

# **Young men in love: the (re)making of heterosexual masculinities through ‘serious’ relationships**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I examine how young men’s experience of what they termed ‘serious’ relationships are contexts in which they were engaged in the processes of exploring and, in some important ways, remaking their masculine identities. I refer to data drawn from in-depth interviews with 8 middle-class, white young men who are reaching the end of their studies in a Scottish secondary school and planning to enter higher education. I identify and explore aspects of the intimate relationship in which these young men contest culturally patterned discourses of gender difference and, show, how in trying to resolve these differences, their sense of masculine identities is altered. I suggest that familiar gendered differences – relating to the ways that sex and love, commitment and independence and emotional expressiveness are linked to heterosexual masculinity and femininity - are three of the distinct fields of which these young men are aware and via which they engage in ‘gender’ work. I argue that how this work is done, the resources employed and the meanings that are generated are independent on specific local and temporal realities of these young men lives.

**Keywords:** Love, relationships, young men, masculinities, gender, emotion

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## Introduction

In my paper ‘‘Big and tough’’: boys learning about sexuality and manhood’ (Forrest, 2000) I wrote about how boys’ and young men’s learning about sex and sexuality contributes to the development of their masculine identities. In this paper I want to shift my attention to love and examine how young men’s experience of what they termed ‘serious’ relationships are contexts in which they were engaged in the processes of exploring and, in some important ways, remaking their masculine identities<sup>1</sup>.

The shift in my interest from young sex to love reflects the course of a personal and professional journey over the decade since I wrote the ‘Big and tough’ paper. My professional interest in young people’s views and experiences of sex developed with the emergence of HIV/Aids in the United Kingdom the late 1980s. I worked in HIV prevention with young people and then research. Although I was always interested in both the affective aspects of sexual interaction and how intimate, relational practices and experiences were influenced by socio-cultural factors I drifted more and more towards contributing to behavioural and intervention studies working with groups and population of young people. This reflected imperatives of the time which included the development of a robust research base which described young people’s sexual behaviour and the evaluation of programmes aiming to reduce the risks which were associated with it. As time passed, however, I found myself asking with increasing frequency what depth and diversity of experience the categorical measures that we employed in these studies were concealing. Love emerged as a particular interest in the context of the RIPPLE study (a randomised controlled trial of peer-led sex education in English secondary schools) where I was involved in annual surveys of several thousand young people (Stephenson *et al.*, 2003, 2004; Stange *et al.*, 2001). The self-completion questionnaire employed in the survey adopted several items that had been in use

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<sup>1</sup> The young men who participated in this study described a ‘serious’ relationship as involving intense, mutual emotional investment.

in studies dating back to Michael Schofield's seminal work on young people's sexual attitudes and lifestyles conducted in the 1960s (Schofield, 1968). Among these was a question asking to what extent love had been a motivating factor in first sexual intercourse. It was of interest to me that some young people's responses altered over time. Surveyed at one point they might indicate that they were definitely in love at the time of their first sexual intercourse; at a later date they might indicate that they were not sure if they had been in love. Why, I wondered, did their views alter? Was this a correction in recall or an alteration in their understanding of their feelings, perhaps mediated by subsequent experience? What was changing, love, them, or both? How did what we asked and how we asked it affect these responses? What constructs of love might we be projecting through the questionnaire? How did these constructs relate to the 'truth' about feelings? Could one ever abstract them from the discursive and other contexts in which they were situated? Was there such a thing as a feeling beyond or behind words and other forms of social construct?

I would quite probably not have pursued these questions in any robust, academic way had it not been for the chain of reflection that they initiated about my own experiences. As I grew older, into early middle age, I spent time looking back on my youth. This was in part prompted by becoming a step-parent living with a teenager. I could see much in their relational experiences that I recognised but also that they were indexed to resources unfamiliar to me, which in short, did not speak to me. It also was evident that the wider context was altering and that sex and sexuality were framed by public concerns and awareness about gender relations, sexualities and health risks which simply did not exist when I was young. I began to ask, as a man, a partner in a stable relationship and a step-parent what did this mean for understanding love? I felt a different sort of love to my youth, freighted with different responsibilities and opportunities. It did not draw on the repertoire of

cultural reference points to that of my stepchild and, very evidently, was profoundly inflected by gender.

I recalled how status-enhancing having a girlfriend was and how it represented a distraction from the grinding impersonality of school to be close and intimate with someone. I remembered the bitter-sweet taste left by the memory of screwing up my courage to ask someone out, the excited anticipation of furtive fumbblings at a party or on a joint trip with the local girls'. The blissful agony of composing wilfully elliptical poetry pledging my everlasting devotion to a girl I hardly knew. I remembered all the energy expended and all the energy gained from manufacturing an opportunity to be alone together, soaking up the rawness and potency that it brought to the everyday, turning the park bench or promenade into a set of a film in which I was the star.

These particular kinds of emotional 'moments' had gone. Love was no longer the same; not weaker but different. It was still configured within ideas of who I was, who I wanted to be and what kind of person my circumstances allowed me to be but these ideas of self and my circumstances had changed and so too, it seemed, had the kinds of feelings that I called love. Had I loved then? Why was 'young love' different and how were identities, feelings and cultures bound up together?

Studying love, then, and especially among young men, represented a logical progression bringing together introspective, personal considerations and my professional interests.

### **Relationships, gender and identity work**

It may seem a far from startling claim to suggest that intimate relationships are contexts for identity work and that these processes draw on and refer to culturally embedded ideas about gender and sexuality. Indeed, that most familiar form – the classical romance - focuses on

heterosexual intimacy achieved through the exploration and transformation of gendered identities. Women become empowered and enriched by love and men transformed from distant, cold and sometimes even hostile characters into sensitive, emotionally literate and demonstrably caring beings (Stacey & Pearce, 1995). It has been forcefully argued that even if the power and relevance of romance is waning and people are investing instead in 'pure' relationships characterised by emotional confluence expressed and experienced via mutual, reciprocal intimate disclosure, these processes still take place against the background of powerful and resilient 'gendered languages of heterosexuality' (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson, 1998).

These 'languages' have been conceptualised in terms of a repertoire of discourses which represent the 'public truths' about heterosexual masculinity and femininity (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 84). These can be renegotiated in the private context of the intimate relationship where, for example, the powerful 'truth' that young men are interested in sex and young women are interested in love can be explored, challenged and subverted. A young man may no longer see emotional intimacy as a demand made on him by young women in order to obtain sex and as a threat to their masculinity but as an opportunity for articulation and fulfilment of their desires, needs and anxieties.

Young men are well aware of this splitting of public and private masculinities and able to mobilise a variety of repertoires of meanings and practices in the ways that they enact and talk about intimacy in order to handle and negotiate the tensions between them (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002; Wight, 1994; Wight & Henderson, 2004). They may, for example, understand relationships which are primarily organised around sexual pursuit and conquest in terms of the 'public truth' about male interest in sex and female interest in love and those which focus on feelings as romantic (Redman, 2002). Their typologies may also include attachments which are characterised as primarily emotional or companionate and also be

inflected by the duration of relationships (Allen, 2004). However, this is not some form of relationship 'pick and mix' but relational aspirations, opportunities and resources for both talking about and investing in them which are mediated by factors such as class, locality, cultural background and aspects of biography (Henderson *et al.*, 2007; Holland *et al.*, 1998; Redman, 1999, 2002).

This paper seeks both to further elaborate our understanding of the nature and processes of gendered identity work that heterosexual young men may engage in via 'serious' relationships and also how social contextual factors are influencing the timing and meanings that these processes acquire. In doing so, I am adopting a socio-cultural approach to understanding intimacy, relationships and emotions. This approach posits that the forms that intimate relationships take and the kinds of emotions with which they are associated are contingent on social structures, discourses, repertoires of cultural images and practices and the roles occupied in specific social encounters (Averill, 1996; Bendelow & Williams, 1998; Harre, 1986; Hochschild, 1998, 2003; Lupton, 1998; Lutz, 1998,). In this case I am deploying this conceptualisation with the aim of demonstrating that it is local social influences, in particular the school and the family, and the forms of identity and personhood that these make available, which bear on what is possible, even desirable for these young men to feel in relation to their experiences of intimacy with young women and how they understand these emotional practices in terms of constituting and making their identity as men.

## **Methods**

Data are drawn from a qualitative study which involved interviewing students in the sixth year of a school situated in south-west Scotland about their views and experiences of being in love. School provided a context in which it was relatively easy to access young people, and

in targeting sixth year students (who are mostly 17 and 18 years old) I expected to reach those of an age to have had some experience of intimate relationships. Access was negotiated via the headteacher and with the permission of the school board. Young people were recruited to the study via a combination of short presentations about the study and the distribution of paper-based information.

From a sixth year comprising around 50 young people I recruited 14 interviewees; 8 young men and 6 young women. Another 9 young people contributed to three small group discussions. In this paper I am reporting data from the young men who participated in individual interviews. No-one who expressed an interest was excluded from participation in the research.

### **Data collection**

Data were collected via two in-depth, lightly structured interviews which took place at an interval of around two months. Each of the individual interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. The first interview was organised around a question about the interviewee's experiences of relationships and being in love. The interviews followed a narrative trajectory thereafter in which I asked about the formation of relationships, their progress, what young people did together and the emotional experience. The interview closed with some more general discussion regarding cultural representations and other people's views and values around love and relationships. The second round of interviews provided an opportunity to deepen my understanding of specific issues which had arisen in the first round. I also gathered some basic demographic information including how interviewees identified their ethnicity and sexual orientation.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed to paper. Data were analysed via a grounded approach inflected by the theoretical interests and insights which I have sketched out above. Extracts from interviews presented here are intended to illustrate findings and degree of consensus and/or deviation among young men's views and experiences from these extracts is noted.

### **Ethical considerations**

This study was subject to ethical governance of a UK University Ethics Committee and conducted to a strict protocol which entailed obtaining informed, written consent both prior and post interview, reminding participants of their right to withdraw at any time and holding and processing data in line with data protection regulations. The study adhered to the child protection policies of the school about which participants were informed. Given the sensitive nature of the topic support was put in place for any participant who requested it. Data are presented here in a form in which identifying references; to names, places and so on, have been altered or removed.

### **The sample of young men**

Six of the young men identified themselves as white Scottish, one as white English and one as white Eastern-European. All identified themselves as heterosexual. All of the interviewees were living with members of their biological family although Doug was living with a father and step-mother. Seven had siblings and four were the youngest child in their family. The young men's families were broadly middle-class as defined by the occupation of the principal wage-earner.



At the time of the first interview all the male interviewees had plans to enter university and a profession thereafter. Shane and Doug were considering teaching, Stephen medicine and nursing, Ross, Gareth and Dan business and management. Scott was thinking about becoming an academic, and Franco an airline pilot. In terms of relationship status and experiences, 7 of the young men were in a 'serious' relationship at either the time of the first or second interview. Angus had been in relationship which had ended recently.

## **Findings**

I want first to look here at three specific dimensions of the 'serious' relationship which represent sites through which young men were remaking their masculinities. Crucial to these processes was the idea that 'serious' relationship is a communion of souls which in itself was consciously situated against an understanding of gender as difference configured within heterosexuality. Ross summed this up as follows:

Ross: I think men and women want the same thing at the end of day. A relationship where they can trust each other and love each other and be close, I mean that's what you look for. It's just that sometimes it feels like they're starting miles apart.

## **Sex and love**

Doug: Of course women want love. Men do too, but you know it's got to come first for the lasses. They like to feel emotionally erm...., involved. For guys that comes but not always at the same time. Also

you don't need to be in love to enjoy a relationship. You know, you can enjoy...the company and the physical aspects too.

Here, Doug reprises the 'public truth' about the relationship between sex and love, masculinity and femininity. His analysis was recognised by all the male interviewees but some saw it as patrolled by a group of young men with which they did not strongly identify. This group were often termed the 'lads'. They were powerful, confident, apparently and ostentatiously socially and sexually successful. Scott distanced himself from these young men and their particular version of masculinity by positioning their gendered and often sexualising discourse as immature.

Scott: There are lads, you know, who just talk about women and who they've 'had' and what they've got up to. I don't like it. It feels really immature to me. They're just trying to make themselves look big and they think it's funny but it's not. It's just talk. It's sexist and pretty, well...., stupid. You expect it of people when they're younger but I think we should be leaving behind by now.

Stephen was also negotiating this discourse, but the focus for him was more explicitly on his relationship with his girlfriend and specifically his experiences and understanding of the meanings of their physical intimacy. He said, in the context of describing to me the development of his relationship with his girlfriend:

Stephen: Erm.... the first, first six weeks, we were doing things that you normally do. Go round each other's houses, and, and more of a

sexual relationship towards, the two month mark...I think that we knew that we could graduate to that, we knew we could sort of (.) handle it, be more mature about it and be more sensible about it. It's just the way we are, the way both of us are, we're not exactly the most erm.... sexual-minded people. We don't go around just looking for a pull. So we both feel it's right because it's the way we are...We were both virgins before each other. So it's a new experience for us both. It's like a think (.) erm (.) a connection between us, it's a way of expressing our feelings and it just makes them more and more intense.

There are some similarities with Scott's account here: the distancing of self from other young men; the capital to do so apparently derived from a 'serious' relationship; and, the reference to immaturity of a masculinity which focuses on sex for its own sake. Significantly, Stephen was conscious of how these discoveries had altered his ways of 'doing' his masculinity in relation to his male friends. He described a shift in his engagement with and understanding of talk about relationships with young women among his male friends:

Stephen: [They say] 'What's she like?' or 'What have you done?' or the more immature, erm.... more immature members of the common room going, 'Have you pumped her yet?' Yeah. They're always on about that. It's funny because I used to be like that. I suppose I still can be actually.

What is startling about this candid observation about the self and others is Stephen's recognition that he can still behave in a sexually objectifying manner himself. This splitting was implicit in many accounts. For example, while Doug rehearses the 'gender gap' discourse in relation to sex and love he went on to talk about intense emotional investment in his relationship with his girlfriend. This seems to suggest that masculinities may not simply be remade in any absolute way through 'serious' relationships but rather new positions created which young men may come to see as appropriate to different social contexts and interactions.

### **Commitment and independence**

Gareth: Women and men see it differently. I don't think men mind being in a relationship at all, that's not it. But it has to have limits. It can't take over everything. You've got to have your time with your mates for example. I think sometimes women don't understand if you were just in the relationship totally so to speak, you won't be yourself. I think it shows commitment to let the other person be themselves actually.

Here Gareth suggests that emotional commitment to a relationship with young women threatens and can even diminish masculinity. Again this analysis was recognised by all the male interviewees but some rejected it. For example, Shane saw immersion in a 'serious' relationship not as a means through which his identity was at risk of erosion but rather enrichment. Shane had discovered this by accident. He described to me how, just recently, he had thought that his girlfriend was pregnant, and after lengthy discussion with her, her and

his family he had decided that if this was the case, they would get married, he would find a job and they would settle down together.

Notwithstanding that Shane presented his point of view as a product of unforeseen and pressing circumstantial demands, he grasped this opportunity to index a particular form of masculine identity which allows him to make commitment without sacrificing any sense of his independence. His reference to marriage, settling down and forming a family may seem alternatively, optimistic, naïve or commendable, but in any case he seems to be projecting himself into an adult male identity which partakes of the idea of the *pater familias*; responsible, selfless; a man who has status because he cares for and looks after a family.

### **Expressing emotions**

Shane: Boys, lots of boys don't know how to say what they feel, you ken [know]. Maybe no-one has spoken to them about feelings before and they're sort of shy of it. I think if you do it, it gets easier. They maybe go and kick a ball about or something rather than speak about it. If it's bad they kick the shit out it, if it's a good feeling they just want to blow off the energy.

As this suggests, Shane's perception was that, although young men have the capacity to talk about their feelings, they are unpractised deterred by insecurities about the implications of doing so and have alternative means of expressing themselves. Other interviewees shared this view and went further identifying both the 'gender gap' around talking about feelings and the way that crossing that determined whether a relationship was 'close'. As Angus put it:

Angus:        You need to talk, to say what you feel and about yourself and to listen when you're in a relationship. It's kinda natural for women. They're encouraged into it as they grow up. You can't really be close if you don't talk.

Young female interviewees were very aware of this difference and male reticence to 'do' emotions and often took the lead in creating opportunities for intimate talk both before and during 'serious' relationships. This partly may serve a self-protective function in terms of ensuring that they trust their boyfriends not to exploit them and their relationship but, for example, broadcasting it in the sexually objectifying terms described by Stephen above. However, these young men enjoyed and found it a positive experience. Furthermore, as Franco says here, the self-knowledge that it provided access to could be understood as contributing to his masculine identity.

Franco:        I mean, I'll tell her almost everything and, you know, like in about a month and a half when I've been talking to her, like, its' that (.) she probably knew me better than people do here [in school] for the past four years. You really get to understand yourself better when you share everything about you with someone. Can't know yourself as a person what kind of man you are, unless share yourself.

### **Social context as an influence on 'serious' relationships and gender**

The three dimensions of the 'gender gap' identified by these men have a certain stereotypical quality which reflects the position that they occupy in the wider cultural background against

which ‘serious’ relationships are formed and enacted. I want now to turn to the question of how these young men’s negotiation of these differences is being influenced by the specific local and temporal context.

### ***Maturity, status and school structure***

The notion of ‘maturity’ is important in these young men’s accounts of ‘serious’ relationships. It functions primarily as a means of differentiating lower and higher status relationship practices and associated masculine identities. At the top of the hierarchy sit ‘serious’ relationships which are connected with more ‘mature’ masculinities. These were closely associated with being a sixth year student. Interviewees described a typology in which other forms of relationship and their associated masculinities were organised as a hierarchy linked to their passage through the school. At the bottom were situated what were termed ‘kiddy’ relationships. These relationships were described as comprising ‘dares’ to ask girls out. They were regarded by these young men as less concerned with intimacy than maintaining status with other young men. These were followed in turn by, in around the second and third year, ‘romantic’ relationships which were talked about in terms of superficial emotional investment, then, in the fourth and fifth years, relationships were primarily organised around sex. I would contend that the typology of relationships and the high status of those that are ‘serious’ is connected in important ways to the kinds of subjectivities which were available to these young men and, in important ways, mediated by the age-maturity hierarchy created by school structure.

At the time of interview these young men had made the latest and last step into the sixth year. They experienced this as a very different environment from other, earlier year groups. These young men felt more actualised, they talked about taking responsibility for

self-directed learning, exercising prefectorial duties, enjoying more equitable relationships with staff and having access to a common room. All of these helped to create conditions in which the previously stifling homosociality was breaking down, greater individuality could emerge and the potential for interest in others as persons could increase. Importantly, these processes were further contextualised by the slimming down of the student group as students perceived as non-conformist and less-academic left at the end of the compulsory phase.

That these young men utilised these new conditions in the ways that did can be seen as associated with the value that they attached to school and this is in turn mediated by their backgrounds. They are academic, aspirant, individuals from middle-class backgrounds planning to go to university and into ‘good’ careers. Education, qualifications, study and achievement matter to them and this investment was validated by their families and peers. This suggests an accretion of particular conditions is pertaining in this context that makes ‘serious’ relationships not only available but positively desirable in terms of narrative of the self.

### ***Modern, middle-class femininities***

These young men’s experiences also seem to be inflected by ideas about the kind of middle-class femininities that they perceived that their female partners aspired to. Dan suggested that women’s access to the high-status, high-paid labour market might provide a vehicle through which conventional understandings of heterosexual relationships and gendered positions within these could potentially be reconfigured. In our second interview he talked about generational differences in relationships:



Dan: The main thing is probably that women expect to have careers and good jobs. All the girls here, well nearly all, they're going to uni and want to be doctors and teachers and erm.... lawyers. They don't want to be committed to a relationship as young as maybe people did before. That's a big change... They can be the bread-winners now.

In a way this view both helps to create a context for the 'serious' relationship – as a coming together across gender differences – and simultaneously poses a 'problem' for young men interested in 'investing them' at this moment in time. It shifts the ground in the 'gender gap' in an unresolved way and implies that avoidance of commitment may not be a male preserve. This irresolution may explain the simultaneous recognition, rejection and enactment of sexism described in Stephen's account above, as a means of creating space to hold and understand femininities with which the available forms of masculinity do not fit completely congruently.

### ***The family***

Family also emerged as a strong influence on the conduct and meanings of these young men's 'serious' relationships. This took a number of forms but three predominated: the parental relationships as a model (for better or worse) for one's own 'serious' relationships; the ways that relationships were accommodated in family life; and, the idea that one's relational capacities and needs were products of emotionally charged incidents within the family.

With regard to the influence of relationships between parents these young men drew particularly on modalities and practices which demonstrated emotional commitment. They

cited examples of parents celebrating their relationship, via anniversaries, gift-giving and everyday intimacies as well as resolving difficulties and talking about feelings as patterns for how 'do' own emotions in the context of a couple. With respect to how relationships were accommodated in family life what was apparent across the diversity of accounts was the distinctions young men drew between cases and times, sometimes in context of one individual's experiences, when relationships were taken seriously by their own and their partner's family and times when they were not accorded much recognition. In the former cases, these parental reactions were seen as validating and in the latter as diminishing the 'seriousness' of the relationship.

Both these themes are well illustrated in an account in which they were brought together. Stephen recalled a Valentine's day when the men in his family each contributed a dish prepared for their respective partners: his older brother's girlfriend; his father's wife; and, Stephen's own girlfriend. Stephen saw in this his relationship placed on a par with those of his male relatives. He felt that their collective actions simultaneously validated emotional commitment in relationships with women as properly masculine and drew him into this 'adult' identity.

With regard to the third theme the specific details of young men's accounts were very varied, reflecting the complexities of their biographies. For example, Doug talked about how his mother's death and father's remarriage had brought to the centre of family life issues about relationships and love. He said that in exploring his grief and feelings about his father's new relationship (which were positive) he had been drawn closer to his girlfriend as a source of support. Shane told me about his childhood living in Northern Ireland. He had witnessed the shooting of a friend in a sectarian gun battle. Shane vividly recalled the incident and felt that it had both formed the basis of his commitment to emotional openness

and to rejecting any ideological barrier to relationships. For Shane, the gender gap was like a sectarian divide: an ideological barrier to be overcome by refusing to acknowledge the constraints that it placed on him. He valued openness, commitment and intimacy in relationships as ways of warding off division and conflict.

Despite the very different narratives described here, what binds them together is the point being made that what happens in the context of family life invokes strong feelings which influence the tenor of young men's future emotional practices and investments.

## **Discussion**

I want to focus here on some of the possible limitations of this study and to identify some further questions that it raises. We have to take seriously questions about the sufficiency of the data referred to here to support both the interpretation I place on them and the theoretical claims I stake as consequence. It could be suggested that interviews with just 8 young men, all from one community and attending one school does not allow me to demonstrate that differences in relationship cultures may exist at a local level. However, three claims are supported by other data, which are not cited in this study, especially that which comes from young women who participated in the research. Of course, what this legitimate query suggests, above all, is that further research in other contexts, with people at different points in their lives, and with other sexualities is warranted to examine, develop and nuance the proposition about the contingency of relationship cultures.

We also need to take into account that these data represent unfinished accounts. The pace and drama of change was in fact evident in the context of this study as these young men's sense of self and their 'serious' relationships altered between interviews. Some realigned their educational aspirations and plans in light of exam results and the sustainability of their 'serious' relationship had to be reconsidered. I suggest that this alerts us to enduring

inconclusiveness of ‘identity stories’ and also the ways that all narrations of the self are mediated by a combination of past, present and future needs.

This also directs our attention to the importance of audience and recognition of the fact that these interviews are in themselves sites where young men’s gendered identities are being actively renegotiated. I would claim no simple relationship here. For example, that for young men talking to an older man about feelings was difficult because it transgressed or conflicted with norms about interaction between men. Nevertheless, there were moments when I became acutely aware that gender was mediating either a particular young man’s account or an aspect of it. For instance, there were moments in interviews with Doug when I sensed difficulties for us both in talking about him or his feelings. These seemed to be associated with his experiences of working with a child psychologist at a time when he had been bereaved. The therapeutic dynamic transferred from that encounter to our interview troubled him and this involved gender. Doug reminded me that he was ‘one of the lads’, that he ‘liked the banter’ and ‘liked to keep it light’ as he rebutted questions about his feelings for his girlfriend. What I think was going on in this case was that Doug was working on finding ways of positioning himself and me as men in a relationship which was neither threatening nor invasive. Although these processes were not so apparent in other interviews there were no doubt present. Far from diminishing or distorting the data I suggest that it is important neither to try to discount nor to minimise these effects but acknowledge and understand how they may be mediating the encounters and my interpretation of them.

## **Summary and conclusion**

In this paper I have examined some of the ways that a small group of young heterosexual men’s experiences of what they termed ‘serious’ relationships can be seen as contexts through which they engaged in processes of exploring and, in some ways, remaking their

masculine identities. I have described some of the aspects of the background culture of gendered differences with regard to love and relationships that they operate against and some of the practices through which these are resisted and negotiated. I have demonstrated that the sociological claim that emotions can be conceptualised as socially situated interactions which are contingent on social structures, discourses, repertoires of cultural images and practices and the roles occupied in specific social encounters is helpful in enabling us to understand how young men experiences are situated at a nexus of 'big' cultural ideas about gender, emotions and relationships and the specificities of the little cultural world that they inhabit.

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### **Notes on Contributor**

SIMON FORREST, PhD joined the School of Medicine and Health at Durham University in 2009. He has written and taught about young people, sex, sexuality and gender for fifteen years. He has a special interest in young masculinities. His current research focuses on the emotions and intimacy.

Early in his career he taught in secondary and further education before getting involved in health promotion with young people in the mid 1980s. His developing interest in the social aspects of adolescent health was reflected in his Masters degree which involved empirical research into the dance and drug cultures of the period, HIV/Aids prevention for young people and gender, sexuality and health. Subsequently he moved into academic research working on a number of studies and evaluations focusing on various aspects of young people's sexual attitudes and lifestyles before becoming a Research Fellow in the Department

of Sexually Transmitted Diseases at University College London and working on the RIPPLE study – a RCT assessing the impact of peer-led sex education targeting young people.

During his time at UCL Simon was involved in supporting medical students who initiated their own programme of peer-led community-based sexual health promotion and was involved in establishing a similar programme at St George's Medical School.

Simon's PhD is in sociology and doctoral research explored teenagers' experiences of being in love. Throughout his career Simon has contributed to under- and post-graduate teaching as well as training programmes for professionals in health, welfare and education. He has also contributed to a variety of national and international expert groups, advisory committees and conferences.

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