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Ironizing Masculinity: How Adolescent Boys Negotiate Hetero-Normative Dilemmas in Conversational Interaction

NEILL KOROBOV
 University of California, Santa Cruz

This article presents a discourse analytic examination of the ways that adolescent boys (ages 12–15) use irony to construct and resist hetero-normative forms of masculinity in social interaction. While there is a glut of macro-level analyses of irony and pastiche at the broader cultural level (in media, advertisements, etc.), there is a paucity of research detailing how “ordinary” men use irony at the level of the interpersonal. The present paper focuses on how several varieties of irony function in group conversations among adolescent boys, with particular attention given to ways that irony is instrumental in allowing the boys to simultaneously articulate and partly deny certain masculine positions. The findings are meant to be interpreted within a critical, sociopolitical context that is concerned with how the performance of certain types of masculine subjectivities becomes strategically useful in the overall survivability and adaptability of hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: hetero-normative masculinity, irony, discourse, adolescence, positioning, social interaction

The burgeoning literature on the social construction of gender has now made the notion of “masculinities” an academic commonplace. Over the last decade or so, a glut of insightful analyses have been churned out that variously attest to the increasingly plural, contested, and mutable nature of such masculinities. This has not only exposed the taken-for-granted nature of hetero-normative masculinity, but it has also encouraged the creative supplanting of it for more self-conscious and reflexive vari-

Correspondence for this article should be sent to Neill Korobov, 277 Social Sciences 2, University of California, Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA 95064. Electronic mail: Nkorobov@ucsc.edu.

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eties. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the textual and visual construction of masculinities in popular culture magazines, television, and films.

For instance, consider the recent onslaught of "new lad" men's lifestyle magazines (*Maxim*, *Details*, *FHM*, *Stuff*, *Loaded*, etc.) that offer men (in a tongue-in-cheek way) rather metrosexual, feminine-friendly lifestyle advice on topics like grooming, fashion, and etiquette. Or consider the television sitcom trend of presenting men as "anti-heroes" — as hapless, yet affable "everymen" who are typically characterized as befuddled, domesticated, and defanged, yet who coincidentally remain eminently likable and successful. Or think of Bud Light's incredibly popular "Real Men of Genius" ad campaign (2002-04), which ironically pays homage to various incarnations of the "lovable loser" ideal of masculinity that is doted on as a "real" man precisely because he is such an underachiever. With such a heavy, lacking irony, we are left to wonder which masculinities are being mocked and which are really being celebrated. What is certain, however, is that these rather glib and self-aware visual and textual gambits are becoming increasingly popular as emerging stylizations for constructing and deconstructing masculinity (see Benwell, 2002, 2004).

As men are increasingly exposed to such simulaera, it seems crucial to ask: how do "ordinary" men relate to and appropriate these competing and often contradictory constructions of masculinity within their everyday social contexts? While there is a glut of macro-level analyses of irony and pastiche at the broader cultural level (in media, advertisements, etc.), there is a paucity of research detailing how "ordinary" men use irony at the level of the interpersonal. Given the mixed expectations that often exist in particular interpersonal contexts, we may ask if men actually and routinely employ the cultural tools of irony and verbal play to construct, parody, or resist certain masculinities. If so, we may wonder at what point in their development they begin to use these tools, and in what social contexts, and to what extent. The aim of this paper is to make headway into answering these types of questions. The present paper focuses on how several varieties of irony emerge and function in group conversations among young adolescent boys (ages 12-15). The analysis adopts a discourse analytic approach that is critical in scope, which will be discussed in due course. The findings of the analyses provided are meant to be interpreted within a critical, sociopolitical context that is interested in how the performance of certain types of masculine subjectivities becomes strategically useful for the overall survivability and adaptability of hegemonic masculinity.

IRONY AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

The present work is interested in how masculinities get socially constructed—that is, how they get consolidated and fragmented through the creation and repetition of certain social activities (Butler, 1990). This process of construction is a tenuous and revisable process that is intricately tied to context. As such, masculinities will always be somewhat negotiable, in the sense that they may be exploited in various ways to achieve various functions (Connell, 1995). In other words, while masculinity can be constructed to appear stable, stereotypically monolithic, and thus norma-

tively powerful, these same stereotypical positions can easily become "ironized" to index other forms of masculinity that (at a second level of irony) do not necessarily sacrifice their power or persuasiveness. The present study is concerned with exactly these kinds of ironic performances, specifically those that occur verbally within social interaction.

Here, verbal irony is defined broadly as a strategic incongruity or dissimulation between different levels of meaning (Giora, 1995; Ivanko & Pexman, 2003). Unlike the traditional "oppositional view" of irony (see Grice, 1975), where irony is seen as a figure of speech that conveys the opposite of its literal meaning, the view adopted here is that irony does not cancel out the indirectly negated message or necessarily implicate the opposite meaning of the negated message (Clift, 1999; Giora, 1995). Rather, ironic statements keep both the explicit and implicated messages in play so that the dissimilarity between them can be rhetorically honed for interactive purposes. Applied to current study of young men's talk, irony may be instrumental in allowing males to infuse a certain amount of deniability into their masculine positions, deniability that allows them to indirectly articulate one type of masculine position while at the same time partly denying or disclaiming personal ownership of it. Both meanings, however, are to some degree kept in play. Irony thus achieves a kind of hedging—a "have your cake and eat it, too" equivocation that pivots on multiple levels on meaning, a pivoting that suggests that the very stability and adaptability of hegemonic masculinity may very well lie in its ability to be strategically ironized.

This idea is highly consonant with Connell's (1995, p. 77) claim that hegemonic masculinity is a "historically mobile relation" with a formidable resourcefulness, whose very stability may lie in its flexibility to accommodate ostensibly incongruous values or norms. This not only underscores the growing sentiment that contemporary forms of masculinity are often contradictory and inconsistent (Connell, 1995; Pleck, 1995) but, more important, suggests that the difference between complexity and resistance to normative masculinity may not be a straightforward distinction. Researchers are increasingly noting how men, over the course of their socialization, are increasingly aware of gender politics and, as a result, often mix complexity with resistance, blending sexism with equality and mitigating homophobia through irony, disclaimers, innuendo, and humor (see Gough, 2001; Korobov, 2004; Speer & Potter, 2000; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). This suggests that in everyday social practices, the most common and problematic elements of normative masculinity (like homophobia and sexism) are often hedged and indirect. This indirectness is often visible at a subtle level of irony, innuendo, and presupposition and thus is often rhetorically insulated and difficult to challenge without looking puritanical, naive, or lacking in a sense of humor (Mills, 2003). As such, irony may be useful for avoiding the appearance of prejudice while at the same time getting some type of prejudice across.

The use of irony underscores the negotiations that men have to make in positioning themselves between the conflicting pressures of normative masculinity and the moral orders of particular interactions (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). By examining local uses of irony, we see not simply that men sometimes feel caught between politically correct and hegemonic enactments of masculinity, but, more important, we can see how they negotiate such quandaries—

that is, we can see into their language socialization practices, which reveal how they reconcile the societal moral order and the masculine order. Seen this way, it is possible to consider the use of irony as reflective of a level of social development or social fluency akin to what Bakhtin (1981) calls "heteroglossia," which refers to the ability of speakers to inscribe multiple voices into their discourses. "Heteroglossia" captures the way we often design our talk as if it should appear in quotation marks, as nonliteral, tongue-in-cheek, or simply less than serious. Being able to engage in "heteroglossia" through the use of irony is arguably a developmental accomplishment. It reflects the ability to both understand and flexibly negotiate the "two-sided" and often dilemmatic aspects of local gender politics "on the spot."

IRONY IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE

For developmental reasons, the present study posits that these interactive "on the spot" negotiations of masculine norms begin to get routinely displayed in early adolescence. It is during adolescence that the necessary cognitive skills of abstract, figurative, and hypothetical thinking emerge (Erikson, 1968; Piaget, 1965), skills that are necessary for routinely and strategically displaying different forms of irony. Further, gender socialization research has underscored the ways in which adolescents begin to socially and interactively negotiate alternative views of gendered norms as a way of doing "borderwork" (see Eckert, 1989, 1994, Mac an Ghail, 2000; MacCoby, 1998; Thorne, 1994). "Borderwork" reflects a period beginning in early adolescence where sexual attraction becomes pronounced and precarious, when the taboos of cross-sex interaction break down, and when discourse about the other sex and "sexual attraction" flourishes (Eckert, 1989, 1994; Thorne, 1994). It is a time of heightened ambiguity, when adolescents must socially satisfy the normative "developmental imperative" (Eckert, 1994) to display age-appropriate forms of their gender. These displays often occur socially and conversationally, and thus rely on discursive strategies like irony.

Moreover, research has suggested that adolescence is a time when young men in particular begin to routinely practice forms of heteronormative masculinity that may implicitly or explicitly sanction sexism, homophobia, and "compulsory heterosexuality" (Frosh et al., 2002; Korobov, 2004; Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). As boys do this throughout adolescence, they seem to become more aware of the antinormative aspects of such masculine displays, and they may begin to resist direct or obvious displays of affiliation with certain features of hegemonic masculinity. This is one place where irony becomes routinely instrumental as a discursive and developmental tool for satisfying positions against a backdrop of cultural values and practices (see Thorne, 2000). Because the current study focuses on the uses of irony in early adolescence, it must be noted that the examples of irony analyzed here are less complex than those varieties found in more adult or commercialized constructions. But they are, nevertheless, well formed and consequential for subverting and (indirectly) asserting different masculine subject positions. Seen this way, masculinity takes on a new form during adolescence, appearing as repertoires of competing psychodiscursive positions that get practiced and consolidated in different ways depending on the local moral order of given social interactions.

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A DISCURSIVE APPROACH

It is with this view of masculinity as sets of communicative positions and practices that a discursive approach is being employed. A discursive approach is concerned with identifying the rhetorical and argumentative or organizational of discourse (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Weherell, 1987). The present work focuses on discourse by making analytic use of Bamberg's (1997, 1999, in press-a, in press-b) notion of "positioning." Analyzing conversational positioning means paying close attention to the way speakers rhetorically position their accounts, descriptions, and evaluations of people and situations. This requires an analysis of the "offensive" and "defensive" rhetorical positioning of talk (Korobov & Bamberg, in press; Potter, 1996). In other words, when we give an account, a description, or an evaluation of something, we "offensively" take a position on that something, and in so doing we undermine alternative positions. But our positions in talk also have a "defensive" aspect to them, in that they can be constructed in such a way so as to "defensively" head off or resist potential counters or rebuttals. Billing (1991) calls this "prolepsis," which refers to the way our talk is designed so as to "defensively" guard against potential future challenges and counters to what one is "offensively" claiming in the present.

Irony has just such an "offensive" and "defensive" function to it, which is why a discursive approach to conversational positioning is apposite. An ironic comment works precisely as it does because it preserves ambiguity between multiple interpretations. For the speaker, this ambiguity preserves the rhetorically "defensive" aspect of deniability should challenges arise. For the other interlocutors, the ambiguity presents a choice—either take the comment literally and thus miss the irony, or enjoy it too enthusiastically and thus miss the political force of the irony, a force that suggests that something controversial or problematic is at stake, which occasions the irony in the first place (see Edwards & Potter, 1992). Because of this, irony needs to be analyzed within the discursive contexts in which it is put to use. With a discursive approach, irony is analyzed for the ways it works to manage the tension between its offensive and defensive components, a tension that belies the ideological dilemmas surrounding (in this case) the different features of normative masculinity. A discursive analysis is essential for revealing how these dilemmas are managed—that is, how irony is used to negotiate the tension between the local moral/political order (of an interaction) and the pressure to affirm the broader values of hetero-normative masculinity.

In contrast to some ethnographic and content-analytic approaches, the goal with discourse analysis is not simply to report a general compendium of findings or to offer summary snap-shots, paraphrases, or general themes of the conversational data. While these forms of analysis are useful for handling large amounts of qualitative data, their analyses and interpretations are usually conducted "off-stage," and the claims are justified through argument rather than "binding" to actual data. The findings are often presented as summaries or frequency counts of "what" happened in general (rather than *how* it happened) and thus run the risk of recapitulating "common sense" (see Korobov, 2002). In contrast, the goal of the current analysis is not simply to offer arguments that support the general finding *that* young men begin to

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actively use irony during early adolescence to negotiate their gender (something we may already know), but rather it is to detail *how* this is done—that is, the aim is to identify several discursive positioning strategies that young boys locally draw up to display irony while considering the interactive effects of such uses. The benefit of such a micro-analytic focus is that it addresses the “how” question, it binds the claims to actual data, it reveals (rather than conceals) how the analysis was conducted, it invites reflexive re-interpretations, and it provides a concrete model for analyzing similar segments of data. Within a discursive analytic paradigm, the goals of describing rigor, context specificity, and particularization are key evaluative criteria (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002; Silverman, 1993).

THE PRESENT STUDY

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The current data come from the first phase of a longitudinal and cross-sectional study investigating adolescent boys’ (ages 10-15) discourse and identity development (Bamberg, in press-b). Within the first phase, more than 300 hours of talk were audio- and videotaped from 54 boys, including adult- and nonadult-guided discussions. All 54 of the participants were from public elementary, middle, and high schools of a large city in the northeastern United States, from lower to working-class families, and of mixed ethnicities.¹ This article will specifically examine eight excerpts from four different adult-guided group discussions with boys 12-15 years of age. Each of the group discussions contained between four and six boys, lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, was moderated by an adult male, and was videotaped and transcribed.

At the beginning of the group discussions, the boys were told that the purpose of the discussions was to generate talk about what it means, from their perspectives, to be growing up as young men. From here, the conversations often drifted in many directions, encompassing talk about hanging out with friends, recent events, joking girls, and so on. The adult moderator did not focus these conversations in structured or probing ways that reflected a formally pre-established research agenda. Rather, the moderator followed the boys’ lead and worked to encourage the boys to elaborate simply on different conversational topics or evaluations on those topics. Therefore, the positions taken by the boys and the language used in these types of group discussions often consist of the same vernacular, slang, speech idioms, vocabulary, and sense-making procedures that the boys use in their natural interactive settings (Albrecht et al., 1993; Morgan, 1997).

DATA AND ANALYSIS

All of the group discussions were first worked through to build up a file of instances where irony was employed. Some of the more interesting uses of irony occurred during the back-and-forth exchanges where face-threatening topics were salient, such as talk about their interest and sexual attraction to girls, and their concurrent non-attraction and disinterest in things feminine or homosexual. These were discourse

sites where irony seemed to be useful. Therefore, analysis proceeded with identifying the more repetitive forms of irony employed during these types of discussions. Because of space limitations, four types of irony will be analyzed here. They are sarcasm, hyperbole, suppression (or “biting one’s tongue”), and rhetorical questions. Broadly speaking, these types of irony will be conceptualized as positioning strategies that involve constructing an incongruity or dissimulation between multiple levels of interpretation. Analysis will not only detail how this dissimulation is accomplished but also, more important, consider its effect—that is, how it is instrumental for positioning the self and others alongside competing masculine subject positions.

SARCASM (VIA “MATTER-OF-FACTNESS”)

One of the more common types of irony is “ironic criticism” (Dews, Kaplan, & Winner, 1995), in which someone says something positive or supportive while at the same time conveying something negative or unsupportive. Sarcasm is a form of ironic criticism that is directed at an individual and intended to chastise or tease (Longman & Graesser, 1988). One of the more subtle ways to construct sarcasm is through a tongue-in-cheek appeal to “matter-of-factness,” where the speaker delivers his sarcasm in a sincere-sounding way. Haiman (1998) refers to this as “caricatured courtesy.” Such courtesy is hearable as ironic because of the disjunction that is created between its matter-of-fact or nonchalant tone and the hearable unbelievable of the putative content. In the following discussion about having girlfriends, notice how Terry and Julius adopt (beginning in line 10) an understated, supportive, and matter-of-fact tone to sarcastically convey to Jordan that it is “okay” for him to admit his “secret” that he is a homosexual.

Excerpt 1 (See Appendix 1 for transcription conventions.)

Participants: M: Moderator, T: Terry, J: Jordan, N: Nathan, Ju: Julius (ages 12-13)

- 1 M: do any of you guys have ↑girlfriends
- 2 J: I don't 'want one'
- 3 M: Jordan () you uh=
- 4 J: =don't wanna get married ()? I don't'
- 5 N: [we know what Jordan likes=
- 6 M: [oh ↑yeah
- 7 T: =excuse me () excuse me ((to Jordan)) ↑YOU don't
- 8 J: wanna get married
- 9 J: no
- 10 T: what'aya gonna hire someone or:... ((laughter, 3.0))
- 10 → Ju: or do you (1.0) uh (1.0) wanna man
- 11 → T: right () you know that gays and lesbians are legal in Vermont
- 12 J: shu...:t UP
- 13 → Ju: Jordan () we know your secret () it's okay

- 14 [...] (to Jordan)) ↑so you want a boyfriend
 15 → Ju: shut up=
 16 J: =huh (.) what
 17 M: he said you wanna boyfriend
 18 N: ((to Jordan)) how about James (.) you should date James
 19 → Ju: (.) maybe he's your type
 20 J: NO NO NO (.) that's just wrong

The first several lines feature Jordan rather cautiously (lowered voice in lines 2 and 4) admitting that not only does he not want a girlfriend, but that he also does not want to get married. Terry orients to this abruptly (line 7) with two bids for the floor, which are followed by a two-part extended turn that first displays surprise ("↑YOU don't wanna get married"), which works as a pre-announcement for his follow-up remark in which he announces the consequences of not wanting to get married ("what'aya gonna hire someone or::::"). The notion of "hiring someone" is hearable as "hiring for sex," which indexes "compulsory heterosexuality" and secures Terry a position within stereotypical hetero-normative masculinity, which the others collude with through laughter. As such, the irony that follows is occasioned within a sequence of turns where hetero-normative masculinity is claimed by Terry (and those laughing) and at stake for Jordan.

The irony that follows occurs in two short sequences that are nearly parallel in their construction. The first sequence occurs in lines 10-13:

- 10 → Ju: or do you (1.0) uh (1.0) wanna man
 11 → T: right (.) you know that gays and lesbians are legal in Vermont
 12 J: shu::::it UP
 13 → Ju: Jordan (.) we know your secret (.) it's okay

This first example of irony represents a shift in tone. The contributions of Julius and Terry in lines 10-13 not only lack the emphatic stress found in lines 7 and 9, but also, which is more important, lack the typical paralinguistic and articulatory cues that are common in ironic displays. Instead, Julius and Terry work up a series of rather matter-of-fact evaluations that are constructed with strategic micro-pauses to suggest deliberation and precision (line 10), high epistemic markers ("right," "you know," and "we know"), and emphasis on the stative verb "are" (in "gays and lesbians are legal in Vermont"), which accomplishes fact construction via a state of affairs. These devices position Terry and Julius as seemingly careful, informed, and sympathetic. This "politically correct" position is useful for allowing Julius to gently inquire about Jordan's sexual preference ("do you wanna man"). Without missing a beat, Terry quickly and politely assumes *are* does ("right"), enabling them to then offer lifestyle advice ("gays and lesbians *are* legal in Vermont"), understanding ("we know"), and acceptance ("it's okay"), despite Jordan's protest ("shu::::it UP").

That Julius's and Terry's positions are hearable as ironic is reflected primarily by Jordan's dispreferred response of "shut up." The "shut up" represents a pivotal

sequential disjunction in which the support that is projected by Terry in line 11 is subverted and rejected. In others words, Terry's so-called "supportiveness" is heard by Jordan as sarcasm. In addition, Terry's earlier alignment with hetero-normative masculinity (lines 7-9) casts an additional shadow of disingenuousness on his current support of Jordan's purported homosexuality. As such, the irony here is recognizable because it constructs hetero-normative positions concerning sexuality and gender to which Julius and Terry have appealed earlier in the dialogue. Thus, it is clearly absurd for Julius and Terry, given their earlier talk about "hiring someone" (for sex), to believe that "wanting a man" is actually "okay." Jordan understands this, which is signaled by his "shut up." It is thus in the sequential unfolding of turns where these shared norms are made meaningful and instrumental, which the ironic utterances throw into focus by invoking and then apparently contravening them.

The second example of irony is structured in much the same way:

- 15 → Ju: ((to Jordan)) ↑so you want a boyfriend
 16 J: shut up=
 19 → Ju: ((to Jordan)) how about James (.) you should date James
 20 J: (.) maybe he's your type
 NO NO NO (.) that's just wrong

Again, there is the similar question-protest-support sequence in which Jordan is matter-of-factly constructed as wanting a boyfriend (line 15). And again, his protests are not oriented to as genuine disagreements but as veiled requests for affirmation and guidance. In the first exchange, Julius reminds Jordan that they know his "secret" and that it's "okay." In this second sequence, Julius responds to Jordan's protest by casually encouraging Jordan to date a guy who he thinks is Jordan's type (line 19). Again, Jordan's dispreferred response (line 20) constructs Julius's advice as sarcastic. What is unique about these uses of sarcasm is the way they are delivered so matter-of-factly, without the typical exaggeration and laughter found in sarcastic teases. It is because of this that the sarcasm is more sophisticated, insidious, and therefore insulated from the challenge of blatant prejudice. By doing this, they can subtly promote homophobia but in a mitigated and tongue-in-cheek way that can be denied if challenged.

HYPERBOLE

In contrast to the above example, the following uses of irony involve the typical articulatory cues of exaggeration, laughter, and absurd-sounding descriptions. The irony is thus marked through the strategic use of extremity, which presents the listener with a double perspective: the possibility of what could or should be, in the face of what is (Clift, 1999). In the following example, the boys work up a series of highly exaggerated evaluations concerning what they like (and what they think girls like) in terms of physical attraction. When these characterizations get challenged for not being serious, the boys offer tongue-in-cheek retorts that (at a second level of irony) parody the idea of being "serious" or "truthful" about such characterizations in the first place.

Excerpt 2
 Participants: M: Moderator, W: Walt, B: Brice, S: Seth, Bo: Bob, A: Amos (ages 12-13)

- 1 M: okay (.) so (.) what what's about girls (.) what is there that guys like=
- 2 A: =a lot of stuff
- 3 M: like
- 4 A: =uh (.) chest (.) their chest=
- 5 W: =ass
- 6 B: ↑what
- 7 A: their chest
- 8 S: their CHEST (Laughter, 2.0) butts and chests
- 9 (Laughter, 2.0)
- 10 M: =no (.) but seriously
- 11 W: WE ARE SERIOUS
- 12 (Laughter, 2.0) [...]]
- 13 M: bur don't girls find like different things (.) like brains or=
- 14 S: =nope (.) it's just BIG BALLS
- 15 (Laughter, 4.0)
- 16 W: they care about your baseballs and bats (.) your HOME RUN TOOLS
- 17 M: guys (.) guys (.) is this the way ALL of you guys are
- 18 → W: well it's the TRUTH
- 19 (Laughter, 4.0)
- 20 M: ((over laughter)) is this the way all of you guys are
- 21 (Laughter, 5.0)
- 22 B: yeah (.) your home run tools ((laughter, 1.0)) your twig and berries

Rather than offering a mature or politically correct answer to the moderator's question, this excerpt features the boys offering a series of compulsory objectifications of physical appearance. This is done with humor, colloquial forms of vulgarity, emphatic stress, and absurd-sounding idiomatic descriptions of body parts. The constant laughter and hyperbolic content constructs their objectifications as so over-the-top that it is difficult to take seriously. This is, after all, what exaggeration does. Yet, when the moderator challenges the boys about the seriousness or believability of their statements (lines 10 and 17), Walt holds form and laughably exclaims that they are being "serious" and that they are telling the "truth," and he says so in an exaggerated and emphatic way (lines 11 and 18). In the face of absurd sounding descriptions, such as caricatured appeals to "truthfulness" and "seriousness" carry a certain rhetorical weight to them, a weight that at a second level of irony resists the moderator's attempted frame shift. Thus, Walt's comebacks are disarming. They work to mock the need to be serious in the first place. By doing this, the boys are able to maintain an alignment with compulsory expressions of sexual interest but in a tongue-in-cheek way that is ironic because of the way it is explicitly overbuilt.

In the following excerpt, the boys are discussing what keeps them from approaching girls. Alex mentions that approaching girls is sometimes embarrassing. In what follows, the boys use hyperbole to effectively ironize Alex's purported attractiveness.

Excerpt 3
 Participants: M: Moderator, A: Alex, B: Bob, C: Carl, D: Dirk, E: Earl (ages 14-15)

- 1 M: ((to Alex)) and what about you (.) I mean I heard you (.) you said=
- 2 A: =I'm just embarrassed
- 3 M: I'm a shy guy too (.) but what is [that what do you
- 4 D: [A LOT of girls like you
- 5 B: Alex=
- 6 D: =KNOW (.) Alex is the guy EVERYBODY [wants [well
- 7 M: mostly=
- 8 B: =is it possible that girls like (.) uh:: (.) shy guys
- 9 C: back at the school (.) uh (.) EVERYONE likes Alex=
- 10 D: ((smiling)) he's just a real likable kid
- 11 E: ((to Bobbie)) now you just wish you were Alex
- 12 B: OH:: I know

The use of extreme case formulations ("A LOT", "EVERYBODY", "EVERYONE", "real likable"), high epistemic markers ("I KNOW" and "OH:: I know"), and affective collusion tokens ("oh:: yeah") all work as forms of hyperbole that make descriptions and evaluations sound over-the-top or absurd. Unlike precisely stated detailed descriptions, absurd-sounding ones are not easily undermined. They can be retracted or laughed off quite easily. As such, the established jovial environment for evaluating Alex's purported attractiveness can work as fertile soil for launching a tongue-in-cheek tease that effectively works to police certain types of heterosexual expression around girls (here, Alex's shyness). While they are not directly insulting Alex or disparaging being shy or reserved, they are certainly indirectly (by way of hyperbole) calling it into question.

The strategic and collaborative use of extreme case formulations, high epistemic markers, and collusion tokens constitute a social practice that functions in the present context to position Dirk, Carl, Bob, and Ernie as not simply having "inside" knowledge about what is and what is not attractive to girls, but additionally as having the discursive ability to package this "inside" knowledge in an increasingly upgraded series of exaggerations that uses Alex as a convenient foil. By using hyperbole as the vehicle for this type of ironic social practice, the boys can elicit the necessary smiling and laughter to guard against the appearance of cruelty. In other words, the use of hyperbole and exaggeration is good camouflage. Like other forms of irony, hyperbole preserves deniability, and in this case allows the boys to indirectly police certain forms of heterosexual attraction without appearing too serious or condescending about it.

SUPPRESSION ("BITING ONE'S TONGUE")

The notion of suppression, which is colloquially referred to as "biting one's tongue," is an interactive phenomenon that involves outwardly displaying that one is intentionally withholding some thought, belief, desire, or action because it will likely be heard as inappropriate, "politically incorrect," or somehow problematic (see Gough, 2001). The irony is that the suppression actually does get the potentially problematic thought, belief, or desire "on record," but it does so in a way that is highly mitigated and staged, which means it can be easily taken back or disclaimed if it is challenged. As is the case with all forms of irony, strategic uses of suppression result in an ambiguous tension or dissimulation between multiple levels of meaning. Consider the following excerpt where Carl suppresses what he knows regarding their conversations about certain women and then feigns confusion when pressed by Dirk to divulge.

Except 4

Participants: M: Moderator; B: Bob; C: Carl; D: Dirk (ages 14-15)

- 1 M: and that's when you talk about women (.) and the women
2 in the movies
3 D: °yee::h° ((nods and smiles))
4 B: yeah that and uh (.) other women ((looks at Dirk and smiles))
5 C: ((to Bob)) other women that are ↑at our::
6 M: and do you (.) [do you
7 D: [oh let Carl talk let Carl talk now=
8 → C: =(smiling) oh:: I don't have much to say
9 D: oh come on (.) we wanna know how you talk (.) how you
10 talk about women (.) and uh:::
11 ((laughter, 3.0))
12 → C: ((laughing)) huh (.) I'm uh::: confused

Like in other excerpts, there are knowing smiles (lines 3, 4, 8), strategic glances (lines 4, 5), marked emphases (line 4), and hanging turns (lines 5, 10) that suggest that there is "inside" information being carefully alluded to. Such discursive contexts suggest that the ability to hedge is a prerequisite for skillful participation. Suppression works to do exactly this. In line 5, Carl orients to the potentially problematic nature of Bob's confession about "other women" in the form of a "next turn repair initiator" as he begins his turn by repeating back (and then extending) "other women that are ↑at our:::" (line 5). The NTRI is an insinuatingly strategic positioning device because it simply repeats back (and thus casually emphasizes) the potentially problematic part of the previous speaker's turn (Schegloff et al., 1977). Seeing that Carl is alluding to "inside" information with this NTRI, Dirk almost immediately (line 7) encourages Carl to continue to comment on Bob's innuendo

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regarding these "other women." This occasions Carl's selective use of suppression (line 8).

Interestingly, Carl's suppression is set off with a knowing smile and then the turn-initial particle "oh," followed by a proposition. Hutchby (2001) and Heritage (1984) have both underscored the usefulness of the "oh" + *proposition* structure as a change of state marker for creating a disjunction or dispreferred turn shape between consecutive turns. Hutchby (2001) has taken this one step further in noting how these types of disjunctions are useful for accomplishing crafty inversions and ironizations of prior utterances. In line 8 above, Carl's elongation and stress on "oh::" followed by the "I don't have much to say" proposition works as a mischievous and dismissive formulation of Dirk's request for Carl to come "on record" with his inside information regarding Bob's innuendo. Carl's suppression foregrounds an ironic hearing because it treats Dirk's invitation to talk as a potential trap that he must carefully negotiate. The "I don't have much to say" is a strategic "biting of the tongue" that allows Carl to *indirectly* suggest that he does have something to say about these "other women" (thus satisfying a normatively heterosexual position of openly talking about girls), while also partially avoiding a violation of the norm against exposing fellow guys too much and thus potentially implicating oneself in the process. Carl's playful display of confusion (line 12) caps this positioning move off nicely, thus securing the kind of "double voicing" needed to say something without saying it.

In the next excerpt, the same group notes that they talk most about girls when they are at sleepovers together. In lines 7 and 13, Dirk works up two relevant bits of tongue-in-cheek suppression.

Except 5

Participants: M: Moderator; B: Bob; C: Carl; D: Dirk; E: Earl (ages 14-15)

- 1 B: after ten o'clock at a sleepover (.) after we've seen a
2 movie like American Pie (.) it's a lot
3 E: it's not that we try to (.) it just comes up
4 D: something else comes up too
5 ((laughter, 4.0))
6 M: okay (.) so what (.) what are the topics when you talk
7 → D: ((smiling)) oh:: now we don't want to go into that
8 M: just (.) just in general
9 C: oh uh (.) we talk about who is going out with who at
10 school (.) uh::=
10 D: =yeah (.) YEP we talk about that a lot=
11 M: =okay=
12 D: =basically not much more:: than that (1.0) actu::ally (.)
13 → B: Bob's been asking me quite a lot (.) but I'm not gonna
14 E: [I know what it is

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- 15 M: [that ↑true
- 16 D: na::h () well but uh () [I'm not making that up
- 17 B: [quite ↑a LOT
- 18 D: ju::st kidding () just kidding (2.0) °now I am making THAT up°

Dirk's sexual innuendo in line 4 indexes the "compulsory heterosexual" tone that is carried through and alluded to in his first bit of suppression in line 7. His suppression is yet again set off with a knowing smile, followed by the "oh + proposition" formulation that works as a way of constructing a disputatious turn, thus indexing the potential for their answer (regarding the kinds of things they say about girls) to be heard as somehow inappropriate. What's more, Dirk constructs his proposition ("now we don't want to go into that") in the "we" voice, thus constructing the suppression as a *group* project that these young men collectively share. This positions suppression as a "heteronormative" and "masculine" social practice, which proves useful as a discursive tool for handling sensitive topics. Here, Dirk can allude to the problematic nature of their talk about girls, thus getting it "on record," but can bite his tongue at just the right moment so as to avoid going too far with it.

Dirk's second use of suppression (line 13) does not come on the heels of the moderator's query and thus does not have the dispreferred turn shape that is typical of suppressive moves that come as responses to the questions or challenges of others. Instead, Dirk's suppression is self-initiated. He first offers a downgraded assessment when he says "basically not much more:: than that" (line 12) in commenting on the extent to which they talk about girls. In a second move, he self-repairs by using the epistemic particle of "actually" which works to create the necessary disjunction (or self-initiated dispreferred turn shape) between the downgraded assessment and the forthcoming third part, which is the upgraded assessment of "Bob's been asking me quite a lot." This three-part turn creates a momentary dissimulation, which generates a fertile context for irony. The irony immediately comes with his suppression of "but I'm not gonna even say:" which yet again is flanked with a knowing smile. In line 17, Bob uses an NTRI "quite ↑a LOT" in repeating back (and thus questioning) the upgraded and hearably problematic part of Dirk's "quite a lot" assessment, which leads to Dirk's quickly claiming to be "just kidding" (line 18), which yet again displays the ease with which speakers can deny or shrug off the innuendos projected in suppressive irony.

The central idea here is that open displays of suppression allow young men to "have their cake and eat it, too" — that is, the strategic "biting of one's tongue" allows these young men to pay homage to certain societal or group norms but in tongue-in-cheek ways that nevertheless allow them to get something potentially problematic or inappropriate "on record." It is thus not unreasonable to think that the successful maintenance of heteronormative forms of masculinity involves these types of maneuvers.

RHETORICAL QUESTIONING

A rhetorical question was defined as a question whose answer is obvious or unanswerable in any kind of straightforward way (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000). They are ironic precisely because their function is not to secure a direct answer but to indirectly make a point, express frustration or blame, tease, make an accusation, and so on. In the following excerpts, the boys use rhetorical questions to hedge around developmentally relevant hetero-normative dilemmas.

Excerpt 6

Participants: M: Moderator, B: Bob, D: Dirk, C: Carl, E: Ernie (ages 14-15)

- 1 D: when girls go out with boys () I don't think uh () I
- 2 think it is much less for looks than it is for guys () when
- 3 boys want to go out=
- 4 B: =yeah boys want looks=
- 5 C: =it's much more for looks=
- 6 B: =boys do want looks=
- 7 D: =and if girls go out with boys () it's because they
- 8 actually LIKE the boy=
- 9 E: =this is true=
- 10 M: =WHICH IS GOOD FOR US () cause then we get
- 11 → E: to go out () assuming we ever go out
- 12 B: so then is it personality that matters for you all () is
- 13 () is that () yeah () or::=
- 14 D: =but () well yeah () but then I mean () what are we
- supposed to say ()
- that we like Britney Spears for her music () come on=
- =right () yeah
- ((laughter, 2.0))

This first example shows the boys caught in the all too familiar dilemma of accounting for their attraction to girls based on "personality" or "looks." When Bob makes the self-deprecating quip (lines 8-9) about their own lack of good looks, the moderator follows by asking, then, if personality is what is more important for them (line 10). Ernie responds by hedging ("but () well yeah () but then I mean"), displaying a hesitancy in either affirming or denying the moderator's question. While the exact meaning of the hedges is unclear, they do at the very least suggest that there is something at stake in either affirming or denying that personality is what matters for them. Rather than answering directly, Ernie offers a hypothetical rhetorical question that has an ironic force to it ("what are we supposed to say () that we like Britney Spears for her music"). Not only is this an example of suppression, but it is suppression couched within a rhetorical question that is designed to make a point—i.e., that it is unreasonable to expect them to only notice personality and not

physical appearance, and that Britney Spears is a case in point. The tag remark of "come on" is highly effective for framing and making off the irony. It suggests that the answer is obvious, thus problematizing the reasonableness of the question itself. As such, Ernie's rhetorical question is insinuatingly strategic in simultaneously denying and affirming the values of hetero-normative masculinity.

The following excerpt is a continuation of excerpt 2. The boys continue to use rhetorical questions to make absurd (and ironic) jokes about what girl's are purportedly looking for in terms of a guy's physical appearance. To fend off the moderator's attempted frame shift (line 6), Walt uses a rhetorical question to maintain the ironic environment of laughter and hyperbole.

Excerpt 7

Participants: M: Moderator, W: Walt, B: Brice (ages 12-13)

- 1 W: =they care about THE SIZE::=
2 M: =[WALT
3 B: [under the belt=
4 W: =under the belt () yep=
5 B: =the SIZE UNDER THE BELT
6 M: Walt () come on Walt=
7 → W: =well what else is under the belt
8 M: Wal::t=
9 B: =no () THE SIZE BETWEEN THE THIGHS
10 (laughter, 5.0)
11 W: oh my god I'm seriously gonna die laughing

With his soft challenge in line 6, the moderator attempts to shift the tenor of the talk to something perhaps less puerile. His "come on () Walt" is, however, not oriented as a request to shift the tone of the discussion but is rather strategically interpreted by Walt as a literal questioning of whether it is actually "the SIZE" that is "under the belt" or perhaps something else. Walt's rhetorical question of "what else is under the belt" performs exactly this ironic inversion on the moderator's question, thus dismissing the force it has to construct their talk as inappropriate while also buying them extra time to continue to playfully try out colloquial forms of idiomatic vulgarity.

In this last excerpt, the boys (all 12 years old) are talking about who has had sex. Aaron point-blank turns and asks Wilson if he has had sex before. Wilson attempts to mock the question with ironic sarcasm and caricature (lines 4-5) before capping it off with a robust rhetorical question (line 5) and a slap on the back of Aaron's head.

Excerpt 8
Participants: A: Aaron, W: Wilson, J: Jasper (ages 12-13)

- 1 A: ((to Wilson)) have you had sex before
2 W: ↑huh
3 A: did you have sex before
4 W: UH:: ↑yea:h () I've had sex before () I just uh:::
5 → got down on er' and was all like () 'c'mon' WHAT DO
6 YOU THINK () gah' ((tries to hit Aaron on the back of
7 the head)) =
8 A: =↑have you
9 J: ((to Aaron)) well you haven't=
10 W: =I know I:: haven't
that's the stupidest question I know

There is a two-part irony in Wilson's reply. The first part ("UH:: ↑yea:h () I've had sex before () I just uh::: got down on er' and was all like") relies on an exaggerated and caricatured display of Wilson "just" having sex. He ironizes the simplicity of it all, and thus problematizes the casual presumption of Aaron's question. What drives the irony home, however, is the emphatic rhetorical question "WHAT DO YOU THINK" that is made robust with the preface of "c'mon," the tag of "gah,'" and the attempted slap on Aaron's head. These ancillary devices intensify the hearable force of the rhetorical question, thus setting it off as the high point of Wilson's ironic reply. As such, Wilson is able to suggest that he *obviously* has not had sex, and to ask such a question is "stupid" (line 10). Wilson is thus able to secure rationality (he can fend off stupid questions with glib irony), while denaturalizing the commonness of sexual promiscuity at their particular age.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of adolescent boys' uses of irony is significant in several ways. First, it lends empirically grounded weight to discussions about the place of irony within gender construction, discussions that, to date, have largely been confined to more macro-level cultural analyses. Less common are empirical studies that reveal masculinities as sets of social practices, where positioning strategies (like irony) are featured as interactive tools for doing identity-work within mundane, local social interactions. By studying irony as it is locally deployed by young men to handle hetero-normative dilemmas, the present work has attempted to show how the meanings of masculine norms are inextricably tied to the contexts in which they are put to use, and by extension, that they ought to be studied as they are given meanings within those contexts. In other words, hetero-normative masculinity is not something that comes "written into" specific words, nor is it something that can be legislated in advance or easily codified in survey or questionnaire items. This study has, as a result, pushed for a contextually sensitive analysis of irony as a discursive tool that is uniquely equipped for both subverting and (indirectly) asserting different masculine subject positions.

Second, this study has attempted to demonstrate precisely *how* different masculine positions come to be simultaneously "claimed" and "resisted" in actual conversational interaction. By focusing on sarcasm, hyperbole, suppression, or rhetorical questioning, the analyses have revealed how boys can exploit and at the same time call into question certain masculine norms. The foregoing discursive methodology was utilized to reveal the *processes* by which this is accomplished. Since irony always works as a commentary on what is normative, a discursive analyses of irony-in-use demonstrates what the boys themselves *treat* as "normatively masculine" in distinct conversational settings. From the data analyzed, it appears that irony is a culturally pragmatic tool that the boys use to delicately attend to the edge of disputability that may be heard in talk that is about potentially self-incriminating topics, such as their interest in "girls," "sex," or "physical attraction." It would appear that displays of masculinity, at this age and in these types of interactive contexts, mean orienting openly and clearly to the features of "compulsory heterosexuality" but often in tongue-in-cheek ways that fall short of appearing shallow, sexist, ignorant, or desperate.

This finding is consonant with the work of other discursive researchers of masculinity, who argue that adolescent boys often do their masculinity by drawing on homophobic, sexist, and heterosexist banter while at the same time safeguarding their positions with disclaimers and softeners to suggest more egalitarian, liberal, or sensitive portrayals of themselves (Bamberg, in press b; Korobov, 2004; Speer & Potter, 2000; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). To date, very few discursive researchers (and even fewer psychologists) have examined how these safe-guarding strategies are worked up and managed or how they become psychologically relevant in the formation of young men's masculinities. As such, irony can be seen as a developmental accomplishment. Over the course of adolescence, young men may increasingly learn to manage masculine norms by ironizing them, which entails neither attending nor disputing them in direct or obvious ways.

This has direct repercussions for research concerning the relationship between "new prejudice" and hegemonic masculinity. "New prejudice" refers to forms of prejudice that are accomplished in subtle and intricate ways—often, paradoxically, by the speaker espousing egalitarian or liberal values (see Billig et al., 1988; Gough, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Because ironic positioning strategies have a built-in deniability to them, they are useful for deflecting accusations of prejudice or bias while still getting a potentially shallow, sexist, or homophobic message across. The developmental paradox here is that, as young men become more socialized to resist obvious and "old fashioned" forms of prejudice, they may become better at normalizing the prejudices of more contemporary forms of masculinity (of the kinds found in popular entertainment, for instance). Strategic displays of sarcasm, hyperbole, suppression, and rhetorical questioning all seem to be tools that are especially useful for evincing these "new" types of indirect, mitigated, or staged prejudice.

Seen this way, masculinity research would seem to benefit from work that is acutely focused on identifying the ways that different men, at different ages and within different contexts, are able to design their talk to negotiate those dilemmatic features of masculinity that are both useful and at times potentially inappropriate. Young men's management of such dilemmas is in many ways consonant with the "crisis" in masculinity that looms over the broader cultural context of gender rela-

tions. Young men are encouraged to promote "compulsory heterosexuality" while simultaneously being advised (over the course of development) to reform or abandon their oppressive habits, to be more open and tolerant, and to practice sensitivity and compassion. These dilemmas, however, are not so much ones of balancing pre-established cultural norms but are rather "jived" ideological dilemmas, which get constructed and managed within local conversations. By investigating the conversational uses of irony, the present study has attempted to make headway into answering the question of how young men socially negotiate the "jived" or "practical" ideological tensions associated with heteronormative masculinity.

NOTE

1. With permission from school administration, members of Dr. Michael Bamberg's research team (Clark University) made a series of short classroom visits to explain the study to various groups of boys (see Bamberg, in press-b). The boys were then given informational flyers and permission slips to bring home. They were all told that the purpose of the study was to find out what it is like, from their perspectives, to be growing up as young men in today's culture. They were told that participation would last several weeks and that they would be participating in various activities such as journal writing, an individual interview, an adult-moderated group discussion with other boys, and various after-school "outings" (to do things like bowling, eating ice cream, playing games at a recreational center, etc.). They were told that we would be audio- and videotaping them at various times and that everything was confidential. The boys were also told that they would be given (via their parents/guardians) \$30 for participating. All of the boys voluntarily consented to participate in the study. The data for this particular article are derived from the adult-moderated group discussions.

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