.8.5 Researcher identity

Feminist researchers have also usefully shed light upon the methodological concerns, challenges and different perspectives with regard to when women interviewers research participants who are men, noting that this can either challenge or benefit the research process, nonetheless impacting it in some way. Scholars such as Lee (1997), Schwalbe and Wolkolmir (2001) and Pini (2005) have explored issues such as vulnerability and sexual harassment faced by women researchers, whilst others have warned against too readily assuming that all participants who are men pose a risk to women researchers (Tarrant, 2015). Tarrant (2014), for example, in her study of grandfatherhood, chose to interview participants in their own home, though she acknowledges this placed her in a potentially vulnerable position and due to this, she refrained

from discussing issues of sex and sexuality. However, Tarrant (2014) also points to this as somewhat reflecting her own preconceived assumption that all of the respondents in her study were heterosexual. This is a noteworthy admission which emphasises “the co-constituted nature of knowledge production in research” (Tarrant, 2014: 496), emphasising how such pre-determined assumptions can limit or permit topics of inquiry.

In terms of the gender of interviewees and interviewers, though some suggest that it is better to match participants and researchers from the same gender (Oakley, 1985), others have argued that participants often feel more at ease sharing information with ‘outsiders’ (Letherby, 2003). Conceptualisations of the ‘insider’/‘outsider’ tend to dominate discussions relating to the gender of the researcher and the researched, and also who is appropriate to research whom (Tarrant, 2014). As Tarrant (2014: 494) writes, “this reflexive language dominates critical explorations of women researching men, particularly where the gendered relations between men and women have deemed women as outsiders or less powerful and therefore less privy to understandings of manhood.” Certainly, within not just academia but also my wider personal life, my capacity to research men as a woman researcher has been frequently questioned and interrogated. Indeed, Hearn (2019: 55) asserts that there is a “recurrent misapprehension that studying men and masculinities somehow belongs to men and is primarily men’s business.”

Horn (1997) points to the beneficial aspects of having ‘outsider’ status as a woman researcher researching men. She argues that this is particularly so where women are couched against traditional notions of gender as “harmless and unthreatening, and slightly incompetent” (Horn, 1997: 300). Within the context of researching the police, a traditionally male-dominated sector, she argues that this afforded her admission to a customarily inaccessible research setting. However, this assumption of the traditional woman role also gave way to paternalism which shielded and “protected” her from certain areas of police work and policing deemed “unpleasant” (Horn, 1997: 300)

Thus Horn (1997), highlights how gendered dynamics within the research setting are ever-changing, dynamic and certainly never fixed. Indeed, there have been critiques of the concepts of the ‘insider’/‘outsider’ as this binary understanding often problematically negates that research power dynamics are complex and that identities are not only multi-layered, polygonal and shifting, but also intersectional (Tarrant, 2014). Within the research setting there may be multiple power dynamics at play relating to, for example, class, race, age, disability, professional status and sexuality and these identities are constantly shifting and contextually dependent (Sallee and Harris, 2011). As Sallee and Harris (2011: 412) write, “sameness in gender or social

identities do not necessarily equalize power dynamics or produce non-hierarchical relationships between interviewers and interviewees". Moreover, gender is always "multiply and spatially produced and performed in different ways, in different places" (Tarrant, 2014: 494). Nonetheless, as Etherington (2007) asserts, reflexive researchers must maintain an awareness of and be sensitive to, both cultural differences and gender. This is paramount given that "researcher identities are embedded and implicated in all stages of the research process" (Farquhar and Das, 1999: 50) and should therefore be considered throughout. The same can also be said for political affiliation and how this impacts the research process.

Similarly to O'Neill (2018), who conducted her research with heterosexual men who are part of the so-called 'seduction' industry, I chose not to reveal myself as a feminist or state that this research was a feminist piece of work. I felt this was necessary so as not to elucidate certain responses from the young men that would be based upon my political beliefs as opposed to theirs, particularly given that it has been well-documented that participants often answer questions in such a way so as to please or align themselves with the researcher (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). Conversely, stating that I was a feminist could have also opened up opportunities whereby I would have to discuss and navigate pre-held beliefs often attached to being a feminist which, for some, remains steadfastly associated with being "anti-male and man-hating" (O'Neill, 2018: 177) thus invoking the figure of the "feminist killjoy" (Ahmed, 2017). Not only would this have been energy and time-consuming, it would have veered the project towards my politics or understandings of feminism due to my position as a woman. For example, if I stated that I was a feminist on meeting a participant, both my positionality and feminism as a broader topic could have proceeded to be the topic of conversation for the majority of the interview, at the forefront of interviewees' minds, despite me asking alternative questions. Moreover, if I had revealed this, I would not have been privy to some of the rich data which organically arose and informed Chapter 3, some of which stood at odds with feminism and in line with men's rights activism. For example, one participant favourably referenced a number of 'alt-right' men's rights activists to articulate his understandings of gender throughout the interview, some of whom were renowned for targeting, threatening and harassing women and feminists, both on and offline. Furthermore, the discourses espoused by these figures also threaded through other participants' narratives even if they were not explicitly referenced.

I was also somewhat uncritical of responses from the young men that I felt were inequitable, though I did probe for further comments to encourage the young men to think more deeply and reflexively about their assumptions here. In chorus with O'Neill (2018: 179), I approached my research with a "willingness to silence myself." Echoing O'Neill (2018) further, my decision to 'sit

with' and in effect collude with such admissions filled me with a sense of inner discord and conflict, though luckily and in contrast to O'Neill (2018), there were only a few instances of overt and explicit sexism throughout the data collection.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the methodological design and strategies which underpin the thesis. It has discussed the theoretical framework informing this research, detailing feminist post-structural approaches. As such, it explored how this theoretical perspective enables investigation of contemporary gendered subjectivities and how these come to be shaped by discourses which are often competing and contradictory. Moreover, how this comes to produce certain gendered practices and not others. Given that this is a feminist piece of research, it maintains focus on issues of power and equality, and as such aims to further social justice projects. The chapter then discussed the sample for this research and methods of recruitment, noting the benefit of online recruitment methods with regard to young people. It then explored the utilisation of focus groups and one-to-one interviews to explore the research questions which inform the thesis. The chapter then explored how the data from these methods will be analysed through thematic analysis and discourse analysis. The methodological limitations to this research were also explored, as well as ethical considerations such as gaining informed consent, researching sensitive topics as well as attention to issues around power and reflexivity. Finally, this chapter discussed issues around participant and researcher identity with regard to 'outsider' and 'insider' status relating to gender.

The next part of this thesis moves on to explore the key themes of the data. The following empirical chapter, *Politics and (post)feminism*, explores participants' understandings of sex, gender and gender politics, drawing attention to how these can be said to reflect postfeminist logics.

3. Politics and (post)feminism

3.1. Introduction

Gender relations within the UK have changed considerably within recent decades, as have the political projects seeking to tackle social injustice and gender inequality. Men's previously unchallenged dominance and authority has been contested as feminist projects have drawn attention to issues of power and inequitable gender relations. This has compelled men to change, though "this may be hard for men to hear, and even harder [for them] to act on" (Hearn, 1999: 149). In response to these changes, some have noted an anti-feminist "backlash" (Faludi, 1992), others the evocation of postfeminist sensibilities marked seductively by the "double entanglement" of both feminist and anti-feminist discourses (McRobbie, 2004, Gill, 2007). As discussed in the introductory chapter, feminism has also gained increased popularity at exactly the same time that misogyny and sexism have intensified (Banet-Weiser, 2018). To complicate this landscape further, though discussions around gender and indeed feminism have flourished in recent years, so to have notions of 'natural' sex difference and biological essentialism, which posit immutable differences between men and women said to be based upon scientific 'fact' (Fine, 2010, García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). Paradoxically, gendered and sexual identities and expressions have also simultaneously diversified and flourished. Despite this diversification, the revival of biological essentialism, as propagated by popular evolutionary psychology, can be said to limit understandings of how gender can shift and how gender relations can change, particularly when set against the postfeminist backdrop that equality has been achieved (Tasker and Negra, 2007). The ways in which such logics of postfeminism inform and (re)produce young men's understandings of sex, gender, and gender politics will be explored here.

This chapter first discusses the resurrection of ideas of 'natural' sex difference, exploring how biological determinism is often utilised subjectively to justify and legitimate gender inequality in ways which align with postfeminist logics. It then explores how such understandings are employed to bolster investment in static, fixed and ahistorical masculine identities, whilst also giving focus to the ways in which participants challenged such assumptions, demonstrating awareness of gender fluidity and diversity. After this, it examines participants' understandings and views of gender equality, gender politics and feminism. Here, attention is given to the ways in which participants simultaneously expressed support for feminism, whilst also maintaining binarised essentialist understandings of gender, highlighting how this limits scope with regard the boundaries of gender equality and equitable gender relations. It then goes on to address the discursive splitting of second and third-wave feminist projects and how this serves to undermine

more recent modes of feminist thought and politics, whilst also exploring notions of “reverse sexism”, said to be a key postfeminist sensibility (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). Finally, it discusses participants’ engagement with notions of masculine ‘privilege’, whilst also exploring the young men’s support of feminism.

3.2 Biological essentialism: The resurgence of ‘natural’ sex difference

Notions of biological essentialism and the idea that there are predetermined immutable differences between men and women wove through many of the young men’s narratives. Drawing on popular-scientific discourses, a significant number of participants spoke of what they believed to be fundamental and intrinsic differences between men and women that were seen to result in different gendered behaviours. Not only this, but men were often posited as stronger and more physically adept than women. In the following excerpt from Andy, for example, he emphasises bodily differences between men and women, reducing women to childbirth and men to physical strength:

Andy: [Men and women’s] physiology is different. One bears children, one’s obviously designed to do the heavy lifting. I think that’s just the way we’ve been built. Natural selection has said this is the most effective form for human beings. So, this is how it works.

For Andy, women are defined by and reduced to their reproductive capacities. He presents his statement as given or as he terms it, a product of “natural selection”. In this sense, the historical immutability of ‘natural’ sex difference is underlined, particularly when he states “that’s just the way we’ve been built.” The wider connotations of such understandings, in line with postfeminist logics, is that this posits irreconcilable differences between biological sex difference and political feminist demands which centre upon equality (O’Neill, 2018). As such, “evolutionary imperatives are mobilised not to deny women’s right to social and political equality per se but, rather, to frame the pursuit of equality [...] as fundamentally untenable” (O’Neill, 2018: 129). That Andy employs words like “obviously” and given his assertive claim that “this is how it is”, this further emphasises the presumed fixity and rigidity of biological sex difference and men and women’s supposedly differing roles. Another participant, Adam, utilised similar language when talking about the similarities and differences between men and women. He explains:

Adam: [...] In ways, obviously like... obviously in like a science, like in a scientific way our bodies are definitely different, and our hormones and how we react to like different situations...

By using the word “obviously”, Adam, like Andy, presents his statement as both a fact and universal truth. What is more, he presumes that supposed biological differences result in differing gendered behaviour amongst men and women, echoing essentialist understandings of gender. Similar narratives can be found during one focus group with four young men. Participants spoke of how men are biologically predisposed to compete over women and how the presence of testosterone in men results in increased aggression. The excerpt is as follows:

Mike: We are only an-, we’re bi-, we’re animals aren’t we, and biologically we’re sort of like, or, these things are ingrained in us that like two men will fight over a woman or something like that.

Leon: It’s like dog’s innit. It’s like balls, you know what I mean. You just chop em off, just chop em off to take away the testosterone and like the manliness.

Mike: It takes away their mojo or whatever?

Leon: No, no the aggression.

Mike: Oh yeah, it takes away the aggression.

Leon: It doesn’t take away their mojo, it doesn’t take away their mojo, it doesn’t take away their, you know dogs still actually hump even though they don’t have balls. It doesn’t take away their view on sex, it just takes away their aggression and I think one of the main masculine traits is aggression. I think that’s almost like the key, well not the key.

Mike: Well stuff like testosterone is like sort of synonymous with the word aggression. You know, “he’s got a lot of testosterone, he’s very aggressive”.

Though perhaps unintentionally, Mike immediately shores up heterosexuality as the ‘natural’ result of masculinity and being male (Butler, 1990). Thus it is only heterosexuality that is afforded “cultural intelligibility” (Butler, 1990: 17). As such, it is posited as the ‘natural’ outcome of masculinity, seen to follow on from having male body; homosexuality is omitted altogether. As Butler (1990: 17) states “the heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine,’ where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female.’” What is more, Mike’s account draws upon the heteronormative assumption that heterosexuality is biologically derived and given (Hird and Jackson, 2001).

With this in mind, men's competition over women is seen to be directly linked to biology; something literally "ingrained" in men, as Mike states. Hence Mike's account, rooted in Darwinist notions of 'sexual selection', draws upon notions of "male-male competition and female mate choice" (Hunt et al., 2009: 13), a theory which remains prevalent in evolutionary psychology scholarship. We can trace such understandings back to the writing of Darwin (2004 [1879]: 246), who in 1879 wrote that "it is certain that amongst almost all animals that there is a struggle between the males for the possession of the female. This fact is so notorious that it would be superfluous to give instances." Such statements, though nearly 150 years old, continue to resonate and inform young people's understandings of gender and sexuality today, featuring heavily in participants' accounts, as discussed further in Chapter 5.

In other research, scholars have noted a surge in these types of discourses within both the anti-feminist online 'manosphere' (Van Valkenburgh, 2018) and the 'seduction' industry (O'Neill, 2018) whereby heterosexual men utilise evolutionary psychology to understand and validate their sexual pursuit of women. More broadly, these ideas of male competition and female choice not only perpetuate notions of 'natural' sex difference, but more dangerously position men as the active, pursuant and even aggressive initiators of sex, which by implication renders women the passive and receptive gate-keepers of their own bodies (Powell, 2007). As Powell (2007: 166-167) states, "this serves to position young men in such a way that they are able to exert pressure, whether they actually intended to or not."

The dictum of evolutionary psychology, though often informed by nonhuman animal studies, continues to be misconstrued and effectively mapped onto humans, permeating common-sense understandings of sex, gender and sexuality to this day (Fine, 2010). Hence studies on rats, hamsters, mice and monkeys, however dated, are frequently used (albeit incorrectly) to make sense of the human condition. Despite biologists (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) calling such theories into disrepute, they continue to be utilised in order to bolster and cement the idea that patterns of behaviour have underlying biological causes, or more specifically, that different hormones cause different gendered behaviours (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, Fine, 2017). This is perhaps most prevalent in pop psychology accounts of gender, which are given ubiquitous exposure and publicity despite contestation by masses of evidence based research (Fine, 2010). Indeed, these ideas remain all the more culturally pervasive today, with writers like García-Favaro and Gill (2016) arguing that there has been a reassertion of notions of 'natural sex' difference within recent years, bolstered by evolutionary psychology and Darwinian notions of sex difference, said to be a key postfeminist sensibility.

Mike and Leon can be seen to further borrow from such understandings by speaking of themselves as “animals”, whilst drawing upon analogies of dogs to talk of aggression as an intrinsically male trait due to testosterone present in the testicles (Fine, 2017). More broadly, a running theme throughout a number of interviews was that participants often spoke of themselves and other men in terms of “packs”, “alpha males” and “top dog’s” (see Chapter 4). Leon, whilst referring to dogs, speaks of “manliness” as though it can be symbolically cut from the male body via castration, highlighting how notions of masculinity are seen to be intrinsically located within the body (Halberstam, 1998) and more specifically, the male sex organs and hormones (Potts, 2001). The wider implications of this is that such understandings often work to validate and justify the enduring inequalities between the sexes. Indeed, it is these very understandings that contribute to those very inequalities in the first place.

What is more, they operate in a way that often shifts blame away from men, particularly in relation to their sexuality, by suggesting scientific immutability through discourses pertaining to ‘that’s just the way it is.’ As Potts (2001: 152) writes, “male sexuality is construed as animalistic, out of the usual realm of male conscious control.” As discussed in Chapter 1, male (hetero)sexuality is positioned as simultaneously ordinary (Fischer, 2013) and lay open to powerful sexual urges driven by ungovernable raging hormones that could almost be regarded as frenzied (Hollway, 1989, Holland et al., 2004, Richardson, 2010). O’Neill (2018) similarly notes how notions of personal, moral and ethical responsibility are often abandoned where understandings of male sexuality draw upon evolutionary psychology. As such, male sexuality is posited as something which, though located “deep inside” men, is “utterly outside their control” (O’Neill, 2018: 128). Moreover, by cementing male (hetero)sexuality as something that is fixed and ‘natural’, it is positioned as something that should be left alone and disregarded as fact. As O’Neill (2018: 129) asserts, such a view resonates with “the postfeminist logic whereby campaigns for equality are considered to overlook the immutability of sexual difference.” Subsequently, any calls for discussion or debate are seen as almost trying to invalidate and refute human nature or evolution itself (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016, O’Neill, 2018). Due to this, demands for change are suppressed. Understandings that posit immutable ‘natural’ sex differences also provided fertile ground for the propagation of views which naturalised gender differences, as the next section explores.

3.3 The naturalisation of gender difference

Due to the prevalence of popular-scientific discourses relating to gender difference in the young men’s accounts, participants often saw men and women as intrinsically different to one another.

One participant, Leon, for example, stated “men and women are so different for me.” What is more, interviewees often celebrated perceived ‘natural’ sex difference and the gender binary. As Gill (2007: 159) states, “discourses of natural sex difference can be used to freeze in place existing inequalities by representing them as inevitable – and if read correctly – as pleasurable.” In the following quote, Dave speaks favourably of gendered differences, reducing these to an effect of different male and female “energies”:

Mary: In an ideal world, what would it be like to be a man?

Dave: Umm. I suppose our society, I suppose we should keep certain aspects of masculinity or being a man and certain aspects of femininity... male and females do have energies which are complimentary I suppose... I wouldn't say it's a bad thing that we've got those archetypes in society. I wouldn't say it's a bad thing. I think it's a good thing that we have two opposing archetypes and stuff.

Here, Dave posits that ‘natural’ sex difference is not a “bad thing”, whilst also maintaining an investment in masculine identities. As Dave speaks of males and females having different “energies” which complement each other, his understanding of sex and gender can be said to resonate with sex-role theories, which though somewhat departing from biological models of gender, still assumes ahistorical and rigid masculine and feminine behaviours (Kimmel, 2015). Largely influenced by functionalism, ‘sex roles’ are viewed as both complementary and essential to the functioning of society – as opposed to arising from unequal gendered power relations (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). In this sense, the ways in which men benefit from being positioned as rational, active and competent, for example, are largely obscured by biological or ‘sex-role’ definitions (Kimmel, 2015).

This is important given that where participants were invested in the idea that there are innate and essential differences between the sexes, this unsurprisingly served as a means by which to legitimate gender inequality and opposing gender roles. Andy, for example, spoke of the ways in which different sexes attract or are attracted to different occupations, justifying women’s over-representation in office work and primary school teaching by assuming that women have innate feminine qualities that compliment these roles. Andy’s quote is as follows:

Andy: I think different sexes attract different, different, like HR, for example, when it comes to office work - very female orientated. Same with teaching, primary school teaching seems very female [...].

Mary: Why do you think there are those different roles?

Andy: Umm. With primary school teaching I think it's the whole nurturing mother kind of aspect. I don't think that's particularly healthy either. Some things are just seen as intrinsically more feminine. Things that require, that are more kind of detail orientated as opposed to, I guess things that are more male are like bigger, broader strokes, more strategy and creative.

Although Andy does not think that women being disproportionately employed in feminized sectors is particularly "healthy", he goes on to assert that some things are just "intrinsically more feminine." This is seen to result in women and men occupying different positions within society. Accordingly, Andy draws upon traditional understandings of motherhood to suggest that women are more caring, nurturing and concerned with the finer "details". Men on the other hand are positioned in opposition as being more adept at "strategy" and "creative" endeavours. For Andy, different sexes are attracted and "orientated" to different roles because of innate disposition. As Donaghue (2015: 363) argues, the dictum of evolutionary psychology produces binary understandings of sex/gender as biologically predetermined, endorsing "the postfeminist position that difference in the lives of women and men arise from 'choices', and that if these 'choices' are gendered it is a result of 'natural', biologically grounded predispositions." The broader implications of this is that such 'choices', are "therefore an inappropriate target of political analysis or intervention" (Donaghue, 2015: 363).

Not surprisingly, due to a reliance on the gender binary in such a way, the value attached to men and women was also positioned paradoxically and hierarchically. Leon, for example, succinctly describes the gender binary in the following excerpt:

Leon: You know what I think is a man, and I don't think this, but I think man is always seen as better than woman, and I think man is a positive thing. I think man is a more positive thing than a woman. I think that's the first, and I think that is what, not what I think, but as man, the only way I can describe it is, erm, you know, like, is bigger than a woman. Like that's how it's always, it always seems to be a comparison between the two – bigger/smaller, this/this, longer, you know what I mean, wide hips/narrow hips, this/this and it's two things always to do with a woman. I think... does that make sense?

Although Leon states that he does not think this himself, he notes that women and men are often positioned in opposition to each other, with men "always" holding a superior position. Here, women are defined in relation to men, whereby women are always 'Othered.' Indeed, Leon states himself that there "always seems to be a comparison between the two." Due to this,

he views gender as almost inevitably hierarchical, whereby women are seen as inferior to men (Irigaray et al., 1985). As such, Leon's account emphasises the endurance of binary understandings of gender within contemporary times.

Some participants' accounts were, however, contradictory at times. Tom, for example, initially rejected and problematized binary understandings of gender, yet paradoxically, he later went on to assert his investment in masculine identities. Tom says:

Tom: There is this divide that there's two intensely toxic archetypes of man is strong, does these things, can't have a caring side, and woman is weak, does these things, is maternal, has these caring instincts, and both of them are incredibly shitty. They're really crappy, crappy things and I think that's what I mean about the paradoxical side of the privilege.

However, he later went on to assert his investment in masculine identities towards the end of the interview:

Tom: I think a masculine identity is an important thing. I mean it's very easy to say like "oh it wouldn't matter at all." But erm... having a masculine identity does feel important. I mean again this summer [...] I'm going to be out doing, chopping wood and like doing some building work for some Italian people, and that has quite a visceral masculine appeal to it. Um, rightly or wrongly, that is something I immediately associate with - partly because my Dad was a very hands-on guy. He was a chemist as well. It's this "do it" appeal really. I mean that's not just, it's not just a masculine thing, but it is perhaps more common within men. Um... Whether that is genetically coded or socially coded is up for debate and I do not have answer for that!

Although Tom questions whether or not gender differences are biologically innate or socially mediated, suggesting some reflexive work here, he states that undertaking manual labour and physical work though perhaps not "a masculine thing", is "more common within men." Similarly to Dave, he also asserts that having a masculine identity is something that is important to him. Having an investment in gender identities in such a way can be said to stand at odds with contemporary feminist thought which seeks to "undo" or "trouble" stable gender identities (Butler, 1990) in that masculinity is very much tied to being male here. Indeed, it is incredibly difficult to "pry apart" masculinity from maleness due to the persistent and enduring myths and fantasies that surround masculinity (Halberstam, 1998: 2). Also noteworthy is the way in which certain notions of masculinity are generationally embedded. Tom reminisces about his father

being a “hands-on guy”, locating the “visceral masculine appeal” of “chopping wood” with his father as a genesis of its appeal. Certainly, fathers were often cited as providing the basis from which participants came to know themselves as men.

More broadly, Tom’s account highlights the contradictions present in masculine subject and identity formation. Whilst initially critiquing assumptions that marry masculinity with strength, positing this as “really crappy”, he later goes on to discuss the “visceral” embodied attraction of labour-intensive, physical tasks. As such, he draws upon competing and contradictory discourses of masculinity to make sense of gender and of his own gendered identity. Reflecting wider findings of this thesis, whilst Tom was at first critical of the gender binary and also reticent to acknowledge that this shaped his own masculine subjectivity, identity and practices, he later explicitly voices his investment in having a particular type of masculine identity. Yet as the next section explores, a number of interviewees expressed awareness and support of gender fluidity and diversity.

3.4 Moving beyond the gender binary

Diverse understandings and vocabularies relating to gender identity and expression were present in some participants’ understandings of gender (Bragg et al., 2018). Mike, for instance, asked for clarification on an interview question in the following way, “To me it depends on how you define man. Are you talking about a man by gender or by sex?” Another participant, Jack, used the term “cis male” to describe himself, demonstrating knowledge and understanding of sex/gender diversity and that people do not always identify with the gender they are assigned at birth. Jack’s use of correct terminology here is also suggestive of respect and recognition of those who identify as transgender. This was further reiterated when he spoke of having friends who identify as transgender, gender fluid and non-binary. Jack says:

Jack: I've got you know, countless trans friends, countless agender friends or gender fluid and all this, and it's like, it is inspiring to see people that are so - carefree isn't the right word. Comfortable in who they are that they couldn't care less what other people have to say. Like my housemate, they were born male and they're still genetically male, but for the past 3 years they're just, they're agender and it's just admirable. Like to you know, you are you. You're not a man, you're not a woman, you're just you and it's, yeah.

Jack’s understanding moves beyond the often taken-for-granted assumption and language that there are only two genders that reflect biological sex (Butler, 1990), showing awareness of

multiple embodied gendered identities. He does not regard gender as immutably derived from biology then, but rather sees this as something which is fluid and diverse. What is more, Jack is celebratory of his friends who live beyond the confines of the gender binary, emphasising acceptance and support of gender diversity within his peer relationships (Bragg et al., 2018). As he states that he has “countless” agender and gender fluid friends, this also suggests increased visibility amongst those communities. This is perhaps due to progress brought about by the trans movement and trans activists, which has enabled, supported and encouraged young people who transgress normative gender categories to ‘come out’. Indeed, scholars such as Hines (2010), note the growth and increasing visibility of both the trans community activism and support groups over the last few decades.

Another participant, Sahib went further in his support for people who identify as transgender inasmuch as he stated that he would not be friends with someone if they were either transphobic or homophobic. In response to questions around friendship and values, Sahib stated that holding progressive views on gender and sexuality was more important to him than finding common interests, as the following quote shows:

Sahib: Someone who’s as progressive as me. I mean not to sound too pretentious, but someone who’s more open to liberal views as me. So, someone who’s open to homosexuality. Someone who’s open to someone being transsexual. Someone who’s accepting, because even though having similar interests is a plus, you don’t need similar interests to be someone’s best friend, cos you can form your own similar interests as you go along. But someone who dislikes homosexuals or whomever, that is kind of the cut off personally.

Sahib’s account demonstrates his progressive views, which resonates with recent scholarship which suggests that due to social and cultural progress regarding gay visibility and activism, masculinities are becoming more “inclusive” given that young men are rejecting homophobia (Anderson, 2009, Dean, 2013). Moving away from previous men and masculinities literature, which highlights men’s almost prolific use of homophobia as a means by which to affirm masculinity (Kimmel, 2012), Anderson’s (2009) inclusive masculinities theory asserts that men’s attitudes have shifted towards acceptance and tolerance (Dean, 2013). However, as discussed in Chapter 1, some argue that such theorisation over-optimistically presents a picture of change with regard to contemporary formations of masculinity, reflecting and reproducing the logic of postfeminism (O’Neill, 2015a). Certainly, despite Sahib and Jack both expressing progressive views, it is important to note that instances of transphobia (Hines and Santos, 2017) and

homophobia (Phoenix et al., 2003) within the UK remain frequent, as discussed further in Chapter 6.

It is, therefore, important to draw attention to contrasting accounts such as that of Leon's, which can be said to stand at odds with Jack and Sahib's more progressive and inclusive statements of gender and sexuality. In the following extract, for example, though professing to have a transgender friend, Leon stated his frustration regarding the diversification of gender identities. Leon states:

Leon: I really really hate... I can't get my head round the whole... I was talking to Miranda, she recorded some tracks for us, she was born a man, a boy, whatever, with male genitals and we were just talking and stuff and she identifies as a woman. And like, I kind of, I have nothing, I'm totally cool with everyone and how they express themselves, but it's this whole labels and sub-labels and masculinity and fucking this and this and this and this... And for me, it's like I just can't, I just can't, I don't understand why everyone's so... for me it's just like... I'm Leon, you know what I mean? And that's as far as it goes.

Whereas Jack was celebratory of difference then, Leon expresses a hostile view towards gender diverse identities, despite initially attempting to gain symbolic currency by stating that he has a transgender friend. Leon nullifies the specificities of the lives of people who do not sit within the boundaries of dominant constructions of gender by asserting his dismay at the diversification of gendered identities or what he terms "labels and sub-labels." Although one interpretation of this could be that Leon's account resonates with queer theory in that he is somewhat endeavouring to deconstruct identity categories (Gamson, 1995), there is also a sense of 'diversity fatigue' present in Leon's narrative, which resonates with postfeminist motifs of "political correctness gone mad" (Gill, 2014: 201). It is also interesting to note that he seems to attempt to reinforce his argument by rendering his own gender identity invisible or irrelevant by stating: "for me it's just like...I'm Leon." Indeed some participants often regard themselves as non-gendered, in contrast to women who were viewed as gendered (Hearn and Pringle, 2006, Elliott, 2019).

At first glance, Leon's gender-blindness appears egalitarian given that he is asserting that he sees all people the same, yet as Carney (2016: 168), writing in relation to race asserts, such ways of thinking merely provide "a false sense of comfort to those who do not face [...] oppression in their everyday lives." Indeed, it is often easier for those who sit within dominant, often unexamined categories, to render those very categories insignificant, given that they may fail to

recognise the benefits which those categories, sitting within systems of power, afford them; moreover, how those systems of power disadvantage and oppress others. As Acker (2006: 452) writes, “visibility varies with the position of the beholder: one privilege of the privileged is not to see their privilege.” For example, we can look to the Black Lives Matter movement and the ways in which those who hold positions of privilege (white people) have sought to undermine the specificities of racialized inequality by claiming “All Lives Matter.” Indeed this kind of post-racial ideology operates to keep those very inequalities in place by omitting the struggles of black and ethnic minority communities and declaring racism no longer exists, thus serving to displace critique (Carney, 2016).

Following on from participants’ understandings of sex and gender, the next section provides analysis of interviewees’ views on feminism and gender politics, exploring how these were often informed by and linked to binary understandings of gender.

3.5 Dichotomising feminism: Social justice warriors, new-age feminists and femi-Nazis

Whilst some participants asserted their support for women’s rights, they often simultaneously maintained the idea that there are two opposing and hierarchical genders (O’Neill, 2018). Indeed, it was often participants’ investment in ‘natural’ sex difference that informed this type of thinking. In light of this, narratives were not dissimilar to ideas pertaining to the notion of gender as being ‘separate but equal,’ or the idea that there are two opposing sexes and corresponding genders that are complementary of each other. Andy, for example, whilst stating somewhat critically that feminism is “100% a good thing”, also asserted that there are inherent differences between the sexes that results in differing roles for men and women. What is more, he maintained that this should be accepted or as he states, that “we don’t have to be dicks about it”. Andy says:

Andy: [In an ideal world I’d like] less bullshit. Less antagonism on both sides of the whole male and female thing. I think that feminism, while absolutely and 100% a good thing, that really kind of radical far left feminism kind of pushes people back [...] You know kind of pushing each other away from each other when in reality we should all accept the fact we’re different and we’re not going to occupy the same roles in society, but we don’t have to be dicks about it [...].

In line with postfeminist logics, whilst Andy views gender equality as reasonable on one hand, he also maintains the view that “biological differences between men and women cannot be

submitted to the ideological demands of gender equality” (O'Neill, 2018: 129). This is particularly emphasised when he states “we should all accept the fact we’re different and we’re not going to occupy the same roles in society.” In this sense, whilst supporting feminism in some respects, the boundaries of social change are limited by his understanding of ‘natural’ sex difference. Justin similarly acknowledged feminism and critiqued the gender pay gap, but went on to speak of supposedly fixed gendered differences between men and women, as the following quote shows:

Justin: Well, there, there is a difference, but erm, there's a clear difference because of the problems that people are having with feminism, er with women being treated differently or lower pay and women have been fighting this for ages now. But there shouldn't really be a difference, but there is. Like it's different in some aspects, like gender and stuff like that - some women will like different things. Like you're not going to see me wearing make-up and everything, but some things should be the same but they're not. That hopefully will change in the future.

Whilst to begin with, Justin critically discusses the differences between men and women with regard to the gender pay gap, he then goes on to assert that, in his view, there are gendered differences which result in men and women liking different things. He uses the example of make-up to state that this is something that he personally as a man would not be interested in, presumably as beauty products are symbolic of femininity and that beauty practices are configured as inherently ‘feminine’. Hence, although Justin says that “some things should be the same” (i.e. pay), he believes that there are intrinsic and immutable differences between men and women that result in different gendered preferences (Fine, 2010).

In this sense, accounts were often contradictory. This was particularly so given that it seemed as though participants were making sense of their own views on gender for the first time during interviews. What is more, they were perhaps at times wishing to gain symbolic feminist currency in front of me as a woman researcher and therefore reporting more gender equitable views than they themselves thought. This is not to suggest some sort of false consciousness regarding participants, but to make note of the gendered identity work interviewees undertake during qualitative research, particularly where participants who are men are interviewed by a woman researcher (Allen, 2005a), as discussed in Chapter 2.

Bill’s views on feminism, for instance, were inconsistent and conflicting at times in that he initially spoke critically of sexism and approvingly of gender equality, but then went on to favourably discuss men’s rights movement figures such as “the triggerer”, whom he regularly

viewed via Youtube. He also described feminists as “feminazis” towards the latter part of the interview, as will be discussed later on in this chapter. In the following excerpt, Bill begins by asserting that it “isn’t manly” to be sexist and hold the view that women should be confined to the private sphere. Interestingly, he also states that embracing gender equitable views signifies masculinity in that it is what “makes a man a man”. His quote is as follows:

Bill: [...] People are unmanly if they're genuinely sexist being like “ha ha, women deserve to stay at home.” You know, that kind of stuff. That isn't manly that's just you being a complete and utter prick. Like in my opinion, they just don't deserve to be called a man, they deserve to be called a boy with their stupid ideas [...] a manly perspective would be original feminism kind of thing if you get me.

However, Bill goes on to state that he only supports a certain type of feminism, most notably first-wave feminist projects in the following quote:

Bill: You know, kind of like 19th, not 19th, 20th century and stuff where they actually wanted equality and erm, they were just not being a racist and not a complete and utter arse. That's what makes a man a man.

Mary: So it would be sort of like old, oldish feminism you'd say?

Bill: Yeah. Before this er new stuff popped up with everyone being like - oh actually I shouldn't get into this cos this is going to be like half an hour long me talking about that... I erm, I dislike the new-age feminism because it's, a lot of it you see is women saying “oh men are inferior” and all that. It's like we're both born, we both come from the same area, so how are we inferior anyway?

Here, Bill constructs a clear-cut dichotomy between gender equality of the past, which he views as acceptable and even commendable, and more contemporary forms of “new age feminism”, which he views with disdain and contempt - as oppressive, threatening and menacing to men (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). As McRobbie (2009: 14) asserts, within the context of postfeminism “the kind of feminism which is taken into account [...] is liberal, equal opportunities feminism, where elsewhere what is invoked negatively is the radical feminism concerned with social criticism rather than with progress or improvement in the position of women in an otherwise more or less unaltered social order.” Similarly to Justin and Andy, in Bill’s account, the postfeminist “double entanglement” (McRobbie, 2009: 12) of “feminist and anti-feminist discourse” (Gill, 2007: 161) is thus underscored as feminism is simultaneously employed and disavowed. Liberal feminist projects are presented as sensible and logical, whilst other types

of feminism and feminists are simultaneously positioned as punitive (Gill, 2007). The rhetorical effect of this is that it invokes a well-used separation between ‘moderates’ who are seen to “actually” seek equality (us), and ‘extremists’ who threaten the very fabric of society (them) (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). Moreover, Bill employs the language of feminism to undermine it (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Positioned as unreasonable then, current day feminists are construed by Bill as not concerned with equality, but rather the pursuit of superiority and dominance over men (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). In a similar way, Jacob spoke of looking up to friends who have equal morals to him, but went on to distance himself from “extremists.” Jacob says:

Jacob: Someone with equal morals to me and confident in their views. Like, as long as they’re similar to me and they’re not like extremists (laughs). And not... Just equality. Everyone should be happy and equal, that kind of thing.

Edley and Wetherell (2001: 443) call this the “Jekyll and Hyde binary”, whereby accounts of feminism are discursively split as fair, reasonable and necessary on the one hand, and extreme, needless and unreasonable on the other. Indeed, this signs in chorus with these young men’s accounts. Another interviewee, Justin, expressed similar views in that he perceived feminism as predicated upon female supremacy and power (Gough and Peace, 2000), or as he puts it “women above men”. In the following quote, he was asked to describe which aspects of being a man he least liked:

Justin: Erm, recently people with a lot of arguments, not arguments, they get into quite a few discussions about feminism and that, because there are some feminist people who think that feminism is women above men, but it's not. It's meant to be equal.

By employing terms like “equality” and “equal”, there was a sense that the young men were endeavouring to assume social legitimacy by drawing upon language traditionally synonymous with feminism, whilst simultaneously discrediting it (Schmitz and Kazyak, 2016, Banet-Weiser, 2018). As such, they “use the architecture of feminist argument to turn feminism against itself” (O’Neill, 2018: 146). I will also come back to Andy’s quote again here. He explicitly aligns himself with feminism, claiming to support (a certain type of) feminism which he deems “100% a good thing,” however, he states that he is critical of “that really kind of radical far left politics [that] kind of pushes people back”. The quote is as follows:

Andy: [In an ideal world I’d like] less bullshit. Less antagonism on both sides of the whole male and female thing. I think that feminism, while absolutely and 100% a good thing, that really kind of radical far left feminism kind of pushes people back.

Here, Andy invokes hostility to more “radical far left” feminist projects, fitting with pro-status quo discourses of feminism as extreme, yet he also tactfully positions and establishes himself as tolerant and fair; a supporter of feminism (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). In this sense, Andy constructs an image of himself as liberal, reasonable and pro-equality, which by implication reduces the “hearability” of his anti-feminist sentiment (Gough, 1998, Riley, 2001).

Some participants also drew upon notions of feminist tyranny, whereby men were perceived to be under attack from feminism and feminists (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). In the following quotation, Justin recalls a story which made headline news during the time of the interview:

Justin: I've had discussions about like recently, I had a discussion with someone about, there was a, I'm not sure if I'd seen it online - somebody was cat-calling a woman so they, she ripped the headlight off or something and I had a discussion about that she was equally in the wrong, because they shouldn't have done it, that's a criminal offence.

Here, Justin invokes the figure of the militant, violent feminist who seeks revenge over men (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016), despite this woman responding to being sexually harassed whilst riding her bike. In the same way, Bill invoked a sense a male victimhood and feminist tyranny when he spoke of feminists as “new social justice warriors”. Such use of military language can be said to generate a general feeling of threat, whilst conjuring up an image of war between feminists and men. Indeed, Bill goes further, characterising feminists as “feminazis” in the following quote:

Bill: There's certain, a couple of pages that I follow. Its erm, there's two that I follow. There's one called “Anti-feminazi”, which it sounds awful, cos you know anti-feminazi, but it's because the joke is erm, er third-wave feminists are dubbed as, dubbed as fem-nazi's because the way they see everything is like, “oh if you disagree with us, you just have to die”, kind of like how the Nazis were kind of thing, if you get me?

Here, men are positioned as though they are at constant risk of vilification and disparagement from feminists for “everything”, as Bill states, due to feminists imagined totalizing power. By utilising the term “feminazi”, feminists are by extension positioned as fanatical, intolerant and persecutory (Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2016). What is more, this figurative device linguistically profiteers from the visceral association with the Nazis as a way of positioning feminists as not only the enemy, but also as potential killers in the face of dissent. As García-Favaro and Gill (2016: 391) state, “through constant repetition these linguistic choices gain rhetorical force and

powerfully work to evoke ideas of a chilling all-encompassing threat, as well as to make the figure of the ‘man-hating fascist feminist’ acquire affective power as an apparently real entity.” Portraying feminists as militant and extreme also serves to dissuade women and indeed men from identifying as feminists. Edley and Wetherell (2001) go further, arguing that the production of negative feminist stereotypes itself operates as an anti-feminist tool, bringing disrepute to the movement. It is also interesting to note that although Bill is aware that the term “feminazi [...] sounds awful,” and is thus problematic, he reframes his statement as a joke, which works to subtly undermine the severity of his statement. Indeed the ways in which humour, often categorised as ‘banter’, is used to depoliticise and trivialise gender politics has been discussed by scholars (Phipps and Young, 2014).

Alongside “Anti-feminazi”, whose twitter account profile states “Egalitarian. The TRUE equal rights movement. It’s time we expose feminism in its sexist tracks,” Bill also told me that he followed a number of other anti-feminist commentators online. He spoke of regularly watching YouTube videos by Carl Benjamin, who under the pseudonym “Sargon of Akkad” purports vehement anti-feminist sentiment. Whilst most recognised for his “Why Do People Hate #Feminism” series, Benjamin has also gained notoriety for targeting and harassing feminists online. Given his near one million followers on YouTube, “Sargon of Akkad’s” views are far-reaching. Bill discusses “Sargon of Akkad” in the following quote:

Bill: I think er, as I said the one I mainly watch is Sargon, because he’s interesting. He was talking about how erm, and he also owns up for his mistakes cos he was talking about Lush, you know the beauty products?

Mary: Yeah, yeah.

Bill: Erm, in I think it was Cardiff, they had some woman standing around in a er, fem, it just says feminist t-shirt, and people were saying she was false to wear it, but he took a photo and pretty much complained to lush about it, but people found her- that woman specifically and started, you know attacking her and he pretty much had a go at all of his viewers saying 'how dare you attack her. I've told you before multiple times do not attack these people' and he openly apologised to that woman for doing that.

Mary: That's interesting.

Bill: Yeah, so he's very aware of his own mistakes. He's very, you know, self-aware. He doesn't just think he's a god.

Although Bill was the only participant to express explicit support of anti-feminist commentators, the discourses espoused by men's rights activists and the men's rights movement were taken up by a number of other participants, even where the men's rights movement or activists were not explicitly referenced. As this section has shown, anti-feminist sentiments resonated more broadly in other participant's accounts, particularly in relation to contemporary feminist projects. Taking this further, the next section explores how in spite of acknowledgement of the gendered inequalities faced by women, some participants also held views which assumed that it is now men who are unfairly discriminated against and disadvantageously positioned in the gender order, often due to women's increased standing in society.

3.6 The rise of reverse sexism

As the last section discussed, some participants spoke negatively about feminist projects, noting feeling demonised and attacked by feminism and feminists. Closely related to this were assumptions pertaining to a supposed gendered double standard, whereby ironically, men were perceived as suffering at the hands of both feminism *and* sexism. Against the backdrop of postfeminist logics, which assumes gender equality has been achieved, notions of "reverse sexism" can be said to rest upon the assumption that women's success has gone so far that it is now men who face gender discrimination (Anderson, 2014). Indeed, one interviewee, Dave, spoke of the ways in which men may feel "like they've lost their position in society." Not surprisingly, however, double standards against men were often emphasised and accentuated, whilst cases of women's disadvantage were omitted or rendered invisible all together (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). Jim, for example, spoke of the ways in which being a man serves as a detriment to getting a job in the aviation sector. Jim says:

Jim: This might sound counter-intuitive, but a lot of job stuff is easier if I was a woman. Like when I did want to become a pilot, things are stacked by and large in your favour if you are a woman. Like, British Airways have this very sought after apprentice, not apprentice but candidate scheme where they sort out everything. They sort out training and stuff. And in an interview you're 20 times more likely to get hired if you're a woman.

Jim goes on to give an example of a female friend getting a job over a male colleague, as the following quote shows:

Jim: I do have a specific example that happened recently where, I can't say if it happened because of gender, but I can only - it's the only thing I can think of.

There's a flight school centred in Leeds/Bradford international and two of my friends applied for a job there. The difference between them being a man and a woman and they're both on the same course - very similar CV's except the CV of the man was a slightly better because of more relevant and recent work experience, but only one of them got the job interview.

Mary: And who got the job?

Jim: (Laughs)

Mary: The woman?

Jim: Yeah. She feels a bit bad about it...

Jim's account resonates with postfeminist sentiments which allege a new gender order in which "reverse sexism" and gendered double standards positions men as the losers (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). In line with this, Jim contends that sexism has in effect been reversed to favour women over men with regard to employment and hiring decisions. Interestingly, he notes that equal opportunity and diversity management policies have detrimentally impacted himself, his male friend and presumably his male colleagues, yet he fails to contextualise this in relation to women's existing disadvantage within this sector given their historically low participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Given that this is the only time that Jim speaks of the gendered aspects of labour market participation, it is noteworthy that he calls attention to the presumed negative effects that equal opportunities schemes have had on men, whilst omitting men's structural privilege in relation to women's over-representation in low-paid, low-skilled employment.

What is more, he presumes that his friend has been employed on the basis of her gender alone, refuting the possibility that she was offered the position on merit. Jim's account somewhat reflects wider neoliberal socio-political shifts or what McRobbie (2009: 57) terms, the "new sexual contract." This is said to encourage women to grasp opportunities and new found powers in employment, education, consumer culture and sex under the stipulation that this is exchanged for feminism (McRobbie, 2009). Indeed, for Jim, the supposed privileging of women is set against the backdrop that feminism has been won, which by implication serves to indicate that it is no longer needed (McRobbie, 2004).

Bill also spoke of how men were at a disadvantage with regard to child custody cases, fitting with themes which have emerged in recent years from the men's rights movement and organisations like Fathers4justice.

His quote is as follows:

Bill: I guess one thing that I'd have happen would be child custody cases go equal ways, rather than it being, because if you look at most statistics now it says it mostly goes towards women, because obviously they birth the child. So, they think that they know how to care for them more when they might be the one who works, but the guy looks after it, but they don't take that into account and I think that's a bit stupid. So that'd definitely be something that I'd change. Obviously there's all these things that society thinks men have to do that need to change and that'd be gone. It'd be kind of like, "OK, you're a guy. Just don't break the law" and you'll be fine.

Here, Bill speaks of a perceived sexism against men with regard to custody cases, whereby mothers are at an unfair advantage because they are women. This is despite recent reports into court decisions on parental custody within the UK, which found that there was no indication of gender bias across a sample of 197 cases (Harding and Newnham, 2015). The report goes on to assert that whilst mothers are predominantly the primary care-giver in applications, this merely reflects that women are more likely to assume this role following the breakdown of a relationship. In this sense, Bill imagines a postfeminist world, whereby women are the winners and men the losers (Gill, 2007). Interestingly, however, he moves away from essentialist understandings of gender to make his case. Hence he repudiates the idea that women are confined to their reproductive capacities and therefore considered more caring and nurturing by proposing that men can equally fulfil parental roles. Indeed, Jordan (2018) notes how discourses of care and notions of the 'new man' and 'new father' masculinity interweave throughout father's rights movements. The postfeminist "double entanglement" (McRobbie, 2009: 12) of "feminist and anti-feminist discourse" (Gill, 2007: 161) is thus writ large here.

The next section moves on to explore young men's negotiations of masculine privilege and power.

3.7 Power, privilege and progress

Discussions relating to men's power and privilege were often difficult conversations for the young men to have, particularly given that they necessitated critical reflection of participants' own gender privilege (Casey et al., 2013). Moreover, though it is noteworthy that masculine privilege was acknowledged by some participants, many of these young men felt unable to challenge or remedy this. Alex, for example, recognised men's position of power within society,

yet despite not desiring to accept this, he voiced feeling unable to rectify this, as the following quote shows:

Alex: [...] like you have the privilege there. You don't really in a way accept it, but it's there and you can't really realistically do anything about it on your own and you know it's not right, but we have it, so...

Moreover, some participants viewed masculine privilege in conflicting ways as both structurally beneficial to their lives, and as a source of personal shame and guilt. Jack, for example, cited masculine privilege as the aspect of being a man that he most and least valued. In this sense, privilege for him was interpreted as somewhat of a double-edged sword – advantageous in one respect, but also invoking feelings of guilt on the other. His excerpt is as follows:

Jack: What parts of being a man do I value? I don't know, obviously I'm in a position of privilege, which I'm not pleased with, but it is what it is. Yeah.

Mary: OK. Cool. And what part of being a man do you least value?

Jack: The unfair privilege I guess that has been given. Like I don't think men should, like for instance, in like work like, you know men do get paid better generally. They do generally find it easier to find jobs I guess in certain industries, because just they're a man, which I don't think is right whatsoever. So I guess the advantages that males get as opposed to females I guess.

Though Jack acknowledges masculine privilege and inequitable gender relations with regard to labour market employment, echoing Alex, his quote demonstrates a feeling of powerless as to how to change this (Pleasants, 2011). This is underscored when Jack states, "it is what it is." Another interviewee, Mat, gave a similarly conflicting response. In the following quote, he states that he most values the privilege of being a man, but then goes on to speak critically of his position of power as a man and how this disproportionately benefits him with regard to labour market participation and pay:

Mary: what aspects of being a man do you most value?

Mat: I guess the privilege of it. Like, especially like recently, I guess coming to terms with like what it actually means. Obviously as we're growing up, like all my friends are 17 or 18 - it's getting to that point where jobs and life lessons are becoming more playable because we're not kids anymore. So there's things like, just like job availability, pay differences and things. I'm just recognising that I have that

privilege. Like, it's not something that I'm proud of, that's what annoys me. Like I can't be happy with that because it's just sad for everyone else.

Mary: What do you least value about being a man?

Mat: Having that privilege. Just like that women and other genders and things are being discriminated against and you kind of feel that way because you didn't choose it. Like I'm happy that I am a male, but not because of my position of power. Like it upsets me that I feel alienated when I shouldn't be. Like it's stupid that I feel that way, but it's because I want to be able to relate to that even though I physically can't.

Though it is noteworthy that Mat critically reflects on masculine power and inequitable gender relations, given that he asserts that he did not "choose" or ask for his privilege, it is as though he subsequently decides that he does not "*deserve* to feel guilty" (Pleasants, 2011 :235, original emphasis). As he states that it is "stupid" that he feels "alienated", and that he "shouldn't" feel like this, it is as though he becomes somewhat defensive of his position. For Pleasants (2011), given that normative masculinity requires men to appear powerful and in control, guilt when discussing privilege may serve to intensify defensiveness in that it compels men to not only be reflexive of their own actions and beliefs, but also "threatens their masculinity by making them feel powerlessness" (2011: 235). Mat's discussion of masculine privilege translates to feelings of hurt and frustration, because he feels he cannot "physically" relate to the discrimination women experience because he is a man.

Pleasants (2011) also asserts that through a 'discourse of guilt' young men may express an inability to challenge or resist masculine privilege when discussing this as these participants have shown. For both Mat and Jack, although they both acknowledge that they inhabit a structurally advantaged group, they feel unable to undermine the systems of power of which they are both knowingly a part. As such, there is little understanding or knowledge of how to further gender equality or social change, despite a clear desire to do so (Pleasants, 2011). For Pleasants (2011), where men are positioned as feminist allies or given opportunity to improve with gender equality in mind, such discourses of guilt can potentially be productive of positive social change. The importance of positioning young men as potential agents of feminist and social change when attempting to unpick and deconstruct gender relations and systems of power is thus underscored (Pleasants, 2011).

With this in mind, Sahib stated that the aspect of being a man that he most valued was being an advocate for marginalised groups. His quote is as follows:

Sahib: I think being an advocate. Like being that kind of voice for people like whatever gender, race or sexuality minority, being that person, that man you are you have to help those in need. If you're actually on the top of hierarchy, you have to help the ones on the bottom.

Given that Sahib positions himself as an advocate and ally of marginalised groups, he is able to be "that person" who can provide help and support to others. He goes on to assert that given that he is in a structurally advantageous position that he is able to help those who are disadvantaged and less privileged than he is. It is through situating himself as an advocate that Sahib asserts himself as an agent of positive social change and as someone who can contribute to challenging inequalities.

Jacob, on the other hand, asserted that he felt he should utilise his privilege to further himself. Though there was a textural feeling of guilt also present in Jacob's account, in contrast to the participants previously discussed, he felt that this resulted in pressure to "take advantage of the fact" that he had been "given this privilege". Jacob's quote is as follows:

Jacob: It's difficult because there's a juxtaposition to being privileged. It's like all the privilege you get means that you have this massive weight upon your shoulders - if you're a man like me who believes that everyone should be paid the same rate for the job, and everyone should be able to get the same job, and so on and so forth. So there's this massive difficulty in going, it's like a guilt that I know that I can, I know that all across the world, males are allowed to do more and be more and erm, I kind of like, sometimes when I think about that and how that is, it kind of puts this weight upon your shoulders to feel like you should take advantage of the fact that you've been given this privilege to do this. Do you know what I mean?

In this excerpt, whilst Jacob demonstrates recognition and indeed a feeling of guilt with regard to the privileges that being a man affords him, Jacob states that he must take advantage of this. In contrast to asserting that this is something he must resist or change, he states that he feels he must reinforce this. Also noteworthy is that Jacob momentarily shifts between feminist and anti-feminist discourses (Gill 2007, McRobbie, 2009). On the one hand, he positions himself as egalitarian and supportive of equal pay and labour market participation, whilst also critiquing men's globally advantageous positionality, yet he then goes on to assert that he should himself strive to inhabit those very same positions of power.

Another participant, Tom, also spoke reflexively about his own privilege as a man, again in relation to the labour market, yet he also discussed issues relating to sexual violence and

harassment. In the following quote, Tom speaks of the relative feelings of safety he experiences with regard to women being more likely to experience violence or harassment when walking home at night:

Tom: OK. Privileged is a fairly obviously one. There is an incredible privilege and I'm very aware. Like I walk my friends, well I walk all my friends home after a night out, but particularly with my female friends, I insist on walking them home regardless of where they're going [...] I'm going to walk them home. Or if it's out to Harehills I will, because I'm particularly conscious of the horrific precautions that have to be taken as a woman. I mean there's obviously a lot of fears as a man as well, but the, it's a lot less effectively. So I'm very aware of my privilege. I'm aware that in some ways I'm going to be probably better at work. I'm going to be, I mean it depends where I am, but in a very traditional work environment, I am probably going to get it better.

Tom demonstrates significant awareness and recognition of inequitable gender relations with regard to the labour market, as well as women's increased risk of sexual harassment and violence as perpetrated predominantly by men. Although this is noteworthy, Tom's discussion is also problematically contextualised amidst a discourse of male protectionism. Indeed, a number of participants maintained an investment in traditional gender identities, particularly the idea that men are 'protectors' who are there to care for women both financially and physically. Another interviewee, Kai, for example, stated:

Kai: I like being big and strong. It feels good. I went out last night in Sheffield with my girlfriend and there were two of her mates there who are both tiny. All three of them are tiny. And it felt good that I'm like, the bodyguard. I really like that.

The narrow models of masculinity illustrated in Tom and Kai's account position women as in need of protection, promoting the idea that they are devoid of the capacity to look after themselves. The assumption that women are weak and vulnerable, whilst men are strong is thus underlined (Pascoe and Hollander, 2016). What is more, such understandings can be said to inspire men to utilise their (supposed) strength for 'good', in the form of the protection of women (Messner, 2016, Pascoe and Hollander, 2016). Significant in Tom's account then, is the way in which he couches his statement in gender equality by performing a somewhat artificial gentlemanliness embedded in traditional notions of masculinity as chivalrous and noble. Indeed, another participant, Kai, spoke of feeling unmanly because he had not stopped to pick up women who were walking home in the countryside after being out at a pub. Though understood

by the young men as respectful, or perhaps the 'right' thing for a man to do, such beliefs can be said to perpetuate gender binaries, which position men/women as strong/weak, protector/protected, independent/dependent and superior/inferior. Such narratives also illustrate the entanglement of new and old discourses of masculinity within contemporary times; issues around sexual violence are acknowledged and condemned, whilst at the same time the cultures that inform these same issues are reinforced. Moreover, there is little broader discussion relating to wider social change or that responsibility should be placed on perpetrators.

Tim also spoke of the relative freedom he experiences as man with regard to personal safety, whilst also reinforcing the notion that women need to be 'protected'. Tim says:

Tim: Hmmm. I mean I guess it's quite a specific thing that I value about being a man, but erm, I feel like if you're a man or a boy your parents have a lot, I think you have a lot more freedom in your life in terms of when you can go out and erm, I dunno I was speaking to a girl about it recently and she was like "you have no idea like how protective my parents are over me" and it's true that they kind of should be. Like they shouldn't allow their daughter maybe to walk home really really late at night on their own, because they're probably more vulnerable. And erm, yeah that's probably something that I value, that I don't even have to think about, like me being vulnerable.

Similarly to Tom, Tim agrees that his friend's parents "should" be protective over her and that they shouldn't "allow" her to walk home late at night. She is positioned as "vulnerable" and thus in need of protection, something which Tim feels is unnecessary for him given his perceived lack of vulnerability as a man. What is more, for both Tim and Tom, onus and responsibility is placed upon women to manage perceived threats from men in the form of risk management and risk avoidance (Powell, 2007). In this sense, there is a resounding silence with regard to the possibility that it is men that should alter their behaviour, or that there should be societal change more broadly.

Jacob similarly spoke of being privileged in terms of not having to worry about personal safety or sexual prejudice as much as women, as the following quote shows:

Mary: What do you enjoy most about being a man?

Jacob: Erm, I guess having the stability, just because you don't have to worry about the pressures so much as sexual prejudice and things. So there's a lot of stigma

around young people going out and stuff, just after a certain time. I know my mum wouldn't feel comfortable with my sister going out after 10 by herself or something, but I do it constantly and obviously at first she was like "just be wary and things" but as I've grown up, it's "you're 18 now, go ahead". But I know if it was my sister at 18, she'd still be a bit "just be careful what you do." So I can enjoy that as my privilege. That I don't have to be so worried about predators or something.

Jacob nods to understanding the gendered dynamics of personal safety and sexual prejudice, signalling acknowledgement and engagement of debates around sexual violence, whilst also recognising how he is advantageously situated here due to being a man. Yet, whilst participants spoke about their privilege, this was often regarded as something not to relinquish, but rather something that women should aspire to achieve. In this sense, men were often positioned at the centre of gendered power dynamics; they were always the norm, centre and the sign (Davies, 2017). When asked what an ideal world for a man would look like, for example, Jacob responded, "to be like on the same level as women, or for them to be on the same level as us I suppose." Jim similarly answered:

Jim: [...] More equality, I guess, because with a lot of stuff, we're too far ahead. Not necessarily knock down notches but women brought up, if that makes sense.

In this sense, whilst Jim believes in gender equality and that women should be equal to men, he fails to see that men's position of privilege within gendered power dynamics contributes to and sustains the oppression of women. Indeed, Jacob, though having articulately reflected on masculine privilege earlier in the interview, spoke of gender equality in similar terms. Similarly to Jim, Jacob's view is largely androcentric as his stance posits 'male-as-norm', whereby masculinity is both naturalised, unquestioned and revered (Gough, 1998).

Notwithstanding this, in Jim's account as in other participants, there was a sense that the young men desired and wished for a more gender equitable society. Mike, for example, spoke of his hopes for gender equality in the following quote:

Mike: I think a world without prejudice in a sense of... A world where all men operated on a same wave-length of equal, equalness... Where there would be no need for feminism because it wasn't needed and there was no inequality between the sexes. That's an ideal world for me.

Some participants also asserted their personal support of feminism, and also other feminist men. Jacob, for example, expressed looking up to and respecting a musician he characterised as a “feminist kind of person.” His quote is as follows:

Jacob: Erm, there's a rapper called J Cole that I really like. He's quite big in America and he talks, all of things are quite close to home. They're all relatable to any kind of social situation. He talks a lot about family things. He set up a, he's bought his old house back from when we was growing up and he's set it up as a hostel for single mums and stuff. So I really respect him as a feminist kind of person.

Other participants went as far as to position themselves as feminist allies. Tom, for instance, spoke of being a member of a gender equality society, whilst another participant, Sahib, stated that one of his main interests was feminism. Sahib also went on to explicitly express hostility towards sexism and racism as the following quote demonstrates:

Sahib: Sexism and racism [...] Racism is definitely something that I'm really strongly against. And like erm, just from where I've grown up in Chapelton and Harehills, like I've not had the chance to find racism. Like if I was it wouldn't be right and I've known that from the go. So if a friend that I'd maybe been friends with just recently, and they had said something a bit out of line, that would just be the cut-off point straight away and I would happily stand up to them. And with sexism and things, if they called a women something derogatory or even something to men, I'd just be like, “you know that's not right”. I maybe wouldn't cut them off, maybe that would be my kind of point to kind of correct them and say what's going on, but yeah that kind of thing it just doesn't appeal to me – especially from a man.

Noteworthy in Sahib's account is that he states that he would willingly challenge friends who held sexist or racist views, suggesting significant resistance to these types of views. His pro-feminist politics also transcends personal change alone, moving towards collective responsibility to challenge gender and racial inequality amongst men (Pease, 2000). It is also noteworthy that Sahib openly expresses resistance to sexism and racism within the context of the male peer group, as his extract is taken from a focus group comprising four other young men. As such, his statement is particularly demonstrative of resistance to normative models of masculinity, standing in contrast to studies which argue that the male peer group is space in which misogyny and sexism is frequently enacted (Ghail, 1996).

3.8 Conclusion

To summarise, notions of 'natural' sex difference and biological essentialism remained central to these young men's understandings of gender, serving to inform their gender politics and delineate the boundaries of social change. In line with postfeminist logics, a number of participants viewed men and women as inherently different, often on the basis of pop psychology or popular-scientific discourses, which served as a means by which to validate and substantiate wider gender inequality. Whilst some of the young men voiced support of feminism in their accounts, this was often enveloped in the idea that feminism only relates to women gaining equal status with men in albeit different roles. As such, these understandings were set against the backdrop of naturalised gender difference. The majority of participants remained largely silent with regard to more contemporary feminist debates which posit gender identities as fluid, unfixed and more importantly, open to cracks, fissures and change. Moreover, a number of participants voiced explicit disdain towards more contemporary feminist projects. Taken together, most participants failed to look beyond structural oppression within the workplace when discussing gender politics.

Where feminism was discussed, this was often dichotomously positioned as either reasonable, moderate and fair; pursuing 'real' gender equality, or extreme, fanatical and totalizing; serving as a means by which to exert female power and domination. Old tropes of 'us' and 'them' were thus used in such a way that participants were able to position themselves as egalitarian, whilst simultaneously drawing upon anti-feminist discourses. What is more, one participant professed to being an active follower of 'alt right' anti-feminist commentators, whilst ironically positioning himself as in favour of a certain type of liberal feminism. Although only one participant explicitly referenced men's rights activism, the discourses which can be said to underpin these movements were suffused in other participants' accounts, most notably through notions of 'misandry', 'reverse sexism' and female supremacy. Yet there were a number of participants who expressed gender equitable views, with some professing to be keen allies and supporters of feminism. There was noteworthy acknowledgement of masculine privilege, though feelings of guilt and powerlessness to enact change pervaded these discussions. Moreover, whilst there was dialogue of women's disadvantage in the labour market as well as risks relating to interpersonal violence, with regard to the latter, participants often reemployed traditional constructions of masculinity when discussing this. Problematically then, where participants did recognise that women were at increased likelihood to experience sexual violence, focus was very much on women's supposed vulnerability, which was seen to necessitate men's protection. Protectionism was thus positioned as chivalrous, and as ultimately signifying 'good' and 'healthy'

masculinity. Given that focus was largely on women within these discussions, the role of perpetrators was obscured as responsibility was placed on women to resist potential violence or on other men to protect them.

This chapter has considered the relationship between participants' understandings of sex, gender and gender politics, giving particular focus to how these were informed by postfeminist logics and discourses. Whilst it has drawn attention to participants' investment in 'natural' sex difference, such understandings also coalesced with contradicting accounts of gender, as participants' demonstrated significant reflexivity regarding masculine gender norms. As such, I now move on to the next empirical chapter to consider how young men negotiate contemporary discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality.

4 Gender norms

4.1 Introduction

Whilst there are multiple ways of 'doing' gender (Butler, 1990), with albeit no one, universal or uniform model of masculinity, there still endures "a symbolic ideal-type of masculinity that imposes, on all other forms of masculinity (and femininities), meanings about [...] identity" (Aboim, 2016: 2). As such, although both masculinities (and femininities) are diverse and heterogeneous, there remains an assumed "natural gender order" (Whitehead, 2002: 5), which (re)produces certain gendered discourses, making available certain subject positions. However, given that these processes are by no means stable or fixed and are therefore laid open to contestation and change, processes of power, subjectivity and identity are continually open to being reworked and revised. Given contemporary shifts relating to the social, cultural, economic and political lives of men (and women), alongside a rise in public and popular discourse around contemporary masculinity, discussions pertaining to what it means to be a man, or what exactly masculinity 'is' have burgeoned. It is against this backdrop that this chapter seeks to explore young men's understandings of contemporary discourses of masculinity, how these shape processes of masculine subject formation, and how these inform subsequent gendered practices. It will bring to light the ways in which young men can be regarded as "subjects-in-transition" (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 148), who utilise both traditional and emerging discourses of masculinity simultaneously and therefore often balance between conflicting and divergent subject positions (Gough, 2018). In this sense, this chapter aims to emphasise that contemporary masculine identity formation is contradictory, complex and fraught with tensions, given that individuals are so tenuously positioned between competing discourses within current times.

This chapter first explores young men's understandings and negotiation of discourses of masculinity, focusing on how this shaped and regulated their gendered performances. In this sense, it focuses on the effects of discourses of masculinity, or the social processes by which men's practices come into being (Whitehead, 2002). After this, it discusses how participants discursively distanced *and* aligned simultaneously with normative discourses of masculinity, drawing attention to the contradictions and complexity at play with regard to contemporary masculine identity formation. It then moves on to explore how traditional notions of masculinity, closely tied to employment and the 'male bread winner' discourse, endured for a number of participants, whereby they were compelled by notions of gender, race, and class, and normative understandings of masculinity instilled by family networks. It highlights how participants were often critical of these discourses in that they were viewed as expectations rather than desires.

Building on from this, it explores the shift to neoliberal aspirations and values, which centre and celebrate perseverance, tenacity and success through strife, to the exclusion of wider structural factors. As such, it examines how the young men constructed their subjectivities as increasingly individualised and democratised, and no longer tied to notions of work or providing. The last section of the chapter highlights the body as a key site from which young men construct their masculine identities, whilst drawing attention to the ways in which this remains bound by notions of muscularity and subsequent feelings of inadequacy or fleeting success.

4.2 Becoming gendered

Woven throughout most of the young men's accounts was a sense that there were certain narrowly defined expectations associated with being a man, informed by dominant constructions of masculinity, which participants felt compelled to adopt and perform to others. This heavily mediated and constrained the ways in which the young men felt they could speak, look and act, and was often compounded by fears of homophobic reprisal (see Chapter 6) and notions of "failed masculinity" (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 188) particularly in the event that the young men did not conform to and perform what was regarded as 'correct' masculinity. Tim succinctly articulates this in the following excerpt:

Tim: I feel like there's way of speaking and ways of acting. I feel like when you're born a man you've got to take on a vague structure, or a vague personality structure that requires, that meets the requirements of being masculine. And I feel like, yeah, you can't truly be yourself if you're trying to kind of meet this quota.

Echoing Simone de Beauvoir (1997 [1949]: 295) and her assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", Tim reflexively notes the process of 'becoming' gendered. As such, he highlights how "gender is an aspect of identity that is gradually acquired" (Butler, 1986: 35). Tim conveys having to embody a certain "personality structure" that corresponds and conforms to "the requirements of being masculine", which results in him feeling that he is unable to "truly be" himself. As Nayak and Kehily (2013: 188) assert, "the styling of the body through gestures, actions and utterances is a primary technique through which gender is performed." Yet, as Tim highlights, this does not necessarily correlate to being able to perform gender as one truly desires (Nayak and Kehily, 2013). Tim's account emphasises the discord he feels with regard to expectations to perform and practice masculinity in a certain way, and his own capacity to live out his life as he wants. Here, the constraining elements of "gender projects", whereby young people must become "gender competent" (Connell, 2002: 81-82) is underscored. Indeed, scholars have highlighted the anguish and indeed the danger in 'doing' gender differently and

straying from the confines of normative constructions of masculinity (Butler, 1990, Renold, 2004).

In chorus with Tim, Adam also drew attention to the ways in which gender constructs demand that he dresses and acts in certain way. His excerpt is as follows:

Mary: What parts of being a man do you least like?

Adam: Probably some social pressure of what male, or masculinity is perceived to be as in modern society [...] As in like masculinity, or feminine aspects of people, or if someone like expects you to be or act more masculine in situations where like... I don't know, or just like dress in a certain way, or act a certain way, or even like in what kind of trade or business that you can associate with. But then again that can be the same with feminine pressure - people with femininity.

Writ large in Adam's account is the pressure he feels to perform 'correct' masculinity. As Schrock and Schwalbe (2009: 279) state, to be "credited as a man", individuals must "put on a convincing manhood act." In line with this, Adam's statement places emphasis on the dramaturgical way in which he works to performatively signify a masculine identity within a variety of contexts because this is "expected" of him. As Butler (1990) argues, gender is discursively constructed into a distinct and oppositional binary, whereby certain bodies, performances and desires are assumed to uniformly correspond to the categories of 'man' and 'woman', which are symbolically bound to an arsenal of meanings.

Whilst Adam's account highlights this, it is also noteworthy that he critiques and problematises these assumptions. Further, that Adam draws attention to how such pressures are experienced by both men *and* women. This suggests that his understanding moves beyond individualised notions of men's "wounds" (Messner, 1997: 19), an understanding which has become increasingly predominant in public discourse on men and masculinities (O'Neill, 2015a), to recognising the wider gender order and gendered power relations. This is significant given the recent spread and surge in popularity of men's rights discourse, which predicated itself on notions of misandry excluding discussion of gender inequality with regard to women. As the previous chapter demonstrated, a number of participants drew upon discourses utilised by the men's rights movement, with one explicitly referencing a number of men's rights activists in consideration of his understanding of masculinity.

With regard to the young men's acknowledgement of how certain constructs of gender compelled them to perform masculinity in certain ways, also notable was participants'

discussion of the ways in which displaying practices or expressions associated with femininity were assumed to be non-concomitant with being a man. Tim, for example, voices this in the following quote:

Tim: I mean to generalise, I'd say it's kind of the expectation to be masculine. Like I feel like it's quite difficult for a guy to be feminine, and there's a lot of assumptions made about you if you are more feminine, or not as masculine as everyone else. Like there's assumptions made about your personality and about, I dunno, just about you as a person. And erm, I'd say that's probably the only thing that I don't rate about being a guy. That you can't be as feminine.

Resonating with Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, as discussed in Chapter 1, Tim articulates the process by which the hegemony of masculinity is dependent upon and solidified by the subordination of femininity, particularly given that one is judged negatively if they are "more feminine". Echoing Connell (1995) further, Tim contextualises expectations of masculinity in relation to the marginalisation of other masculinities which do not adhere to gendered ideals, for example, when someone is "not as masculine as everyone else." Indeed, Schippers (2007) asserts that this theorisation of the hierarchies *within* masculinities, as well as how masculinities are positioned in relation to femininities, is one of Connell's (1995) most important contributions. At an interesting theoretical juncture, however, Schippers (2007) asserts that whilst for Connell (1995) masculinity and femininity are defined in relation to one another, for Butler (1990), emphasis is placed upon the ways in which heterosexual desire cements masculinity and femininity into a hierarchical binary. In other words, men and women are supposedly 'naturally' attracted to one another based on gender difference (Butler, 1990).

As Schippers (2007: 90) asserts, "heterosexual desire is defined as the basis of masculinity [...] but it is also, and importantly, the basis of the difference between and complementarity of femininity and masculinity". This is key when thinking about masculinity, given the centrality of heterosexuality to masculine subjecthood, as discussed at more length in Chapter 5. Moreover, though Tim does not state this explicitly within this excerpt, fear of being seen as feminine was often inextricably tied to the association of effeminate masculinities with same-sex relationships, and thus fears relating to being perceived by others as being gay (Fulcher, 2017). Sahib, for example, who was also present with Tim during one focus group stated, "if you have your legs one over the other in a more feminine stance, you'd be instantly badged as gay". Indeed, this "homoshysteria" (Anderson, 2009) was often at the forefront of the young men's minds with regard to their gender presentation, as discussed in more depth in Chapter 6. As

such, gender for these young men was “habitually embodied” and corporeally performed and can thus be viewed as an “embodied art” (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 188). Hence, participants spoke at length of carefully and vigilantly choreographing their gendered performances so as to correspond with ‘acceptable’ forms of masculinity. The male peer group was also cited as a heavily regulatory space in which gender was policed and gender norms enforced, as the next section explores.

4.3 The male peer group

The male peer group was regarded as a hierarchical space of both loss and gain, whereby the young men felt compelled to demonstrate physical strength and dexterity, most notably through fighting and sport, as a means by which to signify masculinity and garner reputation and standing amongst peers (Flood, 2008). What is more, participants spoke of having to exhibit and demonstrate heterosexuality here as well (see Chapter 5). This is exemplified in the following quote from Ken:

Mary: Where would you say you learn to be a man?

Ken: At school, friends. Friends particularly, because if you get it wrong, they bully you. If you get it right you gain friends and status. So you learn quite quickly from, rather than friends I'd say peers, because they're not necessarily your friends. They're the people who are of a similar age group and a similar background who are telling you how you've got to behave and that doesn't necessarily just mean male peers - and female peers, in that by going through high school and stuff, you kind of get the who gets the girlfriend based on how they behave, how they are. You know if you behave in the right way you're more likely to get a girlfriend. They reinforce that by going “yeah”.

Mary: So the male peer group is quite,

Ken: Yeah, the male peer group, and there's no kind of way around that. In the male peer group, you're pretty much meant to get involved in football or whatever sport it is that's big at the time or within that group, and expectations that you'll at some point in your high school career have a fight with another guy.

Mary: so fighting and sports?

Ken: Yeah. If you don't win that fight then you're less than a man, that kind of thing.

Mary: And you said not just men, but women as well?

Ken: Yeah, women as well. If you play sports then you're more likely to be liked, and if you don't then you're less likely to.

Explicit within this extract is Ken's assumption that there is a "right" and "wrong" way to be a man, which is either rewarded with status or policed through bullying respectively. For Ken, this necessitates that he regulate his gendered performances and behaviour in ways that align with dominant constructions of masculinity. Also notable is the way in which Ken differentiates between male friends and male peers, stating that it is predominantly the latter, those "of a similar age group and a similar background who are telling you how you've got to behave." Correspondingly, a number of participants spoke of their close male friendships as providing spaces in which the young men could transcend the confines of normative notions of masculinity, which have traditionally positioned men as emotionally despondent and detached. The male peer group, however, which was often spoken of as an abstract entity comprised of 'imaginary' others, continued to be viewed as a heavily regulated space (Flood, 2008). As Flood (2008: 342) writes, for young men, "[...] other men are the audience, always imagined and sometimes real."

Although Ken regards male peers as the principle regulators of masculinity amongst young men, women are also seen to regulate how young men 'do' masculinity. However, this is narrowly demarcated in terms of their positionality as potential (hetero)sexual partners, which is in and of itself a marker of successful masculinity, as is discussed further in the next chapter. Once again, there is an entanglement here between masculinity and heterosexuality; heterosexual relationships with women are seen as not only borne out of displays of 'successful' masculinity, but are also viewed as signifying 'successful' masculinity as they in turn bolster masculine capital amongst male peers, consequently establishing young men's status within the peer group. This is exemplified when Ken states "if you behave in the right way you're more likely to get a girlfriend. They reinforce that by going 'yeah'." Though female peers are seen to be implicated in the policing of masculinity, they do so in ways dissimilar to the male peer group. Contrastingly, women are in effect the scaffolding that acts to buttress masculine capital, serving as props in young men's demonstrations of their ability to enter (hetero)sexual relationships.

Towards the latter part of Ken's discussion of his male peer group, he goes on to discuss the significance of fighting and sport. As has been widely documented, sport continues to feature as a key component to male peer group inclusion in a significant number of the young men's accounts (Swain, 2000, Keddie, 2005, Warrington and Younger, 2011).

When discussing what made a man 'unmanly', Jacob, for example, responded in the following way:

Jacob: I guess maybe not liking sport. Maybe being a bit more artistic than that kind of thing [...]

Mary: So what happens when you don't sort of fit that stereotype then? What's it like?

Jacob: I guess you get put into a certain group. Like I've never done sports, it's just not in my body or something. I'm just physically not capable of being coordinated. So in like primary school it wasn't so much of a big deal, but coming into year 7 it's a way to be popular. So I didn't have that, and I just thought I was kind of cool to talk to, but no one knew that because that was it if I didn't play rugby or football, I wasn't 'in.'

Here, Jacob speaks of the ways in which certain practices continue to be gendered. Hence, disliking sport, or being artistic is said to result in a man being unmasculine. Jacob highlights that once he reached the age of about eleven, that not playing sport or being physically dexterous resulted in male peer group exclusion. Thus he wasn't "cool to talk to." He wasn't "in". Ken, similarly spoke of being excluded and relegated to the "out group" because of a lack of engagement with certain types of sport. Ken says:

Ken: [...] And so if you were in that conversation going "actually I know nothing about football" (*laughs*), or at rugby and you went "I don't know anything about that," you're kind of automatically in the out group. It's not necessarily given that if you're in the out group that you get bullied. There's man points isn't there. Everything you do which is manly is a point, that's how I see it. Everything that you do that isn't manly, you lose a point for. The less points you have the more likely you are to get bullied. And that's basically a reinforcement that you should behave in this way. If you start behaving in this way you'll get bullied less and then you'll be like "right OK."

Echoing Jacob, Ken states that not liking or being knowledgeable of sport results in being ostracised and consigned to the "out group." Once more, the hierarchical dynamics of the male peer group are shown. Ken goes on to describe how entry and inclusion to male peer group is dependent upon what he terms "man points" (Coy et al., 2013: 2), or what could otherwise be regarded as masculine capital. Where young men engage in or display performances that do not

adhere to dominant constructions of masculinity then, they “lose” points or capital and are thus at increased risk of bullying. The regulatory effects of gender policing are further stressed when Ken states that this is “basically a reinforcement that you behave in this way”.

Participants also underscored the hierarchical nature of the male peer group by employing terms such as “top dog” or “alpha male” to describe the different status laden positions young men can occupy within this context. In the following excerpt from Dan, for example, he explicitly states that within the majority of male peer groups, there is a delineated “dominance hierarchy”: His quote is as follows:

Dan: Like most male friend groups will have like a dominance hierarchy. So they’ll have like, one friend will be like the loser weird one and usually the top dog, he’ll like rip on the bottom one the most and so it’s like your assuming the role of like the leader of the pack but, in fact, you know, the jobs lie to get everybody to where they’re going sort of safely if you know what I mean? I think it’s just to establish themselves more as the alpha of the group.

Not only does Dan set out the tiered elements of the male peer group, he also highlights how the status of the “top dog” is often predicated on the subordination of the “loser weird one.” Echoing Connell (1995), it is through the marginalisation of supposedly subordinate members of the peer group that the status of the “top dog” is bolstered. Also noteworthy, is the way in which Dan draws upon popular-scientific discourses of the animal “pack” to describe the male peer group, utilising evolutionary psychology which draws upon non-human studies to denote human experience, as previously discussed in Chapters 1 and 3.

This section has explored how the male peer group continues to be a hierarchical context in which gender and sexual norms are policed and regulated. The next section moves on to discuss the ways in which participants discursively positioned themselves in relation to discourses of masculinity.

4.4 Contemporary masculine subjectivities

For many participants, there was a reticence to align themselves with hyper-masculinity, and in some cases, masculinity at all. One participant, Jack, for example, unequivocally distanced himself from normative masculinity throughout the interview, stating at one point that he would not describe himself as a “massive masculinity person.” Andy also stated that he disliked “that whole kind of big man attitude.” Aversion was also expressed to “macho” men who were often subsequently shunned as potential friends. Both Pat and Adam spoke of their dislike of “typical

alpha guys” and “macho people” respectively when discussing prospective friendships. Their quotes are as follows:

Pat: I don't know. People who just go out and always try and cause trouble all of the time, do you know what I mean? Your typical sort of alpha guys who've always got something to prove. I don't sort of like hanging around with them sort of people.

Adam: I don't like sleazy people. They fucking weird me out. Well they wind me up anyway. It's not really, I don't like sleazy fucking guys. I don't really like macho people as well to be honest.

Interestingly, although Adam clearly voices disliking “macho people”, during the interview he also drew upon dominant discourses of hetero-masculinity denoted by virility and phallogocentrism, referencing his penis at various points throughout. This type of hybridised masculine practice is suggestive of what Bridges and Pascoe (2014: 250) term “discursive distancing”, whereby young men distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity whilst simultaneously reaffirming gender inequality in subtler ways. Adam also draws attention to the contradictions and precarity inherent in present-day subject formation, whereby young men draw upon both traditional and contemporary discourses simultaneously. Soon after, Adam emphasised the importance of being able to “stand up for yourself”, whilst stressing that this should be done in an “intelligent” as opposed to a “macho way”. Hence, traditional discourses were also rearticulated and reframed to fit within modern understandings of masculinity, which it seemed, were no longer defined by machismo and hyper-masculinity, as in previous years.

Sahib similarly voiced feeling “put off” by “overt masculinity” with regard to his friendships with men, signalling distancing from hegemonic masculinity in the context of the male peer group. However, his reasoning for this was that it made him feel “under-shadowed”, emphasising the hierarchical nature by which the male peer group operates, as has been highlighted by scholars (Flood, 2008) and as the previous section showed. Mike similarly distanced himself from hegemonic masculinity, discussing how his male friendship group was a place of “androgyny”, where they “shy away” from gender constructs. In contrast to Sahib, however, Mike reflected on feeling uninfluenced and unfazed by the pressures of masculinity (Elliott, 2019), particularly when amongst other men who were members of his band. Yet, Mike went on to reveal that when he reflexively looked at himself as a separate entity to the group, he began to contemplate masculine expectations more. Mike says:

Mike: I mean personally I don't feel it on my day to day basis, because I shy away from that whole thing, because of the person I am and the people that I surround

myself with. We don't personally see it as that, we're sort of in our own bubble of whatever, androgyny or crazy, kooky wackiness. So we don't notice it, but when I retract from that and just sort of like separate myself out and pick myself out, then it really becomes apparent and I really start to see it.

Mike positions himself differently depending upon whether he views himself as a member of the male peer group, or as an individual. Interestingly, and contra to previous research which has highlighted the male peer group as a key site in which dominant hetero-masculinity is hierarchically performed (Flood, 2008), it is within this context that Mike disassociates from such discourses. Conversely for Mike, the male peer group is a space of “androgyny or crazy kooky wackiness.” It is only when in solitude and isolation that Mike begins to consider and note the pressures relating to constructions of masculinity. This highlights that the male peer group has the capacity to be a space of resistance to dominant discourses of masculinity, as well as a space in which these are upheld and reinforced. Such a view reverberates with the work of Renold (2004: 254), who highlights that young boys who perform masculinity in non-hegemonic ways often do so by seeking out “safe-spaces, and drawing upon collective peer group support and solidarity.” The band and its members can be said to provide this “safe space” for Mike.

Also noteworthy is that whilst Mike’s account could suggest that he genuinely feels detached from dominant constructions of masculinity, his aloofness and nonchalance could also in and of itself be symbolic of adherence to traditional constructions of masculinity. Indeed, writers such as Wetherell and Edley (1999: 352) have shown how subject positions which are “ordinary” or “rebellious”, generating distance from machismo, are often couched in traditionally masculine notions of autonomy, independence and rationality. With this in mind, writers such as Bridges and Pascoe (2014) highlight how hybrid masculine practices often represent stylistic deviations from gender norms, but that this does not necessarily signify ‘real’ shifts in power in terms of gender inequalities. In other words, that hybrid masculine practices allow some young, White, heterosexual men to construct themselves outside of the confines of systems of gender inequality by discursively creating space between themselves and hegemonic masculinity, whilst also reiterating gender inequality in subtler ways (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014).

Tom also asserted that a lot of his practices, such as writing emotionally driven music and spending time in gay bars were seen as “incredibly unmanly by traditional definitions.” Due to this, Tom rejected the assumption that certain practices would make a man ‘unmanly’, maintaining that he did not see gender in these terms. Noteworthy in Tom’s account, however, is the relationship between masculinity, femininity and homosexuality and how these were

never truly independent of each other (Connell, 1995, de Visser, 2009). Certainly, Connell (1995) has highlighted the hierarchical and relational nature of the gender order and how hegemonic masculinity is constructed, upheld and maintained by its association and separation from femininity and homosexuality, as discussed in Chapter 1. Consequently, women/girls and gay men are Othered, or as Connell (1995) terms it, “marginalised” and rendered “subordinate”. For Tom, it is that he composes “confessional” and “upsetting” music traditionally associated with femininity alongside spending time in gay bars that makes him unable to categorise himself as “manly”.

In this sense, there was an assumed irreconcilability between masculinity and femininity, which were more often than not viewed in binary, dichotomous terms. In a similar vein, de Visser (2009: 370) found that the young men in his study assumed that “one cannot be very masculine and very feminine” simultaneously. With this in mind, although Tom puts forward that he is an “unmanly” man, effectively distancing himself from masculinity, he says this in such a way as to define his supposed lack of masculinity on the basis that his practices are traditionally coded as feminine and gay. Though perhaps unintentionally, such an understanding inadvertently (re)produces the logic that masculinity and femininity, as well as masculinity and homosexuality are mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed. Moreover, the hierarchical relation between masculinity, femininity and homosexuality, whereby masculinity is always the norm, sign or defining category from which femininity and homosexuality are marked out is bolstered, echoing Simone de Beauvoir’s (1997[1949]: 16) assertion years ago that “he is the subject, he is the absolute – she is the other.”

The contradictory nature of masculine identity formation is further underscored, given that Tom paradoxically emphasised the importance of dominant constructions of masculinity to his own identity later on during the same interview, stating that having “a masculine identity is an important thing.” As will be discussed later on in this chapter, Tom also spoke of yearning to inhabit the breadwinner role. Hence, whilst Tom’s earlier account suggests that he is largely uninfluenced by gender norms, living in a way which may be deemed non-normative against the backdrop of dominant constructions of masculinity, further analysis of his interview points to a more paradoxical and contradictory picture. Similarly to Waling’s (2017) analysis of Australian men’s conceptualisation of masculinity and identity, there was often conflict between both the rejection and acceptance of aspirational forms of masculinity that are presented to young men. She goes on to assert that “men feel under pressure in relation to the reconciliation of ideals of masculinity but are reluctant to admit they themselves are affected” (Waling, 2017: 445). Indeed, Gill et al. (2005: 44, original emphasis) similarly argue that men are often “united” in

narratives which centre that they themselves are “*different*” to other men. Hence, men distance themselves from ‘other’ men by articulating their gendered identities through a “*grammar of individualism*” (Gill et al., 2005: 57, original emphasis). In this sense, though some participants stated that they did not engage with dominant constructions of masculinity and were, therefore, not influenced by these, closer reading of their responses, however, drew attention to inconsistencies inherent in this narrative, as Tom’s account has shown.

In Adam’s previous quote on the pressures of masculinity, he articulated feeling that there were certain ways of being a man that he felt he was expected to conform to. However, he later went on to assert that he was not actually affected by this. Adam says:

Adam: But it's something that actually doesn't bother me, but bothers other people. Do you understand like? I don't really like, whatever. Super mega whatever's (*laughs*).

Mary: Super mega whatever's - I've not heard that one before?

Adam: But like obviously it does. Like I think in some cases males do have to kind of act a bit macho. Do you understand like? In situations where I just think... I'd just rather do something else.

Once again highlighting the contradictory nature by which young men utilise conflicting discourses of masculinity, Adam can be said to attempt to precariously reconcile varying subject positions. He momentarily switches from reflexively discussing gendered ideals and pressures, to presenting himself as indifferent, unconcerned and unaffected by these. He then shifts to disclosing that he does indeed feel compelled to perform hyper-masculinity in certain situations despite being reticent to do so. Echoing Waling (2017), Adam initially acknowledges the constraints of gender but then goes on to assert that these have no influence on his life. However, when probed further, he rescinds his previous statement by stating that “obviously” he is affected by the expectations to be masculine that moments before he had cited. This sense of conflict and contradiction was also present when participants discussed their masculine identity in relation to the endurance of male bread winner discourse and employment, as the next section explores.

4.5 Compelled to work and provide

Moving on from the last section which focused upon the young men’s discursive distancing from masculinity, this section explores the ways in which gendered identity formation remained bound to traditional notions of masculinity predicated upon employment, ‘breadwinning’ and

'providing'. It highlights, however, that despite the endurance and compelling power of such discourses, most participants said that these were inconsistent and incompatible with their own lives. As such, fulfilling this role was, but for a few, viewed as an expectation rather than an aspiration.

Some of the young men's critiques of the male breadwinner discourse may in part be due to being precariously positioned occupationally in light of current levels of austerity, job insecurity and unemployment, though it is important to tread with caution here so as not to reproduce a "discourse of crisis and loss", which mourns the demise of masculine privilege" (Roberts, 2014: 7). This not only obscures women's enduring experiences of inequity with regard to economic gain throughout the life course and works to envelope women's continuing lack of representation in positions of power and seniority, but also negates women's historical and ongoing (dis)engagement with insecure job markets (Roberts, 2014). Moreover, scholars have asked "just how much masculinity by its very definition requires crisis as a means for re-establishing power and cultural legitimacy" (Roberts, 2014: 7). As such, scholars have suggested that the notion of 'masculinity in crisis' conceals the continued power of white, middle class masculinity inasmuch as it actually represents "a crisis of legitimation for *hegemonic* masculinity" (Evans and Riley, 2018: 999, original emphasis). Moreover, this perspective can be said to mirror postfeminist logics in that it posits masculinity as under threat largely due to women's gains in traditionally male-dominated spheres, as discussed in the previous chapter. In light of this, it feels important to note that the young men's accounts here are not posited through a discourse of 'masculinity in crisis', as this often operates to obscure the historical gendered nuances of power, privilege and loss. In other words, the 'masculinity in crisis' discourse assumes that men are the predestined proprietors of that which they have supposedly lost (in this case full labour market participation), without acknowledgement of women's historic marginalisation with regard to this sphere.

Conversely, moves away from employment and 'providing' as a key source of masculine identity seemed to be more indicative of a shift towards identity formation as predicated by gender expression, body image and appearance (Harvey et al., 2013, Evans and Riley, 2018), as will be discussed later on in this chapter. Yet, notwithstanding this shift, notions of masculinity defined and produced by employment, work and notions of the 'provider' still featured in a number of accounts as a 'successful' way of being a man despite the young men not necessarily aligning with this themselves. This was more so the case for working class participants, particularly given that such understandings were often generationally embedded and reproduced (Nixon, 2017). With this in mind, participants often drew upon both traditional and emerging discourses of

masculinity simultaneously (Gough, 2018), making their subject positions complex and contradictory. This is exemplified in the following quote from Tom:

Tom: the working class element around my town was very much you drop school at 16, you get an apprenticeship, you do that. And there's a lot of people I see on Facebook who are doing very well for themselves and it's fantastic and they're still doing that, but their definition of masculinity is intensely and inherently tied up in I am the worker. I am delivering - and it is classed. Like I'm the worker. I am providing for the family. I mean my dad is the main worker in my family, he always has been. So, I think to a certain extent there's a bit of that engrained in me, but I would be perfectly happy to be a stay at home dad. I would love to be a stay-at-home dad. It would be so good. Like stand around spending time with my child. What would be better than that? But nevertheless, there is a little of me that goes, because I mean I'm very hard-working by nature and I'm a saver and hopefully this summer I'm going to be going on holiday, and there's a part of me that goes "yes. I have succeeded as a man." I mean it's not in those exact words, but if I were to translate it I would say that's a large part of what comes out. I think that strain of, that kind of like provider is hugely built in, and it's gradually becoming less and less built in and I think men on the whole now are becoming less and less fearful of this empowered, earning woman, which is a generation divide as well, sure. Luckily my parents are very progressive.

Tom's account emphasises that there are limited opportunities and narrowly defined life trajectories for young working class men, centred upon manual labour and having a family. He states that for working class young men, work and being able to provide are key components to masculine identity, with employment operating as the vehicle by which men can inhabit the 'breadwinner' role. Indeed, the notion of the patriarchal 'breadwinner' was once inextricably seen as surplus cultural capital to the status work afforded men in and of itself (Nayak and Kehily, 2013). Tom states that this understanding is deep-rooted in him because this is the role his father occupied, yet he also voices that he would love to be a "stay-at-home dad", something he frequently mentioned throughout the interview. In this sense, his account brings to light feeling fractured and torn between traditional and contemporary subject positions.

Whilst wanting to move beyond traditional notions of masculinity that are inextricably tied to working and providing by, for example, becoming a stay-at-home dad, Tom articulates feeling in effect coerced by the gendered rewards that "hard work" offers him. In line with Gill et al. (2005:

45), whilst expressing “hostility to everything associated with the conventional: office, work, marriage, the 9 to 5 day”, he is also “simultaneously attracted to security in jobs and relationships.” In Tom’s instance, this attraction is heavily gendered and classed; though he wishes to be a stay-at-home-dad, there is “little bit” of him that compels him towards hard work and saving as this would result in him securely asserting that he has “succeeded as a man.” Indeed, one could assert that the “little bit” of himself that Tom speaks of could in fact represent the wider incentivising force of gender norms, which are not only wedded to individualised masculine notions of occupational success and accomplishment, but are also remunerated socially, economically and politically. By implication of this, alternatives are met with self-derision, as well as wider societal ridicule and regulation. Also notable is that Tom feels the need to explicitly attest to being a “hard-working” and “a saver” after stating that he aspired to be a stay-at-home dad. This resonates with Allen’s (2005a: 35) work on the “slippage between ‘hard’ and ‘softer’” displays of masculinity within interview settings, whereby young men attempt to manage vulnerability by simultaneously signifying their masculinity.

Tom’s account also resonates with hybrid masculinities theory (Demetriou, 2001, Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), as discussed in Chapter 1. Whilst appearing to signify progressiveness in that he challenges traditional models of masculinity predicated upon the ‘breadwinner’ role by wishing to be a stay-at-home dad, he also simultaneously undervalues and undermines domestic labour traditionally undertaken by women. Though perhaps unintentionally, Tom positions domestic labour and childcare more specifically as undemanding and stress-free. This is demonstrated when he states that being a stay-at-home dad “would be so good. Like stand around spending time with my child. What would be better than that?” As Tom then states that “nevertheless”, he is “hard working”, being the main carer of a child is positioned as though it stands at odds with hard work. Hence, he subtly reinforces gender inequality by fortifying the endemic devaluation of labour in the home, which is traditionally undertaken by women, despite at first appearing to support social change.

Another interviewee, Jacob, also voiced that having a successful career and associated possessions was expected of young men and was an aspect of masculinity that he found difficult to contend with. Jacob says:

Jacob: I don't get it myself, but I suppose socially there is a pressure to conform to that manly thing. Like you need to be successful because you're the man [...] I suppose career wise, maybe possessions. Just like having an all-round perfect image, like a bigger ego because you've earned it.

This excerpt highlights how masculinity is enduringly sutured to not only work and employment, but also success and wealth (Levesque, 2016). Against the backdrop of neoliberalism and consumerism, young people are now increasingly defining themselves by what they buy (Harvey et al., 2013), having shifted from being producers to consumers (Phoenix, 2004). Yet Jacob states that although he recognises this, he does not “get it” himself. Once again, we can see how discursive distancing from dominant forms of masculinity threaded throughout many of the young men’s accounts, yet that this was often due to participants’ reticence to admit they themselves were influenced by gendered constructs (Waling, 2017).

Another participant, Dom, was more explicit in his rejection of the male breadwinner discourse, stating that he least valued “that manly expectation to get a job, provide, that sort of thing.” Sahib also spoke critically of the expectation to be a “strong patriarchal figure” within the context of his own family. He stated that the pressures associated with this was the part of being a man that he least valued, explicitly challenging this conception of masculinity as something he would himself enjoy or wish to practice. On the contrary, Sahib highlighted how the notion of the male “breadwinner” was discursively embedded and generationally “ingrained” in both his family and culture, as the following quote shows:

Sahib: I think culturally, like personally for me, like the man has to be the breadwinner - the one to sort all the problems out while the woman stays at home. I feel like that’s always been ingrained in the family for generations. Personally for me, like as far as I can remember. Like my grandma, she says “O you’re just a man, you’ll get a job or something, your wife, [if I want a wife] just has to stay home.”

Here the significance of the family in the (re)production of gender norms is underscored. Indeed, for many of the participants this was a key site whereby ideas of ‘correct’ masculinity were both instilled and policed. Whereas for Sahib, it is his Grandma who in this instance reinforced and shored up traditional gender roles, for most participants, Sahib included, fathers were viewed as the main source of where they learnt how to ‘be’ (and not ‘be’) men. Sahib’s account also brings to light the intersections of family, culture and gender. He highlights how being successful at work is directly associated with his capacity to provide and care for others, most notably his imagined future wife. Indeed this provider discourse endured for some participants, though they were often torn between remaking their identities by shifting focus away from work, whilst simultaneously aspiring to inhabit the role of provider and protector of women.

Whilst most participants were critical of associations with masculinity and work and employment, with this having decreased significance in young men’s subject and identity

formation, many of the young men's discussions relating to values and aspirations ironically revealed investments in individualised neoliberal discourses of meritocracy and success through hard work, as the next section explores.

4.6 Neoliberal values and aspirations

In spite of the falling away of occupation as an identity source for young men, participants frequently valorised hard work in terms of an individual's capacity to succeed in the face of adversity (Mendick et al., 2015). As Mendick et al. (2015: 167) argue in relation to their study on young people, hard work and celebrities, "hard work is repeatedly spoken of within a broader rhetoric of individual strength, resilience and agency." They go on to state that "individualised practices of 'working hard' and 'staying strong' figure as ways to overcome structural disadvantages [...] eliding wider inequalities by emphasising the heroic individual who succeeds against the odds" (Mendick et al., 2015: 167). This echoes the narratives of both Dom and Sean in the following focus group excerpt:

Mary: What sort of mates do you look up to?

Dom: Erm, well one mate that I actually do really look up to because [...], I met him when I was about 14 and I thought he was great cos he was like "o yeah the cool guy" (*mocking voice*), and he actually went away to join the army and got rejected and was homeless for about 4 or 5 years. Then he got his act together and now he's a programmer, he's got a gorgeous girlfriend and all sorts. It's that, I don't know what you'd call it... that, tenacity I suppose. The fact that he didn't really give up, I find that amazingly inspiring almost.

Mary: Endurance almost?

Dom: Yeah that not really giving up.

Sean: One lad I used to know [...] He wanted to be a soldier, but was also doing stupid things as well, and then he was walking back from a cadets evening and he got hit by a car and he broke, he was in a wheelchair for a couple of months and he broke his collar bone, damaged his back, damaged his pelvis and he said "right, this is me done, I can't join the army anymore." And he went for his selection a couple of years later and they said yeah, you can't do it. But he persevered at the end of the day and he kept going, he went through some hardships, especially with his dad and his family, girlfriends, friends. And now he's managed to turn it around and he's

serving in the reserves back home and he's actually sorted his entire life out. Like Dom said, the tenacity to just keep going. Yeah.

Echoing Mendick et al. (2015), Dom and Sean give particular respect to those who have strived for and achieved 'success' in the face of adversity. For Sean, his friend who is a wheel-chair user also becomes an "object of inspiration" (Young, 2014: 1) because of his disability and that he has "persevered" and succeeded in spite of this hardship. What is more, these discourses are coached in neoliberal notions of the self as a perpetual project for transformation and progression, to be continually worked upon. Problematically, however, as scholars have noted, where weight is given to hard work, the significance of structural inequalities are undermined (Mendick et al., 2015). Similarly to Dom and Sean, another participant Ken, also spoke of admiring friends who achieved "off their own back", therefore valuing self-reliance and ambition, as the following quote demonstrates:

Ken: [...] I don't look at what I would class as stereotypes or what people want to be, I more look to people who have achieved something, like generally achieved something. Like they've worked off their own back to get a decent education and succeed in the thing that they want to do, whatever that is. That's the kind of person I look up to. That's what I want to be - somebody who is successful and what they want to be.

Here, Ken states his admiration for peers and friends who have "achieved something" and who are "successful", contextualising this in terms of those who have prospered by having "worked off their own back". In this sense, Ken's idea of success and his own aspirations correspond with neoliberal discourses of meritocracy and the entrepreneurial subject, whereby success or failure are privatised to the individual to the exclusion of wider structural forces (Spohrer et al., 2018). Through this process of individualisation then, the limits of "who can go where in education and the labour market" (Mendick et al., 2015: 175) are concealed as individuals are pathologised for their own perceived 'failure' within the context of educational and labour market achievement (Tyler, 2013). For many of the participants then, success was admired particularly when it was achieved through sheer hard work, persistence and determination, thus demonstrating the interweaving of neoliberal discourses and traditional notions of masculinity. Kai similarly spoke of admiring music producers who had become successful "from the bottom with nothing". He utilised a discourse of "success against the odds" (Mendick et al., 2015: 167), as the following quote demonstrates:

Kai: [...] Most of them [music producers] sort of started from the bottom with nothing and didn't do degrees, but they've built themselves so far and used like the internet a lot to erm learn what they know now and develop a fan base and like a brand. I think that's really cool. I did my a-levels, but I didn't do very well. So I did 2 more years of b-tech's and stuff before I started uni. I thought that'd be a good idea because it's kind of similar to what my role models are doing erm, and it seems to be working out at the moment. Just being a little bit older, gives you a bit more respect. You're not just a kid.

Writ large in all of the above accounts then is the framing of 'success' (or its absence) as an "individual enterprise" (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017: 288). In this sense, neoliberal notions of individualised success permeated through many of the participants' accounts. Closely related with this was disdain and condescension of people who do not inhabit or demonstrate this 'success' narrative. Andy, for example, when asked what type of friends he did not look up to, gave the following response:

Andy: People without ambition. People without scope. People whose dreams are just small. I used to live with someone like that and actually now I don't live with them, I like them a lot more. But it was like his dream in life to sit on the sofa and get shit-faced every night.

A dichotomous notion of "strivers and skivers" (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017: 292) pervades Andy's account. Missing here, however, is that individual effort, ambition or indeed big dreams, does not necessarily translate to securing employment or achieving 'success'. As McDowell (2014: 45) states, "young men are constructed not as victims of economic transformation and recession, but the authors of their own failure, refusing to work hard at school to gain educational and employment credentials." Certainly, this echoes Andy's quote.

Notions of 'success' through strife were thus increasingly valorised on individualistic terms. Taking this forward, the next section further explores the shift away from occupation as central to masculine identity formation to notions of individualism.

4.7 Shifting identities

As the 1970s and 80s saw rapid de-industrialisation brought about by the Thatcher government, alongside the acceleration of information technologies and global marketization, labour market patterns shifted to temporary, insecure and transitory work giving way to more diffused and fragmented employment participation creating lives in flux (Bauman, 2000). Due to this, the idea

of a job-for-life is now seen for many young people as a thing of the past (Nayak and Kehily, 2013). Certainly, for participants, traditional notions of the male breadwinner who provides for the family were deemed to have less significance and be less available than for previous generations of young men as this chapter has shown (Walker and Roberts, 2017). Moreover, gender was often viewed in plural terms as diverse and shifting. Ken, for example, stated that “nowadays there are so many ways that you can be a man.” Leon, similarly asserted that “in 2017, being a man changes every day, every location, every Facebook page you go to.” In the following excerpt, Jack also highlights the increasing democratisation of gender whilst also succinctly emphasising the gendered temporality of changing formations of work and family:

Jack: I suppose there's less pressure on what it is to be a man. Like back in the 50s and what have you, I guess it was very - the man goes to work and gets the money in for the wife and family. Whereas now I think it's a lot more, you know, men and women can do whatever they want a lot more than they used to. So, that - the man is a breadwinner, I think is a lot less expected now than it was many, many years ago.

Jack's accounts echoes Aboim's (2016) assertion that when articulating their masculinity, young men often describe differences with other men from different generations and highlight similarities with women. Whilst signalling departure from older models of masculinity and older men, Jack excerpt also resonates with Bauman's (2000) assertion that gendered models within times of liquid modernity have loosened for both men and women. Jack speaks of the democratisation of gender, stating that men and women now have more autonomy and freedom in line with postfeminist logics. Both men and women are seen to be less restricted by gender roles, which historically consigned women to the home undertaking caring responsibilities and men to the world of work, operating as the sole wage earner and provider for the family. Whilst in contrast to Jack's account, this gendered division of labour endures, where work and entering the labour market following leaving school were once the central nexus to young men's transition to manhood, such life trajectories are increasingly unavailable and inaccessible to young men (Nayak, 2006, Walker and Roberts, 2017). With shifts to insecure service sector and call-centre work, this is particularly the case for some young working-class men (Nayak and Kehily, 2013, Walker and Roberts, 2017).

However, Roberts (2014) urges against generalised understandings of men's views and participation regarding service sector work, noting that increasing numbers of working class men and women are in fact employed within this sector. Notwithstanding this, there has been

significant increased casualization of labour over the last decade, seeing some 1.8 million people, a large proportion of whom were young people, on 'zero-hour contracts' in 2018 (ONS, 2018). Though women also bear the brunt of this, particularly given their overrepresentation in low-paid, insecure employment, young men are now undeniably less able to draw upon work and employment for subject and identity formation (Walker and Roberts, 2017). Sean echoes this in the following quote:

Sean: I suppose for me a man these days has changed quite a lot from what it used to be. Like Dom said, the idea that you've got to be responsible, you've got to do this - as a man you're born, you grow up and you go and get a job, you support your family. That's what it used to be, whereas today there's so much pressure from everyone to behave in a certain way and do the right thing and be responsible [...] There's a lot of pressure involved in acting like a man, but in all fairness the idea of being a man has changed so much from what it used to be it's quite hard to be that person.

Sean emphasises a shift from occupation to "manhood acts" (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009: 277), echoing participants previously mentioned in this chapter. In this sense, masculine identity formation can be said to be increasingly individualised and privatized. Given that there are now varying and numerous occupations and ways of living, identity construction is now increasingly the task and responsibility of the individual (Phoenix, 2004, Branaman, 2007). For Giddens (1991), self-identity is now a reflexive and increasingly individualised project, whereby individuals are the forbearers of responsibility for their own life stories. Key to Giddens' (1991) analysis is that social structures such as work have significantly decreased in importance, giving way to wider choices as to how to produce "an individual biographical project of the self" (Nayak and Kehily, 2013: 31). Though such analyses of individualisation are widely used, they have, however, been heavily critiqued by feminist scholars (McRobbie, 2009, Nayak and Kehily, 2013, O'Neill, 2015a).

Moreover, there are questions around the interplay of individualised notions of increased choice and freedom, and neoliberal discourses pertaining to the autonomous, freely-choosing subject who is albeit still constrained by narrowly-defined gendered ideals (Gill, 2007), which Giddens fails to acknowledge (McRobbie, 2009). As O'Neill (2015a) highlights, the work of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) mirrors the logics of postfeminism by calling into question both the significance and existence of enduring inequalities, or the need for feminism, given their claims of the inevitability of social change and also that this has somewhat seemingly been achieved. With

this in mind, whilst the idea that gender is increasingly democratised was prevalent amongst participants, they often oscillated between emphasising this whilst also stressing the continued significance and constraining effects of gender, as the beginning of this chapter discussed. Moreover, narratives of the diversification and democratisation of gender conflicted with accounts (given by those same participants), which highlighted the centrality of the body and gender presentation to masculine identity formation, as the following section explores.

4.8 Embodied masculinities

As the social and economic transformations previously discussed have diminished the centrality of occupation as an identity source for young men, the body is increasingly becoming a site from which men are “*defining themselves*” (Gill et al., 2005: 39 original emphasis). As Aboim (2016: 1) writes, “even if there is now more room to manoeuvre, identities still obey powerful rules of social categorization.” Whilst historically it has been women who are the primary bearers of pressures to adhere to narrowly defined ideals of beauty and body type, with men supposedly unconcerned with their appearance, the body is increasingly central to young men’s gendered identities, particularly when set against the backdrop of consumerism and capitalism (Gough, 2018). Although as Gough (2018) argues, men have in the past given attention to their appearance, noting the seventeenth century Fop through to numerous subcultures of the twentieth century (teddy boys and new romantics to name a few), he asserts that these are far more context specific examples than can be seen in current times. Now, he asserts, individuals are increasingly “compelled to engage in various body projects” (Gough, 2018: 20) as a means by which to formulate and construct their identities. Certainly such assertions that the body is now central to identity projects mirrored themes present throughout this research (Featherstone, 1991, Gill et al., 2005).

Ken, for example, spoke of how notions of gender have changed considerably since the 1930s when his grandad was young, asserting that contemporary masculinity is very much demarcated by muscularity and physicality. Ken says:

Ken: Like now it's all around muscle, you know the physical side of things and then it was a lot more around occupation [...] whereas my step-dad who's in his 30s is very much muscle. It's all about muscle, it's all about physical. It's all about being big as a guy.

As Gill et al. (2005) assert, there is an interesting paradox between the celebration of muscularity at exactly the time when there has been a significant decrease in men’s employment in manual

labour occupations which necessitate physical strength. They write that “highly developed muscles have become ‘semiotically divorced’ from specific class connotations, and are no longer indexical of participation in manual labour” (Gill et al., 2005: 40). Hence within the context of contemporary consumerism, the body as a source of symbolic capital is now more bound by “how it *looks*”, rather than what it “is able to *do*” (Gill et al., 2005: 40). Leon very much echoed Ken in his assertion that masculinity is defined and produced by physicality. For Leon, this was defined by the contemporary idealized mesomorphic male body type (Vaccaro, 2011), as the following quote shows:

Leon: For me what makes a man is way more physical actually, as in if I was really gonna answer it, a man for me is like mesomorph. You know, like skinny waist, like really skinny weight, wide shoulders, low body fat, long body, kind of like big brow, that's how I see...

For the majority of participants, however, expectations to adhere to and achieve the ideal male body was cited as a source of worry and anguish (Gough et al., 2014). Jim, for example, voiced feeling concerned about his weight, noting that this compelled him to go the gym as the following quote exemplifies:

Jim: Yeah, for me [body image] is quite important. Like I'm kind of overly conscious of being fat, I don't know why. I just like, gym quite a lot and try not to eat ice cream and that kind of stuff.

Jacob also expressed feelings of inadequacy relating to feeling too fat from a young age:

Jacob: I think for me [body image] has always been a bit of a thing. I've never, like I've always been pretty skinny, but I just convinced myself in year 7 when we did PE and things and a lot of boys were like even skinnier than me and I thought, that's not normal. Am I a bit fatter? And I never was, that's just what I convinced myself to be like, because some kids just had 6 packs, but literally because they were so skinny and I was like “OK. I need to be doing that.” But I don't, like I feel the pressure and I do exercise, but I think it's just for myself. That I want to look good for me.

Similarly to Jim, Jacob states that he feels pressured and compelled to exercise, echoing Harvey et al. (2013: 3) in their assertion that neoliberalism has permeated intimate life such that “boys and men are increasingly becoming subject to self-disciplining discourses of bodily appearance.” Indeed, Crawshaw (2007) similarly highlights how neoliberal discourses of self-governance and individual responsibility have permeated wider constructions of men's health within the context

of men's magazines. Also notable in Jacob's response is the way he shifts from comparing himself to other young men, where he feels compelled to become more toned, to asserting that the exercise he does is "just for myself". Jacob states that he works on his appearance not because he has to measure up to others or look good to peers, but rather, he individualises this (Gill et al., 2005). In line with postfeminist logics, Jacob's account is suffused with "notions of choice, of 'being oneself' and 'pleasing oneself'" (Gill, 2007:153). Indeed, Gill (2007) argues that such neoliberal discourses are often employed to the exclusion of wider structural gendered pressures. Moreover, Jacob's statement highlights how young men are required to "simultaneously work on and discipline their bodies while disavowing any (inappropriate) interest in their own appearance" (Gill et al., 2005: 38). Close bedfellows with neoliberalism and individualism then, such discourses seam together traditional notions of idealised male muscularity with a neoliberal narrative of choice, autonomy, and self-determination (Gill, 2007). Jacob also later spoke of experiencing a "loss of pride" when he felt physically weak in relation to others, yet he quickly worked to reaffirm himself as self-assured and confident. Jacob says:

Mary: Has there ever been a time where you've not felt man enough?

Jacob: I suppose... I suppose that is more, not like emotionally, but physically like sometimes where I know I might be helping my dad out - I never do really anymore, but doing stuff in the garden and things where I've not felt capable. Stuff like lifting things, moving things, if someone's better than me and a bit stronger than me I'm a bit like (disappointed) "alright." It's just like a natural loss of pride I suppose. I'm like proud in how bodily I am, I'm confident, but I'm not like... If someone did like lift it I wouldn't be that bothered, but then it's just like that kind of, "right."
(Disappointed)

Noteworthy within this excerpt is Jacob's assertion that he is confident and "proud" of his body, despite expressing feelings of inadequacy moments prior. As such, he exudes a nonchalance historically associated with masculinity whereby if you appear to be trying, you are failing. Whilst this speaks to traditional discourses of masculinity as self-assured, Jacob's statement also somewhat resonates with what Orgad and Gill (2015: 324) term "confidence cult(ure)", whereby "to be self-confident is the new imperative of our time." Though they assert that the postfeminist, neoliberal propensity to be confident is more prevalent for women, and therefore indicative of the corporatisation of feminism and contemporary technologies of the self, one can note the increasing omnipresence of "happiness industries" (Davies, 2015) and foci on individual well-being (Crawshaw, 2007) as emblematic of wider contemporary society. Indeed, Jacob's

account resonates with this. Jacob's account also echoes Allen's (2005a) assertion that young men work to maintain a masculine identity by precariously managing "soft" and "hard" projections of masculinity within interviews. Hence Jacob quickly shifts from disclosing his feelings of inadequacy and therefore rendering his masculine identity vulnerable, to recovering this by assuming a position of self-assurance and aloofness traditionally associated with masculinity (Allen, 2005a).

The media was also cited as a key site by which versions of an idealised type of male body are projected. As Gill et al. (2005: 39) state, "the male (body) has become an object of the gaze rather than simply the bearer of the look." The following quotes from Jim, Jacob and Andy sing in chorus in their emphasis on how the media (re)produces specific and narrowly defined representations of the male body:

Jim: But, like I was saying about the media in like action films and whatever, the guy is just like ripped.

Jacob: So I guess for men who maybe feel like they don't, they maybe don't feel as confident in their body if they are too skinny or too big or something, I kind of feel that sort of pressure. Yeah, because that's where more media is going to cover like strong looking men to fit people. So that's where they're going to get the most pressure to think that's the only way that you can be attractive.

Mary: so what parts of being a man do you least value or not like?

Andy: Erm, society's strange fixation on physical prowess I think. That's something that gets shoved down your throat a lot [...] It's a mix between advertising and celebrity culture I think. I just went to see Logan recently - Hugh Jackman suddenly makes me feel bad about not going to the gym enough, because you've seen the guy - he's fucking shredded right. They sell film after film about him just being absolutely ripped and - name me Hollywood actor that isn't. Benedict Cumberbatch is the one I can think of. The rest of them all look like Calvin Klein models [...] And also like, I don't know, I feel like women expect it of you.

Adhering to commercialized masculinities as portrayed by the media was thus identified as an area of pressure by interviewees (Waling, 2017). Indeed, Gough et al. (2014) assert that young men face difficulties in reconciling idealised media images which celebrate physical prowess. Although images were often cited as unattainable ideals, pressures to conform to idealised representations of masculinity was a recurring theme in interviews (Waling, 2017). In this sense,

young men who do not fit these ideals are rendered vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy, which Gough et al. (2014: 117) suggest stands in contrast to wider public discourse and media portrayals of “hypermasculine youth disengaged with society.”

Yet whilst some participants spoke negatively of media imagery which centred upon idealised masculine bodily forms, others contrastingly spoke of looking up to and admiring such figures. However, this was in part due to the fact that these figures simultaneously employed practices traditionally concomitant with femininity, highlighting the mixing of traditional and emerging notions of masculinity. This was particularly the case for celebrities, who participants cited frequently when discussing their role models. Take the following separate quotes from Bill and Tom:

Bill: Like there was one guy Charles, he's a musician, he's in a band now, but he's like really muscly, but a guy that shows his emotions and is genuine with people. So I kind of like aspire to be like that and I kind of like based my idea of what a man is off these guys.

Tom: Actually thinking back to male role models - Terry Cruise. I have a lot of admiration for him. Obviously he's got the, he's huge - he's an actor and body builder and he's on the Old Spice adverts. Um, but he's a very openly emotional man and I have a lot admiration for that. Similarly Dwayne Johnson - he fulfils a lot of the stereotypes of “oo he is terrifying.” He's a massively, massively built guy and he's dedicated a lot of his life to that, and he's got the credentials for being in that sphere of manliness, but at the same time, he's happy as an actor to put himself out there and do silly things. Like, unmanly things. He talks about prostates in a very, very good video, and having a manly man open up on camera about that. I would say that's huge.

These excerpts demonstrate how traditional models of masculinity, here centred upon muscularity and physical prowess, bestow men the masculine capital which enables them to contravene gendered boundaries. Hence, where men exhibit vulnerability, “traditionally, exceptions have only existed for boys with high masculine capital, who (ironically) maintain permission to break some of these gendered boundaries” (McCormack and Anderson, 2010: 845). Indeed, scholars have noted that young men in effect balance between and exchange traditionally feminine and masculine practices in ways which do not contravene or threaten their masculine identity (Pascoe, 2003, Allen, 2007). As expressing emotions is traditionally associated with femininity and thus weakness, it is unsurprising that some participants were celebratory of

men who expressed emotion only where they maintained investment in models of masculinity centred upon physicality and the muscular body; a continuing signifier of masculinity. Hence, in the above quotes, emotionality is reframed as masculine against the backdrop of the muscular male body. Another participant, Jack, also rearticulated emotional expression as masculine, explicitly stating that he was “not scared” of expressing his emotions, whilst Justin similarly spoke of being “man enough” to cry. As de Boise and Hearn (2017: 8) state “the notion that ‘real men are not afraid to show their emotions builds on existing class, age and/or cultural distinctions between ‘weak, regressive’ men, who are afraid of being judged, and ‘real, enlightened’ men who are not.” Indeed this echoes these young men’s accounts.

Aboim’s (2016: 161) assertion that an amalgamation of “old and new is creating novel forms of masculinity” also seems fitting here. And in a similar vein, these accounts also resonate with theorisations on hybrid masculinities (Messner, 2007). Hence, masculinity is here hybridised in such a way so that toughness and muscularity coalesce with momentary emotionality and vulnerability (Messner, 2007). Given that hyper-masculinity has been delegitimised within recent years, and as emotionality is enduringly disavowed amongst men, “neither hard nor soft is fully legitimate, unless the two are mixed” (Messner, 2007: 469). Whilst such configurations of gender may give the appearance of progressiveness, foregrounded first and foremost is masculinity symbolically centred through physical prowess. To reiterate this, both Bill and Tom centre and foreground the muscular male body, before celebrating emotional expressiveness. Bill states, “he’s like really muscly, but a guy that shows his emotions.” Tom similarly states, “obviously he’s got the, he’s huge - he’s an actor and body builder [...] but he’s a very openly emotional man.” Accordingly, these men balance “hard bodies with the requirements of softer masculinity” therefore retaining “the privilege of mobility in, out of and between spaces of progressiveness and traditionality” (Elliott, 2019: 118). Ultimately signifying manoeuvrability and capacity to shift between expressions of gender, hegemonic masculinity and power is maintained (Elliott, 2019).

4.9 Conclusion

A running theme throughout interviews was that participants felt pressured by dominant constructions of masculinity, which compelled them to look, act and behave in certain ways so as to avoid ridicule or social exclusion. Without undermining men’s structurally advantaged position within society, such findings compel us to recognise that hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily productive of favourable and satisfying lived experiences amongst young men (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Yet in spite of participants’ reflexivity and awareness of

gendered constructs with the majority talking with ease about this during interviews, some interviewees were reticent vis-à-vis acknowledging that they themselves were affected by these discourses. Participants often engaged in a gendered performance of nonchalance and aloofness, asserting that it was only other men, or rather 'imaginary others' who were influenced by discourses of masculinity. In this sense, they worked to position themselves as different to other men. What is more, some of the young men discursively distanced themselves from machismo or masculinity, often stating that they were not 'masculine' men. Further reading of the data, however, revealed that participants often actively and deliberately modified their speech, corporeal movement and behaviour so as to present a carefully crafted 'masculine self', which was also significantly bound to not presenting as feminine.

Constructions of masculinity remained enduringly tied to employment and the trope of the male 'provider' for some of the young men, though this was often critiqued and questioned. In this sense, this was viewed largely as an expectation rather than a desire. This discourse of the male breadwinner was particularly salient where participants were from lower socio-economic backgrounds, given that they lacked capital which entitled others to transgress traditional gender norms more freely. However, this emphasis on occupation as central to constructions of masculinity was seen by some to have lessened in recent years as participants voiced investment in neoliberal values and aspirations, foregrounded through individual notions of success through strife to the exclusion of wider structural factors. Participants also spoke of the diversification and democratisation of available discourses of masculinity and ways of being men, whilst at the same time asserting that the body is a key source from which masculine identity is produced.

Notwithstanding this, the young men stated that there were now varying, numerous and ever-changing ways of being men, speaking at points of increased individual freedom and being able to "be who you want to be". Yet it was as though these narratives were articulated through discourses pertaining to the authentic, autonomous, and freely choosing neoliberal subject, to the exclusion of wider societal constraints relating to gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and so on. As such, participants oscillated between asserting individuality, autonomy and gendered freedom, to expressing feeling constrained, regulated and as though they must adhere to and enact dominant constructions of gender. In this sense, masculine identity formation was very much a precarious, complex and often contradictory undertaking. The young men tight-rope and traversed unstable and rocky gendered terrain, simultaneously drawing upon and utilising conflicting discourses of masculinity simultaneously. Indeed, it seems as though Edley and Wetherell's (1996: 106) assertion over two decades ago that masculinity "is a contested territory; it is an ideological battlefield," continues to bear relevance.

In spite of narratives which emphasised the democratisation of identity and the falling away of traditional notions of gender, heterosexuality remained central to the young men's masculine identities. As such, the next empirical chapter provides analysis of participants' understandings, constructions and practices of (hetero)sex.

5. Sex

5.1 Introduction

This chapter first explores the ways in which heterosexuality remains central to these young men's consolidation of their masculine identities. Here, particular focus is given to sexualised talk, displays of sexual conquest and competition, and how this plays out within the male peer group (Richardson, 2010). It highlights that whilst sex has the potential to be a space of gain for young men, it too can produce feelings of sexual inadequacy, loss and shame, particularly in relation to anxieties around penis size, sexual performance and partner infidelity. After this, it discusses the prevalence of the sexual double standard, noting participants' adherence and resistance to this, contextualising the latter amidst more contemporary postfeminist constructions of female sexuality, which affords women increased sexual agency (Gill, 2007). Notwithstanding this shift towards notions of women's sexual freedom, the chapter goes on to examine the continuation of the "male sex drive discourse" (Hollway, 1984), discussing the dichotomisation of men and women's sexual desire. Building on from this, it explores understandings which posit women and men's investment in love and sex respectively, contextualising how such understandings translate back to beliefs about women and men's supposedly paradoxical sexual desire, as informed by biological essentialism and neuropsychology (Donaghue, 2015). Following this, it addresses participants' investments in love, communication and reciprocity in their intimate relationships, yet it goes on to discuss how this was largely concealed from other men. As such, it explores the ways in which discourses of gender and sexuality continue to limit young men's discursive freedom. With this in mind, it discusses gendered differences in terms of what is revealed and concealed with regard to men and women in young men's discussions of their intimate lives.

5.2 Heterosexuality and the consolidation of 'successful' masculinity

Throughout the majority of interviews with the young men, heterosexuality remained central to participants' construction and consolidation of 'successful' masculinity. Certainly, this research sings in chorus with Connell's (2000: 120) brusque assertion that "to be masculine is to fuck women." As Jackson and Scott (2007: 103) also assert, "human sexuality is not fixed, but it is both reproduced and transformed as an ongoing accomplishment of everyday practices within wider social relations." This was both exemplified in the research setting itself (Allen, 2005a), whereby the young men in focus groups engaged in sex talk (Richardson, 2010) amongst other participants, as well as in the young men's personal accounts of their lives. Ken, for example,

spoke of the ways in which masculine capital is accrued by young men through displays of libidinous and pursuant heterosexuality, to be showcased whenever possible. Ken says:

Ken: [...] It's the whole if a guy sleeps with lots of women, he's more of a guy. He's one of the lads - well done [...] Yeah, he's a lad. He's a stud. You know it's all deemed positively. You see guys going, "I'm one of the lads." That's good. That's who they want to be. And you see it on t-shirts, so it's like you're bragging about it. It's a status you want to be.

For Ken, sleeping with multiple women literally equates to and results in being "more of a guy", thus serving as a means by which to acquire masculine currency. The status and power having sex gives young men is thus underscored, particularly when Ken states that it is something worth "bragging about", "a status you want to be." There are clear parallels here with the work of Coy et al. (2013: 2) who note that youth masculinities are constituted through the assemblage of "man points", which are acquired and obtained via (hetero)sex. Given that having sex with as many women as possible is given such high value, Coy et al. (2013) argue that this reward system compels and incites young men to have sex. Problematically, this has the potential to foster unsafe sexual practices amongst young men given that they may feel pressured or expected to not only engage in sex, but to pressure women to do so by implication. As Powell (2007: 12) asserts, this is compounded by pressures to be "sexually active, desiring, even aggressive." At the heart of these pressures then, is the very real risk that such expectations may lead to "coerced and unwanted sexual experiences" (Powell, 2007: 12). This is echoed in the following quote from Ben:

Ben: I think some men view sex as an opportunity to assert authority and dominance. Like, well I think other men see sex as a very, as a very fearful thing and so for that matter they will probably go about it in the wrong way. In a way that they probably don't truly want to do, but feel is necessary because of, perhaps because of friends, or because of television, or because of the person they're with. And I think it becomes a very difficult process and so they brush it off and, you know, because, like I said, it's an unmanly trait showing fear and showing weakness. So they'll turn their head on weakness by presenting it as like brash.

Ben begins by stating that for some men, sex is seen an opportunity to "assert authority and dominance", yet he contextualises this amidst sex being a "very fearful thing" for men. Given that fear is an "unmanly trait", Ben states that this compels men to translate and transpose these feelings into what could problematically be described as sexual assertiveness, and more

worryingly, sexual force. For both Ben and Ken, the constraining effects of the male peer group is underscored. For Ben, the male peer group compels men to engage in sex “in a way that they probably don’t want to”, whilst for Ken, the male peer is a space where heterosexual prowess is marked, valorised and celebrated by other men. Hence, Ken speaks of how a sense of male comradery is achieved through accomplished hetero-masculinity inasmuch as heterosexuality can be said to act as the “social glue” (Richardson, 2010: 745), which cements homosocial bonding. As Sedgwick (1985) writes, patriarchal heterosexuality can best be thought of in terms of a “traffic in women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (1985: 25-26). Accordingly, sexual activity operates not only as a way to foreground popularity and approval amongst friends, but is also indicative of group inclusion and belonging (Richardson, 2010). This is exemplified when Ken states twice that having numerous sexual encounters acts as a gateway to being “one of the lads” (Gill, 2003).

During one focus group, Carl, Ryan and Mike similarly spoke of a feeling of “unification” and togetherness between men when engaging in sex talk about women’s bodies:

Carl: But there is a real sense of kind of something in there, kind of thinking were all men together.

Mike: A unification.

Ryan: Kind of like a tribal, primal thing

Carl: Were like you know... Let’s all be men together, and talk about fanny’s! You know what I mean? It's like that! That's what it’s like!

Echoing Ken, these participants draw connections between sexualised talk and solidarity and belonging within the male peer group. Sexualised talk about women’s bodies is thus described as something that men do “together”, to “be” men. What is more, Ryan naturalises this social dynamic, situating this as a “tribal, primal thing” or in other words, an ancestral pastime. In doing so, Ryan echoes the logics of postfeminism and the associated resurgence of evolutionary psychology (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016, O'Neill, 2018), which draw upon caveman-esque discourses of hetero-masculinity (Fine, 2017). To refute the collective discussion of women’s bodies among men could thus be perceived as though it was repudiating historically integral ways of being men.

Pat also spoke of how the male peer group constituted the primary context in which young men engaged in heterosexual posturing, once again emphasising the significance of having numerous

sexual partners. In the following quote, Pat notes that his friends have frequent discussions centring upon the quantity of women they have had sexual encounters with:

Pat: It's something that a lot of my male mates talk about - how many girls, or what girls they've been on this week. Do you know what I mean? Like, it's the main topic of conversation with some of them and like some of it, I think is quite degrading. So I don't get involved.

Whilst Pat works to distance himself from his friends "degrading" conversations about women, suggesting some resistance to dominant discourses of hetero-masculinity, his account nevertheless brings to light the ways in which heterosexual boasting still features heavily within male peer group settings. This is underscored when Pat states that "It's the main topic of conversation" with some of his friends. As O'Neill (2018: 59) asserts, "heterosexual experience circulates as a form of currency among men and organises their relationships with one another." Also notable is the way that Pat speaks of his friends having sex in terms of "what girls they've been *on*." Heterosexual men's sexual story-telling thus functions to establish "mastery and dominance literally or figuratively over girls' bodies" (Pascoe, 2007: 86). Moreover, this is enacted in a way which refutes women's sexual desire all together. Subsequently, women's agentic capacity is undermined as they are positioned as passive sexual objects, whereby sex is seen as something that is "done" to them. With this in mind, Allen (2003) argues that as women are often perceived as occupying the subordinate position in heterosexual relationships. Subsequently, they are viewed as though they are "acted upon" rather than being seen as "acting" (Allen, 2003: 218). Indeed we can draw parallels here with Pat's account.

Debasing conversations relating to sexual encounters were not, however, confined to young men's discussions with other young men who were part of their friendship networks. Andy, for example, rather brazenly stated in interview that his idea of an ideal world was "Whore Island." Later on, when discussing where he had learnt about sex, he also recalled a conversation with his father who had advised against revealing sexual encounters with "fat girls", as the following quote shows:

Mary: Where did you learn about sex?

Andy: From having it. From having it and pornography. School was useless. My parents, my dad told once, he was like "Son, fat girls are like mopeds. They're fun to ride, but don't let your mates catch you on one." And that was absolutely the be all and end all of the sex talk I had with my parents.

Andy's dad's account of "fat girls" resonates with wider assumptions that larger women are 'easy' and sexually available given that they fall outside of the narrow confines of idealised feminine beauty (Prohaska and Gailey, 2010). Given this, they are subject to increased stigma and shaming and subsequently hidden from public view. That Andy's father says "don't let your mate catch you on one" underlines this. Standing in stark contrast to the prior mentioned centrality placed upon sex talk as central to and constitutive of the masculine self (Richardson, 2010), this brings to light the ways in which certain *types* of women's bodies are either celebrated or concealed. As such, women's bodies come to be hierarchically positioned in men's sex talk, where women's presumed (un)attractiveness is correlated with men's social status (O'Neill, 2018). Unsurprisingly, such logics continue to be classed and racialized, and also heavily correspond to feminine beauty ideals as reflected within wider advertising and celebrity culture (O'Neill, 2018). This segment also reveals that constructions of masculinity and heterosexuality are generationally produced through familial models of gender and sexuality. Given that Andy's primary sources of sexual knowledge are pornography, his own experiences and his father's dictum, who unmistakably holds unsavoury and insalubrious views relating to both women and sex, the need for high-quality sex and relationships education is accentuated.

In contrast, however, Jacob explicitly rejected sexualised talk, stating that if he were to talk about sex with male friends, they would question why he was doing so and label him as sexist. Jacob says:

Mary: How you do think girls view sex?

Jacob: I think it's more fun. I think women, like a lot of my female friends just talk about it really openly, because I feel like they can, whereas if I did or if any of my male friends did around men, they'd think it was a bit like "why are you doing this? You're being sexist." But if my female friends talk about it, it's just fun.

Though Jacob's account could superficially be read as transgressive in that he asserts that within his peer group sexualised talk about women has the potential to be deemed sexist, there is a suggestion of "reverse sexism" in Jacob's articulation of how men and women communally engage in sex talk differently. In line with postfeminist logics, women are viewed as sexually expressive, exemplifying confidence and agency (Jackson et al., 2013: 145). This is exemplified when Jacob states that women can talk about sex "really openly", because "they can." Contrastingly, young men are positioned as being at the behest of a new gender order which challenges sexism, ultimately limiting their discursive freedom and power. As such, though Jacob's statement is somewhat encouraging in that it signifies disruption to the historic

communal sexualisation of women amongst men, his account is also coached in a feeling of masculine loss, which sits alongside mild resentment to women's newfound discursive sexual liberation. As O'Neill (2018: 145) suggests, in the context of postfeminism, women are ascribed so much power "that it is assumed that women are in a position to deny men the freedoms they putatively enjoy." Concomitant with this notion of 'reverse sexism' is the idea that women are now the winners and men the losers (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). With this in mind, Jacob can be said to employ what Bridges and Pascoe (2014: 250) term "discursive distancing", whereby men distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity whilst simultaneously aligning with it. In this sense, Jacob's account aligns with "contemporary hybrid masculinities [which] create space between men and hegemonic masculinity while reiterating gender relations of power and inequality" (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014: 252).

Sex was also positioned as a competitive space, whereby sexual activity was embedded in notions of male rivalry and contest. As Flood (2008: 341) writes, "males seek the approval of other males, both identifying with and competing against them." Pat, for example, underscores this, stating "I think it's a competition for some lads for how many girls they've slept with kind of thing." As such, sex was often viewed as a competition with other men, whereby the goal is to have sex with as many women as possible. Hence, general claims to heterosexuality surmounted to being insufficient as heterosexuality was seen as something which must be "continually proven by demonstrating that one has the capacity to sexually access women's bodies" (O'Neill, 2018: 57).

Similarly to Pat, Andy also saw sex as a competitive field, yet for him, this was not limited to the male peer group as he also spoke of competing with imaginary others (Flood, 2008). This is illustrated in his quote below:

Andy: [...] when you're single it's a competition. It's you and all your other males, trying to like fight over all the best women. Whereas with women, society kind for values it the other way. I think they have more kind of, I don't want to say power, but with men it's more like a competition. With women, it's more like a selection. There's quite a lot of like articles about this. About how, you know, real break ups are, can be harder on men, because you feel like you're going to the back of the queue competing with all your other, your fellow kind of wonky males. Whereas women, are kind of like, "it's time to choose another perfect mate!"

[...]

Andy: I think once again it goes back to my kind of like competition vs selection. With guys it's more like a competition to get laid. You're kind of like fending off your fellow rivals. Where with, if a woman really wants to get laid it can't be that difficult. I think, I don't want to sound pejorative or sexist when I say that!

During these excerpts, Andy utilises a militaristic discursive strategy, linguistically articulated through notions of competing or fighting with other imagined men over the "best women" (Flood, 2008). Andy's emphasis on attaining sexual access to a certain calibre of woman or the "best women" aligns with wider narratives that the "attractiveness of a man's sexual partners is a direct indicator of his social value and personal worth" (O'Neill, 2018: 38), but also underscores the competitive aspects of the sexual field. As such, "getting laid" is seen as a struggle *between* men, or as Andy puts it, "fellow rivals."

Andy's account is clearly rooted in notions of 'natural' sex difference and more specifically ideas around "male-male competition and female selection" (see - Hunt et al., 2009), which continue to feature heavily in the field of evolutionary psychology (Fine, 2010). Seen as a key postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007), such accounts have seen a renaissance in recent years, advanced by far-reaching and influential pop-psychology narratives of sex and gender (Fine, 2010, García-Favaro and Gill, 2016), as discussed in Chapter 1. Here, men are portrayed as pursuant and active, whilst women are positioned as the gate-keepers of their bodies who choose or select the "perfect mate" after battle. As Andy states that men who are unsuccessful go "to the back of the queue", men are presented as though they are always sexually primed and unbounded, ever-waiting for sex (Hollway, 1984, Farvid and Braun, 2006). Andy's statement "if a woman wants to get laid it can't be that difficult" further reiterates the idea of women as sexual gate-keepers, able to choose from a stockpile of sexually voracious men who are always ready and willing for sex (Allen, 2003). Andy's account also resonates with postfeminist logics in that women are seen to be in an advantageous position sexually. Though Andy states, "[women] have more kind of, I don't want to say power", it seems that this is what he means. Indeed this is ironic given that it is predominantly women who experience sexual violence and coercion (Pleasants, 2011, Powell and Henry, 2014). Moreover, men are positioned disadvantageously in relation to break-ups, which are viewed as "harder" for them. The postfeminist logic of women as the winners, and men as the losers is thus emphasised.

Whilst some interviewees measured their intimate encounters in mathematical, competitive terms, other's spoke of the ways in which having sex with numerous sexual partners gave way to higher levels of sexual experience (O'Neill, 2018). At the same time as placing emphasis on

the quantity of sexual encounters, another interviewee, Ken, also later contextualised this as a means by which to gain sexual experience in preparation for a relationship, demonstrating how “sexual learning [is] imagined as [both] exploration and conquest” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 851). He stated that it was advantageous to have sex with a large number of women “because then you have more experience and you're prepared when you have a proper relationship.” Symbolising a form of “sexual apprenticeship” (O'Neill, 2018: 36) undertaken through aspirational sex, this illustrates the ways in which neoliberalism has seeped into intimate life, thus promoting and (re)producing continual work on the sexual self. In this sense, Ken measures his intimate life not only numerically, but also in terms of certain levels of experience, seeing this as beneficial later on in his intimate life (O'Neill, 2018). Indeed, a criterion of ‘successful’ hetero-masculinity is that subjects are sexually knowing, dexterous and skilful.

Sex was also viewed as a “hunt” for some participants, whereby young men “scored” by having sexual encounters. Certainly, the importance of competitive “scoring” among young men has been highlighted by scholars (Messner, 2002). This is exemplified in the following quote from Jacob:

Mary: How do you view sex, or how do you think men view sex?

Jacob: Again, like fun, but more in a, it's like something to hunt for. Something to go after, like it's the main thing in a woman maybe? For me it's not, but that's kind of what's important to them in a relationship more than like other things, which will come second.

Jacob posits that for some men, sex is the not only the “main thing in women”, but also the most important aspect of a relationship for young men. Given that Jacob states that sex is something that men “hunt” for, it is also characterised in pursuant and competitive terms. Serving as both a heterosexual and homosocial pursuit, Grazian (2007: 223) asserts that “girl hunting” is a collective, ritualistic practice whereby other men are the target audience, there to bear witness to performances of sexual and peer status through competitive games. With this in mind, Bill similarly asserted that men often view sex as “game”, whereby men’s primary motive is solely sex to the exclusion of a ‘meaningful’ relationship. Bill says:

Bill: I think they think of it more as a game. Like “oh, I can, she can, let's do it.” Rather than being like “OK, we both feel like it, it's the right time, let's do it.” And a lot of it tends to be people going just for sex, rather than trying to go into a relationship and have you know – meaningful...

In contrast, Kai distanced himself from notions of masculinity which were predicated upon sexual conquest, positing that masculinity is no longer signalled through having numerous sexual encounters with women. What is more, he stated that “chasing after lots of women” is actually antithetical to masculinity in that it is “unmanly” or “not manly anymore”. This was particularly the case amongst his friends and within the music industry more broadly, though he did point to this not necessarily being so within wider society. He asserts that “it’s really looked down upon” within the music industry, and also stated “what would be the point in not having equal expectations on nights for different genders.” Though this demonstrates a departure from contemporary heterosexual cultures, which posit the acquisition of numerous sexual encounters as fundamental to signifying an appropriate masculine self, the ways in which Kai contextualises this also draws upon notions of ‘bro’ culture, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

Kai: [...] Like if they leave their mates to do it on a night out - that's just, that's not manly at all.

Mary: so the opposite of that, say the manly opposite of that would be?

Kai: Erm, not necessarily having a steady relationship, but having a good sense of relationship with others. So maybe... the opposite guy will kind of have a one night stand here and there, but it's not like an obsession. And he won't, I think more importantly, he won't leave his friends to chase a boy or a girl or whatever you're into.

Hence, Kai contextualises promiscuity as unmanly on the basis that it undermines and weakens the solidity of the male peer group, drawing upon traditional discourses of masculinity associated with ‘bro’ culture and homosociality (Flood, 2008). Whilst motioning towards more equitable practices which do not objectify women, Kai simultaneously aligns with hegemonic masculinity situating men’s friendships with each other as sanctified and above that of other relationships, producing a hybridised form of masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Thus he simultaneously employs “discursive distancing” (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) strategies to distance himself away from hegemonic masculinity, whilst also re-invoking this by using other dominant discourses of masculinity which rest upon the prioritization of men’s friendships over partner relationships (Flood, 2008, Silver et al., 2019).

Whilst this section has explored how heterosexuality remained central to participants’ consolidation of ‘successful’ masculinity, the next section discusses how sex was also viewed as a site of potential loss and shame.

5.3 Hetero-masculinity, anxiety and loss

A number of participants spoke of harbouring feelings of anxiety and inadequacy with regard to partner infidelity, sexual performance and penis size. Indeed, as Aboim (2016: 143) writes, “men’s sexual story-telling [...] illustrates how heterosexual men comply with dominant ideologies, but at the same time face a number of difficulties in enacting their sexuality”. Tom, for example, spoke of experiencing a feeling of a loss of masculinity when a previous partner engaged in sex with another man during their monogamous relationship. His quote is as follows:

Tom: [...] Basically a while back my girlfriend cheated on me, and that was a huge, huge hit, because it, it hits your worth and that is tied in, partly because it’s a sexual thing - I think it’s tied in with masculinity. So, I think that’s a huge part of it [...] It hits the core of who you are and makes you feel insufficient. And like I said, I think a lot of it is because it’s a sexual thing, like it hits your worth as man. I think "I am not man enough for this woman who I love" and that really, really messes with you. Um, um, some people it doesn't, it doesn't affect everybody the same. It's a very different thing, but that hit me very, very hard. Also, going back to the provider thing, if I can't get something for somebody I love whether family member, friend, girlfriend then I feel like less of a man, which is not a conscious thing, it's hard wired.

Sex, for Tom, is a site which has the potential to strip him of his masculine identity, rendering him emasculated and “not man enough”. His account further evidences that ‘successful’ masculinity is consolidated through heterosexuality for young men (Holland et al., 2004), which must centre on being not only able to acquire, but also retain a sexual partner. How sexuality is seen as integral to young men’s sense of manhood is particularly illustrated when Tom states that his ex-partner’s infidelity was a “huge, huge” hit to his worth “because it’s a sexual thing, like it hits your worth as a man.” What is more, this is seen to not only be associated with but also constitutive of “the core” of who Tom is. The distress and anguish Tom feels in relation to his ex-partner’s infidelity and his subsequent loss of his masculine identity is further demonstrated when Tom voices that it “really, really messes with you” and that it hit him “very, very hard.” He goes on to draw upon traditional discourses of masculinity to make sense of his partner’s infidelity, asserting that this further rendered his hetero-masculine identity obsolete in that it supposedly reveals that he cannot “provide” for his partner. Moreover, Tom states how this is due to the “hard-wired” provider instinct inherent within men, underscoring an essentialist and reductive understanding of gender and sexuality.

In a similar way to Tom, Rob also spoke of the ways in which being rejected by a women posed the most significant loss to his masculine identity. Another participant, Ben, also spoke of the ways in which heterosexuality remained central to successful masculinity, constituting the “the basis and very foundations” of being a man. Not being able to achieve and maintain an erection, and therefore “perform” during sex served to directly impact upon and compromise his masculine sense of self. Ben says:

Mary: Have you ever felt not man enough or not manly enough in a situation ever?

Ben: [...] Or if I go deeper, there's times where I might be having sex with a person and things might not work, or like it might not live up to the expectations either person has in their head and that sort of like, and then for me that, if I feel I can't sort of like commit, or sort of perform to the best of my ability when it comes to things like that, then that sort of demasculinates me, because it becomes a very like, it's a very sort of like, [the] basis and the very foundations of what it is to be human and in my instance I'm a male. So, if I can't perform and have sex and be able to perform with the person I'm having sex with in order for us both to be happy, I find that very demasculinising.

Aboim (2016) argues that given the reduction in significance of familial breadwinner roles, the penis comes to symbolically and psychically signify power, and that this power is realised principally within the sexual field. Yet as both Forrest (2000) and Flood (2008) suggest, that sexual activity is viewed as an achievement amongst most men, it also has the potential to produce anxieties with regard to sexual ability and performance, particularly where men fail to maintain an erection. Indeed, Aboim (2016: 141) echoes this, highlighting “masculinity as ideologically paradoxical.” From this, she asserts that whilst “one of the greatest strengths of masculinity lies in sexuality” this too is “concomitantly the source of one of its most profound vulnerabilities” (Aboim, 2016: 141). This is compounded by the fact that prerequisites of ‘successful’ Western hetero-masculinity necessitate that men are always sexually virile, libidinous and potent. As patriarchal discourses, which are bolstered by medicine and sexology prescribe notions of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ sexual response, healthy male sexuality is signified chiefly by the erect penis (Potts, 2000). Under such conditions then, young men can be said to be “under pressure to become victorious gladiators” (Holland et al., 2004: 136). For Ben, as being able to sexually perform constitutes the “basis and the very foundations” of what it means to be a man, not being able to live up to this directly renders his masculine identity vulnerable. As Aboim (2016: 139) writes, “the inability to perform sexually as a ‘man’ still signifies failure, still

emasculates and feminizes men.” Not surprisingly, Ben went on to talk of how he sees sex as a space which was fraught with anxiety, whereby there were boxes “to tick” and “criteria to hit” as the following quote demonstrates:

Mary: Are there quite a lot of expectations around sexual performance being a man or?

Ben: Well of course there is isn't there. People talk to each other and Chinese whispers happen and then it becomes like a Fugazi of like, people think 'o, it should be like this, it should last for this long and it should make you feel like this.' So, there's like all of these boxes that you need to tick and so I feel like when there are all those, all these criteria to hit, sometimes it just becomes too much.

Men's sexual performance is increasingly enveloped in high expectations, put forward by not only medical experts and the mass-media, but also through the opinions of others (Aboim, 2016), as Ben's account demonstrates. As such, “it is not enough to do it, it is necessary to know how to do it” (Aboim, 2016: 153). Also evident in Ben's account is the fear of possible ridicule from “Chinese whispers”. Indeed Jim also expressed concern with regard to possible ridicule from others relating to penis size. Certainly, this is unsurprising given that penis size and erection is symbolic of masculinity (Hall, 2015) and also given that penis size remains a key concern for young men (Forrest et al., 2004, Aboim, 2016). Jim's quote is as follows:

Jim: [...] But like I was saying about the media, in like action films and whatever, the guy is just like ripped and that is just kind of what, and the same with penis size really, because if, you know, you had a smaller whatever (laughs), you would feel quite emasculated by that, because everyone (coughs), a lot of our insults or whatever are quite 'that' related and it is sort of, you'll feel emasculated.

Jim's statement resonates with Leon, who also spoke of his worries around sexual performance, seeing this an ongoing negotiation which flitted between feelings of triumph and sex inadequacy. Leon says:

Leon: [...] When I first started like exploring that kind of world and stuff, I was like “orr I'm proper shit” and I was really nervous, and then for like four, like three years I was like “I'm the fucking best shag” you know what I mean? I thought I was like the best shag. I thought I knew it all, like yeah I'm fucking sick! And then I went through like another kind of dip where I was like “man, I'm soooo bad at shagging. I'm so shit (laughs).” And then you come out of it and you kind of think like I know

it all and you're like "orr yeah" and then you meet a girl and you're just like "shit" and you're like, and then you go through that phase. So I think it's kind of a beautiful kind of learning experience always [...]

Notwithstanding the potentiality that young men are open to feelings of vulnerability in relation to the demands of normative masculinity, and that they may be positioned by others and themselves as 'failing' where they fail to meet the requirements of being a 'real' man, as Holland et al. (2004: 135) write, "they nevertheless engage in heterosexuality in a different way from women." Despite privatised concerns relating to sex discussed in this section, within broader societal contexts the young men spoke of a continuing sexual double standard, as the next section explores.

5.4 The sexual double standard and the dichotomisation of sexual desire

Many participants spoke of the ways in which having sex with numerous partners was celebrated, but for men only. In contrast, however, young women were not seen to receive the same admiration, particularly within wider society. On the contrary, they were often seen to be ridiculed by others and subject to vehement criticism for being sexually active. However, it is noteworthy that participants spoke critically of these assumptions and thus rejected this sexual double standard in that they often afforded women sexual agency and freedom (Holland et al., 2004, Reid et al., 2011). Notwithstanding this, in the following quote from Ken, he explains that whilst there continues to be various terms used to vilify and slander women who frequently have sex with different people, there is also a distinct absence of language with regard to the same behaviour from men:

Ken: [...] if a women sleeps with lots of men, she's all kinds of names and none of them are good. So, there's definitely a difference there, even if individuals don't see it. I personally don't see any difference, but society does.

Mary: There's still that idea?

Ken: Yeah, there's no negative word for a man who sleeps around, there's a lot of negative words for women who sleep around.

Ken works to discursively distance himself from such a view by stating "I personally don't see any difference, but society does," yet at a different point in the interview he himself referred to an ex-girlfriend as a "slut". Hence the endurance of such discourse is underscored. Indeed, Ken notes that whilst there is no language or script available to him to insult men with multiple sexual partners, there is a wealth of terms to choose from with regard to women who "sleep around."

Jack echoes Ken in the following excerpt, whereby he acknowledges that a sexual double standard remains present in contemporary society:

Jack: You know, like there's lad culture of like 'went out on Saturday night. Did you pull anyone?' is the first question that a lot of lads would, you know ask, which I think, you know - why?! It's like nowt to do with you. It's bizarre. I don't get it. [...] It's like that, you know, the joke of why do you call women a slut but men lads? [...] I hate that. Like, I hate how men can have sex with pretty much whoever they want and it's 'oh high five.' Whereas when a girl does it, I think girls get a lot more negative stick for enjoying sex, which is erm, I don't agree with.

Jack notes that casual sex is viewed as seemingly beneficial to men's reputations and damaging to women's, highlighting how sexual reputation continues to operate as a means by which women's sexuality is regulated and policed (Farvid et al., 2017). This confirms the durability and resilience of the sexual double standard despite feminist progress (Kalish and Kimmel, 2011, Farvid et al., 2017). Hence, Jack states that women are still chastised for having sex with numerous people, whilst men receive praise, adoration and commendation. Jack expresses explicit hostility towards this, which can be read as suggestive of societal change, signalling divergence from group "sex talk" (Richardson, 2010), in that Jack views this practice as "bizarre" and perplexing. Notwithstanding such resistance, most participants felt as though "unfair and undesirable though it may be, the double standard *is* active and powerful" (Holland et al., 2004: 163). Yet Jack's statement is also indicative of resistance to normative gendered and sexual scripts in that his excerpt demonstrates increased acceptance of women's sexual freedom and recognition of women's desire (Reid et al., 2011). Certainly female sexuality has been somewhat reconfigured and reframed during recent years from wholly passive, submissive and receptive to active, desiring and autonomous, particularly in broader culture and media texts (Gill, 2007). However, scholars have also contextualised this shift as a key postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007).

Within the context of postfeminism, women are positioned as freely-choosing, desiring sexual subjects who are "forever 'up for it'" (Gill, 2007: 151). Yet as Farvid et al. (2017: 545) state, "although women are less likely to be portrayed as demure and passive sexual *objects*, and more likely to be depicted as active, independent and sexually authoritative sexual *subjects*, there are new pressures on women to not only be heterosexually attractive, but 'sexy' [...] and available to heterosexual men for sex". Indeed, it is this very "double entanglement" (McRobbie, 2004) of both persistent traditional discourses of heterosexuality such as the sexual double standard, which chastises women for sexual activity, alongside postfeminist discourses of the sexually

empowered, freely-choosing and liberated woman that makes sex a site that is laden with tensions, contradictions and incongruities for young women (Farvid et al., 2017). Certainly, this presents a novel and new sexual predicament for young women where they are instructed to “‘be desirable but not too desiring’ (a shift from ‘be desirable but not desiring’)” (Reid et al., 2011: 555). Yet in spite of this, women’s desire continues to be constructed in differing ways to men’s, whereby the former is mysterious and emotionally bound, and the latter powerful and pervasive.

Whilst there was acknowledgement of the endurance of the sexual double standard and resistance to this amongst participants, who explicitly rejected this by viewing women’s sexual agency and freedom in largely progressive terms, there endured a different type of sexual double standard whereby men and women’s desire was articulated in paradoxical ways. Accordingly, women’s sexual desire continues to be constructed as “transitory, spontaneous, impulsive, or emergent in the situation”, in contrast to men’s desire which is characterised as “natural, permanent, and in line with his basic character” (Reid et al., 2011: 555). Hence, the male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1984) closely related to the sexual double standard featured in some of the young men’s accounts. Moreover, this dichotomous characterisation of men and women’s desire was frequently represented as a predetermined biological ‘fact’ given that men were perceived as having an almost carnal sexuality (Farvid and Braun, 2006), with women positioned dichotomously as sexually tepid and less desiring (Allen, 2005b). This is exemplified in the following quote from Pat:

Mary: How important is sex?

Pat: Erm, I think from a male’s perspective, it’s very important [...] like a lot of my girlfriends told me like sometimes they really struggle to get like horny or in the mood or whatever, but like from a males perspective, I haven’t known many of my mates who aren’t like “nah we need it once a day really.” Do you know what I mean?

The male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1984) is accentuated in Pat’s account, particularly where he states that most of his male friends “*need* it [sex] once a day.” The far-reaching effects of this discourse are also brought to light given that Pat states that he knows few friends who do not profess the same view. Women, on the other hand, are seen to lack the same sexual desire inasmuch as they “struggle” to become sexually aroused by implication of merely being women. Here, there is no consideration to the wider influences which may hinder women’s arousal, with this situated *within* women’s bodies as a fundamental aspect of their ultimately fixed biology.

Later on in the interview, Pat went on to assert that men are so sexually driven that they would “cheat” on their partner or “start to look elsewhere” were they not having enough sex. Pat says:

Pat: I reckon if there isn't any sex for a guy in a relationship, he will start to look elsewhere. Like I definitely, if there wasn't enough sex in a relationship for me, I'd definitely approach it with my partner before I looked elsewhere and if it wasn't going to change, I'd probably leave them and look elsewhere, because I'm not about to go and cheat, but I definitely know some of my male mates, they'll just go out and cheat.

Here infidelity is cast as a practice performed primarily by men, “portrayed as a response to inadequate ‘sexual upkeep’” (Farvid and Braun, 2006: 303). Farvid and Braun (2006) assert that women are often paradoxically portrayed in more negative and moralistic terms for being ‘unfaithful’ given that they cannot operationalise the sex-drive discourse to give meaning to infidelity as it is assumed that this does not apply to women on the basis of biological ‘fact’. Certainly, this speaks to ways in which wider constructions of men and women as inherently different are employed to explain and validate different gendered behaviours (Fine, 2010, 2017), as discussed in Chapter 3. Featuring heavily in pop-psychology and relationship self-help books (Farvid and Braun, 2006), such understandings reawaken and revive notions of a “battle between the sexes” said to be a key motif within postfeminist culture (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016: 382). In line with evolutionary psychology approaches then, for Pat, men’s infidelity is a result of their supposedly natural higher levels of sexual desire (Munsch, 2012). This stands in contrast to sociological research which states that “decisions to engage in infidelity are subject to influence by individuals, groups and the larger social structures within which one is embedded”(Munsch, 2012: 55).

Similarly to Pat, Dom spoke of feeling “weird” if he did not have frequent sex. He also made his “high sex drive” known to myself and other participants during the focus group as the following quote shows:

Dom: Without being too crass, I've got quite a high sex-drive. So I see quite a few people, which I think is quite a good thing because... Sean doesn't get it.

Notable is the sense of accomplishment and pride Dom feels with regard to having a high sex-drive and a correspondingly high number of sexual partners. Moreover, Dom positions this as something which is exceptional and unique to him, by stating “Sean doesn’t get it.” Sean is effectively subordinated (Connell, 1995) for not embodying or being privy to the high-sex drive of which Dom speaks, alongside his supposed lack of sexual partners. Through this process, and

Dom's enactment of hegemonic masculinity within this context, nonhegemonic masculinities as said to align with Sean, which are not centred upon sexual conquest and virility, are subordinated (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Closely linked to the male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1984), was the idea that men want sex and women want love (Holland et al., 2004), as the next section discusses.

5.5 Men want sex, women want love

Although there was some resistance to notions that men are primarily concerned with sex and women with love, men were often deemed to see sex as primarily instrumental and as motivated by lust (Reid et al., 2011). Women, however, were viewed in contrast as not only being more interested in long-term relationships than casual encounters, but were also seen as having more of an emotional investment in sex (Reid et al., 2011, Coy et al., 2013). This is exemplified in the following quote from Pat:

Pat: [...] For a lot of guys sex is just sex. Whereas a lot of girls I know sex actually means something. Do you know what I mean?

Mary: OK. Explain that a bit more.

Pat: Erm, I don't know. Like...

Mary: What does it mean to girls?

Pat: I don't know. I think they put a lot more, there's a lot more feeling involved for girls than there is for guys. I know a lot of my guy mates like, they will literally sleep with anything depending on what level of fucked they are. Do you know what I mean?

Mary: OK.

Pat: They don't have to particularly fancy them, if they were like "come on, let's go," they'd be like "yeah, down." (Laughs). Just because it's another notch on the bed post, kind of thing. Do you know what I mean? Or they enjoy that feeling. But like for a girl, I think there's like a lot more, it's a lot more intimate for them [...]

In line with other research, this excerpt reflects the commonly held assumption that women are "more interested in the emotional aspects of physical intimacy" (Allen, 2003: 218). This is demonstrated when Pat states that for girls, "sex actually means something [...] it's a lot more intimate for them." Pat adheres to gendered stereotypes of sexual intimacy then, seeing men and women's intimate desire and reasons for having sex in polarising terms (Coy et al., 2013).

As has been previously discussed in this chapter, sexual encounters are also positioned as holding symbolic currency, particularly where he describes these as “another notch on the bedpost.” Here, men’s sex is defined in relation to sexual conquest and as such, is seen as exclusive of intimacy.

Jack similarly felt that for women, sex was predicated upon meaningful connection as opposed to pleasure alone. Moreover, he held the belief that “a lot of women” have difficulty achieving orgasm during a “one night stand”, as the following quote shows:

Jack: I think in my experience, the women who I’ve shared experiences with, a lot of them, I’ve noticed that the ones who I’ve had more meaningful connections with, a lot of the women I’ve been with then, find it easier... and maybe I’m just not that good (laughs), but find it easier to literally, you know, to orgasm, whereas sometimes with a one night stand you don’t really know or, do you know what I mean?

Jack’s account is also representative of the widespread notion that orgasm is the goal and pinnacle of (hetero)sex, locating pleasure chiefly at this point (Potts, 2000). Where a woman does not orgasm then, “its absence signifies a failed or incomplete sexual event, one that has not reached its proper conclusion: the sexual sentence has no full stop!” (Jackson and Scott, 2007: 106). Though it is encouraging to note Jack’s consideration of mutual sexual pleasure, the way in which he contextualises his previous sexual partner’s inability to orgasm reflects and reproduces wider gendered stereotypes that women need emotional connection to climax. However, Jack does state that an absence of orgasm may be because he is “just not that good,” signalling some recognition of wider forces. Ben expressed a similar view, stating that women view sex “in a very different way to men”, ultimately in terms of love and intimacy. Due to this, they were also seen as less likely to climax during sex that was purely “physical” (Allen, 2003). Ben says:

Ben: I think that some women can view sex as a very, personally, like for them personally, they can view sex in a very different way to men do in the fact that it’s a very loving and intimate act and in order to, I know a lot of people that in order to... they can’t climax unless there is more than just, it’s more than just a physical act and there’s more things involved mentally.

Both Jack and Ben’s accounts strengthen claims that “within heterosexual relations, women’s orgasm has conventionally been seen as more problematic, elusive and mysterious than that of men” (Jackson and Scott, 2007: 96). Moreover, both narratives can be said to be rooted in

conventional notions of female sexuality, which positions women as not only more emotionally invested in sex, but also as unable to achieve the same pleasure as men, particularly during sexual encounters that are not predicated upon love or 'meaningful' connection. Women's more broader supposed absence of sexual desire was perhaps most starkly illustrated when Jack later stated that it was not until he reached the age of eighteen that he realised women had orgasms at all, owing this to his use of pornography. His quote is as follows:

Jack: I wouldn't say I learnt from porn, but like I guess that was where I saw the most, what's the word? The most representation of it I guess was in porn, which is very, usually it's you know the man is the one that's in power and it's for the man's pleasure rather than the women's, and it wasn't until I was about I guess 18 that I was like "women can have orgasms". Like I didn't even know that like. Yeah and it was suddenly like "oh." I guess something in my brain clicked - like sex is for two people's enjoyment. It's not just for the guy. Yeah, like porn is very much just for the pleasure of the man I think generally.

Though it is viewed as simplistic to assert that media texts have linear causal effects on audiences (Attwood, 2005), Jack articulates his prior lack of awareness of women's sexual pleasure directly in relation to watching normative mainstream pornography, which he argues foregrounds and centralises men's sexual pleasure. Echoing other participants, pornography was a primary source of sex education for Jack. Here women's pleasure is eluded and omitted, as Jack states, "it's for the man's pleasure rather than the women's." Certainly, scholars have noted that mainstream pornography may (re)produce the idea that chiefly, "women are instrumental for men's sexual pleasure" (Klaassen and Peter, 2015: 730). However, scholars urge caution in overemphasising pornography's impact upon sexual behaviour, noting young people's resistance and critical engagement with such texts (Attwood, 2005). With this in mind, it is noteworthy that Jack now positions pornography as fantasy and therefore not representative of 'real' sex.

Understandings relating to the reasons and feelings surrounding sex were also often rooted in neuropsychology and notions of biological essentialism. Take the following discussion between Dom and Sean, for example. Whilst recalling a time when he and a female friend were discussing emotions and sex, Dom draws heavily upon popular-scientific discourses to justify and validate the idea that it is "obviously [...] natural" for men to have multiple sexual partners, in contrast to women who "try to keep it to one". Women are also viewed as having different emotional patterns to men in that they are seen to "develop emotions over sex quickly." Not only this, but

Dom held the view that women were more likely than men to desire a long-term relationship after having sex. The excerpt is as follows:

Dom: [...] We were talking and she brought a study somebody apparently did, which is that post-sex feelings lights up different parts of the brain for different people, which obviously for men - it's natural, because we're meant to shag many people and women try and keep it to one - in nature anyway, which is why I find it very easy. But she also says that apparently it's that women develop emotions over sex quickly,

Sean: Whereas men don't.

Dom: And men feel it, men find it much easier.

Sean: Well it's a stereotype isn't it, that women develop feelings quicker. But it is,

Dom: Which is why I never do the cuddling, because I feel like that it's going to create a connection that I don't want. Like I don't want that to be romantic, I want to be physical and then we're mates.

Sean: I think, because obviously with any reward system you get dopamine pumped into your brain, you have a fag, you have a drink, you eat something crap, you have sex, you get dopamine and it makes you feel good and you crave it and I can't remember the, I think for blokes that's what you get depending on who you are. You have sex and you're like "yeah, I feel really good, I really want this." Like you do want sex and you always want sex and you crave that feeling, whereas for women there must be some other chemical effect that makes them think or differently. Or maybe not, they could be like blokes. They could just think,

Dom: Maybe it's a social thing?

Sean: It could be.

Dom: Maybe the expectation of somebody to get together after sex is heavier in women than men.

Sean: Yeah, that's a study for the psychologists to do, I think.

Whilst Dom begins to unpick and scrutinise his view, questioning whether or not gendered differences are socially conditioned or biologically predetermined, he nonetheless seems to hold the view that women and men inherently think and feel about sex differently. Thus it is seen as a product of 'nature' that men desire numerous sexual partners, in contrast to women who paradoxically desire fewer, if not one, sole partner. Certainly, evolutionary psychological

approaches often put forward this argument on the basis that men's 'need' for sexual variety is a means of securing genetic success, and that contrastingly, it is advantageous for women to have one long-term partner who is able to offer resources for survival (Munsch, 2012). Hence, as Munsch (2012: 47) claims, "advocates of this approach reason that women are therefore innately disposed to want commitment, where men are innately disposed to want sexual activity."

As such, the resurgence of notions of 'natural' sex difference is once again underscored in these young men's accounts (Fine, 2010, 2017), reflecting postfeminist logics (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016, O'Neill, 2018). Also noteworthy in Dom's account is his reference to a study, which suggests that men and women's brains "light up" differently, which is taken to be indicative of differential "post-sex" feelings, which are positioned as "hardwired" (Donaghue, 2015). Indeed, Donaghue (2015: 363) argues that "the compelling images of women and men's brains 'lighting up' in observably different ways apparently provide the hard scientific evidence to counter critiques of evolutionary psychology as merely a series of 'just so' stories." Subsequently, these understandings are naturalised whilst any assertions that dispute these claims are seen as calling into question nature itself (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). Moreover, "experience-dependent" neuropsychological "plasticity" is overlooked (Donaghue, 2015: 363), as Dom's account demonstrates.

Sean, however, seems to disagree with Dom, signalling some departure from these kind of views, as he questions men and women's supposedly innate different feelings towards sex as a "social thing" and therefore potentially "experience-dependent" (Donaghue, 2015: 363). He also states that it is a "stereotype" that women are more emotionally invested in sex than men, going on to suggest that the "chemical effect" of sex for both men and women could be similar. In another interview, Kai also held views which challenged essentialist notions of gender and sexuality, stating that men and women's interest in long-term relationships or casual sexual encounters "depends on each person on a case by case." However, he did later assert that with regard to his own experience "more girls have long-term interests", which jarred with his reticence to get married or have children due to him being twenty two. With this in mind, there were instances where participants rejected essentialist understandings of gender and sexual practices.

Women were also thought to view sex differently on the basis of anatomy and by implication of penetrative sex, which Leon viewed as a wholly submissive sexual for women, as the following quote shows:

Leon: Just from the physical side straight away its pretty, for me, this is just a generalisation, but at the end of the day, I think women see sex differently to men because, er, our anatomy, is that what you call it? Yeah, physicality, physically were different. You know sex is a different thing, a different thing. (Stutters). And I'm sure, you know, I'm inside a woman. That's - so from a physical side I'm sure it will be seen [...] and this sounds crude and awful, but you know letting someone inside you, straight, is for me [...] straight away it's submissive. Yeah it feels like, yeah it's like the sword in the stone [...] you know, shit... it's fucking, it is different, physically. And I'm sure that if it was the other way round and you know, someone was going inside me. I would see sex differently if I didn't have a penis, is what I'm saying.

Leon asserts that for women and men, sex is a “different thing” reducing this to basis of human anatomy. Women are said to “see” sex differently on the basis of this, and are subsequently positioned as submissive, receptive and largely passive on this basis. As Messner (2002: 33) asserts, “the sexual dynamics are imagined in such a way that the ‘men’ are the ones who are on top, in control, doing the penetrating and fucking. Women, or penetrated men, are subordinate [...]” Indeed, women’s subordinate position is underscored when Leon states “letting someone inside you, straight, is for me [...] straight away it’s submissive.” As such, the vagina is wholly represented as a passive receptacle for the penis, enveloping any suggestion that the vagina itself is an active part of women’s bodies as research on women’s talk about their vaginas has shown (Braun and Wilkinson, 2003). Ben similarly viewed sex as submissive for women as the following quote shows:

Ben: Erm, well speaking personally I think women view sex in multiple ways, just as many multiple ways as men do and sometimes there can be hidden connotations. Whether it be just doing this to maybe like, because they're being peer-pressured into it by the guy, because the very act of sex is very, it, well, not always, but it can be very submissive for females. So, I feel that the ideology behind sex for females is to be like, to give in and to allow a lot of, and maybe like, sort of like, erm, maybe give people like men the opportunity to like let their fantasies come true.

Hence, in spite of recent shifts which have seen women increasingly expressing sexual desire and agency, heterosexual sex continues to be constructed and reduced to penetration and importantly here for women, being penetrated (Schippers, 2007). Such sexual relations are enduringly constructed as “intrusion” (Schippers, 2007: 90), which is seen as wholly dominating. As Schippers (2007: 90) writes, “the cultural construction of embodied sexual relations, along

with other features of masculinity and femininity, defines a naturalized masculine sexuality as physically dominant in relation to femininity.” Writ large in Ben’s account is that women are submissive, receptive and because of this, sex for them is about “giving in” and “allowing” sex to happen. Indeed, Ben explicitly states that it is because sex for women is submissive, that they may be pressured into this by men. Ben also states that sex for women gives “men the opportunity to like let their fantasies come true.” As such, women’s sexual desire is wholly omitted as they are positioned as a conduit or instrument for men’s sexual pleasure. As previously mentioned in this chapter, sex from this point of view, is something that is *done to* women, whereby they are acted upon, or where fantasies play out *upon* women’s bodies (Allen, 2003).

This section has explored participants’ understandings of sex, demonstrating how this was often rooted in biological essentialism and reductionist understandings of gender and desire. It has shown how some participants maintained investment in the idea that women are chiefly interested in love and that this acts as the foundation upon which women can achieve sexual pleasure. Contrastingly, men were viewed as primarily concerned with sex. The next section builds upon this analysis to explore contrasting accounts.

5.6 Love and laughter in intimate relationships

In contrast to participants discussed in the previous section, some young men in this research voiced desiring and needing emotional connection and friendship within their relationships, often in ways which undermined the centrality of sex in their intimate lives. Accordingly, accounts often stood in contrast to the idea that men are primarily interested in sex. Jim, for example, succinctly articulates this in the following quote:

Jim: There’s a stereotype that guys just want sex, which I think a lot of the time isn’t true, especially in a relationship.

Tom also challenged the idea that sex takes centre stage for men in their relationships with women. Tom says:

Tom: I don’t subscribe to men are from Mars, women are from Venus kind of thing [...] I know men who view relationships incredibly sexually fundamentally and I know women who do the same, and I know men who are incredibly emotional about it - like fundamental connection first. Some men who just don't care about sex like, don't care about the physical intimacy. So it’s, I personally, from my experiences I would say that it is an individual thing rather than a gendered thing.

Tom rejects the assumption that women and men are fundamentally different in their approach and outlook of relationships, stating that he does not conform to the idea that as he puts it, “men are from Mars, women are from Venus.” In contrast to pop psychology accounts of gender as put forward by John Gray (1992) in his aptly titled book, *Men are from Mars, women are from Venus*, Tom challenges such essentialist discourses of masculinity. He states that the centrality of either sex or emotions in a relationship is not due to gender, but rather that this is based upon individual preference. He purports to know men who value emotional connection above sex, and vice versa with women. What is more, he refutes the male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1984) in that he states that he knows “some men who just don’t care about sex.” In this sense, he disentangles the supposed inherent and innate interconnectedness that is assumed to exist between masculinity and sexual virility. Indeed, another participant, Jack, went as far to assert that he himself was not particularly sexually driven as the following quote demonstrates:

Mary: Is sex important in a relationship?

Jack: Erm, to a degree. To a degree. Like, I've never been that sex-driven anyway. I wouldn't want to be in a sexless relationship really. Like a relationship does go hand in hand with intimacy I guess, but I don't have a set quota that you need to fulfil to have a healthy sex life at all. Erm, I'm not into kind of one night stands at all. Like I've had a few and they're not for me, like really not for me. Erm, I think sex should be between two people that have a connection and yeah.

Not only does Jack explicitly distance himself from the male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1984) stating that he has “never been that sex-driven”, he also rejects the idea that sex is the primary reason for embarking on or staying in a relationship (Allen, 2003). Also notable in Jack’s account is his aversion to “one night stands,” which can be said to contravene traditional notions of hetero-masculinity that continue to be founded upon sexual conquest (Holland et al., 2004). What is more, he goes on to assert the centrality of “connection” in relation to his own sexual encounters. In this sense, Jack’s understanding of gender and sexuality can be said to signal resistance to dominant discourses of hetero-masculinity (Allen, 2003). However, as Allen (2003) found in her research, it is noteworthy that such comments were less forthcoming in the context of focus groups and were more openly discussed during individual interviews. Within the context of one-to-one interviews, the potentially damaging impacts of such discussions on young men’s masculine identities were reduced due to the absence of other men (Allen, 2003). Moreover, Allen (2003) goes on to assert that her positionality as a woman researcher may have also provided fertile ground for such discussions as participants may be less inclined to display forms

of masculinity whereby sexual intercourse is given centrality, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Another participant, Dan, whilst aware of broader societal discourses which position men as more sexual than women, stated that having fun was more important to him than having sex. Whereas his girlfriend would note the frequency or lack of sex in the relationship, he was more preoccupied and concerned with how much fun they were having. Dan says:

Mary: Is sex important in a relationship?

Dan: It's strange, my friend [...] thinks that men need sex to feel loved, but women need to feel loved before they want to have sex. So, he thinks it's quite a weird cycle of giving love to giving sex and the right amount of such here and there. It's like the fundamentals of what makes a relationship. For me, actually having fun is more important than having sex. Like, so my partner is quite stressed at the moment and she might say "we haven't had sex in like a week" and I'll be thinking "that's not something that's in the forefront of my mind." Like what I'm thinking is "we haven't had a good time or been to the pub and had a laugh in like a week." [...] I think if you live with someone and you're with them all the time, having fun and just general recreation is more important.

Other participants also spoke how sex was not the most important aspect of a relationships. Adam, for example, stated that his ideal relationship would involve "just have a fucking laugh with someone to be honest." Another participant, Jack, also stated that he valued friendship and "someone who you can genuinely confide anything in and they can the same to you". Charles also emphasised the importance of common interests, good communication and laughter in his intimate relationships, whilst also resisting the idea that successful relationships are "purely based on sex." His quote is as follows:

Charles: I mean through experience, not just sex. If you build a relationship purely based on sex it's not going to go right. You want to be able to have things in common. You want to be able to talk. You want to be able to have the same sense of humour [...]

Another interviewee, Sean, also stressed that sex was not the most important part of a relationship for him. Sean says:

Sean: I'll happily sit there with a girl on Saturday night eating a shit pizza, watching a shit film, having a bit of a cuddle. I don't care if we have a shag at the end of the night. If we do, perfect, but if not... Whereas I know some guys who are just like,

they don't like it. They prefer the physical relationship or an emotional relationship, but not at the same time, which I suppose is the difference between me and you [Dom].

Moreover, Sean distances himself from other men who place centrality on sex within their intimate relationships. For these young men then, communication, laughter and friendship were given particular significance in terms of what constitutes a good relationship. Jack, also went as far as to position himself as “romantic” echoing Allen’s (2005a: 54) assertion that “romance acts as a new currency through which contemporary masculine identities are constituted.” Later on in the interview, Jack also questioned notions of romance which posit that it is men who must propose to women as the following quote demonstrates:

Jack: I don't like how it's still generally seen as the man has to propose. Like I'd quite like to be proposed to. Like it would be really sweet, but like if a girl proposed to me, people would be like “why didn't you propose to her?” Because it is generally seen as the man proposes [...] It would be nice for proposals to be a more 50/50 thing. Like “oh, who proposed to who?” You know, rather than “how did *he* do it.” Like it's generally assumed that the man did the proposal.

In this sense, it is also noteworthy that Jack moves beyond and capsizes traditional conventions relating to the romantic masculine ‘hero’, who ‘wins’ the affections of a woman (Redman, 2001). In contrast, Jack voices a desire to be proposed to and also unpicks gendered assumptions relating to this practice. Jack’s account can thus be said to signify a form of romantic masculinity which poses a challenge to inequitable and oppressive gender relations (Allen, 2007). This is important given scholars’ assertion that contemporary forms of romantic masculinity may indeed signify hybridised masculinities (Demetriou, 2001) in that it may no longer be the case that romantic masculinity represents a form of hetero-masculinity which is subordinated or alternative (Allen, 2007). Rather, as Allen (2007: 139) writes, that “romantic has been reconfigured within hegemonic masculinity and enables the relative stability of male power over women in heterosexual relationships.” In a similar vein, de Boise and Hearn (2017) advocate critical engagement with understandings of emotions such as ‘love’, challenging assumptions that they are intrinsically progressive. They argue that emotions are discursively characterised in value and status-laden ways, which may work to camouflage how they reinforce gender inequality. As such, they assert that, even loving men “can help reproduce rather than challenge colonial, patriarchal structures” (de Boise and Hearn, 2017: 788).

Whilst this section has discussed participants' investment in romance, love and communication, the next section explores how certain topics relating to sex and relationships, such as love and same-sex desire, were often concealed and hidden, particularly in the context of men's friendship networks.

5.7 Sex and silence

In contrast to the previous section, some participants spoke of being reticent to discuss love and emotional attachment for partners within their friendship networks. Moreover, discussions of same-sex sex and experiences were largely disavowed, as I discuss later in this section. Jim, for example, spoke of being reticent to discuss his relationship at all, noting ridicule from friends when he was to do so. Jim says:

Jim: Like I have a girlfriend at the moment, but there's this sort of running joke that "Jim always talks about his girlfriend", which couldn't be further from the truth really, because I feel like I never mention her. But if I do, everyone's like "why are you talking about your girlfriend?"

Some participants also spoke of having to appear emotionally remote or despondent about their relationships, particularly when in the company of other young men. During one focus group, for example, Mat spoke of how it was "unmanly" to "enjoy" being in a relationship, which compelled him to present himself as emotionally detached and disinterested in front of male peers as the following quote shows:

Mat: I think even if you were talking to a friend who was in a relationship you'd feel like you were enjoying it too much. It's like a masculine thing, you don't feel like you're being masculine. To a man it should be a prize. Not something to have fun with.

Mary: So you shouldn't be happy?

Mat: So if I said 'o we're gonna play mini-golf next weekend and I can't wait' it's like 'o?!' I know it's completely fine to say that, but I'd feel like I'm not being very manly.

For Mat, professing emotional attachment towards a partner or enjoyment of a relationship is seen to contravene acceptable notions of masculinity. Rather, relationships are defined in terms of conquest over women, who are demarcated as a "prize", or something to be won. Although Mat stated earlier on in the focus group that relationships should be based upon common interests, communication and respect, here we can see the constraining effects of normative

masculinity on discourse, but also how this restricts the affective dimensions of relationships and how men can feel about their partners. Allen (2005a) suggests that as relationships entail and require young men to engage with qualities traditionally marked as feminine, such as a desire for affection, care and emotions, that this can potentially render their masculine identity vulnerable. Subsequently, young men negotiate this by presenting themselves as indifferent and unconcerned with relationships. As Allen (2005a: 45) states, “enjoying a relationship for more than its sexual benefits [...] involves young men ‘engaging their emotions’ and ‘recognizing their need for affection.’” Mat’s account resonates with this, particularly when he states that “enjoying a relationship too much” made him feel like he wasn’t “manly” or “being masculine.”

During another focus group, Dom voiced his love for an ex-partner only when his friend was not present, revealing the constraining elements of the male peer group within the research setting itself (Allen, 2005a). What is more, he was explicitly secretive and guarded about this, stating “don’t repeat this to Sean, because he can’t know.” Dom says:

Dom: [...] don't repeat this to Sean, because he can't know, but 3 years ago I was with someone who I wish I'd never left because, yeah, it was like square peg, square hole type of thing if you know what I mean. Like every single thing played off in just the right way. I fucked it up. I did the stupid thing, I can't even remember, I think I was just being arsy with her and she just got sick of it [...]

This was perhaps the most explicit and candid example of how young men work to conceal any sign of emotional investment in relationships amongst male peers as this unfolded and played out in my presence in interview. Moreover, upon Sean’s return, Dom immediately began posturing and boasting about having numerous sexual partners. Here, Dom can be said to draw upon dominant discourse of heterosexuality, positioning himself “as sexually assertive, emotionally detached, with a voracious sexual desire” (Allen, 2003: 224) as a means by which to signify a masculine self. The excerpt is as follows:

Dom: I was just talking about the black book - the fact that I enjoy seeing a lot of people on a sexual basis as friends and a lot of people don't get that.

Sean: It’s always a funny thing with Dom. I mean, you're a bit of a, you sort of went around everywhere and anywhere last year didn't you?

Dom: (laughs)

Sean: There was always jokes around ours about me being his little personal secretary thing as I was trying to figure out when I could book.

Dom: Shut up.

Mary: Personal what?

Sean: Secretary. That's what it feels like. When he can bring in all of these girls. He was saying "o, I've met so and so. I've got two girls on Tinder. I've got to chat with people on Facebook. I've got my ex-girlfriend here. I've got this girl Rachel from France. I've got this and this." [...] We were joking saying that one day, somehow his little dorm room is going to turn into office and I'll be sitting there at my desk typing and a girl will walk past and I'll be like "you'll be the 3 o'clock. He's just got a client in, do you mind waiting?"

What participants choose to disclose and conceal during focus groups is thus revealing in terms of how young men manage their sexual identity whilst in the presence of others (Allen, 2005a). Within this excerpt, Dom enacts hegemonic masculinity by not only signalling his interest in sex and women using off-the-cuff comments, but also by presenting himself as emotionally redundant and detached throughout the rest of the focus group (Flood, 2008). Kept hidden from his close friend, however, is his emotional connection with his ex-partner, which he reveals to me in private. As Dom states "don't repeat this to Sean, because he can't know," it is clear that he was wary of bringing to light the love he felt for this woman in front of his friend. Indeed, this compounds Allen's (2005a: 44) assertion that voicing "insecurities renders masculinity vulnerable and may necessitate the reinstatement of a hegemonic masculine self." Dom's account is thus indicative of the precarious identity work undertaken by young men, particularly in the context of the male peer group and indeed the research setting itself. It also demonstrates not only the fluidity of young men's gendered and sexual identities, but also how these are constantly under negotiation and subject to change. Hence, we can see how Dom momentarily moves between "hard" and "soft" expressions of masculinity (Allen, 2005a).

Whilst some young men were reticent to voice their emotional connection with women amongst male friends, other participants also spoke of not being able to tell friends of sexual experiences, which could be deemed to fall outside of the boundaries of supposed 'normal' sex. More specifically, sex which can be said to cross the boundaries of Rubin's (1983) theorisation of the "charmed circle", said to comprise heterosexual sex which is normative and procreative. The following excerpt from one focus group details a lengthy discussion of how participants felt they would be guarded about disclosing having sex with either another man, or if it involved fetishes:

Leon: [...] for example right, let's say you have a gay experience or something [...] on a night out in Leeds

Carl: But then you don't fucking tell anyone about it

Leon: ...And you go back to someone's house - this has never happened to me, and you know, they shit on your face, and this is a guy or a girl, and they shit on your face and piss all over you, fucking, they do this stuff[...]

Ryan: They shit on your face! *Laughs*

Carl's response to Leon's hypothetical declaration of same-sex sex illustrates that this is often concealed within the context of the male peer group. By stating that "you don't fucking tell anyone" about having same-sex sex, Carl demonstrates the endurance of homophobia and the ways in which same-sex sex continues to be regarded as something to conceal (see Chapter 6). Though the young men in this focus group were never explicitly homophobic, and contrastingly held views which were supportive of same-sex relationships, this excerpt highlights how same-sex sex is enduringly viewed as something which warrants secrecy, silence and concealment, particularly where this is practiced by heterosexually identified men. In this sense, it stands at odds with scholarship which posits that homophobia has decreased significantly over recent decades and that young men are now at ease to disclose same-sex desire and sexual experiences (Anderson, 2009). This will be discussed at more length in the next chapter. Interestingly, at this point in the focus group, Mike chose to reveal a sexual encounter with another man to the rest of the group. The excerpt is as follows:

Mike: I'm going to say something now - I don't know whether I've told any of you's? I know I've definitely told girls, because I can name them straight away, but I've had a gay experience - at Uni.

Ryan: Oh yeah.

Mike: Have I told any of you's? That wouldn't be something I would tell...

Ryan: Yeah I remember you telling...

Carl: Yeah, you've told us bro. You've told us.

Leon: You've told us.

Mike: I've told you people.

Ryan: But you wouldn't tell,

Mike: But I wouldn't really class you guys as real people.

Group laughs

Mike: I don't think I'd ever tell, I'd be more (*hesitates here*) jittery or I don't know, less inclined to tell someone like my little brother Jacob, or rather than tell like my girlfriend or someone like that.

Ryan: Yeah.

Leon: And that's quite interesting actually, because you wouldn't tell your little brother because he obviously, you obviously feel like maybe more of a man than him.

Mike: Perhaps, yeah.

The significance of Mike's disclosure is exemplified by his declaration that he "is going to say something now" before he discloses his same-sex experience. Notwithstanding the weight of this, Mike seems to get shut down by all of the other members of the group who successively repeat the phrase "you've told us", in such a way as to terminate further discussion. As same-sex sex and desire is often viewed as antithetical to 'successful' masculinity (Kimmel, 2012), where this is predicated upon overt displays of heterosexuality (Richardson, 2010), Mike can be said to effectively jeopardise his masculine identity in this moment. Due to this, he employs humour as a means by which buffer this and reoccupy an 'appropriate' masculine identity (Kehily and Nayak, 1997), playfully mocking the other members of the group for not "being real people".

Also noteworthy is the way in which Mike goes on to suggest that he would be reticent to tell his younger brother about this experience, which Leon asserts is due to the expectations around masculinity that coincide with being an older brother and subsequently "more of a man than him." From this, we can assert that same-sex sex is seen to directly contravene 'being' a man in this instance. Moreover, same-sex experiences are represented as something which you would not disclose to someone who respected you as an older man. As Gardiner (2002) argues, like gender, age as a social category is similarly imbued with differences in terms of power and social status. Similarly to gender then, "age categories form part of systems of power relations that shape and are shaped by all other social hierarchies" (Gardiner, 2002: 94). Indeed, the above excerpt highlights the temporal, power-laden aspects of masculinity and how gender and age intersect to produce certain formations of masculinity which are hierarchical and either relationally legitimised or undermined. Similarly to how certain things could not be discussed amongst other men, participants also articulated speaking to men and women about different topics as the next section explores.

5.8 Discursive gendered strategies

Whilst the last section highlighted how participants concealed discussions of love and same-sex experiences from other men, there was also a sense in the young men's accounts that certain topics of conversation were heavily gendered. Ken, for example, stated that whilst discussions within the male peer group were often quite "sexualised", when speaking with women he purposefully subdued sexually explicit content. His quote is as follows:

Ken: [...] the more girls you sleep with when you're not in a relationship the better, because then you have more experience and you're prepared when you have a proper relationship, but it's not seen as a bad thing. Whereas again, if it comes up in a conversation with a woman, you're a bit more like "noo, that wouldn't be me. That would never have happened" (laughs). Not that we don't talk about sex at all, we don't just sit there and go "no, we've never had sex ever. I don't even know what that is. What's that?" But you're more likely to say, "I've never cheated on a girlfriend. I've never even thought about it. I don't even look at another woman and go 'wow, she's fit'." Again, with guys, you look at mutual, or not mutual female friends and go "out of 10?" It's not as common as it could be in my circles, but it does happen and you do go "yeah."

Whilst having sex with multiple women and talking about this amongst other men is "not seen as a bad thing", Ken is quick to state that he would distance himself from this if he were in conversation with a woman. Whereas Ken would say to women that "I don't even look at other women", when in the company of other young men, "the more girls you sleep with [...] the better." Once again, the significance of sexual pursuit and experience within the context of the male peer group is emphasised. Though attempting to shift the spotlight onto others by asserting that this is not as prevalent in his "circles", Ken states that rating and assessing the attractiveness of women is fairly common practice amongst young men. This echoes Phipps and Young (2014: 313), who note the practice of "sexual auditing" within young men's heterosexual cultures, said to "characterised by sexual scoring matrices and appraisal against neo-normative femininities." What is more, at a later point, Ken recalls a particular instance where he discussed the appearance of a picture of woman on his phone with a male friend. Although a female friend was also present, Ken states that although she had to ask to be involved, she was informed that their discussion was "a guy thing." Ken says:

Ken: Like the other week I was speaking to a friend - actually we had a female friend there and a male friend and I literally got out my phone and said "this is a woman

I'm looking at" and he went "yeah, can't fault you," and the phone went back to me, and my female friend was just like "do I not get a say? Do you want my opinion?" Alright then. She literally asked "am I not invited in this? Is this a guy thing?" "Yeah, it is a guy thing." But, you know. So there is definitely a, I wouldn't say the conversations are always different, but there is a structure and sometimes women have to ask to be involved and then you're like "oh, I just completely forgot you were here."

As Ringrose et al. (2013) argue, showing other men photos of women is often utilised by young men to gain respect from male peers as this signifies that the beholder is desiring of the opposite sex. Flood (2008) goes further, arguing that such activities work to establish and strengthen bonds between male friends. Ken's account underscores that such a pursuit is only undertaken in company of men, as where a woman is present, she is not invited or allowed to involve herself in the discussion merely because she was a woman. This is exemplified when Ken explicitly excludes her in response to her request to be involved in the conversation by saying it's "a guy thing." Moreover, he states that women "have to ask to be involved", suggesting that de facto membership to such discussion is only afforded to men.

During another focus group, Leon and Mike similarly stated that they spoke to men and women about different things, as is shown in the following excerpt:

Leon: It's really weird what Carl says, because like I usually talk to guys, or you guys about good things with girls and I talk to girls about bad things with girls. So like, if I'm having trouble with a girl or with any situation, I always think that girls are better at... like my mum, basically I'll talk to my mum about it. If something's going on with my girl issues, I'll talk to my mum, or my Grandma [...] but if I'm talking about, this is really crude but you know, "oh, you know I was banging this girl the other week! She was mental! She took me back to her place!" (*Exaggeratedly deep voice*) Then obviously I'll talk to these guys about that [...]

Mike: You're saying he's a heterosexual male and you want to celebrate.

Leon: Celebrate with the guys!

For Leon, whereas women are seen to provide emotional labour and support, men provide an audience for heterosexual bravado and sex talk (Richardson, 2010). In this sense, women and men are positioned as listeners and spectators respectively. Thus, the male peer group is viewed as a place to exhibit, mark and celebrate successful hetero-masculinity (Flood, 2008). This is

exemplified when Mike succinctly states, “you’re saying he’s a heterosexual male and you want to celebrate,” to which Leon in chorus responds “celebrate with the guys.” Sahib similarly noted how discussions relating to the “emotional side” of relationships was reserved only for women, as the following quote shows:

Sahib: I feel like you’d associate what you’d talk to a woman about relationships is more the emotional side [...] I feel like if you talk to male friends, I didn’t really talk to male friends about my partner, but I feel like what I’ve overheard is ‘o, she’s got this part of the body that’s amazing and you see her do this or whatever.’ I feel like the physical attributes stay within the men’s conversations and I feel like that’s always, it’s arguably changing, but it’s kind of been there for a while.

Sahib, like Leon positions women as the sole undertaker’s of emotional labour. Men on the other hand, are seen to engage in sex talk (Richardson, 2010), whereby women’s bodies and movement are openly assessed and evaluated (Phipps and Young, 2014). Whilst Sahib suggests that this is changing, his statement also illustrates how men’s sexualised talk of women’s bodies endures. Sahib, however, distances himself from other men who he has overheard, stating that he himself does not engage in this kind of conversation, suggesting dissidence and non-conformity to these constructions of hetero-masculinity. In this sense, Sahib works to present himself as a different type of man.

Similarly to participants mentioned previously, Jacob also spoke of the ways in which he censored his conversations with women. Jacob says:

Jacob: I'd probably be more comfortable to talk about like sex with my male friends. Not like in a way showy offy, pride way, but I know if I talked to like quite a few of my female friends about it they'd just be put off. They might think that it's perverted when it's not, because we're both in an intimate setting where we've both consented. But they just wouldn't, I know a lot of my female friends would be like “I just don't want to know.”

As Jacob feels as though women would be reticent to engage with him in discussions about sex, ultimately viewing him as “perverted”, he states that he would be “more comfortable talking to his male friends about sex.” In contrast to previous accounts, however, Jacob notes that whilst he would speak about sex with male friends, this would not be in a “showy offy, pride way.” Although scholars such as Richardson (2010) suggest that young men are in a sense compelled to enact and display hetero-masculinity, particularly amongst peers, it seemed as though Jacob is somewhat precariously negotiating his masculine identity here. In this sense, participants to

some extent assumed multiple and often conflicting subject positions. For Jacob then, there is a tension between demonstrating his heterosexuality, but in a way that would not be read as vain to other men. Indeed, there was a conflict between appearing masculine, but not too macho, throughout most of the young men's accounts, with participants being quick to distance themselves from 'macho' men (see Chapter 4). Jacob's rejection of heterosexual posturing could also signify direct challenge and resistance to the centrality given to heterosexuality in the constitution of 'successful' masculine identities. Indeed, most participants spoke knowingly and reflexively of the constraints of dominant constructions of masculinity, often working to disassociate themselves from these or recalling instances where they had deliberately negotiated 'doing' masculinity (West and Zimmerman, 1987), as discussed in the previous chapter.

During one focus group, for example, Carl spoke of having to put on his "man skin" in front of other men who were engaging in sexualised talk about women. His excerpt is as follows

Carl: Yeah. Yeah. For me, it's like I work in an environment where it's full of old sweaty perverse men that are fucking talking about fannies and tits and you know just right dirty old bastards and you know they're right gruff and (*makes gruff sounding noise*).

Group make gruff noises and laughs.

Carl: So they all kind of... I've got to put my man skin on and fight back a little bit, because you've got to do that. It's what it's like in the man world.

Here, Carl speaks of 'doing' gender (Butler, 1990), in order to be accepted into the male peer group and indeed "the man world." As Carl speaks of putting on his "man skin", Butler's (1990) theory on gender performativity seems fitting here. She writes, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990: 25). Carl's account also resonates with Schrock and Schwalbe (2009: 279), who assert that men must master "a set of conventional signifying practices through which the identity 'man' is established and upheld in interaction." They go on to assert that in order for young men to signify masculine selves 'successfully', they must become adept at adapting to different audiences and contexts. Certainly, it is because Carl works "in an environment where it's full of old sweaty perverse men", that he feels he has to put his "man skin on" and adjust his behaviour within this context. Conversely, as will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter, Carl also spoke of wearing 'feminine' clothes and

feeling as though he could express himself more freely when amongst close friends who were men, highlighting how gender is shifting, fluid and contextually dependent.

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter has emphasised the continuing centrality of heterosexuality to young men's consolidation of their masculine identities. It has highlighted that displays of sexual conquest endure as a key signifier of masculinity, whilst also noting how sex is a power-laden space whereby young men compete for sexual partners, particularly within the context of male peer group. Moreover, that heterosexuality continues to be valorised by young men through sex talk amongst peers, whereby women's attractiveness was seen to correlate with and bolster young men's status. However, it was only certain types of women, and certain types of women's bodies which were celebrated, as those which did not align with idealised standards of femininity were hidden from view. Notions of men's sexual competition also featured, though this was often shrouded in biologically essentialist understandings which were utilised to foreground and justify men's supposed 'naturally' predetermined need for numerous sexual partners.

Closely related to this was a persistent sexual double standard which celebrated sex amongst men, but not women. However, participants often critiqued this understanding, positioning this as a belief that other men held. As such, participants' understandings here can be contextualised against the backdrop of contemporary postfeminist constructions of female sexuality, whereby women are increasingly seen as sexually agentic and thus afforded sexual freedom (Gill, 2007). Yet despite this shift towards notions of women's sexual autonomy, men and women's sexual desire was frequently dichotomised, and as such, the 'male sex drive discourse' endured (Hollway, 1984). In light of this, men's sexual desire was reduced to an innate force which necessitated regular sex. In line with this was assumptions that women are chiefly invested in love, and men in sex. Moreover, that women were biologically and psychologically unable to achieve the same levels of pleasure sexually without a 'meaningful' connection. As such, notions that women want love and men want sex translated back to beliefs about women and men's contrasting sexual desire. These understandings were also often rooted in and bolstered by popular-science and popular neuropsychology, which participants drew upon to articulate different brain chemicals, emotions, and desires between men and women, echoing data in chapter 3. Moreover, some participants viewed sex as wholly submissive for women on the basis of anatomy and vaginal penetration as sex was reduced to these terms. In contrast to assumptions that men are primarily concerned with sex, other young men expressed significant investment in love, communication, laughter, friendship, romance and reciprocity in their

intimate relationship, often in ways which challenged conventional normative notions of romance. However, the constraining effects of the male peer group were once again underscored given that participants were reticent to disclose this to other men. Indeed, this played out within one focus group in real time.

Closely related to the consolidation of masculine identities through the affirmation of heterosexuality was the disavowal of femininity and same-sex desire. These were frequently collapsed together as gender and sexuality were conflated such that gender expressions were seen to result in sexual preference (Fulcher, 2017). As such, the final empirical chapter of the thesis now moves on to critically explore assertions made by inclusive masculinities theorists (Anderson, 2009) that young men are now not only able to transcend gender boundaries, but also that there has been an decrease in gender policing and homophobia.

6. 'Homohysteria' and the 'heterosexual matrix'.

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores participants' understandings, experiences and practices of gender and sexuality, offering critique of recent theorisations which propose that masculinities are now more "inclusive" (Anderson, 2009, McCormack and Anderson, 2010, Dean, 2013). As discussed in chapter 1, inclusive masculinities theory asserts that young men now "reject homophobia; include gay peers in friendship networks; are more emotionally intimate with friends; are physically tactile with other men; recognize bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation; embrace activities and artefacts once coded feminine; and eschew violence and bullying" (Anderson and McCormack, 2018: 548). However, the data from this research stands in contrast to these claims, emphasising the importance of critical scholarly engagement with this body of literature. This is underscored given that scholars argue that inclusive masculinities theorisations mirror postfeminist logics by presenting an overly zealous picture with regard to social change, thus undermining gender and sexual politics by obscuring the endurance of gender and sexuality inequalities (O'Neill, 2015a).

The chapter begins by exploring young men's views on same-sex relationships, demonstrating support for these and also resistance to notions of fixed, stable and correlating sex/gender/desire modalities or the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler, 1990). It then discusses the notion of homohysteria, or the fear of being seen as gay or "homosexualised" (Anderson, 2009: 248), assessing claims made by advocates of inclusive masculinities that this has lessened due to the widespread decrease of homophobia (Anderson, 2005). It explores homohysteria in relation to young men's supposed increased physical and emotional tactility with each other, before interrogating assertions of increased tolerance and support of young men's incorporation of feminine performances (Anderson, 2009). It analyses the young men's negotiation of normative constructions of masculinity with regard to gender presentation, noting participants' adherence and resistance to dominant discourses of masculinity. Here particular attention is given to hybrid masculine performances (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), which problematise understandings that posit men's appropriation of feminine styles as signalling gender equality. In this sense, it specifically seeks to investigate the processes by which power is subtly rearticulated and reworked within this context. It also critically analyses the way in which traditionally feminine expressions displayed by young men, are enduringly seen as concomitant with same-sex desire. Here, focus is placed upon the durability of "fag discourse" (Pascoe, 2005) and homophobia as a key gendered policing tool amongst men.

6.2 Sexual diversity and decreased homophobia

Although, as I discuss later in this chapter, homophobia (Anderson, 2009) and the association of effeminacy and same-sex desire remained pervasive throughout the research, most of the young men spoke openly and supportively of same-sex intimate relationships. Indeed, some participants went as far as to state that they themselves may indeed desire other men at some point in their lives. During one focus group, Leon alluded to the possibility that he may fall in love with a man later on in life. Another interviewee, Dan, also viewed sexuality as fluid and subject to change over time, similarly noting that he may later be attracted to a man as the following quote demonstrates:

Dan: I believe that you can be a different sexuality at different points of your life. Like I'm doing this interview with you as a straight male because at the time, that's what I am. My belief is even so much as whatever it is in the moment rather than what phase you're at in your life. So say if there was a dude that just came in now and I was instantly attracted to him, in that moment I would be into him.

Other participants also critiqued the sex and relationships education they had received at school, stating that this was heteronormative and failed to recognise and incorporate same-sex and bisexual relationships. In the following quote, Jim's account can be said to reflect Anderson and McCormack's (2018) assertion that bisexuality is now acknowledged and legitimated by young men:

Mary: Do you think there's anything that could be added to sex education to make it better?

Jim: Erm, I can't remember how much homosexual stuff there was. Probably more, like we need more homosexual integration and bisexual integration and all that stuff. Obviously you need the biology side of it, but then you also need to see that this thing is quite normal - don't worry about this stuff.

Bill similarly critiqued sex and relationship education for failing to include teaching on homosexuality. Bill says:

Bill: No, they [sex and relationships educators] didn't talk about relationships, they just said "oh, sex is between a man and a woman." I mean one thing they need to do as well erm, unless they've started doing it now, I don't know obviously, is erm they shouldn't be obviously saying like between a man and a woman, cos obviously there's gay people, you know. So I guess that's one thing they could do.

Both Jim and Bill's accounts are suggestive of support of sexual diversity in that they are critical of sex education's failure to accommodate and teach a range of sexual identities and practices which fall outside the confines of heterosexuality. As sex and relationship education tends to be focused on biology and sexual reproduction, this often limits its scope and reach, as it remains narrowly confined to (hetero)sexual health (Abbott et al., 2015). This in turn shores up heterosexual sex as 'natural' and subsequently 'normal', with alternatives conversely rendered 'unnatural' and 'abnormal'. Closely associated with this is the assumption that sex is ultimately procreative. This understanding is somewhat reflected in Jim's statement. For example, he states, "obviously you need the biology part of it, but then you also need to see that this thing [homosexuality and bisexuality] is quite normal." Even though Jim advocates for same-sex and bisexual relationships to be included in sex and relationship education, during his extract, for him, biology is presumed to be synonymous with heterosexuality only, which is in turn naturalised. In this sense, heterosexuality is, albeit unconsciously, posited as the norm. Nonetheless, both Jim and Bill's statements can be regarded as supportive of same-sex relationships, signifying a shift in attitudes towards these. The following statement from Jack is also particularly demonstrative of this:

Jack: Erm yeah, like places like, a lot of my friends are gay, so I go to a lot of gay bars and stuff, and there I feel genuinely comfortable. A lot more, you know, a lot more than I do in a straight club I guess. Not obviously every straight club, but there's quite a few straight clubs where I go there and it's, it's just guys trying to sleep with girls and it's like this is not what I'm about, you know. It's yeah, I don't like it.

Jack's account points towards increased tolerance and inclusivity relating to same-sex relationships. Jack clearly adopts a gay-friendly stance during this excerpt, asserting that he has various gay friends, and also that he prefers frequenting gay bars as he is more relaxed here, in that he feels "genuinely comfortable." Conversely, Jack expresses dislike of straight spaces within the night-time economy, stating that "it's just guys trying to sleep with girls." Jack explicitly distances himself from this when he states "this is not what I'm about," signalling a departure from formations of masculinity, whereby displays of heterosexuality are central (Kehily, 2001a, Holland et al., 2004, Richardson, 2010), as discussed in the previous chapter. What is more, his account is also demonstrative of decreased homophobia said to denote heterosexual men's fear relating to assumptions that they are gay (Anderson, 2009). This is particularly pertinent here given that Jack seems to have little, if no fear relating to assumptions about his sexual preferences despite frequenting gay bars regularly.

Some participants also actively questioned and critiqued the presumed correlation and fixity with regard to sex/gender/desire or the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990). During one focus group, participants demonstrated resistance to and actively challenged the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990), as is demonstrated in the following extract:

Leon: I know really feminine guys,

Carl: Physical looking,

Leon: Who are really, for me are really male and manly. I see purely physical. Masculinity for me is physical. Like, and like you can be, I know a lot of gay guys who are really masculine, if that can even be possible?

Ryan: Yeah I know what you mean, just cause you're gay doesn't mean you're not manly.

Leon: I know a lot of really manly gay guys, you know like, who are like, fucking, who I'd class as more men than us.

Ryan: Yeah

For Leon, “feminine guys” can be “manly” if they physically signal masculinity. Hence, Leon states, “masculinity for me is physical.” Femininity is associated with the male body, which can be said to unsettle the “heterosexual matrix”, as proposed by Butler (1990). Here she argues that for individuals to be “culturally intelligible” or in other words to make sense, it is assumed that there must be some uniform correlation between the sexed body, gender and sexual desire (Butler, 1990: 17). For example, that someone who is male, will present as masculine and desire the opposite sex (Butler, 1990). With this in mind, as Leon thinks that people who are “really male” can be “really feminine,” he troubles this assumption. Thus Leon’s account suggests that he does not assume “a stable sex expressed through a stable gender [...] that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the practice of heterosexuality” (Butler, 1990: 151).

However, Leon does initially question whether or not it “can even be possible” for gay men to be masculine. Whilst this is indicative of the pervasive and enduring way in which gay men are viewed as effeminate with society, this quote is also demonstrative of Leon, Carl and Ryan’s interrogation of such an assumption. Not only this, but also noteworthy is that they actively resist such a view, positing an alternative by suggesting that “just cause you’re gay doesn’t mean that you’re not manly.” Indeed, Leon goes as far as to assert that he knows numerous “manly gay guys” whom he would class as “more men” than himself and the rest of the group. Another

interviewee, Pat, similarly challenged the assumption that gay men are inherently feminine. Pat says:

Pat: [...] I know some people who would probably say “oh, if you're gay you're unmanly,” but I know some blokes who if I said “he's gay”, they'd be like “no he's not” (*laughs*). Do you know what I mean? And if you tried to take the piss out of them for it as well, you'd have another thing coming. Like, he's a proper bloke's bloke, but he's gay. Do you know what I mean? So you can't really say that being gay makes you unmanly. So, I don't know. I think some of these pretty boys, I don't know, not a willingness to get your hands dirty and things like that. If you're not really willing to get stuck in and do something with the lads kind of thing I guess.

Pat initially challenges the assumption that gay men are inherently “unmanly”, stating that “you can't really say that being gay makes you unmanly.” In doing so, Pat disentangles same-sex desire from effeminacy, ultimately challenging the assumption that gay men are effeminate and therefore lack masculine capital (Taywaditep, 2002). However, he then asserts that “pretty boys”, or those not prepared to get their “hands dirty” and “get stuck in and do something with the lads” are unmanly. Whilst demonstrating the significance of toughness and physicality to masculine identity and peer group inclusion, when set against the backdrop of Pat's prior statement, it highlights paradoxes with regard to understandings of gender and sexuality. Whilst Pat discusses the ways in which he regards gay men as potentially masculine, contrastingly, heterosexual men who were seen as effeminate and categorised as “pretty boys” are associated with marginal and failing masculinity (Nayak and Kehily, 2013). As such, ‘successful’ hetero-masculinity is very much still demarcated by not being feminine within Pat's account. Many participants were also reticent to display physical tactility or emotional intimacy with other men, in contrast to inclusive masculinities claims (Anderson and McCormack, 2018), as the next section explores.

6.3 Physical tactility and emotional intimacy amongst men

As discussed in chapter 1, inclusive masculinities theorists assert that young men are now “emotionally intimate” and “physically tactile” with other men (Anderson and McCormack, 2018: 548). Although the previous section could be suggestive of inclusive masculinities in that participants espoused support of same-sex relationships, further inspection of the data reveals that Anderson's (2009) interpretation and theorisation of contemporary masculinities is somewhat optimistic (O'Neill, 2015a) and problematic (Levesque, 2016). In contrast to Anderson's (2009) analysis, data from this research reveals a much more precarious and

hazardous landscape with regard to young men's gendered and sexual lives. As discussed in the previous chapter, displays of heterosexuality remained central to signifying an 'appropriate' masculine self. Closely associated with this was the disavowal of practices which may call into question men's heterosexual status. As such, participants spoke of their reluctance to demonstrate affection or physical tactility with other men. Though there were instances where hugging or psychical tactility was practised by participants, they also often recalled being ridiculed or shamed for this, underscoring the persistence of homophobia within contemporary society contra to inclusive masculinities theories' claims. This is demonstrated in the following quote from Jack:

Jack: [...] especially in school and stuff, it was like showing affection to friends was really weird. Like between two males. Like you know, I give like pretty much every single one of my friends a hug when I see them and when I say goodbye, which in school was seen as really weird and like "ooer, what are you doing, you know." It's just what friend's do, like, you know. There's been times in Leeds city centre that I've been meeting up with a guy friend and I've given him a hug before we go into a bar and I can already see people looking. It's like, he's just my friend and I'm saying hello, like, and you really do feel people staring, which I just find odd. Really odd.

Though Jack attests to being physically tactile with friends who are men, suggesting adherence to Anderson and McCormack's (2018) claims, his account also brings to light the endurance of homophobia and the ways in which young men continue to be policed with regard to displays of physical tactility with other. Indeed, another interviewee, Ken, went as far as to articulate his own criticism of other men who were physically tactile with each other, in spite of stating that he himself was a "huggy person". Ken says:

Mary: Can you think of things that make a man unmanly?

Ken: A lot of hugging. Yeah, I mean I do it, I'm a very huggy person, but I always sort of criticise other men. See I work in a job that has quite a lot of physical contact, so there's a lot of, you know, particularly female colleagues do get upset because the ward we work on really is quite distressing. So they get quite upset and I'll go into the nurse's space and be like "oh, I'll give you a hug." But the guys do it too, and I do with a couple of guys [...] and I started going, actually that's a bit unmanly really. Maybe it's alright if the women behave like that, but I don't think that's sexist in any way, I just think that literally, men have been so brought up that you don't hug. You only hug if you're in a relationship or there's a need to hug as opposed to just

going “oh hi, you're back in work after 3 weeks leave. Just give me a hug,” which we do and it causes some of us to go hmmm, it's a bit unmanly.

Though Ken states that he is a “very huggy person”, and that he himself hugs other men at work, he repeatedly constructs hugging between men as “unmanly” and openly reveals that he criticises other men for doing so. This contradicts research put forward by McCormack (2012a), which notes that widespread hugging and physical tactility is now widely accepted and incorporated amongst young men, and as such, that this is indicative of “inclusive” masculinities. Moreover, though Ken voices hugging people himself, and being a “huggy person”, as this excerpt shows, this does not necessarily translate to or resonate with his wider, heavily gendered stance on hugging inasmuch as he regards this as antithetical to masculinity. This echoes de Boise (2015), who takes aim at inclusive masculinities scholarship, arguing that physical tactility and emotional intimacy amongst men does not necessarily correlate to or provide valid indication of wider gendered societal attitudes. As de Boise (2015: 330) illustrates, “there are numerous examples of other intensely patriarchal societies where men who express same-sex desire face open hostility, such as Iran and Uganda, but where men can openly show public tactility without being considered gay.”

Physical tactility between men was also deemed off limits due to assumptions that this held the potential for young men to be perceived as gay. In times of marked homophobia as Anderson (2005) terms it, young men’s gendered landscapes are narrowly restricted. Anderson (2009: 8) states that within these periods, “men’s demonstrations of intimacy are generally relegated to the public sphere (such as playing sports), and soft tactility is prohibited.” He goes on to assert that “in such cultural moments, boys and men who do display physical or emotional intimacy are socially homosexualized and consequently stripped of their perceived masculinity” (Anderson, 2009: 8). However, Anderson (2009) and other proponents of inclusive masculinities theory (Dean, 2013, McCormack, 2014) claim that as there has been a lessening of homophobia within contemporary society, so too that there has been a significant decrease in homophobia. Yet such assertions have received fervent criticism from scholars in the field (de Boise, 2015, Bridges, 2014, O'Neill, 2015a), as will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Moreover, figures published recently in the UK government’s national LGBT survey (GEO, 2018: 3) state that “at least two in five respondents had experienced an incident because they were LGBT, such as verbal harassment or physical violence, in the 12 months preceding the survey.” Certainly, these figures stand in stark contrast to Anderson’s (2009) claims. Perhaps even more sobering to read from the survey is that “more than nine in ten of the most serious incidents went unreported, often because respondents thought ‘it happens all the time’” (GEO, 2018: 3).

Hence, whilst McCormack and Anderson (2010: 844) assert that heterosexual young men are now more at ease to be “physically tactile and emotionally intimate” with one another, some participants in this study shone light on a different picture. In view of this, the following extract from Dan’s interview reveals how he was inhibited with regard to both public and private displays of affection in terms of his friends who were men:

Dan: Well, they [women] can kiss their mates without being out-ed as homosexual. Sometimes, like when you’re really pissed and you’re having a heart-to-heart moment with one of your guy friends, you know, they’ll like kiss you on the cheek or something nice. It’s just like an affectionate thing, but I think if you were to do that in the cold light of day, I think you’d be seen as homosexual. But I think, like, to some extent las’ have more freedom of like physical contact without anything sexual coming into it. However, like men have contact sports and stuff like that, they can like las’ can. I think it’s to do with like physically showing affection to your friends. So, like las’ can hold each other’s hand in the street and stuff and not necessarily be lesbians, whereas if two guys hold hands - they’re definitely gay. But, then again, there is physical contact with males like in sports and stuff like that.

In contrast to claims made by Anderson (2009), Dan voices how physical tactility is only permitted within the context of contact sports. What is more, where men display affection with one another in public spaces beyond the ‘field’, Dan states that they are immediately “out-ed as homosexual.” This contradicts assertions made by Anderson et al. (2012: 421) that “kissing behaviours are increasingly permissible due to rapidly decreasing levels of cultural homophobia”. Women, in contrast, are positioned in opposition to this, able to publically display affection freely and without reference to their sexual preference. This is presumably as affection is a traditionally feminine-coded practice that is seen as not dependent upon or productive of sexual desire with regard to women. However, because of the amalgamation and conflation of femininity and same-sex desire (Fulcher, 2017), where heterosexual men adopt practices which traditionally signify femininity, their sexuality is called into question (Butler, 1990). As such, the significant ways in which heterosexuality continues to restrict young men’s constructions, understandings and ways of being men is emphasised.

However, Dan goes on to reveal how alcohol and being drunk opened up space whereby young men can be affectionate with one another. Indeed, another participant, Ken, spoke of being unable to meet a male friend for a coffee as this was considered “weird”, going on to say that “if we go to the pub, we can just be guys.” Certainly, a theme throughout the data was that the

young men's negotiation of gender norms was very much dependent on space and context (Connell, 1995). As such, this highlights the contextual specificities of contemporary masculinities. Dan also spoke of the ways in which young men were reticent to be emotionally expressive with each other within private spaces, such as online messaging. Dan says:

Dan: It really sucks for me, cos I really like telling people what I like about them [...] but a lot of, everyone's just like, proper aren't comfortable with it. Even to the level, like, I showed my mate a song that I'd written and I sent him it on line, and he was like "o that's some great song writing skills there." I said "you know, I wouldn't have got here if you hadn't shown me like a cover when I was 14. Thanks for introducing me to rock music." And he saw it and he just didn't reply. I just think that he wasn't comfortable with the compliment and the emotional connotations to it.

Mary: Is that what happens then, you just don't get a response if you're affectionate to a male friend?

Dan: Yeah. Unless they're intoxicated, then you won't get a response usually.

Once again alcohol is said to create a context in which the constraints of normative masculinity can be transgressed. Given that alcohol is often thought of as a signifier of masculinity (de Visser and Smith, 2007) and thus utilised to accrue masculine capital, this may serve to open up space for non-masculine practices which in other circumstances may threaten masculine identity (De Visser et al., 2009). This is notwithstanding how alcohol of its own accord can act to inhibit behaviour and action. Nevertheless, whilst Dan expresses a desire to compliment and praise his male friends in other contexts, he states that this is often met with taciturnity or silence given that he believes this brings discomfort to other men. Another interviewee, Jacob, similarly discussed being unable to compliment other men, stating that this signals same-sex desire, as the following quote shows:

Mary: So if you posted a picture online it'd be seen as vain?

Jacob: I think for me yeah. From a lot of like male people, because I know that if a woman posted one, men and women would appreciate it, for different reasons, but if a man did it other men wouldn't be able to appreciate it, because that's not manly to say "nice abs you've got." Because you'd think "they're gay. They must be."

Mary: OK, so you can't sort of compliment each other?

Jacob: No.

Given the emphasis that Jacob places on not being seen as vain, and as dominant constructions of masculinity demand that young men maintain an athletic physique, Jacob's statement is indicative of the precarious gendered identity work young people undertake online, particularly in an era of increased social media use. Indeed, writers have noted the tension between the value and esteem attached to muscularity, and also the widespread belief that narcissism and vanity are symbolic of femininity and homosexuality (Gill et al., 2005, Barber, 2008, De Visser et al., 2009). Hence, whilst women can receive praise relating to their appearance from both men and women, men are unable to praise each other, as this is deemed "not manly", as Jacob says. By implication of this, where men do compliment each other, they "must be" gay, given that such practices are said to contravene the boundaries of 'correct' masculinity. In the following excerpt, Ben echoes Jacob. Yet, here he discloses being violently pushed by a man as a result of praising his appearance and subsequently being seen as gay. Ben says:

Ben: [...] and the week before, I was at the pub that I got kicked out of actually, and there was a man going past and I went, I said to him "o you look really nice tonight mate. I bet you're going to go home happy aren't you?" And he took that as I was making a pass at him and then immediately got aggressive and started pushing me and saying "mate, blah blah blah. I'm not gay. You better fuck off right now." But for something as simple as trying to make a passing observation as I was walking past. Yeah.

Ben's quote indicates both the endurance and persistence of homophobia and homophobia (Anderson, 2009), and also the ways that these continue to police and regulate (often violently) gender and sexuality. Once again, this contravenes Anderson's (2009) assertion that young men are not only more openly "inclusive" of same-sex relationships, but also that they actively integrate certain performances which have previously signified subordinate or marginalised identities. Here we can see that the material reality of gay men's lives is often one of violence and intimidation in contrast to inclusive masculinities claims (Anderson, 2009).

This section has evidenced how physical tactility and emotional expression were seen as inaccessible to some young men due to continuing gender and sexual policing. The next section explores participants' negotiations of gender and sexuality in relation to gender presentation, with specific reference to the incorporation and disavowal of traditionally feminine styles and practices.

6.4 Gender presentation and the incorporation of feminine styles

Although most participants spoke of a desire to transcend normative constructions of gender with regard to their appearance, clothing, and style, a running theme throughout this research was that gender presentation was heavily policed and narrowly demarcated. Hence, although clothing was increasingly cited as a cultural resource from which to carve out identities, the young men spoke of the enduring boundaries of gender expression and concomitant narrowly-defined models of masculinity (Barry, 2018). Veering from normative and ‘acceptable’ notions of masculinity was thus, more often than not, viewed as risky and hazardous for most participants. Some interviewees noted having already faced ridicule and bullying where they did not present as ‘correctly’ masculine, whilst most certainly saw this as a potentiality. Moreover, some participants explicitly ridiculed men who adopt traditionally feminine styles or practices within interview. At points, this was sutured to homophobia, given homosexuality’s continued association with effeminised masculinities, as is discussed further later on in this chapter. It is not surprising then that a significant number of participants felt that they were unable to transgress gendered boundaries, which they saw as rigid and inflexible most of the time. This is shown in the following excerpt from a focus group where participants were discussing how constructions of masculinity limit their lives:

Tim: Like probably wear a dress in public. I thought that was quite a brave thing to do if you were a man. I personally don’t think I’m brave enough to do it.

Mat: It’s not something that you’re nervous to do, you just literally couldn’t do it.

Mary: OK. So it’s completely off the cards sort of thing?

Mat: Yeah.

Tim: I think its cos of the judgement sort of thing, like, it shouldn’t affect you, but you know it would if you did something like that.

Sahib: Yeah, you’d feel like you’d get looked at cos that’s, that’s not the norm.

Alex: Back to the whole this is how you should be as a man type thing, even though people don’t think, well a lot of people don’t think about how this is what you should do as a man, if, for example, Tim was to go in a dress walking through the streets people would look at him like “what!? Why is that guy in a dress?” Type thing. And that’s not very manly, without that even being their viewpoint. I think it’s just probably imprinted in a lot of brains.

Sahib: I feel like it's only permissible if you're on a stag night out or you're drunk then it's just in a sense mocking, mocking the entire institution of wearing a dress as a man. But you couldn't wear one just because you felt like it or you felt comfortable in a dress. That would be off the cards.

That Mat states "you just literally couldn't [wear a dress]" underlines that gender presentation and expression continues to be heavily demarcated along strict gendered lines. As Alex states that it is "imprinted in a lot of brains" that wearing a dress is "unmanly" further highlights the embeddedness and entrenchment of this. These young men are also acutely aware of the risk of gender policing if they transgress the boundaries of the gender binary, emphasising the durability and persistence of gender policing as a key apparatus of entrenching gender norms. Indeed, as Sahib's final statement shows, it is only when young men are themselves interpellated as the agents of gender policing through "mocking the entire institution of wearing a dress as a man", that they are able to present in this way.

Unsurprisingly then, other participants voiced personal disdain towards men who engaged in traditionally feminine practices in interview, scorning those who veered outside of the confines of traditional masculine presentation. Pat for example, spoke critically of waxing, moisturising and other appearance-related practices among men. Pat says:

Mary: How would you describe a manly man?

Pat: I don't know. He wouldn't wax for a start would he (*laughs*). He wouldn't shave or being waxing his legs or anything like that. Moisturising - I don't think a manly man moisturises.

Mary: Or what would you say makes a man unmanly?

Pat: Erm, I don't know. If a man spends more time to get ready to go out than a girl does (*laughs*).

Here, Pat draws upon the stereotypical notion that 'real men' are unconcerned with their appearance (Edwards, 2003). His use of laughter marks investment in traditionally feminised practices as absurd and open to ridicule, which he himself engages with during this excerpt. Masculinity is thus policed through the renunciation of femininity as feminine practices are disavowed (Barry, 2018). However, it is noteworthy that a number of participants did voice wearing make-up, nail varnish and clothes traditionally coded as feminine, reflecting evidence that young men are assuming feminised practices which were previously unavailable to them

(Gough et al., 2014). Tom, for example, spoke freely and openly about wearing make-up. His quote is as follows:

Tom: I'll wear make-up if I want to, if it suits me. I look alright with a bit of eye liner, but to be honest anything else just doesn't look good on me. Similarly, I do not do dresses. No. A) I just don't have the hips for them [...]

Kai also critiqued assumptions that heterosexual men should not wear make-up as the following quote shows:

Kai: I still feel like men can't wear make-up unless they're bi or gay, which is just, it's ridiculous. I used to wear concealer when I had acne.

Kai attests to using concealer himself and also lambasts the widespread assumption that only gay or bi-sexual men can wear make-up. Indeed this conflation of femininity and same-sex desire featured heavily in other participants' accounts. Yet, even where non-normative gendered performances and styles featured in participants' accounts, this was often discussed in such a way as to reinforce their hetero-masculine identities. One group of young men, for example, who prided themselves on eccentricity and gender nonconformity and were often eager to declare their resistance to dominant constructions of masculinity, spoke of wearing dresses, but in ways which bolstered their hetero-masculine identities. Hence, they were not able to discuss wearing 'feminine' clothing without deliberation and consideration as to what this meant in terms of their identities as heterosexual men first and foremost. In the following excerpt, Carl states that he likes to wear women's clothing, but prior to this, he works to discursively shore up his heterosexuality:

Carl: I'm a straight man right, but I like to dress up in women's clothing. I do. I like to put on my mum's tops and shit.

Mike: Yeah the androgyny comes into it.

Carl: I like, play gigs in them.

Ryan: I think we've all worn women's clothes before.

Carl: I don't wear dresses and put wigs on and stuff.

Ryan: Yeah it's not drag.

Mike: You're not identifying as a man there, you're just identifying as an artist.

Carl: Yeah

Leon: I don't think you're necessarily identifying, I think you're just expressing yourself.

Carl: Yeah, but if a lot of people knew that... When I'm on stage and stuff it doesn't really matter. But I think if a lot of people knew that they'd think "he's like a tranny" or summat, but I'm not, really... am I? Or am I?

Ryan: Yeah it's not drag is it, it's just how you want to dress. You're not pretending to be a woman you're just a man wearing feminine clothes. That's what drag is, isn't it?

It is as though Carl feels compelled to demonstrate and prove that he is not gay by at the outset, declaring and foregrounding his hetero-masculine identity (Bridges, 2010). Echoing theories of hybrid masculinities, whilst Carl discusses adopting feminine styles, he does not do this without shoring up principally that he is still both masculine and heterosexual (Bridges, 2010). This subtly works to obscure the bolstering of hetero-masculinity and the relegation of LGBTQ people (Bridges, 2010). Moreover, although this excerpt may appear to be indicative of increasingly gender diverse performances amongst young men, Carl and the other members of the band rearticulate and reframe wearing 'feminine' clothing as artistic performance, as opposed to signifying a gender transgressive act, though as Mike states, "androgyny" does play a part. In light of this, the symbolic use of feminine clothes within the context of musical performance may in fact be used to shore up their power and status as performers. Similarly to participants in Barry's (2018: 19) study on men's fashion, these young men were "immersed in the arts community that legitimized his use of feminine clothing." With this in mind, whilst Carl's dress "challenged societal gender norms, mobilizing feminine performances earned him cultural capital within his niche creative field" (Barry, 2018: 19).

This leads to questions as to whether or not men's adoption of practices traditionally allied with femininity merely represents a repackaging of hegemonic masculinity and thus "the flexibility of identity afforded privileged groups" (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014: 249). Notions of what is deemed hegemonic, or rather that which is idealised is also subject to change over time and is dependent on context (Demetriou, 2001). Furthermore, are such performances merely stylistic and therefore not representative of a real shift in terms of gendered power inequality (Demetriou, 2001)? It is, therefore, useful to ask if the boundaries of gender performance and expression are loosening for young women in the same way that they are for young men. Certainly, as, Kolehmainen (2012: 196) writing on postfeminist makeover cultures states, "men have greater mobility in relation to gender than women do, as men are invited to perform such 'feminine'

actions as caring for their skin, but women are not encouraged to take over conventional masculinity.” With this in mind, are young women able to acquire power and status by transgressing gender norms in the same ways as young men? Indeed, it seems that idealised notions of femininity and feminine beauty have remained fairly rigid and fixed.

Also noteworthy is how Carl jokes about the possibility of being viewed as a “tranny”. Hence, whilst Carl’s incorporation of feminine clothing may seem to create distance from hegemonic masculinity, he discursively reiterates some of the very discourses which underpin gender inequality and anti-trans speech. As Bridges (2014) argues, whilst such aesthetic borrowing of traditionally feminine styles may have the capacity to subvert and disrupt gender and sexual boundaries, such stylisation can also operate to disguise and obscure inequality in novel and subtle ways. Hence when Carl’s adoption of ‘feminine’ style is set against the backdrop of him affirming his hetero-masculine identity, alongside his joking about being viewed as a “tranny”, it is given a different meaning. Therefore, Carl’s wearing of ‘feminine’ clothes, while appearing to challenge gender boundaries, comes largely at the expense of transgender people whom Carl makes efforts to distance himself from. Nevertheless, whilst maintaining a critical eye on the manoeuvrability of those who inhabit dominant categories, this excerpt does somewhat point towards a lessening of normative constructions of masculinity and increased gender fluidity amongst this group of men.

This section has discussed young men’s negotiations of traditionally feminine styles and practices, focusing also on the ways in which incorporation of these may obscure gender equality in subtle ways (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Building on from this, the next section explores the conflation of gender and sexuality given the enduring association between effeminacy and same-sex desire (Fulcher, 2017).

6.5 Femininity and same-sex desire

Although some of the young men echoed Anderson (2009), demonstrating that to some extent overt homophobia has decreased contra to previous research emphasising its ubiquitous use as a gendered regulatory tool (Phoenix et al., 2003, Renold, 2003, Pascoe, 2005, Froyum, 2007, Kimmel, 2012), most of the young men also spoke extensively of ‘doing’ gender in such a way so as to not be perceived as gay. Whether by distancing from same-sex desire through affirmations of hetero-masculinity, or not incorporating feminine styles or practices, most participants seemed to labour to avoid assumptions that they desired the opposite sex. As such, this can be said to be a reflexive process, which is informed and reproduced by gender and sexual norms (see chapter 4).

As de Boise (2015) argues, though it would seem implausible to suggest that young gay men experience the same level and rate of homophobia today as they did before the conception of Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, a theory Anderson (2009) seeks to critique, the young men within this study were still very much constrained by homophobia. Indeed, whilst there have been various significant legislative changes such as the repeal of Section 28 in 2003, which have contributed to shifts in public attitude towards same-sex relationships (de Boise, 2015), participants within this research spoke extensively about their fear of being "homosexualised", as Anderson (2009: 248) puts it. Hence, a key oversight of inclusive masculinity theory is that it ignores that whilst young men may have gay friends and hold non-homophobic attitudes, they themselves may still work hard to signify that they are not gay (Pascoe, 2007, Ward, 2015, Levesque, 2016), as the focus group in the previous section demonstrated. Moreover, notions put forward by Anderson (2009) that society is now post-homophobic fails to acknowledge developing and emerging homophobias, as well as more subtle discrimination such as microaggressions (Bridges and Pascoe, 2015, Levesque, 2016). The data from this research reflects this and thus stands at odds with Anderson's (2009) argument that with decreased homophobia, comes the lessening of homophobia, or a fear of being perceived as gay.

Accordingly, participants repeatedly discussed the ways in which both they and other men explicitly dis-identified from being gay. As Richardson (2010: 357) writes, "to ontologize that which they consider themselves 'to be', heterosexual subjects frequently identify what they are not: 'I'm not gay.'" Hence, despite assertions by Anderson (2009) and other proponents of inclusive masculinities theory, such as McCormack (2012b), that homophobia is lessening, the majority of the young men spoke at length of "fears of being homosexualised" (Anderson, 2009: 248). This was so much so that a number of interviewees discussed censoring, adjusting and regulating their behaviour and how they spoke about themselves so as to avoid being categorised as feminine and as a presumed result of this, gay. Indeed, this was seen to bring about stigma, shame and embarrassment even though the young men themselves spoke favourably about same-sex relationships.

In the following excerpt, for example, Jacob describes the "pressures" of navigating and indeed not overstepping the "line between straight and gay." Jacob says:

Jacob: (Long pause) maybe just like the line between being straight and gay, and where does it, like, social pressures...

Mary: Do you think there is a line or?

Jacob: Just... I just like, there's so many traits of being gay that even if you're just doing one as a straight person, it's like people would take that as a clue. So I don't know, what defines a gay man from a straight man.

Mary: So do you feel like, do you have to really act like a straight man and you can't do anything that's associated with being gay?

Jacob: In front of like new people. So, like, in front of all of my male friends I'm quite comfortable to just be whatever, but I know if I met like a new group of men maybe, just around my age, I'd put a bit more of a front on. Just to like... feel part of it. Like make them feel like, sorry I've got hiccups...

Emphasised in this excerpt is the underlying “pressure” Jacob feels with regard to not being viewed as gay by others. Not only does Jacob talk of the “line between being straight or gay”, he discusses this in such a way as to imply that this line is something which should not be crossed, particularly as a heterosexual young man. He goes on to state that adopting “traits” associated with same-sex desire, of which there are “many”, would result in people taking this as a “clue.” This indicates that Jacob believes that homosexuality is something to conceal or hide. Once again, this stands at odds with inclusive masculinities theory (Anderson, 2009), which proposes that young heterosexual men now freely and openly display behaviours associated with femininity and same-sex desire (McCormack and Anderson, 2010). Conversely, Jacob explains that he has to present himself as heterosexual and assume a “front” or “manhood act” (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009) when in the company of a new group of men his age. This serves as a means by which to feel included within the male peer group, or as Jacob terms it - a “part of it.” Emphasised here is the gendered and sexual identity work Jacob undertakes in order to secure male peer group inclusion, which is foregrounded upon successful and ‘correct’ displays of (hetero)masculinity, as discussed in chapter 5.

Closely associated with this was the continued association of effeminacy with homosexuality (Taywaditep, 2002, Fulcher, 2017). Men’s incorporation of traditionally feminine styles and practices thus evoked anxieties pertaining to participants’ sexuality (Edwards, 2003). Where participants engaged in traditionally feminine practices they were often fearful of, or explicitly coded as being gay by others. In this sense, same-sex desire and femininity were often collapsed together, amalgamating into the same thing (Fulcher, 2017). Accordingly, being feminine was frequently seen to signify desire for those of the same-sex, whilst same-sex desire was frequently married with notions of ‘inherent’ femininity. Connell’s (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity comes into play here. Not only were gay men seen to occupy the lower echelons of

the gender hierarchy among men, homosexual masculinities, categorised by Connell (1995) as subordinated masculinities, were also often conflated with femininity. However, as writers such as Schippers (2007: 88) state, this leaves “no conceptual apparatus with which to distinguish femininity from subordinate masculinities unless we reduce femininity to the practices of women and masculinity to those of men.” Nonetheless, this coagulation of femininity and same-sex desire featured heavily within participants’ accounts and is reflected in the data of this chapter. This is also exemplified in the following excerpt from one focus group:

Tim: Yeah with like clothing as well, but in the reverse way with clothing. Like, you know we were talking about dresses and stuff like that, I feel like, it’s if a girl like... There’s a lot more clothing that girls can wear, that boys can’t. Like, I don’t know, you can get tomboys, and there’s not really a reversal of that for guys.

Mat: You’re just gay straight away.

Tim: Yeah, like your sexuality or your erm,

Mat: Well yeah, I think it’s your sexuality that gets questioned.

Sahib: And if you have your legs one over the other in a more feminine stance you’d be instantly badged as gay.

Tim: I’ve been told that before actually, whilst I’ve had my legs crossed.

Sahib: Yeah.

This excerpt highlights the suturing of traditionally feminine styles and practices with same-sex desire. Striking here is the ease and promptness with which Tim recalls an instance where assumptions were made about his sexuality for having his legs crossed, in response to Sahib’s hypothetical statement. This emphasises the everydayness of gender and sexual policing for young men, stressing the continued employment of homophobia as a regulatory apparatus of gender and sexuality. What is more, this contrasts with inclusive masculinities theorisations (Anderson, 2009, McCormack, 2012a). In another interview, Jacob also highlighted the endurance of the “fag discourse” (Pascoe, 2007). Jacob says:

Jacob: [...] you know once you’re a famous male actor no one thinks of you as feminine, but the whole I want to be an actor when I grow up, it’s like “Oh.” That’s what stresses me out, because I do a lot of music things and I’ve always like wanted to say “I want to be a pop star when I grow up”, but everyone would just be like “shut up. You’re a gay boy.” But if I was their next famous singer or rapper they’d love it – “the real man.”

Here, Jacob asserts that if he were to disclose his hopes of being a pop star, an occupation traditionally coded as feminine, that this would signify to others that he is gay. In this sense, this excerpt epitomises his anxiety around “the line between straight and gay”, as mentioned in his previous quote, so much so that he actively censors talking about his future aspirations for fear of assumptions being made about his sexuality. Whilst Jacob wishes he could freely publicise his ambitions, he is held back by the thought that he would be negatively chastised and teased by others as “a gay boy.” Indeed, it is just the thought that this might happen that underlies Jacob’s silence. Contrastingly, he draws upon a fictitious idea of himself as being a famous rapper to state that it is within this context that he would be seen as “the real man.” Whilst the pop star, coded as feminine and thus gay, is met with ridicule and derision, the neoliberal subject of fame and successful masculinity borne through the figure of the rapper is revered (see chapter 4). Though writers have provided more nuanced accounts of rap music than has been produced in previous years, engaging with alternative elements of the genre foregrounded on humility between friends, within wider society popular rap is recognised for its “hypermasculinity, misogyny and homophobia” (Oware, 2011: 22). Hence it is this which Jacob assumes will be celebrated by male peers. Other participants, such as Tom and Sean, echoed Jacob, maintaining that there is often an underlying assumption that a man is gay if he enjoys traditionally feminine practices such as dancing or gymnastics. This is exemplified in the following excerpts from separate interviews:

Tom: [...] well, when I was a very, very young kid, I was dancing and I did quite a bit of dance, like, even then - I must have been 8, and people were like "oh, are you gay?" "No! I'm 8! I'm not remotely interested in anybody in my sex or the opposite sex. I'm just... like, interested in Blue Peter you know?" I've got my priorities!

Sean: [...] Like if you're a bloke in gymnastics people assume you're gay...

Both Tom and Sean’s statements emphasise the endurance of assumptions around gender and sexuality, which posit that incorporation of traditionally feminine practices is indicative of same-sex desire (Fulcher, 2017). Here gender and sexuality are conflated and collapsed together (Fulcher, 2017). Moreover, Tom’s account further stresses how “fag discourse” (Pascoe, 2005) continues to regulate young men’s lives, normalising certain gender and sexual identities, whilst undermining others. In a similar vein, Ken spoke of modifying the way he spoke about his job as a nurse in order to avoid being deemed feminine and subsequently gay. Ken says:

Ken: [...] even just healthcare in general, it's really feminine so you kind of feel like you can't go "OK, I work in nursing." It takes you to say you work in a psychiatric hospital for people to go "OK, that's more masculine. That's more masculine." They go "yeah, so what do you do," and you go "I'm basically a nurse." They'd go "riiight."

Mary: So you'd get that kind of response?

Ken: You'd get the kind of "is he, is he gay? Is he!?" And then you go, "psychiatric nurse" - it's like the more masculine bit that you get in there (laughs). We do a lot of restraints, so there's a physical side of it. You're not just putting a plaster on and going "are you OK sweetheart" and making coffee. When you actually say I'm on the floor wrestling with them, they go "OK. That's masculine." You go "I'm being strict. I'm assertive and authoritative," and then suddenly that's a bit more masculine. You get a lot more men working in psychiatric care than say general [care]. So yeah, that's definitely something I envy women on. Women aren't necessarily... they're not embarrassed when they go "I'm a nurse." Whereas men are a bit more...

Given that Ken considers healthcare to be a feminine occupation, he distances himself from this on the grounds that occupying such a profession would invite others to question his sexuality. Ken speaks of declaring that he is in fact a psychiatric nurse, stating that this is the "more masculine bit that you get in there." He then goes on to dichotomise psychiatric and general nursing, placing emphasis on how the former centres upon physical strength, restraint, authoritativeness and thus signifies masculinity. Given that general nursing is deemed feminine and thus viewed as inferior, undesirable and tame, Ken indicates that he would be embarrassed to say he was just a nurse. Due to this, Ken effectively rearticulates a traditionally feminine practice in masculine terms. As such, traditionally feminine practices are reframed so as "to inoculate [...] against potential charges of gender non-conformity" (Hall et al., 2012: 2019).

Ken also assumes that women experience more freedom and autonomy with regard to gender in the workplace. In this sense, women are imagined as having greater liberty and manoeuvrability. Indeed this is in line with accounts from other participants relating to a number of topics, which may well reflect wider public discourses around masculinity which centre upon notions of men's "wounds" (Messner, 1997: 19), to the refusal of broader gendered power dynamics. Nonetheless, Ken later goes on to describe experiencing feelings of stigma and shame due to his job, as it holds the potential to position him as feminine and thus gay. Subsequently,

this highlights how both femininity and homosexuality continue to be rendered inferior and subordinate to masculinity and heterosexuality. Ken says:

Ken: You go “Oh, I’m seeing a physiotherapist” and everyone goes “oh, what’s she called?” You go, “it’s a he,” and they go, “oh, is he?! Oh OK.” You know, I’ve even heard family say when I’ve seen male physiotherapists and literally a family member goes “is he gay then?” And I’m like “I’ve not asked him.” And you get a kind of stigma that you’re going to be innately feminine because you work in healthcare.

This quote demonstrates the entanglement of notions of ‘natural’ sex difference, gender stereotypes, and assumptions relating to sexuality and desire. Given that Ken’s physiotherapist lacks what Butler (1990: 17) terms, “cultural intelligibility” as he occupies a traditionally feminine occupation, his sexuality is subsequently questioned. As chapter 1 discussed, Butler (1990: 17) posits that for things to be “culturally intelligible”, or make sense in the world, that uniformity and consistency appear to exist between a presumed stable sex (male/female), expressed through a stable gender (masculine/feminine), resulting in concomitant desire for the opposite sex. Whilst these relations are naturalised, any deviation from this, whereby sex, gender and desire align differently, is thought of as ‘unnatural’ and thus opened up to not only political, economic and social disadvantage and exclusion, but also stigma and shame. Where a man may desire another man, or express himself in a way deemed feminine by others, for example, he may, therefore, be considered not a ‘real’ man. As Butler (1990: 17) writes, “the cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of subjects of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender.”

With this in mind, it is interesting to note that whilst Ken is critical of the association of femininity and same-sex desire in the previous quote, he later went on to express views which questioned and castigated heterosexual men who incorporated traditionally feminine practices. Hence, when discussing heterosexual men who wear make-up, he maintained that effeminacy is only acceptable amongst gay men, as the following quote shows:

Ken: [...] wearing make-up going back 20 years, a man wearing make-up just wasn’t even a thing [...] Straight men wearing make-up is now a thing, which still surprises me a bit. You know, I see men wearing make-up at work and I’m a bit... Who are married with kids – yeah?! I’m not at all being judgemental.

Mary: So it surprises you then?

Ken: It surprises me a bit yeah. So I suppose on that basis I do see that there are normal practices with being a man, but I can't think what they are. I can more pinpoint what I think is abnormal in being a man - things like wearing make-up [...], straight men cross-dressing. And again I see a lot of my friends engage in that kind of behaviour and it's just like?! Again I'm, I'm all for men wearing dresses, but straight men with kids going out and wearing dresses on a Friday night?

Most alarming to Ken is that *heterosexual* men enact and display traditionally feminine practices. As such, Ken expresses derision at heterosexual men wearing make-up or “cross-dressing”, positioning this as objectionable and abnormal. This “exceeds the bounds of cultural intelligibility” (Butler, 1990: 29) for Ken as he assumes these practices should be limited and restricted to men in same-sex relationships only. Given the possibility of mockery and ridicule where young men contravene normative standards of masculinity, as demonstrated by Ken, it is not surprising that most participants voiced being unable to incorporate traditionally feminine practices. Certainly, this problematises assertions that gendered boundaries have significantly diminished for young men so much so that homophobia or homophobia have less significance now, as scholars assert (Anderson, 2009). Hence, Ken’s account stresses the persistent ways in which gender and sexual policing operate as a key regulatory apparatus in young men’s lives. Participants also recalled specific instances whereby deviating from ‘acceptable’ notions of masculinity and adopting more ‘feminine’ styles had meant that they had experienced homophobia, as the next section discusses in more detail.

6.6 Enduring homophobias

Although the young men in this research identified as heterosexual, they spoke of widespread homophobia and gender policing. When Dan, for example, shared that he often wears feminine clothes and “dresses up” as a woman, he also spoke of another instance from his youth when he was chastised by family for wearing feminine clothes. His quote is as follows:

Dan: Erm, yeah I’ve always liked to actually be feminine like er, and er, like when I was a kid, I found boys clothes so boring and so dull. So I had pink shoes and I got a my little pony thing for Christmas and all my Christian relatives and that side of the family were like “O, you’re going to turn him gay. You’re going to turn him gay if you let him have all this stuff.” And yeah, they let me buy it and, yeah, I still like dressing up as a woman sometimes. It’s fun (shows me picture).

Though it is significant that Dan reveals that he wears feminine clothing, his statement also reiterates the ways in which such practice is regulated and indeed ridiculed within family settings for its correlation with same-sex desire. Hence, Dan recalls being reprimanded and scolded by relatives for wearing pink shoes, based on the assumption that this would “turn him gay”. Where participants veered away from expressing themselves in ways concomitant with dominant constructions of masculinity, conversely adopting styles traditionally coded as feminine, they were often met with homophobic slurs and abuse (Fulcher, 2017). The following quote from Ben also exemplifies this:

Mary: Have you got any more examples of being ridiculed for what you wear?

Ben: Yeah, like every weekend. So it happened this weekend, so some young lads, probably in their mid-teens, commented negatively on the fact that I had, that I chose to paint my nails and I gave them a very honest, very logical reply as to why. As they were like “why are you wearing painted nails?” And I was like “because it looks really cool, and two, because I want to.” And then they couldn't get it round their heads and started calling me homophobic slurs [...]

Mary: So quite frequent then?

Ben: Oh yeah. It happens very often. I mean I probably don't do myself any favours, like I should probably shut up (laughs) or stop putting on a bit of eye liner or I don't know, something like that. But the fact is that we live in society where stuff, freedom of expression, unless you surround yourself with like-minded people and safe environments, you're not safe to go out freely into the unknown without being, or without the possibility of being threatened or more.

Ben's account brings to light that gender policing and homophobia remain a consistent and recurrent facet of everyday life. That Ben states this happens “like every weekend” and “very often” underscores this, corroborating the aforementioned national survey on LGTB harassment and violence which highlights the prevalence of homophobic abuse (GEO, 2018). Indeed, Ben speaks of “being threatened” or “not safe” in public due to his gender non-conformity. As such, he questions whether he should “stop putting on a bit of eye-liner” or “shut up”, highlighting how the visibility of gender nonconformity may be constrained in public places through fear of reprisal. During another focus group, Charles, also spoke of being mocked for wearing nail varnish as the following quote shows:

Carl: One time, one time I were at the bus stop um... and this guy came up and he were like, “Can I borrow a lighter?” and I were like “yeah yeah.” This old guy... and

I gave him my lighter and he were like “You’ve got nail varnish on!?” He were like, “I see, I see gays doin’ it, and trannies and queers ‘n’ that.”

Ryan: Yeah I was just about to say that.

Carl: And he was like “But you seem like an alright lad. You’re not... you’re not... .. gay?” I were like “No... I just... I just... why are you asking me that?”

Ryan: Yeah its interesting you should say that because at my work I showed... We made a music video – on one of them, Charles has got like lipstick on, and they watched it and they were like, “so, he's got lipstick on?” I was like “yeah he wears make up and stuff” they were like “really?” He said, so, so they just said,

Carl: “Is he gay?”

Ryan: “Is he gay?” I was like “No.” And he was like “He's not gay!?” As in like,

Luke: It depends where you go like...

Mike: There's those negative...There's those connotations isn't there, attached to, and the stigma attached to a man who wears make up.

Ryan: It’s just society.

Mike: If you're slightly androgynous it’s seen as slightly effeminate.

Hence, data gathered from this research stands in stark contrast to claims made by proponents of inclusive masculinity theory. This is despite more recent attempts by Anderson and McCormack (2018) to refine inclusive masculinity theory in light of criticisms from writers in the field (Bridges, 2014, de Boise, 2015, O'Neill, 2015a), as discussed in chapter 1. They attempt to make sense of such criticism by suggesting that whilst attitudes towards same-sex relationships may be more positive amongst young men, that there has been somewhat of a “cultural lag” regarding language use (Anderson and McCormack, 2018: 552). As such, Anderson and McCormack (2018: 552) problematically claim that “intent *and* context”, as well as reception are key to the meanings behind the usage of the term “that’s so gay”. They cite one study whereby young gay men did not find the term homophobic, also noting that participants themselves spoke of using this phrase. They state that “not only is it possible for some straight men to use phrases like ‘that’s so gay’ while genuinely supporting gay rights (Sexton, 2016), some gay youth may agree with their perspective” (Anderson and McCormack, 2018: 553). Whilst it is possible that some heterosexual men may simultaneously employ “fag discourse” (Pascoe, 2005) and be non-homophobic, Anderson and McCormack’s (2018) interpretation of this lacks nuance with regard to how language and discourse shape and regulate the social world, making available certain subject positions and not others. As Davies (1993: 10) states, subjectivity is “constantly

achieved through relations with others (both real and imagined), which are themselves made possible through discourse.”

Moreover, “fag discourse” (Pascoe, 2005) continues to be utilised by young men as a powerful way of policing gender and sexuality, as the aforementioned quotes have shown. With this in mind, Pascoe (2005) importantly stresses that whilst most young men would not be explicitly be homophobic to a gay man, they will still mock and goad each other using the term gay without second thought. Indeed, Fulcher (2017) similarly argues that young men’s use of homophobic language serves to not only conflate gender and sexuality, but also reinforces masculine gender norms and peer status. Moreover, that this occurs even where young men state that they themselves are non-homophobic. As Bridges and Pascoe (2014: 254) also assert, “boys socialize each other into normatively masculine behaviours, practices, attitudes, and dispositions in a way that has little relationship with boys’ fear of actual gay men.” In this sense, those championing inclusive masculinities theory are at risk of undermining and depoliticising the effects that “fag discourse” has on young men’s gendered and sexual lives (Pascoe, 2005, 2007).

Given this, the prevalence and widespread usage of inclusive masculinities theory within critical men and masculinities studies is also particularly concerning, alongside the more broader recognition and the significant media attention this scholarship has garnered (O’Neill, 2018). De Boise (2015) also takes issue with the type of claims made by inclusive masculinities theorists inasmuch as findings are presented as though they are representative of men as a population. Writing with specific reference to McCormack’s (2012a) book *The Declining Significance of Homophobia: How Teenage Boys Are Redefining Masculinity and Heterosexuality*, but also in reference to the wider field, de Boise (2015: 332, original emphasis) asserts that it is “politically dangerous to be making *generalized* claims from small, biased samples.” Certainly, whilst equally not claiming to put forward generalizable findings, this research and the data presented in this chapter problematises claims made by Anderson (2005) and other proponents of inclusive masculinities theory (McCormack, 2012a, Dean, 2013).

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored participants’ views on same-sex relationships, suggesting that whilst overt homophobia was not particularly prevalent in interviewees’ accounts, and although participants voiced support of same-sex relationships and gender fluidity, gender policing and homophobia continued to feature heavily in the young men’s lives. In contrast to claims made by inclusive masculinities theory that homophobia, or fears relating to being perceived as gay have reduced significantly for young (Anderson, 2009), gender policing and concomitant

homophobia centred as key regulatory apparatuses of gender and sexuality in the young men's lives. Moreover, participants revealed experiencing homophobic slurs and physical violence where they were assumed to desire the same sex, often on the basis that they presented as 'feminine' in some way. As accounts of this were widespread, this highlights the endurance and durability of these regulatory apparatuses in contrast to research put forward by inclusive masculinities scholars (Anderson, 2009). The embeddedness and ubiquity of this was further emphasised given the ease with which participants revealed their own personal experiences of gender policing and homophobia, as though they were routine, familiar and commonplace. Furthermore, other participants also recalled times when they themselves had policed others who were gender non-conforming. The "heterosexual matrix" (Butler, 1990) and understandings which assume that sex, gender and sexuality neatly corresponds thus endured. As such, participants noted regulatory frameworks of gender and sexuality, understood in such a way that 'males', should present as masculine and thus desire the opposite sex. Where this was "troubled" (Butler, 1990), say for instance through the presentation of femininity or the incorporation of feminine styles, this was often seen to translate into and be representative of same-sex desire (Fulcher, 2017). Such understandings thus worked to enforce the disavowal of femininity, which was seen potentially undermine young men's heterosexual identity. In light of this, participants spoke of going to great lengths to invalidate and rebut potential assumptions that they desired the same sex by carefully crafting their identities and gendered expressions in ways which distanced themselves from femininity, as was discussed also in chapter 3. Though some young men did employ traditionally feminine styles into their gendered performances and expressions, this was often enacted in ways which reiterated gender and sexual inequalities in subtle ways. With this in mind, it points to cautionary reading of young men's appropriation of 'feminine' styles and practices as necessarily signifying transgression or progressiveness (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014).

Conclusion

Theoretical contribution

This thesis has drawn upon both feminist theory and critical men and masculinities literature to explore young men's understandings and experiences of hetero-masculinity within the contemporary UK. By utilising recent feminist scholarship on postfeminism as a point of analysis, particularly in Chapter 3, it has offered significant contribution to current theorisations of young men's gendered and sexual landscapes given the stark absence of research on postfeminist masculinities. As O'Neill (2018: 19) asserts, "scholarship on postfeminism has been all but ignored within masculinity studies." Where scholars have interrogated postfeminist masculinities, this remains largely confined to analysis of cultural texts predominantly within the field of media studies (see Agirre, 2012, Kolehmainen, 2012, Hamad, 2013, Clark, 2014, Gill, 2014, Zimdars, 2018). Subsequently, there has been little empirical research on postfeminist masculinities, particularly from the field of critical men and masculinities studies. Whilst O'Neill's (2018) study on postfeminist masculinities and the 'pick-up' industry offers innovative and thought-provoking insight into men, masculinities and postfeminism, it is the only published empirical sociological research on this topic. Moreover, it provides a context specific account of how postfeminism comes to shape men's engagement with the 'seduction industry' specifically. As such, this thesis provides the first empirical sociological study of postfeminist masculinities in relation to young men's *everyday* gendered and sexual lives. In light of this, it offers a significant and timely contribution to theorisations and understandings of young men's contemporary hetero-masculine subjectivities, identities and experiences by addressing this gap.

The dearth of empirical sociological research and literature on postfeminism and masculinities is, I believe, also indicative of a concerning trend within the field of critical men and masculinities studies. Whilst previous men and masculinities scholarship and scholars have made efforts to engage with feminist theory and research, the lack of engagement with recent feminist bodies of knowledge, in this case analyses of postfeminism, becomes particularly problematic when set against the backdrop of the proliferation and increasing utilisation of inclusive masculinities theory within critical men and masculinities studies; more so given that it has been argued that inclusive masculinities theory reflects and mirrors postfeminist logics due to its overly optimistic assertions of social change and gender and sexual equality (O'Neill, 2015a). Subsequently, this thesis provides significant theoretical contribution by offering a critique of inclusive masculinities scholarship through demonstrating not only the endurance and staying power of gender policing, homophobia and 'homosystemia', but also by situating this amidst contradicting

and paradoxical assertions by participants that gender and sexual equality have been achieved. As such, assertions by inclusive masculinities theorists of newfound gender and sexual equality somewhat mirror the narratives of participants in this research, but only insofar as both can be said to reflect postfeminist discourses. In light of this, postfeminist discourses of presumed social change were not only present in the data of this research, but can also be said to have permeated theoretical understandings of men and masculinities more broadly. I argue that it is paramount that research under the rubric of men and masculinities studies engages with postfeminist bodies of knowledge and interrogates postfeminism as a socio-cultural context and as a point of analysis.

Foregrounded throughout this thesis is the argument that inclusive masculinities theorisations of contemporary gender and sexuality warrants a critical eye. I have drawn attention to certain methodological incongruences with regard to sample size and generalizability in relation to empirical research from key proponents of this approach, as well as evidencing how the majority of research in this area is conducted in relation to white, able-bodied, middle class men, primarily in sporting and educational settings (de Boise, 2015, O'Neill, 2015a). At best inaccurate and at worst dangerous, I have also argued that such sanguine assertions of social change run the risk of undermining gender and sexual politics by emptying out analyses of power and the continuation of inequalities from men and masculinities research and debates (O'Neill, 2015a). This field of research thus ultimately serves to envelope and obstruct analysis of the endurance of wider gender equality and inequitable power relations.

Although, as I have argued, theorisations of inclusive masculinities (Anderson, 2009, McCormack, 2012a) and hybrid masculinities (Demetriou, 2001, Messner, 2007, Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) somewhat overlap in that both give focus to transformations of gender and sexuality within contemporary times, they are distinct in their analyses of power. As this thesis has highlighted, there are significant political and theoretical differences between these approaches. I have argued that inclusive masculinities scholarship often portrays a rather hopeful and confident picture (O'Neill, 2015a) with regard to the 'softening' of masculinities, the lessening centrality of heterosexuality to masculine identity formation and decreased homophobia and homophobia. With this in mind, I interrogated the validity of this approach in terms of whether masculinities are in fact 'softening' and becoming more inclusive (de Boise, 2015). I have, therefore, suggested that there are serious questions as to the validity and accuracy of claims made by inclusive masculinities theorists, for example, that homophobia is indeed diminishing (de Boise, 2015). Certainly, these assertions were not mirrored in the data of this research.

Inclusive masculinities theories' claims of decreased homophobia are made all the more concerning given the recent rise in homophobic and transphobic attacks seen within the UK, with these doubling over the last five years (Pidd, 2019). The findings of this thesis also indicate that for these participants homophobia endured, even amongst heterosexually identified men. As this thesis has shown, homophobia is not necessarily aimed primarily at those who identify as homosexual, but also men who present or are seen as 'feminine' in some way (Connell, 1995, de Boise, 2015). With regard to 'homosystemia', this was often bound to concerns relating to the blurring of binary gender boundaries whereby men "perceivably 'act like women'" (de Boise, 2015: 329). As participants have recalled, presenting as gender non-conforming has the continued potential to lead to bullying and stigma, as well as physical violence and assault due to the persistence and entrenchment of gender policing and associated homophobia; more specifically, the conflation of gender and sexuality and the collapsing of femininity and same-sex desire (Fulcher, 2017).

Accordingly, this thesis has problematized claims made by proponents of inclusive masculinities that young men are now more able to display traditionally feminised styles, clothing and behaviours due to the supposed dilation of rigid codes of masculinity. Furthermore, by drawing upon theorisations of hybrid masculinities, which provide a more nuanced and complicated interpretation of contemporary gendered and sexual shifts, I have argued that even where young men do display traditionally feminised behaviours and styles, that this does not necessarily mean that there has been a shift in power. Contrastingly, this may in fact be suggestive of the flexibility of patriarchy and the manoeuvrability of those who inhabit dominant categories and positions of power (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Moreover, that this may in fact shore up power and privilege in subtler, novel ways whilst eclipsing this process through a veneer of progressiveness (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). As such, this body of work is useful in that it gives focus to the ways in which aesthetic and stylistic shifts in masculinities, which may superficially appear to signify social change, may in fact operate in such a way as to rework and reframe power and privilege (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). More importantly, that hybrid masculinities "often obscure this process as it is happening" (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014: 247). This further draws attention to the ways in which inclusive masculinities theory lacks nuance with regard to analyses of power, and of the processes by which power is (re)produced, rearticulated and upheld. Subsequently, this thesis offers a theoretical contribution by providing an analysis of contemporary hetero-masculinity with a focus on theorising power, in contrast to inclusive masculinities theorisations.

This thesis also further contributes to understandings of young men's negotiations of masculinity and heterosexuality more broadly. Though feminist scholars have interrogated and analysed heterosexuality, research here understandably tends to focus primarily on heterosexual women (Richardson, 2010, Garner, 2012). As such, there continues to be a lack of focus on research relating to heterosexuality and masculinity. Research on young men and hetero-masculinity has further importance given that sexual violence continues to be perpetrated predominantly by cis men (Powell and Henry, 2014), with efforts to end violence against women and girls having produced limited results given that rates of violence have remained relatively stagnant over the last few decades. Recent social movements such as the #MeToo campaign have also highlighted the widespread and far-reaching ways in which sexual violence perpetrated by men continues to dominate women's lives. With this in mind, it remains vital and important to further understand young men's gendered and sexual lives, producing analysis of the ways in which discourses of hetero-masculinity continue to provide fertile ground for the propagation of inequitable gendered and sexual practices. It is, therefore, key that we further knowledge which explores the foundations upon which inequality is built and preserved (O'Neill, 2018). Moreover, that we maintain a focus upon power and inequitable practices, in contrast to inclusive masculinities theorisations, as I have previously argued. As the young men in this thesis have demonstrated, sex continues to be a site in which gendered and sexual double standards are upheld. What is more, that some young men continue to hold beliefs which situate women in a subordinate position sexually, which can be said to produce a conducive context in which inequitable sexual practices may come into being. It is thus important to continue to explore and further understandings of young men's gendered and sexual lives, whilst situating this within a broader theoretical and analytical framework of power and inequality.

Methodological contribution

By utilising both focus groups and individual interviews, this research has contributed to understandings of how discourses of heterosexuality and masculinity play out and are utilised by young men in different contexts. This methodological strategy allowed for analysis of how young men negotiate gendered and sexual discourses in the context of the male peer group, as well as when being interviewed individually by a woman researcher. What participants chose to disclose and conceal during focus groups was, therefore, informative with regard to how, and in what ways, young men manage their sexual and gendered identities whilst in the presence of other men (Allen, 2005a). The benefits of this mixed-methods approach was perhaps most strikingly demonstrated during one focus group when one member voiced his feelings of love for a previous partner, only when other members were not present as discussed in Chapter 5;

more so, that he explicitly stated that he did not want other members to know that he had revealed this. This example highlighted participants' differing discursive strategies dependent upon context and space, and therefore underscores the importance of using a range of research methods to fully explore young men's negotiations of heterosexuality and masculinity. A further example can also be found in another focus group, whereby one young man was shut down by other members of the group for recalling a same-sex experience, despite all other members espousing support of same-sex relationships. This enabled analysis of how gender and sexual norms play out within the male peer group, and as such, this method produced a context which was analogous to everyday life and group communication. Focus groups thus allowed for naturally occurring data to arise, and also, provided fertile ground for the propagation of data which reflects everyday group interaction. This has been particularly beneficial to this project given the continuing significance of the male peer group as a space in which gender and sexuality is collectively performed, and also policed through legitimisation or ridicule (Flood, 2008). By also using one-to-one interviews to explore how young men navigate contemporary discourses of heterosexuality and masculinity, participants were provided an additional space away from the constraints of the male peer group in which to elucidate their understandings and experiences of gender and sexuality. Methodologically, this allowed for analysis of how masculinity and heterosexuality are negotiated in both contexts.

Conducting research with young men as a woman researcher has also contributed to methodological insights into researcher-participant identities and how this comes to impact data. Due to my own experience and identity as a cis woman, I have had no prior personal insight into or experience of 'being' a young man. Without undermining the impact of my own positionality as a feminist woman and avoiding any claims of binarised gender essentialism, I believe this has contributed to a certain type of knowledge production. Studying 'up' has meant that I have had to navigate maintaining a critical eye on the continuing power of dominant categories of identity i.e. men and masculinities, whilst also giving attention to young men's individual feelings of powerlessness. This has been particularly precarious given the pull of broader debates which tend to emphasise the latter. In a similar way, I have also maintained caution so as not to reproduce apologist accounts of masculinity, by maintaining focus upon power and inequality. As such, it has often felt as though there have been tensions in producing a feminist piece of research which does not focus upon a marginalised group of people, but rather those who are situated within a globally dominant category. In light of this, I have made efforts to ensure that I do not (re)produce scholarship which focuses on men's "wounds" (Messner, 1997: 19), to the exclusion or obfuscation of how men and masculinities are situated

within enduring systems of oppression. This has felt ever more pertinent given the resurgence of men's right's discourses, as demonstrated by some participants in the data, alongside broader discussions around men and masculinity which centre on the ways in which masculinity comes to hinder and harm men only (Pease, 2000).

Young men's negotiations of hetero-masculinity: Key findings

This thesis has explored young men's negotiations of hetero-masculinity in the contemporary UK. More specifically, it has analysed how young men make sense of, navigate and mediate gendered and sexual discourses in contemporary times. It has addressed a number of substantive research questions to explore this. It has analysed how normative discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality come to shape young men's understandings of gender and sexuality, as well as their subjectivities, identities and experiences as heterosexual men. The thesis has also sought to investigate how, and to what extent, young men challenge, disrupt and resist gender and sexual norms. Building on from this, it has interrogated what shifts in contemporary formations of masculinity and heterosexuality mean for wider gender equality and gendered power relations. To consider these questions, the thesis has drawn upon data from one-to-one interviews and focus groups with twenty five predominantly white, heterosexually identified men between the ages of 18-24.

Given that participants were predominantly white, the diversity of ethnicity that exists among men in the UK was not reflected within the sample of this study. Masculinity is always situated within other axes of power, including race and ethnicity (Cho et al., 2013). For this reason, the conclusions of this research predominantly shed light on white men's engagements of gender. Though this can be seen as a limitation, studying dominant groups through a critical lens remains valuable.

Regarding the intersections of class and gender, discussions of participant's understandings of masculinity in relation to work and employment in Chapter 4, proved particularly informative regarding the intersecting dynamics of class and masculinity. Although for most of the young men interviewed, there had been a shift away from occupation as central to their masculine identity formation towards this as predicated upon gender expression, body image and appearance, formations of masculinity remained wedded to occupation and notions of the male provider more so for working class participants. Indeed this was also the case for Sahib, a British Bangladeshi participant who stated that the notion of the male breadwinner was generationally embedded within his family and culture, though he was particularly critical of this.

With this in mind, a key finding of this research is that the young men interviewed demonstrated significant understanding and awareness of gender and sexual norms. However, discussion of this often remained confined to masculinities with relatively little dialogue of femininities or broader relational gendered dynamics. Though this is perhaps somewhat understandable given the topic of this research, whilst there was widespread acknowledgement of the constraining effects of the “costs of masculinity” (Messner, 1997: 5-6) to men, discussions relating to wider gendered power relations were not as forthcoming. Ironically, at times, this coalesced with assertions that in some respects, women are in fact at an advantage to men, thus reflecting postfeminist logics. Whilst it is notable that some participants were knowledgeable of the gender pay gap and broader gender inequalities, others assumed that women were advantageously positioned with regard to labour market participation, child custody cases and in some cases sexual practices, in that women were also seen to hold power over men sexually. This leads me to assert that whilst broader societal discussions of masculinity have undoubtedly furthered conversations and dialogue around gender, given that men and masculinities have been subject to increased debate within recent years, this has only gone so far. Focus, it seems, often remains concentrated on men’s “wounds” (Messner, 1997: 19), to the exclusion of wider gender power relations and enduring inequalities. As I have previously mentioned, it is important not just to engage in conversations about men and masculinities, but also to ask *how*, *why* and *in what ways* these are taking place. Whilst men’s acknowledgement and reflection of the constraining effects of masculinity could be regarded as the ‘first step’ towards men’s engagement with gender equality, debates must move beyond this. Even more so given that such discussions may in fact serve to contribute to existing gender inequalities by centring and privileging men, whilst excluding examination of wider structures of power and how men are imbricated in these.

In contrast to men’s historical genderless positioning then, in that it has traditionally been solely women who are afforded gendered status (Hearn and Pringle, 2006), these young men were particularly cognisant of their gendered status as men and that they were gendered subjects. There was significant reflexive discussion relating to the dramaturgical choreography young men undertake to signify a ‘successful’ masculine identity and as such, all participants were perceptive to the ways in which discourses of masculinity constrained and demarcated their gendered performances and presentation. This featured heavily in participants’ accounts, illustrating recognition of the constraining elements and effects of discourses of masculinity. The data from this research thus suggests that gendered discourses continue to be stringently demarcated and narrowly defined, producing certain gendered subjectivities, identities and

practices, and not others. Furthermore, through these processes, particular gendered understandings, identities and practices come to be either legitimised or undermined. With this in mind, the thesis has argued that the young men were particularly conversant and articulate with regard to assumptions relating to the 'right' and 'wrong' way to 'do' masculinity. The male peer group also continued to feature as a hierarchical space in which gender and sexuality was regulated and constrained. As such, participants spoke of being either rewarded with status and acquiring masculine capital were they to perform gender in ways which align with dominant constructions of masculinity, or policed, bullied and often ostracised were they to fall short of this. Participants were also unhesitant and prompt in recalling their experiences of gender policing and homophobia more broadly, indicating that this continues to be a widespread and everyday practice in young men's lives.

The emphasis on gender policing was, however, complicated given that interviewees oscillated between articulating the constraining and regulatory effects of gender, to espousing neoliberal narratives of gender plurality and the democratisation of gender. Yet when probed further, narrowly defined notions of gender presentation, (hetero)sex and the body were posited as central to their masculine identity formation, particularly when set against the backdrop of the falling away of traditional work as an identity source for men (Gill et al., 2005). This sheds light upon the complex and contradictory ways in which young men come to shape their masculine identities and how they come to know themselves as men within contemporary times. Indeed, a major theme of the thesis is that masculine subject and identity formation is fraught, complex and contradictory, with young men utilising conflicting and paradoxical discourses simultaneously. Certainly, it has been challenging and difficult to fully capture these complexities. This is further underscored given that young people can be regarded as 'subjects in flux' (Nayak and Kehily, 2013), who are positioned amidst an ever-changing and shifting gendered and sexual landscape.

The complexities of contemporary subject and identity formation were further emphasised in given that whilst participants spoke with ease of how dominant discourses of masculinity shaped, informed and delineated how they performed masculinity, there was also a sense that the young men were reticent to acknowledge that they themselves were interpellated in this process of 'becoming' gendered. In this sense, there were various points throughout the interviews where participants attested to 'other men' aligning with dominant constructions of masculinity, but not themselves. As such, a key finding was that the young men were often keen to discursively distance themselves from masculinity, explicitly stating that they were not 'masculine' men. Accordingly, they seemed eager to situate themselves as outside of, and as

separate from, normative discourses of masculinity, and ultimately as different to 'other men'. With this in mind, it was often only 'other men' who were seen to appropriate more objectionable models of masculinity and who were ultimately seen as less 'progressive' (Roberts, 2013, Elliott, 2019).

However, upon further analysis, those same participants often maintained investment in normative masculine identities and practices when probed further. The wider implications of this is that whilst young men's discursive distancing from masculinity may produce a guise of progressiveness, this does not necessarily correspond with wider equitable understandings, identities, or practices. As participants thus simultaneously aligned *and* distanced themselves from dominant discourses of masculinity, this demonstrated the paradoxical ways in which they constructed their masculine identities. Moreover, whilst at points masculine identities were positioned as redundant to participants, interviewees would often later go on to reaffirm the significance of dominant constructions of masculinity to their gendered identities. Through 'discursive distancing' (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), it also felt as though participants had significant flexibility to navigate their identities and rework masculinity to fit with contemporary times. In a similar way, it felt as though the young men often positioned themselves in response to the contemporary challenges that men be 'soft' and 'hard' simultaneously, and as such, that they were able to 'pick and choose' and in effect slip between traditional and progressive discourses of masculinity at the same time (Elliott, 2019).

Notwithstanding this, and as I have previously mentioned, discourses of gender were narrowly defined and demarcated, with participants assiduous so as to position themselves within the confines of 'correct' masculinity. More often than not, this translated to not presenting as 'feminine', which was positioned as antithetical to masculinity. As such, rather than viewing gender as a spectrum, or as fluid, most participants held binary understandings of gender even where they were attempting to unpack its constraining effects. In contrast to inclusive masculinities theorisations, I have thus drawn attention to the endurance of the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler, 1990), in that assumptions that sex, gender and sexuality neatly correspond endured for these young men. Though participants were often reflexive and critical of these assumptions, the constraining effects of such understandings within wider society resulted in the young men being unable to transcend dominant constructions of masculinity because they were assigned male at birth. What is more, most participants felt that they were unable to embrace traditionally feminine styles and practices, largely for fear that gender nonconformity may serve to signal same-sex desire.

Whilst participants espoused support of same-sex relationships, with some explicitly referring to ostracising those who were homophobic or transphobic from friendship groups, the embeddedness, permeability and indeed the staying power of gender policing and homophobia was emphasised throughout the data of this research. Although participants disentangled effeminacy from homosexuality in some respects, given that gay men were no longer necessarily effeminised, heterosexual men were viewed as being unable to signify femininity, predominantly on the basis that their heterosexual identities may be called into question. The use of homophobia as a gender policing tool was thus particularly prevalent for these young men where they displayed or practised traditionally feminine models of gender. Moreover, the saliency of heterosexuality to masculine identity formation was frequently affirmed. More broadly, this points to the continuing and widespread stigmatisation of those who are gender non-conforming or homosexual; also, of the continued subordination of that which is deemed feminine or 'other' to heterosexuality and masculinity, which remains dominantly positioned within hierarchies of gendered and sexual practices and identity. The implications for those who are transgender, gender fluid or gender non-conforming are thus stark, given the continuing stigmatisation of those who are situated outside of binary understandings of gender.

Despite widespread desire to diversify their gender presentation, participants were reticent to employ traditionally feminine styles and practices. Moreover, some participants explicitly ridiculed those who are gender nonconforming within the interview itself. Against this backdrop, most participants felt that they could not embrace traditionally feminine styles and practices due to homophobia, or fear of being perceived as gay (Anderson, 2009). Indeed, this contrasts with claims made by scholars who propose that masculinities are now more "inclusive" of feminine styles (Anderson, 2009, McCormack, 2012a). As I have suggested, participants recalled numerous experiences of homophobia and indeed physical violence, enacted by friends, family and strangers, where their sexuality was questioned on the basis of gender non-conformity. Accordingly, this contrasts with Anderson's (2009) assertion that within recent years, there has been a decrease in overt homophobia. Even though these men identified as heterosexual, homophobic insults and reprisal remained a key feature in their lives. Accordingly, this featured as a key regulating tool in the policing of gender and sexuality for these young men, resonating with recent LGBTQ survey on violence and harassment, which evidences the prevalence and extensiveness of homophobia (GEO, 2018).

Even where participants did incorporate traditionally feminine styles into their appearance and practices, this was often not without attestation to their hetero-masculine identities first and foremost, often in ways which marginalised other sexualities and genders. As such, though

appearing to signify social change and the 'softening' of contemporary masculinities, this highlighted the ways in which hybrid masculinities which incorporate traditionally marginalised styles, may actually signify the manoeuvrability of patriarchy and dominant groups, alongside how power is being reworked in ways which veil its continued existence (Demetriou, 2001, Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Again, this complicates Anderson's (2009) reading of contemporary masculinities, alternatively situating shifts in gender and sexuality within the context of wider gendered and sexual power relations and gender and sexual equality, questioning how power may be reworked or disguised.

Whilst I have argued that the young men were knowledgeable of gender and sexual constructs, another key finding of this research is that biological essentialism also remained prominent in these young men's accounts of gender and sexuality. Indeed, this further points to young men's conflicting and contradictory understandings of gender and sexuality within contemporary times. As such, essentialist and reductionist understandings threaded through most participant narratives, often giving way to understandings which posit fixed, 'natural' and immutable gender and sexual differences between men and women. Accordingly, clear boundaries were often defined as to how gender can actually shift and move. Given the resurgence and widespread articulation of notions of 'natural' sex difference and the ways in which some participants drew upon the dictums of evolutionary psychology, men and women were largely seen to be intrinsically different due to binding and unchangeable biological differences. Such understandings not only fed into limiting and inequitable views relating to men and women's supposedly differing roles in society, but also permeated understandings of sexual desire and practices, intimate relationships, as well as participants' political beliefs. Though the majority of participants were, it seemed, well-meaning, the power of discourses of 'natural' sex difference were particularly entrenched and compelling for these young men.

As such, the 'male sex drive discourse' (Hollway, 1984) was particularly salient in participants' accounts. Though it is noteworthy that the young men often viewed women as sexually empowered and were largely critical of the sexual double standard which denigrates and champions women and men's sex respectively, the prevalence of this discourse in participants' accounts indicates that the sexual double standard is still salient today. Though participants critiqued these ideas, they were presented as though they were a normal feature in young men's gendered and sexual landscapes, not as though they were relics of the past. Men and women's sexual desire was also frequently dichotomised as women were deemed less sexually desiring than men on the basis of biology. Moreover, women were seen to be at odds in achieving the same kind of sexual pleasure as men inasmuch as the women's orgasms were often portrayed

as somewhat illusive or mysterious. In contrast, participants often viewed themselves and other men as having biologically predetermined libidinous and unruly sex drives which necessitated frequent sex.

Closely related to this was understandings which posited that women were more invested in love and that sexual encounters and indeed recourse to sexual pleasure must be predicated upon this for women. Men were often positioned paradoxically as having investment chiefly in sex, to the exclusion of wider intimacy or love. Such notions were often heavily rooted in biological essentialism, as men drew upon popular-scientific discourse and neuropsychology to assert that men and women are inherently different in terms of sexual desire, but also in their motivations for having sex. Some participants did, however, explicitly challenge these assumptions, foregrounding the importance of love in their lives, often to the exclusion of the centrality of sex in their intimate relationships. As such, they resisted dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality which posit that men want sex and women want love (Allen, 2003). Moreover, they emphasised the importance of laughter, communication, reciprocity and trust within their own intimate relationships, contravening assumptions that young men are emotionally disengaged (Allen, 2003).

Biological essentialism also served as a means by which to justify and legitimise gender inequity and also provided fertile ground for the refutation of gender equality projects on the basis that they call into question nature itself (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016, O'Neill, 2018). Paradoxically, where participants did express support of feminism, largely through authentication and validation of second-wave feminist projects, they *simultaneously* stressed supposedly fixed and 'natural' gender differences. As such, the postfeminist "double entanglement" (McRobbie, 2004: 12) of "both feminist and anti-feminist discourses" (Gill, 2017: 161) was underscored. These investments in notions of 'natural' sex difference ultimately served to disavow third-wave feminist projects, which attempt to deconstruct gender identities and advance notions of gender fluidity and diversity. Indeed, participants articulated feelings of 'gender fatigue' with regard to these contemporary gender debates, despite attesting to supporting 'equal rights'.

This research suggests that whilst participants largely expressed support of feminism, they discursively split second-wave feminism with more recent feminist projects. Second-wave feminism, described in terms of achievements relating to voting rights and equal labour market participation, was largely supported by participants, with many actively backing feminism in this respect and supporting equality within the aforementioned spheres. Through aligning with the central tenets of second-wave feminism, through discourses of 'equality' and 'justice', this

seemed to open up space where participants could maintain a position of progressiveness, whilst disparaging and condemning more contemporary feminist projects at the same time. From this, contemporary feminism and feminists were positioned as “extreme”, “radical” and, ironically, as antithetical to equality and social justice (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016).

Echoing postfeminist logics further, some participants believed that gender equality had been achieved (through structural gains), and as such, that the *raison d'être* of more recent feminist projects was the sole pursuit of women’s superiority and dominance over men. Moreover, notions of feminist threat and female tyranny were discursively mobilised through militaristic linguistic phrases to denote feminists as “social justice warriors” and “feminazis”. Against this backdrop, men were positioned by some participants as not only the victims of feminism, but also a new gender order which favours women and victimises men (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). Through notions of ‘reverse sexism’, it was men, ironically, who are perceived as suffering at the hands of both feminism *and* sexism. Said to be a key motif of postfeminism, this notion of a gendered double standard against men served to invalidate and annul wider gender equality through the belief that women’s success has gone so far that it is now men who are discriminated against. Although only a small number of participants directly referenced men’s rights activism, this in and of itself is indicative of the far-reaching nature of this movement. Furthermore, that wider men’s rights activism discourses featured in other young men’s understandings of gender and sexuality even if this was not referenced explicitly. Accordingly, notions of masculine loss set against the backdrop of women’s empowerment and accounts of reverse sexism were common.

Some participants did, however, position themselves as feminist allies with some espousing explicit rejection of homophobia, transphobia and sexism. A number of participants were also reflexive of masculine privilege, yet those who articulated this often felt at odds with knowing how to challenge or relinquish masculine power. Certainly, this indicates that there is space for improving men’s engagement with social justice projects here. Those participants who considered their structurally advantageous position within society often did so primarily in reference to the gender pay gap and sexual violence. However, with regard to sexual violence, this was articulated in such a way as to reaffirm traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. As such, some participants drew upon notions of the ‘male protector’, which ultimately served to position women as passive by implication of this. Though these young men were albeit well-intentioned, and although their accounts illustrated consideration of contemporary debates relating to sexual violence, the ways in which this was framed served to shore up gender inequality through asserting men’s strength and women’s vulnerability. Moreover, discussion of

perpetrators' roles remained largely silent, as responsibility fell upon women to keep safe, or on other men to protect them. This demonstrated the amalgamation of old and new discourses of gender; traditional notions of masculinity predicated upon chivalry due to women's perceived vulnerability and men's strength were set within the context of contemporary feminist debates of sexual violence. Indeed, as I have argued, a key finding of this thesis is that young men draw upon competing and contradictory discourses of masculinity simultaneously. With regard to men's notions of the 'male protector', this also has implications for anti-violence work with men, particularly those which espouse bystander initiatives that rest upon notions of women's protection as enacted by men. Efforts should, therefore, be made to move beyond attempts to *reframe* masculinity as 'good' (Flood, 2003). For example, where bystander initiatives promote the notion of intervening and protecting women and thus being 'good' men, this serves to reiterate old gendered notions of the male protector who saves 'helpless' women.

Future directions for policy and research

Throughout the research, it often seemed as though the young men were making sense of their understandings of gender and sexuality for the first time within interviews. That some participants stated that they had rarely spoken about masculinity in such depth before, I would, therefore, suggest that more efforts be made to provide young men space in which they can critically discuss gender and sexuality. As some young men voiced having enjoyed taking part in this research in respect of this, their thirst for this was underscored. As I have previously mentioned, given that discussions of men and masculinities have the propensity to centre upon men's "wounds" and the "costs of masculinity" (Messner, 1997: 5-6) to men, I wish to reiterate that this necessitates that discussion centre upon *critical* and *deconstructive* dialogue with young men, which focuses upon enduring inequalities and gendered power dynamics. These types of conversation should not, therefore, become a space in which young men can reinforce or (re)produce discourse which centres and privileges men, to the exclusion of discussion on how men are hierarchically positioned and imbricated in inequitable relational gendered power dynamics.

In spite of women's structural gains over recent decades, and despite assertions that "feminism has a new luminosity" (Gill, 2017: 611), given the findings of this research, I would also suggest that it is paramount that biologically essentialist understandings of gender are challenged and contested if gender equality projects are to succeed; more so, given that understandings such as these can be said to provide the bedrock and foundations upon which inequality is built and maintained. These understandings also uncomfortably coalesced with assumptions that gender

equality has been achieved, yet that, paradoxically, there remain immutable sex differences which are biological ‘fact’ and, therefore, cannot and should not be challenged. When the findings of widespread biological essentialism are set against the backdrop of research which notes that there has been a ‘softening’ of masculinities within recent years (Anderson, 2009), it also poses us to ask how these supposed changes relate to and interplay with fundamental beliefs about ‘natural’ sex differences between men and women and the endurance of the sex/gender binary. I thus stress that the key to furthering contemporary gender equality projects lies in critical deconstructive work of the popular-scientific, essentialist understandings of ‘natural’ sex difference. Whilst previously biologically essentialist claims were produced through medicine and scientific discourse (Foucault, 1998), in more recent times, such ideas are bolstered by popular evolutionary psychology (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). Given that this has seen increased prominence and proliferation in recent years (García-Favaro and Gill, 2016), I suggest critical investigation of these knowledges, as well as analysis of how young men engage with them.

I would also argue that these findings suggest that focus be placed upon unpicking biologically essentialist assumptions of gender within the context of practitioner work with men. Importantly, this would involve shifting focus away from reworking and rearticulating masculinity as ‘good’ and ‘healthy’ so as to not further operationalise men’s investment in masculine identities (Messner, 2016). Certainly, captivating men’s sense of ‘real’ manhood, whereby they are encouraged to establish themselves as ‘good’ *men*, runs the risk of entrenching patriarchy by reproducing inequitable binary understandings of gender and reconfiguring problematic gendered tropes in novel ways (Flood, 2003). Moreover, I believe that critical deconstructive work of the sex/gender binary would also encourage awareness and acceptance of gender diversity, thus contributing to young men’s understandings relating to issues around transgender, gender fluidity and gender nonconformity. This becomes particularly important given that the recent backlash surrounding trans debates, as mobilised through ‘gender critical’ feminism and ‘sex-based rights’, is informed by similar essentialist arguments as those purported by evolutionary psychologists, and as those put forward by some young men in this research. Furthermore, given that some ‘pro-feminist’ men’s organisations also espouse similar essentialist and transphobic sentiment, I would suggest that this kind of deconstructive work becomes all the more paramount.

Given that the young men in this research discursively distanced themselves from normative masculinity, whilst simultaneously maintaining investment in traditional masculine identities and inequitable practices (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), this research also emphasises the

importance of analysing contemporary masculinities in ways which sheds light upon these nuances. Future discussions should, therefore, recognise that whilst young men may no longer align with normative constructions of masculinity and may now be unforthcoming with regard to positioning themselves as masculine, that this does not necessarily mean that they are not embedded within and productive of continuing and oppressive systems of gendered power. With this in mind, efforts to further gender equality amongst men should maintain focus on the ways in which men continue to be knowingly and unknowingly complicit in continuing oppression, even if they do not locate themselves as such. Young men's discursive distancing from masculinity should not, therefore, be read as signifying social change in and of itself. Indeed, this thesis has shown how those very young men may continue to understand and practise gender in ways that contribute to gender equality.

When the findings of this research, which demonstrate the endurance of gender policing and homophobia, are taken together with research highlighting a rise in transphobic and homophobic violence within the UK, I would also suggest that it is particularly pressing to critically engage with inclusive masculinities theory, whilst also maintaining scholarly focus on the continuation and endurance of gender and sexual oppression. Moreover, it is vital to further explore how dynamics of power are (re)produced and are enacted in a time when feminism and misogyny coalesce (Banet-Weiser, 2018), where traditional and emerging (Gough, 2018), and patriarchal and progressive discourses of gender and sexuality are utilised simultaneously by young men. The need to maintain focus upon enduring inequalities is further highlighted given the recent institutional rolling back of rights seen across the world stage. Within the UK more specifically, the appointment of anti-LGBTQI cabinet ministers to the new Boris Johnson led Conservative government further poses risks to LGBTQ rights that have been hard fought for. As such, it is paramount that researchers and policy-makers and individuals continue to analyse how homophobia and gender-policing manifests and is enacted, and also how these mechanisms of oppression may be shifting to fit with contemporary times.

Whilst this research has addressed the significant gap in research on postfeminist masculinities, I would recommend further engagement with this body of knowledge within the critical men and masculinities field. With this in mind, research on how racially and ethnically diverse men are positioned in relation to postfeminist discourses, and how postfeminist logics come to shape these young men's subjectivities, identities and practices would thus advance understandings of the intersections of race, ethnicity and gender in relation to postfeminism. Indeed, scholars have noted that it would be beneficial to utilise critical race theory within research on men and masculinities more broadly (Bridges, 2019). I would also recommend that research focus upon

and explore the relationship between far-right, racist and colonial ideologies, and postfeminist logics that feminism 'has gone too far'. Thus it would be advantageous to analyse how discourses of white masculine loss sit with and coalesce with postfeminist logics and sensibilities. I would also suggest research on postfeminist masculinities within the online sphere, prompting exploration of how these come about, how they go on to manifest in everyday life, and the implications of this for broader gender dynamics and politics. I would further recommend research which explores the relationship between men's rights activism and postfeminism, to provide analysis of which men's rights discourses are being activated in times when feminism is posited having been achieved.

Research on masculinities in relation to other axes of oppression such as class and disability would also be fruitful for furthering understandings of postfeminist masculinities. There is also space for research on postfeminist masculinities within different international contexts. This could, for example, explore what postfeminist logics look like within different geographical and national contexts and spaces and how these manifest and take shape. A further question for exploration is how this informs gender subjectivities, identities and practices and shapes gender (in)equality and politics within these contexts. Given that this research has focused on young men between the ages of 18-24, I would suggest that more research on postfeminist masculinities throughout and at different stages of the life course should be welcomed. This would allow for analysis of how postfeminist discourses play out in relation to different generations of men, thus furthering understandings of how men of different ages are situated amidst postfeminist discourses and located within the postfeminist socio-cultural context. In light of this, I propose that critical men and masculinities scholars engage with postfeminism as a point of analysis and socio-cultural context.

Though it may be appealing and enticing to see contemporary masculinities as 'progressive' and 'inclusive', or to see gender equality as having been achieved, it is paramount that analysis of young men's negotiations of gender and sexuality is situated amidst broader gendered power relations and *enduring* inequalities. Attention to wider gendered power dynamics becomes ever more pertinent given the prevalence of postfeminist logics within wider society and as reflected in some masculinities scholarship, which ironically sits alongside increased misogyny, homophobia and sexism, as displayed on the political world stage. Against this backdrop, a focus on theorising power will allow for analysis of how this is maintained, reworked and rearticulated within contemporary times amidst a shifting gendered and sexual landscape. More importantly, this encourages scholars to produce knowledge which sheds light upon the nuances and

flexibility of power, whilst maintaining a key focus on furthering social justice, equality and feminism.

Appendix 1 – Pen portraits.

Adam is a 23 year-old white British man. He is currently unemployed and is educated to degree level. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Alex is an 18 year-old white British man. He is studying for his A-Levels at a sixth form. He is in a relationship and lives in a northern town.

Andy is a 24 year-old white British man. He is copywriter and holds a degree qualification. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Ben is a 24 year-old white British man. He is a teaching assistant and holds a degree qualification. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Bill is a 20 year-old white British man. He is a university student at a northern town and is single. He lives in a small town in the north of England.

Carl is an 18 year-old white British man. He works as an apprentice product designer in a factory. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Dan is a 23 year-old white British man. He is a musician and holds a BTEC. He currently lives in a northern market town.

Dave is a 23 year-old and white British. He is a university student currently living and studying in a northern town. He described himself as not being in a relationship at the time of the interview.

Dom is a 21 year-old white British man. He is student at university and lives in a northern town. He is single

Jacob is an 18 year-old white British man. He is studying for his A-Levels at a sixth form and is a music teacher. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Jack is a 23 year-old white British man. He works in a coffee shop as a barista and is educated to GCSE level. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Jim is a 19 year-old and white British. He is student and also works as a care worker. He is in a relationship and lives in a northern town.

Justin 22 year-old white British man. He is unemployed and educated to college level. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Kai is a 21 year-old white British man. He is a university student and is currently in a relationship. He lives in a northern town.

Ken is a 22 year-old white British man. He is studying for his PhD and also works as a psychiatric nurse. He is single and is a wheelchair user. Ken lives in a northern town.

Leon is a 20 year-old white British man. He works as a bike courier. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Mat is an 18 year-old white British man. He is studying for his A-Levels at a sixth form and is a music teacher. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Mike is a 24 year-old white British man. He is a teaching assistant and holds a degree qualification. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Pat is a 24 year-old white British man. He is unemployed and educated to college level. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Rob is a 24 year-old white British man. He is a temporary administrator and holds a degree qualification. He is in a relationship and lives in a northern town.

Ryan is a 21 year-old white British man. He works at an engineering company. He is single and lives in a northern town.

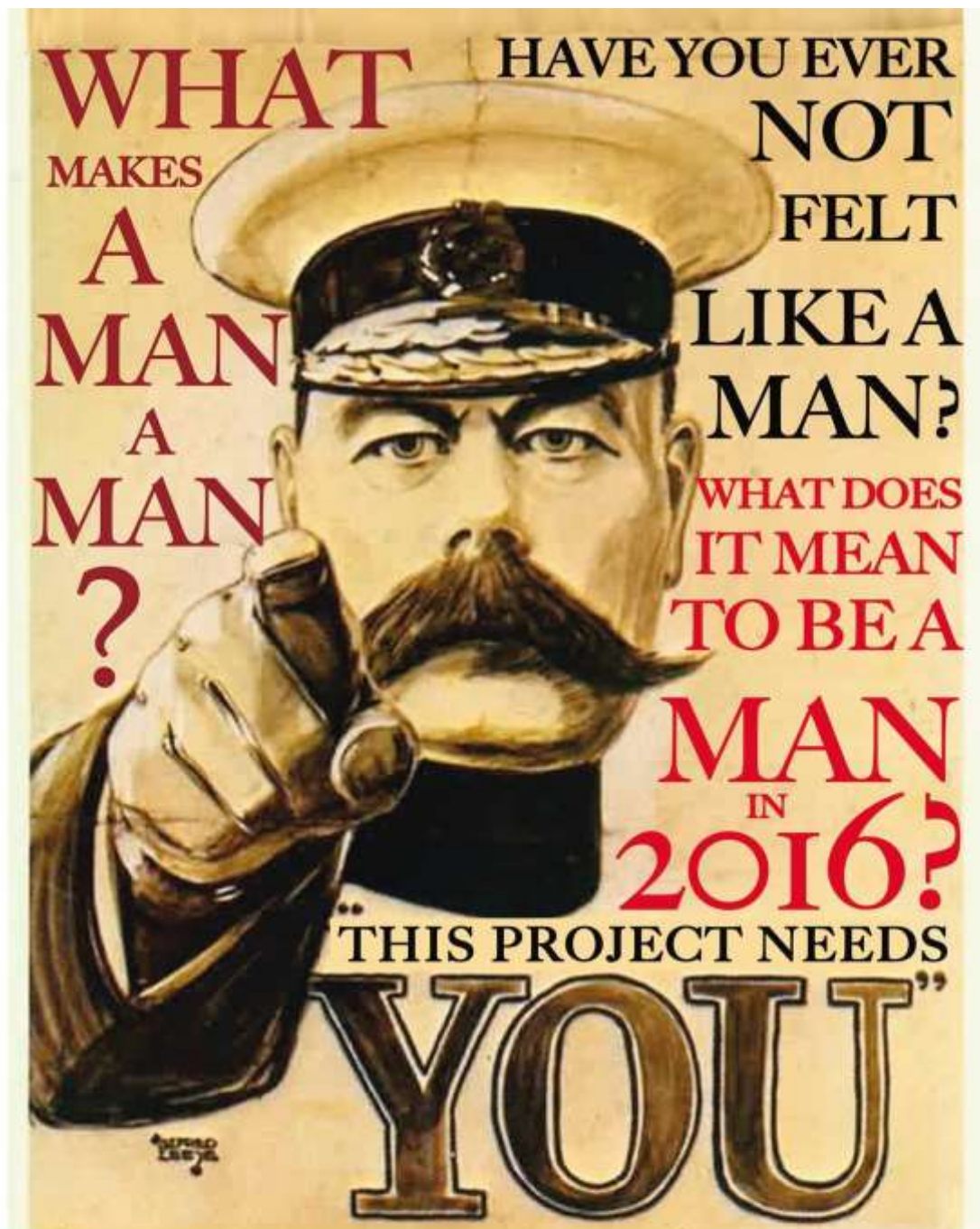
Sahib is an 18 year-old white British born Bangladeshi man. He is studying for his A-Levels at a sixth form. He is single and lives in a northern town.

Sam is a 20 year-old white British man. He is student at university and lives in a northern town. He is single.

Tim is an 18 year-old white British man. He is studying for his A-Levels at a sixth form. He is in a relationship and lives in a northern town.

Tom is a 22 year-old bi-sexual, white British man. He is a university student and a musician. He is Irish, but currently living in in a northern town and is in a relationship.

Appendix 2 – Recruitment poster 1



Hi, my name is **Mary Robson** and this research is part of a PhD project on men and masculinities, which I am studying at the University of Leeds.

If you self-identify as a straight man, are aged 18-24 and would like to take part in a group discussion with your friends, please get in touch. You can contact me by email: ss09memr@leeds.ac.uk, call me on 07872344150 and can find more information on the project's Facebook page: [EVERYDAY MASCULINITIES](#)

You will be reimbursed £10 for your travel costs and time if you wish to take part. If you want to confirm that I am a research student at the University of Leeds, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, please contact my supervisor, Dr Sharon Elley on: 0113 343 4717.

Appendix 3 – Recruitment poster 2

**What's
it like
to be a
man?**

**Looking for
research participants
for sociology PhD project
Take part in a 1hr
1-2-1 interview
and receive
£10!**

**Straight man? 18-24?
HAVE YOUR SAY!**

FB: Everydaymasculinities #: 07856373776

Appendix 4 - Informed Consent Form one-to-one interviews.

My name is Mary Robson and the purpose of this consent form is to tell you of your rights as a participant in this study and of what is involved in the collection and keeping of data about yourself. I am interested in young people's views on what it's like to be a man and on relationships, and identities in general. I would be very grateful for your participation in this study.

Research and what you need to know...

- It is your right not to answer any question that you are asked
- You may ask the researcher any questions you have
- You are free to end your participation in the interview at any time without giving a reason and without consequence
- No information will be passed onto anyone connected with you, including parents, youth workers or your school
- If you are under 18 and tell the researcher about any physical, mental or sexual harm, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed and this information will be passed onto the appropriate persons
- Your name and identity will be changed so no one will be able to recognise you in the study and you are guaranteed confidentiality in any discussions and publications in agreement with the Data Protection Act 1998
- The interview will be recorded using audio tape and all notes and files will be kept in a secure password-protected and locked file

I have read this consent form in full and it has been verbally explained to me. I have had a chance to ask questions concerning any areas that I did not understand. I consent to being a participant in the study.

Signature of participant:

Printed name of participant:

Date of interview:

Signature of interviewer:

I am happy to be contacted about future research: Yes/No (please circle)

Email address:

If you want to confirm that I am a research student at the University of Leeds, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, please contact my supervisor, Dr Sharon Elley on: 0113 343 4717

Appendix 5 – Informed Consent Forms – Focus Groups

My name is Mary Robson and the purpose of this consent form is to tell you of your rights as a participant in this study and of what is involved in the collection and keeping of data about yourself. I am interested in young people's views on what it's like to be a man and on relationships, and identities in general. I would be very grateful for your participation in this study.

Research and what you need to know...

- It is your right not to answer any question that you are asked
- You may ask the researcher any questions you have
- You are free to end your participation in the interview at any time without giving a reason and without consequence
- No information will be passed onto anyone connected with you, including parents, youth workers or your school
- If you are under 18 and tell the researcher about any physical, mental or sexual harm, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed and this information will be passed onto the appropriate persons
- Your name and identity will be changed so no one will be able to recognise you in the study and you are guaranteed confidentiality in any discussions and publications in agreement with the Data Protection Act 1998
- However, full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if you are taking part in a focus groups as other participants are present
- The interview will be recorded using audio tape and all notes and files will be kept in a secure password-protected and locked file

I have read this consent form in full and it has been verbally explained to me. I have had a chance to ask questions concerning any areas that I did not understand. I consent to being a participant in the study.

Signature of participant:

Printed name of participant:

Date of interview:

Signature of interviewer:

I am happy to be contacted about future research: Yes/No (please circle)

Email address:

If you want to confirm that I am a research student at the University of Leeds, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, please contact my supervisor, Dr Sharon Elley on: 0113 343 4717

Appendix 6 - Participant Information Sheet.

Young People's Views about Identities and Relationships.

I am Mary Robson and I would like to invite you to take part in some research that is all about **YOU** and **YOUR VIEWS...** It only takes about an hour and it's up to you.

My research project aims to find out about:

- What it's like to be a straight young man in the 2017?
- What has shaped your views about being a straight young man?
- What you think about relationships?

You can help by taking part in this research and telling me your views. You can do this by:

- Taking part in a group discussion with your friends at a public location convenient to you.

Any information you tell me will be strictly confidential. This means:

- You will remain anonymous - none of the information will have your name on it.
- No information will be shown to anyone who knows you.
- No one will be able to identify you in anything written

You don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to and your participation is voluntary.

If you are interested in having your say then please contact me on: 07856 373776 or ss09memr@leeds.ac.uk

If you want to confirm that I am a research student at the University of Leeds, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, please contact my supervisor, Dr Sharon Elley on: 0113 343 4717

Appendix 7- Interview Schedule

Tell me a bit about yourself – background, family, work, where you live, things that you do.

General masculinity questions -warm up.

1. Can you give me 3 words that describe what it's like to be a man in 2017/UK? How would you describe being a man to an alien?
2. Where do you learn about being a man? Who do you get your ideas about being a man from?
3. What makes a man a good mate? Which friends do you look up to?
 - What type of man would you not be mates with? Which friends do you not look up to?
4. What aspects of being a man do you think men most value? And least value?

Masculinity – more in depth.

1. At what age/when did you first consider yourself to be a man/memory no longer a boy now a man?
 - Do you feel different now?
 - What's the difference between a boy and a man? Age, anything else?
2. What makes a man unmanly?
 - Have you ever felt like this?
 - Has anything ever happened to you that's made you feel that you're not man enough?
3. Is there such a thing as a normal man? Describe them?
 - What behaviours are associated with being a normal man?
4. Are there things you can't do as a man?
 - Are there things that you envy that women can do?
5. Does your background affect your idea of manhood? Family/where you grew up/friends?
 - How/in what ways/examples?
 - Being a man different to how it was for your dad/ granddad?
6. Any differences between/ being a men and women?

Masculinity and heterosexuality – some questions about relationships...

1. Are you in a relationship now? What's it like?
2. Tell me about your last/past relationship.
3. What do you look for in a relationship/girlfriend?
4. What do you get out of your relationships? That you don't get from friends?
5. How important is your relationship with your girlfriend?
6. Do you talk to your friends about your relationships? What do you discuss?
7. Do you think men and women view relationships in the same way or is it different?
8. How would you describe a good/healthy relationship?
 - And a bad one?
9. Do you think there's different kinds of relationships with women? Say female friends/girlfriends?
10. How important is sex in a relationship? Why?
11. Do you think men and women view sex in the same way or is it different?

12. Where did you learn about sex and relationships?

Ending questions.

13. What would an ideal world look like for a man?

14. Can you think of a good question that would be good to ask the next group of men I'm going to talk to?

15. Is there anything I've missed out that you think is important that you'd like to say?

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