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# Speaking of Stigma and the Silence of Shame: Young Men and Sexual Victimization

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# Speaking of Stigma and the Silence of Shame: Young Men and Sexual Victimization

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**Abstract:** This study addresses male sexual victimization as that which is both invisible and incomprehensible. Forensic interviews with young men following reports of suspected sexual assault reveal patterns of heteronormative scripts appropriated to make sense of sexual victimization. These scripts show that victimhood is largely incompatible with dominant notions of masculinity. Sexual coercion and assault embodied threat to boys' (hetero)gendered selves, as they described feelings of shame and embarrassment, disempowerment, and emasculation. These masks of masculinity create barriers to disclosure and help to explain the serious underreporting of male sexual victimization. Questions of coercion and consent are addressed, as it relates to matters of legitimacy, sexuality, and power. With few exceptions, boys' constructions of sexual violence have received little attention. This study adds the voices of young men to the

developing empirical and theoretical research on male victims of sexual assault.

**Keywords** [hegemonic masculinity](#), [violence](#), [youth](#), [culture](#), [criminology](#)

The notion of male sexual victimization is still relatively new (see [Graham 2006](#)) and has received little research or public attention outside of clinical ([Frazier 1993](#); [Myers 1989](#); [Pesola, Westfal, and Kuffner 1999](#)) and institutional settings, such as prisons ([B. Smith 2012](#); [Stermac et al. 1996](#); [Walker, Archer, and Davies 2005](#)). Treating male sexual assault as rare or minimizing the effects ([Dube et al. 2005](#)) is at odds with recent federal surveys that report widespread sexual victimization of men ([National Center for Injury Prevention and Control 2011](#); [Stemple and Meyer 2014](#)). Results from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey show similar prevalence rates of nonconsensual sex for men and women in the previous twelve months ([Stemple and Meyer 2014](#)). Other studies report prevalence rates between 11 percent and 18 percent ([Briere and Elliot 2003](#); [Dube et al. 2005](#); [Finkelhor et al. 2014](#); [Tjaden and Thoennes 2006](#)), supporting the statistic that one in six men have experienced abusive sexual experiences before age eighteen (<https://1in6.org/the-1-in-6-statistic/>). These estimates are likely low, however, due to underreporting that often accompanies the shame and stigma of sexual victimization ([Tjaden and Thoennes 2006](#)). Only a small number of children who are sexually abused actually tell an adult ([Finkelhor, Wolak, and Berliner 2001](#); [Finkelhor et al. 2014](#)). Boys are generally less willing to report than girls (48 percent vs. 76 percent; [Nofziger and Stein 2006](#)) and adolescent boys might be least likely to tell someone ([Paine and Hansen 2002](#)).

Rape myths that portray male victimization as either aberrant or harmless ([Denov 2003](#); [Scarce 1997](#)) discourage young men from disclosing sexual assault. Victim attributions like self-blame and the fear of negative reactions from others such as doubt, disbelief, or indifference also reduce the likelihood of reporting ([Davies 2002](#)). Accounts from survivors indicate that normative expectations about masculinity act as additional barriers to disclosure for fear of being ridiculed as weak, inadequate, or labeled homosexual ([Scarce 1997](#); [West 2000](#)). Masculine socialization practices depict boys as invulnerable and powerful and male bodies as impenetrable. Dominant

discourses position men as sexual aggressors and women as sexual victims; to envision men as victims or women as perpetrators challenges dominant paradigms of sexual harm and risk, particularly in a heteronormative culture. The invisibility and minimization of male sexual victimization, the use of outdated definitions that fail to include female and same-sex perpetrators ([Black et al. 2011](#); [Weiss 2010b](#)), and the lack of money available to study male sexual assault culminate in a paucity of research and public information ([Graham 2006](#); [Stemple and Meyer 2014](#)).

With few exceptions, boys' constructions of sexual violence have received little attention from victimization scholars and those interested in the gendered power dynamics of adolescent sexual development. The ways that young men process sexual assaults are unclear, but they are likely influenced by relationships among masculinities, sexualities, violence, and victimhood. Cultural narratives regarding gender and sexual offenses may contribute to victims' definitions of their experiences as shameful or stigmatizing. Ideals and myths about gender and sexuality influence perceptions about who can and cannot be raped ([Connell 1995](#); [Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#); [Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald 1999](#); [Weiss 2009](#), [2010a](#), [2010b](#)). This study is concerned with boys' experiences of sexual victimization and consent. I pay attention to how boys interpret and respond to experiences of assault and coercion. The narratives of young men allow for an exploration of how they understand their experiences within particular cultural discourses. How are male victims constructed? How do boys experience shame and stigma within these contexts? In what ways do they account for and respond to these experiences? Using data from a larger study on child sexual assault in which youth were interviewed by specialized forensic interviewers following reports of suspected sexual assault, I study the descriptions and understandings provided by young men alongside their demonstrations of gender during the interviews. In their own words, boys explained the stigma and shame attached to sexual assault via culturally available discourses of gender, sexuality, and violence.

## Dominant Discourses of Masculinity

Under patriarchy, power has always been central to masculine identity ([Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#)). Scholarship on compulsory heterosexuality ([Connell 1987](#); [Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#); [Rich 1980](#); [Tolman et al. 2003](#)), hegemonic masculinity ([Connell 1987](#); [Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#)), and heteronormativity ([Kitzinger 2005](#); [Martin 2009](#); [Thorne and Luria 1986](#)) consistently finds that traditional gender arrangements, beliefs, and behaviors reinforce men's access and ability to gain power over women and other men. [Butler's \(1993\)](#) theory of heterosexuality is based on an understanding of bodies as either penetrating or penetrated. The male body is culturally identifiable as the "penetrator/not penetrated." Hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality is compulsory in that it is assumed to be natural and expected ([Rich 1980](#); [Schippers 2007](#)) and anything outside of that model might relegate boys and men to deviant or stigmatized identities ([Goffman 1967](#); [Ralston 2012](#)). Boys and men who are homosexual or members of minority racial groups, for instance, are marginalized within this framework ([Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#)). [Graham \(2006\)](#) argues that for a society where heterosexuality is dominant, and being gay is the ultimate male insult, the penetration of the male body is problematic. Male homosexuality is widely considered a threat to masculinity, and boys are locked in a "gender straitjacket" enforced by a cultural "boy code" ([Pollack 1998, 2006](#)). The boy code insists on invulnerability via the use of admonitions like "be a man," "boys don't cry," or "don't act like a wimp, sissy, or fag." Young people are subject to the pressures of heteronormativity from an early age, and the predominance of a boy code is found in a variety of settings including [Pascoe's \(2007\)](#) work in high schools. Pascoe found that young men were expected to achieve certain standards of masculinity such as distancing oneself from homosexuality. Those who identified as or were deemed gay in high school were stigmatized and boys learned that acceptable masculinity could be performed through homophobic behavior ([Pascoe 2007](#)). Such expectations about masculinity promote a regressive construct of what it means to "be a man," thereby reinforcing victimization paradigms that mask male victimization.

## Sexual Victimization and Stigma

Stigma and shame are intimately connected. As a social construction, shame is fundamentally a social and reflective emotion ([Goffman 1967](#); [Scheff 2005](#)). Individuals define and respond to situations according to anticipated reactions and appraisals received from others. According to [Mead \(1934\)](#), the self-concept is formed through reflected appraisals, as it combines social identities (meanings held by others) and personal identity (meanings held by one's self). Shame is also mediated by a culture that defines, encourages, and maintains particular gender behaviors and sexual practices ([Weiss 2010a](#)). [Finkelhor and Browne \(1985\)](#) refer to stigmatization as negative connotations such as shame and badness that are communicated to a child around experiences of sexual abuse. Shame can become incorporated into the child's self-image, especially if they keep the abuse a secret. For Goffman, stigma is an attribute that spoils identity. Individuals must then develop strategies to protect their identities and therefore might present favorable impressions in certain situations both to self-position and to exert influence over others' perceptions.

Men who are sexually victimized confront a set of stigmatizing cultural narratives that contribute to a unique sense of shame. Male sexual victimhood is nearly incomprehensible because it contradicts cultural ideas of what it means to be a man—strong, powerful, self-sufficient, and impenetrable ([Connell 1995](#); [Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#); [Graham 2006](#); [Kimmel 1996, 2003](#); [Sabo 2003](#)). Heteronormative discourses consistently link male sexuality with dominance, aggression, and desire and female sexuality with passivity, vulnerability, and submissiveness ([Butler 1990](#); [Doherty and Anderson 2004](#); [Ingraham 1994](#)). Many men do not see themselves as particularly vulnerable to sexual assault outside of prison settings ([Stanko 1990](#)). Myths that men are always the sexual aggressor and that sex is always welcome ([Smith 2012](#)) render the male victim illegitimate ([Graham 2006](#)) or altogether invisible.

The literature on rape myths supports such assertions, finding that people harshly judge male victims of sexual assault because they are seen as having failed in their masculine duty to protect themselves

([Doherty and Anderson 2004](#); [Stermac, Del Bove, and Addison 2004](#); [Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson 1992](#); [Turchik and Edwards 2012](#)). Men are viewed as personally responsible for being raped, are perceived to be less traumatized by rape than are women, and are assumed to be gay ([Stermac, Del Bove, and Addison 2004](#); [Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson 1992](#)). Rape myths also seem to operate more strongly when the perpetrator is a woman ([Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson 1992](#)) and when respondents thought the man encouraged the assault or enjoyed the encounter ([Denov 2003, 2004](#)). Such attitudes and rape myths contribute to the cultural acceptance of sexual violence; they provide justifications and victim-blaming narratives that dismiss male victimization in many forms ([Doherty and Anderson 2004](#); [Gavey 1999](#)); and they obscure the very real effects of victimization that include shame, stigma, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation ([Dube et al. 2005](#); [Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson 1992](#)).

Sexual stigma is difficult to study, but it is accessible through the way people talk about and explain unwanted sexual experiences. [Weiss \(2010a, 2010b\)](#), for example, explored men's shame narratives of sexual violence and found that they felt ashamed for being unable to defend themselves, humiliated and embarrassed for being sexually victimized, and were fearful of others finding out. Unwilling to risk exposure or emasculation, many men were too ashamed to report their assault to the police. They did not want to expose or "unmask" ([Pollack 2003](#)) their masculine selves for fear of homophobic accusations ([Pesola, Westfal, and Kuffner 1999](#); [Walker, Archer, and Davies 2005](#)). The dominant script for boys and men is to be brave, stoic, and to deal with problems alone ([Connell 1995](#); [Walker, Archer, and Davies 2005](#)). Even when men were drinking heavily or drugged by their perpetrators, they blamed themselves for not remaining in control and defending themselves ([Dunn 2012](#); [Weiss 2010a](#)). Perpetrators have been found to use alcohol, drugs, and pornography as disinhibiting techniques against men in order to test or to groom them ([Spiegel 2003](#)), and research shows that almost one in five adult men reported being forced to drink or use drugs prior to their assault ([Du Mont et al. 2013](#); [Stermac, Del Bove, and Addison 2004](#)). Gender role confusion is also a strategy for rendering boys vulnerable to abuse. Perpetrators might target boys who are hungry for acceptance,



who are confused or unsure of their sexuality ([Spiegel 2003](#)), and treat the assault as consensual by telling the victim they are in love with them ([Walker, Archer, and Davies 2005](#)).

The internalization of the belief that male sexual assault is not possible ([Garnets, Herek, and Levy 1990](#)) or is somehow not traumatic also decreases reporting. Barriers to sexual assault disclosure include, among others things, event minimization, self-blame, fear of getting the perpetrator in trouble (e.g., [Arata 1998](#); [D. Smith et al. 2000](#); [Wyatt and Newcomb 1990](#)), and stigma threat or fear of negative reactions from others such as doubting or discounting (e.g., [Ahrens, Stansell, and Jennings 2010](#); [Gibson and Leitenberg 2001](#)). Stigmatizing responses promotes feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment, and research shows that men often do not report rape when it jeopardizes their masculine self-identity ([Pino and Meier 1999](#)). Certain discourses make available particular subjectivities, and it is likely that underreporting is associated with threats to boys' self-concepts and notions of masculinity. In this study, I focus on young men's constructions of gender and sexuality as they talk about sexual victimization, coercion, and consent.

## Data and Method

The study draws on audio-videotaped interviews of youth seen by forensic interviewers for reported cases of sexual abuse between 1995 and 2004. The data come from a nonprofit Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) located in an urban Midwest community. Children are referred to the CAC by law enforcement or Child Protection Services (CPS). Youth were brought to the CAC for an interview because they reported sexual abuse to someone, someone else witnessed or reported the abuse to authorities, or the offender confessed to the abuse.

The forensic interview is based on a semistructured interview protocol designed to maximize youth's ability to communicate their experiences and meets national standards ([American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children 2002](#)). The interview begins with rapport building and obtaining details about sexual abuse only if the child first verbally discloses to the interviewer. The two then discuss the circumstances surrounding the abuse using nonsuggestive, largely



open-ended questions. So, while the interview is set up to investigate whether or not abuse occurred, youth were consistently allowed to raise and discuss subjects important to them. The semistructured format of the interview allows for rich and unique narrative data that do not solely rely on retrospective reports common in most studies on sexual abuse. The interviews are recorded using audiovisual equipment and vary in length and scope, primarily based on the child's age. Following the interview, CAC team members participate in a postinterview meeting at which time one of the three findings is made: abuse occurred, did not occur, or is inconclusive. The finding is based only on what the young person is capable of communicating during the interview rather than on outside reports from law enforcement or CPS.

The larger study sample included 100 interviews of young people between ages three and seventeen, stratified disproportionately by gender and age and proportionately by race. Descriptive data were gathered from case files, such as date of the interview, child and offender characteristics when available, preinterview reports, family background, and CAC investigative findings and assessments. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the author. The study was reviewed and approved by the CAC and University Institutional Review Board. Human subjects protocol and data protections included confidentiality for children, interviewers, family members, peers, and alleged perpetrators. Code numbers were assigned and data remained on-site during data collection. Pseudonyms for individuals and locations were used at all stages.

## **Coding and Analysis**

Interviews were coded using a qualitative, analytic-inductive method ([Patton 1990](#)) with analytic bracketing ([Gubrium and Holstein 1998](#)). Categories were not imposed, rather they emerged from the data ([Glaser and Strauss 1967](#)). Using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program, open coding of transcripts was completed and classification schemes were developed ([Patton 1990](#)). The process included attention to sensitizing concepts, data grounding ([Strauss and Corbin 1998](#)), data coding, and interpretations. Descriptive passages were contextually coded with a constant comparative method; data grounding and coding included exhausting the data, comparing cases,

developing new codes, and returning to the data ([Glaser and Strauss 1967](#)). Comparisons between interviews were made across gender, age, and race for youth and perpetrators whenever available to assess demographic or case-specific patterns.

From the total sample of 100, a subsample of 31 racially diverse young men emerged through coding (eighteen boys are white, seven boys are black, four boys are Latino, and two boys are Native American) ranging between five and seventeen years of age. The reported perpetrators were known to the boys, as acquaintances, family members, friends, or peers. Of the thirty-one cases, six alleged perpetrators were adolescent or adult women, while the remaining were adolescent or adult men. Accounts were unpacked as (a) masks of masculinity, (b) embodying stigma, and (c) mechanisms of coercion. These categories illuminate the heteronormative cultures within which young men described victimization and negotiated the meaning of what happened and why.

## **Masks of Masculinity**

Young men in this study overwhelmingly struggled with cultural ideologies that reinforce sexual victimization as violating codes of masculinity at best, and occupying invisibility at worst. Laying claim to cultural boy codes, youth acutely articulated the masks of masculinity ([Pollack 2003](#)). Young men had difficulties naming sexual assault because of masculine ideals of what it means to be a *real* man in the culture. Rather than risk exposure and scrutiny, many young men did not disclose to forensic interviewers, despite corroborative evidence like confessions by the perpetrator or a witness to the assault. For example, fourteen-year-old Derek (white) was interviewed for suspected sexual assault by a thirty-five-year-old male neighbor. The perpetrator had befriended Derek and his mother, helping around the house and acting as a father figure. According to police reports, the perpetrator's nephew disclosed his own victimization and the possibility of Derek's abuse, prompting investigation by authorities. Derek did not disclose sexual victimization during the forensic interview but noted that he was aware of the other boy's report. In the following excerpt, the interviewer asked Derek about sexual assault in generalized terms, assessing how he would appraise such an event:

Interviewer: What would you do if [someone gave you touches that made you uncomfortable]?

Derek: Um, like, I'd fight them. I'd fight them away and punch them.

Interviewer: Okay, and what if you couldn't fight them away?

Derek: I would (2.0 seconds pause) I-I don't know.

Interviewer: Do you think that it's possible that someone could try to touch another person and they wouldn't be able to get away or do anything about it?

Derek: No, not that I'm aware.

Interviewer: No? (1.5) Well, cause sometimes stuff like that happens, I mean, sometimes people can't get away and can't tell and, if something happens to someone and they don't tell, who's fault do you think it is?

Derek: Um, the- ah, the person that it happened to, the person that got touched.

Interviewer: You think it'd be their fault? Why do you think that, Derek?

Derek: Cause they didn't, they didn't do it right. They didn't, well, fight or be strong enough right away.

Despite some encouragement from the interviewer, Derek was unable to determine possible solutions to unwanted touching outside of dominant codes of masculinity like fighting and punching. He believed fault should be placed with the victim because they failed to defend themselves ("they didn't—fight or be strong enough").

Other young men expressed similar expectations of masculine behavior that required handling problems with aggression and violence. In accordance with traditional masculine socialization, boys often self-presented as strong, tough, and able to fight. Across all ages, boys commented on various forms of physical retaliation, such as "I tried to get him" or "I hit him off." As [Messerschmidt \(2000\)](#) explains, masculinity comes through the body and male physical violence is legitimate when responding to threat. *Real* men cannot be victimized because they "hit, and punch in the face" (Sam, age eleven, white). Passivity can be problematic, and it is common for men to experience a "sense of emasculation" ([Coxell and King 2002](#); [Dunn 2012](#)) following a sexual assault. While some boys may be unaware of their masks, the experience may prompt other boys to demonstrate masculine behaviors in an effort to put their masks back on through impression management ([Goffman 1967](#)). Being labeled a victim of

sexual victimization was shameful and stigmatizing; it disrupted masculine ideologies of power and control and unearthed questions of vulnerability and victimhood. Although most perpetrators were much older than youth, were family members, or in other positions of authority, the assumption of male strength seemed to operate with few constraints. For Nate (age fourteen, black), sexual violence was both improbable ("I never thought I'd be in this situation before, in my whole life!") and shameful. He told the forensic interviewer that he was too embarrassed to tell police officers details of the assault. Nate insisted that he tried to fight back against his step-father, illustrating why forensic interviewers were often attentive to young men's concerns about failing to live up to masculine codes of behavior, and repeatedly stated it was not their fault:

Interviewer: Nate, can you tell me about the things that your dad did?

Nate: Tried to make me also kiss him, tryin' ta (1.5) do some other things. I didn't tell the police that cause I was too ashamed to say those things.

Interviewer: Nate, you know it doesn't matter what you did or didn't do, it's not your fault it happened,

Nate: (7.5) He tried to stick his thing in my butt, but I fought him back,

Interviewer: And, you know what Nate, even if ya didn't fight him back, or you couldn't fight him back, it's still not your fault.

Gendered identities were located alongside discursive constructions of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality (e.g., [Butler 1990](#); [Rich 1980](#)). Few young men in the study sample were sexually victimized by a woman offender (9 percent). In these cases, however, boys were implicated—to varying degrees—in their own abuse. The shame of sexual victimization was acutely experienced via reflected appraisals. Assault by a woman was often determined by others to be at least partly reciprocal and certainly less harmful than assault by a man, reinforcing codes of masculinity that men always want sex with women. For example, after six-year-old Noah (white) told the forensic interviewer his foster sister "molested" him, he explained that his foster parents "said it wasn't a big deal." In another case, Brent (age six, multiracial) explained "[my mom] said that's what boys do with girls." Jim (age twelve, white) was sexually assaulted by his father's thirty-something-year-old girlfriend. He told

the interviewer, "My dad thinks I'm lying and I'm traumatized and stuff. He thinks I'm basically a circus freak or something." The shame of weakness and trauma are evident in how Jim's father responded to his disclosure of sexual assault. Disbelieving that his son could be assaulted by a woman, Jim's father attached the stigma of emasculation to victimhood. The belief that men are unlikely victims promotes a dangerous, regressive construct of what it means to be a man. In a few cases, young men disclosed sexually abusing other children years after their own victimizations because they thought "it was normal" (Patrick, age fifteen, black) and "that's what boys do" (Darren, age fourteen, white). Sexual assault then is also linked to fighting and hitting as accepted masculine practices—they are gendered performances of masculinity—ways of being, becoming, or reconfiguring what it means to be a real man ([Messerschmidt 2000](#)).

When young men are expected to demonstrate sexual dominance over women, female-perpetrated victimization disrupts traditional victimization paradigms. In several cases with adolescent men, assault by a woman was described as neutral or inconsequential. Robert (age seventeen, black) described "sex" with his mother's female friend as "weird but fine." Robert continued: "She wanted it. We watched pornography and she went to get a condom and dressed in a nightgown and it just happened." In another case, fourteen-year-old Ken (white) rhetorically asked the interviewer "Can boys be sexually abused?" Throughout the interview, he continued to deny that his father's live-in girlfriend, Debra, sexually victimized him, despite his sister witnessing the event and his initial affirmative disclosure to law enforcement:

Interviewer: Okay, so, [police officers] asked you something about sex?

Ken: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, and where did that come from?

Ken: Because Debra said, or [my sister] said that I slept with Debra or whatever.

Interviewer: Okay, which kind? As you told me before, there's a couple different kinds of "slept with."

Ken: Like, she thought I had sex with Debra.

Interviewer: Okay.

Ken: Which I didn't. [...]

Ken: [Debra] said she liked me, I said, "Ick. I don't want no sloppy seconds."

Interviewer: What does that mean, sloppy seconds?

Ken: Like one person maybe kissed someone and then you get seconds from that person.

Interviewer: And how would that be seconds, with Debra?

Ken: Cause, I don't know. It's very, ah,

Interviewer: Was she with somebody else that you knew about or,

Ken: She was with everybody. She's like, "I think you're cute." I'm like, "Yeah. You're gross. So get away."

Here, Ken draws from specific heteronormative discourses, using language that promotes dominance and objectification of women. Ken positioned himself as in control by rejecting Debra's advances and insisting sex with her would be "sloppy seconds." Shaming and degrading Debra's sexuality allowed Ken to determine his own agency rather than his victimhood. Admitting that he was coerced to have sex with Debra would violate heterosexual norms that encourage boys to view early sexual experiences with adult women as normative and desirable, while regarding sexual encounters with adult men as incomprehensible and shameful.

## Embodying Stigma

Sexual victimization threatens young men's developing gender identities. Whether perpetrated by men or women, victimization was shameful and stigmatizing for boys and they did not want to risk exposure by disclosing to others. From very early ages, boys emphasized loss of a masculine, heteronormative identity reinforced by the stigma of homosexuality. The myth of male rape is that it is about homosexuality: that only gay men are raped, only gay men rape other men, or if you are raped you are gay ([Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson 1992](#); [Turchik and Edwards 2012](#)). For example, in response to the forensic interviewer asking about bullying and teasing at school, twelve-year-old Karl (white) explained that it would not be okay to be gay at his school: "You'd get your ass kicked in about a second. Everybody's saying, well, all the guys are saying-saying 'oh yeah, that kid's a fag, and that kid's gay, oh he's a faggot, oh, I don't like him, he's gay,' and stuff like that." Many young men plainly revealed sexual scripting and homophobic labeling in their peer



cultures. The embodiment of stigma created tremendous barriers to disclosure. When asked by the forensic interviewer if his older male cousin ever touched anyone in his family, Lawrence (age eleven, black] explained:

Lawrence: If he did, that disgusting.  
Interviewer: That's disgusting?  
Lawrence: Yep. That's about the nastiest thing you can do.  
Interviewer: That's the nastiest thing you could do?  
Lawrence: Yeah.  
Interviewer: Yeah? What would make that so nasty?  
Lawrence: That's gay.  
Interviewer: That's gay? Okay. Is it okay to be gay or not okay, or what?  
Lawrence: Not okay.  
Interviewer: What makes gay be not okay?  
Lawrence: Cause, you supposed to like girls- girls supposed to like boys, and that's how it just should go.  
Interviewer: That's how it's supposed to go? Okay. Did you learn that somewhere, or is that something you think, or what?  
Lawrence: That's what I think. I like girls! I don't like nobody else.

Here, Lawrence actively worked to present himself as heterosexual during the interview. He makes it clear to the interviewer that male–male sexual contact is “the nastiest thing you can do” and he emphatically stood his ground: “I like girls! I don't like nobody else.” Young men like Lawrence understood the importance of confirming ones heterosexuality lest they be relegated to deviant or stigmatized identities.

Because compulsory heterosexuality enforces male–female sexual activity ([Butler 1990](#)), homosexuality was viewed as an evitable harm transmitted by sexual victimization. Youth who did disclose during interviews expressed explicit concerns about being gay as a direct result of the assault, which was equally reinforced by others. Ten-year-old Jared (white) said his mother asked if he was gay following his report of victimization to which he responded, “Well, I guess so cause of what just happened now, though.” Eight-year-old Case (white) shared his fears while he simultaneously struggled to disclose assault by a male teenager in his neighborhood. Ultimately, he referred to the event as “being gay” rather than a sexual assault:



("that's called being gay, when a boy shows you his private and a boy showed the private back at the boy"). The forensic interviewer was often attentive to these specific concerns:

Interviewer: Would someone be mad if that happened and you talked about it?

Case: People be mad.

Interviewer: Who'd be mad?

Case: But a gays per- gay person wouldn't.

Interviewer: A gay person wouldn't be mad? Hmm, okay. It sounds like you're kind of worried about that gay stuff. Are you worried about that gay stuff, how come?

Case: Cause he's not gay but, (5.5) I don't wanna be gay.

Interviewer: You don't wanna be gay.

Case: He's not.

Interviewer: But he's not. You know what, Case? Sometimes people have other people touch their body and it doesn't have anything to do with being gay. At all, okay. Sometimes people get mixed up and they want people to touch parts of their body that might not be okay cause they're mixed up. But it doesn't make 'em gay. Okay? Yeah, cause it sounds like you're kinda worried about that. Is there a reason why you're worried about being gay?

Case: I think I might be gay.

Case struggled to differentiate victimization from homosexuality; the two were unmistakably connected and both seemed to be negative and problematic for him. In fact, Case noted that gay people would not be upset if someone showed them their privates, and then revealed that he was worried about being gay himself.

Other young men were just as fearful, but more confident in their notions of stigmatization. Vince, age thirteen (white) revealed that he tried to "be numb as much as I could" to resist any physical, sexual responses during the abusive events. He was fearful of "becoming gay" and did not disclose the abuse by his grandfather for over seven years. Branden, age sixteen (Native American), was sexually abused by several older male adolescents while attending a boarding school. He described one of the perpetrators as "a fag—a gay fag, you know a fag is like a male likes a male." Branden explicitly blamed homosexuality for his experience of sexual victimization, and

later generalized his experiences as a gay issue: "I hate gays; I have a lot of stereotypes about them because of this." For these young men, conflating homosexuality and sexual victimization wholly presumed that only gay men rape other men, if you are raped you are gay, and gay men cannot be raped (Graham 2006). Aaron (age ten, white) was sexually assaulted by an older male acquaintance and insistently explained that he did not "wanna touch another man" and that it was "always wrong" and "gross." Sexual victimization was an affront to heterosexuality and called into question one's sexuality even when young men maintained that they could fight against it. Dominic (age fifteen, white), for example, was sexually assaulted by a thirty-eight-year-old male acquaintance. He did not initially report the assault, rather a neighbor suspected that the adult man was providing neighborhood youth with drugs and reported to law enforcement. Dominic was hesitant to disclose and told the interviewer he felt ashamed largely because of the perpetrator's sexual identity. During the interview, Dominic revealed the internalized importance of statements made by the offender:

Dominic: [O]ne time he was, done giving me a blow job he said somethin' I'll never forget (1.0) he says, there's a lot of people out there that will like ya Dominic, women and guys, and then he sat there,  
Interviewer: so he said there's a lot of people out there,  
Dominic: that-that-that will think that you're pretty, men and also women.

Dominic explained his discomfort with the statement that men and women will find him "pretty" and will "like" him and described it as something he will "never forget" because it "sticks in [his] head." The perpetrator displaced responsibility under the guise of desire and mutuality. Dominic also expressed shame about knowing the perpetrator is gay:

Dominic: Umum, [he] is gay.  
Interviewer: How-how do you know that?  
Dominic: Cause, the family told me that and he told me that.  
Interviewer: Okay, alright. How does that make you feel?  
Dominic: Very uncomfortable, [...] you mind your business and I'll mind mine you know, but don't come on me. That's what he did.

Interviewer: That's what he did, okay. How does that make you feel, knowing that he's gay and he came on to you?

Dominic: Makes me feel, pretty bummed out, sorry.

Interviewer: Sometimes when I talk to the boys your age, or guys your age- you're not really a boy anymore but, they saw sometimes that they, wonder or worry that they might be gay, do you ever feel that way?

Dominic: Sometimes, yeah.

The social stigma against homosexuality is a source of shame and embarrassment for many young men, and fears about becoming gay because of the assault are significant. Here, Dominic worried that he might be gay even as he drew borders between his sexuality and that of the perpetrator ("you mind your business and I'll mind mine ... but don't come on me").

## **Mechanisms of Coercion**

The stigma of male homosexuality and sexual assault were exploited by perpetrators as well, signaling familiarity and manipulation of dominant cultural discourses. In their disclosures of victimization, young men's shame was connected to the perpetrators use of "gay porn(ography)" (Nate) and homosexual images displayed through photos, magazines, and "gay websites" (Darren, Nate, and Patrick). Similar to drugs and alcohol, perpetrators used pornography to entice and to disinhibit young men. Days before his sexual assault, Adam's (age ten, white) perpetrator showed him pornographic magazines and videos. In other cases, perpetrators used the threat of defamation to discourage disclosure. Victor (age fourteen, white), for example, told the interviewer that he did not tell anyone about the long-term sexual assault he experienced because, "I was really afraid that if I told, like people would think I was gay and stuff." Implicit threats were used for compliance and mechanisms of coercion were employed as grooming techniques both to test young men and to silence them. Dominic, for example, connected his use of drugs to the fact that he "froze up" during his sexual assaults. He keenly described how the perpetrator provided long-term access to drugs and alcohol as a grooming tactic to coerce and manipulate:

Dominic: We'd go over here, what he'd do is, it was ah, sorta like a switch off. Like, I give him something' and he gives me

something, which I didn't catch it at that point. I- I was really bad into drugs ya know, and so [the perpetrator] would always convince us, hey, you wanna come over—smoke some marijuana and drink, ya know. That's the only reason why we usually came over, you know what I mean. Then he started, then one night he called me and said, well, I'm gonna start getting' into deep things with you, er like, okay. And, I didnt' really understand what he was talking about til it started happening. He started touchin' me all over you know, just on my arm, right—and on my body. I froze—I froze up! I couldn't do nothin'.

Dominic outlined how the perpetrator groomed the young men for over a year, testing them with the progressive use of drugs, alcohol, and a space away from adult others. Dominic makes it clear that he was unable to stop the assault because of his heavy drug use which was exploited by the perpetrator to disinhibit the two friends. Dominic at least partly accounted for the assault and the fact that he “froze up” by his drug use. A common myth of sexual assault is that the nonconsenting individual would fight back at all costs. Dominic worked to reestablish his masculinity by blaming victimization on his drug use, thereby reasserting his control in a situation where he was overpowered ([Weiss 2010a](#), [2010b](#)). Worried about whether he was in trouble, Dominic later asked the interviewer, “So, am I going to get in trouble for like, like—all the drugs?” Combined with the stigmatization of homosexuality in Dominic's case, fear of getting into trouble or being defamed were serious barriers to sexual assault disclosures.

Perpetrators also exploited young men's sexuality in order to coerce and victimize. Somewhat similar to how young women described their experiences of harassment and abuse by men ([Hlavka 2014b](#)), a few young men in this study described their sexual assaults as mutual and participatory. These self-described roles encompassed both ambivalence and acquiescence, however. Fourteen-year-old Cody (white), for example, was sexually assaulted by two 20-something-year-old male acquaintances on and off for approximately two years. Cody told the interviewer he was initially contacted online when he was “still nine or ten years old” by a man who “sent me pictures, homosexual pictures of naked men.” He did not intend or want to officially report his sexual encounters. When the interviewer asked about what happened, Cody said, “sexual stuff ... everything, pretty

much" and described the encounters as "all mutual." Cody felt forced to report, however, because one of the perpetrators threatened physical violence if he discontinued their "relationship" and Cody feared for his safety. Cody denied having an intimate relationship outside of "sexual stuff" with either of the perpetrators. Cody disclosed multiple sexual encounters with the older men and noted that they knew his age ("I didn't have a problem with that. I thought it was okay") and positioned himself as participatory and encouraging.

Adolescent interpretations of mutual sexual experiences were couched in notions of agency and choice, despite episodes of manipulation, force, and coercion. Both perpetrators in Cody's case attempted to employ discourses of romantic love and mutuality to coerce ("He talked a lot about love, and stuff like that ... he just said stuff like, how he'd do anything for me, he just said that he'd be with me") but also to threaten. The perpetrators depicted the encounters as consensual and told Cody they were in love with him. One man went to his home in an attempt to scare Cody into a relationship, and later threatened to "out" him to his parents if he did not comply. Cody's understanding of his experiences must be couched within a system that stigmatizes and shames homosexuality, often disallowing sexual experimentation and relationships at young ages in particular. Because Cody identifies as gay, he may feel that he welcomed the assault or got what he deserved when he engaged with men in Internet chatrooms.

Young gay men or those who were questioning their sexuality were made complicit in their own assaults by perpetrators who used trust and acceptance as a mechanism of coercion. Playing on sexual scripts that included testing, teaching, and experimentation, perpetrators exploited young men's desires to belong and be accepted. Trust in the perpetrator may be especially strong when young men identify with his sexual identity and share a sense of belonging ([Ben-Yehuda, 2001](#)), simultaneously making them less likely to define and disclose the sexual encounter as abusive. John (age sixteen, black), for example, was sexually assaulted by his male cousin's twenty-seven-year-old live-in boyfriend, Todd. He told the interviewer that the perpetrator befriended him and took an interest in his sexuality:

Interviewer: Ahm, do you remember like the idea behind anything that he said or you said or, John: Basically, I was gay, and, whatever.

Interviewer: He said that, or you said that or what?

John: That was about the conversation. That's what he was trying to get out of me, I remember. We were talking about the issue of me and my sexuality. I can remember that much. But, actually what was exactly said, I don't remember though. I think he was trying to see if I was like (1.5) far as I remember it, if I was gay or bi or whatever the case was.

Todd sexually assaulted John on more than five different occasions. Sexual manipulation was described under the guise of attraction, affection, and experimentation. In this case, the perpetrator was able to amplify John's sense of belonging by showing empathy for and acceptance of his sexual identity. John's cousin suspected there was sexual activity between them, and John told the interviewer about escalating fights between household members. When John told his cousin about the sexual assaults, his concerns were ignored and instead his cousin accused him of lying and trying to "steal [Todd] away and cause problems between them." John is doubly vulnerable in that he is reliant upon the men for housing; his mother abandoned him at his cousin's house because "she didn't wanna stay ... I thought we were here to stay, but I guess she had something different. We moved so many times." When asked about his initial disclosure, John told the forensic interviewer that there was a lot of yelling, screaming, and hitting and both men threatened to kick John out of the house:

Interviewer: Was there ever a times when you talked to [Todd] about what you thought about this stuff happening? That is was something you thought was okay or not okay?

John: No, we never really talked about it. So, I never (1.5) when- when all this stuff started happening, I don't really talk about stuff with people because I don't like to burden other people, put my problems on other people, that's why I—I can't do it anymore cause it was affecting my grades at school. How I think (deep sigh).

Interviewer: You doing okay? So John, how come you ended up talking about this stuff?

John: Cause, it wa-wasn't so much the sexual stuff had stopped, but, I mean, it started getting bad at first, but it was more about physical and verbal stuff. I never, there was never really any emotional support in the house. And then [my cousin] kept

threatening me, "Oh, I'm gonna send you back to [state]." Well, where, where would I do? I don't know where my mom is. [...]

Interviewer: John, the first time that [Todd] came in when you were lying on your bed and the first time that he came in, what were you thinking when all that was going on?

John: I was, I was just shocked. I didn't know what to do (1.3) Well, actually, not (2.0) I don't (sigh), I'm not the kind of person that will stand up and yell and scream and stuff like that. I'm not a, I don't know (2.0). I mean, obviously, I think about, think about it a lot. Like I tried to tell [my cousin] and I told him, but I'm not the type of person that like (1.5) I just, like to stay to myself, basically.

In this excerpt, John described how he felt about the "sexual stuff" that was happening and why he decided to disclose the physical and verbal abuse to the assistant principle. He did not intend to report his sexual victimization until a social worker directly asked him if he had been "molested" and he broke down crying. John displayed feelings of shame during the interview, sighing deeply and putting his head in his hands. He self-described as passive and one to keep to himself and likely blamed himself for his victimization. His struggles with disclosure signal questions of consent and credibility. Young gay men are already considered deviant and may not identify as legitimate victims because of their sexuality and/or that of the perpetrator.

## Conclusion and Discussion

An examination of young men's narratives describing sexual assault shows that there is little room for men in dominant sexual victimization paradigms that often exclude same-sex assaults and women as perpetrators. Treating victimhood as outside of cultural norms of masculinity not only excluded young men as victims but also imposed constraining social expectations on them. These expectations manifested in how young men understood their experiences of sexual violence as well as how they presented themselves and performed masculinity to forensic interviewers.

Youth who feel emasculated and are concerned that they will be scrutinized or humiliated are often too embarrassed or ashamed to disclose. The shame and stigma of sexual victimization is a culturally mediated response ([Finkelhor and Browne 1985](#); [Mead 1934](#)).



Constructions of gender and sexuality limited boys' ability to define their experiences of sexual victimization in ways outside of heteronormative ideals ([Connell 1995](#); [Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#); [Kimmel 1996, 2003](#)). Young men negotiated what it meant to be victimized within widely held gender norms and rape myths ([Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson 1992](#); [Turchik and Edwards 2012](#)). When boys were assaulted by men, they emphasized a loss of a masculine, heteronormative identity that reinforced the shame and stigma of both male victimization and homosexuality. It is not surprising then that many boys sought to reclaim their invulnerability and regain control or save face during forensic interviews by emphasizing strength, aggression, and physical retaliation. Young men also reaffirmed their heterosexuality by stigmatizing and degrading homosexuality. Young men assaulted by women, on the other hand, encountered doubt, suspicion, and indifference from family members and others. Expected to demonstrate sexual dominance over women, young men had trouble identifying whether boys could be victimized and some took up heteronormative discourses that objectify, shame, and degrade women's sexuality ([Doherty and Anderson 2004](#)).

The stigma of homosexuality was similarly exploited by perpetrators, restraining young men's willingness to disclose assault. Perpetrators groomed boys with drugs/alcohol and pornography in order to shame boys into silence. Critically, this study also shows that young men who are gay or questioning their sexuality might be especially vulnerable; perpetrators exploited their feelings of difference and deviance while they manipulated boys under the guise of affection, love, belongingness, or experimentation. Lack of sexual desire, consent, and mutuality is presumed for heterosexual men who are victimized by men, but this is not so for gay men who are suspect because of their deviant sexuality identity and desire.

Credibility issues and self-blame are likely to emerge under these conditions, raising questions about who is to blame, who is deserving of protection, and "how sexualized notions of sexual harm are constructed to support the legitimacy of the victim in sexual assault" ([Graham 2006](#), 199). Meanings of harm and violation vary for different victims, and a rigid understanding of sexuality promotes a hierarchy of sexual harm that privileges the violation of certain bodies

over others ([Dunn 2012](#); [Graham 2006](#)). While this study cannot directly speak to how constructions of masculinity and victimhood are variably constructed based on race and class differences, a hierarchy of harm emerges through the way young men talk about violence, gender, and sexuality. Those victims who are not suspect and thus represent the “ideal victim” are on the top tier including very young victims and heterosexual youth who were drugged or physically harmed, as they are able to explain their victimization and reestablish their masculinity within cultural ideologies. The bottom tier includes gay victims presumed suspect and questioned about consent because of their deviant sexuality. Like common rape myths about women, they are “asking for it.” Young men sexually assaulted by women fall somewhere between, as their heterosexuality is not questioned, but they are unable to identify as a victim within a culture that presumes men what to engage in (hetero)sex at all times, with little thought to the circumstance. This hierarchy conforms to dominant models of sexual assault against women that construct “stranger rapes” as the ideal “real” rape ([Estrich 1988](#)) and victimizations by known persons as less legitimate and suspect despite its higher incidence.

There are several important limitations to the current study, including findings that rely on a relatively small sample of young men which limited the extent of the analysis. The sample is racially diverse, however, and one of the few studies to explore boys' sexual victimization experiences in their words. Similar to other studies, findings here show that age of the victim, sex of the perpetrator and use of force, whether boys fought back, and lifestyle (alcohol/drug use) affected reporting practices ([Finkelhor 2008](#); [Nofzieger and Stein 2006](#); [Pino and Meier 1999](#); [Weiss 2010a](#), [2010b](#)). It is also important to consider how fear of revealing one's drug or alcohol use might influence disclosures to forensic interviewers in the study, especially given issues of youth trust in adults generally and criminal justice authorities in particular (see [Hlavka 2014a](#)). However, shame and stigma seem overwhelmingly devastating for boys from a variety of backgrounds and are arguably significant deterrents to help seeking. Norms of masculinity are continually being worked out however ([Bridges 2014](#)) and should be investigated through an intersectional lens. It is essential to examine how shame manifests with transgender and bi youth, and how stigma is experienced by white upper-middle

class, minority, and socioeconomically disadvantaged young men (see [Ralston 2012](#)).

Underreporting of sexual assault is commonly linked to fear of being disbelieved, treated negatively, blamed for the assault, or not taken seriously. Male youth experience immense stigma and shame but are unlikely to receive social service support or mental health treatment if they do not disclose. Without addressing the assault, young men may reinforce negative stereotypes about gay men and rape and engage in especially harmful acts toward themselves and others, including sexual assault (e.g., Patrick and Darren) in an effort to reclaim masculinity. However, identifying as a victim often has to be claimed before help is made available. As participants in this study show, many victims of sexual assault—both men and women—do not identify as or wish to be labeled “victim” ([Dunn 2012](#); [Hlavka 2014b](#)). The dominant masks of masculinity preclude victimhood in many contexts and settings.

A feminist perspective has much to offer to the investigation of male rape, as it concentrates on the role of power, control, gender norms, and practices that permit, normalize, and encourage rape culture. Absence of education and attention toward male sexual victimization denies its reality and therefore excludes discussion about the effects and possible solutions ([Turchik and Edwards 2012](#)). Sexual assault education programs must focus on dispelling dominant sexual assault paradigms including male rape myths and regressive gender norms. Boys contend with relentless messages encouraging them to disconnect from their emotions, objectify and degrade women, debase homosexuality, and resolve conflicts through violence. More research attention, more resources, and more publicity are needed to dispel the stigmatizing rape myths that shame men and boys into silence. However, mainstream education cannot afford to continue to create binaries between hetero- and homosexual rapes. [Graham \(2006\)](#) reviews how the increased attention to heterosexual male rape was perhaps an effort to mainstream the issue, but in fact delegitimized certain victims. This is well-trodden territory: “The integrity or autonomy of the non-heterosexual male body is therefore constructed as less deserving of protection or even attention, in ways which echo the (lack of) protection of women’s bodily autonomy” ([Graham 2006](#), 199). Programs that address sexual assault in K–12 (Stop Sexual

Assault in Schools; <http://stopsexualassaultinschools.org/>) and sexual education programs in elementary schools are ideal places to have discussions about cultural gender norms and how they relate to sex/sexuality, desire, coercion, and consent. Popular discussions continue to frame consent *only* as a woman's decision; beyond that of *obtaining* and *securing* consent, young men are left largely out of picture. Evident in the present study, these truncated discussions do not help men understand their experiences of coercion and assault, perhaps especially with women perpetrators. Furthermore, youth may not want to label themselves as victims or disclose their experiences to parents and caregivers out of confusion, embarrassment, or shame. Sex/sexuality education programs might be a beneficial way to combat heteronormative gender standards and the boy code that explains much of the underreporting of male rape including assumptions that it is unmanly to express pain or trauma. Levels of reporting and help seeking may increase, as young men learn that their experiences are not out of the ordinary and they do, indeed, constitute "real" victims.

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### **Author Biography**

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