

**'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**

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### **Key Words**

Identity · Microgenesis · Narrative · Positioning · Gender · Masculinity · Adolescence

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### **Abstract**

In this article I discuss an excerpt from a group discussion between five 15-year-old boys who, in the presence of an adult moderator, engaged in the act of 'slut bashing' while telling a minimal story about an incident of female promiscuity. The analysis proceeds microanalytically in a three-step procedure that details the *positions* taken by the young participants during the interaction. First, I analyze how the story characters are positioned in story time and story space. Next, I analyze how the interactants draw up their positions in relation to one another during the interaction. Finally, in the third step, I discuss how the first two levels are used to develop positions in relation to any preexisting normative discourses (master narratives). My observations focus on the role of narrative and interaction in the microgenetic construal of identity and self, and reveal how positioning becomes part of the *identity construction* of the five male adolescents.

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## Identity Construction in Narrative and Discourse

Numerous authors [Bruner, 1986, 1990, 1993, 1999; Carr, 1986; MacIntyre, 1981; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986] have put forward the idea that identity and self are narratively configured. And, more recently, suggestions to use narratives to analyze selves and identities have soared [Bamberg, 2000b; Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Crossley, 2000; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Linde, 1993; Riessman, 1990]. Not only do we plot our lives retrospectively when we pour events into narrative format, but we also construct our memories in narrative form [see Brockmeier, 2002]. We even seem to construe what we call experience in preformatted units of narrative origin, and segment the flow of time as if it actually occurred in the form of chronological events. That is, we attribute temporal boundaries to an imagined left and an imagined right of such imagined units, and therefore can argue that we experience them in sequence, with a natural, intrinsic forward orientation.

In this article I examine a segment of a group discussion that was part of a larger analysis of adolescent male identities. The particular interaction on promiscuity occurred within a two-hour group discussion between a male moderator and five 15-year-old boys who had come together to discuss what it means to be a male adolescent. Promiscuity was by no means the only topic of the discussion. It was not invited or probed by the moderator, and three minutes later it was replaced by another topic. However, as is the case in most talk, not just talk among adolescents, such topics like promiscuity are rarely discussed in the abstract, without reference to one's own experience. In the course of the three-minute discussion that I will analyze in more detail below, the five adolescent participants talk very specifically about one particular character, a female classmate who is said to have engaged in sexual activities. In this sense, their talk is not just about the general topic of promiscuity. It is about a particular case that apparently has originated in their own life world. By bringing into this conversation particular characters, grounding them in a storied world, and describing the actions in a temporal arrangement, the five participants appropriate a particular discourse format to make claims about the female story character and appraise her actions (and thereby the girl herself) from a particular *orientation*<sup>1</sup>. And, by designing their story in a very specific way, they orient toward a particular moral ground, which they claim to be their own: 'This is who we are, we as individuals, as well as 15-year-old males.'((■■■7))

I should clarify from the start that the speakers do not share a prototypical first-person account in which they thematize their own actions in their talk. Nevertheless, the claim will be made that the same analytic procedures can be applied as when analyzing first-person or past-experience narratives, the privileged genres in research interviewing. And although first-person narratives seem to give a more direct analytic access to the identity of the narrator and his/her subjectivity, I am suggesting to analyze both first-person and third-person narratives with the same suspicion – for the following reasons: First, when a speaker interactively moves to

<sup>1</sup> Toolan [2001, p. 60] coined the term 'orientation' in renaming (appropriately, in my opinion) Genette's [1980, 1988] use of 'focalization' to describe how story recipients orient to the position or quality of consciousness through which they 'see' events in a narrative and identify an individual position.

claim the floor for an extended turn in order to share an incident from the past and attempts to make this incident currently relevant, the story presents characters as ordered in space and time. A detailed analysis of the story particulars 'at work' (such as tense, aspect and modality markers, spatial transitions, or the particulars of the pronoun use and character attributions) gives insight into the position from which time, space and characters have been 'pulled together'. This 'position' is not necessarily part of a preexisting plan, idea, or intention. Rather, just as characters in the course of the telling gain their shape as protagonists and heroes, or antagonists and villains (or simply as agents, undergoers, and sufferers), the teller of the story gains his or her interactive positions as advice giver, teacher, gossip, advice seeker, or as male and adolescent. In other words, the positions from which narrative order comes into existence *emerge* in the course of the delivery of the unit of narrative. Second, in order to analyze such positions, we need to pay close attention to the order *within* the story unit – where in time and space characters are positioned vis-à-vis each other – as well as to the order that emerges in the telling of the story – where speaker and audience orient each other toward a particular type of 'discursive relationship'. Both the order inside the story and the emerging order between the interactants are interwoven and relevant for the outcome of the interaction and for the construction of 'who we are' in terms of locally emerging selves and identities. In sum, irrespective whether the speaker thematizes him- or herself or whether the speaker thematizes another person, the relational order between the participants of the interaction and the order in the story (between the characters) both need to be analyzed in close interdependence.

The narrative shared between the 15-year-olds and the moderator is not centrally about the 15-year-olds as characters in the story, but about someone else. In addition, it is at best a 'minimal narrative,' consisting of very few references to 'bounded events' that may be taken as representatives for past experiences.<sup>2</sup> Further, the unfolding of the story as a whole, although implemented by one of the boys as central narrator, is not pushed through by only one contributor. A second speaker takes on a central role in the sharing of the narrative by reformulating central events and pressing for the evaluation of the character, followed by all the other teenagers, who join in the telling in one or another way. As will be shown, the moderator also contributes considerably to the way the narrative is being performed, not only in terms of his institutionally structured status as moderator, but also in terms of being a conarrator, as if this were a 'naturally occurring conversation.' Since the interactive situation consists of several parties, it should not come as a surprise that the interactants pursue different communicative ends with their participation in the discussion.<sup>3</sup> However, these factors do not interfere with my

<sup>2</sup> To the best of my knowledge, it were Labov and Waletzky [1967/1997] who coined the notions of 'minimal narrative' and 'bounded events.' However, how the relationship between experience and the so-called bounded events is to be imagined is open to quite a number of differing views, as discussed in Bamberg [1997a].

<sup>3</sup> It also would be possible to structure the analysis more around the ways in which the two boys who are more outspoken (Fred and Ted) position themselves vis-à-vis the other three boys, or to focus more strongly on Ted's position vis-à-vis Fred (and vice versa). These aspects have not systematically been followed through in order to orient the reader toward the participants' claims regarding adolescence and masculinity (versus, for instance, competition and friendship building).

central claim that it is possible to differentiate between the positions of the participants as emerging in the ongoing discussion. Since it is assumed that such positions are always interactive achievements, accomplished in situated contexts, the actual sites where such accomplishments take place establish the empirical ground for the investigation of 'emergent identities'. Starting from the assumption that self and identity are not givens, as sitting on a shelf to be picked and plugged into communicative situations, but rather, that they are constantly under revision and interactively renegotiated, the analytic focus has shifted to the process of single instantiations. Detailed descriptions of the moments of revising and renegotiating selves and identities lay open the emergence, the coming-into-being, of identities as contextual and draft-like processes [Bamberg, 1997b]. The discussion between the five boys and the moderator is just one of those moments. All participants present themselves as having a sense of who they are – though in a draft-like format, something that is unready and can be taken back and remodeled, if necessary. ((■■■3))

Starting with the notions of selves and identities as project drafts that are constantly under revision [see Lewis, 1979, and Riegel, 1975, for a similar claim in earlier issues of this journal] and discursive spaces where such projects are drafted by interactants (for this study, the five 15-year-olds and to some degree the moderator), a microgenetic approach to development is favored. This approach focalizes the momentary history of human sense-making in the form of emergent processes. In our group discussion, the interactive space between the participants is the arena in which identities are microgenetically performed and consolidated and where they can be microanalytically accessed. Here I am borrowing from developmental [Bamberg, 2000a; Catan, 1986; Riegel, 1975; Werner, 1948; Werner & Kaplan, 1984; Wertsch & Stone, 1978], conversation-analytic [Schegloff, 1982; Sacks, 1995; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974], and 'communities of practice' approaches [Hanks, 1996; Eckert, 1989, 2000; Wenger, 1998] to analyze the sequential and relational structure of narrative talk-in-interaction, for the purpose of inquiring into the developing sense of self and others and what is shared as a cultural model of sense-making. This does not imply that such 'senses' do not exist previously to or outside the discourse situation. However, for analyzing narrative-in-interaction, I am suggesting to bracket these categories so we can be open to the analysis of what participants make relevant in the interactive setting. Entering this orientation from a socio-linguistic/ethnomethodological vantage point, I will deal with narrative and identity work that focuses on the active and interactive 'occupation of discursive spaces,' making particular use of contextualization and contextualization cues [cf. Bamberg, 2000a; Gumperz, 1981, 1992, 1996].

For the current exploration of how young 15-year-olds make sense of themselves as adolescents and as males, I start from the assumption that neither youth (adolescence) nor masculinity are attributes that were given by nature in prefabricated and nonrevisable ways. Rather, our ways of making sense of one another and, in particular, ourselves, are mediated through talk – talk that is socially interactive and locally managed for the purpose of identity construal. It is here where we understand ourselves and others and where we are able to study such positions from the perspective of the interactants with as little preconceived adult and gendered knowledge as possible. It is my aim in the following to show how the participants

in their narrating (in interaction) microgenetically produce a sense of themselves as males and as adolescents.<sup>4</sup>

### Three Levels of Positioning and Positioning Analysis

Central to the interpretive framework for the analysis of narrative interaction is the idea of *positioning*. According to Hollway [1984], positions are *given* by preexisting social forms of communication (*discourses*), and also, in another way, are *taken*. She writes: 'Discourses make available positions for subjects to take up. These positions are in relation to other people' [Hollway, 1984, p. 233]. Similarly, Harré and van Langenhove [1999, p. 17] argue: 'With positioning, the focus is on the way in which the discursive practices constitute the speakers and the hearers in certain ways and yet at the same time, they are a resource through which speakers and hearers can negotiate new positions.' In line with this type of positioning concept, narratives-in-interactions can be analyzed as being constrained by, and to a large degree determined by, such preexisting social forms of communication, whether they are termed master narratives [Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Mishler, 1995; Talbot, Bibace, Bokhour & Bamberg, 1996], master plots [Abbott, 2002], culturally available narratives [Antaki, 1994], dominant discourses [Gee, 1992; Gergen, 1995] or simply cultural texts [Denzin, 1992; Freeman, 2002]. It is in this sense that subjects, speakers, or 'the person' are 'always already' positioned in a top-down fashion, regardless of what is said and to whom it is directed.

In stark contrast, a constructivist and social constructionist perspective that operates strictly bottom-up construes the individual person as actively and agentively positioning him- or herself. Here, the person is not viewed as being 'subjected' to preexisting discourses or narratives, but rather as *subjectively* constructing these discourses. In doing this, the person constructs him- or herself as agent *and* subject, that is, as somebody who is accountable for his or her actions and words. Butler's [1990] *performative view* of realizing and performing identities in an almost play-like fashion picks up on the construction process as agentively performed, but attempts to connect and ground it to the social site of construction. Edley and Wetherell's theory of 'interpretive repertoires' [Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell & Edley, 1998, 1999] can be seen as another line of reconciling the contradiction between the two views of a subject: being positioned and agentively positioning him- or herself.

It appears that the contradictions between the two views of the person as interacting with the world (one as agent, the other as undergoer) are due to two rather distinct views of two separate centers of construction and motivating forces. They

<sup>4</sup> In order to take the reader through this construction process within which the identities of the participants are negotiated and are microgenetically emerging, I will abstain from giving information that we as observers of previous (and subsequent) interactions had gathered. Bracketing this information (as far as this is possible) will help us see (more clearly, I hope) how the interactants attend to each other as interactants and not in terms of their previously established identities. Again, this is not meant to imply that they enter the interactions *tabula rasa*, as if they have no individual or interactive histories. Rather, analytically bracketing the types of social categories that we usually bring to bear in psychological research as hypotheses or heuristics will enable us to focus 'developmentally' on emergence as the 'processes behind the structures.'

orient to two very different directions of fit ('person to world' and 'world to person'), both of which have their affordances and explanatory power as distinct metaphors that are irreconcilable. Both of them are orientational metaphors that guide our everyday talk and conceptions about the relationship between person and world. They also organize our investigations of human action and development in quite different ways.

Positioning and positioning analysis in this article are attempts to reconcile this contradiction in the following way. To investigators interested in the microgenesis of identities, the analysis of narratives-in-interaction opens up a particularly productive space in which the speaker is viewed as agentively (and responsibly) bringing about (in the sense of drawing up) a position vis-à-vis the kind of master narratives(2) that seem to position him or her. In narrating-in-interaction speakers signal their preferences in how to draw up characters and relating them in space and time, that is, they reveal aspects of how they view the world. These aspects are scrutinized in the form of fine-grained linguistic analyses at 'positioning level 1'. At this level of analysis, we scrutinize the linguistic means used to establish the characters in the story – how they are drawn into existence and how they are placed in relationship with one another – so that we can answer the question, 'How are the characters depicted, and what is the story about (its theme)?' Principles of this type of analysis reveal, in Herman's [2002] terms, the 'systemically patterned preferences for assigning roles to narrative participants' (p. 169). According to Toolan [2001], such principles 'uncover links between grammar and plot-structure' (p. 36).

In a second, analytic, step we shift from the level of content construction to 'positioning level 2', where the focus of the analysis is the interactive work that is being accomplished between the participants in the interactive setting. It is at this level, again for analytic purposes, that we ask why a story is told at a particular point in the interaction or, more specifically, why the narrator claims the floor at this particular point in the conversation to tell the story. What is he or she trying to accomplish interactively with the story? The analysis of speaker-audience positioning follows the sequential arrangement of turns between speakers, assuming that each uptake is sequentially coordinated, because it is assumed to be 'consequential' for the flow of the conversation. The principles and techniques for this type of analysis are laid out in classic conversation analytic work [Sacks, 1995; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 1982, 1997] and are applied for identity analysis [cf. McIlvenny, 2002a], an arena that was originally considered 'non-CA purposes' [ten Have, 1999]. However, the analysis here does not attempt to contribute directly to principles of how talk is done as social interaction, but rather how talk is made use of so we can analyze it as 'resulting in identities'.

The shift to 'positioning level 3' is probably best characterized in the following way: By talking *about* others and arranging them in narrative space and time (level 1) and by talking *to* others in the here and now (level 2), narrators engage in the creation of 'a sense of (them as) selves'. In other words, narrators transcend the level of story contents and the interactional level of 'How I want to be viewed by you, the audience' and (most often implicitly) address the question 'Who am I?'. In doing so, they position themselves vis-à-vis cultural discourses and normative (social) positions, either by embracing them or displaying neutrality, or by distancing, critiquing, subverting, and resisting them. It is here where a discursive space is

drawn up in a more general sense. Whatever has been accomplished locally between the interactants by sharing the story can be told *about* the speaker elsewhere, held against the speaker or contribute to his/her positive standing within the community of their practices. Therefore, the original story gains an independent status above and beyond the situation for which it was originally relevant. This is the risk of engaging in story-telling-in-interaction.((■■■4)) But such positioning is essential for claiming an identity that the others will work with and build on, because it is oriented toward culturally shared forms of continuity, including the potential for coherence (positioning level 3).

Overall, then, the analysis of the first two positioning levels is intended to progressively lead to a differentiation of how speakers draw on normative discourses and position themselves in relation to these discourses in their claims of ‘who they are’ as identity drafts. It is along these lines that speakers develop ‘subject positions’ that can ultimately lead to a sense of continuity and a sense of self. The arrangement of these three positioning levels is not coincidental. For analytic purposes, it may be appropriate to start from what seems to be ‘most explicit’ at the level of textual arrangement at level 1, working up from there to the level where speakers interactionally arrange themselves among one another at level 2. From here we can proceed to analyze at level 3 how the speakers create a *sense* of themselves – rather than assuming that they carry an ‘essential self’ into all talk-in-interactions just to explicate ‘it’. Thus, in procedural terms, I will start with a narrative, textual analysis (level 1) in which I will analyze those parts of the conversation that relate to what happened in the story and to the characters in it. This will be followed by an analysis of how these narrative parts were established interactively (level 2), resulting in the analysis (at level 3) of how the interactants engage in ‘doing adolescence’ and ‘doing masculinity’ [cf. the discussion of West & Zimmerman, 1987, by McIlvenny, 2002b, pp. 130–142).

### **Positioning Analysis: Applied**

The following interaction (presented as a full transcript here) originated in a discussion of a group of five 15-year-old males who had agreed to get together to explore ‘what it means to grow up as a young male.’ Within this project we collected written (journal entries) and oral accounts from 10-, 12-, and 15-year-old boys in different discursive contexts (one-on-one interviews, group discussions, and peer interactions) on the topics of friendship, girls, feelings and body, and future orientation. The interviews and group discussions were open-ended, both working through the same list of topics: (1) friends and friendships, (2) girls, (3) self, feeling & body, and (4) adulthood and future orientation. All five participants shared quite a bit of interactional history, within which they seemed to establish particular speaker and listener roles. At the time of the interview, the boys were 9th-graders in a large metropolitan city on the East Coast of the United States. The project had been explained to them, and they knew we were interested in how young males grow into young men and that the aim of the project was to find out, from their perspective, what it means to be a 15-year-old male.

About 25 minutes into talking about the previous weekend, being with friends, friendship and best friends, the moderator shifted to a new topic, girls. After a brief

discussion of what girls find attractive in boys and boys in girls, the conversation turned to a female classmate, who a few boys characterize as having engaged in promiscuous sex, in the course of which she may have become pregnant. A letter in which she discussed her situation fell into the hands of one of the boys, Ted, who describes the events from the perspective of a ‘central witness’, claiming that he had access to the letter the girl wrote. While the fact that one of their classmates has become pregnant definitely fulfills the criterion of ‘tellability,’ it is not this that seems to be the focal point for making it currently relevant. Rather, what seems to be more salient for their discussion is the detailed characterization of the female classmate, that is, who this girl is, how she deals with her situation, and her moral standing.

Before starting my analysis of the participants’ positions, let me briefly clarify why I would like to argue that the participants actually were engaging in the activity of narrating, since Ted’s account consists of only two references to past events: their classmate ‘had [...] sex’ (line 10) and ‘she wrote a letter’ (line 40), which by no means constitutes a full-blown narrative. Both events are nevertheless good candidates of what is ‘tellable.’ However, and more important, the way these events were inserted into the talk is typical for how narratives are woven into conversations. On both occasions, in line 4 and in lines 35–39, the speaker positions himself to enter the floor for a more extended turn by using his body posture (leaning forward), gestures (hand and finger pointing upward), and his eye gaze (in both cases directing his gaze toward the moderator with the opening of the turn). Opening in line 4 with the discursive device ‘actually,’ Ted clearly marks the shift in topic, and by immediately inserting the temporal and spatial coordinates of the event under consideration (‘last year’ and ‘a girl in our class’), he orients the audience to an upcoming story. Furthermore, the way Ted uses supra-segmentational devices to hold on to and manage the floor for several utterances also resembles typical storytelling activity. Thus, in spite of the fact that we do not find the structure of a fully developed narrative in the excerpt, there are clear hints that point toward narration as the intended type of discourse activity. The same can be said of the way Ted tries to redirect the conversation in line 35, unsuccessfully at this point, by attempting to reenter the floor (‘yeah ... and also’), and lines 39/40 (‘yeah, yeah, yeah, she wrote a letter to a kid’), where he dismisses the orientation of the previous turn by Fred and successfully reconnects to the girl as the previous topic.

*Transcript of group discussion between five 15-year-old boys and moderator*

Mod:	Moderator (50 years old)		<i>Transcription conventions</i>
B:	Bert	//	overlapping speech
F:	Fred	<< ... >>	contextual information
T:	Ted	..	short pause
W:	Wil		
A:	Al		All names are pseudonyms

*Discussion topic: ‘Girls’*

Previous topic of conversation: ‘Looks’, i.e. what do looks (of boys) mean to girls, and what do looks (of girls) mean to boys.

- 1 Mod eh .. but why .. why should girls like .. ok what what do girls//
- 2 B //you can’t really say
- 3 at the end erase that, erase that <<following up on Fred’s earlier turn>>
- 4 T actually, a girl, a girl in our class .. last year she was like .



5 she was always a little bit crazy  
 6 she always wanted a lot of attention  
 7 and she didn't get it  
 8 she didn't get the attention she needed  
 9 and so this year .  
 10 she's had a lot of sex with boys  
 11 in order to ehm gain attention of others around //her  
 12 F //and not just sex but everything  
 13 she's got earned the reputation//  
 14 Mod //you guys are fifteen, right?  
 15 F yeah . she's earned the reputation of being .. a slut  
 16 that's how everyone knows her  
 17 Mod and would she .. how does she feel?//  
 18 T //she likes it  
 19 F I think she likes it  
 20 T she needs the attention  
 21 she likes the attention  
 22 I think she enjoys the attention so much that I think she is worthless .. she's horrible  
 23 Mod I mean you guys know who you are talking about, right?  
 24 F+T yeah  
 25 W no I don't  
 26 Mod is that really true? .. is that really the case?  
 27 T Wil doesn't know her this year but last year  
 28 W yeah, I know her  
 29 Mod but that she likes it .. that girls like to//  
 30 F //she . most girls are not like that  
 31 but for some reason  
 32 you know how they say  
 33 negative attention is better than no attention at all  
 34 she really likes the attention she's getting  
 35 T yeah .. and also//  
 36 F //now everyone knows who she is//  
 37 T //once  
 38 F oh yeah, she is the slut who <<inaudible>>  
 39 T who who .. yeah yeah yeah [falling intonation]  
 40 she wrote a letter to a kid  
 41 to another child in our class  
 42 and I read the letter  
 43 because .. ok well she wanted everyone to read  
 44 and it said  
 45 she said she was pregnant  
 46 and she was deciding how to get rid of the child she was carrying  
 47 B oh my God  
 48 T and she listed about seven options  
 49 and one of the options was like starve myself  
 50 so ehm internally killing the baby  
 51 and actually she would die first if that happened  
 52 and second was eh  
 53 F you remember <<inaud>>? the baby thing //  
 54 T //oh yeah  
 55 F that she also did for attention  
 56 she was like she said she thought she might be pregnant  
 57 and she used to not be for abortion  
 58 T yeah, abortion she said a bunch of things  
 59 and she said I have the baby without my parents' knowledge  
 60 Mod I .. do you guys discuss this stuff with your mom and dad?  
 61 T+F no – no  
 62 T I would  
 63 F I wouldn't mind doing it but//

64 T //it's not important  
65 my mom would like to  
66 my mom would like to give me advice  
67 F our parents would like us to  
68 T my mom <<inaudible>>  
69 Mod so, ok, are you guys when you heard about this first,  
70 was that a little bit shocking or what?  
71 ?? about//  
72 F //but when we heard of like the first day of school we were like  
73 the first thing is like  
74 person lost their virginity over the summer .. it's like dude  
75 T telling everyone about it  
76 F it was like so shocking that Ted didn't even believe it  
77 that's how shocking it was  
78 cause I mean it's like we're just in a way ..  
79 B it's like before she was kind of ehheh <<soundplay>>, in the beginning of the seventh grade  
80 she was .. you know//  
81 F //she still is  
82 Mod but that's definitely a topic you guys talk about// after 10 o'clock at night  
83 F //not that much  
84 T no not that  
85 F I mean I know it may sound mean to say this  
86 but we couldn't really care less about her anyway

In overall terms, the chosen excerpt consists of two references to past events that are inserted into the discourse by the same person, positioning him in the role of a narrator. There is no further reference to other narrative events – apart from what was argued to have been written in the letter. All other talk follows up on and surrounds these two events by elaborating on them in a descriptive and evaluative fashion. According to Labov and Waletzky [1967/1997], these two events can be said to form the skeleton around the evaluative information, although with the interesting difference that, while we usually expect more sequentially ordered events interspersed with less evaluative information, we find the opposite relation in our excerpt. Most of the talk is occupied with evaluating the events in moral and ethical terms, while information about what actually happened is relatively sparse.

### *Positioning Level 1:*

#### *Who Are the Characters and How Are They Positioned in the Story?*

The narrative under analysis contained only one central character, namely, the girl. There are no other singular, individual agentive characters mentioned in the story. Only one other individual character is explicitly referred to. He is the recipient of the letter written by the girl: 'a *kid*, another *child* in our class' (lines 40/41). Then, there is the plural mention of other boys in 'she had (...) sex with *boys*' (line 10), and a reference to other girls in '*most girls* are not like that' (line 30). All others (line 10), whose attention she wanted, remain unnamed and faceless. In other words, the girl in question as a potential main character is stripped of her personal relations with particular others. These others in the story-world are pluralized and referred to as *kids*, *children*, *boys*, *girls*, or simply *others*. Of course, these others all might have been specific individuals who have proper names, but Ted and Fred have chosen not to present them with their names, but in more generalized and

faceless contours. Furthermore, this world within the story is explicitly characterized as one of children, not adults or young adults. The girl who will be discussed and evaluated is positioned and integrated into this *kids'* world – a world that later on will be contrasted with their own world of rational, young adults.

Turning next to the analysis of how the girl is positioned in relation to these other faceless characters in terms of her action descriptions, we find her in a somewhat agentive role inasmuch as she is mentioned in the syntactic subject slot. It is not that other boys had sex *with* her or that another kid in the class *received* a letter, but that *she* seemed to have initiated these acts willfully as if she was in full control. Overall, it is clear that the story told is *about* her, this particular classmate of the group of interview participants, who happens to be female. She is the central focus and we are faced with the question (for positioning analysis at level 2, further below) as to why she has been topicalized at this point in the ongoing conversation.

The details of how the girl is characterized are nevertheless much more drawn out and relevant for further analysis. The narrator (Ted) starts with an account of who the girl is in terms of her history of intentions: Last year [in 8th grade], she didn't get the attention she wanted, resulting in the fact that this year, which was actually over the summer, she had 'a lot of sex with boys.' Ted does not suggest that this girl simply had sex, but she had 'sex with boys' (plural), and even worse, she had 'a *lot* of sex with boys,' using an 'extreme case formulation' to mark his evaluative stance and evoke the image of promiscuity. Furthermore, Ted attributes 'to gain attention' as the motivating force behind her actions, placing her in the vicinity of 'craving for acknowledgment from others' and 'wanting to gain popularity.' Whether Ted, by assigning motives to her actions, can be assumed already at this point to demarcate his own 'social location' in all this – as Mills [1940, p. 445] suggests 'vocabularies of motive' do – may be left open for now. However, it should be noted that Ted takes elaborate effort to underscore her agentive engagement in sexual activities as part of her desire and efforts to be socially accepted by (unnamed and faceless) others.

At this point, Fred enters the floor. He reformulates Ted's account in what appears to be a more extreme formulation, that it wasn't 'just sex, but *everything*'<sup>5</sup> (in line 12), summing up the characterization of their female classmate (in line 15) as 'a slut.' The self-correction from 'she's got the reputation' to 'she earned the reputation' (in line 13) marks the preference for *her* as the one responsible for the characterization that others attribute to her. And it is also interesting to note that Fred does not take the responsibility himself for this characterization by saying, 'I call (or would call) her a slut.' Neither are others given a more agentive semantic role, as in potentially 'others call her (or would call her) a slut.' What she did led to what she got; it was deserved. She *earned* this reputation – this is a fair deal.

When asked by the moderator to consider the girl's perspective, how *she* might feel about this characterization (line 17), Fred and Ted follow through by assigning to her the internal motive of joy and satisfaction because she succeeded in gaining the attention she desired, and Ted additionally characterizes this in line 22 as

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<sup>5</sup> Fred's exact wording 'and not just sex, but everything' seems to parallel Ted's qualification of 'sex' in the sense that their classmate didn't have 'sex with lots of boys,' but 'lots of sex with boys,' i.e., both of them seemed to try to display their expertise on issues of 'sex' by hinting at the fact that there is 'more than *just* sex.'

‘horrible,’ and her as ‘worthless.’ When challenged by the moderator, who seems to be taking this passage to constitute a claim about girls in general, Fred is willing to acknowledge (in line 30) that ‘most girls are not like that,’ but that the ‘popularity motive’ laid out by Ted earlier is the driving force for what happened, resulting in the girl’s reputation as a slut.

In lines 35 and 37, Ted attempts to reenter the floor – or to continue what he had started but not completed with his account of the sexual activities of their classmate. Indicating by way of falling intonation (‘yeah, yeah, yeah,’ line 39) that the conversation of the others was not heading anywhere, he successfully cuts off Fred and reenters the floor in order to reestablish the story with ‘she wrote a letter’ (line 40). He confirms in line 42 that he actually had read the letter, and in line 43, accounts briefly that there was no wrongdoing in his reading because, again, it was her own intent (‘she wanted everyone to read it’), attributing motives to her that are in support of the general characterization of her as a notorious ‘attention getter’ and ‘popularity achiever.’ Line 45 establishes the fact that makes the sequence of events even more tellable, namely that she had claimed to be pregnant. It is worth noting that this is not stated as factual in the form of an event clause, but as reported in the letter. Presenting the pregnancy as a claim by the letter writer, instead of simply stating that she *was* pregnant (as a prerequisite for writing the letter), seems to be a carefully chosen rhetoric tactic in order to avoid a clear commitment with regard to the truthfulness of what was quoted, thereby downplaying and minimizing the pregnancy and leaving the adult participant in the dark as to whether she actually had been pregnant. The ambiguity about their classmate’s pregnancy is further corroborated by Fred’s mention of her talk about the pregnancy in line 56: ‘she said she thought she might be pregnant.’ Quoting her indirectly and as *thinking* ‘she *might* be pregnant,’ indexes a very distanced and noncommitting perspective, underscoring their classmate’s indecision about her stance toward abortion and further undermining her moral resoluteness and standing as a person.

With line 48, the principal narrator (Ted) prefaces the potential list of ‘about seven options’ for how ‘she was deciding to get rid of the child,’ of which three are actually mentioned (lines 49–59), concluding the narrative by way of falling sentential intonation with line 59. The lexical choice of ‘getting rid’ clearly signals his condemnation of the procedure by which the protagonist was considering abortion as an option. In addition, slipping into the girl’s internal perspective in line 49 (‘starve myself,’ in contrast to a possible ‘starve herself’) juxtaposes his very distanced and rational (and thereby superior) stance, namely that she had forgotten with this option that she would actually die first. The narrator chooses these perspectives to effectively characterize the female protagonist as not only irresolute and irresponsible, but also as stupid.

The moderator, in line 60 (‘do you guys discuss this stuff with your mom and dad?’), lines 69/70 (‘when you heard about this first, was that a little bit shocking?’), and line 82 (‘that’s definitely a topic you guys talk about after 10 o’clock at night?’)<sup>6</sup> tries to probe deeper into the meaning of this experience for the group of

<sup>6</sup> This comment is actually an uptake on an earlier segment, whereby the moderator had tried to find out to what degree they were sharing secrets and talk about more personal and intimate issues during their sleepovers ‘after 10 o’clock,’ when the lights were out.

five boys.<sup>7</sup>((■ ■ ■ 6)) The answers given by Fred are somewhat contradictory. While he describes her as ‘worthless’ and ‘horrible’ (line 22), and asserts in lines 75/76 that it definitely was a shock to hear this at first, he seems to shrug the whole affair off at the end of this excerpt as not caring much for her (line 86), not really worrying or being touched by the events. In addition, while they admit that their parents might want their sons to share these kinds of stories with them, Ted also claims that this information is ‘not important’ (line 64).

Although my analysis of how the narrators position the girl by use of detailed rhetoric devices could be far more specific, I hope to have demonstrated sufficiently the rhetoric construction of her charactership as ‘at fault’. The female character has emerged in a narrative plot as situated in a ‘kids’ world’ and as acting irresponsibly, bringing her fate upon herself, as a result of something that is ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ for anyone who acts like she did. At the same time, her actions and her responsibility are characterized as ‘unnatural’: normal (good) girls are not like her – drawing up a position of fitness from where ‘good’ and ‘bad’ girls are clearly distinguishable.

### *Positioning Level 2:*

#### *How Does the Speaker/Narrator Position Himself vis-à-vis His Interlocutors?*

Having worked through the narrative to describe the emergence of the girl as positioned by the narrators, I will work through the whole segment a second time, this time with a focus on the relational work that is accomplished between the participants of the conversation. To begin with, we need to consider that there is more than one story-teller and two potential audiences, the adult moderator and the peers. Thus the choice of linguistic forms and performance features serves to design positions in relation to two audiences: the adult moderator, who has been claiming that he needs to be informed about what it is like to be a young male, and the age mates, who know the speaker, at least in the context of this group.

For his account for what happened some time in the past, Ted prefaces his narrative in line 4 with the discourse marker ‘actually,’ and then introduces the main character with the use of the indefinite article, ‘a girl.’ Since the general theme thus far had been ‘attraction’ and ‘popularity’ of boys and girls with regard to the other sex, and since the moderator in line 1 had tried to re-thematize ‘girls’ as a more concrete topic, Ted’s turn-initial information can easily be heard as the attempt to continue on the topic of ‘girls’ with information that is more specific. ‘Actually’ in turn-initial position serves as an opener (for his turn) and continuer (of the topic), indexing that the general topic of ‘girls’ will be ‘actualized’ as some-

<sup>7</sup>As these questions and the boys’ responses clearly signal, the participants structure the interactive situation in terms of an institutional framework, i.e., they engage in ‘doing group discussion.’ A closer analysis of this aspect of the interaction would show how this particular format enables or ‘calls for’ an identity that is more likely to speak as a generic person and not as someone who is informally chatting in ‘more natural’ interactions. However, this does not imply that the practices under scrutiny in this article are solely the ‘product’ of the participants’ institutionally structured status. Rather, I am following Speer and Potter [2002] in treating these data ‘as natural material in the specific sense that we are not privileging the actions and orientations of the researcher, but instead are treating [him] as an active implicated part of what is going on’ (p. 177).

thing that is ‘actual’ but probably also fascinating and bizarre. In addition, ‘actually’ also signals a potentially adversarial or corrective stance with regard to what has been said before. But instead of immediately following up with what ‘actually’ is the case, that is, giving the contrasting information, Ted first launches into a description of the character of what the girl was like in the past. Interactively, he signals that he is shifting gears (‘actually’) and setting the scene for launching into the narrative mode. In addition, we can assume that the targeted audience for this narrative is the adult moderator. If Ted had been trying to appeal to his peers, he might have indexed more directly whom the upcoming events were ‘about,’ for instance, ‘Do you remember [name]?’ – followed with what actually happened.

As we had established in our level 1 analysis, the female character in the course of the narrative was depicted in the narrative as having done something that ordinary, ‘good,’ girls would not do. In addition, the motives that were attributed to her created a picture of someone who is a kid; unstable, maladjusted, and irresponsible; that is, the prototype (from an adult perspective) of a juvenile, or pre-adult-like person. Thus, the story-world that is construed for the ears of the moderator serves as an exemplar for a moral order that is clearly ‘outside’ the teller’s perspective. The characterization of the girl’s actions as deviant and untenable becomes even more marked in the way her letter is slipped into the discourse. First of all, a letter to be read by everyone is a highly problematic way to talk about something that under normal circumstances is considered a personal and secretive dilemma. Second, writing notes and placing these notes into the hands of ‘overhearing audiences’ (for the purpose of ‘attention getting’) is something that is typical of juveniles who have not made their transition into the world of young adults.

Furthermore, starving oneself to death or having a baby without anyone noticing while freely talking about these choices along with abortion in a semi-public letter are designed in Ted’s version of the story to ridicule the girl’s credibility and her general credibility as a person. The female classmate is characterized as blameworthy (due to her ignorance); she is characterized as unstable in her values and opinions, and seems to have become a victim of her own ambition to seek popularity. She is ‘morally blind’ – see Fine [1986] for the distinction between three types of assigning blame by ‘moral defect,’ ‘negligence,’ and ‘moral blindness’ – blinded by attractiveness and popularity, which, according to many authors [Eckert, 1989; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Thorne, 1993; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995] are emerging characteristics of the ‘marketplace of popularity’ in junior high school within the larger peer-controlled ‘marketplace of identities’ [Eckert, 2000, p. 14]. However, Ted and Fred’s position with regard to these marketplaces is one of disapproval and rejection. In order to remain decent and respectable, they seem to suggest, you either stay away from any engagement in these marketplaces or you engage in them in moderate ways and in accordance with proclaimed standards. The position from which their classmate’s actions and her worth as a person are assessed elevates these standards up to a moral high ground that is characteristic for a detached rationality – one that is not committed, impartial, and objective. Ted, supported by Fred, ‘teaches’ the adult moderator who *we*, as young boys – in contrast to *this* girl – are: smart, rational, in control of our minds and actions, stable, well adjusted. In sum, we are responsible, *young adults* who make their decisions on the basis of commonly shared, adult-like standards.

The adult moderator in all of this, which is typical for this type of research discussion, is oscillating between the role of collaborator and the role of challenger. After Fred attempts to display himself as an authority on sex, one who knows more accurately (and better) how to appraise the events than Ted, the adult moderator challenges the group of five boys by placing them in the category of ‘too young for this’ (‘you guys are 15, right?’ line 14), opening up the interpretation that he considers them more in the ‘children’ category. Addressing the group with ‘you guys,’ the moderator cues for a context of alignment and solidarity. However, the overall question in this slot is more likely to cue for a context of difference: ‘you are 15, and I’m an adult.’ The second challenge, in the form of asking the boys to take the girl’s perspective (‘and how would she .. how does she feel?’ line 17), as well as the moderator’s display of surprise in light of the revelations in lines 23 (‘I mean you guys know who you are talking about, right?’<sup>8</sup>) and 26/29 (‘is that really true? Is that really the case?’ and ‘but that she likes it .. that girls like to’) all serve as contextualization cues to read the moderator as speaking from an adult position and as a moderator in the process of ‘doing moderating’. It is against this background that we interpret the five adolescents as more strongly condemning their classmate in relation to the moderator, aligning themselves individually and as a group with what can be taken as the normative, adult orientation and thereby distancing themselves more clearly from the category of children.

With his question in line 60 (‘do you guys discuss this stuff with your mom and dad?’), the moderator again cues for a context in which he is viewed as speaking from an adult position, placing the adolescent participants in the category of children (of their parents). However, he then takes on a position that places him into a more colluding relationship with the group of participants, though to no avail. None of them open up and reveal why they are sharing these details with him but not with their parents or teachers – and most likely not with any other adult. While it could be argued that the information shared by the group of adolescent participants in this group discussion is special to the relationship between moderator and participants, I would like to claim that we may be facing a typical feature of institutionally organized discourses. In their role of ‘advisors’ on issues of what it means to be a 15-year-old boy, the participants share some events that they do not necessarily share with other adults in order to come across as authentic and trustworthy. Thus it can be argued that the sharing of seemingly intimate information is not necessarily the result of ‘good rapport’ between participants and moderator but rather a feature that is more typical in group discussions with research agenda. Nevertheless, what becomes increasingly clear here is that the group of adolescents attempts to altercast with the group of parents: Although our parents would like to know such things, we have our own world. It is not necessarily the case that our parents do not care but that they have their own relevancies as adults, and we, as young adults, have ours.

Of particular interest in this discussion is the fact that the principal narrator (Ted) and Fred, the one who echoes and amplifies Ted’s story, seem to oscillate between two conflicting positions. On the one hand, they want to come across as

<sup>8</sup> It is also interesting to see how the moderator uses this question to cue himself into the context as ‘gossiping,’ that is, he structures the talk so the five boys can become ‘respondents’ to his research agenda (see also footnote 7).

concerned about events that are characterized as shocking and unbelievable, and display their horror about the ‘worthlessness’ of the person who engaged in such ‘horrible and unspeakable acts.’ On the other hand, they claim this is not the kind of stuff they share with their parents or with one another in more intimate situations. They actually claim, in line 86, they could not care less about the girl and her ordeal. It seems that such a contradiction is actually quite common for the type of interaction we are dealing with in this excerpt. Fred has made elaborate efforts to signal that all this is not just his construction but that others share his attributions and, most likely, the general position from where such attributions are justifiably imposed. In line 16, he declared that ‘everyone’ knows her as a slut, in line 32 he appropriated the general public ‘you know how they say,’ in line 72, he spoke for the whole group’ (‘when *we* heard this, *we* were like’), and in line 86, he again called on ‘us’ as jury and judges (‘*we* couldn’t really care less about her anyway’), prefaced by the disclaimer ‘I know it may sound mean to say this.’

Speaking for others and appealing to public discursive rituals are discursive management strategies employed so that Fred’s own evaluations of others cannot be directly attributed to him, or at least not to him alone. Openly reflecting (as in line 85, ‘I know’) on how he might be heard as insensitive is yet another subtle, discursive way to preempt and deflect potential negative reactions from the audience [Speer & Potter, 2002, p. 163] – his peers – and particularly from the adult moderator. These discursive devices in concert contribute further to Fred’s claim of being authentic and to position himself as a helpful messenger of more general moral concerns, rather than as a gossiper or someone who has any personal stakes or interests regarding their classmate. The dilemma in this position would be in his desire to claim access to their classmate’s mind and emotionality, but by laying claim to know her ‘intimately’ coming dangerously close to blurring the boundaries between her stance and one’s own. Therefore, the rhetorical devices employed not only serve the interactive function of preempting potential negative uptakes in the ongoing conversation, they also simultaneously function as a self-display that clearly contrasts with the person under evaluation. The construction of their classmate as not newsworthy or relevant (see Positioning Analysis Level 1) is designed ‘not to flaunt,’ as Kitzinger calls it [2002, p. 71] but ‘to slip it into the conversation so as to make it public (...) displayed as being an instance or piece of evidence in support of some other point’ (ibid.). It is within these interactional dynamics that moral perspectives come into existence, whereas they are traditionally viewed as preexisting attitudes or resources for individual or group actions [cf. Fine, 1986, p. 420].

Of similar interest is Fred’s response to the moderator’s question (in lines 69/70), this time echoed and supported by Ted, topicalizing their emotional reaction when the ‘story’ first broke. Fred ‘speaks for’ Ted and reports that Ted was very shocked upon hearing about it on the first day of school after the summer vacation, although Ted could certainly have given a more detailed and authentic account. But Fred, as the interpreter and amplifier of the moral impact of the story, continues in his role of instructing their audiences about the moral magnitude of what had occurred. Ted’s characterization of the girl as ‘telling everyone about it,’ in line 75, on the one hand echoes and supports Fred’s account: He had heard of it because she had told *everyone* about it; so he was a by-standing eyewitness, and what Fred is reporting here is seemingly a truthful account. On the other hand, Ted



can also be heard as emphasizing *why* he was morally so indignant, not so much because of what she had done, but because she had shared it with *everyone* – most likely, as the group tried to impress, in her ‘obsession to gain popularity.’ All of this diminishes the issue of promiscuity and focuses on the public nature of the story, which violated the space of what is proper – a space that is being claimed increasingly as their own in the course of this interaction.

Whether these discursive and interactive moves in themselves can be characterized as a particular type of masculinity or as ‘male discourse’ is unclear, particularly because girls reportedly engage in the same, if not worse, acts of slut bashing [see Tanenbaum, 2000; White, 2002]<sup>9</sup>. It could be argued, though, that girls may appropriate male discursive positions at such occasions. Nevertheless, the way this girl is construed as similar to but different from other girls opens up the ideological discourse of ‘good girls’ versus ‘bad girls,’ wherein good girls use the ‘publicly controlled’ space to engage in ‘moderate’ popularity work, but do not use their physical attraction to engage in sexual activities and do not have any sexual desires. As Fine [1988] and Tanenbaum [2000] argue, within this discourse, girls are constructed to have sex because they are pressured or coerced – or else they are sluts. The positioning of their classmate as different from ‘other girls’ is significant here. Not only is she characterized as ‘other’ in terms of her standing with regard to an adult rationality (and morality) that is appropriated by the five boys, but she is also ‘other’ from how the boys construe ‘girls’ as different from boys. It is in this respect that the adult rationality evoked here takes on aspects of a masculine discourse within which sexuality is regulated by the logic of men as agentive and women as passive.

### *Positioning Level 3:*

#### *Positions Taken vis-à-vis Normative Discourses and ‘Self’*

Having detailed how the girl was drawn up as a particular character in the story in order to position themselves in a social sphere that is markedly different, we can now more clearly delineate the particulars that the participants attempt to claim for themselves as adolescents (vis-à-vis children and adults) and also as males (vis-à-vis females). The discursive function of this story within the interaction sequence as a whole can be described as follows: On the one hand, the boys as a group give an example for how they morally construe themselves as responsible young adults. As such, they cue for a context in which they come across as advice givers and ‘deliver’ the kind of advice the moderator had asked for at the onset of the group discussion. At the same time, the five boys do relational work with each other. They try to present themselves as a relatively solid block in terms of their moral position, with Ted and Fred setting the discursive orientation for the others to follow.((■■■8)) In Charles Antaki’s words [1994], they evoke and develop a portfolio of identities that is available to be carried over into new conversations. They are building, reproducing, and constituting culture as they talk, reiterating and re-staging discursive building blocks that are not original and, in doing so, logically

<sup>9</sup> My appropriation of the term ‘slut bashing’ is based on these authors’ work.

contribute to the processes through which ‘resignification’ may come about [Bell, 1999; Butler, 1990; Speer & Potter, 2002, p. 153]. In terms of their sense of who they are, something that they may potentially develop into a repertoire for new discourse settings and situations, the five participants have successfully reestablished very traditional and normative gender roles around male standards as prototypical norms or guideposts from where they are able to police the behavior of girls.

The particulars of how the activity of drawing up their moral position has been achieved now can be argued to more clearly point to aspects of a *male* position. The category of girls – in general, ‘good girls’ – is established as a middle ground, in between ‘sluts’ and ‘us,’ depicting a space distinctly separate from the space the boys claim for themselves. And girls, who traditionally or ‘naturally’ engage in ‘popularity work,’ run the risk of overdoing it and becoming victims of their own desire to be popular. They may end up as sluts. Thus, to run the risk of becoming a slut is only possible for those who occupy that middle ground: One has to be a girl to engage in popularity work, in contrast to us, as boys, who could never slide into this, because we do not need to engage in this type of work.

The group’s claim to an adolescent or adult rationality vis-à-vis the adult moderator bears the implicit orientation that girls, in principle, are shut out of the public domain that allows them to make the same kind of identity claims as boys. Girls’ talk activities are looked down upon as ‘pussy,’ ‘girlish’ and ‘childish,’ not endowed with reason, and often absurd [see Eckert, 1989, 2000; Thorne 1993]. Their attempts to get attention and be popular and attractive are warded off as unmanly or uncool [see Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002]. Therefore the danger of playing out and potentially *over*playing this kind of currency simply is fended off as not posing any threat to their own masculine identity space.

In terms of the identity work performed within the frame of the particular interactive setting, all five boys (in cooperation with the moderator) succeeded in giving a number of answers to the ‘Who am I?’ question. Drawing up positions around the girl in question, and girls in general, they evoked a sense of self that confirms a strong consensus with regard to *what it means to be male*. First, their joint positioning generated the same kind of rationality that was identified as a male traditional discourse and that historically has formed the basis for the scientific rationality of mainstream modernism ((■ ■ ■ 1)) [Giddens, 1991; Grimshaw, 1986; Lloyd, 1984]. Second, their engagement in the joint act of slut bashing led to a construal of ‘male standards’ with regard to girls as ‘others,’ and sexuality as a space under the control of male standards. It is interesting to see that their strategy to position themselves as rational and mature could be functionally appropriated to construct themselves as ‘male.’ In other words, to position themselves as smart, mature, cool, and thereby *not* as children, the boys were able to draw up a space they could occupy as grounds for their position as males.

## Conclusions

The two events, a girl engaging in promiscuity and writing a letter about her potential pregnancy, appear to be ‘borrowed’ and inserted into this interaction to enable the establishment of a number of interactional positions. While it is likely that the two events had surfaced before as hearsay and gossip in school corridors,

they are newly contextualized in the here-and-now to cue a context for educating the adult moderator as to who these five boys *really* are: somewhat young in appearance, but actually very rational and mature-young males who can make justifiable claims about their moral standing the way adults do to police children. In other words, the significance of this narrative is that the (local) product of the interactive situation was facilitated by – and ‘coproduced’ in relation to – the adult moderator during the group discussion. The events and the girl’s character are ‘invented’ and appropriated for the here-and-now of the group to do the type of identity work in the discussion with an adult moderator and with each other.

Again, this is not to imply that the kind of moral standards that seemed to have been drawn on here never before entered the consciousness of the five participating boys (or the adult moderator), just as slut bashing may not have been a new practice for all of them (although this is possible). Both existed before the activity that is reflected in the transcript, and most likely all five boys had been exposed to aspects of them way before this discussion took place. However, rather than viewing them as repertoires or resources that they simply could draw on, I want to highlight the conversational ‘pull’ that moved toward the mutual engagement in the act of slut bashing. Without the need that was borne within the group’s (social science) agenda to present oneself as mature, rational, and responsible, there probably would have not been any need to appeal to maleness in this particular way and to engage in slut bashing. The male positions, so to speak, slipped in underhandedly. They helped create an in-group orientation and made the discursive work more authentic. ((■■■5))

Further, and along the same line, the activity of slut-bashing in the interview context *became* what Thorne calls ‘borderwork’ [Thorne, 1993]. For the purpose of underscoring one’s own maturity, borders between boys and girls need to be erected so they can be argumentatively drawn upon [see also Frosh et al., 2002, p. 72]. In their attempt to emancipate themselves into the moral domain of mature adults, the principal narrator (Ted) and his amplifier (Fred) empower and entitle themselves and the group as a whole as males. And it is in this sense that a form of ‘collective experience’ is being generated, that is, not necessarily intended and not necessarily with ‘masculinity’ written all over it, but in rather subtle, highly contradictory ways that, in retrospect, can also be regretted.

What ‘simply’ happened in the construction of this narrative was the following: The minimal references to past events served as an appeal to something that all the boys participating in this conversation knew about: a shared (and most likely talked about) experience of a girl they all knew from last year. Although the account as a whole was shared and co-constructed by all participants, including the moderator, it was orchestrated chiefly by two of the 15-year-olds, with one (Ted) predominantly responsible for establishing the factual information, and the other (Fred) as echoing and amplifying this information in terms of its evaluative (and moral) implications. The two past events inserted into the conversation served as the backdrop for a character appraisal with the aim to establish an authorial position (on the topic of sex, talking about it in public spaces, as well as moral issues in general). From here the events and the characterization of the protagonist could merge into a framework of givens – so everything appeared as natural and as if it could not be otherwise. Thus, the joint construction of this narrative effectively altercasts the character (in the story) with ‘us’ as a group of male youths (in the

here and now), resulting in the collective identity claim of 'us' as young, though mature and responsible and, in this sense, as 'adults.' As such, this construction process prolongs and strengthens the positions and standards that emerged and can be argued to have the potential to contribute to their perpetuation. While it seems to be a common characteristic of youth cultures to question and potentially subvert adult and gendered norms, the boys in our conversation, in their attempt to 'be different' and altercast parents and girls, reerect very normative boundaries that are much in agreement with adult, male territories common to the traditional adult world. It is this contradiction that was most surprising in the analysis, again reflecting the inherent contradictiveness of local, microdevelopmental processes.

Of course, at this point, the critical question remains, what can we as adults and as educators make of this? It should go without saying that the interaction discussed here is not typical in the sense that *this* is the way *boys* talk and act. I nevertheless would like to raise two issues. First, by showing slut bashing as an interactive achievement, we are able to view this activity in its fuller interactional context as an accomplishment that serves a number of (interactive) purposes. Using a particular form of positioning analysis, it could be shown how slut bashing as a speech activity (in this particular discursive situation) was instantiated in order to claim a mature and adult-like position. At the same time, it established a moral high ground as the platform for one's own morality, with a claim to one's positional space as male in relation to 'the female.' Again, it should be stressed that 'male space' here is *not* implied to be conversationally planned and intended, but *emerging* within the constraints of the conversation as 'tacitly agreed upon' or as 'legitimate peripheral participation' [Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998], and as a space where the 15-year-olds came to practice speaking collectively as legitimate actors. As such, speech activities like slut bashing can be said to be part of the fabric of adolescence, but such conversations by no means constitute a 'natural' or a necessary way of 'growing-up.' The way the boys designed their 'male space' in this particular conversation strengthens the cultural (double) standard 'that men and boys are free to express themselves sexually, but women and girls are not' [Tanenbaum, 2000, p. xix]. It also perpetuates and potentially cements this and other standards as 'natural' differences between boys and girls. This tendency to 'naturalize' cultural versions into facts of life that could not be otherwise may very well contribute to the 'ideological dilemma' [see Billig, 1987, 1991] of a logic of accountability that is detrimental for a more healthy development of male identities.

As a second and concluding point, I would like to suggest that investigations of how identities are microgenetically developed and locally construed in different discourse sites seem to be a very important site for future pedagogical considerations. While it may be necessary and important to judge and condemn activities like slut bashing as ostracizing, degrading, and despicable, it is of utmost importance to become clearer about the processes and the identity-generating functions involved in such activities. It is my conviction that such investigations into the micro-organization of discursive positions will result in the development of communicative strategies of adults (teachers and parents, as well as educational policy makers) for how to work more productively with positions that traditionally are quickly characterized as stereotypical or maladjusted and held against those contributing to them. Deeper and more descriptive insights into how these positions become pieced together early on in particular discourse situations will most definitely result in

better interactive strategies than individualistic therapeutically misconstrued ways of helping deprived and deficient young males become more responsible and reflective.

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