

Background: Masculinities, Gangs and Sexual Abuse Abstract

The sexual abuse of young women by gang members in the UK is a subject of concern. The Coalition Government outlined its commitment to ending gang violence and as part of this overall enterprise pledged several million pounds to supporting initiatives aimed at young women at risk of sexual violence by male gang members (HO 2011). These initiatives were developed in response to reports that the sexual exploitation of young women had become 'normalised' within the gang context (see Firmin, 2010, 2011).

This article examines possible reasons for the 'normalisation' of such abuse. Based on extracts from interviews with male gang members living in Birmingham, England, the author argues that understanding the version of masculinity enacted by the young men was crucial to explaining their negative attitudes towards young women. Indeed, it is only by encouraging a redefinition of masculinity based on providing young men with the tools and incentives to negotiate masculinity differently that we may see them rejecting the gang and with it, sexual abuse. Whilst suggestions are made for the development of policy initiatives to reduce sexual abuse of women by gang members these may also prove helpful in non-gang contexts.

Keywords – Sexual assaults, Women, Honour, Masculinities, Gangs

Background: Masculinities, Gangs and Sexual Abuse

Whereas the history of gang research in the UK is relatively new compared to the USA there can be no doubt that the 'gang' label has become commonplace partly because of the lack of a standardised definition (Hallsworth and Young 2008).¹ This can lead to lazy assumptions

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made about gangs and offending, evidenced by the English Riots of 2011 in which the Government was forced to admit that the initial link between gang members and the riots was greatly exaggerated (Lewis et al 2011).

Whilst the respondents discussed here self-identified as being in a gang the factors that they drew upon correlated with the Centre for Social Justice's (2009: 3) definition of a gang as:

*“A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who:
(1) See themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, and
(2) Engage in a range of criminal activity and violence.
They may also have any or all of the following features:
(3) Identify with or lay claim over territory
(4) Have some form of identifying structural feature
(5) Are in conflict with other, similar, gangs”*

Typically, where young women and UK gangs have been considered there has been a focus on victimisation (see Batchelor 2009). There is growing evidence that young women with gang ‘connections’ are frequently subjected to sexual and physical violence within the gang, especially if they are deemed to have transgressed their expected gendered roles or gang boundaries (see Firmin, 2010, 2011). The paradox here is that the minority of young women who recognise some benefits from gang membership, such as gaining ‘status’ or ‘feeling protected’ may actually be exposing themselves to a greater risk of sexual abuse and physical violence, both from their own gang members and from rival gangs (see Firmin, 2011). Specifically some studies (see Heart 2013) have also highlighted that gang initiation rituals for women are sexualised and that some are expected to be ‘sexed-into’ the gang by ‘agreeing’ to have sex with several gang members.

Furthermore, there can be no doubt that *any* sexual abuse by gang members that we do know about represents only a small proportion of the overall amount, given the poor levels of

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reporting gang-related sexual violence. Inevitably, this makes any evaluation of government initiatives to reduce incidents of sexual assaults problematic.

In this article, the author turns her attention to how masculinity within the gang context is 'operationalised' through a focus on the attitudes and behaviours of male gang members towards the women with whom they are acquainted. This can help to improve our understanding in order to help build better policy solutions in the future. This is necessary given that policy responses in this area have largely focused on how women can help themselves to avoid victimisation rather than putting the emphasis on how masculinity is interpreted and operationalised. In large part this can be explained by the bulk of gang research being on male-on-male violence (Pitts 2007; Heale 2009; Bullock & Tilley 2002) and how men relate to other men, within both their own and rival gangs (Hallsworth & Silverstone 2009; Gunter 2008; Trickett 2011), rather than affording a detailed consideration to the role of masculinity in the sexual abuse of young women with gang associations.

The Children's Commissioner Inquiry (~~Berelowitz et al~~ Berelowitz et al 2013) on young people's understandings of sexual consent, highlighted concerns about attitudes demonstrated by some young men towards young women. Yet there have been few concrete suggestions about *how* we should deal with this within the gang context. Indeed, as part of the Commissioner's inquiry, a further study (~~by~~ Beckett et al, 2013), which focussed specifically on the victimisation of gang associated women reported that both male and female respondents felt that change was unlikely due to the 'normality' of the violence and the corresponding reluctance to report, problems compounded by a failure of agencies to properly identify and response to abuse.

Overall therefore, the focus to date has largely been on *what* is going on rather than on *why* and masculinity and gendered power issues seem to have been alluded to, rather than actively

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debated and challenged. Whilst this is, in large part, due to the research agendas of these particular pieces of research it does serve to limit suggested strategies for dealing with the problem. More importantly for this author however these problems are arguably a feature of our reluctance to address the anti-social ways in which masculinity is interpreted and operationalised particularly within the ‘paranoid’ environment of interactions between male gang members.

In contrast, in this article, the author turns the focus back to young men to look at *why* the sexual abuse of young women has become ‘normalised’ within gangs. To this end, she uses the interpretative lens of masculine identity and alongside this draws on a range of criminological theories including subcultures, symbolic interactionism and the work of labelling theorists in order to show how the behaviour of the young men under discussion was informed by a male honour code that validated the two central characteristics of their masculine identities, namely the expression of toughness through physical violence and the demonstration of heterosexuality both of which were exhibited through their relationships with women. In this way ideas about female ‘honour’ were used to challenge, shore up and defend masculine identities

We must of course recognise that the attitudes discussed herein are not inherently peculiar to the ‘gang’. Indeed, the ‘pornification’ of young people², the ‘grooming’ of young girls for sexual exploitation and the well documented spate of prosecutions of popular TV personalities for sexual offences committed in previous decades are all indicative of wider societal issues involving misogyny and patriarchy.³ Notwithstanding, the author suggests that the extremely narrow ways of ‘doing masculinity’ for male gang members are particularly

²-Whilst the focus in this article is on the gang context and space does not permit more than a passing acknowledgement of this problem, the author does examine this in more detail in a later article (see Trickett, forthcoming).

problematic for young women caught up in associations with such young men. Different antecedents such as social learning and the ubiquity of porn contribute to a climate which facilitates abuse but within the gang context such factors also coalesce with ways of ‘doing masculinity’ premised almost entirely on the exemplification of control through violence. Therefore whilst there may well be a measure of theoretical overlap between gang and ‘non-gang’ sexual abuse, the focus here is on the gang as an insular and unique ‘male peer’ group.

The Research Study: Methodology

The dataset used in this article is taken from a larger research study into the fear of crime with men of different ages. The research was conducted in Birmingham, the second largest city in England in a predominantly white area which was mainly comprised of social housing estates. There were 45 respondents in total and the young men discussed here were drawn from the youngest age group aged 16-25; ten of whom self-defined as being in a gang based on friendship ties, shared geographical location and collective experiences including criminality.⁴ Notably none of these young men was in paid employment or living independently and all of them resided in council accommodation with their mothers and/or mother and step-father. These young men had criminal records for crimes such as GBH⁵, ABH⁶, criminal damage, arson, joy-riding, burglaries, thefts and frauds. They were well known to the police in the area and had a problematic relationship with them.

The respondents were all white which reflected the largely white demographic of the area but also provides an interesting example of the different ethnic variations of gangs in the UK,⁷ albeit this ethnic composition was also illustrative of the fact that these gang members were also racist and resented ‘immigrants’ and anyone who was not white (see Trickett, 2014).

At this point it is pertinent to point out that the young men referred to their gang as a male peer group and whilst they had associations with young women in the area they did not appear to consider them as ‘gang’ members. The author can therefore only speculate about

⁵-Grievous Bodily Harm, s18 and s20 Offences Against the Person Act 1861.

⁶-Actual Bodily Harm, s47 Offences Against the Person Act 1861.

the views of the young women that the male respondents discussed. This is a pity as the accounts of young women would have helped to triangulate the findings, albeit it was an inevitable feature of the research which was on men. Other gang research on young women which may help to shed light on the issues has been mentioned earlier.

The interviews took place at and around an annexe building in the area where the young men used to congregate at different times during the day, smoking, hanging out and playing pool. The research was advertised and information on it was provided; quota sampling as used but there was a possible snow-balling effect as the young men concerned discussed the fact that they had taken part with their peers; snowball sampling is common however in reaching marginalised groups.

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There may be possible effects of doing research on men and for this reason the researcher has to remain mindful that respondents are 'doing gender' within the interview situation.

Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) have suggested that because of this researchers need to treat evidence of this as data and formulate their research questions and handle their interview interactions with men carefully. Men may perceive interviews as being threatening to their masculine identities and there may be particular issues to consider when women are interviewing men as was the case here. Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) suggest ways of reducing possible 'feelings' of threat through the researcher paying attention to how questions are framed and posed. Other strategies to reduce perceived threat include drawing on 'common ground', for example, in this study, the researcher was raised in the research area and still had family living there and this shared experience was helpful in building rapport with interviewees. Moreover, the researcher was older than the respondents and visibly pregnant at the time of the interviews, whilst the pregnancy often proved to be an 'icebreaker' as respondents would ask about when the baby was due it may also have reduced

the potential for the respondents to 'sexualise' the interviewer; a strategy sometimes employed by men as an attempt to regain some control over the interview situation (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001).

A possible effect of this woman interviewing the young men may have been that they either exaggerated or underplayed their sexism to the researcher, although there is no reason to assume that they may not also have been tempted to do so with a male researcher, albeit for different reasons. However, it should be noted that the respondents also exhibited hostile attitudes and engaged in assaultive behaviour against many other people in the area and these were all expressed at various times within the interviews. For this reason the researcher did not feel that the respondents exaggerated or underplayed their sexism any more than they did their racism. Indeed, the respondents gave the impression that their attitudes towards young women and the sexual double standards expressed were commonly understood and 'taken for granted' i.e. that they were 'normal' and would be understood by the researcher herself.

Whilst, at times it was uncomfortable listening to such sexist (and racist) views, a researcher must always remain neutral in the interview situation and as suggested by Treadwell and Garland (2011), it is important to listen to 'marginalised' voices, in order to learn 'why' respondents act in the way that they do and 'how' they justify their behaviour. This was especially important here as men's accounts of their own behaviour have been neglected on this subject.

In a previous article (see Trickett 2011), the author has discussed the masculine identities of these respondents explaining how they were engaged in the constant demonstration of an 'on-road' type of masculinity (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009:365). What life 'on-road' tends to encourage is a daily existence characterised by a hyper-aggressive form of masculinity (Campbell 1993). This is a vision of purified masculinity informed by homophobia and

misogyny where being hard assumes master status; there is no backing down in the face of threat or provocation and violence is imperative (Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009). The street norms on which this hyper-aggressive form of masculinity was based were similar to those in Anderson's "Code of the Street" (2000: 9-10):

"At the heart of this code is a set...of informal rules, of behaviour, organised around a desperate search for respect that governs social relations – especially violence...particularly among young men"

The significance of these points is revisited in the explanation of the research findings.

The research findings

The author will now demonstrate that understanding how the young men obtained respect from their male peers was crucial to explaining their negative attitudes towards women.

Respect was given or withheld according to a gendered honour code. The honour code was significant as a means of identifying honourable and dishonourable behaviour and to inform behavioural responses including the expressive use of emotions and violence. In turn, the behavioural practices were illustrative of gendered honour as a 'moral career', wherein honour was bestowed on one whose behaviour conformed to the gendered honour code whereas dishonour (stigma) (Goffman 1963) was bestowed for failure to comply.

With respect to relations with women the male honour code indicated that appropriate behaviour for male gang members included the exemplification of heterosexuality through the evidence of many sexual encounters with women, whilst also exhibiting the ability to utilise violence to defend sexual territory marked as one's own. This honour code around masculinity, which was implicitly linked to the expressive use of violence and sex (and the connections between them), was used to judge male behaviour in the group and determined whether a man was worthy of respect from his male peers. It was this honour code therefore

that gave 'meaning' to the expressive use of emotions and actions that will be discussed in the interview extracts that follow.

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Although the male and female honour codes worked in parallel with each other, the primary distinction between the two was that the female honour code was solely about female sexuality and the inclusive/exclusive dichotomy around sexual availability. This, in turn, was informed by a 'double standard' around male and female sexuality; which meant that whilst promiscuity was a source of honour for the men it was a source of dishonour for women. Although this demarcation between male and female sexuality is not exclusive to the gang context, there was very little opportunity for choice in terms of how to build masculine identities for male gang members, which arguably limits alternatives and magnifies the willingness to label women and to respond in particular ways.

The compliance or lack of compliance with the honour code around female sexuality was drawn upon in order to determine honourable and dishonourable female behaviour and to signify how men should behave towards particular women, in short, it indicated whether women were worthy of abuse or protection. In accordance with this the men used labels to indicate two clear distinctions between their female associates based on perceptions of their sexual availability. Whilst the term 'bird' was a label for girlfriends based on sexual exclusivity; in contrast, the label of 'slut' was used to describe young women with whom these men had casual sex; the term being used to signify inclusive sexual availability to 'all men' including those within the group;

The difference between the two labels is illustrated in the following quotes:

Male aged 20

“We call them sluts, girls you have sex with because you can, because anybody can, they’re just easy”

Male aged 18

“Your ‘bird’ is when you’re talking about your girlfriend, you know, the missus, that means she’s yours basically and any other bloke must keep their hands off”

The interviews revealed that encounters with ‘sluts’ were simply viewed as being a ‘notch’ on the bedpost because their significance was wholly about their sexual availability which helped to cement a gang member’s reputation as a heterosexual man, who ‘should always be on the look-out for and ready to have sex’ with women. Therefore young men were encouraged to engage in such sexual encounters and were expected to share these experiences with other male gang members. The stark contrast in male and female labels around promiscuity is illustrated in the next quote which indicates the approval and celebration of male promiscuity as compared to the negative associations implicit for women:

Male Aged 17

“It’s completely different, if a woman sleeps around she’s a slag but a man having sex with loads of women, you ain’t gonna call him a slag are you? If you did he’d laugh at you cos you’d be saying it as a joke, it’s a compliment for him really let’s face it”

In contrast, the ‘shaming’ effects of female promiscuity were exemplified in the derogatory terms used for young women who were perceived as having had different sexual partners, the most frequent of which was ‘slut’;⁸⁹ other terms included ‘slag’, ‘bitch’, ‘whore’ or ‘tramp’. These terms were meant to ‘stigmatise’ the young women concerned in accounts of sex that

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completely objectified them within descriptions of the sexual act as a ‘non-active’ participant, a non-person:

Male aged 21

“You might just be in the mood for a fuck and they’re around”

The emphasis on the discussions of sex here therefore was purely on the physicality of the male sex act with terms such as ‘shagging’, ‘fucking’ or ‘getting your end away.’ The sole purpose of the act was the pursuit of male orgasm and this was said to be all that dominated the thoughts of the men at the time of the sexual experience:

Male aged 18

“...at the time you don’t think about what could happen, you just want to get your end away”

In this respect the accounts were not dissimilar to those of women working as prostitutes or lap dancers (xxx) on how they feel they are perceived by their male customers (see Hamilton, 2010) This emphasis on the woman as a ‘mere object’ for the achievement of male orgasm was reflected in animalistic references to describe the sexual act where women were often described as ‘rides’:

Male aged 21

“...its casual, that’s the way I look at it, she’s just a ride”

The emphasis on ‘sluts’ as sexual objects for shared experiences and forging of masculine identities was also present in discussions of sex with the same girl, where men shared intimate details of the young woman and their encounter with her:

Male aged 17

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“we were laughing about one girl we’d all had sex with and where her ‘hidden’ tattoo was, we all thought that it looked like something different than what it was supposed to be, but then most of us were pissed when we’d had sex with her”

A couple of the respondents had engaged in sex with the same girl, with other young men present in the same place, but were keen to express this was strictly a man-on-woman thing and that you had your ‘turn’ rather than it being a group thing with other men seeing you naked. This is different to the accounts in media reports of sexual assaults by multiple male gang members often taking place at the same time and place (Heart 2013).

In terms of consent to sexual encounters these young men appeared to pay little attention to it. As the respondents did not admit to rape and given that it was unlikely they would do so within the context of an interview with a female researcher, the author has focusing on the negative attitudes towards young women which often feature in rape (Kelly 1988, Lovett and Kelly 2009). Importantly, the interview extracts revealed that the issue of consent was blurred and consent was often implied simply because the girl was not trying to physically fight them off:

Male aged 17

“if she’s not fighting me off then she’s consenting”

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This emphasis is also evident in the next extract where the respondent indicates a common theme, that the over-riding concern was ‘getting the sex’ at the time of the encounter:

Male Aged 18

“I don’t really think about it to be honest, you’re thinking about what she’ll let you do and getting on with it, if she physically started to attack me or something or started screaming rape that might be different”

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Notwithstanding, whilst the young men appeared to view rape as being sex where a man has used extreme physical force, their accounts did imply violence:

Male aged 16

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“Your friends tell you what she did to them and that, what she let them do to her, what they made her do”

As well as the implied threat of violence there were other types of coercion used – if submission was not immediately forthcoming – such coercion included both psychological and physical tactics:

Male aged 20

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“it’s about pressure, there are ways you use to get her to let you have sex, sometimes you just try and chat her up, make her feel good, promise her something maybe....but it depends on the situation, I’ve known me and my mates use threats with girls, threaten to spread stuff about her, stitch her up with a crime....stuff like that...sometimes it might be a physical threat...I mean blokes are obviously bigger and stronger than women... but you’re not necessarily holding a knife to her throat”

When women were drunk or stoned it was often assumed that consent was present, particularly if the man had been drinking with her:

“a lot of the time she’s drunk or stoned...we’ve shared a joint and fags, drinks....you just roll with it”

However, there was also a suggestion that getting a woman drunk or stoned made it easier to have sex with her and was sometimes a ploy to do so:

Male aged 17

“it eases the way for you ...I would say that lots of my mates would say the same”

Consent was also assumed when women were perceived as being promiscuous;

Male aged 16

“..if she’s let’s your mates then you know you’re going to get it too”

These findings provide support for other research studies on consent and rape more generally, in that real rape is still viewed as sex with physical violence (Kelly and Lovett 2009).

Overall, it appeared that whether a woman was truly consenting was not something that preoccupied these men. Perhaps this lack of regard about consent was unsurprising given the model of sex that they adopted which was premised entirely on the male sexual act of penetration the only point of which was the pursuance of male orgasm. This lack of regard about consent and the singular focus on male pleasure can be linked to the earlier discussions about the contempt for those young women labelled as ‘sluts’ which indicated a complete lack of male respect and responsibility.

This lack of respect and responsibility was also present in the theme of the ‘slut’ as ‘unclean’ and a potential ‘disease carrier’:

Male aged 16

“...they ain’t clean are they? They’ve been round the block a few times”

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The idea here was that the women had become ‘polluted’ through frequent sex with different men and the reference to them being ‘disease-ridden’ reflected this and placed emphasis on possible contagion:

Male aged 17

“...they’re dirty, they’ve been with loads of blokes, you dunno what they’ve got”

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By having sex with these women therefore, young men pointed out that they were exposing themselves to the risk of disease:

Male aged 18

*“...at the time you just want the fuck cos it feels good but when you’re doing it, it’s at the back of your mind, how many other blokes have been up her and what diseases **she** might give you”*

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Yet, whilst therefore these men acknowledged risks they did not take precautions to prevent them and admitted that frequently had unprotected sex:

Male aged 21

“...I’ve taken risks, shagging bareback with sluts”

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At no point therefore was the responsibility for spreading of sexually transmittable diseases linked to men and their partaking in casual sex; despite, as we have seen, the presumptions of these men that such sexual encounters were ‘*consensual*’. In this way the possibility of themselves as disease carriers posing risks to the young women was ignored and the men justified their behaviour through emphasising an understandable male dislike of condoms:

Male aged 17

“...I ride bareback, I don't like condoms even if I'm having sex with a tramp I never use one”

The justification for the lack of precautions was that wearing a condom was deemed as 'unmanly' because it was perceived as lessening male sexual pleasure and possibly reducing the potential of male orgasm which, after all, was the only focus of the sexual encounter for these men:

Male aged 20

“You ain't gonna use a condom, what's the point? It's like having sex with a sock over it. You don't have sex like that thinking about the future...not with a woman like that...it's simply about the moment”

Therefore, the only concern about these encounters for the young men was the possibility of catching a sexually transmittable disease themselves. The fault and therefore the blame for potential disease was distorted and placed firmly on the young women. This abdication of responsibility was made easy by the depiction of the young woman as a 'dirty slut/slag' to whom the men owed nothing.

The dual lack of respect and responsibility was also evident in the lack of regard for any possible pregnancies. Whereas with 'birds' whilst the over-riding expression was a reluctance of the young men 'to be tied down' with a kid, alongside the feeling that they might be 'tricked' into making their girlfriend pregnant, there were a couple of respondents who suggested they might stick around or at least help to pay for an abortion. With 'sluts' however there would not even be that level of 'consideration':

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Male aged 18

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“When you’re having sex with sluts and slags, you ain’t gonna hang around if she tells you she’s pregnant”

Indeed the quotations illustrated the pure contempt for such women and an unwillingness to take any responsibility for possible consequences

Male aged 21

“You don’t think about getting her ‘up the duff’ when you are doing her but I mean some girl I’d done it with came back and told me she was pregnant, I just laughed at her; she’s a silly bitch”

Arguably, the aforementioned sexual encounters involved emotional expressive displays, where men bestowed honour on themselves but dishonour on the young women, as part of their own ‘moral careers’. Harre (2010) refers to such emotional displays involving the bestowing of honour and dishonour, as discursive acts, which embody moral and aesthetic judgements. Here the young men judged the young women disrespectfully for being sexually available; these ‘dishonourable’ judgements around female sexuality were reminiscent of victim precipitation and victim blaming around rape (Amir 1967⁸), as ‘sluts’ were depicted as both encouraging and deserving of contempt. This important analytical point has been illuminated by the proceeding theoretical discussion.

However, the labelling of young women as ‘sluts’ involved only one half of a discursive strategy, around the labelling of female associates, using the dichotomy of sexual availability/unavailability. In contrast to the ‘slut’ label, the label of ‘bird’ was used to refer to a girlfriend and this label denoted ‘sexual exclusivity’; girlfriends were expected to remain

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faithful to their boyfriend although the same was not true for the men themselves. The emphasis in these discussions was that men had to defend their sexual territory against other men – in this sense the honour code around masculinity used by the men advocated the use of physical violence against those that demonstrated insult such as ‘making a move’ on one’s girlfriend. Within the gang, respondents suggested that such behaviour was considered a taboo and posed a risk of physical assault:

Male aged 21

“Well you wouldn’t make a move on a mate’s bird”

Male aged 16

“You’d keep your distance if you know what’s good for you”

The men suggested that they would also respond negatively to the infidelity of a girlfriend especially if they knew the man concerned and that there would be implications both for the girlfriend and the man:

Male aged 20

“It would not be good news for her, put it that way”

Importantly, issues of ‘sexual territory’ over women could often be long-standing and were sometimes even problematic once relationships with women were over, which was particularly the case with rival gangs. For example, the next quotation details an experience of on-going violence which is partly based on two men in a gang having sex with the former girlfriends of a rival gang member who has been in prison:

Male aged 21

“There’s a few blokes that have just come out of prison that are looking for me...One of them, I did something with his missus [sex] whilst he was inside. I didn’t know he was going out with her, but my friend had done it as well, with another bird he was seeing before he was inside. He kidnapped him. We were walking down the road and he jumped out of a car with a knife and put it to his throat and forced him into the boot”

As the aforementioned quotation indicates the factor of territorial ownership of a girlfriend’s sexuality was a crucial factor in inter-gang rivalry and the respondents suggested that an important way of getting at rival gang members was to attempt to make a move on their girlfriend or take revenge against a girlfriend in some way:

Male aged 20

“...your girlfriend is a target without a doubt; some women round here have been targeted because someone is after us. My mate’s bird had some guys waiting outside of work for her one night...but she saw them and got out of the building the back way...you have to try to prevent stuff; most girls won’t go out without male protection cos they’re not allowed to”

Such behaviour was perceived as implied disrespect of your woman but the real significance of it was that it was used to challenge the masculinity of the boyfriend and this is indicated in the next quote:

Male aged 17

“...if someone targets your woman then that is a test really...they’re letting you know that you can’t defend her all the time and if they’re trying to have

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sex with her then that's even worse...it's like they're saying that they can treat her like a slut, like she's not your woman...there has been some bad shit like that, one girl I know had a bunch of blokes turned up at a family party and they grabbed her and one of them dragged her off and had sex with her...he could have got her pregnant or given her aids or anything...but if he's been with her, it's like she's ruined anyway and that's why he did it and that's why they were seeking her out that night cos they knew she was vulnerable and they hated her boyfriend and wanted to get at him”

Such advances to women labelled as girlfriends therefore posed a double-edged insult to the boyfriend by suggesting that a girlfriend might not be sexually exclusive and that he may therefore be a ‘dupe’, or alternatively, that he could not physically defend his girlfriend’s honour. Such advances posed specific challenges therefore to the masculine identities of the respondents themselves in terms of defending the sexual ‘honour’ of their girlfriends, keeping them sexually exclusive and maintaining their own masculine status. This helps to explain why such incidents were always responded to with violence and were also used to initiate it.

Indeed, the respondents themselves regularly targeted the girlfriends and sisters of other men to instigate, retaliate and perpetuate violence as they knew it was an effective strategy for ‘winding men up’, whether known men or strangers.⁴⁰¹¹ Therefore, approaches to other men’s women provided opportunities for violence and expressing oneself as a real man and formed part of the daily cycle of violence that these men were habitually engaged in:

Male aged 21

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I've done it before, you're with a few lads like, you're got some nice bird walking down the street with some geezer, you're gonna say 'Alright love', pissed out of your face and make a grab for her and then he goes mad and you're gonna do him"

Because young women were targeted by other men they were often accompanied by their boyfriends or his associates when out in public spaces. However, they were not simply at risk of such incidents whilst out on the streets:

Male aged 18

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"My mate got his dick out once at a bus-stop and flashed it at the girlfriend of (rival gang member) asking is she wanted it. She was going past in a car. It was funny at the time but he got a lot of grief afterwards from (rival gang member) and his lot and his sister had loads of blokes contacting her on the internet and posting bad stuff about her and they were ringing her up at work and heavy breathing down the phone and asking it was a brothel, that sort of thing, but that's pretty minor really, it's usually a lot worse than that"

These interview extracts have demonstrated that young women were labelled in ways that reflected their perceived honourable or dishonourable status; honourable women had something to defend whilst dishonourable women had nothing to defend. The discursive strategies informed the behaviour that the young men exemplified in their treatment of the young women, in that the designated honour status of the woman was mirrored in the behaviour of the young men towards her.

Most importantly the male behaviours exhibited, in response to the ‘bird’ and ‘slut’ labels, had the effect of enhancing the personal and collective status of the respondents as ‘real’ men. In this way, gendered ideas about female honour provided men with opportunities for demonstrating the very masculine identity that was valued by other male gang members through showing compliance with the male honour code of the gang. The author now turns to an explanation of these attitudes and behaviours by bringing together a theoretical discussion on masculinities, gendered honour, symbolic interactionism and labelling theories.

Explanation of the research findings

To recap – the two valued components of the masculinities of these respondents, namely heterosexuality and violence, dominated their encounters with women where the demonstration of power through control was imperative. These men emphasised control in many ways through the depiction of sex being focused on the physical act of penetration and male orgasm, through their implied threats and coercive strategies to have sex with ‘available’ women and, their use of physical violence to keep girlfriends sexually exclusive to themselves. All examples were illustrative of ‘hyper-masculinity’ which has been referred to as ‘a psychological term for the exaggeration of male stereotypical behaviour, such as an emphasis on physical strength, aggression and sexuality’ (Wright 2014).

Understanding that ‘power’ can be achieved through the sexual control of women requires a recognition of the ‘cultural cues’ transferred within communities of marginalised, socially excluded, poor urban men. Indeed, ‘hypermasculinity’ has been understood as a subculture of masculinity often formed in response to structural constraints. Consequently, the ‘hyper-masculinity’ (see Katz, 1988; Miller, 1958; Hagedorn 1998)¹² adopted by many marginalised young men has been viewed as a subcultural response (see Miller, 1958; Anderson 1990,

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Hallsworth and Silverstone 2009) to the ‘structural’ disempowerment, which has resulted from the capitalist restructuring of the global economy, where traditional working class patriarchy has been thrown into a prolonged material and ideological crisis (see Bourgois 1996).

Social marginalisation therefore has consequences for how marginalised young men ‘do masculinity’ (see Messerschmidt, 1993), when they are unable to reproduce sufficient conformity to what Connell has referred to as ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Bourgois 1996).⁴³

However, the recognition of structural factors such as these should not preclude us from acknowledging men’s agency and responsibility for their negative behaviour. The young men discussed here chose to construct their masculine identities in ways that harmed others.

Indeed it is their very acts of destructiveness, as part of their constant and desperate need to validate their masculinity, through the expression of power through violence that requires our urgent attention.

Notwithstanding this, because of the ‘futility’ of the violence of many marginalised young men, some writers have questioned the usefulness of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ in such accounts. Hall (2002: 44) has argued that the exercise of violence against other men (whether over women or not) does not amount to ‘patriarchal privilege’ and he questions whether it even amounts to a protest against its unavailability – so-called ‘protest’ masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1993), as previously mentioned. Instead:

“The only discernible reward that the audience of fellow marginals can bestow is applause, a brief moment of approval that, because it delivers only a fleeting shadow of the glory it promises, becomes a highly addictive but ultimately futile pursuit. Some privilege”

And yet, it is this very focus on ‘protest’ masculinity, as an ‘addictive chasing of fleeting glory in an ultimately futile pursuit’ given the fact that it provides no ‘real’ political advantage, that enables us to explain sexual assaults against young women by gang members.

Of utmost significance here is, as Bourdieu observes, that manliness must be validated by other men, in its reality as actual or potential violence, and certified as a relational notion, socially constructed in front of and for the group of ‘real men’, as the active social reproductive capacity and the capacity to fight off or offend (Bourdieu 2001 cited in Akpınar 2003: 432). The demonstration of sexual prowess, through sex with ‘sluts’ and physical violence to keep ‘birds’ sexually exclusive, both provide examples of this.

Crucially, the male gang was the only outlet for these young men to earn respect and have their masculinity validated by other men and it was the constant and insular presence of this male peer group which explains why these lower-class males were so anxious to secure admiration in subcultures that were characterized by mimetic rivalry, together with ruthless judgement of an individual’s ability to adhere to the aforementioned normative sub-cultural expectations (Gilmore, 1990; Polk, 1994; Winlow, 2001).

Therefore, within the micro-world of the ‘gang’, these gendered and sexualised practices were examples of a constant preoccupation, concerning the employment of appropriate – albeit often unachievable – strategies to maximise ‘honour’ and ‘respect’ and minimise exposure to ‘humiliation’ within a context where, alternative strategies were often non-existent. Symbolic interactionism proves especially useful here:

Micro-interactions in the gender order – energized by powerful emotional dynamics such as expectation, judgement, honour and humiliation (Gilmore, 1990)...operate with an impenetrable, preoccupying intensity in the worst material circumstances – where honour is constantly offended and humiliation is a structural condition of

existence – which tends to restrict the practising or even imagining of alternatives
(Horne and Hall, 1995).

Against this background it is easy to see how: 1) attempts to exercise ‘power’ over women serve to reinforce the accepted ‘patriarchal’ gendered order within the gang, whilst also alongside 2) violent responses to threats to sexual territory managed to afford male prestige – and by default ‘honour’ – to individual men. Within this environment it is no surprise that violence often flares up amongst men when sleights are made concerning the performance of traditional roles (Katz, 1988; Ptacek, 1988; Frieze and Browne, 1989); particularly when, fighting and investment in promiscuity, are the only male ‘roles’ available. This also helps to explain why, as Polk (1994) suggests, insults thrown at the traditional objects of male protection – such as wives and girlfriends (the ‘birds’) – are more likely to trigger violence than those directed at the person.

In the context of this research it does indeed appear that the constant coveting and defending of male honour – based on the central components of ‘on-road’ masculinity, hardness and heterosexuality (Hallsworth & Silverstone 2009) – played a pivotal role in shaping these young men’s coercive attitudes to women in their peer groups. Accordingly, their public identities were very much designed to manipulate the impressions that other men formed of them. In this sense, coercive sexual encounters and expressions of violence to other men whilst defending sexual territory formed part of a ‘moral career’. Put simply, doing their masculinity’ through engaging in these status enhancing activities, allowed these men to demonstrate compliance with the accepted honour code around masculinity to the only men with whom they associated.

This focus can also help us to explain the relationship between the levels of symbolic and physical violence, within this micro-context of this West Midlands street gang, and the

broader sexism and patriarchy that we find elsewhere in society, which cuts across factors of ethnicity, class and geography.

If we look at other young men of a similar age to those in the current study, evidence of this can be found in recent media discussions about the sexist leaflets describing women as ‘slags’, ‘sluts’ and ‘whores’ which were distributed by the male rugby club at London School of Economics, a leading British University.⁴⁴ Indeed, the shocking rise in sexual harassment and sexual assaults against female students at university in the UK has been documented in a National Union of Students research study, the findings of which provide support for other research which has indicated the patriarchy and sexism often inherent in male fraternities.⁴⁵ The examples of harassment and assaults illustrated in the NUS study are indicative of Kelly’s (1988) notion of the continuum of violence experienced by young women. As a response to these findings many universities in the UK have developed classes for students on sexual consent.

The difference between the young men at LSE and those in urban street gangs may be a question of degree. An important difference lies in the opportunities available to the two groups in terms of the resources available for building their masculine identities alongside the availability of male audiences to validate ‘manliness’. Young men at university are much more likely to be able to build their masculine identities to comply with key aspects of Connell’s hegemonic masculinity and are not limited to a gang context for proving their masculine identities. This does not mean that they are unlikely to be abusive but that the abuse of gang members is likely to be more violent and more entrenched as the capacity to use violence is *the* defining feature of the masculinities involved and other opportunities for proving masculinity are often limited. Furthermore, the constant need to use violence in order to ‘prove oneself as a man’ in the male street gang, means that the masculinity of individual men is rarely ‘established’ in such contexts, but is constantly subjected to

challenge which fuels the cycle of violence in which such young men are often enmeshed.

An additional factor is that the misogyny of college and university students¹⁶ is often explained away by 'lad culture' which is indicative of ~~xxxx~~ criminological differences in [benign](#) explanations of the offending behaviour of the middle and upper classes as opposed to the criminal labels attached to the behaviour of the working classes and unemployed ([Becker 1963](#)):-

The behaviour of both groups however can be explained in large part by the accepted 'double standard' on the sexuality of men and women, which is prevalent in wider society, based on a patriarchal cultural code which draws on the honour/shame complex which is approved of and practised as a means of controlling female sexuality. This 'double standard' around male and female sexuality informed the 'moral careers' of the young men under discussion here.

The associated honour/shame complex can be seen in many cultures and religions (Hirschon 1976; Peristiany, 1974; Akpinar 2003; Meeto & Mirza 2007) and is rooted in perceptions of male and female biology through a patriarchal interpretation of physiological differences and roles in procreation. In such accounts women are perceived as being physically 'open' whilst men are said to be closed. These conceptions of sexual physiology are then reflected in accounts of male and female contributions to procreation wherein men are depicted as being the 'sowers' of seed and women as the 'receivers' (sometimes referred to as the 'field') (Akpinar 2003). Paternity is over-emphasised in such accounts to the point of man as the 'life-giver' – which in turn, influences the rules around sexuality as the husband has to ensure the purity of his lineage. Because of her perceived 'openness' women are capable of being polluted and, in some cultures, the 'shame' associated with this has implications for her family and husband. These combined factors mean that women's sexuality must be

controlled as the value of a woman lies in her chasteness, exemplified in her virginity before marriage and her fidelity after marriage (Akpinar, 2003).

Whilst, masculinity is defined against other men it is also defined against femininity. In the aforementioned accounts of physiology and reproductive roles they are described as complementary opposites and yet these are constructed on a patriarchal model. This means that the need to control female sexuality is linked to male honour and in such accounts honour can only pertain to a man (Delaney 1987; Bourdieu 2001). A woman is defined essentially as only having negative honour in that she can only protect herself against shame; this is shown in how male and female honour codes are played out (Delaney 1987; Bourdieu 2001).

For example, Bourdieu (2001) states that the construction of habitus in Mediterranean societies implies that men as the social actors set up the rules of the game in social arenas reserved for men only; women have to modify themselves according to male norms with their body and souls (see also Callewaert & Petersen 1995). Masculinity in this respect cannot be defined without women taking part as objects and because of this males can be defiled in exchanges where women are so used. Because men can be defiled in this way they are potentially vulnerable and women are viewed as the embodiment of vulnerability and honour (Bourdieu 2001).

The crucial point about contempt for women here is that of female shame which draws on Douglas's (1966) use of symbols in bodily boundaries in relation to notions of purity and pollution. Notions of good women versus bad women are created using this dichotomy. Engelbrektsson (1978) explains the sexual standard for female sexuality using the woman and field analogy;

*Foreign seed...that is seed from any other man than a woman's husband
contaminates the field forever making the woman permanently defiled*
(Engelbrektsson p137 cited in Akpinar 2003:432)

This explains how a 'polluted' woman is permanently shamed whereas, Engelbrektson suggests that in contrast, since a man does not achieve any substance from a woman with whom he copulates, he does not become defiled by having intercourse with a defiled woman. This lack of shame for a man through such associations is clearly linked to the perceptions of reproduction and these have been linked to physiology, interpretations of which often depict men as having naturally insatiable sexual appetites:

The key to attitudes regarding men and women is the belief that the sexual drive in the adult female is subject to her control, while that of the adult male is physiologically imperative and cannot be controlled (Hirschon, 1978:2)

As the quote indicates women are expected to control their sexuality and whilst there have been conflicting theories on whether women's sexual appetites are insatiable or otherwise – the end result is the same, it is women's sexuality that must be controlled not that of men.

It would appear therefore that the sexual double standard discussed in the interviews had much in common with these cultural ideas. Whilst the expressions of sexual ownership of girlfriends appeared to be more to do with proving masculinity to other men than ensuring paternity – the defending of male honour through controlling female sexuality was the same. On the other hand, 'sluts' were afforded no respect because they were already 'shamed' through failing to police their own sexuality, they were described as 'polluted' and 'dirty' and yet because of the double standard there was no male shame through association and no responsibility for any consequence of it.

The double standard around sexuality therefore meant that 'sluts' were 'stigmatised' on the basis of evidence of female promiscuity, whether real -or assumed (see Goffman, 1963). This provides an example of how stigma may be affixed to a person on the basis of a perceived negative characteristic – here, sexual promiscuity in women. Stigma may also be described as a label that associates a person to a set of unwanted characteristics that form a stereotype – here that of the 'slut'/whore. This emphasis on socially interactive labelling processes allows us to connect the micro and macro levels within such encounters.

At the core of labelling theory, most commonly associated with the work of Becker (1963) was the idea that there was no such thing as deviance per se – in the context of sex, promiscuity is not deviant itself but becomes so when associated with certain types of persons such as women. Becker's work stresses the importance of dominant groups within social contexts where the power dynamics facilitate the labelling process and the labellers protect their own more powerful interests, as the men arguably do here with their application of the 'slut' label.

The young men here had power over women both through their potential for physical violence but also because of the power afforded them by the patriarchal honour codes that approved of sexual promiscuity for them but disapproved of it for women. Moreover, there are additional benefits for those who stigmatize others as the process can serve several personal functions for such individuals including reducing anxiety (Goffman 1963) and thereby increasing one's own subjective sense of well-being, by building self-esteem, as it arguably did here for the young men here..

In contrast to the stigmatisers, the stigmatised will often experience status loss and discrimination and a diminution of power once the cultural stereotype is secured. As those labelled become 'stigmatised' and excluded – the labellers reason the exclusion based on the

original characteristic that led to the stigma (Goffman 1963, 1959), for example, that sexual promiscuity is dishonourable in women. The stigmatization here is done to girls and arguably forms part of their moral career where they can end up with spoilt social identities which affect self-esteem. This is not to deny girl's agency (Batchelor 2005; Young?) or that it is possible to resist stigma or labels. However, the potential and resources for girls to do so within the context of a male dominant gang where the men back up their patriarchal power with violence is limited. Moreover, there is no possibility of the girls labelling the boys as due to the sexual double standard the negative label of 'slut' does not exist for men. such These problems are also seen in the exacerbated still further by existing difficulties in the prosecution of rape and sexual abuse (Lovett & Kelly 2009).

Finally, whilst this study was on men and data was not gathered from women about their perceptions of these honour codes some speculations can be made about possible stigmatizing effects of the 'slut' label drawn from other studies that have interviewed girls (Batchelor 2007a; Beckett et al 2013; see also Miller 1998). Such research has indicated that girls also judge other girls using a similar 'birds'/'sluts' dichotomy and that they often shun those labelled as 'sluts' through fear of negative repercussions through association. Indeed some young women go as far as labelling other girls as 'sluts', whether as a deflective mechanism or otherwise. All of this indicates therefore that the risk of the 'slut' label for women is ever-present and this has serious implications for possible resistances to it particularly for those with gang associations.

The significance of gendered honour and potential for change

The key policy argument made in this article is that we must make men accountable for abusive behaviour towards women and that reductive policies that focus on young women preventing their own victimisation by recognising and rejecting abusive behaviour are one-

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sided and may continue to have the unfortunate consequence, whether intended or otherwise, of blaming women for their own victimisation (Southgate 2011).

The emphasis on gendered honour in this article has generated important considerations for the development of policy on tackling sexual violence in the gang context. Whilst derogatory attitudes towards women based on male perceptions of their sexual availability are common in sexually abusive contexts, arguably it is both the expectation and the value placed on these attitudes by male peers that actively encourages them, particularly within this very insular environment. Both accounts of the 'bird' and the 'slut' involve expressions of male sexuality which deny or diminish a women's agency.

Importantly here men were judged by both physical aggression and sexual promiscuity. In contrast, women were judged solely on sexuality which was depicted as being under male control; whether because a man perceived that he alone had the right to have sex with a woman because she was his 'girlfriend' or because she is was a slut and therefore available to all men, including him; both of these perceptions arguably blur the issue of genuine consent.

What is needed is a proper debate about these issues. In short, we need to ask why demonstrating derogative attitudes and engaging in abusive behaviour towards women is so attractive to men like those in this study. Although these attitudes are not confined to the gang context, controlling and abusive behaviour towards young women within that environment is likely to be more exaggerated due to the limited ways of doing masculinity within male dominated gangs, the over-riding emphasis on control and violence and the tightly constrained scrutiny therein. Until we fully grapple with the issue of those masculine identities which reward men with 'kudos' from their male peers for treating women with contempt and disrespect then things are unlikely to change.

Educational approaches,¹⁷ including sex education, whilst important, –will have limited impact on male gang members, even those of school age as many of them are not in school. Whilst undoubtedly important, discussing models of ‘healthy relationships’¹⁸ with young people is not enough to effect meaningful change. Indeed, the idea of a ‘healthy’ relationship is open to debate – healthy in what way and for whom? Certainly, for the young men in this study exploitative encounters with women were arguably healthy for them. They were getting sex, often when genuine consent was highly dubious, , there were no sanctions for their behaviour, criminal or otherwise and rather than their gendered reputations being ‘trashed’ like the young women of their ‘conquest’, theirs were considerably enhanced. Certainly there was very little for these young men to lose and everything to gain by their behaviour.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is only perhaps when treating young women badly is viewed as something young men should be ashamed about, as something that makes them less of a man, rather than more, that meaningful change may occur. Yet in the gang this is particularly difficult because male gang members and their younger male siblings are likely to value the approval of that male peer group above all else, and given that the masculine identity adopted by that group is misogynistic and predatory and encourages male members to actively invest in promiscuity and sexual conquests whilst, ‘normalising’ sexual abuse and downgrading genuine consent.¹⁹ Unfortunately, we cannot expect to touch the abusive attitudes without having an impact on the moral basis of action and moral careers of the young men involved, as these are the key learning spaces where young people learn the real situation, by being respected or humiliated.

Commented [9]: I really like the historical references you use to show how things are perceived and how much this changes over time

Until we find a way to change the moral foundations of these learning spaces within the gang then exit²⁰ may be the most effective short-term remedy. This is, after all, a far simpler response than rebuilding a deeply damaged character which may, in any event, be impossible in the gang. In the meantime, we should certainly also help young women to understanding these masculine processes by airing and sharing with them *why* some young men act in the way that they do and *what they personally and collectively* get out of it.

Real change however and meaningful reductions in assaults against young women by gang members will require us to engender a societal cultural shift in how we view male and female sexuality.

The long-term challenge then is two-fold; firstly there is a need to redefine the face of acceptable masculinity and to shame acts that are based on the exploitation and abuse of women. This will require us to confront the double standards around male and female sexuality and current conceptions of honour and morality. This will also necessitate the promotion of an equality agenda aimed at developing both a societal shift in the attitudes of young men and also the expectations of young women within heteronormative environments.

Notes

1. See also Ball & Curry 1995 and Katz and Jackson-Jacobs 2004.

2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21127073>

3. Whilst the focus in this article is on the gang context and space does not permit more than a passing acknowledgement of this problem, the author does examine this in more detail in a later article (see Trickett, 2015).

4. Given the sample size it is not possible to make large-scale generalizations from the data. However, the findings on the use of violence and attitudes towards young women are similar to those in other studies on gangs cited in this article and it is possible to draw out key issues which are important to on-going debates about gangs and sexual assaults.

5. Grievous Bodily Harm, s18 and s20 Offences Against the Person Act 1861.

6. Actual Bodily Harm, s47 Offences Against the Person Act 1861.

7. Another name with similar connotations is 'Sket' see Safer London Foundation <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jul/19/gangs-rape-lists-sex-assault>

8. See <http://www.ukpoliceonline.co.uk/index.php?topic/53349-gangs-draw-up-lists-of-girls-to-rape/>

9. Hagedorn (1998) has emphasised how the gang members he interviewed saw their relationships with women, as here, there is some overlap with his typology here but the 'gentleman' did not exist in this research and many of his respondents were considerably older.

10. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/07/lad-culture-women-rape-sexual-harassment-abuse-laddish>

11. Research has recently advocated an emphasis on education such as Catch 22 (2012) and Heart (2013).

12. For policy on exit see HO 2011, Catch 22 (2012).

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