



## Positioning a 'mature' self in interactive practices: How adolescent males negotiate 'physical attraction' in group talk

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This article presents a discursive psychological approach in examining the ways that adolescent boys (ages 12–15 years) accomplish a sense of 'maturity' by bringing off and managing certain features of 'heterosexuality' in group interaction. We focus on and analyse moments when the boys negotiate implicit challenges, make evaluations and offer assessments concerning their physical and sexual attraction to girls' looks. These moments are highly important for negotiating their peer status, for working toward a distinction between 'childhood' and 'adolescence', and for marking a normatively heterosexual self within the burgeoning institution of adolescence. We will specifically show how 'heterosexual desire' is carefully managed in group discussions where the boys participate in normative heterosexuality, but in ways that are nevertheless designed to appear mature and knowing, rather than shallow, naïve or sexist. Three discursive methods of negotiation are identified and described in detail: (1) underscoring the non-literality of actions by appealing to motives, (2) denials with built-in concessions, and (3) differentiation through caricature. Couched within the proposed discursive framework, we are reversing the traditional logic of developmental approaches to 'maturation'. Rather than viewing maturation as the effect of resolving developmental tasks, we argue that 'maturity' comes to existence in the way talk is accomplished; that is, as highly flexible and fragile projections of identity that involve a continuous refinement of 'finely tuned positioning skills'.

Developmental psychologists have conceptualized adolescence as a 'betwixt and between' time of development, when there is a constantly shifting and ambiguous experience of sexual identity (Brooks-Gunn & Paikoff, 1997; Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Galen, 1998). It is a time when adolescents are caught between childish and adult norms of sexuality, where they must negotiate what Eckert (1994) calls the 'developmental imperative' to appear 'mature', or 'the next step older'. Applied to the development of male adolescent sexuality, this typically involves a focus on clusters

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of problem-behaviours (e.g. dating, intercourse, contraception use) and their risks, with less emphasis on the developmental processes that characterize young men's negotiation of the 'developmental imperative' (see Eckert, 1994; Savin-Williams, 1995; Schulenberg, Maggs, & Hurrelmann, 1997). As such, adolescent male sexuality is typically broached through a rather individualistic focus on the cognitive product of internalization (their 'attitudes') in studying young men's attempted resolution of problematic 'masculine norms' and 'ideologies' (see Good, Wallace, & Borst, 1994; Levant, 1996). This interest is at the service of explaining the different factors underlying or mediating the developmental internalization of masculine belief systems and masculine ideologies. In these orientations, 'maturation' is typically treated as an effect of psychological construction and is discussed in terms of the successful or unsuccessful resolution of 'tasks' associated with different developmental 'stages'.

For example, one of the more widely discussed psychosocial stages that adolescent boys are thought to begin to work their way through and sort out is 'non-relational sexuality', which refers to a constellation of hegemonic attitudes and behaviours characterized by an experience of sexuality as 'sport' or as lust, an obsession with physical attraction, an objectification of sexual partners, as well as tendencies toward trophyism, voyeurism and hypersexuality (Brooks, 1997; Good & Sherrod, 1997; Levant, 1997). According to Good and Sherrod (1997), non-relational sexuality is a developmental life-stage that most men enter during adolescence and some successfully begin to resolve. The notion, however, of what it means to 'pass through' or 'successfully resolve' these forms of 'hetero-normative masculinity' remains an open and relatively unexplored (at least empirically) question. Much of the work on young men's negotiation of 'hetero-normative masculinity' is derived from clinical observation, theory and speculation (Good & Sherrod, 1997). What is conspicuously absent are in-depth, contextually sensitive explorations that address developmental process, that is, how young men actually comply with and resist (or try to 'resolve') aspects of their sexualities over time and what that conformity and resistance looks like from their own perspectives and in their own words and actions.

Exploring how adolescent males negotiate hetero-normative masculinity means appreciating that processes of gender-identity formation have a curious negotiability to them, in the sense that gender roles (and role transitions) are often contradictory and inconsistent (Connell, 1995; Pleck, 1995). Connell (1995, p. 77) has stressed that hegemonic forms of masculinity are 'historically mobile relations' with a formidable resourcefulness to them. In other words, the stability of 'hetero-normative masculinity' may very well lie in its flexibility to accommodate ostensibly incongruous values or norms. What this means is that in their everyday talk, young men may not embrace stereotypical masculine norms in the kind of straightforward way that they are asked about them on psychological scales and inventories (Graber *et al.*, 1998). Over the course of adolescence, young men may increasingly learn to manage masculine norms, neither attending nor dis-attending to them in direct or obvious ways. While these processes of managing the norms of masculine sexuality have been intermittently examined by some psychologists (see Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002; Wetherell & Edley, 1999), they have not been more generally discussed as relevant windows into the larger project of the 'developmental imperative' to appear 'mature' during adolescence.

As such, the aim of this article is to think of 'maturing' in a more local and socially discursive way. We are interested in examining 'maturity' as it is locally and discursively accomplished by young men as part of their everyday interactive social practices. In this

study, our aim is to detail several of the ways that adolescent boys (ages 12–15 years) bring off and manage a 'mature' view of themselves. In other words, we are interested in what 'maturity' means to the boys themselves, and in investigating how they interactively position themselves and each other as 'mature'. To broach 'maturity' within the context of 'hetero-normative masculinity', we will focus on moments in group discussions where the boys negotiate implicit challenges, make evaluations, and offer assessments concerning their physical and sexual attraction to girls' looks. Their talk about such topics proved to be relevant discursive sites where appearing both 'mature' and 'heterosexually interested' become highly relevant and dilemmatic.

In examining the boys' talk about attraction and attractive girls, we will show how they position themselves *vis-à-vis* the adult moderator as 'misunderstood', 'aware' or 'knowing', and thus not as naïve, childish, desperate or shallow. They do this by orienting to the moderator's questions and to each other with subtly crafted, hedged responses and delayed or weak disagreements that preface strategically organized accounts or evaluations. What we will try to document is that these strategies are appropriated to avoid conversational trouble. In other words, these strategies reflect the interactive development of 'finely tuned positioning skills', which refers to the discursive dexterity of speakers in being able to constantly interpret and negotiate conversational possibilities. As such, the boys' discursive development does not necessarily reflect the progressive acquisition of internal dispositions, gender schemas or cognitive scripts.

In contrast to a rather transparent view of their discourse as simply reflecting internal processes, we see the conversational positioning of maturity as discursive, culturally relevant ways of attending to the edge of disputability that may be heard in talk that is about potentially self-incriminating topics, such as one's interest in sexual or physical attraction. Part of 'doing maturity' in these contexts means orienting openly and clearly to the features of 'heterosexual desire' (so as to appear 'cool' or 'not gay'), but in ways that fight shy of appearing shallow, sexist, ignorant or desperate. Doing 'hetero-normative masculinity' while appearing to be 'mature' about it is thus an evasive, inscrutable and insinuatingly strategic project. Seen this way, our work is consonant with research that has focused on the *discursive* strategies used to resist the trouble, prejudice or appearance of complicity with 'hegemonic masculinity' in talk (see Bamberg, in press a; Gough, 2001; Speer & Potter, 2000, Wetherell & Edley, 1999). As developmental psychologists, we are interested in such strategies because they form the discursive means that facilitate the radical re-orientation from a 'normatively asexual peer cohort' during childhood into the 'normatively heterosexual' and *contested* social arrangements that are characteristic of adolescence (Eckert, 1994).

### **A discursive psychological methodology**

Discursive psychology is a social constructionist approach that applies ideas from ethnography, discourse analysis and ethnomethodology to psychological issues and concepts (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). A discursive approach is concerned with identifying the rhetorical and argumentative organization of discourse. This means paying close attention to the way speakers' accounts are rhetorically and argumentatively organized, often taking the form of contradictory and inconsistent versions of people, motives, states of mind or events. It is with this analytic focus that our approach parts company with the majority of

traditional psychological research that attempts to measure adolescents' development of sexual identity through attitude scales and inventories.

One such tradition is the 'masculine gender-role socialization paradigm' that is currently popular within the 'new psychology of masculinity' (see Good *et al.*, 1994; Levant, 1996; Thompson, Pleck, & Ferrera, 1992). This orientation assumes that masculine norms and ideologies are *internalized* by individuals, and that this internalization often creates negative psychological and physiological effects (or conflict/strain). In a way, the 'new psychology of masculinity' paradigm can be classified as social constructionist, in that it theoretically embraces the broad idea that ideologies and norms are social, cultural and interactive in nature (see Levant, 1996). It does not, however, generally advocate studying such norms and ideologies as they are socially, culturally or interactively constructed. Rather than focusing on the processes of social construction, the empirical focus has been primarily on the product of psychological (not social) construction; that is, on the individualized and internalized 'categorization' and then expression of one's attitudes towards items on questionnaires, items that are ostensibly 'valid' referential mappings of masculine ideologies and norms.

From a discursive perspective, the key problem is that expressing a forced choice or Likert-scale attitude is entirely different than expressing an attitude in daily social interaction. First, questionnaire items tend to reify the issue under scrutiny (sexual/gender norms) by stabilizing them in the form of relatively stereotypical and arguably facile descriptions that may be easily associated with sexism, shallowness or chauvinism, and thus rejected. Second, the forced choice format systematically strips off the interactive subtleties and rhetorical finessing that are part of the daily expression of attitudes, evaluations and assessments. In a questionnaire, the boys may predominantly disagree with the attitudes that are purportedly associated with the items, especially if those items are measuring something like overt sexism. But in their daily interactions, they may actually put such attitudes to use in myriad ways, constructing them as caricatures, displacing them onto 'other' boys, orienting to them in ironic, tongue-in-cheek ways, or at times even claiming them in order to resist being positioned as effeminate, soft or weak.

As such, we are aligning ourselves with a discursive approach that examines evaluative expressions as parts of interactive, social and cultural practices, which entails a close scrutiny of how such expressions are put to use, as opposed to speculating about the mental or attitudinal objects that they putatively reflect (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Rather than seeing attitudes as mentally held, either/or, and slow to move, we see attitudes as talk's business, as partial and shifting devices (or 'topics') that spring up in a constantly shifting interaction that occasions and makes use of these devices, and then moves on (Antaki, 2004; Edwards & Potter, 1992). As a result, the discursive approach we work from is fully interested in the inconsistencies, contradictions and ambiguities that arise as the boys try to find ways to mitigate the interactive trouble and to appear mature in talking about their attraction to girls' looks. Rather than seeing these shifts and equivocations as an analytic nuisance, they are exactly what are most interesting. They offer a way into examining how the boys are bringing off and managing their social identities (Bamberg, in press a). Seen this way, they no longer appear as contradictions or inconsistencies, but rather as openings into which the analyst can delve and see how such multiple attending and rhetorical finessing is used to work up identity claims that do not appear too obvious, challengeable or immature.

## Positioning

For the purpose of analysing the discourse data of adolescent males, we draw on the concept of 'positioning'. This concept has gained current relevance in theorizing identity and subjectivity, where 'positions' are typically conceptualized being grounded in *discourses* (also variously called 'master narratives', 'plot lines', 'master plots', 'dominant discourses' or simply 'cultural texts'). These discourses are taken to provide the meanings and values within which subjects are 'positioned' (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Hollway, 1984). Here, the 'problem of agency' is addressed by giving the subject a semi-agentive status inasmuch as discourses are construed as inherently contradictive and in competition with one another, so that subjects are forced to choose. In other words, subjects 'agentively' pick a position among those available. Thus, positions, within this view, are resources that subjects can choose; when practised for a while, these positioning activities become repertoires that can be drawn upon in other contexts.

In a somewhat contrasting view, and by elaborating on Butler's (1990, 1995) notion of performing identities in acts of 'self-marking', we argue for a view of positioning that is more concerned with self-reflection, self-criticism and agency (all ultimately orientated toward *self-revision*). In so doing, we suggest that a line be drawn between the 'being positioned' orientation, which is susceptible to discursive determinism, and a more agentive notion of the subject as 'positioning itself', in which the discursive resources or repertoires are not always and already given but rather are accomplished. Moreover, Bamberg (in press a, b) has argued that 'being positioned' and 'positioning oneself' are themselves metaphoric constructs of two very different agent-world relationships: the former with a world-to-agent direction of fit, the latter with an agent-to-world direction of fit. One way to overcome this rift is to argue that both operate concurrently in a kind of dialectic as subjects engage in talk-in-interaction and make sense of self and others in their stories. However, the interaction between these two direction-of-fit metaphors may be a lot more complex than that suggested by the idea of subjects employing relatively ready-made resources or repertoires within talk-in-interaction and becomes even more complex if we see positions themselves as constructed in talk by lexical, grammatical and interactive means (and not just 'expressed' through them). As such, we may be better off analysing the process by which such positions come into existence and with how such positions are instrumental in the construction of a sense of self and identity.

In taking this orientation, the 'who-am-I?' (identity) question should no longer start from a notion of a unitary subject as the ground for its investigation. Rather, the agentive subject is the 'point of departure' for its own empirical instantiation (Butler, 1995, p. 446) - as a subject that is constantly seeking to legitimate itself, situated in language practices and interactively accomplished: 'world- and person-making take place simultaneously' (Bamberg, 2000, p. 763). Thus, the pluralization of identities 'disrupts the social ontology of the subject itself ... as the internal impossibility of the subject as a discrete and unitary kind of being' (Butler, 1995, p. 446). This pluralization simultaneously opens up a new empirical territory for where and how subjects come to existence; that is, a conversational and discursive territory where positions are actively and interactively taken (and explored) for the purpose of self and world construction.

Our analysis of how speakers actively and agentively position themselves in talk starts from the assumption that the orderliness of talk is situationally and interactively accomplished. However, since this orderliness is the result of what is being achieved,

and therefore inherently oriented to, we begin our actual discursive analysis by paying close attention to the ways in which the represented world (what the talk is 'about') is drawn up. Here we attempt to spot descriptions and evaluations of characters as well as time and space coordinates in the way that these relate to social categories and their action potential. From there we move into a closer analysis of the way these referential and representational aspects of language construction are used in their sequential arrangement among the participants of the conversation. The assumption is simply that particular descriptions and evaluations were chosen for interactive purposes. These descriptions and evaluations rhetorically function to convey how the conversationalists signal to each other how they want to be understood.

In working from these two levels of positioning (one *vis-à-vis* the content of what the talk is supposedly about, the other *vis-à-vis* the coordination of the interaction by the speakers), we are better situated to make assumptions about the ideological orientation within which the speakers are positioning a sense of self (as a sense of who they are). The analysis of the first two positioning levels is intended to progressively lead to a differentiation of how speakers work up constructions of normative discourses. It is at this juncture that we come full circle by showing how subjects position themselves in relation to discourses by which they are positioned. In other words, analysing talk-in-interaction along these lines enables us to circumvent the aporia of two opposing subject theories, one in which the subject is determined by existing discourses, the other in which the subject is the ground from which discourses are constructed.

Ironically, this way of analysing talk-in-interaction for the purpose of gaining an understanding of how interactants establish a sense of self (*in* talk-in-interaction) resembles closely what in developmental theorizing is termed 'microgenesis' (see Bamberg, 2003, in press a). This approach focalizes the momentary history of human sense-making in the form of emergent processes. It assumes that developmental changes (such as learning or better understanding) emerge as individuals create and accomplish interactive tasks in everyday conversations. In our group discussions, the interactive space between the participants is the arena in which identities are micro-genetically performed and consolidated and where they can be micro-analytically accessed. Here we are borrowing from developmental (Bamberg, 2000; Catan, 1986; Riegel, 1975; Werner, 1948; Werner & Kaplan, 1984; Wertsch & Stone, 1978), conversation-analytic (Sacks, 1995; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 1982), and 'communities of practice' approaches (Eckert, 1989, 2002; Hanks, 1996) to analyse the sequential and relational structure of talk-in-interaction, for the purpose of inquiring not only into the developing sense of self and others, but also into what is shared as a cultural model of sense-making. This does not imply that such 'senses' of self, other and generalized other (culture) do not exist previously to or outside of the discourse situation. However, for analysing talk-in-interaction, we are suggesting bracketing these categories together so that we can be open to the analysis of what the participants make currently relevant in the interactive setting. In entering this orientation from a sociolinguistic/ethnomethodological vantage point, we will deal with talk and identity work that focuses on the active and interactive 'occupation of discursive spaces', making particular use of contextualization and contextualization cues (cf. Bamberg, 2000; Gumperz, 1981 Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974, 1992 Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974, 1996).

## The present study

### *Participants and procedure*

Our data come from the first phase of a longitudinal and cross-sectional study investigating adolescent boys' (ages 10–15 years) discourse and identity development (Bamberg, in press a). Within the first phase, over 300 hours of talk were audio- and video-recorded from 54 boys, including adult-guided and non-adult-guided discussions. All 54 of the participants were from public schools of a large city in the northeast of the USA. For this article, we specifically examine five excerpts from three different adult-guided group discussions with boys aged 12–15 years. Each of the group discussions included between four and six boys, lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, was videotaped, and was moderated by an adult male. The boys were told that the purpose of the group discussions was to generate talk about what it means, from their perspectives, to be growing up as young men. Because the discussions were adult-moderated, the boys did orient to the setting as a research setting with questions and answers, but did so flexibly, using their own vernacular to collectively fashion their own perspectives to the moderator's queries (see Morgan, 1997).

The main reason for examining only five excerpts of data versus a larger corpus of smaller excerpts is to provide sufficient specificity and analytic detail of the discursive processes that are used to orient *to* and *against* the gendered social norms that are occasioned in talk about physical attraction. Within discourse-analytic qualitative paradigms, the goals of analytic rigour, in-depth rendering of the participant's own positions, context specificity and particularization are key evaluative criteria (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002; Silverman, 1993). In contrast to some ethnographic and content-analytic approaches, the goal here is not to report a general compendium of findings, nor is it to offer summary snapshots, paraphrases or general themes of the conversational data. Instead of offering analyses that support the *general* finding that young men often work to appear 'mature' while talking about their heterosexuality (something we may already know), we are interested in examining in detail *how* such talk is accomplished; that is, the discursive work required to mitigate immaturity while securing a stake in hetero-normative masculinity. This type of micro-analytic focus not only addresses the 'how' question, but it also binds the analyst's claims to actual data. It reveals (rather than conceals) how the analysis was conducted, invites reflexive re-interpretations, and provides a concrete model for analysing similar segments of data.

### Data and analysis

Coming across as 'mature' while displaying an active 'heterosexuality' is one of the central activities for negotiating the 'developmental imperative' to demonstrate new age-appropriate or mature behaviours that consistently require a strategic engagement with the heterosexual social order (Eckert, 1994). Micro-genetically, this engagement can be accomplished using a variety of discursive procedures, ranging from the construction of 'normativity' and irony (see Speer, 2002), to rendering the familiar 'mysterious' (Eckert, 1994), to engaging in different forms of 'differentiation' (Edley & Wetherell, 1997), to the use of 'suppression' (see Gough, 2001), or through the construction of 'in-agentive' versus 'agentive' voicing (see Bamberg, in press a), to name but a few. For the current analysis, we will focus on three discursive methods that

are particularly relevant in the establishment of a 'system of social value' (Eckert, 2002, p. 107). These three discursive methods are:

- (1) Underscoring the non-literality of actions by appealing to motives
- (2) Denials with built-in concessions
- (3) Differentiation through caricature.

In previous studies, these discursive methods have been micro-analytically examined as ways of resisting being positioned within certain social categories, or alongside the less-than-desired features of certain social categories. For instance, Edwards' (2000) work on romantic couples' talk in therapy, and Widdicombe and Wooffitt's (1995) examination of 'punk' subcultures, each focus on how speakers cast their identities as 'non-literal' (or 'non-serious') exemplars of social categories by claiming that their outward behaviours or actions do not reflect their inward motives or dispositions. Speer and Potter (2000) have examined the ways that men attempt to resist the appearance of heterosexism in casual group discussions by strategically crafting less-than-robust denials that have concessionary elements to them; that is, concessions that allow the men to partly buy back into heterosexism at a less direct, or more subtle level. And finally, the use of 'caricature' as a strategy of differentiation has been documented by Rampton (1999) in his work on 'linguistic crossing' and 'stylization', and Georgakopoulou (2002) in her sociolinguistic work on the discursive strategies used to construct gender in Greek youth subcultures. What is common in each of these different research foci is an emphasis on these methods as discursive ways of *indirectly* or *subtly* constructing social and gendered identity positions so as to resist challenges and counters to such positions, and the micro-analytical aim of opening up these methods to closer inspection and potential critique.

#### ***Underscoring the non-literality of actions by appealing to motives***

One of the ways in which speakers manage potentially troublesome inferences worked up during social interaction is to underscore the non-literality (see Edwards, 2000) of their actions by characterizing those actions as not implying what they may appear to be implying. One way to do this is to make an appeal to an inner realm of intentionality, dispositions or motives as a way to trump other interpretations. In the exchange below, Don, in his final turn, seems to play on motives in order to construct the moderator as misunderstanding them, which allows them to claim to be more mature than it would appear to the casual or naïve onlooker.

*Excerpt 1 (see Appendix for transcription conventions)*

Participants: M: Moderator, D: Don, H: Hal

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | M: so is part of growing up not falling for good looks (.) is that (.)              |
| 2 | what do you guys think of that  |
| 3 | D: if you don't know em' (.) like if you are in the mall (.) then it's the          |
| 4 | <u>very</u> first thing ya' gonna notice (l.o) you <u>never</u> gonna automatically |
| 5 | tell that they have [a good personality]  |
| 6 | H: [ > yah, you gott::a] go with the looks first<=                                  |
| 7 | D: =ya' gonna ALWAYS go to looks first=   |
| 8 | M: =↓>yeah yeah (.) okay<=  |
| 9 | H: =and if you know the person at school first (.) and like they're not             |

- 10 to:::tally pretty but not tha::t ugly (.) but if they have a good  
 11 personality (.) then you go out with em'=
- 12 M: =↑yeah=
- 13 D: =to see if it works out (.) ya know (.) you go out to see what happens
- 14 M: would you also say that that is part of:: maturing (.) and possibly=
- 15 → D: =see (.) even though we just joke around with the girls and pretend to  
 be all
- 16 like ((acts like he is eyeing someone up and down)) <yah:: umm:: that's  
 nice::>
- 17 you know (.) acting like we're **not** mature (.) but see (.) we just act like  
 that
- 18 cause we wanna ↑have fun (.) just for fun (.) that's just the way we are

The moderator's opening characterization of 'not falling for good looks' (line 1) as a straightforward index of 'maturing' is problematized by the boys. Don's initial position is that 'falling for good looks' can be seen as natural or inevitable. This position is normalized with the inclusive 'you' and through emphatic stress on certain extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986), such as 'very first', 'never', and 'automatically' (line 4), and through the script fragment 'in the mall' (see Edwards, 1995). The full dispreferred response is heard in lines 6–7, where both Hal and Don emphatically point out that 'ya' gonna ALWAYS go to looks first'. As such, the boys initially claim that 'going to looks first' does *not* necessarily have anything to do with maturity, but rather is a normal and inevitable phenomenon.

Having built in the reasonableness of 'falling' in the context of first impressions, Hal and Don can then particularize another set of circumstances where looks don't matter as much, that is, when a girl has a good personality (lines 9–13). In line 14, the moderator uses the vague indexical of 'that' to casually focus on their position of 'dating based on personality', and asks them to account for 'that' as a possible index of maturity. Interestingly, Don (line 15) orients to the question less as a transparent request for information, and somewhat more as a hedged challenge. Don opens with a delay token 'see' (line 15) that works to preface a bit of clarification ('even though we just joke around...') about a type of activity in which they engage. His final turn is organized in three relevant parts. It begins with an initial *preface*, followed by a mitigated *rejection*, and then is completed with an *account* (see Wooffitt, 2001).

Preface	=see (.) even though we just joke around with the girls and pretend to be all like ((acts like he is eyeing someone up and down)) <yah:: umm:: that's nice::>
Mitigated rejection	you know (.) acting like we're <b>not</b> mature (.) but see (.) we just act like that
Account	cause we wanna ↑ <u>have fun</u> (.) just for fun (.) that's just the way we are

The initial preface implicates them in flirting activity that is hearable as potentially immature. But it does more than this. It simultaneously downplays the seriousness or 'literality' of their 'joking' behaviour by characterizing it as an 'act'. Don uses the case softener 'just' in the idiomatic 'just joking around' formulation, followed by 'pretend to be all like' to initially draw up a less than serious portrayal of their flirtation. He goes so far as to exaggerate the pretend behaviour of eyeing a girl up and down, and follows the exaggerated re-enactment with the intersubjective casual-looking token of 'you know' in a way that underscores that it is obviously not meant to be taken seriously, and that

they are not literally to be seen as immature. This is an obvious 'act' of immaturity (lines 16–17), as reinforced with the mitigated rejection of 'but see we just *act* like that'.

Don then goes on to give an account for the non-immature 'act'. The account is a scripted formulation that plays on motives. The initial 'just act like that' (line 17) and the 'we wanna have fun' (line 18) are constructed in the iterative present tense, suggesting a regular action and motive pattern (see Edwards, 1995). The repeated use of 'just' works to downplay the seriousness of the scripted action and motives, and the 'that's just the way we are' (line 18) is a dispositional account for their motives and actions. The claim is that they have been misunderstood by the moderator and that they are not *really* complicit with immaturity here, although it may look that way from an outsider's perspective. By privileging an interior realm of motives and playing it against an exterior world of particulars (something speakers routinely do in talk), Don is able to claim misinterpretation, which allows him to counter the dispositional inference that they are immature by scripting the event as 'just having fun' and their disposition as 'just the way we are', thus inoculating themselves from appearing literally or seriously preoccupied with girls' physical appearances. He is also able to position the moderator as a member of the 'naïve adult category', uninformed about what is really going on. Maturity is accomplished in the subtle and shifting discursive space where empirical particulars, motives, and dispositions are played off one another.

In the following excerpt, the boys position themselves as *being* motivated in their voyeuristic interest for seeing girls in bathrooms and locker rooms, and thus not responsible or immature. In order to manage the moderator's challenges, they work up a dispositional and scripted account of the girls' motives as having causal force. Although maturity is not explicitly mentioned, the boys defend against the charge that they are habitually 'invading' the girls' privacy, which is hearable as a general index of immaturity.

#### Excerpt 2

Participants: M: Moderator, E: Ernie, J: Jasper, W: Wilson, A: Aaron

- 1 W: I've really gone into a girls' bathroom and I've gone into a girls' locker room=  
 2 J: =oh:: the nastiest thing in the world=  
 3 W: =one time was kinda' on accident  
 4 M: whadaya' think the girls think about it=  
 5 J: =no (.) they didn't see us=  
 6 W: =I thought it was cool when I walked in  
 7 M: but still (.) don't you think you are invading their::=  
 8 J: =I wasn't (.) cause I thought it was CO-ED  
 9 W: I had to pee I had to pee and when I walked in and saw the toilets (.) and I  
 10 didn't see ours (.) well (.) I LIKED it (.) I enjoyed it  
 11 [...]  
 12 M: so wait (.) let's think about that (l.0) that guys are walking into girls'=  
 13 → W: =well they be AL::WAYS trying to model for us (.) so::=  
 14 → E: =and GIRLS be doing the very same thing (.) they'd be like ↑OHH lemme  
 15 see your package=  
 16 M: =not girls  
 17 → W: OH YES (.) yes they do (.) they are just as perverted as guys (.) it's just a  
 18 misconception that girls are more polite

In this excerpt, the boys are positioned as potentially immature because of the way they describe the 'coolness' (line 6) of walking into girls' changing areas. There are four soft challenges by the moderator that construct the boys as potentially immature. The first two (lines 4 and 7) are minimized by being constructed as misplaced concerns ('they didn't see us'), by playing dumb ('I thought it was co-ed'), or by claiming an emergency ('I had to pee'). These forms of mitigation are fairly common in our data as flippant excuse-making strategies. The third challenge of the moderator comes in line 12. It is hearable as a more *general* concern, as indexed with the dramatic 'so wait' preface, followed by a general request ('let's think about that') and the generalized action sequence of 'that guys are walking into girls' locker rooms or bathrooms. Unlike the first two, this challenge is a generalized challenge that scripts the boys' actions as potentially reoccurring or habitual, which can be heard as dispositional immaturity. As such, managing this kind of challenge requires special work. It makes relevant a rejoinder where motives are central.

Interestingly, Wilson and Ernie's reply is a scripted account of the *girls'* behaviour. They draw up a generalized account of what the girls are doing by using the following devices: the iterative present tense ('be always trying', 'be doing', 'be like'), event pluralization with extreme case formulations ('AL::WAYS trying to model'), and manner expressions ('they'd be like OHH lemme see'). The account works to secure that the phenomena of concern (the boys' voyeuristic activity and interest – and by extension, their immaturity) are habitually 'in the object', rather than being caused by the boys, who can be held accountable. It is the girls who regularly *motivate* them to be interested in seeing the girls' bodies, because it is the girls who model for them. In addition, Ernie seems to create a bit of symmetry between the sexes by noting that 'girls do the very same thing' (line 14), even going so far as to impersonate a girl gawking over seeing a guy's 'package' (line 15). The moderator's final challenge takes issue with such a symmetrical characterization of girls ('not girls' – line 16), which makes relevant Wilson's rather robust statement that girls 'are just as perverted as guys', and to think they are not is a 'misconception' (lines 17–18). Again, this positions the moderator as 'misunderstanding', and it positions girls as having *actual* motives which contradict their supposed 'politeness'. This places girls' motives on a symmetrical footing with boys' motives. By doing this, the boys are able to characterize their motives as normative, and not deviant or immature in any kind of unique way.

### **Denials with built-in concessions**

Another way the boys maintain a position of 'maturity' while not appearing overly preoccupied in their attraction to girls' looks is to craft denials with built-in concessions. This type of denial often comes in three parts (see Antaki & Wetherell, 1999; Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson, in press; Speer & Potter, 2000). The concession often follows an initial proposition in order to soften and repair the original overstated claim and is then followed by a revised, weaker statement than the original proposition. The structure is as follows:

- (1) Initial proposition (hearable as extreme)
- (2) Concession (positions the original proposition as disputable)
- (3) Revised, weaker statement (hearable now as more reasoned)

In the extract below, Don and Hal build two rather robust concessions to manage

propositions that display interest or importance in looks. They then partially weaken the force of such concessions through strategically designed reassertions.

*Excerpt 3*

Participants: M: Moderator, D: Don, H: Hal, A: Andy

- 1 M: so looks (.) ↑important (.) not that important really, or=  
 2 D: =no (.) not=  
 3 M: =although good looking is not bad  
 4 D: yeah (.) but not unless like you don't know em' not unless (.) only  
 5 when you don't know em (.) then looks do everything for you  
 6 M: but (.) you know (.) do you think guys are more interested in girls'  
 7 looks than girls are interested in guys' looks  
 8 H: guys are more so (.) but you have to go through a certain number  
 9 of girls first (.) like that number in growing up (.) you know (.) to  
 10 see through girls (1.0) I don't know if they've ((motions to other boys))  
 11 went through that (.) I did and I don't really count on looks no more (.)  
 12 but it still has to be there (.) you know (.) you can't be like the ugliest  
 13 girl (.) you know (.) it still has to be like half-and-half (.) I don't want  
 14 like the prettiest girl in the world=  
 15 D: =you can't always have it (.) you can't always have the prettiest girl  
 16 H: ((leans into Don and Andy)) °I did though (.) remember Kayla°  
 17 A: [ahh yea']  
 18 D: [OHH:: ah] yeah ((looks to moderator)) he did (.) he  
 19 was like the luckiest man in the world

Below is an abridged version of the way their propositions, concessions, and reassertions are sequentially arranged:

- (1) Initial proposition - (Only when you don't know them, looks do *everything* for you - line 5)
- (2) Concession 1 - (But as you grow older, you count on looks less and less - lines 8-11)
- (3) Revised, weaker statement - (Although looks are still necessary - line 12)
- (4) Concession 2 - (But you can't always have the prettiest girl - line 15)
- (5) Revised, weaker statement - (But I once did have the prettiest girl, remember Kayla - line 16)

The moderator opens with a three-part list on the topic of looks (line 1) - looks as 'important', 'not that important really', and the 'or' seems to indicate a forthcoming third option or invitation to respond to the first two. Don cuts in and seems to orient to the 'not that important' option (line 2). The moderator quickly cuts back in line 3 and softly amends it to 'although good looking is not bad'. By doing this, he is able to offer a third option that maintains the importance of looks before Don can fully construct a position to the contrary. Don agrees with this more softened option, and goes on to draw up the initial proposition that when you do not know the person, 'looks do everything for you' (line 5). Hal's first concession comes several lines later (lines 8-11), and it positions Hal in at least three ways. It softens the extremity of 'looks do everything' in Don's original proposition, it insulates guys' interests in girls' looks from appearing unaffected by maturation, and it makes Hal appear sexually mature, experienced, and reasonable. Despite his concession, however, Hal shifts back in line 12 to the tenor of the original proposition in saying 'but it still has to be there (.) you

know (.) you can't be like the ugliest girl'. This weaker statement is designed to counter the concession itself, as if to make sure Hal doesn't now appear too mature, and thus totally uninterested in girls' looks. But then, both he and Don (lines 14–15) soften again this already weaker statement by admitting that having the prettiest girl is not always possible, nor do they necessarily want it. Again, this concession is designed to fend off potential counter-arguments, and offers a more mature position that appears rational, in the sense of 'knowing' that always having the prettiest girl is not realistic. As Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson (in press) argue, concessions often explicitly display the rationality behind repairs and reformulations of prior assertions, thus accomplishing accountability. Thus, 'doing maturity' emerges as the discursive effect of concessive repair practices.

However, in line 16, Hal's aside to Don ("I did though (.) remember Kayla") and Andy and Don's celebration of it in lines 17–18 works yet again as a reassertion that undermines the maturity heard in the second concession. But because it is delivered as an afterthought (with Hal turning to Don and Andy and saying it with a downshift in voice), it carries a kind of off-the-record quality, marking its status as a *direct* or serious reassertion of the original proposition as ambiguous. The ambiguousness is essential for bringing off the hearable immaturity of reassertion without trouble. The laughter constructs the reassertion as both ironic, and thus less serious, but yet still invested to some degree in bragging about it. In other words, while the concession allows Hal and Don to counter the threat of appearing immature and overly preoccupied or naïve about looks, the design of the reassertion allows them to buy back into a kind of sexual interest that celebrates Hal's status as a (hetero)sexual man ('luckiest man in the world') for having had a really pretty girl. By strategically employing concessive repairs, the boys are able to position themselves as mature while simultaneously attending to their interest in heterosexual attraction.

The next excerpt from a different group discussion involves a precarious negotiation of young males' interest in a particular girl whom they know from school and who they have characterized (earlier in the discussion) as someone who sleeps around a lot. In what follows, the moderator inquires about their potential interest in such a girl. Managing an interest is done in a delicate tongue-in-cheek way that protects them from appearing immature or desperate.

#### Excerpt 4

Participants: M: Moderator, B: Bob, D: Dirk; C: Carl

- 1 M: okay different question (.) and no need to uh (.) but isn't there  
 2 a little bit of attraction there in this kind of stuff  
 3 C: ((shakes head no))  
 4 D: YEAH RIGHT  
 5 B: NOT HER ((Dirk and Bob look at each other and smile))  
 6 M: okay okay (.) okay okay (2.0) I just was asking=  
 7 D: =attraction between::: ((makes inquisitive smile face at moderator))  
 8 M: well (.) if I (.) if I (.) uhh (.) well I don't know (.) I was just thinking  
 9 (.) gee (.) if I=  
 10 B: =I don't find her attractive at all=  
 11 D: =you mean if a girl has sex then maybe she'll::: do it with:: me  
 12 M: ↑well (.) uh maybe  
 13 D: if that's the question (.) then NO (.) no because uh::: well::: ((smiles  
 14 and looks at Bob))=

- 15 B: =we're not that desperate=  
 16 D: =yeah (.) and:: she's:: not (.) huh (1.0) she's:: not what I would call=  
 17 B: =she's NOT good looking=  
 18 D: =yes, she's not attractive enough=  
 19 B: =but ((smiling at Dirk)) she's:: not exactly ugly though (.) she's not  
 20 exactly ugly (.) I mean she does (.) she's got big boobs (.) so I don't  
 21 know ((laughter, 2.0))

The moderator opens up the space for the initial proposition in lines 1–2 by asking whether they are attracted to 'this kind of stuff'. Whatever 'this kind of stuff' is, it is interpreted to be extreme, as seen in the way Dirk and Bob immediately counter it with emphatic denials (lines 4–5) and Dirk's display of non-understanding (line 7). This draws up the initial, though potentially overstated proposition that they are not at all interested in 'this kind of stuff'. What is peculiar, though, is that Bob's and Dirk's denials are crafted with overly exaggerated emphatic stress and with a bit of cheeky smiling at one another, as if they are parodying the act of making a denial by protesting *too much*. Even Dirk's question to the moderator (line 7) is given with an inquisitive smile face, underscoring the not-being-said aspect of the conversation. This suggests that conceding something positive or of interest about promiscuous girls is something to be oriented to delicately and indirectly. For instance, in line 13, as Dirk attempts yet again to display disinterest, he hedges ('because uh:: well::'), and ends up smiling at Bob as he falters to finish his turn. It is as if his soft and hedged account is a way of playing dumb by crafting a weak denial that is itself designed to concede that there is perhaps something attractive or interesting in a promiscuous girl.

Interestingly, the reasons the boys give for their disinterest have to do with her lack of attractiveness (lines 10, 17–18) and their lack of desperation (line 15). This leaves the possibility that *if* she were good looking enough and/or *if* they were more desperate, *then* they might be interested. As such, their denial of interest is not based in principle, but rather in particular features of the situation. Again, this underscores the concessionary element to their original denial. This is solidified more explicitly in lines 19–21 as Bob momentarily demurs with their denials and concedes that there is, after all, something attractive about this promiscuous girl ('she's got big boobs'). By equivocating back and forth with an 'off-the-record' kind of concessionary hedging and qualification, the boys are able to orient to *dual* concerns. The concessive repair allows them to interactively negotiate a position of not looking obviously duped into, desperate, or naïve about what might be at stake, while at the same time implying that given the right situation (the girl being attractive or them being more desperate), they would be potentially attracted to a girl whom they have characterized as promiscuous. The careful deployment of concessive repairs allows both positions to remain open; they allow them to appear sexually interested, but also knowing, in control, and thus mature in the way they display heterosexual interest.

### **Differentiation through caricature**

In the following excerpt, the boys differentiate themselves from guys who are only interested in girls for their looks. Showing how one does not possess certain features can be a way of differentiating oneself or resisting membership of the social categories indexed by those features (see Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). One way to do this is by 'styling the other' (Rampton, 1999) through actively caricaturing their voices (see Georgakopoulou, 2002). When heard casually, the reported dialogue or 'caricature' can

appear to position the 'other' as extreme, absurd, or problematic in some way. But the caricature need not always establish complete differentiation. Depending on its design, it may work selectively to problematize *some* features of the 'other', while indirectly leaving other features intact. Consider the following excerpt.

*Excerpt 5*

Participants: M: Moderator, D: Don, H: Hal, A: Andi

- 1 M: okay listen (.) so is it that the girls think that the guys are only looking  
 2 for looks and =  
 3 D: =depends on the guy (.) cause [some ( )]  
 4 A: [some guys] just look for looks  
 5 M: is that a common thing  
 6 A: yeah  
 7 M: very common (I.0)  
 8 so you think you all are different from these guys  
 9 ((all three boys nod))  
 10 M: you think so huh (.) Hal (.) you too  
 11 H: yeah (.) those guys annoy me actually (.) like the guys that are all OHH  
 12 she has such a nice bu::tt (.) OH:: I like it so:: much' ((laughter, I.0))  
 13 M: now are these also kids in your group  
 14 D: yeah (.) like we say:: that (.) like but if we really wanna go out with em' (.)  
 15 we like just say ↓hey you have a nice ass' (.) just say that and like (.) but  
 16 DON'T be like ↑HEY:: I WANNA GO OUT ((laughter, I.0))

The moderator's extreme case formulation of 'only' in line 1 marks the activity of the category 'guys' as extreme. Don undermines the extreme claim with a contrastive counter ('depends on the guy' in line 3) that works to open the landscape of possible masculine positions. They agree with the moderator in admitting that looking 'just for looks' is a common thing, but they all deny being like these kinds of guys (marked in line 8). By adopting a minority position, the boys are able to differentiate themselves from one feature of normative masculinity – looking just for looks. When the moderator asks Hal if he is different, he agrees and then upgrades the difference to being an 'annoying' difference (line 10). Hal's tag of 'actually' at the end of the assessment indexes his position as 'literal' or 'truthful', and in so doing, orients to the moderator's question as a potential challenge. Again, it positions the moderator as potentially misunderstanding and his question as incorrectly assuming that Hal is *not* different.

Hal continues in lines 11–12 to offer the first caricature of these annoying boys, imitating the exaggerated and pronounced way in which these other boys fawn over girls' bodies, particularly with the way they are so obvious and forthcoming about it. The caricature parodies an 'obsession-style' discourse of transparent infatuation with 'butts'. What appears to be annoying to Hal is their extreme gawking, as indexed through the way he emphasizes the emphatic 'Oh's' and desire terms ('like it so:: much'). When challenged by the moderator (12) as to whether they nevertheless affiliate with these types of boys, Don concedes that there are similarities in terms of the *content* of what they say ('like we say:: that'). But Don clarifies that there are differences, and that those differences are salient when they 'really want to go out with them' (line 14). Like the use of Hal's 'actually' (line 11), Don's use of the 'really' positions him as serious or truthful, and by extension, suggests that there are other times in which he is not 'really' being forthright. The 'really' indexes these other times, times when they are perhaps 'just playing around' (as in Excerpt 1). As such, there

appears to be a dichotomy between being into looks in a 'real' or serious way and being into them in a less than 'real' or serious way. This dichotomy is treated by Don as the relevant context for differentiating themselves from these 'other' boys.

Don goes on to offer a second caricature (lines 14–15). He works to show how they would tell a girl she has a 'nice ass' if they were serious about going out with her. The caricature differentiates a rather calm and unassuming approach, marked with the case softener 'just' and lack of prosody in 'just say hey you have a nice ass' (line 15) with an exaggerated and emphatic approach ('HEY::: I WANNA GO OUT'), which is reminiscent of the way Hal stylizes his caricature in lines 11–12. The latter approach is not only loud and demanding, but arguably desperate sounding. What we have, then, is a more qualified idea of what the caricature is and is not differentiating. What is different about these 'other' guys is not necessarily that they are into looks while Don and Hal are not. The difference lies in the *way* their interest is conveyed.

Hal's and Don's caricatures position the 'other' boys as being over the top, obvious, loud, and seemingly desperate in the way they are interested in girls' looks. In contrast, Hal and Don are more nonchalant, even-tempered and seemingly confident in the way they go about orientating to girls' looks. The boys are not interested in resisting a normative male preoccupation with girls' looks because there is something *in principle* wrong with such a preoccupation. They are simply resisting overt displays of obvious and desperate infatuation with girls' looks in order to appear calm and confident when asking a girl out. Although this type of differentiation may seem instrumental or shallow, it is arguably part of the doing of maturity for them. While we would not want to argue that they are necessarily 'resolving' developmental tasks or that they are doing anything to thwart 'hegemonic masculinity' *per se*, we would argue that they are working to manage those aspects of 'heterosexual attraction' and 'desire' that, from their perspectives, need to be negotiated in order to successfully appear mature.

## Discussion

The aim of this article has been to offer a contextually sensitive analysis of several discursive methods used by adolescent males to present themselves as both mature and heterosexual while discussing their interest in girls' looks and physical attraction. It is our belief that a discursive methodology is essential for examining how such interests get brought off and situated rather seamlessly in the midst of questions and implicit challenges. Our goal has been to focus on the interactional subtleties and rhetorical finessing in the boys' management of such questions and challenges. We see such rhetorical finessing as illustrative of the 'developmental imperative'; that is, as ways of negotiating adolescent-appropriate forms of maturity. As such, we do not work from the assumption that their gendered identities arrive on the discursive scene pre-packaged, as more or less mature, such that the boys simply report their attitudes in the kind of straightforward way that they would on a scale or inventory. The value of a discursive analysis is that it reveals that it is *precisely* the sensitive orientations, and the work done to pre-empt and deflect possible counters to the hearable trouble in such orientations, that matter most for the boys as they work to position themselves as mature within the larger context of displaying their adolescent and heterosexual identities.

There are several consequences to investigating maturity this way. First, it allows developmental researchers to move beyond survey or questionnaire approaches to adolescent male sexuality that catalogue problem attitudes and behaviours that are

thought to pose psychological and physiological health risks. Operationalizing the ideological and normative aspects of masculinity in the form of forced-choice questionnaire items is a radically decontextualizing move that is wholly inimical to the discursive dictum that gender is a socially and interactively constructed phenomenon. Within a constructionist view, masculine norms are studied as the active accomplishments of the people who put them to use. Moreover, the heterosexual masculine norm to display desire for females is capable of taking on many forms in different situations. Thus, it is the situation that determines the logic or meaning of the norm being circulated. Seen this way, there is no *a priori* way to define what heterosexuality means, or of specifying a *tout court* distinction between what is normatively masculine and what is not. Connell (1995) has argued that most men are able to mix varieties of masculinities together so as to move between various normative dimensions of masculine roles. If this is true, then operationalizing normative masculinity may be a dubious enterprise.

In contrast, a discursive focus allows for a more contextually sensitive exploration of the social and interactive processes used by adolescent males to construct and then engage with (and resist) hetero-normative masculinity. A focus on discursive *process* allows us to see that masculine norms are complex and fluid, and that they are not oriented to in either/or terms. As Graber *et al.* (1998) have argued, there is always a cost or 'cascade of effects' of embracing sexual norms, and that the negotiation of such costs is a *dynamic* one that methodologically requires contextually nuanced approaches. We believe that a discursive psychological analysis is a fruitful step in that direction.

Second, a discursive approach partially throws into question what is meant when psychologists talk about men 'resolving' stages that feature what could arguably be seen as 'less than mature' aspects of a sexual identity. We resist the urge to think of development in terms of successfully or unsuccessfully resolving tasks, or even of thinking in terms of gradations of resolution. Instead, we argue that young men learn to strategically mitigate appearing *obviously* or *unknowingly* complicit with the noxious aspects of hetero-normative masculinity. They do this in talk. And they do it in ways that resist 'fixity'. Seeing the resistance of 'fixity' is something that a discursive analysis is designed to reveal. By examining this in detail, we can more productively argue that their socialization involves what we referred to earlier as the development of 'finely tuned positioning skills', or the gradual refinement of a range of discursive techniques that allow the boys to maintain more than one ideologically dilemmatic position within a variety of situations and in the midst of a variety of potential challenges.

Third, connecting the type of ethnomethodologically informed discourse analysis employed in this study closer to the analysis of micro-genetically emergent positions of conversationalists opens up an important realm for developmental theorizing and investigation. A micro-analytic focus on the local 'fine-tuning' of interactive sense-making in the form of 'positioning skills' offers a relatively novel, discursive method for exploring developmental changes. In the group discussions analysed, the back and forth rhetorical orchestration between the participants is the space in which their identities micro-genetically emerge and consolidate. In utilizing this type of micro-analytic gaze for developmental theorizing, we are able to suggest that development (for these boys) involves the discursive rendering of linguistic, interactional and rhetorical skills, all of which reflect the burgeoning ability to be pragmatically and rhetorically 'answerable' in contested social contexts. A micro-developmental analysis of the 'fine-tuning' of such positioning skills reveals the gradual development of an 'interactive self' that is increasingly equipped for the vicissitudes of social life.

In the present data, the discursive ability to play up motives against empirical particulars, the strategic use of concessions to wash out the seriousness of a denial, and the inventive ability to style the other through caricature are all 'finely tuned positioning skills' that we believe begin to become strategic and common during adolescence. We believe this for two central reasons. First, adolescence has been well documented as a time when males are increasingly socialized to reconstitute their identities in normatively heterosexual ways (Eckert, 1994; Maccoby, 1998; Thorne, 1993). Second, it is a time when such socialization is flanked with innovative linguistic developments, which refer to an increase in the variable use of certain linguistic procedures and positioning strategies to *do* self-presentation and to *manage* face-work, particularly around gendered and sexual norms (see Eckert, 1998; Maccoby, 1998). Using language to position oneself as heterosexual is a precarious undertaking that involves a delicate balancing of directness with equivocation, something accomplished by practicing certain kinds of linguistic and rhetorical positioning skills.

The gradual and refined use of such positioning skills allows the boys to hedge their commitment or non-commitment to what they see to be the precarious aspects of hetero-normative masculinity. These positioning skills are designed *as if* there are potential counters or criticisms lurking, from either the moderator or the other boys. As such, being able to effectively display such positioning skills entails a constant and vigilant negotiation of an array of discursive possibilities, as well as the use of inventive strategies for positioning self and other. Seen this way, creating a mature self involves reconciling the disparate or potentially incompatible features of social categories, like heterosexuality, *in the moment*. In the present study, it means finding ways of displaying heterosexual desire that get heard as mature.

As such, the 'developmental imperative' to appear mature is best studied as an ongoing discursive project that requires a careful negotiation of different ideological dilemmas. Viewing maturity as the discursive project of managing competing ideological tensions offers a new way of thinking about masculine gender socialization. Rather than thinking in terms of resolving such dilemmas, it would be more helpful to scrutinize the discursive methods used that keep such dilemmas alive while not appearing too serious or obvious about it. This is the subtle level where hegemonic masculinity lurks, where forms of hegemony can be re-claimed or re-invented in the very attempt to look liberal, egalitarian or non-sexist (Bamberg, in press a; Benwell, 2002; Speer, 2002). Paying attention to how young men discursively manage their interests in sexual attraction in the face of implicit challenges gives educators, researchers, and parents a better grasp of how 'doing maturity' may (ironically) involve silently sustaining the dilemmas of hegemonic masculinity. Most importantly, though, it would reveal what counts as maturity from *their* perspective, and how they see themselves to be accomplishing maturity as they negotiate their masculine and heterosexual selves.

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**Appendix: Transcription conventions**

(.)	Short pause of less than 1 second
(1.5)	Timed pause in seconds
[overlap]	Overlapping speech
↑	Rising intonation
↓	Falling intonation
°quieter°	Encloses talk that is quieter than the surrounding talk
LOUD	Talk that is louder than the surrounding talk
<b>Bold</b>	Words emphasized by the transcriber for analytic purposes
<u>Underlined</u>	Emphasis
>faster<	Encloses talk that is faster than the surrounding talk
<slower>	Encloses talk that is slower than the surrounding talk
(brackets)	Encloses words the transcriber is unsure about
((comments))	Encloses comments from the transcriber
Rea:::ly	Elongation of the prior sound
.	Stop in intonation
=	Immediate latching of successive talk
[...]	Where material from the tape has been omitted for reasons of brevity