A Feminist and “Outsider” in the Field: Negotiating the Challenges of Researching Young Men

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Abstract
For a number of years, women scholars have documented the difficulties faced when conducting research with male participants. This article contributes to this scholarship by reflecting on fieldwork I conducted with young men from a rural high school in Aotearoa/New Zealand. While the primary aim of this project was to collect moments of young men’s talk that spoke to their understandings of gendered norms within (hetero)romantic relationships, I also ended up gathering other data in the form of how they interacted with me and each other during our discussions. What resulted were a range of challenges that appeared connected to my “outsider” status. This article exposes these challenges and offers my reflections on why they occurred, how I managed them at the time, and what I learnt in the process.

Keywords
methods in qualitative inquiry, critical feminist theory, focus groups, critical theory, narrative

Introduction
In 2014, I embarked on a research project where I spoke with young men from a rural high school in Aotearoa/New Zealand about how they made sense of being boyfriends and (hetero)romance. While the primary aim of this project was to collect moments of their talk that spoke to their understandings of gendered norms within (hetero)romantic relationships, what I also ended up gathering was other data in the form of how they interacted with me and each other during our discussions. Because of these interactions, this fieldwork experience was testing at times. I argue that this was largely to do with my “outsider” (Bucerius, 2013, p. 1) status: Not only was I female entering a male-dominated space, I was also acutely aware that these young men were unknown to me, and me to them. What developed, as I spent time with these young men, were a series of challenges I faced in my interactions with them. This article exposes these challenges and offers my reflections on why they occurred, how I managed them at the time, and what I learnt in the process.

Women Researching Men
There is now a well-established body of scholarship documenting women researchers’ experiences of interviewing and conducting ethnographic research with men (see Allain, 2014; Allen, 2005; Arbeit, Hershberg, Johnson, Lerner, & Lerner, 2017; Bott, 2010; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Grenz, 2005; Harries, 2016; Hutchinson, Marsiglio, & Cohan, 2002; Orrico, 2014; Pini, 2005; Presser, 2005; Skelton, 1998; Soyer, 2014). This body of work speaks predominantly to the challenges women face when entering a male-dominated setting and the problems that arise that need managing as a result. While scholarship shows that male participants adopt many ways to assert dominance within their encounters with women researchers, it would be naïve to simply think that power dynamics in these situations are static. Instead, power dynamics between researcher and participant are often “multi-dimensional and fluid” (Grenz, 2005; Pini & Pease, 2013, p. 8). However, the stories women share about carrying out research with men tend to focus on having to actively manage the many ways men—and men’s performances of masculinities—render them vulnerable within their own fieldwork.

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Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001, p. 91) explain how male participants often engage in a range of compensatory practices during research interviews that work to both assert and protect their “masculine self” (p. 90). These practices—like claiming authority over subject matter or overemphasizing one’s sense of rationality—can be challenging for researchers to manage (Pini, 2005; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001). Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001, p. 91) warn that these compensatory practices are more extreme when male participants feel that their masculinity is somehow in doubt—what these scholars term as a “surplus threat.” Often this is the case when the topic of gender is a focus of the research, “since this increases the saliency of the participant’s identity as a man” (p. 91) or when the interviewer’s gendered identity is different from the participant’s.

Clearly, male participants are more likely to react to feelings of a “surplus threat” (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001, p. 91) when the researcher is female (Pini, 2005; Presser, 2005; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001); as such, a number of women researchers have documented these compensatory performances look like in practice and the types of challenges these pose to the fieldwork process. While these practices can take benign forms—for example, men claiming to be an authority on the topic at hand (Allain, 2014; Pini, 2005) or purposefully going off topic (Gailey & Prohaska, 2011)—men can also use more malevolent sexualization strategies to exert control over both the female researcher and the research process (Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Harries, 2016; Orrico, 2014; Sover, 2014). A number of women scholars, for example, have written about their experiences of men flirting with them during interviews (Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Orrico, 2014; Sover, 2014) or men being overfamiliar by using terms like “love” when addressing them (Harries, 2016). In more extreme cases, researchers have had men persistently ask them out for romantic dates (Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Harries, 2016; Orrico, 2014). Not only do these advances leave women feeling uncomfortable, they also leave them feeling vulnerable and unsafe. For example, one of Gailey’s (Gailey & Prohaska, 2011) male participants became verbally hostile with her when she refused to go out with him.

Another way that male participants use malevolent types of sexualization strategies as a means of control is through the use of sexist and misogynistic talk, which often leaves women researchers feeling uneasy. Allain (2014) encountered this from one of her participants, who used aggressive language and “sexually explicit stories” (p. 214) to “assert himself as a dominant and powerful man and to position [her] as a woman who might be easily made uncomfortable in the grimy and sexualized world of [Canadian League] hockey” (pp. 214–215). Gailey and Prohaska (2011) also encountered a number of male participants “bragging” about their participation in the sexual exploitation of women. Because Gailey and Prohaska wanted to ensure that the men they were interviewing felt comfortable to “open up” (p. 376), they actually chose not to challenge this type of talk. Both women, however, were left upset afterward because they “felt horrible about remaining silent” (p. 376).

Gailey and Prohaska’s (2011) experiences resonate with the struggles many women researchers face, with whether or not to remain silent when male participants engage in sexist talk. What appears to be the dilemma is whether to let men talk freely, without exerting too much researcher control over the process, or to challenge men when sexist talk is used. Women researchers report engaging in both practices: attempting to challenge sexist talk but also seeing the benefits of remaining silent because of the rich data sexist talk provides for feminist research (Bott, 2010; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Grenz, 2005; Harries, 2016). Gailey and Prohaska’s experiences also speak to the very real emotional toll this type of research can have on women researchers as they manage and negotiate their interactions with the men they are researching.

Women researchers have therefore gone to many lengths to manage the vulnerabilities they experience when interacting with male participants. A number discuss how they actively and consciously desexualized their own appearance while playing down their “expressions of femininity” (p. 210) during the fieldwork (Allain, 2014, p. 210; see also Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Sover, 2014). For Allain (2014), this was in direct response to people questioning why she, a young woman, wanted to interview male hockey league players. Many assumed she was engaging with these young men for some sort of sexual gain. Desexualizing her appearance and emotional responses helped her to manage her anxieties about what others thought her intentions were. Regardless of these attempts, many in the hockey fraternity remained suspicious and guarded around her. Another way in which women researchers manage the vulnerabilities of interacting with male participants is to be vigilant about where interviews take place. Bott (2010), for example, urges other women to ensure that fieldwork is carried out in spaces that ensure women’s safety (e.g., not in participant’s homes).

Talking With Young Men About Romance

This body of literature speaks, in many ways, to some of the experiences I faced during my fieldwork with twenty-two 16-year-old young men from a rural high school in Aotearoa/New Zealand. However, because the age of my participants was generally younger than the men discussed in the extant literature (see Allen, 2005; Arbeit et al., 2017; Hutchinson et al., 2002; Sover, 2014; Skelton, 1998, for specific reflections of researching younger men), I was also presented with some different challenges that I believe resulted from interacting with a younger cohort of male participants.

The main aim of my fieldwork was to find out how young men made sense of being boyfriends and (hetero)romantic relationships more generally. I chose this specific age-group for a range of reasons. For the last 10 years, my research has been dedicated to the prevention of violence against women. Most feminist research in this field has examined adult men’s use of violence and control toward their (hetero)romantic partners (a very small sample includes Andersson & Umberson, 2001; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Enander, 2010; McCarry, 2009;
Pagelow, 1981; Stark, 2007). I decided to speak to younger men,1 in their teenage years, to find out how they would make sense of (hetero)romantic intimacy at these early stages of their “relationship careers” (Towns & Scott, 2008, p. 6), and whether an entitlemet to oppress young women would already be a part of these sense makings. Finding out how this age-group makes sense of these forms of male oppression is a less known field of research (Allen, 2007; Doull, Oliffe, Knight, & Shoveller, 2013; Flood, 2008; Gilmartin, 2007; Korobov, 2009a, 2009b, 2011; McCarry, 2009; Sundaram, 2013; Totten, 2003) and therefore an important line of inquiry.

In gathering their talk, I specifically wanted to locate young men’s dispositions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) toward being boyfriends that gave support to male oppression within (hetero)romantic relationships. Overarching this inquiry was a feminist interest in how dispositions exposed through talk are shaped and enabled by a system of gender hegemony (Schippers, 2007): A gendered order that privileges versions of hegemonic masculinity that only men are able to take up, which enables the domination and oppression of all feminine (male and female) gendered identities within the social world.

Recruitment and Participants

This project was located within a rural high school in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I chose to recruit a school because of its access to young people and specifically a rural school for two key reasons: (1) I live rurally myself with my two children and therefore have a vested interested in how young people grow up in rural areas and (2) there are only a few studies that have looked at how rural young people make sense of heteronormativity (Hillier, Harrison, & Bowditch, 1999; Keddie, 2007; Luft, Jenkins, & Cameron, 2012; Morris & Fuller, 1999; Trell, van Hoven, & Huigen, 2014). What is even less known is how young men from rural communities make sense of oppressive (hetero)romantic practices.

As it turned out, however, recruiting a rural school was not an easy endeavor. After many rejections from various schools I contacted, the principal from Te Ika a Maui High School2 agreed his school would take part. Te Ika a Maui High School is located within a rural township3 with a population of around 7,000. The township is geographically small (in comparison to Aotearoa/New Zealand’s larger urban cities) and centers around a single main street. Peripheral to the township are well-established dairy and sheep farms. The school itself is a public4 coeducational high school.

My main contact person at the school was the guidance counselor—Mrs. A. She was integral to me undertaking this fieldwork within the school. Not only did she organize a place within the school’s curriculum for me to work with the students and allocate me classrooms where I would carry out the fieldwork, she also introduced me to a class of prospective Year-125 male students to participate in my study. Twenty-eight young men were part of this initial meeting. They made up half of the school’s Year-12 male cohort. The other male students were on a different timetable that did not suit my fieldwork demands.

This initial meeting lasted around 20 min. Mrs. A introduced me to the students and then I introduced myself and my research. I gave each student a participant information sheet and a consent form, carefully reading out the information in each. In order to maximize their autonomy, I invited them to take the documentation away with them to consider whether they would like to participate. I did not want them to feel pressured to take part in front of myself and Mrs. A. Within 2 weeks, I had gained 22 consents. All participants were 16 years old.

Method

Overarching this project were three methodological strands that influenced the direction and form of my fieldwork. The first two—a feminist qualitative methodology (DeVault & Gross, 2012; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2012; Laliberté & Schurr, 2016; Orrico, 2014; Presser, 2005; Skelton, 1998; Soyer, 2014) and critical studies on men and masculinities methodology (see Hearn, 2013; Pini & Pease, 2013)—were chosen for two key reasons. Firstly, I am a feminist researcher, which means I understand the social world to be governed by a hegemonic gender order (Schippers, 2007) that privileges men’s hegemonic performances of masculinity, while subordinating girls/women and femininity. Secondly, this research project was an unequivocally gendered interrogation: The focus was on young men’s gendered endorsements of male gendered oppression within (hetero)romantic relationships. Because of my focus on young men, I was also informed by a critical youth studies methodology (Kehily, 2015; Nayak & Kehily, 2014). This methodology was suitable in guiding my research away from an “adult-centric” focus to one that listened to what young people had to say (Kehily, 2015; Nayak & Kehily, 2014; Renold, 2014).

I therefore chose a series of qualitative methods—semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews—to complement these methodological frameworks. Focus groups and interviews have a long tradition of being used by feminists researching women because of their ability to capture “the personal and emotional” (Pini & Pease, 2013, p. 1) dimensions of lived experience that many other approaches (e.g., quantitative methods based on finding “valid” data) fail to do. Pini and Pease (2013) argue that focus groups and interviews are also appropriate for researching men’s lives because they provide a platform for men to speak about their gendered lived experiences. By incorporating a critical youth studies approach to the mix, such semistructured methods gave young men an opportunity to talk about being boyfriends, without the researcher having complete control over the structure of these discussions. These methods, however, also gave me an opportunity to work with these qualitative data in a variety of ways. With my feminist “hat” on, I used these data to uncover the complexities of how young men made sense of and were able to talk about being boyfriends while paying particular attention to the public performances of masculinity (and femininity) that surfaced
during these discussions, as young men talked in front of one another about gendered roles in (hetero)romantic relationships.

The first stage of my fieldwork involved watching the film *Twilight* with my 22 participants. *Twilight* is a teen-hit film about a young vampire (Edward Cullen; aged 17) who falls in love with a mortal human (Bella Swan; also aged 17). I chose this film for three key reasons: Firstly, it showcases a range of both overt and subtle ways that young men can use oppressive strategies to control their girlfriends. Secondly, I wanted to provide my participants with a meaningful medium they could relate to and that could help foster their voice (Nayak & Kehily, 2014). Thirdly, the film provided young men with a reference point that enabled them to take part in our discussions regardless of whether they had previous (hetero)romantic experiences.

I returned to Te Ika a Maui High School a week after showing *Twilight* to commence the focus groups. Focus groups are popular within qualitative research because they provide opportunities for participant interaction (Gibbs, 2012; Robinson, 2012). I was interested in how young men’s public performances of gender (both masculinities and femininities: see Schippers, 2007) would surface as they talked together about being boyfriends and (hetero)romance. I also wanted to expose the hegemonic scaffolding within these performances that promoted male oppression within (hetero)romantic relationships.

I invited the young men participating in my research to choose which focus group they would attend. This was an important step in ensuring that they felt comfortable speaking within their groups and was designed to enhance their voice within our discussions (see University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, 2013; see also Renold, 2014). In total, I ran three focus groups: one group per week. Each group lasted one class period (approximately 50 min) and was carried out in one of the school’s classrooms. I designed the focus group discussions to be open and semistructured. This meant that I prepared 10 broad questions that guided these group discussions but left room for my participants to take the conversation in directions of their choosing. Providing participants with this freedom and agency during the research process makes open and semistructured focus groups a “favored” practice among feminist qualitative researchers (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p. 209).

My initial questions were not related to (hetero)romance. Instead, I asked each group what their favorite part of the film was and which character they liked most, as a way to help them transition from the previous activity of watching the film to the current activity—the group discussion. These questions were also designed to ease young men into the focus groups, without addressing the more sensitive topics around (hetero)romance from the start.

After we talked generally about the film, I asked more tailored questions relating to my research question. The opening questions I asked were broad in nature, about the representations of (hetero)romantic love within *Twilight*: Do you think Edward and Bella were in love? When do you think Bella started to fall in love with Edward? Under each of these broad questions, I also had subquestions to further interrogate either their experience of watching the film (e.g., Did you enjoy the scene when they first “fall in love”?) or their views on (hetero)romantic love within their own lives (e.g., Do you think men and women fall in love differently? What are the good parts of “being in love”? What are the bad things about “being in love”?). I also had a section within my questions that enabled participants to talk specifically about being (hetero)romantic.

After these questions, I then concentrated more specifically on Edward’s performances as a boyfriend. These questions were more directed at my research question, as I wanted to find out whether my participants supported Edward’s oppressive treatment of Bella. I had two broad questions: Do you think Edward is a good boyfriend? If yes, in what ways? If no, in what ways? Do you think teenage girls would like to have a boyfriend like Edward? If yes, why? If no, why? These broad questions also enabled me to veer into more specific questions about my participants’ views of (hetero)romance: What do “good” boyfriends do? What do “bad” boyfriends do?

I also invited all focus group participants to take part in a 25-min individual interview with me; however, only four young men chose to participate. Because of this small number, I was able to conduct all four interviews on the same day. Because only four young men took part in these one-on-one interviews, I was not able to draw any significant insights from their public talk, in comparison with their more private talk with me. What these interviews did provide, however, was an opportunity to delve deeper into their understandings of what boyfriends should be entitled to do, without the presence of their male peers listening to their responses. I was also able to talk more generally about living in the rural township of Te Ika a Maui which I did not have time to do in the focus groups.

**Challenges in the Field**

Choosing to talk with young men within a high school environment was not without its challenges, and as such, my experiences share similarities to what other women scholars have faced when gathering data from “male-dominated settings” (Orrico, 2014, p. 473; see also Allain, 2014; Allen, 2005; Arbeit et al., 2017; Bott, 2010; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Grenz, 2005; Harries, 2016; Hutchinson et al., 2002; Pini, 2005; Presser, 2005; Skelton, 1998; Soyer, 2014).

**Being the Gendered “Outsider”**

From the onset, I was concerned about being the only female in a classroom with young men. Before my fieldwork began, I found it difficult to articulate why I was feeling apprehensive.
However, as I began working with these young men, I started to gain a better self-reflexive sense of where this anxiety was coming from (Bott, 2010). By going into the classroom alone with these young men, I—like other female researchers going “into the field”—was an “outsider” due to my position within my own research (Buceriurius, 2013, p. 1; see also Bott, 2010; Roer-Strier & Sands, 2015; Soyer, 2014). Not only was I female and of a markedly different generation from my participants, I was also acutely aware that I was not from within the insular institution of their school.

Because of being an “outsider,” I felt compelled to come across as genderless and desexualized, a compulsion felt by other women scholars (see Allain, 2014; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Soyer, 2014). I was particularly fixated on making sure that my conduct (how I talked with the young men and my dress) was appropriate. At some reflective level, I was apprehensive of being seen as a relatively young female wanting to talk with younger men about (hetero)romance (see Allain, 2014). One way that I endeavored to de-gender myself was by dressing very conservatively with minimal skin showing. Like other female researchers, this was done in an effort to “ease the tension by trying to efface signs of my femininity” (Buceriurius, 2013, p. 16).

My apprehension also presented itself when Mrs. A was organizing a room for me to conduct my individual interviews. She advised that I could use her office, which she said would be quiet and private. I immediately declined and asked instead for a classroom. This was my attempt to manage risk as a woman researcher (see Bott, 2010; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Orrico, 2014; Soyer, 2014). I felt uncomfortable being in a secluded location with a Year-12 male student because I did not want it misconstrued as inappropriate, especially in light of the subject matter of my research. Sixteen-year-old young men can also embody strength that could be used to physically hurt a smaller woman, like myself. Because of this, I felt hesitant about being in a secluded location with my participants.

Managing Misogyny

Once the focus groups commenced, my interactions with these young men continued to challenge me. One of the main challenges, which other women scholars have written about (see Bott, 2010; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Grenz, 2005; Harries, 2016), came in the form of young men’s use of sexist comments and retorts, particularly to my questions about (hetero)romance. This talk often caught me unaware, which resulted in me having to choose how to manage it in the moment. For example, in response to my question about what makes a “good” boyfriend, one participant said that a “good” boyfriend cooks his girlfriend a meal once a year; this comment was met by laughter by the others. I chose to ignore this comment by asking another participant to reflect on my original question. The intention here was to ignore it and therefore not give it any weight.

While many of these sexist comments were “one-off” statements made by various participants, a young man from the second focus group—Sergei—engaged in more persistent sexist retorts that plagued various parts of group discussion. His retorts were particularly persistent during the first 10 min of the focus group when we were discussing what makes a “good” boyfriend and girlfriend. He contributed with inappropriate answers, for example, a good boyfriend “doesn’t beat her up” and a “good” girlfriend “does squats.” While I chose to ignore his comments as first, it became apparent that he was likely to continue these repeated utterances. I was continuing to ask the group about the good qualities they saw in a girlfriend when Sergei, again, took an opportunity to disrupt the discussion with a sexist remark, by saying “cooks food.” I chose to confront him this time: “Cooks you food? Are you serious or are you having a joke?” To which he replied, “Nah, I’m serious.” Even though he responded with yet another provoking comment (“Nah, I’m serious”), my questioning him did work to challenge his banter. Firstly, his peers stopped laughing after I challenged him. This is significant: My challenging him may have been read by the others as signaling that this was not acceptable banter. Secondly, after I challenged him, and he responded with “Nah, I’m serious,” he abandoned this line of talk. Again, this could be read as him understanding that this was unacceptable banter.

Although Sergei’s sexist remarks may give some insight into how he made sense of women’s roles in (hetero)romantic relationships, they also indicated how he was interacting with me, and his peers, during these group encounters. His remarks may have been moments of masculine rebellion—a way to assert control (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001)—aimed at me, a relatively young woman in an authority role within a classroom setting. His remarks may also have been a reaction to the subject matter (talking about romance). Sergei’s use of sexist talk could have been a way to deflect from having to talk more openly about his views on (hetero)romance (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001). I also felt that his comments were likely a product of immaturity: They were both banal and cliché, and their repetitive nature added to their childishness.

What also became apparent to me, after my fieldwork ended, was that these sexist retorts by Sergei, and the one-off comments made by other young men throughout the focus groups, were unique to the focus group environment. Although I only ran a small number of individual interviews, none of the young men in these one-on-one sessions engaged in sexist talk. This suggests that the sexism I encountered in the focus groups was a public performance of masculinity that required an audience of male peers (see Barnes, 2011; Korobov, 2009a, 2009b).

Encountering Alek

Admittedly, these moments of sexist talk were annoying, but my interactions with Alek, a participant in my third focus group, proved even more confronting. Alek very quickly stood out from his peers as he appeared to embody the most hegemonically masculine (Schippers, 2007) identity of the group. He was muscular, tall, and seemed conventionally handsome for his age-group; he was one of the top scholars of Year 12 and
a future contender for Head Boy. He also told me how he had gained entry into the top rugby team at only the age of 15. In rural Aotearoa/New Zealand, this is a prestigious achievement and often imbues young men with popularity. As such, Alek appeared to speak with authority throughout the focus group on a range of subjects: For example, when I asked this particular group about their own practices of (hetero)romance, he boasted how he “aced” “asking out” Helena (his girlfriend) on the beach at sunset; the inference here was that he was able to “do romance” better than the others in the group.

What became noticeable as the focus group progressed was that Alek engaged in sexist and misogynistic talk that went far beyond what others in the group were contributing. One particular type of misogynistic talk he engaged in took the form of “slut-shaming,” which is designed to be highly pejorative and subordinating toward women (e.g., Flood, 2013a; Ringrose & Renold, 2012). His first slut-shaming utterance surfaced when the group was discussing which of Edward’s boyfriend practices throughout the film they found “creepy”—for example, the way that Edward would sneak into Bella’s room at night, without her knowing, and watch her sleep. Alek suddenly contributed the following: “The fact that she’s down to Bella’s relationship with Edward, Alek remarked, “So she’s yeah, temporarily not having any logic to it, to their thoughts”. Not only are these comments derisive towards women but they also position women who have romantic relationships with violent men as to blame for the violence, effectively exonerating men’s violent practices within these intimate sites (see Towns & Adams, 2000). I believe that Alek said these pejorative statements not only to assert himself as rational and therefore superior to women but again to assert himself as a powerful actor within this particular interview context (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001).

Like his slut-shaming talk, his talk about Bella being irrational also made me feel uncomfortable. In both instances, I chose to say nothing, which I believe was a product of both being ill prepared to deal with such denigrating comments and feeling uneasy about being the only woman in a room with young men that I did not know. On reflection though, I regret letting Alek’s comments slide. Women scholars have shared similar stories and similar feelings of regret (Gailey & Prohaska, 2011). In hindsight, I could have challenged his thinking by telling him that his talk was inappropriate and misogynistic. I also missed an opportunity to gather more data by asking Alek why he thought that way about women. However, remaining silent did serve another purpose: If I had challenged Alek’s talk in the first instance, he may not have been as candid throughout the rest of the group discussion. Therefore, echoing other women scholars, providing Alek with an environment to talk freely gave me access to rich data about how he chose to speak about women within the context of this particular focus group (see Bott, 2010; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Grenz, 2005; Harries, 2016).

As I reflected on Alek’s talk after I completed my fieldwork, I continued to ponder the type of public and disparaging talk (see Barnes, 2011; Korobov, 2009a, 2009b) Alek used to speak about women. I kept returning to the conclusion that his successful status within the school enabled him to speak so vocally in this way in front of his peers. There was something also notable about the fact his comments about young women “being down to have sex” and “irrational” were said alone and mostly left unchallenged by his focus group peers. Empirical studies (Adams, 2012; DeKeseredy, 2015; Flood, 2003; Towns & Terry, 2014) have established the effect homosociality has on keeping men silent about their male friends’ misogyny (especially in rural communities—see DeKeseredy, 2015). By remaining silent, the group gave legitimacy to Alek’s dispositions about deviant women and, in turn, secured any threat to his status. Of course, remaining silent may also have been related to young men safeguarding themselves from being shamed for speaking out against Alek’s embodiment of hegemonic masculinity (Schippers, 2007). From this angle, their silence appeared motivated more by not wanting to risk contesting him as the leader of the group rather than necessarily being motivated by an agreement with what he was saying.

Another way that Alek’s interaction with me proved challenging involved his resistance toward a specific group process that I asked the young men to follow. Even though I had gained ethics approval from the University of Auckland to conduct focus groups, my application only stipulated that I could audio
record the sessions. A few days before my fieldwork was about to commence, I realized a significant flaw in this approach. If I could only audio record the focus groups, how would I know which participant was talking when I came to transcribe these discussions? I knew that I would not be able to simply recognize each participant’s voice. In hindsight, it would have been better to have video recorded my participants while they talked, so that I could have seen, as I transcribed, who was speaking at any given time.

As it was too late to ask for my ethics application to be reopened and a stipulation added to account for the filming of the focus groups, all I could do was proceed with the focus groups being audio recorded. I therefore decided that the only solution was to somehow identify each participant before they spoke. At the beginning of each focus group, I explained clearly to my participants that I would ask them to raise their hands when they wanted to say something, and after I said their name—which I outlined was for the purpose of the audio recording and transcription process—they could begin talking. Obviously, a significant limitation was that this process would potentially hinder the spontaneity of our discussions. On reflection, this worked quite well and did not seem to affect the natural dialogue of our talk too much.

Alek, however, was the only one who refused to follow this process. Every time he put up his hand to speak, he would not let me say his name. Instead, he would quickly interject and say “Alek says . . .”—and then start talking. At first, I thought he was doing this to be humorous or quirky, but as the focus group continued, I started to wonder whether this performance was a way for Alek to assert his authority not only within the group but toward me. His persistent need to say his own name may again have been a compensatory practice (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001) aimed not only at me, a relatively young female researcher who was in a proxy authority role within a classroom setting, but also at the subject content—(hetero)romance—which may have made Alek feel uncomfortable or uneasy talking about.

Alek’s behavior, along with his misogynistic talk, still lingers with me. When people (colleagues, friends, family) ask me about my findings, I often return to my interactions with Alek. Here was a “successful” young man, who enjoyed a high status within the school, yet at the same time was the only participant broaching significant misogynistic themes within the focus group sessions. I also ponder whether his talk was purposeful because of the group context. Alek did not agree to do an individual interview with me; had he, would his talk have been different? Thinking about Alek now, I wonder whether he still experiences a high masculine status now that he has left school and if he continues to publicly promote misogynistic dispositions in other areas of his life.

Conclusion

All of these challenges discussed emphasize how the data I gathered from this fieldwork not only pertained to my research questions but also reflected the interactions I had with my participants. Principally, these interactions were influenced by the group nature of our discussions. For example, the sexist and misogynistic talk I gathered appeared to be specific to the focus group environment. My individual interviews did not yield the same type of narratives, which further suggests that these talk interactions with me were more of a public nature—a performance of young masculinity with two audiences: male peers and a relatively young female researcher. It therefore would be interesting to explore this particular dynamic further. Would, for example, the level of sexist and misogynistic talk be generated from a focus group led by a male researcher or by a much older female researcher? Replicating this study to account for these different variables (i.e., having two researchers—say a male and female or a younger and older female researcher—conducting their own focus groups within the same study) would yield more insights into how the gendered identity and age of researchers impact on fieldwork centered around young men’s talk about gendered issues like (hetero)romance.

What I learned most from these experiences is that this type of gendered research can be “messy” (see Kumsa, Chambon, Yan, & Maiter, 2015, p. 429) and unpredictable, which left me having to think on my feet at various times during interactions with these young men. This was especially the case as each focus group—conducted on separate weeks—brought up their own peculiarities in terms of how the young men interacted with me. In saying this, I do sometimes wish I had done things differently (e.g., challenging Alek). With this said, however, the data I collected—in all its rawness and messiness—was rich data nonetheless (see Bott, 2010; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011; Grenz, 2005; Harries, 2016) and ironically, being an “outsider” had some benefits (Bucerius, 2013, p. 1). As scholars argue, being an insider researching participants of similar demographics and political outlooks can lead to researchers overlooking the complexities of dynamics within their own fieldwork because of their familiarity with their participants (Bucerius, 2013; Flood, 2013b; Pini & Pease, 2013). Therefore, while I felt uncomfortable at times entering a male-only setting with young men I did not know, the data I gathered and the ways I interpreted it are arguably rich precisely because of the outsider status I experienced.

In reflecting on these experiences, I do feel that I am now more aware of when one should step in to challenge disparaging and offensive remarks from younger male participants. For example, researchers should intervene when the talk that is being generated from young men threatens the safety of either the other participants or themselves. For example, while Alek’s comments made me feel uncomfortable, had they escalated in frequency or been directed toward me or specific young women within the school, I am confident that I would have shut down such talk, not only for my own safety but also for the well-being of the other participants who would not benefit from being exposed to such content. Having a reliable contact person within the school—like I had with Mrs. A—would be useful in such situations; in particular, this contact person could be someone to report to if talk escalated in this manner.
This advice, however, is given in hindsight; knowing how to respond to any given range of potential comments before one embarks on their fieldwork is a difficult task for researchers. The messiness and unpredictability of this type of research—which sees women researchers continue to be confronted with misogyny and sexism from male participants—means that often all we can do is respond, at the time, in the best way we can. However, it is precisely because of these interactions women researchers face that makes this type of research so incredibly valuable in exposing the gendered power dynamics that women, in general, face in society.

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Notes
1. The term “young men” is used widely throughout feminist and critical masculinities scholarship (see chapter 3). However, it is an ambiguous term that can signal any age-group from 13 to 25 years old. For my research, “young men” are secondary school aged and specifically Year-12 students aged 16 years.
2. Pseudonyms have been used for all proper names (the town, the school, and participants) to protect participants’ anonymity.
3. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, a “rural” town is officially categorized as a geographical location of 1,000 or more people outside of the main cities (Scott, Park, & Cocklin, 2000). Rural towns in New Zealand also tend to be categorized as having “very little in the way of infrastructure and few services” (Scott et al., 2000, p. 437).
4. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, public schools are funded by the New Zealand Government, with parents making a voluntary donation to the school in lieu of school fees.
5. Year 12 is the second to last year in secondary school; students in this year group are usually 16 years old.
6. By “down to” he means that she gives “consent to.”
7. There were also many moments in our discussions where two or three participants would dominate a part of the conversation. As long as I could identify them at the beginning of their banter, I felt confident that I could recognize who was talking.

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