

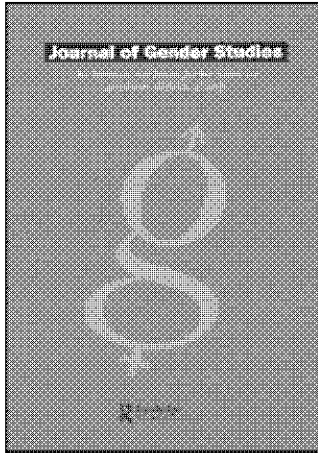
This article was downloaded by: [Emory University]

On: 2 September 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 907000259]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Gender Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713431253>

'He's got no game': young men's stories about failed romantic and sexual experiences

Neill Korobov ^a

^a Department of Psychology, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, USA

Online Publication Date: 01 June 2009

To cite this Article Korobov, Neill(2009)"He's got no game': young men's stories about failed romantic and sexual experiences',Journal of Gender Studies,18:2,99 — 114

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09589230902812406

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589230902812406>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘He’s got no game’: young men’s stories about failed romantic and sexual experiences

Neill Korobov*

Department of Psychology, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, USA

(Received 21 July 2007; final version received 18 November 2008)

This study examined how 12 small groups of young adult male friends ($N = 36$ participants; ages 18–23) told stories about romantic and sexual experiences. Contrary to the expectation that male friends will boast and brag to one another about their romantic endeavors, the young men’s romantic and sexual stories were often about embarrassing romantic and sexual mishaps and gaffes. Like the ‘lovable loser’ laddishness that parades itself in television shows and advertisements, these forays into non-heroic masculinity were cloaked in a knowing irony and self-reflexivity that made it difficult to determine whether their positions were complicit with or resistant to normative masculinity. Critical discursive analyses focus on how positions of failed gamesmanship function in the accomplishment of male homosociality, how a sense of conventionality or ordinariness is re-claimed, and what these processes reveal about the shifting nature of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary culture.

Keywords: masculinity; narrative; discourse analysis; romance; self-deprecation

Introduction

During the last decade, there has been an increasing amount of theoretical and analytic attention to masculinity from a discursive orientation (Wetherell and Edley 1999, Gough 2001, Riley 2003, Korobov and Bamberg 2004, Korobov 2004, 2005, 2006). In seizing on rigorous analytic procedures for the close study of talk, discursive work has been instrumental in revealing how oppressive forms of masculinity are not only discursively produced and reproduced, but also how they are routinely denied, inoculated from challenge, and mitigated through irony, humor and parody. It has been in this second vein of analysis, in exposing the plausibly deniable features of masculinity, that discursive work has uniquely illuminated Connell’s (1995) argument concerning the flexible, formidably resourceful, and inscrutable composition of what is hegemonic about masculinity. Whereas traditional psychological work often conflates ‘hegemonic masculinity’ with ‘heroic masculinity’ (bread-winner, heterosexual, tough, virile), discursive work has revealed that what is sometimes most hegemonic are masculine positions that are knowingly non-heroic or ordinary, i.e. the self-reflexive varieties that casually and playfully parody traditional male stereotypes.

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 interminable barrage of men’s lifestyle magazines (*Maxim*, *Details*, *FHM*, *Stuff*, *Loaded*, etc.)

*Email: Nkorobov@westga.edu

that proffer, in tongue-in-cheek ways, a kind of ‘new laddism’ – an educated, middle-class, and witty version of masculinity that eschews the wimpishness of the sensitive ‘new man’ while seeking to re-claim the conservative ethos of beer, women and sport (Benwell 2002). Or consider the television sitcom trend of presenting men as anti-heroes – as hapless, yet affably befuddled and domesticated, who nevertheless remain eminently likable and successful. There are also series such as MTV’s *Jackass*, where a group of unassuming white working-class guys turn failure and bodily injury into a ‘carnavalesque sadomasochism’ that relentlessly mocks heroic masculinity (Brayton 2007). Also popular is the ‘white-guy-as-loser’ trope that is ubiquitous in beer commercials (Messner and Montez de Oca 2005). This ‘lovable loser’ finds himself routinely humiliated, usually as a result of pursuing unattainably beautiful women. Yet, he is blissfully self-mocking and ironic about his loser-status, for he is a loser only in contrast to the outdated macho versions of masculinity typical of beer ads in the past. In whatever form, these various media gambits have been successful in serving up an average and ordinary ‘everyman’ – a youthful and predominately white version of masculinity that is playfully ironic and self-mocking.

When interpreted in the wake of significant post-civil rights advances by women, sexual minorities and ethnic minorities, these new masculine tropes appear as a form of anxious ‘white male backlash’ (Savran 1996, Robinson 2000), albeit an intentionally mitigated backlash. Commercial forces have commodified these anxious and self-deprecating tendencies, creating a simulacrum of marginalized and victimized masculine positionalities and disseminating them throughout culture (see Benwell 2002, Brayton 2007). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of micro-level research detailing how ordinary young men occasion such positions within mundane social contexts. As these visual and textual depictions of failed masculinity become increasingly woven into the fabric of everyday culture, we are left to wonder if and how young men are adopting them as part of the project of doing homosociality and, if so, how the face of hegemonic masculinity may be slowly changing as a result.

The present study thus takes a keen interest in how young men occasion a variety of self-deprecating masculine tropes in their stories about romantic mishaps and gaffes, often resulting in rejection and embarrassment. These types of stories are the focus of the present study. The aim in studying self-deprecation in the context of romantic experiences is not to voyeuristically indulge in young men’s immature behavior; rather, the aim is to use a critical-discursive perspective to examine how young men formulate stories that, at least on the surface, seem contrary to traditional masculine norms, and to finally suggest how a new variety of male homosociality and hegemonic masculinity is emerging as a result.

The ‘ordinariness’ of hegemonic masculinity

Insight into this new variety of hegemony is not without precedent. In one of the more widely cited discursive studies on masculinity, Wetherell and Edley (1999) found that the most common form of self-positioning with young men did not involve ‘heroism’ or ‘rebelliousness’, but rather ‘ordinariness’. Most men resisted the macho and ‘bad-boy’ masculine ideals in favor of positioning themselves as normal and conventional guys. Wetherell and Edley (1999) noticed, however, that their ‘ordinariness’ was actually a gender-oppressive method of self-presentation. They argue that sometimes one of the most effective ways of endorsing hegemonic masculinity is to demonstrate one’s distance from it – that is, to show, with all the weapons of rhetoric, that one has the courage and

confidence, as an 'ordinary' man, to resist (and even mock) heroic and macho forms of masculinity.

This lampooning of heroic and macho masculinity and embracing of the 'everyman' is a type of masculine subjectivity slowly being illuminated in a range of subsequent studies (see Gough 2001, Korobov 2005, 2006, Korobov and Thorne 2006, Brayton 2007, Gilmartin 2007). In remarking on the 'generous nonchalance' in heterosexual college-aged men's stories about romantic break-ups, Gilmartin (2007) noticed that young men put a considerable amount of effort into making romance a casual, easily-jettisoned topic. In two similar studies, Korobov and Thorne (2006, 2007) found that young men often playfully mitigated the seriousness of their romantic problems so as to appear nonchalant, un-invested, and at times mildly amused by their own and each other's romantic troubles. Gough (2001) found that young men often discursively suppressed their thoughts in particular contexts in order to manage potentially sexist sentiments. The common thread in these studies is not that young men are, as men, simply 'ordinary' sorts of people. Rather, it is that young men are, occupationally speaking, increasingly finding themselves in a culture that mandates the social business of what Harvey Sacks (1984) calls 'doing being ordinary'.

For Sacks (1984), 'ordinariness' is not an aspect of one's personality, but rather is a concerted interactive accomplishment. Sacks (1984, p. 414) notes that 'it is not that somebody *is* ordinary; it is perhaps that that is what one's business is, and it takes work, as any other business does'. As social business, doing being ordinary becomes an attributional issue with deviance and normalcy at stake. It is a way of being 'reciprocally witnessable' or intelligible to members of a social group (Sacks 1984). As a member of a social group, one must not only monitor one's experiences for features that are story-worthy, but one must also take care to assure that what gets storied are those experiences that one is, as an ordinary member, entitled to have. As a way of creating sociality, group members are thus obliged to bind up their experiences by borrowing from the group's common stock of knowledge. The work of being ordinary thus becomes crucially important for telling stories that break with convention, such as romantic/sexual failures.

The central premise of this study is that formulations of ordinariness are likely to be features in young men's stories about romantic and/or sexual mishaps. At stake for these young men is not ordinariness in the sense of their heterosexual *orientation* or their heterosexual *desire*. Those canonical or 'ordinary' heterosexual and masculine elements are secured by virtue of the fact that the young men's stories are clearly about pursuits, albeit unsuccessful pursuits, of romantic and sexual experiences with women. At stake are other aspects of ordinary masculinity, such as skilful and successful seduction, prowess, glibness, bravura, or what is sometimes euphemistically referred to as 'game', as in the sports metaphor of 'he's got game' (Brooks 1997, Levant 1997).

Being normatively masculine is thus only partially about displaying heterosexual orientation or heterosexual desire; it is also about having 'game', which is to say, being able to display a set of well-honed romantic skills. Because these young men's stories celebrate gaffes leading to embarrassment and sometimes rejection, they break with the canonical masculine norms of cool seduction or gamesmanship. A new form of homosociality is thus being created here, where stories of romantic failure function as a strategy for coping with the shifting meaning of 'successful' masculinity. The focus of this study is to understand how positions of failed gamesmanship function in the accomplishment of these young men's masculine subjectivities, how a sense of conventionality or ordinariness is re-claimed, and what these processes reveal about the shifting nature of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary culture.

Background to the study

Twelve group discussions were conducted with three young-adult male friends per group, plus an adult-male moderator. Each of the 36 participants was between the ages of 18 and 23 ($M = 19.8$ years, $SD = 0.8$ years), and was living away from home while enrolled in a public university in Northern California. Small and casual group discussions were chosen, as opposed to one-on-one interviews, so as to create a fluid, symmetrical and collaborative context in which to share stories about potentially delicate topics. Each triad was required to have known each other for at least six months and to have been 'good friends' at the time of the group discussion. The large majority (89%) of the sample self-identified as either 'Caucasian' or 'white'; the remainder declined to state ethnicity, or indicated either 'Asian' or 'Latino' descent. The entire sample self-identified as 'heterosexual'.

Participants were enlisted informally through general requests for volunteers in both upper and lower-level social science university courses. The study was described as a research project looking at how young adult same-sex friends talk about their romantic experiences. Each conversation was audio recorded with permission and fully transcribed (see Appendix 1 for transcription conventions). Each group discussion lasted approximately 1.5 h and generated a total of approximately 980 pages of transcribed dialogue.

The group conversations were relatively unstructured. The moderator casually asked for small stories about everyday events (see Ochs and Capps 2001, Bamberg 2004). The discussions were littered with colorfully co-constructed small stories. It is quite possible that, as a male moderator in his mid-thirties of a similar ethnicity and class as the majority of the participants, the young men felt less inhibited with me than they would with a female or older male researcher. My aim, therefore, was to create a space where the participants felt free to engage in the kinds of conversations that occurred naturally in their everyday contexts. With that in mind, I did not simply remain on the periphery back-channeling the young men with 'mmhs' and 'yeahs', but rather cautiously engaged them, challenged them, and cajoled them when appropriate.

Analysis

The analytic focus is a critical discursive analysis of 'small stories', aligned closely with programs of discursive research that have detailed the subtle and often indirect ways that young men transact compliance and resistance to normative masculinity in everyday conversations (Wetherell and Edley 1999, Gough 2001, Korobov 2004, 2006). The central focus in this form of analysis is how young men indirectly align themselves with the stereotypical aspects of normative masculinity while *at the same time* engaging in talk that is meant to sound sensitive, self-deprecating or vulnerable. This requires an examination of how self-deprecation and self-derogation is *rhetorically* built to simultaneously accommodate and resist an array of social expectations, potential interlocutor challenges and cultural assumptions. It is in this vein that the analyses extend into a discussion of the ideological and gender-political nature of how formulations of self-deprecation and 'failure' become strategically useful for the overall survivability and adaptability of hegemonic masculinity.

Analyses proceeded by first identifying any story that involved talk about romantic or sexual experiences which failed or were embarrassing in some way, i.e. stories about romantic mishaps, gaffes and bad decisions that resulted in embarrassment, anxiety or rejection. Inductive analyses revealed that these kinds of stories generally touched on one of three general themes. First, many of the failed romantic stories seemed to involve

experiences with what some of the participants called ‘*crazy bitches*’. From what could be gleaned from the conversations, ‘crazy bitch’ is a colloquially popular, misogynistic phrase used to describe women who are erratic, overly jealous, insecure, vengeful, and sometimes violent. A second common theme was failure in the context of attempted ‘*hook-ups*’. ‘Hook-ups’ referred to some form of casual, no-strings-attached sexual experience. And finally, many of the young men told stories of times they made fools out of themselves while being inebriated. The subjects talked about alcohol as providing a kind of ‘*liquid courage*’ that often backfired on them. The analyses that follow examine, in a broad and critical-discursive way, paradigmatic stories for each of the three themes.

Theme 1: ‘*crazy bitches*’

In this first story, Hal recounts a relatively recent dating experience in which his girlfriend reveals that she might have contracted herpes from another man and that she has continued to have sex with her ex-boyfriend while dating Hal. Rather than disparage this, Hal creates an ironic and bemused incongruity between his ex-girlfriend’s outlandish actions/statements and his nonchalant reactions, thus creating a palpable tension the young men find funny.

Story 1

Participants: Hal (H), Gary (G), and Cory (C), Moderator (M)

1. H: maybe a week yeah I’d say about a week into the school year I got a
2. phone call from her and she said ‘um I’m sorry but I may have herpes’
3. ((laughter, 2.0))
4. H: yeahha ((laughing)) whic(hah) was a fun phone call to get and then so
5. she told me and what was funny was that on the first date uh one of
6. the things she told me was like uhh ‘hey I just got tested and I’m clean so
7. you don’t have to worry’ and I said ‘<that’s gre::at> that’s wonderful’
8. umm:: and so> but every time we had sex I used a condom <and so but
9. she called me and she’s like yeah uh about a week before she met me she
10. said she was at this party and she ended up getting drunk and her (.) this is
11. an exact quote ‘<ended up having sex with some Asian dude in the back of
12. his van>’ [...] and so I said ‘<okay::: um let me call you back
13. in like a day or two once I think about some things>’ [...]
14. G: and then two weeks later he gets a text message and he looks at it and
15. he just starts (.) I guess he just started laughing or something I don’t really
16. remember but it said something along the lines of ‘hey what up I’m uh
17. oh what was it I’m back=
18. H: =I’m back with Bruce again’ (.) yeah with Bruce [...] she’s crazy
19. she been dating this guy for about two years and like recently broke up with
20. him but <did:::n’t tell him> or something cause like when I talked to her
21. she said ‘yeah me and my boyfriend broke up’ and then later that day her
22. boyfriend called her ex-boyfriend called her and she picked up n’was
23. like ‘oh hey honey what’s up?’ and I’m like uh::: so does he know that he’s
24. been broken up with an’ I’m like well:: I think he knows and so <I
25. don’t think she ever actually stopped having sex with him> while we were
26. dating

Although Hal notes that he had sex with this woman, he deviates from the heroic masculine script by positioning himself not as hero but as a victim. He positions her as having a questionable sexual past that put his health in jeopardy; she also cheats on him with her ex-boyfriend. Nevertheless, Hal exploits the self-deprecating aspect of his victim status to both entertain his male friends and, by extension, to position himself as confidently detached and even slightly amused by the ‘crazy’ behavior of this woman.

Hal's casual position of ordinariness is principally brought off through a series of carefully crafted juxtapositions between his girlfriend's reported speech and his own sarcastic or deadpan reactions to it. For instance, in response to her admission that she is disease-free, Hal slows his speech in an audibly long and drawn-out sarcastic way as he says '<that's gre::at> that's wonderful'. His slow and deliberate staging of this evaluation, common in sarcastic rejoinders, instructs the others to hear her admission as odd and to see him as nonchalant about it. Later, after she casually calls him up to alert him about her sexual encounter with 'some Asian dude in the back of his van' and of the chance they both might now have herpes, he is again affectedly nonchalant as he replies '<okay::: um let me call you back in like a day or two once I think about some things> '. Coupled with Hal's instructive laughter, there are other instances (lines 4, 23–24) where Hal reports his own speech in an exaggerated, slow and sarcastic way so as to forward a surprised but cool and ordinary reaction to 'crazy' admissions from his girlfriend. This ironic tension works to procure laughter, as it illuminates the extraordinariness of his girlfriend's non-normative actions in contrast to his own subdued and ordinary reactions.

As seen in the first story, a defensively built form of misogyny often lurks in stories about failed romantic experiences that involve 'crazy' women. This next story is no exception. In it, Gus weaves a very colorful account about a recent run-in with his angry ex-girlfriend, Noel. Prior to this story we learn that Gus recently broke up with Noel, immediately following their first sexual encounter.

Story 2

Participants: Noah (N), Gus (G), Chris (C), Moderator (M)

1. G: so I see Noel at a party last week and um she's like 'hey Gus' an
2. I was like 'hey' and she's like 'HEY I got something to tell you' and
3. I was like 'oh shit' so like she like walks over to me pretty upset
4. looking and she's like um just went off (.) she's like 'YOU THINK
5. YOU CAN HAVE SEX WITH ME AND JUST NEVER DEAL
6. WITH IT AGAIN' an blah blah an' she's like '<I outta make you
7. feel the pain you made me feel'>
8. ((laughter, 1.0))
9. G: and so she went like this ((makes clenched fist)) and she grabbed my
10. balls and was like '<I hope you're feeling the same pain I was'> an I
11. was like 'AGGHH SHOOT' an I didn't know what to do
12. N: ((smile voice)) and how long was she grabbin em?
13. G: for a good while like=
14. M: =and you just stood there?
15. G: well I put my hand over my balls and then she like she's like
16. 'it's a good thing you cupping em cause I'm squeezing really hard
17. right now' an I'm like 'ALL:::RIGHT' [...]
18. N: ((laughing)) it was AWESOME
19. G: she was freakin out she grabbed my balls and then like for a good
20. like thirty seconds she was like ((inhales loudly)) and like staring in
21. my eyes [...] I didn't know what to say like I was trying to say
22. ((in falsetto)) 'I'm sorry' an trying to like explain myself but at
23. the same time my balls=
24. M: =you're talking in falsetto
25. G: there was no point in like trying to explain anything.

Although Gus had sex with Noel, the story is not about bragging about that, but instead is a colorful and self-deprecating admission of how Noel enacted a publicly and personally humiliating form of revenge. Why, we might wonder, would Gus spend an entire story

ratcheting up the details of this embarrassing incident? Before focusing on the details of the story, imagine that instead of getting angry, Noel approached Gus with a controlled anger or sadness at having been rejected after having sex with him for the first time. Had that happened, it is unlikely that Gus's story would have worked. In other words, Gus's self-deprecating story, and the victim status that ensues, only works if he can construe her vis-à-vis the irrational 'crazy bitch' trope (see Gilmartin 2007). Moreover, her craziness needs to be illustrated in a remarkably weighty and colorful way so that it serves as a clear foil to his relatively calm response. As Gilmartin (2007) observed in her study of college-aged men's experiences of romance, guys expected to end relationships and break hearts, and expected women to get really angry with them. Unlike sadness, anger enables a traditionally masculine response (remain stoic, take it, say nothing). Noel's anger confirms Gus's standing in the gender order. Had she not cared, Gus might be less certain of where he stood as a man. And the crazier she seems, the more difficult it becomes to empathize with her pain. By extension, it becomes more difficult to condemn Gus for sexually exploiting her.

The 'crazy bitch' trope is but one essential ingredient in this story. The other essential ingredient, the one that drives the self-deprecation, centers on the spectacle of having one's testicles squeezed by an angry woman in a public setting. Of the image of Gus standing there cupping his testicles in pain, Noah laughingly remarks, 'it was AWESOME' (line 18). It is 'awesome' for these guys both for its physical comedy and for what it represents at a gender-political level. The punishment of the white male body is yet another prop in the project of creating a white-male backlash rhetoric (Savran 1996). The effect is (yet again) a victimized male identity, or more accurately, the simulacrum of a fractured abject hero (see Brayton 2007). Whereas emasculation in-and-of-itself is not 'awesome', the *spectacle* of emasculation, particularly when cloaked in irony, is a useful rhetorical ploy for simultaneously embracing and disavowing the role of victim. What remains is a quiet reassertion of traditional masculinity. In effect, the misogynistic message is: 'these women are crazy, but we can take it and we can laugh about it'.

Theme 2: 'hook-ups'

This simulacrum of victimization can appear in a variety of forms. Aside from being scared by venereal diseases or accosted, many of the young men in this study told stories highlighting their floundering oafishness in sexual 'hook-ups' with women. In the following story, Terry talks about his recent attempt to 'make out' with a young woman. Kyle and Cal have heard the story before, and prompt him (beginning in line 3) to focus on an awkward expression that he apparently used the first time he told them the story.

Story 3

Participants: Kyle (K), Terry (T), Cal (C), Moderator (M)

1. T: we're just getting kind of flirty and I try making out with her
2. and she totally just like blocks me n' stuff
3. K: but later you were like outside sitting on this thing and she was sitting on
4. your lap and you started to::?
5. T: ((in deadpan)) playing the vagina
6. ((laughter, 2.0))
7. M: ((laughing)) wait(hah) <playing the vagina> ?
8. K: they weren't even making out he was just <playing the vagina >
9. T: ((laughing)) I dunno what(hah) I'm doing down there
10. M: ((laughing)) you can't say 'playing the vagina' what's that? but no
11. wait ((deadpan)) no seriously keep saying it it's cool

12. T: so um we go back in her house and I hop in her bed an' she's like 'oh no
 13. you gotta go' and I'm just like 'what?' I was like 'what the fuck' like
 14. 'why are you telling me to leave like after all this?'
 15. C: right (.) you've already touched her vagina
 16. K: YEAH
 17. T: YEAH
 18. C: no played the vagina
 19. T: ((laughing)) ex(h)actly
 20. K: you played the vagina
 21. C: ((deadpan)) what sport did you play with her vagina?
 22. T: pretty much things just didn't happen
 23. C: no duh

Kyle's interrupted narration in lines 3–4 and the dangling 'and you started to:::' works as a prompt in the first part in a kind of adjacency pair, which Terry completes with staged deadpan in line 5 when he says 'playing the vagina'. Terry apparently used the expression in an earlier telling of this story where Kyle was present (instead of using more common terms, like 'touching' or 'fingering', or even the expression 'playing *with her* vagina'). 'Playing the vagina' is a verbal gaffe that his friends find entertaining. Terry's deadpan in line 5 reveals his willingness to be complicit with the joke so as to produce the expected group laughter (line 6). What makes the gaffe additionally funny is that they were not, according to Kyle, even 'making out' (line 8) when Terry attempted to touch her vagina. He was only 'trying' to 'make out', as Terry himself attests (line 1). In accounting for this, Terry displays ignorance and laughs as he says 'I dunno what I'm doing down there' (line 9), a concession that admits to a general clumsiness in sexual situations. His laughter, though, mitigates the seriousness of the self-criticism, lacing it with a kind of knowing or hipster irony. In other words, because he knows he's not cool with the ladies, he is in a way, cool. His friend's laughter is also ambiguous. Are they laughing at the courage or the stupidity required to attempt to touch a woman like that while not even really 'making out' to begin with?

When Terry tries to get the story back on track (line 12), thus displaying more of the details of his rejection and of how he feels he was sexually led on by this woman, his friends initially agree (lines 15–17), thereby securing for him a victim status; yet, they quickly derail him yet again and return to enjoying Terry's humorous malapropism. This derailing is a form of displacement (see Edwards 2005), which involves the use of displaced buffer topics, particularly in cases where complaints or troubles are being articulated, that are biased towards a non-serious treatment. It is particularly useful for taking the sting out of sensitive topics, like sexual failure. In lines 1–2 and 12–14, Terry attempts to launch his rejection story, only to have it displaced each time. His friends are arguably helping him out, in a way, to mitigate his romantic failure. Terry displays complicity in both instances (lines 5 and 19), thereby colluding in the fun of laughing at his gaffe. In this particular example, Terry is positioned not simply as a victim of his own fumbling hands, but also of the young woman's (alleged) capriciousness when it comes to sending sexual signals and setting clear boundaries.

In this next story, Kyle talks about a recent attempt to ask a young woman over to his house for a 'hook-up'. What makes the story tellable is not that Kyle was rejected *per se*, which seemed inevitable, but is the way he went about trying to persuade her to come back to his house and his nonchalant reaction to her rejection.

Story 4

Participants: Kyle (K), Terry (T), Cal (C), Moderator (M)

1. K: like two weeks ago I went over to Ali's house and there was this girl
2. Jaime that I'd hooked up with in the past a few times an I was trying
3. to get her to go back to my place but she wasn't really having it
4. ((laughter, 1.0))
5. M: what were you saying to try to get her to come back?
6. K: tha::t's the thing uhmm(hahuh) ((laughs))
7. T: I was there I can vouch [it was like]
8. K: [yea what] I say?
9. T: pretty much that=
10. K: =just 'hey let's go back to my place'
11. ((laughter, 2.0))
12. T: it's 'are you coming home with me' n'she's like 'nope I'm going to
13. sleep' [...]
14. M: I think you got dissed ((all laugh, 1.0)) is that what you think?
15. T: I thought it was pretty funny when we were going home and he calls
16. her again on the phone n'he's like 'so are you coming over soon?'
17. ((laughter, 2.0))
18. K: an she did [°not°
19. T: [not ((laughing)) you tried
20. K: I tried (.) that's all that counts

At stake in this story are Kyle's seduction skills, which Kyle formulates in a *knowingly* glib and unadorned way. Kyle assumes the position of the 'underachieving pick-up artist' who admittedly dispenses with curt pick-up lines ('hey let's go back to my place'; 'are you coming home with me?'; 'so are you coming over soon?') so lacking in creativity or romance that they clearly violate the masculine dictum to display 'game'. What function, we might ask, does his self-deprecating story of failed seduction achieve, other than a laugh or the opportunity to display nonchalance? At the end, Terry and Kyle note that it is the 'trying' that counts. Is this a kind of valorization of a blue-collar work ethic when it comes to romantic seduction? Or is this irony yet again? After all, Kyle's seduction repertoire is blissfully lazy. His gamesmanship is entirely lacking. He is not *really* trying, though, which seems to be exactly the point. His laziness, and the subsequent rejection that predictably follows, is the formula that makes the story funny to his friends and therefore tellable in the first place.

One way to understand the logic of such failed masculine positions is to interpret them on a broader gender-political level. They reflect what Messner and Montez de Oca (2005) argue is men's increasingly unstable status in contemporary culture when it comes to understanding how to initiate romantic endeavors. Being ironic or self-mocking about such complexities is one way of coping with this tension, or more broadly, with the erosion of the masculine norm to have seduction skills. Kyle's lazy seduction (i.e. 'are you coming home with me?') can thus be viewed as a misogynistic, albeit tongue-in-cheek, backlash against women's increasing autonomy and social power. Rather than risk being genuinely humiliated, either via rejection for actually trying or by appearing genuinely (not playfully) ignorant about the evolving rules of gender relations, men might opt for a kind of 'boys-will-be-boys' defensive ironic posture. The obvious playfulness and staged certitude of quips like 'hey let's go back to my place' inoculates it from charges of blatant sexism. When seen in this light, the 'trying is all that counts' adage is not an endorsement for an actual roll-your-sleeves-up approach to figuring out how to appropriately talk to women, but is a way of rationalizing failure. 'Trying' is futile, in other words, so one might

as well have a laugh. It allows men to indirectly define themselves as victims, as the purveyors of a now endangered form of suave masculinity.

Theme 3: 'liquid courage'

Being drunk was another common resource in these young men's self-deprecating stories. There were generally two types of stories involving alcohol and romantic embarrassment. The first type, as illustrated in the next story, usually involved getting drunk and making daring, but foolish, attempts to flirt with attractive women. The second type, as illustrated in Story 6, often involved getting drunk with a woman (usually at a party) and then having something embarrassing happen. In this first story, Ron and Seth co-narrate a recent incident where Ron 'got sloshed', took his pants off, and approached a very attractive and sober female friend and asked her for a date.

Story 5

Participants: Ron (R), Zach (Z), Seth (S), Moderator (M)

1. R: apparently I don't remember this but I lost my pants somehow
2. ((laughter, 2.0)) [...]
3. R: and pounded on one of my housemate's doors and said like 'we
4. should go on a date' and then 'let's set a date' an she's like =
5. S: = oh that was so funny
6. R: she's 'you won't remember Ron you're sloshed'
7. M: and she's like 'uh:: you're in your underwear Ron'
8. S: this is our other female housemate from this year Ashley
9. Z: she's pretty hot
10. R: yea she's very hot [...] so yea apparently I guess someone had
11. or I guess I had started going to bed and then I went outside and I
12. knocked on Ashley or I pounded I don't know on Ashley's
13. door (.) she was kind of asleep being it four in the morning and uh
14. I just said ((in drunk voice)) 'we should go on a date' you know
15. an it wasn't knowing me it wasn't very sexual at all (.) it was more like
16. cause she's into a lot of guy things she's into *Family Guy* she's
17. into video games you know so she's pretty cool I have a
18. good time around her you know (.) I can joke around like a guy I
19. don't have to kind of censor myself cause it's a girl and yea so (.)
20. and I just said 'you know what we should go out sometime I like
21. you you're cool you're fun to be around' and <yeah::: > she says
22. <'Ron you're drunk and you won't remember this' > and um of
23. course I didn't the next morning and I get up and Seth's like 'guess
24. what you did last night' and I'm like 'oh god'
25. S: he just wanted me to shut up (.) he just wanted some orange juice and
26. like I just started just started harassing him and asking him if he
27. remembered ANY of the night before and does he remember talking to
28. Ashley and he says 'NO NO NO WAY I didn't do that'
29. ((laughing)) and he(huh) goes 'really I did that?' and he's like 'fu:::ck'

At least three discursive elements intersect to make this kind of story work. First, inebriation stories allow for hazy recollections, where the narrator is able to play 'mind' against 'world' (Edwards 1997). Phrases like 'apparently', 'I don't remember', 'somehow', 'that's a little fuzzy', 'I hear different stories', and 'I guess' are littered throughout Ron's narrative. These rhetorical constructions of ignorance (see Potter 1996, Edwards 1997) make the veracity of the events being narrated a function of the 'world out there', of what his friends have told him, rather than being a product of Ron's actual

memory, which is liable to be biased by his own interests. It is, however, counterintuitive it may seem, absolutely crucial that Ron *not* remember. Not remembering insulates Ron from the counter that he was intentionally trying to be cool or courageous, which works against the masculine dictum to be effortless and nonchalant. Not remembering also allows his friends (see Seth's contributions) to own the story, in a way, since they get to remember it, interpret it as cool or funny, pass it along, and most importantly, hold the one who experienced it accountable in terms of masculine norms. In this way, self-deprecating stories are essential for promoting homosociality.

A second way that Ron manages this kind of story is by scripting his actions according to a pervasive and stable dispositional tendency (Edwards 1995). From lines 16–19, Ron suggests that given what is 'known' about him and Ashley, i.e. that they joke around a lot and that she is cool and into guy things, it is likely that his flirtation was meant playfully and not sexually. Where there is a predictable way of acting, then whatever happens (here, Ron taking his pants off and asking Ashley on a date) can be attributed to a kind of scripted repartee between the participants. The effect is that it situates Ron's actions within a pre-established frame of playfulness, thus mitigating the potential for his actions to appear perverse, harassing or desperate. The self-deprecation reveals that he can be himself around her, that he can be playful and boyish, or as he puts it (line 19), 'I don't have to censor myself'. His self-deprecation is thus proof of their chemistry.

Finally, from a gender-political perspective, the entire story treats failure as patriarchal male privilege, and a supposedly endearing one at that, thus reincarnating the 'loser motif' and 'everyman' trope (see Messner and Montez de Oca 1995). It involves male 'buddies' drinking beer together at a house party, a woman who is constructed as a fantasy object or 'hottie', and precarious attempts by one or more 'buddies' to risk humiliation by attempting to broach the space of the 'hottie'. While this happens, the other 'buddies' gleefully enjoy their beer and the voyeurism of watching their friend make his moves (Seth listened through the door, line 19). The attempt at the 'hottie' inevitably fails, and is followed by the kind of rejection that occasions high-fives from the other 'buddies'. They are thus outed as 'losers' but do not seem to care because they have each other, their beer, and now a good story to tell (see Messner and Montez de Oca 1995). When seen this way, stories of failed seduction, though deceptively playful in their telling, cater exclusively to men's insecurities about their unstable status within the contemporary gender order. They invite men to not only take refuge in the victim identity occasioned by this loser status, but to exploit it through irony, and to finally recognize that while 'hotties' may be unavailable, the one thing that men can count on is their shared fraternal bond.

In this second type of inebriation story, Shawn relates a time when he and his girlfriend, Kaly, got drunk at a big fraternity party and went to an upstairs room to have sex.

Story 6

Participants: Shawn (S), Mod (M)

1. S: I brought Kaly with me and uh it was a big party and we were both
2. fairly inebriated and I uh took her by the hand and lead her into my
3. buddy's room [...] and all my other friends are very aware of it and
4. we're takin off each other's clothes and then there's this like pounding
5. on the door 'SHAWN' ((laughing)) hahan' I say 'GO AWAY' and they
6. say 'NO:: what are you doing come out here' (.) and I guess one of my
7. other drunk buddy's was getting a lap dance like outside in the main room
8. (.) so they're like banging down the door and

9. at one point they were really like harassing us like I guess like the door
 10. had a crappy lock and there was a way to exploit it um and so they were
 11. coming in the room as I was getting a blow job ((laughing)) hahhuh yeah
 12. so like Kaly was awesome she like leans against the door to block em
 13. so I thought that was pretty cool (.) so we're in this bedroom and we had
 14. just finished and we're lying there on the bed and my buddy Paul stumbles
 15. in and uh I say 'Paul what are you doing get out of here now' and he just
 16. kind of like looks at me with this you know this goofy expression and he kind
 17. of like starts stumbling over towards the bed and I say 'Paul what are you
 18. doing LEAVE RIGHT NOW' and I'm like yelling at him an uh he goes
 19. <'nah::: man it's cool' > ((laughing)) and(ha) so he(huh) sits he like
 20. sits down like Indian style just like plops down at the corner of the bed
 21. and he goes <'I'm just getting my gum' > and like ((laughing)) and he pulls
 22. out this pack of like I dunno Orbitz or something ((laughing))
 23. and I'm(ha) like I'm like screaming at him and he uh he says 'Kaly do
 24. you want some gum?' and she says 'NO' and she slaps his hand awayn'
 25. I said 'Paul get out of here' so I jump off the bed like totally naked I'm like
 26. grabbing and I lift him up and I say 'get out' and I throw him out the door and
 27. like slammed it shut
 28. M: holy crap
 29. S: and as I throw Paul out and slam the door I hear my friend Judy
 30. scream ((in a high pitched voice)) 'I saw Sean's lil' penis!'
 31. hahhe an (ha)so now all my friends=
 32. M: =you're like legend there now

This story oscillates between being a traditionally heroic masculine story and an anti-heroic and somewhat humiliating one. With regard to the former, Shawn is having spontaneous sex with his drunk girlfriend at a fraternity party while his buddies are in the other room getting lap dances. Yet, when one looks at how Shawn positions his own character in the telling of the story, his character appears anxious, frustrated and embarrassed. His narration involves people trying to barge in on them and how Paul's nonchalance exposes his own frustration. And finally, Judy sees his penis and yells out to everyone that it was small. There is very little that is cool or suave about the way his character is presented in this narration of sexual activity. It is only in the re-retelling, with the embedded laughter at certain points and with evaluative tags like 'it was awesome' or 'it was funny' that we see he has a different, more nonchalant perspective now.

Like the last story, the self-deprecating aspects of his narrated character allow for 'mind' (i.e. Shawn's intentions and expectations concerning the events at the party) and 'world' (i.e. the actual events at the party) to be played against one another for rhetorical purposes. In allowing his character to appear anxious and embarrassed by the fracas, Shawn-the-narrator is doing interactive work. He is guarding against the view that he intentionally orchestrated the types of events that occur at these parties. As Coates (2003) has shown, although men enjoy telling wild stories, it is a violation of the 'ordinariness' norm to appear to have a hand in making wild things happen for the purpose of having a good story (Sacks 1984). The party needs to have a life of its own. Allowing oneself to appear accidentally, or even reluctantly, embarrassed in the melee of a wild party, is part of the rhetorical project of accounting for potentially anti-normative events. While Shawn can certainly laugh at the events now, as narrator, he must present his character in the story differently. As is true for the other stories analyzed, Shawn's self-deprecation is at the service of creating a discursive identity that is marginalized and victimized by events 'out there'.

Conclusion

The analysis of young men's stories about romantic experiences found that, contrary to the expectation that male friends will boast about their romantic endeavors, young men are apt to display self-deprecating positions about romantic and sexual mistakes and gaffes. However, like the 'lovable loser' laddishness that parades itself in the media, these forays into non-heroic masculinity are not straightforward. They are cloaked in a self-reflexivity that makes it difficult to determine whether the young men are complying with or resisting normative masculinity. The analyses lend empirically-grounded weight to discussions about the use of play and irony in masculine gender construction, discussions that, to date, have largely been confined to more macro-level cultural analyses. The micro-level analysis of young men's small stories reveal how formulations of self-deprecation occasion a victim identity that effaced the young men's agency.

If scored on a psychological inventory or scale measuring adherence to traditional masculinity, these young men's stories would not represent paradigmatic complicity; but when analyzed within the sequential arrangement of turns, where double-voicing, irony and innuendo are played up, displays of self-deprecation buy back complicity with traditional masculine norms. While the young men resist looking straightforwardly or obviously macho, they also work to safeguard the traditional masculine values of appearing confident, secure and knowing about what is at stake in displaying their views. As Wetherell and Edley (1999) argue, one of the more subtle ways for young men to reclaim the control associated with hegemonic masculinity is to appear ordinary, flouting the social expectation that their romantic and sexual agenda is simply about mastering seduction and gamesmanship.

This study found that managing ordinariness through candor meant negotiating an ideological dilemma (Billig *et al.* 1988) – the tension between acquiescing to a transparent conformity to stereotypical masculine norms, and working to avoid the perception that one's resistance somehow portrays one as romantically challenged. Displays of failure allowed these young men to deflate the bravado of heroic masculinity while not appearing to be genuine losers. In other words, they seemed discursively skilled at coming off non-seriously, not because success in romantic relationships is unimportant, but as a strategy for coping with the ambiguities of contemporary gender relations. The types of subjectivities evinced in these stories aptly reflect a crisis in masculinity that encourages men to be independent, confident and secure in their masculinity, while simultaneously not taking themselves too seriously, and also being advised to reform or abandon their oppressive habits, to be more open and tolerant, and to practice sensitivity and compassion.

While this may or may not be a tall order, the young men in this study were skilled at indirectly seizing on it in working up the sheen of victimization. While they certainly implicate themselves in the failures narrated, they also work to position women as irrational, capricious or hostile. For instance, the 'crazy bitch' trope is useful for mitigating sexual exploitation. By presenting Noel as crazy, and himself as being able to take it (as well as being entertained by it), Gus works to turn the tables. He tells a humorous story that circumvents the cause of Noel's anger, namely that he used her for sex. While he does nothing to suggest that Noel did not have the right to be angry, his narration construes her as *excessively* angry, thus mitigating his culpability. It is in this vein that I have argued that self-deprecation is often camouflage for sexism.

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, Wetherell and Potter 1992). The paradox is that as young men become more socialized to resist ‘old fashioned’ forms of sexism, while attempting to accommodate women’s increased power in heterosexual relationships, the better they may become at normalizing the new sexism found in contemporary, media-driven forms of ‘lad-masculinity’. Strategic displays of self-deprecation are one example of a burgeoning discursive practice for trying out ‘new’ forms of staged sexism. To date, very few discursive researchers (and even fewer psychologists) have examined how these practices are worked-up and managed, or how they become psychologically relevant in the formation of young men’s masculinities.

Given the limited sample size and its demographic homogeneity – largely white, heterosexual college-age students – there are limitations regarding the generalizability of this study’s findings. Messner and Montez de Oca (2005) have argued that the ‘lovable loser’ trope popularized in the media caters almost exclusively to young *white* men, rather than men of color. Ethnic minorities may not as easily identify with the playfulness of self-deprecation or the irony of the loser-motif and, as such, may resist them. This remains an open research question, as are questions pertaining to impact of socio-economic status, sexual orientation and age. It is also important to consider whether the context of the adult-moderated group discussions pressed for self-deprecating stories about romantic mishaps. This setting may have been an optimal climate for telling embarrassing romantic stories. Since most of the stories had already been told in previous settings, the threat of teasing, ridicule or rejection is lessened. Future research will have to be more innovative in capturing a variety of conversations in a variety of settings.

To conclude, I return to an issue raised at the beginning: how are we to think about what is currently ‘hegemonic’ about masculinity? This study has shown that for young heterosexual white males, heroic masculinity may be increasingly supplanted with an ‘everyman’ form of masculinity that achieves hegemony through knowing self-deprecation, ordinariness and nonchalance. This supplanting is not simply a media phenomenon, but is alive in the quotidian details of men’s discursive practices. Being hegemonic in a constantly changing landscape of gender relations means learning to manage a variety of social and cultural expectations within specific contexts while neither over- or under-indulging in traditional masculine norms. By examining these projects in detail, we can productively begin to identify hegemonic practices as the gradual fine-tuning of a range of discursive techniques that allow men to maintain *multiple* ideological positions within a variety of situations. To do so in ways that become routinely normalized is to effectively and unfortunately guarantee, as Connell (1995) argues, an iterative process of dominance for men. Preventing this kind of iterative recuperation of hegemony will thus require equally creative interventions that alter the discursive resources of men in ways that promote counter-sexist social practices.

Notes on contributor

Neill Korobov is an assistant professor in the Psychology Department at the University of West Georgia, USA. He is interested in natural language use and the implications of patterns in people’s talk for the study of identity and ideology, particularly with respect to gender. His work is grounded in critical discourse analysis and hermeneutic frameworks for social science inquiry. Currently, he is studying the stories that young adults tell about their romantic and sexual experiences, with a special focus on ‘troubles-talk’, i.e. the way speakers formulate problems about ostensibly private matters, like romantic difficulties.

References

- Bamberg, M., 2004. I know it may sound mean to say this, but we couldn't really care less about her anyway. Form and functions of 'slut-bashing' in male identity constructions in 15-year-olds. *Human development*, 47, 331–353.
- Benwell, B., 2002. Is there anything 'new' about these lads? The textual and visual construction of masculinity in men's magazines. In: L. Litosseliti and J. Sunderland, eds. *Gender identity and discourse analysis*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Billig, M., et al., 1988. *Ideological dilemmas: a social psychology of everyday thinking*. London: Sage.
- Brayton, S., 2007. MTV's *Jackass*: transgression, abjection, and the economy of white masculinity. *Journal of gender studies*, 16 (1), 57–72.
- Brooks, G.R., 1997. The centerfold syndrome. In: R.F. Levant and G.R. Brooks, eds. *Men and sex. New psychological perspectives*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Coates, J., 2003. *Men talk: stories in the making of masculinities*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Connell, R.W., 1995. *Masculinities*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Edwards, D., 1995. Two to tango: script formulations, dispositions, and rhetorical symmetry in relationship troubles talk. *Research on language and social interaction*, 28 (4), 319–350.
- Edwards, D., 1997. *Discourse and cognition*. London: Sage.
- Edwards, D., 2005. Moaning, whining and laughing: The subjective side of complaints. *Discourse studies*, 7, 5–29.
- Gilmartin, S., 2007. Crafting heterosexual masculine identities on campus. *Men and masculinities*, 9, 530–539.
- Gough, B., 2001. 'Biting your tongue': negotiating masculinities in contemporary Britain. *Journal of gender studies*, 10 (2), 169–185.
- Korobov, N., 2004. Inoculating against prejudice: a discursive approach to homophobia and sexism in adolescent male talk. *Psychology of men and masculinity*, 5, 178–189.
- Korobov, N., 2005. Ironizing masculinity: how adolescent boys negotiate hetero-normative dilemmas in conversational interaction. *The journal of men's studies*, 13, 225–246.
- Korobov, N., 2006. The management of 'nonrelational sexuality': positioning strategies in adolescent male talk about (hetero)sexual attraction. *Men and masculinities*, 8, 493–517.
- Korobov, N. and Bamberg, M., 2004. Positioning a 'mature' self in interactive practices: how adolescent males negotiate 'physical attraction' in group talk. *British journal of developmental psychology*, 22, 471–492.
- Korobov, N. and Thorne, A., 2006. Intimacy and distancing: young men's conversations about romantic relationships. *Journal of adolescent research*, 21, 27–55.
- Korobov, N. and Thorne, A., 2007. How late adolescent friends share stories about relationships: the importance of mitigating the seriousness of romantic problems. *Journal of social and personal relationships*, 24 (6), 971–992.
- Levant, R.F., 1997. Nonrelational sexuality in men. In: R.F. Levant and G.R. Brooks, eds. *Men and sex. New psychological perspectives*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Messner, M. and Montez de Oca, J., 2005. The male consumer as loser: beer and liquor ads in mega sports media events. *Signs: journal of women in culture and society*, 30, 1870–1909.
- Ochs, E. and Capps, L., 2001. *Living narrative: creating lives in everyday storytelling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Potter, J., 1996. *Representing reality: discourse, rhetoric, and social construction*. London: Sage.
- Riley, S.C.E., 2003. The management of the traditional male role: a discourse analysis of the constructions and functions of provision. *Journal of gender studies*, 12 (2), 99–113.
- Robinson, S., 2000. *Marked men: white masculinity in crisis*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sacks, H., 1984. On doing 'being ordinary'. In: J.M. Atkinson and J. Heritage, eds. *Structures of social action. Studies in conversational analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Savran, D., 1996. The sadomasochist in the closet: white masculinity and the culture of victimization. *Journal of feminist cultural studies*, 8, 127–152.
- Wetherell, M. and Edley, N., 1999. Negotiating hegemonic masculinity: imaginary positions and psycho-discursive practices. *Feminism and psychology*, 9 (3), 335–356.
- Wetherell, M. and Potter, J., 1992. *Mapping the language of racism: discourse and the legitimation of exploitation*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Appendix 1. Transcription conventions

(.)	Short pause of less than 1 second
(1.5)	Timed pause in seconds
[overlap	Overlapping speech
?	Rising intonation / question
°quieter°	Encloses talk that is quieter than the surrounding talk
LOUD	Talk that is louder than the surrounding talk
<u>Underlined</u>	Emphasis
>faster<	Encloses talk that is faster than the surrounding talk
<slower>	Encloses talk that is slower than the surrounding talk
((comments))	Encloses comments from the transcriber
Rea:::ly	Elongation of the prior sound
=	Immediate latching of successive talk
[...]	Where material from the tape has been omitted for reasons of brevity.