Gender and the school formal

Lee Smith

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand February, 2012
Abstract

This study investigates whether the school formal in New Zealand, like the prom in the United States, is a space where heteronormativity and normative gender codes are reproduced. I explore the gendered differences in the way a group of young people from three secondary schools in one South Island New Zealand urban centre prepare for the formal and perform their sexuality and gender on the night. I analyse the policies of the three participating schools in regard to same sex attracted students attending the formal with same sex partners. I also detail how the participants navigate societal discourses of youth and normative codes of sociability in a New Zealand context.

Queer theory and poststructural feminism are the theoretical frameworks guiding the research. Multiple methods of data collection including observations, researcher facilitated interviews (31 in total) and narratives are utilised in the project. Peer researchers at one participating school took photographs at the formal and discussed these in photo-elicitation interview. Researchers from the other two participating schools conducted interviews (18 in total) with their classmates.

My findings highlight how the school formal is an event where heteronormativity and normative gender codes are reproduced. The degree to which this occurs however, depends on a school’s policy on sexual diversity and the gendered make-up of students in the school. Heteronormativity and homophobic discourses were more pronounced at the participating boys’, compared with the participating girls’ and co-educational schools. Homophobic humour was prevalent at both the boys’ and co-educational school formals nonetheless. Emphasised femininity was more pronounced at the girls’, compared with the participating co-educational, school. Some young peoples’ behaviour on the night of the formal also referenced popular culture and media constructions of the event, as well as normative discourses of youth and socialisation, but other young people transgressed these constructions.

The study includes recommendations for researchers using photography as a data collection method, those working with young people in schools and how to do this in an ethical manner, as well as for future research on school formals. The study concludes with recommendations for how teachers can use the school formal to teach students about the social construction of gender and sexuality, as well as alerting students to social justice concerns.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my two academic supervisors, Dr Karen Nairn and Dr Susan Sandretto for their support, mentoring and guidance over the course of the research project. From Karen and Susan I learned the importance of clarity in my writing and the need to use my voice. I would also like to thank Karen and Susan for alerting me to those occasions when the formal was a focus in the New Zealand media and for supplying me with numerous newspaper and magazine articles reporting on the event. I would also like to thank you for your friendship and concern during the course of the thesis.

I am also grateful to the numerous post-graduate students at the University of Otago College of Education, such as Kate, Julie, Barrie, Hang, Kelly, Keely, Adisorn and Lara for allowing me to ‘run ideas past them’ and helping me with my writing. I would like to say a special thank you to Julie Stigter for helping me with the formatting of this thesis, teaching me about photo-shop and fixing on-going computer ‘glitches’ through the course of the project.

To my friends Carla and Megan thank you for listening to my anxieties and frustrations throughout the course of the research project. Thank you for your continuous support.

I am grateful to the University of Otago Scholarship Committee for granting me the post-graduate award, which provided me with funding to undertake the research study. Thank you for making the project possible.

Finally, I am indebted to the principals/teachers and students who took part in the study. Thank you for being so friendly, open and honest in your responses.
I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my friend and colleague Kate Jarvis. Thank you for so much.
Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................. II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......................................................................................... III
TABLE OF CONTENTS .............................................................................................. V
LIST OF TABLES ......................................................................................................... IX
LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................... IX

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND OUTLINE OF THE STUDY ....................... 1

| Positioning Myself .................................................................................................. 3 |
| Motivation for the Study ....................................................................................... 3 |
| Focus of the Research Study ............................................................................... 4 |
| Terminology ........................................................................................................... 6 |
| Homophobia .......................................................................................................... 6 |
| Experience ............................................................................................................. 7 |
| Sexuality ................................................................................................................ 8 |
| Sexuality terms: Heterosexual, lesbian, gay, queer .......................................... 9 |
| Mapping out the Thesis ....................................................................................... 9 |

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE ON SEX, GENDER AND SEXUALITY AT SCHOOL .... 12

| Introduction .......................................................................................................... 12 |
| Sexuality and Gender and the Official School Context .................................... 14 |
| Sexuality Education ............................................................................................ 16 |
| Teachers ............................................................................................................... 19 |
| Peer Groups and Sexuality/Gender Codes ...................................................... 20 |
| Cross gender physical games and touch .......................................................... 23 |
| Homophobia regulates heterosexuality ............................................................ 25 |
| Peer Pressure, Popularity and Friendship ....................................................... 26 |
| The School Prom .................................................................................................. 29 |
| Beauty work ......................................................................................................... 31 |
| The prom outfit .................................................................................................. 32 |
| Heterosexual romance ....................................................................................... 35 |
| Alcohol and the after party .............................................................................. 38 |
| The School Prom/Formal and Heteronormativity .......................................... 40 |
| The After Party .................................................................................................... 43 |
| Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 45 |

CHAPTER THREE: SEX, GENDER AND SEXUALITY AT THE FORMAL ............... 50

| Introduction .......................................................................................................... 50 |
| Subjectivity and discourses ............................................................................. 52 |
| Power and Resistance ....................................................................................... 54 |
| Agency and ‘forced choice’ ............................................................................. 55 |
| Sex/Gender performativity .............................................................................. 56 |
| The heterosexual matrix .................................................................................. 58 |
| Hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity ...................................... 59 |
| Gendered space ................................................................................................. 61 |
| Male/female binary ........................................................................................... 64 |
| Heterosexual/homosexual binary .................................................................... 65 |
| Heteronormativity ............................................................................................. 67 |
| Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 68 |

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS .................................................. 71

<p>| Introduction .......................................................................................................... 71 |
| Feminist Methodology ....................................................................................... 71 |
| Multiple Methods .............................................................................................. 74 |
| Narratives .......................................................................................................... 75 |
| Interviews ......................................................................................................... 76 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer Researchers</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo-elicitation interviews</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher observations</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young People and Consent</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to ethics</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting Schools</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Participating Schools</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gathering Participants</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting the research and evaluating the data collection methods</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student narratives</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with students</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with senior staff members in charge of organising the formal</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The advantages and disadvantages of using peer researchers in the study</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The photo-elicitation interviews</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problematic aspects of photography and photo-elicitation interviews</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting observations at the formal</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse analysis of the written data</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcribing</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of the participants’ responses</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field note analysis</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of the photographs and the photo-elicitation interviews</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse analysis</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 5: QUEER STUDENTS, COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY, AND THE SCHOOL FORMAL**

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 112

The Official policies of the co-educational and girls’ schools in regard to students taking same sex partners to the formal .................................................................................................................................................................................. 113

The acceptance/policing of students attending the formal with same sex partners by students in the girls’ and co-educational schools ................................................................................................................................................................................................. 115

The use of the terms gay/lesbian to police gender norms ........................................ 119

The policy of the boys’ school regarding students taking same sex partners to the formal ........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 124

Students reproducing heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity at the boy’s school........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................ 125

Attending the formal without a partner ....................................................................... 131

Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 133

**CHAPTER 6: COMING OF AGE AND ROMANCE AT THE SCHOOL FORMAL**

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 136

The school formal as a rite of passage ....................................................................... 137

Youth, friendships and leaving school ....................................................................... 142

A night to remember .................................................................................................... 146

The school formal and romance .................................................................................. 147

Girlfriends and boyfriends .......................................................................................... 155

Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 157

**CHAPTER 7: FORMAL PREPARATIONS AND DRESS** .................................................. 161

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 161

The school formal as a fairy tale space ...................................................................... 161

Planning for the formal .............................................................................................. 163

Girls’ body and beauty work practices ....................................................................... 164

Beauty work as a shared female occupation .................................................................. 170

The dress .................................................................................................................... 172

Skanks, sluts and dress choice .................................................................................... 177

Young women judging other young women’s outfits .................................................... 180

Resisting the normalised hyper-feminine image at the formal .................................... 181

Boys’ body work practices .......................................................................................... 183
Boys who spend time on their appearance for the formal ........................................ 185
The Tuxedo ................................................................................................................ 187
Girls control what boys wear .................................................................................. 190
Boys expressing their individuality through their dress ........................................... 192
Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 194

CHAPTER 8: SEXUALITY AND GENDERED SPACE AT THE FORMAL .........................197
Introduction ........................................................................................................... 197
Sexual Exchanges Between Teachers and Students at the Formal.......................... 198
Policing ‘Traditional’ Gendered Discourses of Sexuality ........................................ 201
‘Homo-sexuality’ and Homophobia at the Formal .................................................. 204
Homophobic ‘humour’ .............................................................................................. 206
Policing acceptable displays of affection between young women ............................ 212
Gender Performances and Spatiality ....................................................................... 216
‘Public’ and ‘private’ space at the formal .................................................................. 217
The toilets ............................................................................................................... 221
Gender, Eating and Spatiality .................................................................................... 223
Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 226

CHAPTER 9: ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION ON THE NIGHT OF THE FORMAL .............231
Introduction ........................................................................................................... 231
Prior to the Formal .................................................................................................. 232
Parents and drinking ................................................................................................ 233
Drinking with friends ............................................................................................... 234
Alcohol/Drugs at the Formal .................................................................................... 236
Teachers drinking at the formal ............................................................................... 239
Drugs at the formal .................................................................................................. 241
The After Party ....................................................................................................... 244
The organisation of the after parties ....................................................................... 245
Vulnerability of international students drinking to excess ....................................... 250
Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 255

CHAPTER 10: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION ..........................................................258
Introduction ........................................................................................................... 258
Summary of Findings .............................................................................................. 258
Same-sex attracted students and heteronormativity at the formal ......................... 258
Resisting the construction of the formal as a heteronormative space ....................... 260
Male Students and Romance ................................................................................... 261
Gendered Bodily Practices and the Formal ............................................................... 262
Young women’s preparations ................................................................................... 262
Young men’s preparations ....................................................................................... 263
Formal Attire ............................................................................................................ 264
Young women’s attire .............................................................................................. 264
Young men’s attire .................................................................................................. 265
Adults and Hetero-Sex at the Formal ....................................................................... 266
Public/private space ............................................................................................... 266
Negotiating Societal Constructions of Youth ............................................................ 267
Navigating New Zealand’s Drinking Culture ............................................................ 268
Summary-Conclusion ............................................................................................... 269
Methodological Insights .......................................................................................... 270
Photographs, peer researchers, observations and ethics ......................................... 270
The ethics of taking and presenting photographic images ........................................ 273
‘Failed’ Research Methods ...................................................................................... 275
Areas for Future Research on the School Formal ..................................................... 276
Implications for Schools, Parents and New Zealand Society .................................. 278
Heteronormativity and Same Sex Attracted Students .............................................. 278
The After Party ....................................................................................................... 279
Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 281

REFERENCES ........................................................................................................ 286
List of Tables

Table 1: Research questions and corresponding data collection methods........... 82
Table 2: The data collection methods at the three participating schools............ 90
Table 3: Themes identified in the student and staff interviews as well as the fieldnotes.................................................................105
Table 4: The themes and an initial theoretical reading of the images..............112

List of Figures

Figure 1: Young man preparing for the formal...........................................190
Figure 2: Two young men embracing....................................................215
Figure 3: Young woman texting............................................................218
Figure 4: Young woman dancing surrounded by young men.......................224
Figure 5: Young woman eating chicken..................................................228
Figure 6: Young man eating chicken......................................................229
Chapter One: Introduction and Outline of the Study

Most secondary schools in New Zealand hold annual school formals or school balls for senior students in years 12 and 13. The New Zealand media portrays the school formal as a glamorous affair and a special night for senior students (Smith, 2008; Valintine, 2009; Yurisich, 2009). Media discourses construct the school formal as a coming of age ritual (Tay, 2007) and therefore a landmark event in the lives of young people (Best, 2000). Given this construction it is somewhat surprising that few research studies have been carried out on the school formal in a New Zealand context.

Despite the paucity of published research on the event, the school formal is frequently a focus in the New Zealand media. There are numerous newspaper and magazine articles reporting on various aspects of the formal and it is also frequently discussed on television news and current affairs programmes (see Beech, 2009; Chateau, 1990; Chinn, 2007; Conway, 2008; Denhardt, 2009; Hannah, 2008; Hartevelt, 2009; Hathaway, 2007; Hewson, 2007; Lewis, 2008; MacDonald, 2009; McCleod, 2008; McCullough, 2009a; 2009b; Munro, 2009; Smith, 2008; Tay, 2007; Valintine, 2009; Van Kempen, 2008; Yurisich, 2009). These media reports and discussions generally centre on one of three issues in relation to the formal.

Firstly, the New Zealand mainstream and queer media report on how some secondary schools ban same sex attracted students from attending the formal with same sex partners (see Chinn, 2007; Hannah, 2008; McCleod, 2008; McCullough, 2009a; 2009b). Such practices highlight how the school formal in New Zealand, like the prom in North America, is a heteronormative event that upholds “heterosexuality as the desired and assumed expression of sexuality” (Grace & Wells, 2005, pp. 248-249). However, under the 1993 Human Rights Act it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of sexuality and gender in New Zealand. Consequently, the Human Rights

---

1 Since there is a dearth of literature on the school formal, I am unable to discuss when, or indeed why secondary schools in New Zealand started including school formals in their calendars.
Commission² (HRC) has received a number of complaints from parents of lesbian/gay/bisexual students and same sex attracted students themselves who have been denied permission by their schools to attend the formal with their same sex partners (McCullough, 2009a). In all these cases the HRC has encouraged negotiation between the schools, parents and students and they report that the issue has been satisfactorily resolved for all parties (although they do not say how) (http://www.hrc.co.nz/home/hrc/enquiriescomplaints/faqs/theschoolball.php).

Nevertheless, the complaints brought to the HRC highlight how the policy of schools banning same sex attracted students from attending the school formal with same sex partners is a current social justice concern.

Secondly, there are a number of full-page articles in New Zealand newspapers reporting on young women’s formal preparations (Hathaway, 2007; Hewson, 2009; Tay, 2007). One of these articles featured the sub-heading “The dress, the hair, the nails, the makeup. It takes a lot of work to become the belle of the ball” (Tay, 2007, p. 6). Such a heading infers that young women must engage in extensive beauty work for the formal if they wish to make an impression at the event (Best, 2000). However, young men’s formal preparations are seldom mentioned in these articles. Consequently, the New Zealand press assumes that young women and men prepare for the formal in vastly contrasting ways (Best, 2000).

Finally, the New Zealand media reports on after formal parties, which are portrayed as ‘drunken affairs’ (Beech, 2009; Conway, 2008; Munro, 2009; Yurisich, 2009). It should be explained that in New Zealand it is usual for an after party to take place immediately following the school formal. However, The Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand (2002) argues that following the decrease of the legal drinking age from 20 to 18 in 1999, the New Zealand media has become increasingly focused on reporting specific instances of young people engaging in problematic behaviour while intoxicated. There have been numerous media articles centring on the criminal offences committed by young people following bouts of excessive drinking.

² The Human Rights Commission is a government department created to mediate in those cases where human rights have been breached. It can take legal proceedings against people or institutions that discriminate on the grounds of sexuality, gender, age, disability and so forth (http://www.hrc.co.nz/home/hrc/humanrightsenvironment).
at events such as after parties (The Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2002). Such reporting frames young people as “deviant troublemakers” (Messias et al., 2007, p. 1), which is typical of how young people are depicted in the media.

**Positioning Myself**

Since this is a qualitative research project, which utilises feminist methodology it is necessary to list the various subject positions in which I am located, which impact on the research study (Davies et al., 2004; Fine et al., 2000; Pillow, 2003; Reay, 1996; Rose, 1997). I am a Pākehā middle-class New Zealander, a student, lesbian, feminist and an adult woman. All of these various locations influenced how the fieldwork was carried out (England, 1994) and the relationships I developed with the participants through the course of the study (see Chapter Four for examples) (McLafferty, 1995).

Being positioned as the researcher I also had the final say in regard to selecting which passages and photographs were included in the thesis (England, 1994; Fine, 1994) and how they were theorised (Fine et al., 2000). Consequently, I am not a “neutral narrator” (Jones, 1992, p. 31) of the participants’ responses but someone whose positioning as a researcher played “a central role in the research process, in the field as well as in the final text” (England, 1994, p. 87).

**Motivation for the Study**

The initial motivation for studying the formal came from research undertaken as part of my Master’s thesis, titled *Un/silencing Lesbian and Bisexual Students: Some Women’s Experiences of how High School met their Needs*, which focused on six young lesbian/bisexual women (aged between 21-25) reflecting on their high school experiences (Smith, 2006). Three participants reported that their schools had policies in place that prevented lesbian and bisexual students attending the formal with same sex partners (Smith, 2006). Two of these participants said that lesbian/bisexual students were expected to sign a form declaring that they were lesbian, followed by interview with the school principal where they had to state they
were lesbian in order to obtain permission to attend the formal with a same sex partner. The third participant reported that her school made it a rule that couples attending the formal had to be male and female.

In 2007 Anna Chinn, a reporter for a queer newspaper, conducted telephone interviews with all the secondary school principals in one New Zealand urban centre, in which she asked them about their school policy regarding same sex attracted students attending the school formal with same sex partners. Interestingly, none of the principals who Chinn (2007) surveyed reported having any policy at their school in regard to same sex attracted students attending the formal with same sex partners. In fact a principal in a school where two participants in my Master’s thesis stated that lesbian/bisexual students were required to sign a piece of paper declaring they were lesbian and then have an interview with the principal in order to get permission to attend the formal with their same sex partners, denied having such a policy in place. Clearly, there is a discrepancy between the Master’s research participants and the principal’s accounts, which made me motivated to find out whether schools do have policies that prevent queer students attending the formal with same sex partners and more about the formal itself.

It should be noted that since both principals’ and students’ accounts of the formal were researched for the study, I also encountered conflicting reports in regard to the policies of participating schools. These instances are analysed and discussed later in the thesis.

**Focus of the Research Study**

This project, *Gender and the Formal* explores the place of the school formal in New Zealand society and documents the importance of the event in the lives of a group of young people. It details how the young people conceptualise the formal, as well as their experiences of the event. A thread running through the thesis is how this group of young people navigate New Zealand popular cultural and media depictions of the school formal and after party (Best, 2000; Zlatunich, 2009).
The project also examines whether the school formal, like the prom in the United States and Canada, is a social space where heteronormativity and normative gender codes are promoted (Best, 2000; Epstein et al., 2000-2001; Grace & Wells, 2005; Zlatunich, 2009). In order to investigate whether the school formal is a space where young people are expected to construct themselves as exemplars of heterosexual masculinity/femininity (Epstein et al., 2000-2001), the gendered differences in formal preparations among a group of young people and their gender/sexuality performances at the event are discussed. An exploration of how teachers and other adults, who are at the formal in an official capacity, construct and perform their masculine/feminine subjectivities at the event is also undertaken (Rasmussen, 2004).

The opinions of student participants in the three participating schools school regarding how they think their classmates would react if a same sex attracted students attended the formal with a same sex partner are detailed. The policy of each school in regard to same sex attracted students attending the formal with same sex partners is also described. Incidences where young people are simply assumed to be heterosexual, as well as instances where heterosexuality is taken for granted in this social setting are also documented (Epstein & Johnson, 1994).

Since young people are also positioned as members of youth and New Zealand cultures, I investigate how these various locations influence the student participants’ investment in the formal and their behaviour on the night. I explore how the group of young people navigate New Zealand’s drinking culture by documenting their alcohol consumption patterns on the night of the formal (Abel & Plumridge, 2004; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al, 2006). Finally, some of the concerns senior staff members at the three participating schools have about after parties where young people are likely to consume alcohol are listed (Conway, 2008).

The following questions are guiding the research project:
1. How do schools/teachers/students reinscribe normative (hetero)sexuality and gender discourses at the site of the school formal and how do students resist or conform to this policing?

2. What rules and regulations do schools have in place in regards to the school formal? Does a student’s non-compliance with the rules give them status amongst their peers?

3. How do students themselves prepare for, and conceptualise the school formal and how do formal goers perform their gender on the night?

4. Does students’ resistance to, or compliance with, compulsory heterosexuality and normative gender discourses secure their ‘in group’ status amongst their peer group?

5. What importance do students place on alcohol consumption on the night of the formal and what are some of the issues that schools face in regard to after parties?

Terminology

Before moving on it is necessary to define and justify why I utilise the terms homophobia and experience in this project. These two terms have been criticised by queer theorists and poststructural feminists respectively.

**Homophobia.**

Queer theorist Britzman (1995) argues that the term homophobia “individualizes heterosexual fear and loathing toward gay men and lesbian subjects at the expense of examining how heterosexuality becomes normalized as natural” (p. 153) in society. Furthermore, Hinson (1996) states that the phobia part of the term constitutes those subjects who direct violence against gay men/lesbians as having a “pathological fear” (p. 143) of homosexuality, which causes them to panic when they encounter a homosexual and respond in a hostile manner. Lawyers frequently draw on this homophobic fear or panic response in cases where their clients have been accused of murdering or beating gay men/lesbians (Hinson, 1996). Hinson (1996) also states that the term homophobia is inaccurate because violence is not solely directed at gay
men and lesbians but also those who perform their gender in non-traditional ways (also see Smith, 2006).

Despite these criticisms I do use the term homophobia in this research project, for a variety of reasons. Since homophobia is a term that is used widely in society I contend that most people would have an understanding that it refers to discrimination directed at lesbians/gays/bisexuals (New Zealand AIDS Foundation, 2004, Rainbow Youth & OUT THERE, 2004; also see Smith, 2006). Consequently, the participants in this research study and anyone who reads this thesis would be likely to understand what this term means and therefore I utilise it in this study.

In addition, many queer students in New Zealand secondary schools are subjected to bullying and abuse (Le Brun et al., 2004; Nairn & Smith, 2003a; Quinlivan, 1994; 1996; Stapp, 1991; Smith, 2006; Town, 1999; Vincent & Ballard, 1997). The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers’ Association (NZPPTA) (2003) and The New Zealand AIDS Foundation, in collaboration with Rainbow Youth and OUT THERE (2004), have produced resources for New Zealand secondary schools to raise awareness of sexual diversity in schools and the impact of homophobic violence. As sexual diversity and homophobic abuse often goes unacknowledged in New Zealand secondary schools (NZPPTA, 2003), having resources that explicitly address these issues is vital. Since, these resources are readily accessible to teachers and utilise the term homophobia I also use it in this study.

Experience.

Poststructural feminist Scott (1992) critiques the term experience and how it has been used in historical research. She explains that traditionally historians have documented people’s personal experiences and taken them as irrefutable proof of a particular thing. For example, what it is like for a man to realise he is gay and to ‘experience’ oppression on the basis of his sexuality. However, Scott (1992) argues that framing experience in this manner is problematic because it draws on essentialist understandings of identity as fixed and fails to account for how people are constructed as particular kinds of subjects based on their discursive ‘experiences’. It also does not
address how ‘difference’ itself is produced by societal discourses and language. This construction of difference also leads to the oppression subjects experience because of their sexuality, race, cultural or other forms of ‘difference’, seem natural.

Despite her critique of the term experience and its use in research, Scott (1992) explains that because it is used so pervasively in society and is such a well-understood term then it is necessary to use the term. However, she states that it should be used in such a way as to centre “on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of ‘experience’ and on the politics of its construction” (p. 37). Consequently, when I do use the term experience in this thesis I also investigate how these experiences are shaped by societal constructions of the event, as well as by societal discourses of youth, gender and heterosexuality.

**Sexuality.**

It is also necessary to unpack how I understand the term ‘sexuality’ and how it is used in the thesis. Rather than viewing sexuality as fixed, I consider sexuality as something that is mutable and shifting (Quinlivan & Town, 1999). Numerous people take up different sexual subjectivities and experience different sexual attractions throughout their lifetime (Quinlivan & Town, 1999). Therefore, although some people in the study may identify as ‘straight’ or ‘queer’, this may not be a sexual subjectivity that they take up for life.

Viewing sexuality as fluid rather than fixed also challenges the heterosexual/homosexual binary, which presents heterosexuality and homosexuality as the only two sexualities available for people to take up in society (Quinlivan & Town, 1999). There are numerous forms of sexuality that exist in society that blur the division between heterosexuality/homosexuality, such as asexuality, bisexuality and transgendered people’s sexualities. Some heterosexual couples also enact queer practices in their relationships (threesomes with two members of the same sex/gender) and some queer people engage in ‘heterosexual practices’ in their relationships (penis shaped dildos for lesbians). Consequently, the heterosexual/homosexual binary, as well as sexual identity terms such as heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian and gay are
not truly representative of the range of sexualities and sexual practices people engage in society.

**Sexuality terms: Heterosexual, lesbian, gay, queer.**

In stating this however, I do utilise the terms heterosexual, lesbian, gay and queer in the study. The term heterosexual is used to refer to those students who self-identified as attracted to members of the ‘opposite’ sex or gender, but also in relation to the larger ‘institution’ of heterosexuality, which frames heterosexuality as the only legitimate sexuality in society (Butler, 1990). I use the terms lesbian and gay when referring to students attracted to members of the same sex/gender, although queer theorists see these terms as conservative and regulatory (Butler, 1990; 1991). This is because the participants themselves used these terms. Furthermore, because the term queer is considered confrontational and schools are often reluctant to participate in sexuality research, I used the terms lesbian and gay when asking senior staff members about their school’s policy on students attending the formal with same sex partners. Finally, I also utilise the term queer in the study to refer to anyone who is attracted to members of the same or multiple genders, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning students and those who identify as queer.

**Mapping out the Thesis**

Chapter Two is divided into three sections. In the first section, literature focusing on how gender/sexuality performances are regulated within the official context in secondary schools is reviewed because of the relative paucity of research on the school formal in the New Zealand context. In the second section studies on how young people construct and perform their sexuality/gender in schools, as well as how peer groups police students’ gender displays, are discussed. In the third section the small amount of research that is available on the prom in the United States, school discos in the United Kingdom (Epstein et al., 2000-2001), and the school formal in the New Zealand context is reviewed.
In Chapter Three, some central tenets of poststructuralism, such as discourse and subjectivity, power and resistance are unpacked. This is because queer theory and poststructural feminism, the key theoretical frameworks employed in the study, both take up poststructural definitions of these terms. Butler’s (1990) notions of gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix are also detailed in the chapter, as are Connell’s (1987) concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. A description of how the masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual binaries serve to reproduce masculinity and heterosexuality as dominant is included. The chapter concludes with a definition of Warner’s (1993) concept of heteronormativity.

The data collection methods selected for the study are detailed in Chapter Four. A description of feminist methodology is provided as well as a justification for why multiple methods of data collection were utilised. I also discuss some of the problems that I encountered through the course of the project because of my decision to use photography as a data collection method. Furthermore, I detail how schools and participants were invited to take part in the project and how the fieldwork was carried out. Finally, the steps involved in the data analysis are reported.

Chapter Five explores the official policy of the three participating schools in relation to same sex students attending the formal with same sex partners. It also reports how student participants in each of the three participating schools thought students would react if a same sex attracted pupil bought a same sex partner to the formal. Finally, a description of how young men who went to the formal without a partner were more likely to be harassed by their peers at the boys’ school than at the co-educational school concludes the chapter.

The student participants’ conceptualisations of the formal are detailed in Chapter Six. A description of how young people negotiated popular cultural and media constructions of the formal, as well as how societal constructions of youth impacted on the student participants’ interest in the event is included (Best, 2000). The first half of the chapter reports on how a number of the participants viewed the school formal and the meaning they attached to the event (Best, 2000). The second half of the chapter details whether or not the participants took up New Zealand
popular cultural and media depictions of the formal as a night of heterosexual romance (see Marker, 2007; 2008; Tay, 2007).

Chapter Seven reports the gendered differences in the student participants’ formal preparations. It describes the variation between how young women went about engaging in beauty work. It also focuses on how the student participants chose their formal attire and some of the factors that mediated their choice of clothing. Finally, it reports on how some young people do not prepare for the formal in accordance with traditional gender scripts.

The major themes that emerged from my observations at two school formals, as well as the themes that were evident in photographs taken by peer researchers at one school formal are reported in Chapter Eight. The focus of the chapter is how the formal goers performed their gender and sexuality at the formal. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the theme of sexuality at the formal. The second section reports on young men’s displays of homophobic humour at the formal. The third section discusses the theme of ‘gendered space’ at the formal.

Chapter Nine explores the student participants’ alcohol consumption prior to the formal, at the event itself and at the after party. Information regarding the organisation of the after party at two of the three participating schools is provided and student and adult behaviour at these after parties is discussed. However, these problems are discussed not to frame the participants in a negative way, but in order to document some of the issues that schools face in regard to the after party where young people are likely to consume alcohol.

Finally, Chapter Ten concludes my research study into sexuality/gender and the school formal. The chapter includes an overview of the research findings, suggestions for researchers who use photography as a data collection method in their research with young people, and future directions for research on the school formal. It ends with a discussion of the implications of the project for schools and wider society.
Chapter Two: Literature on sex, gender and sexuality at school

Introduction

Traditionally, children in Western societies have been constructed as non-sexual beings (Watney, 1991) and sexuality has been framed as belonging in the private space of the family home (Foucault, 1978; Johnstone & Longhurst, 2010). As a result of these constructions schools are considered non-sexual spaces, and staff and students as devoid of sexuality (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Youdell, 2005). However, Epstein (2001) argues that “schools are actually highly sexualized sites, within which struggles around sexuality are pervasive, of consuming interest and, at the same time, taboo” (p. 105). Sexuality is also a ubiquitous force in secondary school passageways, canteens, toilets and classrooms (Fine, 1992), as well as in relationships between students (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Quinlivan, 1999) and interactions between teachers and students (Mac An Ghaill, 1996; 2000a; Wolpe, 1988).

Davies et al. (2001) propose that in schools the construction of the ideal student is founded on the partitioning of body and mind. Since sexuality is associated with the body then schools often view students’ sexuality as problematic and therefore as something that needs to be denied (Allen, 2007a). This is especially the case when it comes to same sex attracted students whose sexuality is silenced in the official curriculum and is often used as a term of abuse by their peers (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Jordon, 1997; Malinsky, 1997; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Smith, 2006; Town, 1999; Vincent & Ballard, 1997).

There is a relative paucity of literature on the school formal in New Zealand and other contexts, however, Zlatunich (2009) and Bests’ (2000) research on the prom in the United States are exceptions. Therefore in this chapter I review the wider literature on young peoples’ gender/sexuality performances in high schools because it is useful for exploring young peoples’ gender and sexuality displays at the school formal. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on how normative gender codes and heteronormativity are perpetuated in the official school context. Section two centres on how young people construct and perform their gender
and sexuality and practices enacted by peer groups that serve to regulate non-traditional gender/sexuality displays. The third section reviews the small amount of literature that is available on the prom in the United States and the school formal in a New Zealand context.

Young women have traditionally been absent in sociological research on youth sub-cultural groupings (McRobbie with Garber, 1991). McRobbie with Garber (1991) noticed that when young women’s sub-cultures are discussed in sociological research they are often “located nearer to the point of consumerism than to the ‘ritual of resistance’” (p. 8). While searching for literature on young men and women’s gender performances in high schools numerous studies focusing on young men’s masculinities were located (Allen, 2007c; Brutsaert, 2006; deVisser, 2009; Dalley-Trim, 2007; Epstein, 1997a; 1997b; 2001; Imms, 2000; Keddie & Mills, 2009; Kehily, 2001; 2002; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1996; 2000b; Martino, 1999; 2000; 2001; Martino & Kehler, 2006; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Pascoe, 1997a; 1997b; Phoenix et al., 2003; Redman, 2001; Robinson, 2005; Smith, 2007; Thompson & Austin, 2010, Town, 1999). However, research focusing on young women and their gender performances was harder to find.

After extensive searching I managed to locate literature focusing on female friendships (Bloustein, 2003; Griffin, 2000; Hey, 1997), working class femininities (Ali, 2003; Archer et al., 2007), young women’s hetero-sexual practices (Fine, 1992; Holland et al., 1994; 1996; 1998; Tolman, 2010), and the societal discourse of the ‘mean’ or “nasty girl” (Barron & Lacombe, 2005, p. 51; also see Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005). Interestingly I found that the majority of studies reporting on young women’s femininities and female youth cultures centred on young women as consumers of popular culture (Currie, 1997; Fritzsche, 2004; Harris, 2004; Kehily, 2002; Lehr, 2001; Mazarella, 1999; 2002; McRobbie, 1991; Smith, 1988; 1990; Zlatunich, 2009). Consequently, although McRobbie’s work with Garber (1991) is twenty years old, I argue that their claim that young women are absent in research on youth sub-cultures and are only mentioned in regard to their consumption patterns, continues to be relevant to contemporary sociological research.
Since I was able to locate more research reporting on young men’s masculinities in school contexts, young women’s gender performances in high schools are discussed in less depth in sections one and two of the chapter. However, studies focusing on the prom in North America are reviewed in section three of this chapter in which young women’s perspectives on, and preparations for, the event are prioritised (Best, 2000; Zlatunich, 2009). In order to avoid reproducing the silencing of young women in sociological research on young peoples’ subcultures and framing them solely as consumers, young men and women’s formal preparations, and their gender and sexuality performances at the formal are discussed in this research study.

Sexuality and Gender and the Official School Context

Schools reinforce the prevailing sexual order present in society (Mac An Ghaill, 1996; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; also see Smith, 2006). Consequently, heterosexuality is promoted as the ‘norm’ and same sex attraction is constructed as ‘abnormal’ in many high schools (Mac An Ghaill, 1996; Quinlivan & Town, 1996; also see Smith, 2006). This is done through incorporating heterosexuality into the official curriculum and silencing same sex attraction (Epstein, 2001, Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Smith, 2006, Town, 1999).

The normative status of heterosexuality in many schools can be seen in the following example from ‘Ayo’ a participant in Epstein’s (2001) research on young gay men’s experiences in schools in the United Kingdom. As a young boy, ‘Ayo’ recalls his class being made to dress up in tuxedos or bridal veils and ‘get married’. Epstein (2001) explains that these pretend ‘marriages’ as well as lessons on weddings were common in England when the royal wedding between Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer took place. Such ceremonies attest to the “heterosexual presumption” (Epstein & Johnson, 1994, p. 223) that students will eventually marry someone of the opposite sex (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Johnson, 1994).

Research carried out on the high school experiences of lesbian/gay/bisexual/queer students in Canada (Khayatt, 1994), the United States (Jordon, 1997; Malinsky, 1997) Great Britain (Rogers, 1994; Wilkinson & Pearson,
2009) and New Zealand (Painter, 2008; Quinlivan, 1994; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Smith, 2006; Stapp, 1991; Town, 1999; Vincent, 1995; Vincent & Ballard, 1997) shows that same sex attraction is rarely mentioned in the official curriculum. On the rare occasions it is mentioned in the classroom it serves to construct same sex attraction as abnormal (Khayatt, 1994; Quinlivan, 1994; Rogers, 1994; Smith, 2006; Vincent & Ballard, 1997). For instance, Rose, a participant in my own Master’s thesis reporting on six young lesbian/bisexual women’s experiences in a number of New Zealand high schools recalled the following mention of homosexuality in the classroom:

[homosexuality] came up in science during biology, yeah ‘cause we were looking at genetics and it was the time when people were like oh there’s a gene umm that was sort of, what’s the word, I don’t think mutated is the right word, but there’s a gene that affects people that most homosexuals have... (Smith, 2006, p. 74)

By linking homosexuality with ‘mutated genes’ Rose’s teacher constitutes same sex attraction as a biologically ‘defective’ condition, as opposed to ‘normal’ heterosexuality (Sedgwick, 1990; also see Smith, 2006). Interestingly, the teacher fails to consider that homosexuals may have ‘normal’ genes and it is heterosexuals who have gene abnormalities that result in their problematic ‘condition’ (Sedgwick, 1990). Sedgwick (1990) argues that trying to trace sexuality back to biology will inevitably reproduce homosexuality as deviant or lacking and heterosexuality as normative, as the teacher is doing here. Tying sexuality to a biological or essentialist framework also fails to account for how sexuality is actually produced by societal discourses (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978).

Despite stating that homosexuality is rarely mentioned in the curriculum there were rare occasions when it was discussed in a more positive way. Painter (2008) conducted research on the safety of queer students in one province of New Zealand. The study used multiple data collection methods and the participants were not asked to identify their sexuality. Like previous studies carried out in New Zealand, Painter (2008) found that “The majority of student respondents could not recall any instance
in which a class lesson had contained queer or gender diverse material or referenced queer or trans. examples” (p. 25). Nevertheless, a few participants (number not specified) said they were “watching Billy Elliot, Heavenly Creatures, and Brokeback Mountain3 in film studies classes and engaged in class discussions on queer elements of these films” (p. 25). Others reported that same sex attraction was discussed in classical studies, English and one participant also reported giving a class presentation “on gay rights” (Painter, 2008, p. 25).

Images of queer attraction are becoming common in popular culture, (which can be seen in the mainstream screening and success of films such as Billy Elliot, Heavenly Creatures and Brokeback Mountain and the inclusion of queer characters in New Zealand television programmes such as Shortland Street, Bro Town and Winners and Losers) (Britzman, 1997; Quinlivan, 1999). Perhaps because of the increasing depictions of queerness in the media and popular culture (as well as images of celebrities supporting queer causes4), some schools are more likely to include queer content in their curriculum than in previous decades.

**Sexuality Education**

Positive mentions of same sex attraction are also rare in sexuality education (Smith, 2006). This is because the normative status of heterosexuality in society and therefore schools means other sexual options like homosexuality and bisexuality are constituted as deviant (Mac An Ghaill, 1996). It may also be because heterosexual intercourse is upheld as the exemplary form of sexual expression in society and consequently also in schools (Allen, 2003; Jackson, 1996).

---

3 *Billy Elliot* (2000), directed by Stephen Daldry, tells the story of a young boy who rather than engaging in ‘manly’ pursuits such as boxing and wrestling, takes up ballet. It is also implied that Billy may be gay (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0249462/plotsummary).

*Heavenly Creatures* (1994), directed by Peter Jackson, is based on the true story of two young women Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme, who have a passionate friendship. Fearful of being separated, the young women kill Hulme’s mother (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110005/).

*Brokeback Mountain* (2005) directed by Ang Lee, tells the story of two cowboys Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar, who fall in love and have a secret relationship (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0388795/).

4 Such as Lady GaGa, whose song *Born this Way* promotes acceptance of sexual diversity.
In New Zealand (Allen, 2007b; Munro, 2000; Smith, 2006) and internationally (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; 1998) sexuality education primarily focuses on the processes involved in heterosexual intercourse, as well as reproduction, contraception and sexually transmitted infections (also see Smith, 2006). This ties sexuality to heterosexuality and also constructs “sex as danger” (Epstein & Johnson, 1994, p. 217), since it can lead to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. Consequently, Epstein and Johnson (1998) argue that this form of sexuality education has nothing to do with sexuality per se, while Chambers et al. (2004) contend that it also fails to account for how young people experience sexuality. Judging from research undertaken by Allen (2007b) in which she asked young people in New Zealand about what information they wanted to learn in sexuality education, the current content on offer is not what young people want to learn about sex.

According to Allen (2007b) young people said that they wanted to learn about “‘how to make sexual activity enjoyable for both parties’” (p. 164). Moreover, her male participants expressed a desire for material on “‘emotions in relationships’” and “‘dealing with relationship break ups’” (Allen, 2007b, p. 164). Requesting more information about how to make sex enjoyable for both parties challenges the silence about pleasure and desire in sexuality education (Allen, 2007b; Fine, 1992; Smith, 2006). However, this lack of discussion of sexual pleasure and desire is more likely to be related to female than male sexuality; because young women are “educated primarily as the potential victim of male sexuality, she represents no subject in her own right” (Fine, 1992, p. 32). Consequently young women learn to be passive in sexual encounters and as a result many feel unable to initiate sex, say no or discuss what they want in sexual encounters with men (Holland et al., 1994).

Young people wanting to know about how sex can be enjoyable for both partners also counters the notion that young women need to protect themselves from violent and predacious male sexuality (Fine, 1992; also see Smith, 2006). Allen’s (2007b) finding that young women and men were concerned about their partner’s sexual desire, challenges the common construction of young men being solely focused on their own sexual satisfaction and desires, and not that of their partners
(Holland et al., 1994). It also thwarts the traditional ‘girls want love/boys want sex’
construction of female sexuality (Allen, 2003; Tolman, 2010).

In research on young women (Fine, 1992; Hey, 1997; Tolman, 2010) and
young peoples’ sexual subjectivities (Allen, 2003) instances of young women acting
as sexual agents were found. In Allen’s (2003) research on the sexual subjectivities of
151 young New Zealanders, one of her female participants reported that she was more
interested in sex than her male partner. Another reported having sex outside of her
relationship and one young woman jokingly called herself a slut (Allen, 2003).
Consequently, although young women are taught to be passive in heterosexual
exchanges, it does not mean that they will necessarily act passively.

Since romance has been socially constructed as a female concern (Allen,
2007c) and hegemonic masculinity is constituted in part through removing the self
from femininity (Mac an Ghaill, 2000a; Martino, 1999), boys/men have traditionally
avoided being seen as romantic (Allen, 2007c). However, international (Chambers et
al., 2004; Redman, 2001) and national (Allen, 2003; 2007c) research has highlighted
how some young men are particularly interested in, and invested in romance. In Allen
(2007c) and Redman’s (2001) studies on young men’s masculinity and romance, a
number of young men talked in depth about falling in love, their girlfriends and
romance playing a significant role in their relationships.

However, rather than viewing these discussions as widening the range of
acceptable masculinities available to young men in contemporary society, Redman
(2001) and Allen (2007c) argue that it highlights how young men can construct a
hegemonic masculine status through romance. For instance, a number of participants
in Redman’s (2001) study discussed the importance of boys/men initiating romance,
while others referenced conventional romance narratives where males are heroic and
their female partners passive and ‘pure’. Redman (2001) shows how some young men
establish themselves as more authoritative than their girlfriends when they draw on
traditional romance narratives and see themselves as the initiators of romance, thereby
re-producing their own hegemonic masculine status (also see Best, 2000).
Talking about romance can also act as a resource for young men to construct a more ‘grown up’ version of masculinity (Best, 2000; Redman, 2001). For instance, a participant in Redman’s (2001) study said that he was moving away from ‘hanging out’ with his male friends, in favour of socialising with his girlfriend, thereby constituting himself as independent and mature and therefore a hegemonic adult masculine subject (Redman, 2001).

In this research study, instances where young men position themselves as romantic males, and young women take themselves up as sexual agents are reported. This is to highlight how the traditional ‘boys want sex/girls want love’ construction of sexuality is inconsistent with the multiple ways young people perform their gender/sexuality (Allen, 2003). In order to challenge the pervasive silence of same sex attraction in many secondary schools in New Zealand (Nairn & Smith, 2003a), I also discuss the school formal experiences of those participants who may identify as queer and mention instances where same sex attraction emerged at the school formal.

**Teachers**

International and national research focusing on same sex attracted students in high schools (Quinlivan, 1994; Rogers, 1994; Smith, 2006; Stapp, 1991; Youdell, 2005) highlights how some teachers are homophobic. Some teachers make disparaging comments about same sex attraction in their classroom (Quinlivan, 1994; Rogers, 1994; Smith, 2006; Stapp, 1991), while others fail to intervene when homophobic comments are made by students, or in some cases also make homophobic remarks in their classroom (Khayatt, 1994; Painter, 2008; Quinlivan, 1994; 1996; Rogers, 1994; Youdell, 2004; also see Smith, 2006). A number of teachers blame students for inviting homophobic bullying because they consider them to be too open about their sexuality, too effeminate or different (Nairn & Smith, 2003a; Painter, 2008; Quinlivan, 1994; 1996; Youdell, 2004).

In New Zealand, schools have a legal responsibility under the National Administration Guidelines “to provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students” (New Zealand Post Primary Teachers’ Association, 2003, p. 9). The New
Zealand Post Primary Teachers’ Association (NZPPTA) (2003) also state that schools are likely to be breaking the law if they “fail to take reasonable steps to prevent the harassment, by pupils of other pupils who are perceived to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender” (p. 7, emphasis in original). Teachers who make disparaging remarks about same sex attracted students, blame them for inviting unwarranted bullying and fail to intervene when students engage in homophobic humour and abuse, are consequently in breach of New Zealand law, but their behaviour largely goes unchallenged (also see Smith, 2006). Perhaps this is because sexual diversity is seldom acknowledged in New Zealand schools and homophobic abuse largely goes unaddressed (NZPPTA, 2003; Quinlivan, 1994; 1996; Smith, 2006; Town, 1999; Vincent, 1997).

In this research study, instances where teachers simply assume their students are heterosexual are reported, as are specific incidences when teachers fail to intervene in homophobic behaviours (Epstein & Johnson, 1994). The disparaging comments teachers and other adults, present at the formal in an official capacity, make about homosexuality are also discussed, but so are school practices that are supportive and inclusive of queer youth.

**Peer Groups and Sexuality/Gender Codes**

Student peer groups are also important sites in helping to shape students’ gender and sexuality performances and may be more powerful in regulating heteronormativity and normative gender codes than school policy and programmes (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; also see Smith, 2006). Epstein and Johnson (1994) explain that although sexuality is often silenced in the official school context, in student peer groups sexual talk and gestures are prevalent, as is homophobia.

Within the student population there are a number of “hierarchically ordered heterosexual masculinities and femininities that are made available for students to collectively negotiate and inhabit within peer group subcultures” (Mac An Ghaill, 1996, p. 195). At the top of this gendered ranking system is hegemonic masculinity, which is the most authoritative and dominant gender performance that exists in
society (Connell, 1987; Dalley-Trim, 2007). Since hegemonic masculinity is forged in part by removing the self from any notion of femininity and homosexuality (Mac An Ghaill, 2000b), then many young men engage in sexist and homophobic behaviours in an effort to construct themselves as hegemonic masculine subjects (Epstein, 1997a; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Consequently, female students and “non-macho boys/men” (Epstein, 1997a, p. 113) act as resources for young men to consolidate their masculinity.

Bragging about their heterosexual sex acts in all male groups is one way young men attempt to construct their hegemonic masculine status (Best, 2000; Kehily, 2001; Pascoe, 2007a; 2007b; Robinson, 2005; Smith, 2007). This “gender-specific boast” (Kehily, 2002, p. 135, emphasis in original) is frequently sexist and full of male grandiosity (Pascoe, 2007b). For instance, when bragging about a sexual encounter the previous night with his girlfriend, one participant in Pascoe’s (2007b) research on young men’s masculinities said, “I did her so hard when I was done she was bleeding. I tore her walls!” (p. 103). By boasting about his ‘sexual feats’ in front of his male peers, this young man attempts to consolidate his ‘manly status’ and secure a high standing among his male peers (Pascoe, 2007b).

If the events did unfold as the young man describes, his comments imply that he takes pleasure in the pain his girlfriend would have experienced during sexual intercourse. This may be because he sees this as a testament to his own ‘powerful’ masculinity and his ability to master his girlfriend’s body (Pascoe, 2007b). His comments are suggestive of “what some feminists call a ‘rape paradigm’ where masculinity is predicated on overcoming women’s bodily desires and control” (Pascoe, 2007b, p. 100), which is an issue that will be discussed in further depth in Chapter Eight.

Male students who are deemed to have considerable sexual experience by their male peers often enjoy high social standing, while those lacking sexual experience, are likely to be read as performing an inferior version of masculinity, and therefore have a lower status amongst their male peers (Kehily, 2001; 2002; Mac An Ghaill, 1999; Pascoe, 2007b). Consequently, some young men brag about non-existent sexual
activity or girlfriends in order to preserve their legitimate masculine status (Chambers et al., 2004; Dalley-Trim, 2007; Kehily, 2001; 2002; Pascoe, 2007b; but also see Allen 2003; 2007b; 2007c for exceptions).

In contrast young men will frequently make comments about young women who they perceive as ‘too’ sexually active (Chambers et al., 2004: Kehily, 2002; Larkin, 1994; Robinson, 2005). In their research into young people’s sexual subjectivities, Chambers et al. (2004) found that a number of male participants referred to young women as sluts if they were thought to be engaging in sexual activity. Such labelling highlights how young men reinscribe the “double standard” (Chambers et al., 2004, p. 402) that exists in society in regard to what is deemed suitable behaviour for males and females. The young woman mentioned previously, references this double standard when she calls herself a slut for engaging in active female sexuality.

However, young women considered to be having sex are also labelled sluts by their female peers (Brown-Chesney Lind, 2004; Hey, 1997; Robinson, 2005; Youdell, 2005). By calling ‘sexually active’ young women sluts, the female students doing the labelling are reproducing the “virgin/whore” (Youdell, 2005, p. 259) binary, which is a dominant force in shaping acceptable/unacceptable codes of sexual behaviour for young women in society. Those doing the labelling reinforce the immorality of female students having sex, while at the same time constituting themselves as sexually pure (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2004; Youdell, 2005). By calling young women sluts, the labellers like the young men mentioned above, are also reproducing the different sexual behaviours deemed appropriate for young men and women in society (Chambers et al., 2004).

Young men will also blatantly remark on the appearances and bodies of female students and rank them on their ‘looks’ (Dalley-Trim, 2007; Kehily, 2002; Larkin, 1994; Pascoe, 2007b; Robinson, 2005). For instance, ‘Dora’ a participant in Larkin’s (1994) research into the sexual harassment of young women in Canadian schools, said that in school corridors it was common for young men to make comments such as “‘I like the way she walks I’ll give her 10 out of 10’; ‘Her bodies
not bad, I’ll give her 7; What a dog, that one’s a real 2’’ (¶ 59). This sexual objectification positions women as sexualised objects and also acts as a resource for young men to consolidate their masculine status (Dalley-Trim, 2007; Kehily, 2002; Larkin, 1994; Pascoe, 2007b; Robinson, 2005). The fact that many but not all young men feel free to engage in such open displays of sexual objectification attests to the dominance of masculinity in the “gender order” (Davies, 1990, p. 513) and also highlights the ubiquity of the male gaze in society (Rossiter, 1994; Holland et al., 1998).

In contemporary society however, male bodies are also objectified in the media and popular culture (Frost, 2001). Images of famous sportsmen, such as Sonny Bill Williams and Dan Carter in their underwear (http://www.youtube.com) are frequently seen on New Zealand television. Given this sexual objectification, I argue that young women are just as likely to comment on the appearance of young men as young men are to comment on young women’s attractiveness. However, because young men occupy a more authoritative positioning in the gender binary then being considered ‘ugly’ may not be considered as threatening to a young man as it is to young woman (see Frost, 2001; Hey, 1997; Kehily, 2002).

**Cross gender physical games and touch**

Gender performances also involve the enactment of specific bodily acts, which are socially constructed as denoting masculinity/femininity and the performer as a legitimate masculine/feminine subject (Butler, 1990 also see Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). One of these gendered bodily acts, which serves to reproduce subjects as masculine/feminine and the dominant/subordinate status of masculinity/femininity in the gender binary, is physical ‘games’ involving “cross-sex touching” (Pascoe, 2007b, p. 96).

Pascoe (2007b) explains that when young women interact they frequently touch one another and will also touch young men during conversations. In contrast, boys/men seldom touch unless it is in “rule-bound environments (such as sports) or as
a joke to imitate fags” (Pascoe, 2007b, p. 96). When relating with young women however, young men frequently touch them and engage in physical ‘games’ involving touch (Pascoe, 2007b; Youdell, 2005). Through this cross gender touch young men establish themselves as more dominant than young women (Pascoe, 2007b; Youdell, 2005). For example, Pascoe (2007b) observed the following: “in the hallway a boy put his arms around a girl as she was walking to lunch and started ‘freaking’ her, rubbing his pelvis against her behind as she walked. She rolled her eyes, broke away, and continued walking” (p. 99).

Patterns of physical touch differ on the basis of the level of authority, where those dominantly positioned “touch subordinates, invade their space, and interrupt them in a way that subordinates do not do to superiors” (Pascoe, 2007b, p. 96). Since young men occupy a more authoritative position in the gender binary, then the young man mentioned above may assume he has the right to ‘freak’ and impose himself on the young woman and her body (Youdell, 2005).

However, young women are often willing participants in these ‘games’ (Pascoe, 2007b; Youdell, 2005). In her research on sexuality and gender performances in one high school setting, Youdell (2005) observed the following exchange in a cooking class:

Owen (boy, White) stands behind Lucy and wraps his arms around her head. The front of his body is pressed up against her back. Lucy exclaims: ‘Owen!’ as she wriggles. He removes his arms... Owen continually touches Lucy, he pulls her by the arms and shoulders and moves her from one standing position to another. Lucy wriggles and giggles as Owen does this. (pp. 256-257)

In this flirtatious ‘game’ Owen and Lucy reference normative gender codes in which male bodies are constructed as “entitled and authoritative” (Youdell, 2005, p. 257) and female bodies as passive. Since a “women’s value in our society is tied to male’s evaluation of their personal appearance” (Larkin, 1994, ¶ 61), this exchange implies that Owen finds Lucy desirable and she may be a willing participant in the exchange because it constitutes her as having worth.
In this research study those instances where young men invade young women’s physical space and impose themselves on young women’s bodies at the formal are reported. However, because this bodily contact and invasion of physical space also serves to construct a legitimate feminine subjectivity (Youdell, 2005), young women’s responses to young men’s intrusive behaviours are also recorded. A discussion of the different amounts of space young men and women occupy as they go about certain activities like eating at the formal is included. I argue that the gendered disparity in the amount of spatial occupation reflects the dominant/subordinate status of masculinity/femininity in the gender binary.

**Homophobia regulates heterosexuality**

In an effort to consolidate their heterosexual masculinity young men also engage in homophobic “bodily displays” (Kehily, 2002, p. 149). For instance, female student participants in Nayak and Kehily’s (1996) research on young masculinities in the United Kingdom said male students created a cross with their fingers when homosexuality was mentioned. In the United Kingdom, these homophobic behaviours occur on a daily basis (Kehily, 2001; 2002; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Judging from national research on queer students’ experiences in high schools, homophobic humour is also pervasive in New Zealand secondary schools (Nairn & Smith, 2003a; Painter, 2008; Quinlivan, 1994; 1996; Smith, 2006; Town, 1999; Vincent & Ballard, 1997).

Pascoe (2007b) argues that homophobia is “central to the formation of a gendered identity for boys in a way that it is not for girls” (p. 54), that is, in order for boys/men to construct themselves as legitimate heterosexual masculine subjects they must remove themselves from any notion of homosexuality (Mac An Ghaill, 2000b). This may be why young men are more likely to engage in homophobic abuse than young women (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Martino, 2000; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Painter, 2008; Quinlivan, 1999).
In stating this however, the term lesbian used in a derogatory manner is frequently directed against women that step outside the borders of normative femininity (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Griffin, 2000; Hey, 1997; Renew, 1996). Epstein and Johnson (1994) explain that authoritative women are often labelled lesbians. Since authoritative women challenge normative discourses of passive femininity and authoritative masculinity, they may be labelled lesbians in an effort to regulate their non-normative gender performance (Epstein & Johnson, 1994). Young women in close friendships are also frequently called lesbians (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Griffin, 2000) to police the limits of their friendship and stop it from becoming intimate (Hey, 1997). However, the disparaging use of the term lesbian impacts heavily on young women who identify as same sex attracted because it constructs this subjectivity in negative terms.

In this research study, the student participants’ thoughts regarding how they think pupils in their school would react if a same sex attracted student attended the formal with a same sex partner are reported. The differences between the three participating schools in regard to the reported acceptance of two same sex attracted students attending the formal as partners are discussed. Incidences where “bodily performances” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 83) of homophobic humour are enacted to construct a masculine subjectivity are analysed, as is the derogatory use of the term lesbian to police young women’s non-normative displays of femininity (Renew, 1996).

**Peer pressure, popularity and friendship**

Normative gender codes also impact on young people’s friendships. For instance, from a young age girls are encouraged to form close friendships and place considerable importance on their friendships (Griffin, 2000; Hey, 1997; Harris, 1999; Thomas & Daubman, 2001). Furthermore, qualities such as encouragement, support and mutual self-disclosure feature strongly in young women’s friendships (Felmlee, Sweet & Sinclair, 2012). Consequently, when friendships break down, young women often experience considerable anguish (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005; Hey, 1997). In contrast qualities such as competition, agency, stoicism and independence are
encouraged in boys from a young age (Felmlee, Sweet & Sinclair, 2012). As a result young men’s friendships are often less intimate than young women’s friendships (Felmlee, Sweet & Sinclair, 2012). It is also difficult for young men to forge close friendships, share emotions and show affection for one another because two young men who are perceived as close run the risk of being constituted as gay (Epstein & Johnson, 1994).

In this research project I explore how friendship plays a pivotal role in young people’s understandings of the formal and their experiences of the event. I also examine how the student participants, who are in the final year of schooling, feel about leaving school and the importance they place on friendships, which they have developed during their five years of secondary schooling.

Despite stating that young men are bought up to be competitive, competition also features in young women’s friendships and interactions with female peers (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005; Felmlee, Sweet & Sinclair (2012). Felmlee, Sweet and Sinclair (2012) argue that competition between young women is less pronounced than it is between young men and therefore young women are more likely to develop close friendships than young men. Research studies highlight how young women do compete with each other over numerous aspects including friendships, popularity and young men (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005). For example, in one New Zealand magazine article, an Auckland fashion designer reports that two young women came into his store and began fighting over a dress, which they both wanted to wear to the formal (Chateau, 1990). The designer goes on to explain that the fight resulted in the sleeve being torn off the dress.

In this study I examine whether young women and men compete to look the best at the formal and also whether young men and women are concerned with making an impression with what they wear to the formal. I also explore the role of friends in young peoples’ formal preparations and young people’s experiences of the night. An examination of how peer pressure may mediate what young people wear to the formal, as well as how the participants conceptualise the event, is included.
Peer pressure often results in young people engaging in behaviours, which they may not want to, so that they fit with their peer group (Tate & Coles, 2010). This is because young people want to be accepted and ‘outsiders’ are frequently bullied and/or ostracised by their peers (Read, Francis & Skelton, 2011). There are many definitions of peer pressure but for the purpose of this project I take peer pressure to mean “informal group consensus” (Tate & Coles, 2010, p. 13). Peer pressure can be both a positive and negative force (Tate & Coles, 2010). For instance, young people may persuade their friends that it is unacceptable to break the school rules by sneaking alcohol into the formal venue, which is an example of positive peer pressure. However, if a young person is at a pre-formal social gathering where everyone is consuming alcohol then they may be persuaded to, and also feel compelled to, drink in order to feel accepted in that setting (see Hathaway, 2007; Hewson, 2009; Tay, 2007).

In the United States, Best (2000) explains that in all male groups, young men often talk about their plans for sex on prom night, which serves to leave some young men feeling alienated. In a New Zealand magazine article reporting on school formals, Chateau (1990) explains that a young man was caught having sex at one school formal. In the same article the principal of a boys’ secondary school is quoted as saying that young men think of sex as a mark of honour (Chateau, 1990). Sex on the night of the formal may be the focus for young men in New Zealand involving peer pressure.

On the other hand, New Zealand popular culture and media portray the school formal as a space where young women are expected to spend considerable time, energy and money on their formal preparations (Chateau, 1990; Denhardt, 2009; Hathaway, 2007; Hewson, 2009; Marker, 2007; 2008; Tay, 2007). In a newspaper article focusing on young women’s formal preparations, the editor of New Zealand teen girls’ magazine GirlFriend Pamela Marker is interviewed. She states that nowadays, young women are “going OTT and turning [the formal] into a competition (Tay, 2007, p. C6). This statement implies that young women may feel compelled to spend large amounts of time and money on their beauty work for the formal so that they will ‘fit in’ with their peers and be accepted.
In this research study I explore the student participants’ responses to young people who stray from these gendered storylines (for instance, young men who discuss their plans for romance rather than sex on formal night and young women who chose not to engage in extensive beauty work for the event). I also report those incidences where young women engage in sexualised behaviour at the formal and young men undertake extensive preparations for the event. I examine how peer pressure, in the form of mocking or harassment, as well as negative responses to this non-traditional gendered behaviour may result in the perpetuation of normative gender codes.

The School Prom

There is one other non-compulsory school site where heteronormativity and gender norms are promoted and this is the school prom or the school formal in a New Zealand context (Best, 2000; Painter, 2008; Smith, 2006; Zlatunich, 2009). In this section I review two studies on the prom in the United States, because of the paucity of literature on the school formal in a New Zealand context.

In the book Prom Night: Youth, Schools and Popular Culture Best (2000) conducts a textual analysis of American girl’s magazines, newspaper articles centreing on the prom, old photographs taken at the prom and various Hollywood films, which centre on the prom. In her analysis of these texts, Best (2000) found that images of “dreamy [heterosexual] romance” (p. 63) were frequently associated with the prom and these images were most pronounced in girls’ magazines. Best (2000) explains that because the prom is constructed as a site of heterosexual romance in the United States that she uncritically prepared a set of interview questions based on this construction. She noticed one bisexual female participant who was attending the formal with her same sex partner, provided one-word answers to her questions because they were irrelevant to her sexuality. By framing her questions in this way Best (2000) acknowledged that she was reproducing heteronormativity.
Best (2000) also conducted observations at four high school proms, interviews with 22 secondary school students and collected written narratives from 73 first year college students who reflected on their prom. Although the number of interviews Best (2000) conducted with her male and female secondary school participants was relatively equal (twelve male, ten female), 58 female and 15 male college participants wrote narratives of their prom experiences. Consequently, Best (2000) includes more discussion of young women’s experiences of the prom than young men’s. In doing so Best (2000) reinforces her own assertion that the prom in the United States is constructed as a “feminine space, conventionally thought to be the domain of girls” (p. 35).

In a second piece of research Zlatunich (2009) conducted a textual analysis of a number of American girls’ prom magazines. She also interviewed 23 female participants from two secondary schools in Northern California, in order to explore how the magazine depictions of the event fitted with the young women’s expectations and experiences of the prom. Zlatunich (2009) conducted her research with separate groups of young women from two schools with distinctly different student populations in terms of their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Ten participants attended ‘Jefferson High School’, four of who self-identified as Latina, three African American, two white and one Filipina, seven were also working-class, two middle-class and one upper-class. The remaining 13 participants attended ‘Westpoint High School’, ten of whom self-identified as white, two Asian and one Latina, seven were upper-class and six middle-class. Zlatunich (2009) explains that she chose to do her study with two diverse groups of young women in order to “prevent bias and allow for comparisons across girls’ social positionalities” (p. 357) and to also explore “under what conditions particular readings of prom magazines transcend race and class lines” (p. 357). However, by making comparisons across the participants’ class and ethnic locations, Zlatunich (2009) constitutes working class families and fathers in a deficit manner, which will be explained in more depth in the following section titled heterosexual romance.

In her analysis of the prom magazines, Zlatunich (2009) found that the drive to obtain perfection was promoted as the key to a young woman’s happiness at the
prom. She also states that the “magazines set up two main criteria for the achievement of perfection at the prom: female beauty and heterosexual romance” (Zlatunich, 2009, p. 357). Looking beautiful at the prom was depicted as being contingent on engaging in extensive beauty work, while heterosexual romance was promoted as “dependent on securing the appropriate male date” (p. 357). Although Zlatunich (2009) reports that some of her participants viewed the prom in accordance with these magazine depictions, the majority formed their own understandings of the event, which sometimes referenced popular constructions of the prom and at other times disrupted them. In the next section of this literature review I discuss the findings of Zlatunich (2009) and Best’s (2000) studies in more depth.

**Beauty work.**

Along with the portrayal of the prom as a “site of romantic possibility” (Best, 2000, p. 63) in American popular culture, a young woman’s perfect prom is also promoted as being dependent on her looking beautiful (Zlatunich, 2009), which in turn is contingent on “purchasing and using the right products” (Mazzarella, 1999, p. 99). This highlights how the prom is marketed as a site for “feminine consumption” (Best, 2003, p. 414) in American popular culture.

In American teen girls’ magazines Best (2000) reports that stories on the prom also feature headings such as “Dare to stand out” (p. 405) and “Be the Babe of the ball” (p. 405). These headings constitute the prom as a space where young women must stand out and “virtually ensures girls’ participation in the consumption of goods and in feminine body work” (p. 405). This may explain why the majority of young women in Best’s (2000) study spent large amounts of time, energy and money on their appearance work for the prom.

Young women may also engage in this beauty and bodywork for a number of other reasons. In American culture the prom is constituted as a space where young people are expected to construct “themselves as feminine and masculine in iconically heterosexual and exaggerated ways” (Epstein et al., 2000-2001, p. 132). Since makeup (Dellinger & Williams, 1997) and hair (long and styled) (Weitz, 2001) are
signifiers of women’s heterosexual desirability in Western societies, many young women may have their hair and make-up done for the prom in an effort to construct themselves as the epitomic desirable heterosexual feminine subject for the event (Epstein et al., 2000-2001).

Nevertheless, other young women may simply engage in extensive beauty work for the prom because they enjoy it (Best, 2000). For instance, Zlatunich (2009) reports that many of her participants said that “they had fun getting ready for the prom- shopping for a dress. Doing their make up, and painting their nails...” (p. 359).

The majority of female participants in Zlatunich (2009) and Best’s (2000) studies were aware that they spent more time and energy on their prom preparations than their male peers. However, because they enjoyed preparing for the prom, none of the young women complained about this difference (Best, 2000; Zlatunich, 2009). The female participants may have also failed to protest, because they are immersed in a culture where appearance work is constituted as a female responsibility in the “gendered division of labor” (Best, 2003, p. 410).

In this research study the gendered differences in the way young women and men prepare for the formal is investigated. Since concern with appearance is constituted as a feminine and not a ‘manly’ occupation (Entwistle, 2000a; Bordo, 1993a; 1993b; Jenkins, 2009), student attitudes towards young men who do spend time on their appearance for the formal are included.

**The prom outfit.**

Many young women in Best’s (2000) study also spent numerous months planning what they were going to wear to the prom and/or shopping for their ‘perfect’ dress. For many young women shopping for their prom dress was a “collective process” (Best, 2003, p. 408) undertaken with female friends. Smith (1990) contends that shopping for clothes and talking about fashion are important aspects of young women’s lives and female friendships are often formed around this activity. Some young women in Best’s (2000) study also shopped for their prom dress with their
mothers, while others said that their mothers made their dresses, thus highlighting how the “practices of femininity are passed from mothers to daughters” (Best, 2000, p. 45).

Many young women in Best’s (2000) research chose to wear prom dresses that bared arms, backs, shoulders, legs and necks. As stated previously, in schools young women are taught to deny their sexual agency (Best, 2000; Fine, 1992). By wearing dresses that reveal parts of their body that are usually hidden, these young women could be seen as taking control of their sexuality and arguably feeling pleasure in doing so (Best, 2000).

There is a second reading of why young women may choose to wear revealing dresses to the formal. In society girls/women are subjected to an ever-present male gaze whereby they are judged on their sexual desirability to men (Holland et al., 1998; Rossiter, 1994). During their teenage years many young women come to internalise this gaze, as they become aware that their bodies are being viewed in a sexual manner by boys/men (Rossiter, 1994). Given the authority of the male gaze, many young women begin to judge themselves, and shape their behaviour in accordance with the internalised male gaze (Holland et al., 1998; Rossiter, 1994). Therefore, some young women may choose to wear dresses that reveal their bodies to the prom because they have learned that their bodies are sexual objects to be looked at by men (Rossiter, 1994). However, if their appearance matches societal ideals of feminine attractiveness, some young women may also experience pleasure being looked at in a sexual manner by young men (Bordo, 1993a; 1993b).

In contrast to the considerable discussion of her female participants’ selection of prom dress, Best (2000) includes little information about her male participants’ prom attire. There are photographs included, which show young men in tuxedos. It seems that most young men wear variations of this traditional form of gendered attire to the prom in the United States.

Gaines (1990) and Entwistle (2000a; 2000b) argue that dress evokes the notion of a fixed natural gender identity and serves to reinscribe the social
construction of gender. Entwistle (2000a) explains how normative dress codes serve to construct gender as an intrinsic quality: “the association of women with long evening dresses [...] and men with dinner jackets and trousers is an arbitrary one but nonetheless comes to be regarded as ‘natural’ so that femininity is constituted in the gown, masculinity in the black tie and dinner jacket” (p. 21). The majority of male participants in Best’s (2000) research chose to wear tuxedos to the prom, and all but one young woman in Best’s (2000) and Zlatunich’s (2009) studies chose to wear dresses, in order to mark themselves as legitimate heterosexual masculine/feminine subjects.

‘Mark’ a male participant in Best’s (2000) study explains how he chose his formal attire:

ML: Well, I really didn’t pick it out. Me and her [his girlfriend] went to get it and she was like, she got her dress way before the prom. But I had to match what she had so I didn’t want to get a regular black tuxedo.
AB: How come?
ML: Because I figured everyone would have a regular tuxedo. I wanted to be different. I wanted to stand out. So I went there and she was like, this is what I want you to get. Like, not a regular one. She picked out everything. This is what I want you to get. Like, so, I got the white jacket. Like I said, she picked it out.

Although ‘Mark’ wished to express his individuality through what he wore to the prom, his girlfriend’s opinion about what he should wear ultimately determines his ‘choice’ of prom attire (Best, 2000). Since concern with fashion is constituted as a female and not a male pre-occupation (Entwistle, 2000b; Jenkins, 2009) then it is not surprising ‘Mark’s’ girlfriend exerted such authority over his ‘choice’ of formal attire (Best, 2000). In this research study a discussion of the formal clothing of young men and women, as well as how the participants selected their formal attire is included since discussions of male attire are notably absent in the literature on the prom reviewed in this chapter (Best, 2000; Zlatunich, 2009).
Heterosexual romance.

In the United States, many girls’ magazines and Hollywood films construct the prom as a night of heterosexual romance, “Where the possibility of sweet love and tender affections are infused to create a magical night” (Best, 2000, p. 63). The construction of the prom as a night of heterosexual romance may have been the reason why many of the young women in Best’s (2000) study placed considerable pressure on themselves to find a male date for the prom. For some young women this meant inviting male partners from others schools or states, while for others having a male date was “all that mattered” (Best, 2000, p. 71), even though they were not particularly attached to their dates. Griffin (2000) argues that during adolescence, extensive societal pressure is placed on young women to find a male partner and take up a heterosexual subjectivity. Since the prom is constructed as a site of heterosexual romance in North American popular culture, young women may experience considerable pressure to find a male date for the event and therefore mark themselves as heterosexual (Best, 2000).

Best (2000) argues that the “the societal pressure many girls feel as they struggle to find a male date leaves them with little room to assert agency in this process” (p. 69). Some young women in Best’s (2000) study who could not secure male dates for the event did not go to the prom. Rather than going to the prom alone and having a good time with friends, the young women concerned were “making the masculine the focus and reference point for their construction or positioning of themselves” (Renew, 1996, p. 152). However, as one participant in Zlatunich’s (2009) study explained a young woman may feel unable to attend the prom without a male partner because her peers would consider her ‘ugly’ if she could not secure a male date. This highlights how being considered heterosexually attractive defines a woman/girl as feminine (Best, 2000; Gershon et al., 2004; Hey, 1997) and shows how, for young women “heteronormativity is linked to appearance” (Zlatunich, 2009, p. 363).

Despite Best (2000) claiming that young women feel they are seldom able to exercise agency in the selection of their prom dates, she also reports that some of her
female participants took male friends to the prom who liked to dance and socialise, with whom they could have fun. One bisexual participant in the study also attended the prom with her female partner (Best, 2000). This highlights how young women are agentic in the selection of their prom dates, despite Best’s (2000) assertion to the contrary.

In this study, the differences in the way young people from a boys’, girls’ and co-educational school went about securing a date for the formal are discussed. Furthermore, those incidents where young women exercised agency in their choice of formal partner, or where young men expressed trepidation about attending the formal with a partner who they did not know, are noted. This is because these instances challenge the strong/weak and active/passive construction of masculinity/femininity (Davies, 1991).

Many young women discussed romantic gestures by their male partners on prom night in lofty terms, in Best’s (2000) and to a lesser extent in Zlatunich’s (2009) studies. This may be due to the construction of the prom as a site of “fairy-tale romance” (Best, 2000. p. 64) in American popular culture. For instance, a female participant in Best’s (2000) research reported feeling like a princess because her date was attentive to her at the prom, which made her feel special. She also stated that on prom night: “Everyone should feel that special. Those nights are some of the only nights when we are treated like ladies” (Best, 2000, p. 64). A participant in Zlatunich’s (2009) study said she was upset after someone spilt a drink on her dress, but her male partner kissed her cheek and that “made it the perfect evening” (p. 365). Perhaps these young women talk about the pleasure they received from their male partners’ attention in such lofty terms because it validates them as romantically desirable women, which consolidates their femininity (Best, 2000; Leahy, 1994).

Despite many young women in Best’s (2000) study talking about romance at the prom in such grandiose terms, 75% of the participants in Zlatunich’s (2009) study rejected the construction of the prom as a romantic space altogether. Interestingly, Zlatunich (2009) reports that her working-class and ‘ethnic minority’ participants were more likely to reject the construction of the prom as a site of heterosexual romance, than the white middle to upper class participants. Zlatunich (2009) argues
that this disparity may be due to working class young women being “socialized to be skeptical of romance” (p. 366). Zlatunich (2009) then quotes from Bettie’s (2003) research on working-class Mexican-American young women from one Californian high school, who states that “Girls know from each others’ backgrounds that boys should not be relied upon...They felt that men could not be counted on for economic support or as co-parents, or to meet the girls’ ideas of romance and intimacy” (p. 367). Zlatunich (2009) then reports that half of the working class participants from Jefferson were warned by their mothers (and in one incidence, a father) “not to trust their feelings of romance” (p. 367), while only one Westpoint participant received a similar warning.

At first glance these parental warnings imply that working-class parents may teach their daughters to rebuff romance and therefore that the rejection of romance may be considered a component of working-class feminine cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997). However, some working-class young women are heavily invested in romance and the desire to “‘settle down’ in a heterosexual relationship” (Archer et al., 2007, p. 166) is a strong motivator for leaving school ‘prematurely’. Therefore, if Zlatunich (2009) is correct in her blanket assertion that working class girls/women are taught to be cynical of romance it does not necessarily mean that they will reject romance in their lives.

Furthermore, when Zlatunich (2009) refers to Bettie’s (2003) research and her finding that some of her female participants made comments suggesting that males cannot be relied on for financial support or help to raise their children, she constructs working-class and ‘ethnic minority’ fathers as having little interest in their children’s welfare. Consequently, by attempting to provide an explanation for why her working class participants were less likely to view the prom as a site of heterosexual romance than her white middle-class participants, Zlatunich (2009) inadvertently constitutes working class fathers and ethnically diverse families in a deficit manner.

Although social class and ethnicity are discussed in depth in Zlatunich’s (2009) study, they are only briefly touched on in this thesis. This is because the three
schools participating in the study had similar decile\textsuperscript{5} ratings and the majority of the participants self-identified as Pākehā or New Zealand European (this will be explained in more detail in Chapter Four). However, it is important to mention Zlatunich’s (2009) research because it suggests that social class and ethnicity impact on how young people experience the prom, and by implication the school formal.

Few male participants in Best’s (2000) research project talked about romance on prom night. However, Best (2000) points out that this does not necessarily mean young men did not experience romance at the event. As stated previously romance is constituted as a female, rather than a male, concern (Allen, 2003; 2007c; Best, 2000; Redman, 2001) and therefore young men in Best’s (2000) study may have been reluctant to discuss their experiences of romance on prom night, for fear of being considered ‘girly’ (Martino, 1999; 2000).

In New Zealand popular culture and media the school formal is depicted as a site of heterosexual romance, especially for young women, like the prom in the United States (see Marker, 2007; 2008; Tay, 2007). In this research study I explore whether the student participants view the formal in accordance with this cultural depiction and whether young women are more likely than young men to view the event as a site of potential romance (Best, 2000).

\textbf{Alcohol and the after party}

In the United States it is common for an after party to take place following the prom (Best, 2000; Zlatunich, 2009). Best (2000) reports that in contrast to the little interest her male participants expressed in the prom itself many talked about excessive alcohol consumption at after prom parties with great enthusiasm. In New Zealand society, alcohol consumption is a virtual requirement for the legitimate

\footnote{\hspace{1em} In New Zealand schools are given a decile rating by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, which determines how much funding they get from the New Zealand government. “Decile 1 schools are the 10\% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 10 schools are the 10\% of schools with the lowest proportion of these students” (http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/Schools/SchoolOperations/Resourcing/OperationalFunding/Deciles.aspx, ¶ 1)}
performance of masculinity (Campbell et al., Nairn et al., 2006). Best’s (2000) findings suggest that this may also be the case in the United States.

In stating this however, some of the female participants in Zlatunich’s (2009) study also reported consuming alcohol to excess and taking drugs at after prom parties. According to Zlatunich (2009) some young women take pleasure in “how they are able to break all sorts of rules, implicit and explicit” (p. 369) when they consume alcohol and drugs at the after party. For instance, ‘Renee’ said that after the prom:

We went back to the hotel and we hung around with some other people and when it got later and we got tired and by then I was pretty fucked up... Everyone was smoking pot and drinking rum and coke and stuff” (Zlatunich, 2009, p. 368)

In order for young women to perform a legitimate version of femininity then they must perform their gender in accordance with normative discourses of feminine self-restraint (Bordo, 1993b; Burns, 2004). However, by consuming alcohol to excess and taking drugs at after parties, young women like ‘Renee’ are not exercising feminine self-restraint (Burns, 2004). When Zlatunich (2009) notes that young women experience pleasure breaking the rules by consuming excess alcohol and taking drugs at after parties, one of the rules she may be referring to are normative codes of femininity (Bordo, 1993b; Burns, 2004).

In American popular culture, the after prom party is constructed as an event where young people participate in alcohol and drug consumption and sex (Zlatunich, 2009). Nevertheless, the majority of young women in Zlatunich’s (2009) study said that this “occurs all year round at parties” (p. 368). This highlights how alcohol consumption may not only be a requirement for a legitimate performance of masculinity (Campbell et al., Nairn et al., 2006) but also suggests alcohol is essential for young peoples’ socialising in general, as it is for adults (Abel & Plumridge, 2004; Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Room, 2001).
The School Prom/Formal and Heteronormativity

Like the after prom party (Zlatunich, 2009), the issue of same sex attracted students challenging their schools for the right to take their same sex partners to the prom is given extensive coverage in North American media (Best, 2000; Grace & Wells, 2005). In 1980, Aaron Fricke petitioned the courts in the United States to be able to attend the prom with his same sex partner (Best, 2000). In 2002 Canadian high school student Marc Hall bought a case against his school board after they refused to let him attend the prom with his male partner (Grace & Wells, 2005). Fricke and Hall were successful in their court cases and did attend their school proms with their male partners (Best, 2000; Grace & Wells, 2005). However, in Fricke’s case, the extensive media coverage given to his court case left him open to death threats (Grace & Wells, 2005), which highlights how queer youth acting as “‘lone ranger’ change agents” (Quinlivan, 1999, p. 67) are vulnerable (also see Smith, 2006).

Students such as Fricke and Hall who challenge their schools for the right to attend the formal with their same sex partners have a level of ‘outness’, which is given a “utopian status within the political agenda” (Epstein et al., 2000-2001, p. 150). Friend (1997) identifies four features that he considers make it possible for some same sex attracted students, such as Hall and Fricke to be ‘out’, challenge homophobic practices and initiate change despite encountering prejudice in their immediate environments. Friend (1997) lists these features as: a gregarious “temperament” being “insightful” especially in regard to how homophobia operates, having a network of “supportive and affirming relationships” and “moral strength” (pp 2-3, emphases in original). However, Epstein et al. (2000-2001) argue that what is missing from Friend’s (1997) list is an investigation of the “desirability of being out” (p. 150).

Epstein et al. (2000-2001) explain that there is a lack of research on ‘out’ queer students in high schools. As a result we have no understanding of how queer youth “can be ‘out,’ which bits of their queer identity are privileged in their outness, the consequences of being ‘out’ for their own identities and the identities of others, and the limitations of being ‘out’ as well as the ‘freedoms’ it brings” (Epstein et al.,
Therefore, Epstein et al. (2000-2001) argue that it is impossible to frame being ‘out’ as an attractive option for same sex attracted students and they ponder whether being ‘out’ reproduces the “same-other binary” (Epstein et al. p. 151).

Furthermore, because heterosexuality and homosexuality are set up in a binary formation, Epstein and Johnson (1994) argue that it should not be up to queer subjects alone to challenge heteronormative practices. This is because “change in the subordinated form alone, however out and proud, cannot altogether change the balance of forces [and therefore] heterosexuals must also share the load” (Epstein & Johnson, 1994, pp. 225-226). For this reason, in this study, I document all the student participants’ responses to any discriminatory school policies regarding same sex attracted students attending the formal with same sex partners.

The School Formal in New Zealand

Although there is little research available on the school formal in the New Zealand context, two pieces of New Zealand research include information on the school formal as part of the discussion of a larger topic. A number of student participants (number not specified) in Painter’s (2008) research on queer students’ safety in all secondary schools in one province of New Zealand, and my own Master’s thesis (2006), reported that students were forbidden to take same sex partners to their school formal, thus highlighting how the school formal in New Zealand, like the prom in the United States is an event at which heteronormativity is promoted (Best, 2000; Grace & Wells, 2007; Zlatunich, 2009).

Other participants stated that their schools had policies in place that restricted students from taking same sex partners from their school, or other schools, to the formal (Painter, 2008; Smith, 2006). In accordance with “these policies, any student wishing to invite a friend of the same sex to a school ball would be required to sign a statement confirming that he or she was queer and that the friend in question was his or her romantic partner” (Painter, 2008, pp. 38-39). A number of female participants in Painter’s (2008) study went on to report that students could invite male friends
from other schools to be their partners, but not female friends. Such practices highlight how the school formal is an event where male-female pairings are upheld as the most “appropriate [form of] coupling” (Zlatunich, 2009, p. 365) that exists in society.

Some (number not specified) of the staff participants in Painter’s (2008) study also said that same sex partners were not permitted at the formal. Others said that the ‘issue’ of students wanting to take same sex partners to the formal had never been raised at their school. Another staff participant said that her school employed the “genuine partner” (Painter, 2008, p. 39) rule, but staff at the school were aware that queer students would be unlikely to ‘out themselves’ and ask for permission to attend the formal with their same sex partners. However, most staff participants said that having a policy that prevented same sex attracted students attending the formal together, or which forced them to declare their sexuality, was “unfair and inappropriate” (Painter, 2008, p. 39).

Under the 1993 Human Rights Act it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of sexuality in New Zealand, as reported in Chapter One (also see Smith, 2006). It is interesting to note that there is no mention of heterosexual students having to prove they were in a ‘genuine relationship’ or having to sign a form declaring their heterosexuality before being granted permission to attend the formal with an opposite sex partner. From the staff participants’ comments, it appears that many staff members fail to question the implementation of this discriminatory policy at their schools even though they see it as unjust. Perhaps this is because as Mills (1999) explains the smooth “running of a school rests upon the acquiescence of those lower in the hierarchy to the power of those higher up the education ladder” (p. 319). If a teacher did protest their school’s stance on same sex attracted students attending the formal as partners, he or she would be questioning the authority of the Board of Trustees or principal, who are likely to have implemented the policy in the first place (Mills, 1999). Since the Boards of Trustees and principals occupy a more authoritative position than the teacher, as they are a teacher’s employers, then they may be unlikely to object to discriminatory practices in order to avoid “bringing discord into the institution” (Mills, 1999, p. 319) and risking their job.
However, Painter (2008) also reports that “a large number” (p. 39) of staff participants (number not specified) said they did not have such policies in place at their schools and students could attend the formal with same sex or opposite sex partners or by themselves if they chose to. Nevertheless a teacher at one of these schools also said that “the assumption is the boy-girl relationship” (Painter, 2008, p. 39), which attests to the pervasiveness of the “heterosexual presumption” (Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 22) that exists in many secondary schools.

In this study I investigate the policies of the three participating schools in regard to same sex attracted students attending the formal with same sex partners. Specific teacher and schooling practices that serve to construct the school formal as a heteronormative arena are also analysed.

The after party

Like the United States (Best, 2000) it is common for young New Zealanders to attend an after party immediately following the school formal. The New Zealand media construct the after party as a night where many young people drink to excess (Alcohol Liquor Advisory Council, 2004; Beech, 2009; Chateau, 1990; Valintine, 2009; Yurisch, 2009). The New Zealand media also reports that some parents organise after parties and provide young people with alcohol despite schools requesting them not to do so (Valintine, 2009; Yurisch, 2009). This has resulted in some schools banning school formals the following year, which is unfortunate for year 12 students (Valintine, 2009; Yurisch, 2009).

Since I was unable to locate any information on young people’s alcohol consumption at after parties in New Zealand, I provide a brief overview of the findings of research focused on the alcohol consumption patterns of young people and adult New Zealanders. In a recent study of 9,000 New Zealand high school students, Ameratunga et al. (2011) found that 71.6% of their young participants, aged between 13 or less and 17 or more, reported having consumed alcohol. More specifically, 50.8% aged 13 or lower, and 85.5% aged 17 or older reported having consumed
alcohol, while 60.6% of all respondents said they were current drinkers (Ameratunga et al., 2011).

In the New Zealand media, binge drinking is framed as the norm amongst many young New Zealanders (Nairn et al., 2006). In 2006 the New Zealand Ministry of Health conducted research on the alcohol use of 6,500 adults, aged 16-64. They found that 6 out of 10 of their participants reported drinking to the point of intoxication in the past year. In comparison, 34.4% of Ameratunga et al.’s (2011) young respondents reported an incident of binge drinking in the past month. Such statistics highlight how drinking to excess is reflective of New Zealand’s drinking culture in general (Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2002; 2005; Nairn et al., 2006; Panelli, et al. 2002).

International research reports that young people often feel pressure to consume alcohol when their friends and peers are drinking because they want to be accepted (Bot et al., 2005; 2007; Teunissen, 2012). In social situations Sessa (2007) also explains that some young people encourage others to drink through modelling alcohol consumption as the desired and expected behaviour, as well as teasing others who choose not to drink (Sessa, 2007). It is the norm for young New Zealanders and adults to consume alcohol in social situations and encouraging others to drink is not a behaviour that is unique to young people (Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al., 2006).

In New Zealand intoxicated young men are more likely to be accepted than intoxicated young women (Lyons & Willot, 2008). This is because drunken women are viewed as vulnerable to sexual assault or conversely, as ‘sluts’ (Lyons & Willot, 2008). Women who are drunk are also held responsible for practising unsafe sex and any unwanted pregnancies that result (Gavey, 2005; McPherson, Casswell & Pledger, 2004). In contrast, heavy alcohol consumption is traditionally constituted as a marker of a young man’s masculinity in a New Zealand context (Lyons & Willot, 2009; Nairn et al., 2006).

In contemporary New Zealand society however, women in general are consuming more alcohol than in previous decades (McPherson, Casswell & Pledger,
This is attributed to women’s changing role in society (more women are becoming members of the workforce), as well as alcohol being made readily available in spaces such as cafes and clubs, which women are more likely to frequent (McPherson, Casswell & Pledger, 2004). Some women drink heavily in these settings and on social occasions (McPherson, Casswell & Pledger, 2004).

There also appears to be very little difference in the proportion of young men and women who consume alcohol in New Zealand. A study on the drinking patterns of New Zealand youth by The Adolescent Health Research Group reports that 85.6 percent of young men and 85.1 of young women drink alcohol (http://www.youth2000.ac.nz/other-reports.html). Consequently, alcohol consumption appears to be the norm for the performance of an adolescent social identity, as it is for New Zealand adults, rather than a masculine identity per se (Nairn et al. 2006).

In this study I examine the student participants’ alcohol consumption patterns on the night of the formal and associated after party. I investigate how young people navigate New Zealand’s binge drinking culture, by comparing young people’s alcohol consumption with that of teachers and parents on the night of the formal (Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2002; 2005; Lyons & Willot, 2008). I document any gendered differences that emerged in the way young people reported their consumption of alcohol on the night of the formal and how the participants viewed young men and women who were intoxicated. I also detail how the discourse of young women as vulnerable when drinking play outs (Chapters Eight and Nine).

**Conclusion**

In the first section of the chapter I reported on how sexuality is largely silenced within the formal curriculum, but when it is mentioned it is heterosexuality that “is spoken of” (Epstein & Johnson, 1994, p. 199). In sexuality education, any discussions of queer desires and sexual practices are notably absent (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; 1998; Smith, 2006; Vincent & Ballard, 1997), while mentions of sexual pleasure (Allen, 2007a) and active female sexual agency are also silenced (Fine, 1992; also see Smith, 2006). The silencing of sexual diversity and pleasure in
sexuality education denies students’ diverse sexual subjectivities and the range of sexual acts young people actually engage in (Allen, 2007a; 2007b). Perhaps this lack of discussion of sexual diversity and sexual pleasure in sex education is because schools fear being constituted as promoting homosexuality and sex if they do discuss it, which may affect the reputation of the school (Mac An Ghaill, 1996; Quinlivan, 2002b). In this research study I explore how traditional constructions of sexuality are reproduced at the formal as well as those instances where they are transgressed.

Some teachers also reinforce heteronormativity in their classrooms by making homophobic comments or ‘jokes’ (Quinlivan, 1994; Rogers, 1994; Smith, 2006), while others blame same sex attracted students for inviting homophobic abuse (Nairn & Smith, 2003a; Youdell, 2005). Nevertheless, some teachers also challenge homophobia in their classrooms, thus highlighting how teachers, like students are not a homogeneous group, with some actively working to create an inclusive environment for their queer students and others perpetuating heteronormativity (Jordon et al., 1997; Smith, 2006). In this research project I explore the attitudes of the staff at three schools towards same sex attracted students attending the formal with same sex partners and their comments about homosexuality more generally.

In the second section of the chapter, a review of research into the processes whereby young men and women construct their gender subjectivities in schools was undertaken. I explored the role of hetero-sex talk, opposite gender physical ‘games’ involving bodily touch, and homophobia in the constitution of hegemonic masculine subjectivities. Through engaging in these activities young men construct themselves as dominant over other young men and women (Pascoe, 2007b; Smith, 2007; Youdell, 2004) and separate themselves from any notion of femininity and homosexuality (Mac An Ghaill, 2000a). Since hegemonic masculinity is forged in part through detaching oneself from any notion of homosexuality or femininity (Mac An Ghaill, 2000a; Martino, 1999), then young men who engage in these activities can in part construct themselves as legitimate masculine subjects. In this research study I also investigate the role of homophobia, sex talk and opposite gender touching in the construction of a legitimate masculine subjectivity.
However, many female students are willing participants in these physical exchanges with young men despite having their body and bodily space invaded (Pascoe, 2007b; Youdell, 2004). This is because in most instances these ‘games’ are tinged with sexual flirtation (Pascoe, 2007b), which constructs young women as heterosexually desirable and therefore legitimate feminine subjects (Youdell, 2004). This may explain young women’s apparent compliance or participation in these bodily contacts (Youdell, 2004). Young women also police each other’s sexual reputations through calling young women considered ‘too sexual’ sluts and by gossiping about others constructed as lesbians. Such labelling serves to construct any notion of active female sexuality as deviant and reinforces normative societal codes of female sexual passivity (Fine, 1992; Holland et al., 1996; 1998). In this study I investigate the use of the terms lesbian and slut to police normative codes of female sexuality.

A brief discussion of how normative gender codes impact on young men and women’s same sex friendships is also included in section two. Discourses of hegemonic masculinity circulating in society make it difficult for young men to establish close friendships with one another (Epstein & Johnson, 1994), while in contrast, young women are encouraged to forge close friendships with others (Harris, 1999). In this study I explore how discourses of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity intersect to police the limits of closeness in young men’s friendships but also how the term lesbian is directed at young women who transgress normative codes of femininity. I also explore how friendships, competition between friends and peer pressure may impact on young people’s preparations for, behaviour at, and experiences of the school formal and after party.

In section three the small amount of literature that is available on the prom in the United States was reviewed (Best, 2000; Zlatunich, 2009), which highlights how the prom is constituted as “the domain of the feminine” (Best, 2000, p. 61), and as such, an event in which young women “are expected to be heavily invested” (Best, 2000, p. 35). Young women are concerned with looking their best on the night and spend more time, energy and money preparing for the event than their male counterparts (Best, 2000). Perhaps this is because young women are aware that they are judged on their beauty to a greater extent than young men (Baker-Sperry &
Grauerholz, 2003; Bordo, 1993) and/or they enjoy engaging in appearance work (Best, 2000). The female participants in Best’s (2000) study were more likely to view the prom as a site of fairy tale heterosexual romance than Zlatunich’s (2009) participants. However, Zlatunich (2009) reports that her working class and ‘ethnic minority’ participants were less likely to view the prom as a romantic space than her white middle class participants, which she attributes to their social-class. However, in making comparisons in the young women’s understandings of the prom as romantic across social class and cultural background, Zlatunich (2009) constructs working-class and ethnic minority fathers and families in a deficit manner.

The prom experiences of young men are not discussed in the same depth as young women in the literature. However, the male participants in Best’s (2000) study appeared to have less interest in the prom than their female counterparts. Instead Best (2000) reports that they talked about alcohol consumption at after prom parties with great enthusiasm. Perhaps this is because talking about their alcohol consumption is one way young men attempt in part to constitute themselves as legitimate masculine subjects (Kehily, 2002; Nairn et al., 2006). Nevertheless, some young women in Zlatunich’s (2009) study also talked about consuming alcohol to excess at the after party, while the majority reported that young people consume alcohol at parties throughout the year. This indicates that alcohol consumption is normalised as part of young people’s socialisation in the United States, as it is for young and older people in New Zealand (Abel & Plumridge, 2005; Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al, 2006; Room, 2001).

The small amount of research available that provides information on the school formal in the New Zealand context, reports how the event, like the prom in the United States, is a heteronormative social space (Best, 2000; Painter, 2008; Smith, 2006). Some schools prohibit or restrict the ability of students to take same sex partners to the formal, but others have no such policy in place (Painter, 2008; Smith, 2006). This attests to how, like masculinity (Martino & Frank, 2006), sexuality is regulated differently in different schools.
In the last section of the chapter I included a brief discussion of the alcohol consumption patterns of young and adult New Zealanders, since I wish to explore how young people perform their sociability on the night of the formal and associated after party (see Chapter Nine). Although the New Zealand media frames young people’s binge drinking as out of control in social situations such as after parties (Alcohol Advisory Council, 2002; 2005; also see Beech, 2009), research highlights young people’s drinking habits are indicative of New Zealand’s drinking culture more generally. This theme will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Nine.

In New Zealand there are no research studies specifically reporting on the formal experiences of young people. Since this study centres on how schools/students reproduce/resist heteronormativity and normative gender codes at the school formal, and queer theory and poststructural feminism focus on sexuality and gender, it was decided a combination of these two theories was the best choice for studying gender and the school formal. In the following chapter the central tenets of poststructural feminism and queer theory are outlined.
Chapter Three: Sex, gender and sexuality at the formal

Introduction

Since the study focuses on gender and sexuality at the school formal, then a set of theoretical tools is needed to explore gender and sexuality. As queer theory focuses on sexuality and poststructural feminism on gender, then a number of concepts from various queer and poststructural feminists are included in the study, and are unpacked in this chapter.

In New Zealand high schools many lesbian/gay/bisexual/queer young people report that they experience homophobic abuse from their peers and same sex attraction is rarely mentioned in the official school curriculum, as noted in the previous chapter (Quinlivan, 1994; 1996; Painter, 2008; Smith, 2006; Stapp, 1991; Town, 1999; Vincent & Ballard, 1997). As someone who went through school knowing I was lesbian and encountering similar experiences, I am particularly interested in social justice for queer students in New Zealand schools. However, since the meaning of the term social justice is disputed (Irving, 2010; Sandretto et al., 2007) it is necessary to provide an explanation of my understanding of this term, as well as my interpretation of what social justice in schools looks like. I consider social justice as meaning everyone has the same opportunities in life regardless of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, religion and so forth (Gale, 2000; Irving, 2010). A school that incorporates social justice would be inclusive, acknowledging and celebrating that diversity amongst its student population and include diversity in the curriculum (Irving, 2010). In order to achieve inclusion teachers need to meet the needs of all their students and consequently need to reflect on their own attitudes and classroom practice to see how they may be perpetuating inequality (Gale, 2000; Irving, 2010). Finally, a school that is socially just would be democratic and include students and parents in decision making in regard to matters that affect them (Gale, 2000). However, queer theorists argue that campaigning for social justice for queer students draws on the notion of a fixed homosexual identity, which is inconsistent with queer theory, and this in turn undermines my desire for social justice (Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010).
Queer theorists also focus on destabilising all identity categories, including lesbian/gay/bisexual/queer (Jagose, 1996). As mentioned in Chapter One, the New Zealand media reports that gay/lesbian/bisexual/queer students are often banned from attending the school formal with their same sex partners (Chinn, 2007; Hannah, 2008; McCleod, 2008; McCullough, 2009). If I were to destabilise the identity categories lesbian/gay/bisexual queer then those practices implemented by schools that impinge on the ability of same sex attracted students attending the formal as partners would be more difficult to discuss in this project. The formal experiences of any participants who self-identified as lesbian, gay or queer would be more challenging to report since these ‘identity’ categories are put under erasure in queer theory.

Queer theorist and pedagogue Britzman (1995; 1997) also argues that the inclusion of same sex attraction and anti-homophobia material in the curriculum does little to challenge the normative status of heterosexuality in society. This is because such methods constitute homosexuality as something that needs to be ‘accepted’ by heterosexuals (Britzman, 1995). However, research on lesbian/gay/bisexual/queer adolescents’ experiences of secondary schooling usually contains suggestions from the participants on how schools can better meet their needs (Khayatt, 1994: Malinsky, 1997; Quinlivan, 1996; Rogers, 1994; Smith, 2006; Painter, 2008; Vincent & Ballard, 1997). These suggestions frequently include incorporating same sex attraction into the curriculum and educating peers about homophobia (see Khayatt, 1994: Malinsky, 1997; Rogers, 1994; Smith, 2006; Vincent & Ballard, 1997). Since, the young people in these research studies are current pupils or recent school leavers then their suggestions cannot be discounted as Britzman (1995) implies.

Consequently, those aspects of queer theory deemed useful for social justice for queer students, which include the notion of heteronormativity (Warner, 1993), gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), and destabilising the heterosexual/homosexual binary, are included and unpacked in this chapter (Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990). This is because these concepts are necessary to understand how heterosexuality maintains its cultural dominance.
Since I also wish to explore how the school formal may perpetuate normative gender codes, then the focus on gender in poststructural feminism means that it is a useful tool for analysing how young people take up or resist normative gender codes at the formal. Poststructural feminists such as Bordo (1993a; 1993b) and Smith (1990) (whose work is discussed in Chapters Six and Seven) have focused on women’s bodies and how they are shaped in order to adhere to feminine ideals of beauty. Therefore poststructural feminism is a valuable tool for discussing how young women (and men) construct their appearance for the school formal. Therefore the work of poststructural feminists such as Davies (1990; 1991; 2000; 2006) and Jones (1993) is outlined in this chapter.

As queer theory and poststructural feminism both draw on a poststructural perspective, then all of the theoretical concepts discussed in this chapter are grounded in poststructuralism. Therefore it is necessary to define poststructural understandings of particular terms before moving on to discuss the work of specific theorists (also see Smith, 2006).

**Subjectivity and discourses**

In today’s society most human beings are seen to have a unique ‘identity’ that is consistent across time and contexts (Davies, 1991; 2006). However, the notion of a stable and coherent ‘identity’ is rejected in a poststructural framework (Davies, 2000). Rather than perceiving people as having a fixed ‘identity’ poststructuralists consider “the experience of being a person [is] captured in the notion of subjectivity” (p. 57). Subjectivity through which we make sense of ourselves via the discourses we draw upon, and the discourses that others use to describe us. Since discourses constantly change and contradict one another then the notion of a stable and coherent ‘identity’ is inconsistent with poststructural theory (Davies, 2000).

It should be noted that my use of discourse is based on a Foucauldian understanding of this term. Foucault (1972) defined discourses as groups of statements that “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (p. 54). For example, a number of discourses circulate in society in regard to femininity.
Girls/women learn through these discourses, which are perpetuated in popular culture and reinforced in discussions with families and friends (Jones, 1993), that if they wish to be considered feminine then they must be thin and beautiful (Bordo, 1993b; Jones, 1993; Young, 1990). As a result many girls/women engage in practices, such as dieting, dying hair and eyebrow plucking in order to be slender and attractive and thus feminine (Bartsky, 1990; Bordo, 1993a; 1993b; Epstein, 1997a; Young, 1990). Consequently, it is through discourses, which are taken up by girls/women that the subject position of feminine girl/woman is created (Davies, 1991; Jones, 1993).

In American popular culture and the media, the prom is depicted as a “feminine space” (Best, 2000, pp. 15-16) and as such it is expected that young women will engage in beauty work so they can look their best for the night. In New Zealand media and popular culture this also appears to be the case (see Hewson, 2009; Hathaway, 2007; Marker, 2007; 2008; Tay, 2007). In this research study, I explore how young women position themselves in relation to normative discourses of femininity at the site of the school formal (Zlatunich, 2009).

There are also a number of other subject positions available to young women in society, such as slut, girlfriend and ‘good girl’ (to name a few) (Jones, 1993). For young men the positions of rugby player, stud and boyfriend are usually favoured over others such as ‘gay’ or nerd. Young people locate themselves in relation to these various subject positions, some of which are more desirable than others (Jones, 1993). For example, many of the female participants in this study commented that young women should not wear a dress that is too revealing or she will be called a slut (or skank) (this will be discussed in in detail in Chapter Seven). This highlights how young people are active in the reproduction of discourses, normative gender codes and the discursive positioning of themselves and others (Gee, 1996; Jones, 1993).

St Pierre (2000) also claims “the rules of discourse allow certain people to be subjects of statements and others to be objects” (p. 485). Thus discourses determine “who is able to speak and who is spoken” into existence (St Pierre, 2000, p. 485). For example, research focusing on same sex attracted students’ experiences in New Zealand secondary schools has found that queer youth are largely an invisible group
in high schools (Nairn & Smith, 2003a; Quinlivan, 1994; Stapp, 1991, Smith, 2006; Vincent & Ballard, 1997). This is because queer youth are frequently unable to be open about their sexuality since their peers are often hostile towards same sex attraction (Khayatt, 1994; Nairn & Smith, 2003a; Quinlivan, 1994; Rogers, 1994; Smith, 2006; Stapp, 1991; Vincent & Ballard, 1997). In addition, many schools fail to include any mention of same sex attraction in the curriculum, as reported in Chapter Two (Nairn & Smith, 2003a; Quinlivan, 1994; Smith, 2006; Stapp, 1991, Vincent & Ballard, 1997). As a result, queer students are predominantly a group whose subjectivities are not spoken into existence within school environments. In this research study, I explore whether this is also the case in relation to the school formal.

**Power and resistance**

Poststructuralists also take up Foucauldian understandings of power and resistance. Foucault (1978) sees power as something that is “exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relationships” (p. 94). In other words, according to Foucault a person or group cannot grasp power and use it against those positioned as subordinates (Danaher et al., 2000; also see Smith, 2006). Instead, he sees power as something that oscillates between different factions in society, which changes over time and in different contexts (Danaher et al., 2000; also see Smith, 2006). This formulation of power means that those groups or subjects positioned as having a subordinate status in society are not ‘powerless’ because of their low social standing (St Pierre, 2000). According to Foucault (1978), wherever “there is power there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (p. 95) and therefore subjects can resist their less authoritative positioning if the situation is right.

For instance, after one same sex attracted student was denied permission to attend his school formal with his boyfriend, friends of the young man approached a local newspaper (see McCullough, 2009). The newspaper, which is free and delivered to every household in one New Zealand urban centre, then dedicated an entire edition to issues surrounding same sex attracted students attending the formal with same sex partners (see McCullough, 2009). Consequently, by approaching the media the friends
of the young man who was denied permission to attend the formal with his boyfriend raised considerable awareness of same sex attraction in New Zealand secondary schools and the rights of same sex attracted students to attend the formal with their same sex partners.

Foucault (1978) also does not see power as exclusively oppressive. Instead he claims that what makes people obey power is that it is both productive and prohibitive: “it induce[s] pleasure, forms knowledge [and] produces discourses” (p. 61). Therefore power needs to be considered as a productive vein “running through the whole social body, much more than a negative instance whose function is repression” (Foucault, 1991, p. 61). In this research study I explore how power, or alternatively authority fluctuates between teachers and students and amongst students themselves at the formal. Those instances when young women and young men resist the dominant positioning of masculinity in the “gender order” (Davies, 1990, p. 153) are also noted in order to highlight how young people are not passive victims of the current gender regime (Zlatunich, 2009).

Agency and ‘forced choice’

Despite stating that resistance accompanies power, people are not free to take up any subject position they choose (Davies, 1991). This is because people “can only ever speak [them]selves into existence within the terms of available discourses” (Davies, 1991, p. 42). For example, the subject position of prom king is not readily made available to young women because of their gender. However, since prom king is a subject position conventionally associated with young men, young women are also unlikely to choose to take it up in case they are considered abnormal (although there are exceptions, see Rasmussen, 2004). Therefore, poststructural feminist Davies (1991) argues that choices are more like:

‘forced choices’, since the subject’s positioning within particular discourses makes the ‘chosen’ line of action the only line of action, not because there are no other lines of action but because one has been subjectively constituted through one’s place within that discourse to want that line of action. (p. 46)
So in a second example, a young woman is likely to want to wear a dress to the school formal because dresses are considered conventional feminine attire on formal occasions. Therefore a young woman will want to wear a dress to the event so they look elegant. However, a young woman does have the option of wearing trousers or a suit and tie, but is unlikely to wear this formal attire because she may be considered ‘butch’ or weird for wearing it.

Davies (1991) also explains that in poststructural accounts agency “is never freedom from discursive constitution of self but the capacity to recognise that constitution and resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted” (p. 51). Such a definition of agency sounds utopian and unlikely to occur on a practical level. This is because a subject risks being constituted as a freak if they choose to perform their subjectivities outside of what society constructs as normal (Jones, 1993).

In terms of this research project, I investigate how the participants position themselves in relation to normative gender and sexuality codes. I explore how young people’s gender and sexuality performances are regulated by society, but also how they are agentic in shaping their gendered and sexual subjectivities (Jones, 1993; Rasmussen, 2004).

**Sex/gender performativity**

It is a common societal belief that there are only two genders masculine/feminine that directly tie to male/female bodies, which in turn are distinguished on the basis of sex organs (Butler, 1990; Valentine, 1993; 2001). However, leading feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler (1990) argues that gender is not part of our ‘biological make up,’ but something that is performatively constructed. It is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1990, p. 33). In other words, the idea that we have an inner gendered self is created through performing everyday tasks like dressing, sitting,
walking and talking and therefore there is no pre-gendered subject who might be said to “preexist the deed” (Butler, 1999, p. 33).

Similarly, Martin (2010) argues that subjects come to view themselves as masculine/feminine because they internalise or alternatively embody normative societal gender codes or discourses. These discourses in turn shape how subjects conceptualise, contour and carry their bodies (Martin, 2010; Valentine, 2001, Youdell, 2005; Young, 1990). For example, through wearing make up, high heels, dresses, bras and spending time styling their hair, girls/women can construct themselves as feminine and their bodies as female, because such practices are constructed as denoting femininity in Western societies (Grosz, 1994; Entwistle, 2000a; 2000b). Through wearing suits, ties, briefs, boxer shorts, as well as having short and/or facial hair, or alternatively shaving, men constitute themselves as masculine since such practices are deemed to signify masculinity in society (Grosz, 1994). Since practices like gendered clothing and body styling can in part convey a legitimate gender and/or sexed body (Grosz, 1994), I investigate how young people dress and shape their bodies for the school formal and how this (re)presents their legitimacy as female and male subjects.

However, since gender is performative, Butler (1990) argues that there is no correlation between sex and gender, which means that masculinity does not have to tie to a male body, nor femininity to a female body. As there is no correlation between sex and gender, Butler (1990) argues that gender is “a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (p. 6, emphasis in original). This is turn leads her to consider whether sex, like gender, is also performative: “indeed, perhaps sex was always already gender, so that the sex/gender distinction is actually not a distinction at all” (Butler, 1990, p. 7). However, what holds the prevailing societal assumption that gender has to tie to sex and the notion that masculinity/femininity are two disparate categories is the “institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality” (Butler, 1999, p. 30).
The heterosexual matrix

Since compulsory heterosexuality is the fundamental cultural framework, then a subject can only make sense if their gender ties to their sex and if the subject is attracted to the ‘opposite’ sex (Butler, 1990; also see Epstein, 1997a). Butler (1999) also claims that it is through heterosexual desire that masculinity/femininity are constructed as juxtaposing terms and “understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (p. 23). Butler (1990) calls the process through which sex, gender and heterosexual desire are tied together in a causative formation, the heterosexual matrix, which she defines as:

a hegemonic discursive epistemic model of intelligibility that assumes for bodies to cohere and make sense, there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the process of compulsory heterosexuality. (p. 151)

Since the heterosexual matrix is embedded in society, then those subjects whose gender does not proceed from their sex or those who desire members of the same sex are frequently read as enacting an invalid gender performance (Butler, 1990; 1993). For example, it is a common societal practice to label “gay men ‘feminine [and] lesbians masculine” (Butler, 1993. p. 238). Such labelling serves to dishonour the gender-sexuality performances of same sex attracted subjects (Butler, 1993). Since homophobia is so entrenched in Western societies, then those whose gender/sexuality performances do not tie to their sex are often detested, abused and punished (Butler, 1990; 1991; 1993).

In this research study, specific behaviours or performances that constitute a subject as masculine/feminine and a body as male/female are explored. Instances where participants draw upon the heterosexual matrix to ‘make sense’ of students who desire a member of the same gender, and those whose gender performance do not
map onto their sex are also documented. I do so to highlight the entrenchment of the heterosexual matrix in society and how it serves to reproduce compulsory heterosexuality and normative gender codes (Quinlivan, 2002a; Salih, 2002).

Hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity

As Butler (1990) explains above, masculinity and femininity are set up as opposing binary categories, with masculinity being positioned as more authoritative than femininity. Yet there are also numerous types of masculinity that subjects perform with some having more authority than others (Connell, 1987; Dalley-Trim, 2007). Currently, one form of masculinity, which Connell (1987) calls hegemonic masculinity, is the most authoritative and valued form of masculinity that exists in society, even though Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) explain that only a small number of men actually ‘embody’ it. Nevertheless, because many men strive to attain this ideal form of masculinity, they are complicit in its reproduction and cultural dominance (Connell, 1987).

In order to perform hegemonic masculinity a boy/man must be heterosexual (Connell, 1987). Therefore boys/men often direct homophobic abuse against others they consider to be gay, in an attempt to extricate themselves from homosexuality (Connell, 1987; Mac an Ghaill, 2000b; Martino, 1999; 2000). Lusher and Robins (2009) also state that because homosexuality is commonly associated with behaviours traditionally aligned with femininity, such as passivity, emotionality and physical weakness, boys/men also distance themselves from such aspects in case they are read as gay (Mac an Ghaill, 2000b; Martino, 1999; Smith, 2007). Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is linked with physical activity and feats of strength exhibited through ‘manly’ sports such as rugby (Epstein, 1997b; Lusher & Robins, 2009; Smith, 1997), as well as emotional stoicism (Best, 2000; Martino, 1999; 2000).

At this point it should be stated that although hegemonic masculinity is constituted as the dominant and most desirable form of masculinity, it does not mean that other types of masculinity, such as gay masculinity are eliminated (Connell, 1987). Instead these versions of masculinity are constructed as “subordinate and
marginalized” (Connell, 1995, p. 242), but because of their presence also serve to contest and reproduce hegemonic masculinity itself.

Hegemonic masculinity is also constructed in relation to girls/women and sexist behaviours, as reported in Chapter Two (Connell, 1987; Dalley-Trim, 1997; Epstein, 1997b). For example, boys/men will often make sexual or disparaging comments about women’s bodies and touch them without permission (Dalley-Trim, 2007; Pascoe, 2007b; Valentine, 1989; Youdell, 2004; 2005). In doing so they establish their hegemonic masculinity and constitute themselves as authoritative over girls/women and their bodies (Youdell, 2005). Having a ‘good looking’ girlfriend and ‘showing off’ about their ‘sexual experiences’ (whether real or imagined) with young women are also ways that young men can construct a hegemonic masculine status amongst their male peers (Kehily, 2001; Mac an Ghaill, 2000a; Pascoe, 2007a; 2007b).

Connell (1987) argues that there is no form of femininity that impacts on women’s/girl’s gender performances to the extent that hegemonic masculinity does on men/boys. This is because unlike hegemonic masculinity, which is constructed via splitting oneself from femininity and homosexuality (Mac an Ghaill, 2000b), all versions of femininity are formed in relation to dominant masculinity (Connell, 1987). As a result there is less pressure on girls/women than boys/men to police each other’s gender performances, which results in more variation in girls/women’s gender performances (Connell, 1987). However, among the many varieties of femininity that are performed in society one form is idealised, which Connell (1987) calls “emphasised femininity” (p. 183). This is a type of femininity that girls/women perform, which centres on meeting male desires (Connell, 1987). Connell (1987) argues that those girls/women who perform emphasised femininity, contribute to their own oppression in society and the reproduction of the cultural dominance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). Connell (1987) also explains that emphasised femininity is a counterpart to hegemonic masculinity and they work to mutually reinforce one another.
In Western societies discourses of emphasised femininity are promoted in popular culture and media, which depict beauty, sexual attractiveness, sexual availability and sexual passivity as desirable qualities in young women (Connell, 1987). They also promote marriage, motherhood and domesticity as the most rewarding and legitimate ways of being female in society (Connell, 1987).

Since the school formal, like the prom in North America, is a site where young people are expected to construct themselves as the epitome of heterosexual masculinity/femininity (Epstein et al., 2000-2001) then the terms hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity are utilised in the study. The term hegemonic masculinity is also employed to investigate those masculinities or male behaviours, which are celebrated and valued over others. Emphasised femininity is adopted to highlight how some young women may engage in behaviours that contribute to their own subordination, but also how they find such practices enjoyable.

Gendered space

Connell (1987; 1995) argues that differences in the levels of authority between men and women play out in bodily form, posture and movement. For example, men are encouraged to view their bodies as powerful and can develop a highly prized masculine subjectivity through physical exertion on the sports field, hard physical labour and having ‘lots’ of sex, as stated previously (Connell, 1987). From girlhood however, women are taught that their bodies are delicate troublesome things, which need to be “dragged and prodded along and at the same time protected” (Young, 1990, p. 148). Women also learn that they need to be aware of how they look as they go about everyday tasks because they are objects of the authoritative male gaze (Holland et al., 1998; Rossiter, 1994; Young, 1990). Consequently young women learn their bodies are things to be “looked at and acted upon” rather than active and acting (Young, 1990, emphasis in original, p. 150). From a young age girls/women also come to realise that boys/men are looking at them and their bodies in a sexual manner (Rossiter, 1994). Since masculinity is constructed as dominant over femininity in society, girls come to internalise this male gaze and sexual objectification (Rossiter, 1994; Holland et al., 1998).
In this research study I investigate how the societal construction of male bodies as powerful and female bodies as delicate may play out in relation to the formal. For instance do young men prepare for the formal by going to the gym and young women move their bodies in a way that suggests fragility at the event?

The inequality between genders is also reflected in the amount of space men and women occupy as they go about every day activities like walking, standing, throwing and sitting (Martin, 2010; Valentine, 1993; Young, 1990). For instance, men often sit with open legs and have their arms at the sides (Martin, 2010; Young, 1990). In contrast women sit with their legs closed or crossed and frequently have their arms positioned across their bodies (Martin, 2010; Youdell, 2005). Sitting with legs open means that men take up more space as they sit than women, which reflects their authoritative positioning (Martin, 2010; Youdell, 2005; Young, 1990). Furthermore, Davies (1989) argues that if women did sit with their legs open as men do, they are more likely to be seen as sexually available than authoritative.

In this research study the bodily positioning of young men and women at the formal is investigated. I explore whether young men and women occupy different amounts of space as they engage in everyday activities like eating and standing at the formal. However, Young (1990) also explains that women are not just objectified in society, they are also subjected to “spatial and bodily invasion” (p. 155). This ranges from sexualised jokes and remarks (Lyman, 1998), right through to unwanted sexual touching and rape (Gavey, 1991; 2005; Valentine, 1989; 1993). One reason why girls/women may perform their bodily movements in a confined space is to keep men at a distance and thereby reduce the chances of their bodies and personal space being invaded (Young, 1990). Since male/masculine is constructed as the dominant sex/gender in society then those incidences where young men simply take it for granted that they can intrude on young women’s body space at the formal reveal this process in practice (Youdell, 2005).

Due to the authority of hetero-masculinity in society, straight men are also able to regulate who has access to public space (Valentine, 1993). For example,
women are discouraged from walking by themselves after dark in public for fear of attack or sexual assault (Valentine, 1993). Yet, because public space is also constituted as heterosexual space, then those subjects who perform their sex, gender or sexuality in non-normative ways are often subjected to homophobic remarks and abuse usually by heterosexual men in public places (Namaste, 1996; Valentine, 1993). This is because these non-conforming gendered subjects “pose a fundamental challenge to public space and how it is defined and secured through gender” (Namaste, 1996, p. 226).

If two young women went to the formal together they would threaten authoritative masculinity and male control of public space (Namaste, 1996; Valentine, 1993). As a result, young men (and women) may direct homophobic abuse towards the same sex couple in an effort to reassert their dominance in this semi-public space (Namaste, 1996; Valentine, 1993). However, even in the most extreme heteronormative environments like secondary schools, “stories of [same sex] desire and friendship persist” (Britzman, 1995, p. 186). In this research study therefore I document those practices that serve to constitute the school formal as a heteronormative space, but also any expressions of same sex desire that may occur at the event. Students’ attitudes towards same sex attracted students attending the formal with same sex partners are also discussed.

Furthermore, like public space, Johnstone and Longhurst (2010) argue that most private spaces, or alternatively homes, are also “heterosexualized spaces” (p. 42, emphasis in original). For instance, some queer adolescents report that their families are homophobic and they fear the repercussions that would occur if they disclosed their sexuality at home (Duncan, 1996a; Khayatt, 1994; Rogers, 1994; Smith, 2006). Consequently, many same sex attracted adolescents find their homes alienating and hostile spaces (Duncan, 1996a; Khayatt, 1994; Rogers, 1994; Smith, 2006). Since private space, like public space, is constructed as heterosexual terrain (Duncan, 1996a; Johnstone & Longhurst, 2010), then any parental pressure placed on their children to create themselves as quintessential heterosexual subjects for the formal is documented in this research study.
At this point, however, it should be noted, “public and private spaces are heterogeneous and not all space is clearly private or public” (Duncan, 1996a, p. 129). Within the public space of a classroom a teacher’s desk is considered their private space, for instance. Consequently, Johnstone and Longhurst (2010) argue that the distinction “between private and public” (p. 44) space is tenuous. Since the division between public and private space has led to the oppression of queer subjects and women (which will be explained in more depth in Chapter Eight) then Duncan (1996a) argues that the division needs to be unsettled. Those practices at the formal that blur the distinction between public and private are highlighted in this thesis to destabilise the public/private binary construction of space (Duncan, 1996a; 1996b).

**Male/female binary**

Like public and private space, male/female are constructed in a hierarchal binary formation. Since male is the first term in the male/female binary it is constituted as the superior partner, the ‘norm’ which has been aligned with humanity itself (Davies, 1991; 2000). The latter positioning of female however, means that it is the devalued term and obtains its meaning from its difference from the first term male (Davies, 2000). It has also meant that women have been considered ‘abnormal’ or ‘not quite fully human’ in society, which until relatively recently, has resulted in women not having the same rights to vote, work and inherit as men (Davies, 1991; 2000; Duncan, 1996a; Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002; St Pierre, 2000).

The latter placement of female also means that women/girls are positioned as other to boys/men, which results in female subjectivities being constructed on the basis of what male subjectivities are not (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002). For example, in society femininity is constituted as soft, weak and passive, while masculinity is constructed as hard, strong and assertive (Davies, 1990; St Pierre, 2000; Young, 1990). If girls/women did show strength and assertiveness, then rather than this being admired as it is in men, such qualities may disqualify her from the category of woman altogether, but may be admired on other occasions (such as boardroom meetings or sporting competitions) (Davies, 2000).
Despite male being the authoritative partner in the male/female binary, it is also dependent on female to (re)assert its own reproduction and privileged position. For instance, as explained previously, young men can construct themselves as legitimate masculine subjects through sexist comments (Epstein, 1997a; Lee, Marks & Birds, 1994; Lyman, 2000), by dominating girls'/women’s bodies and personal space (Valentine, 1989; Youdell, 2005), or through talking about their sexual experiences with girls/women (Kehily, 2001; Pascoe, 2007b). Consequently, a discussion of how male-masculinity is dependent on female-femininity to secure its own definition and authoritative positioning is undertaken in this research study.

Co-existing with the male/female binary are numerous other binaries, three of which include the mind/body, rational/emotional and active/passive binaries (Budgeon, 2003; Davies, 1991). The first term in each of these binaries is the privileged term and is associated with boys/men, while the second and therefore undesirable term is linked with girls/women (Davies, 1991). All of these binaries are explored in this study. One other binary that co-exists with the male/female binary and is discussed in detail in this study is the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Davies, 1991). Like the heterosexual matrix, Quinlivan (1999) explains that the heterosexual/homosexual binary works to reproduce the privileging of heterosexuality in society and normative gender codes.

**Heterosexual/homosexual binary**

Since heterosexuality occupies the first position in the heterosexual/homosexual binary, it is taken for granted as the normal, majority, and prized sexuality in society (Fuss, 1991; Halperin, 1996; Sedgwick, 1990). The secondary placement of homosexuality however, means that it is constructed as unnatural, has little value with a minority status in society and is the subordinate partner in the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990).

Despite the dominance of heterosexuality over its binary partner, it is also reliant on homosexuality for its definition (Butler, 1990; Fuss, 1991; Smith, 2006). For instance, Fuss (1991) states that, “heterosexuality secures its self-identity and
shores up its ontological boundaries by protecting itself from what it sees as the continual predatory encroachment of the contaminated other, homosexuality” (p. 2). In other words, heterosexuality constructs homosexuality as detestable in order to define itself (Butler, 1990; Fuss, 1991; Halperin, 1996). Therefore, societal discourses that constitute gay men/lesbians as sexual deviants and ethically corrupt have nothing to do with lesbians or gay men per se (Butler, 1990; Halperin, 1996). Instead they highlight how heterosexuality is a sacred institution, which must continually re-interpret itself, while at the same time portraying itself as the natural sexuality (Butler, 1990; 1991).

The negative construction of homosexuality also reveals how heterosexual subjectivities are forged through exorcising any indication or tinge of homosexuality from the self (Fuss, 1991; Mac An Ghaill, 2000a). Research undertaken on masculinities in high schools reports that young men engage in homophobic humour, remarks and abuse, in order to remove themselves from homosexuality and any chance that others will perceive them as gay (Epstein, 1997b; Kehily, 2001; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 2000a; Martino, 1999; 2000a; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Smith, 1997). In this study I explore how young men may engage in homophobic humour and practices in order to construct their hegemonic masculine status.

Furthermore, the range of sexualities that subjects currently perform in society is inconsistent with the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Fuss, 1991). This is because those sexual practices, which cannot be classified as distinctly straight or gay, such as “bisexuality, transvestism [and] transexualism” (Fuss, 1991, p. 2) are excluded from the inflexible binary construction. This means that heterosexuality and homosexuality are held up as the only two sexual alternatives available in society, which is unfortunate because bisexuality, transexuality, transgenderism and other practices such as drag threaten the binary construction of sexuality and/or gender and open up a space for diversity (Butler, 1990; 1991; Fuss, 1991; Smith, 2006).

Sedgwick (1990) argues that the heterosexual/homosexual binary is such a ubiquitous force in society that, “every aspect of Western culture must be, not merely incomplete but also damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not
incorporate a critical analysis of modern homosexual/heterosexual definition”, p. i). Therefore, in this research study an investigation of how the heterosexual/homosexual binary is reproduced through particular behaviours at the formal is included in the study, as is a description of how participants reproduce or subvert the normal/abnormal status of heterosexuality/homosexuality in society.

**Heteronormativity**

Warner (1993) explains that the heterosexual/homosexual binary, or alternatively the “sexual order” (p. xiii) is so entrenched in Western societies that it is “embedded in most standard accounts of the world” (p. xiii). He states that homophobic discourses can be found in almost all societal texts and institutions, which serve to reinscribe “heterosexual culture’s exclusive ability to interpret itself as society” (Warner, 1993, p. xxi). Warner (1991) coined the term heteronormativity to explain how:

Het culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of production without which society wouldn’t exist. (p. xxi)

Because heteronormativity is such a fundamental societal force, it is also prevalent in schools (Quinlivan & Town, 1999; also see Smith, 2006). Therefore, Quinlivan and Town (1999) contend that “making transparent its pervasiveness is the first step in addressing the threat to the well-being not only of young gay men and lesbian women but also of young men and women in general who feel constrained by the limited range of representations of masculinity and femininity that are available to them throughout their schooling” (p. 510).

As one of the aims of this research project is to investigate how schools/students reproduce/resist heteronormativity at the school formal, then locating heteronormative discourses is a pervasive feature of this study. Since heteronormativity is pronounced in society, specific instances where the participants
assume that all formal goers are heterosexual are also noted as well as incidences such presumptions are challenged (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Quinlivan & Town, 1999).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, a number of theoretical concepts utilised in the study are outlined. As this research project centres on gender and sexuality performances at the formal, then the focus on gender in poststructural feminism and sexuality in queer theory were considered the most appropriate theories. Since queer theory and poststructural feminism are both grounded in poststructuralism, they both take up poststructural understandings of the terms discourse, subjectivity, power, resistance and agency, which I defined in this chapter.

However, since some of the central tenets of queer theory clash with my desire for social justice for queer youth in New Zealand high schools, then only those aspects of queer theory that I consider beneficial for the study are employed. This is because some aspects of queer theory, such as the erasure of all sexual identity categories, are problematic in a research project that aims to explore how same sex attracted students experience the formal and how heteronormativity is promoted at the event. I also argue that a queer pedagogy where all forms of normalcy are examined and destabilised as Britzman (1995) suggests, is unlikely to occur in the conservative school environment (Quinlivan, 2002b). Therefore educating students about homophobia and including same sex attraction in the curriculum may be the most effective way that is currently available of making school environments more inclusive and safe for queer youth.

However, some aspects of queer theory are beneficial for the study, which include the notion of gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), heteronormativity (Warner, 1993), and the desire to destabilise the heterosexual/homosexual binary, which works to reproduce heteronormative gender codes (Fuss, 1991; Quinlivan, 1999; Sedgwick, 1990). These concepts are useful for exploring how heteronormativity and normative gender codes intersect to privilege heterosexuality (Butler, 1990).
Butler (1990) contends that it is through performing specific bodily actions, which are socially constituted as denoting masculinity/femininity, that people are constituted as gendered subjects (Butler, 1990; also see Jones, 1993). Therefore, our sense of ourselves as having an inner masculine/feminine ‘identity’ is something that is produced through embodying and performing normative gender discourses (Butler, 1990).

Subjects can also engage in specific practices that can lead to high status amongst their peers. Young men who engage in ‘manly pursuits’ such as sports and sex can in part constitute themselves as hegemonic masculine subjects, which is a form of masculinity that is highly valued (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Epstein, 1997b; Kehily, 2001; Kehily & Nayak, 1996; Mac an Ghaill, 2000b; Martino, 1999; 2000; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Smith, 1997). A hegemonic masculine subjectivity is also formed through removing the self from any notion of homosexuality and femininity (Mac an Ghaill, 2000b). Emphasised femininity is an accompaniment to hegemonic masculinity and girls/women who take up this style of femininity often position themselves in relation to male desires (Connell, 1987).

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that research on masculinities has primarily focused on male only groups, which is unfortunate because women (such as mothers, girlfriends, friends) play a central role in helping to shape boys’/men’s masculinity (although such a statement reduces women to the status of a subordinate male accessory). Research on femininities has also tended to study female only groups (see Bloustein, 2003; Holland, 1994; 1996; Hey, 1997). Since masculinity and femininity are set up in a binary formation and thus obtain their meaning from one another, then both female and male experiences of the formal need to be discussed, which I do in the thesis, in an effort to contribute to the wider study of gender and gender relations.

Through the binary construction of gender, which is reproduced through the framework of the heterosexual matrix, masculinity and femininity are constructed as disparate categories, with masculinity being more authoritative than its binary partner
(Butler, 1990; Davies, 2000). This authority is evident in the way men encroach on women’s physical and personal space and the larger amounts of space they occupy (Johnstone & Longhurst, 2010; Valentine, 1993; Youdell, 2005; Young, 1990). This issue is explored in more depth in Chapter Eight.

Heterosexuality/homosexuality are also in a binary formation, which leads to their majority/minority and normal/abnormal status in society (Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990; Halperin, 1996). Compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormative gender codes are also perpetuated through the cultural framework of the heterosexual matrix. Instances where participants resist the binary constructions of sex, gender and sexuality are documented in this study, because they pose a challenge to these rigid binary constructs. In the following chapter, I report on the data collection methods selected for the study, how the research was carried out and introduce the participants.
Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods

Introduction

In this chapter, I justify why a feminist model of research was selected for the study. I also describe a number of ethical principles underlying feminist methodology and how I addressed these concerns during the fieldwork. I explain why multiple methods of qualitative data collection were selected for the project and provide a brief overview of each method of data collection chosen for the study. I also point out the reasons why my initial choice of these data collection methods changed over the course of the fieldwork. I give a detailed account of how gaining consent from the University of Otago Ethics Committee to begin my fieldwork was complicated by my decision to include young people as peer researchers and photography as methods of data collection in the project. I discuss a specific ethical issue that emerged during the fieldwork in regards to principals not informing students that I would be conducting observations at the formal. In the process, I describe how the fieldwork was carried out and how the data analysis proceeded.

Feminist Methodology

There are numerous types of feminism that exist in contemporary society (Jaggar, 2008; Lather, 1991; Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002). Despite the variety of feminisms that are currently available however, a central tenet of all feminist research is the desire to trouble “the social construction of gender” (Lather, 1991, p. 71), as well as the privileged position of masculinity in society (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007; DeVault & Gross, 2007; Jaggar, 2008). Feminists argue that the dominant position of masculinity in society, leads to the devaluation of femininity and therefore the oppression of women, as well as of some men who are constructed as feminine for whatever reason (Jaggar, 2008). Since a major aim of this research study is to investigate how schools and students reinscribe normative gender discourses at the school formal then an examination of gender is central to the project and therefore a feminist research strategy was selected for the study.
Feminist researchers also argue that gender has definite material consequences for women’s lives because it shapes the “distribution of power and privilege in society” (Lather, 1991, p. 71). Since men are on the privileged side of the masculine/feminine binary then they have more ‘access to power’ than women (hooks, 2000; Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2000). Since feminists study gendered ‘power dynamics’ then Ramazanoglu with Holland, (2000) argue that “men and masculinity” (p. 9) also need to be studied.

In this study I am choosing to study both female and male students’ experiences of the formal in order to ascertain information about how they negotiate discourses of hegemonic masculinity surrounding the event. For example, in her research study on the prom, Best (2000) found that her male participants seldom talked about the emotional components of their dates or relationships. Emotions are associated with femininity and the performance of a legitimate masculinity in society requires the “erasure of the feminine from the male/masculine psyche” (Town, 1999, p. 136). In this research study I wish to find out if young men in New Zealand talk about such aspects as the emotional components of their relationships with their girlfriends. Consequently, feminist research was considered the most appropriate research strategy for discussing such aspects.

Finally, I want to find out whether schools implement policy that prevents same-sex attracted students from attending the formal with same sex partners. I also wish to explore how students would feel if a same-sex attracted student bought a same sex partner to the formal. Given that feminism examines how gender intersects with sexuality and feminists also aim to end “oppression of lesbians and gay men” then feminist research seemed most appropriate (hooks, 2000, p.153).

Harding (1987) defines methodology as “a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed” (p. 3). Since feminist researchers work within a variety of academic fields (Reinharz, 1992), undertake quantitative and qualitative research and employ numerous data collection methods in their studies, then a definitive definition of a feminist methodology is problematic (Jaggar, 2008; Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002). Despite stating this however, feminist researchers
have noted particular ethical features they associate with feminist methodology (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2000). Firstly, feminist researchers need to be accountable for their research studies (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002) and therefore they are reflexive, writing about how their positioning impacts on the shape of their research (Hesse-Biber, 2007a; Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002). Secondly, feminist researchers pay attention to ‘power issues’ in research studies and try to establish non-exploitative relationships with their participants (DeVault, 1990; DeVault & Gross, 2007; Jaggar, 2008). Finally, feminist researchers always include a “theory of power” (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2000, p. 13) in their research projects, which I presented in the previous chapter.

In order to be accountable for my research study, I position myself throughout this thesis and describe in detail how the data analysis proceeded. In addition, throughout the fieldwork I noted in my journal how my positioning as a researcher, adult and woman impacted on the relationships I developed with the participants as well as my analysis of the interviews. For example, in one interview a male participant used the term stunners. Realising that I had no idea what he was talking about, he explained that young people now call sunglasses stunners and he jokingly stated that I probably had no idea about the meaning of the term because of my age. This comment indicates that because of the gap in our ages, the young man was constructing me as an outsider to youth culture.

I also tried to develop non-exploitative relationships with my participants by using research methods such as peer researchers and photo-elicitation interviews in the project, which would give the participants more control over the data collection (these data collection methods will be discussed later in the chapter). In addition I reimbursed the participants for their time, either through vouchers (interview participants) or by paying for their formal tickets (peer researchers). The peer researchers also got a reference outlining the tasks they had undertaken as part of their role, which they could include with their curriculum vitae (Nairn & Smith, 2003b). If I was to employ an adult co-researcher or if an adult gave up their time to take part in an interview, then I contend that they would expect some form of reimbursement (Nairn & Smith, 2003b). Consequently, I felt that the participants should also receive remuneration for their time and the work they were going to do for the project.
Multiple Methods

I elected to use a combination of qualitative data collection methods in the project for the following reasons. Firstly, qualitative researchers use multiple methods in their studies because they argue that the choice of data collection method influences the data collected (Fine & Weiss, 1996; also see Smith, 2006). Given that different methods produce different data, qualitative researchers frequently combine data collection methods in order to gain an “in depth understanding” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994a, p. 2) of a particular topic. I elected to use multiple methods of data collection in this study because I felt that the combination of methods would provide me with detailed information on participants’ expectations for and experiences of the formal. Secondly, young people are not a homogeneous group and each young person has their preferred ways of interacting with an unknown researcher (as do adults) (Punch, 2002a; 2002b). For example, some may say nothing while others relish the opportunity to talk with an adult who is prepared to listen. Punch (2002a) argues that the use of multiple data collection methods can be helpful in catering for young peoples’ favoured ways of interacting with a researcher. Finally, Reinharz (1992) explains that feminist researchers need to use data collection methods that match their research questions. Each method of data collection I selected for the project was chosen to provide data for one or more of the research questions. Table 1 lists each method of data collection alongside the research question that they were selected to provide data for.
Table 1

*Research questions and corresponding data collection methods*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Collection Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do schools/students reinscribe normative (hetero)sexuality and gender discourses at the site of the school formal and how do students resist or conform to this policing?</td>
<td>Narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews with principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo-elicitation interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What rules and regulations do schools have in place in regards to the school formal? Does a student’s non-compliance with the rules give them status amongst their peers?</td>
<td>Interviews with principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo-elicitation interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How do students themselves prepare for the event and perform their gender on the night?</td>
<td>Narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo-elicitation interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Does a student’s resistance to, or compliance with compulsory heterosexuality and normative gender discourses secure their ‘in group’ status amongst their peer group?</td>
<td>Interviews with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo-elicitation interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher observations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Narratives**

Collecting students’ written narratives, focusing on their expectations for the event, formal preparations and their ideal school formal, was the first method of data collection. Researchers working within specific disciplines attach different meanings to the term narrative and therefore a ‘definitive definition’ of what constitutes a narrative cannot be obtained (Chase, 2005; Reissman, 2008). Having said this however, qualitative researchers generally agree that extended responses constitute a narrative and therefore single word/sentence answers are not considered narrative data (Chase, 2005).
The main reason why researchers choose to use narratives in their studies is because they believe people construct themselves, their realities and their lives through the stories that they tell to themselves as well as to other people (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991; 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Grumet, 1991). Researchers study the ways in which the narrator makes sense of themselves and their environment through the stories they tell and the language they use to articulate their experiences (Casey 1995-1996; Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 1991; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Grumet, 1991; Reissman, 2008; Witherall & Noddings, 1991).

I elected to use narratives in this research study for the following reasons. Firstly, I wanted to gain a broad picture of how students construct their masculine/feminine subjectivities for the formal and narratives were chosen as the best way of obtaining this information. Secondly, I wanted to locate the material gathered in the individual interviews within the context of the interview participant’s wider peer group and written narratives were selected as the most effective and practical way of going about this. Thirdly, I thought that when I analysed the narratives a number of themes would emerge. I would then formulate a number of open-ended questions based on these themes and use these questions as conversation starters in the individual interviews.

Interviews

An interview has traditionally been defined as an encounter in which an interviewer asks questions to a participant, in order to gather ‘factual’ data about the participant’s experiences (Beer, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994b; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). However, qualitative researchers critique this definition because it constructs participants as “passive vessels of answers” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 12, emphasis in original) whom the interviewer can simply withdraw information from if they ask “the right questions” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p. 12). Instead of viewing participants as passive in the creation of information, qualitative researchers stress that participants are active (Beer, 1997; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002 Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). For example, when a participant talks with an interviewer, they create their account through incorporating certain aspects of their experiences while omitting others,
therefore a participant is actively engaged in constructing and reconstructing their account (Beer, 1997; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Harding, 2006; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

Qualitative researchers also stress that the interaction between interviewer and participant impacts on the participant’s thinking, as well as on how the participant retells their story (Beer, 1997; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Harding, 2006; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). In fact the interviewer’s bodily movements, choice of clothing, gender, age and so forth, as well as his or her questions all help to shape the participant’s account (Beer, 1997; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Harding, 2006; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Rapley, 2004). For example, the interviewer decides which of the participant’s responses need further investigation and directs additional questions at these responses (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Therefore, the interview account is actually a joint production “between the interviewer and the interviewee” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 2). Consequently, qualitative researchers contend that “interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but rather active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 698) accounts.

I elected to use qualitative semi structured interviews in the research study for the following reasons. Firstly, Johnson (2002) contends that qualitative interviews should be used when a researcher seeks knowledge about common everyday understandings that remain unquestioned because of their pervasiveness. In this study I wanted to find out whether the participants unquestioningly take up normative societal discourses of masculinity/femininity. For example, do students presume that they have to wear suits or dresses to the school formal, because in society males wear suits/tuxedoes and females wear dresses to formal social occasions? However, I also wished to ask the participants questions such as what would happen if a boy turned up in a dress or a girl in a tuxedo? I hoped that the confidential nature of the one on one interview would mean that I would feel comfortable enough to ask such a question and the participants would feel safe enough to provide honest responses to this question (Bennett, 2004). Secondly, Johnson (2002) argues that qualitative interviews should be used when researchers want to gather the diverse understandings/experiences of people engaged in the same activity. All of the
participants in the study were attending the formal, but each participant will attach different meanings to the event. Qualitative interviews were selected to provide detailed information on the meaning participants attach to their formal experiences.

Peer Researchers

Peer researchers were also employed in the data collection. Nairn and Smith (2003b) define peer researchers as young people who research “other young people” (p. 1). A number of qualitative researchers who study adolescents/children use peer researchers in their research projects in an effort to reduce the “power imbalance” (Nairn, Higgins & Sligo, 2007, ¶ 13) between themselves as researchers and their young participants. Since feminist researchers are also concerned with reducing the power imbalance between themselves and their research participants, I elected to use peer researchers in the study.

Given that peer researchers are young people who research other young people, they can be seen as ‘insiders’ (Clark & Moss, 1996; Nairn, Higgins & Sligo, 2007; Nairn & Smith, 2003b). This ‘insider’ status often means that the peer researchers have insights into the understandings/experiences of other young people “not necessarily available to adult researchers” (Nairn, Higgins & Sligo, 2007, ¶ 11). As an adult woman, who has conducted feminist research for a number of years, I felt that I would have different understandings of gender than the participants. Therefore, I decided that having peer researchers take photographs of their peers’ gendered behaviour at the formal, and interpreting these photographs in a photo-elicitation interview with me, would provide me with a snapshot of how the young people viewed gendered behaviour.

Photo-Elicitation Interviews

Photo-elicitation interviews were also chosen as a method of data collection. In a photo-elicitation interview the researcher typically presents a photograph (or series of photographs) to her/his participant and then asks a number of questions to ascertain the ‘meaning’ the participant attaches to the image (Croghan et al., 2008; Harper, 1994; 2002). The photographs presented to participants are often taken by the
researcher and have some relationship to the participant’s community (Harper, 1994; 2002). However, it is becoming more common for interviewees to take their own snapshots because this can provide the researcher with greater insight into the participant’s cultural understandings and perspectives (Croghan et al., 2008; Harper, 1994; 2002).

In this research study the peer researchers were asked to take photographs of their formal preparations and things they found particularly interesting at the formal and that they deemed to show typically gendered behaviour. The peer researchers were then presented with the snapshots in photo-elicitation interviews, and asked to discuss the images in the hope that it would allow me insight into how the peer researchers prepared for the formal and understood gendered behaviour without me influencing their understandings (Croghan et al., 2008). However, I also acknowledge that the task asked of the peer researchers, my role as a researcher and audience for the photographs would have impacted on what the peer researchers photographed (Croghan et al., 2008).

**Researcher Observations**

Finally, I decided to conduct observations at the formal for a number of reasons. Firstly, “researchers must witness the phenomena that they are studying in action” (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 378). Secondly, a researcher who observes should be close to their chosen setting or participants to enable them to gain a greater awareness of people’s actions and the events as they happen in specific contexts (Burns, 2000, 1994). In more traditional methods such as surveys or interviews, participants provide “retrospective or anticipatory” (Burns, 2000, p. 411) accounts of a particular thing and as such, their accounts may be removed from the process that the researcher is investigating. In an interview situation participants may also filter what s/he says according to what “they think the researcher wants to hear” (Punch, 2002a, p. 325). Therefore, I thought that observations conducted at the formal would provide information about ‘gendered behaviour’ and social interactions as they happened (Burns, 2000: Esterberg, 2002).
Young People and Consent

At this stage it is important to state that all of the students who were participants in the project were aged between 16-18 and therefore I, in consultation with my supervisors, deemed that parental consent was not required for students who volunteered to be participants in the research project for the following reason. Under article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (U.N.C.R.O.C.), which was sanctioned by the New Zealand Government in 1993 (Nairn & Smith, 2003a), all competent young people have the right to “express [their views] freely in all matters affecting the child” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, ¶ 38). Article 12 also states that “the views of the child [should be] given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, ¶38). Such legislation constitutes young people as “competent agents” (Valentine, 1999, p. 80) capable of making their own decisions regarding participating in research projects. Asking for parental consent for young people aged 16-18 to participate in the study could be interpreted as contrary to this legislation because asking for parental consent frames young people as incompetent to make their own decisions (Nairn & Smith, 2003a; Valentine, 1999).

It should be noted that the decision that parental consent was not required before volunteers could take part in the project was not made in an attempt to deceive parents. Actually, the participants were encouraged to show their parent/s or guardian/s copies of the information for participants and consent forms. Furthermore, I also prepared a letter that would be sent home to parents stating that researcher observations were going to be conducted at the formal and that parents could contact me if they had any concerns about this.

Although legislation such as U.N.C.R.O.C. constructs young people as capable of making their own decisions in matters that affect them, there are a number of normative discourses circulating in society that undermine the capacity of young people “to represent themselves” (Raby, 2007, p. 48). One of these discourses constructs young people as “vulnerable, in need of protection from exploitative
academic researchers” (Valentine, 1999, p. 150). In this research study, I contend that this discourse played a significant role in the difficulties I encountered when trying to obtain consent from the University of Otago Ethics Committee to begin my fieldwork.

**Attention to Ethics**

As stated previously, I decided to employ some young people as peer researchers in the project. The peer researchers would be asked to take photographs of their formal preparations and aspects that they deemed to be ‘typically gendered’ at the school formal and then they would discuss these snapshots in a photo-elicitation interview. However, the process of gaining consent from the University of Otago Ethics Committee for photographs to be taken by the peer researchers, and possibly included in the thesis, proved to be a complex undertaking.

I approached the Ethics Committee four times, in order to gain their approval to begin the fieldwork, and the Committee rejected my application three times because of specific issues associated with photographs being taken at the formal. Firstly, the Ethics Committee turned down my initial application because they saw formal attire as being very distinctive, and they felt that individual identification might occur if photographs of students in their formal clothing were included in the thesis. The Committee rejected my second application because they stated that any people depicted in the photographs taken by the peer researchers, needed to view the photographs in order to give their consent for their image to be included in the thesis. My third application was rejected because the Committee wanted to see a copy of the questions that I would ask the peer researchers in the photo-elicitation interview.

I addressed the Committees’ concerns in the following three ways. Firstly, I decided that if I wanted to discuss the formal goers’ clothing then I would do so by writing about their attire without publishing photographs of students in their formal outfits. Secondly, I realised that the Ethics Committee was right and it was sound ethical practice to show people any photographs that contained their image before including them in the thesis. Therefore I decided to get the contact details of the people depicted in any photographs that I wished to include in the thesis from the peer
Researchers. These people would be contacted before the end of the school year, so they could give (or not) their consent for their image being included in the thesis. Thirdly, I came up with three broad questions that could be used in the photo-elicitation interviews: why we why did you take the snapshot, what is happening in the photograph and how do you think it shows gendered behaviour. However, I explained to the Ethics’ Committee that the photographs themselves would ultimately determine the questions that I asked in the photo-elicitation interview.

In retrospect I believe that gaining consent from the Ethics Committee for my fieldwork to begin, was complicated by the fact that photographs of young people would be taken and possibly included in the thesis. Even though the Ethics Committee gave me permission to conduct research with young people without parental permission being required, I believe they were still acting paternalistically (Nairn & Smith, 2003a). This was because young people have traditionally been constructed as a vulnerable population (Close, 2007; Raby, 2007; Valentine, 1999) and therefore it is hard to escape “society’s explicit wish to protect their welfare” (Sartain et al., 2000, p. 914). The drive to protect young people was also evident in schools themselves. A number of principals declined to take part in the study because it involved photographs of young people being taken at the formal, which forced me to abandon photography as a data collection method in two of the three participating schools.

Recruiting Schools

Ideally, a boys’, girls’ and a co-educational school would take part in the study in order to compare data from three different sites. There is some evidence to suggest that single sex schools are more likely than co-educational schools to reinscribe normative gender/sexuality codes and ban students from taking a same sex partner to the school formal (Hannah, 2008; McCullough, 2009; Nairn & Smith, 2003a; Watson, 1996).

After obtaining consent for the fieldwork to begin from the University of Otago Ethics Committee, letters outlining my project were sent to all the principals of
secondary schools in a South Island urban centre. I set up a meeting with a principal of a boys’ school, in which he said there was no need to inform parents about my project “because as soon as parents become involved then it gets tricky” (Research Journal Entry, 10 March, 2008). By failing to inform parents that research was going to be undertaken in the school, the principal was constructing himself as more authoritative than the students’ parents and usurping their right to be informed that their child might participate in the study (http://www.youthlaw.co.nz/default.aspx?_z=85). Although I felt that not informing parents about the project was deceptive, I had determined that parental consent was not required before young people would be invited to participate in the project. Consequently, I decided that if the principal agreed to take part in the study, which he did, then I would conduct research within the school.

The principal reported that he was happy with the steps put in place, which would protect the identity of those students depicted in the photographs. He said that provided permission of any young people depicted in photographs was obtained before any were published in the thesis, then he had no issue with photographs being taken at the formal. However, he also made the comment that “you may have issues with girls’ schools but boys do not care too much about their photographs being taken” (Research Journal Entry, 10 March, 2008). It soon became apparent that he was right.

I spoke to the principal of a girls’ school who asked me a number of questions about the project over the telephone. After I explained that the peer researchers would be asked to take photographs at the formal and that I would also like to conduct observations at the formal itself, she stated that my methodology was flawed. She said that having the peer researchers take photographs and me conducting observations at the formal would make the girls uncomfortable. She also said:

Lee you do not know teenage girls because the girls taking the photographs may feel unsafe taking the photographs and that would also spoil the idea of the formal being a fun night for those girls (Research Journal Entry, 16 March, 2008)
I thought that she raised a valid point. I had considered the impact of photographs being taken on the photographic subject, but not the impact on the photographers, peer researchers themselves. With this in mind I decided to ask any potential peer researchers how they would feel about taking photographs at the formal before employing them.

The principal said that I should go back to the drawing board, change my data collection methods and contact her again when I had done so. Although the principal said no to participating in the study because of the research methods involved, I was aware that she did not say no to participating in the project altogether. Consequently, I thought that if there were no other girls’ schools willing to participate in the project, I would change my data collection methods and contact her again.

After I had approached and been turned down by the principals of all the girls’ schools in the urban centre in which the research was being conducted, I came up with a second alternative research strategy. Instead of taking photographs at the formal, the peer researchers would be asked to conduct two interviews with one of their classmates, before, as well as after, the event and I would not go to the formal. I set up a meeting with the principal of the girls’ school who initially declined and outlined the alternative research strategy. The principal (in consultation with the Board of Trustees) gave permission for the data collection to take place in the school.

I decided to employ the alternative research strategy at the third co-educational school. This was because their formal was relatively late in the 2008 formal season and I was concerned that if parents had any objections to photographs being taken at the formal, then I would have to wait until the following year to approach schools again. With this in mind I decided that peer researchers interviewing a classmate was the most practical option. Due to the lack of volunteers for this role however, the peer researchers were asked to interview two of their classmates instead of one, in return for a double formal ticket. I also decided to conduct observations at the co-educational school formal because the principal invited me to the event. This meant that the data collection methods differed at each of the three participating
schools. Table 2 lists the research strategy implemented in each of the three schools. It also outlines the number of students who volunteered for specific roles as well as the different tasks performed by the peer researchers at each school.

Table 2

The data collection methods at the three participating schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Methods</th>
<th>Boy’s school</th>
<th>Girl’s school</th>
<th>Co-educational school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narratives</td>
<td>5 peer researchers wrote narratives</td>
<td>11 students wrote narratives:</td>
<td>3 peer researchers wrote narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 5 peer researchers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 2 interviewees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 4 other students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>(I conducted)</td>
<td>7 interviews conducted before the formal with:</td>
<td>5 interviews conducted before the formal with:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 interviews conducted before the formal with:</td>
<td>- 6 peer researchers</td>
<td>- 3 peer researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 1 interviewee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 interviews conducted after the formal with:</td>
<td>- 4 peer researchers</td>
<td>- 2 interviewees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 1 interviewee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the formal</td>
<td>1 interview conducted after the formal with 1 interviewee</td>
<td>5 interviews conducted after the formal with:</td>
<td>5 interviews conducted after the formal with:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 peer researchers provided with disposable cameras &amp; asked to take photographs of ‘typically gendered behaviour’ at the formal or other aspects they deemed to be interesting. They discussed the photographs in a photo-elicitation interview with me.</td>
<td>- 4 peer researchers</td>
<td>- 3 peer researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- 1 interviewee</td>
<td>- 2 interviewees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer researcher tasks</td>
<td>5 peer researchers participated in photo-elicitation interviews after the formal</td>
<td>4 peer researchers interviewed 1 classmate twice, before and after the formal</td>
<td>3 peer researchers interviewed 2 classmates twice, before and after the formal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo-elicitation interviews</td>
<td>5 peer researchers participated in photo-elicitation interviews after the formal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher observations</td>
<td>Researcher observations conducted at the formal</td>
<td>Researcher observations conducted at the formal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Interviews</td>
<td>With senior staff member after the formal</td>
<td>With senior staff member after the formal</td>
<td>With senior staff member after the formal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ‘failure’ to gather schools because visual methods were employed in the project

Since I was unable to secure three schools that were willing to participate in the project, because it employed visual methodology, it could be argued that my decision to employ photography as a data collection method had ‘failed’. However, because New Zealand schools are reluctant to participate in projects that employ visual methods, especially in relation to studies on sexuality (Allen, 2009a; 2009b), having one school agree to participate in the project can be considered a success (Allen, 2012, personal communication).

The Participating Schools

The participating schools are all mid-decile secondary schools. I am unable to include any further information about the schools because if I was to do so then it could lead to the individual schools being identified.

Gathering Participants

I organised a time with all three school principals to attend senior classes to introduce my project. During the introduction, I explained that the students could participate in three ways. Firstly, they could volunteer to write a narrative, which would take approximately fifteen minutes to complete. Secondly, they could volunteer to take part in two interviews, one before and one after the formal, which would take approximately an hour each. Thirdly, students could also volunteer to be peer researchers and this depended on their definite attendance at the formal. At each of the three schools I outlined the tasks of the peer researchers (see table 2) and told students that they would be required to attend a half hour training session on either photographic techniques (boy’s school) or interviewing techniques (girls’ and co-educational schools).

After I explained what each of the three roles involved, I handed out the narrative forms, which had an information sheet and consent form attached (see
Appendix A). Those students who wanted to volunteer to be peer researchers and interview participants were told to tick a box on the consent form indicating which role they were volunteering for. I placed a box in either the school library or school office for students to deposit their completed narrative.

After a week I checked the boxes and found that seven students at the boys’ and girls’ schools had volunteered for a combination of peer researcher and interview participant roles (see table 2 for a breakdown of the numbers of students participating in these two roles). At the co-educational school three students volunteered to be peer researchers and two also volunteered to be interview participants.

**Conducting the Research and Evaluating the Data Collection Methods**

**The student narratives.**

The narrative sheet handed out during my initial introduction to the project had six questions written on it. These questions were written in order to gather information about the student’s preparations for the formal and their expectations. After each question there was half a page for the participants to write one or two paragraphs in response to each question.

Although I chose narratives in order to capture participants’ stories, not many students filled out the narrative forms. In the boys’ and co-educational schools only the peer researchers filled out their sheets, because it was a necessary part of their role, as did the peer researchers at the girls’ school. These students primarily wrote one or two sentences in response to the questions on the narrative forms. At the girls’ school however, five additional participants wrote narratives, due to a senior staff member’s encouragement. However, these young women’s ‘narratives’ contained two or three word responses to the questions on the narrative forms.

Since few participants filled in the narrative forms and those who did only wrote a few words or sentences, I initially considered that my decision to employ narratives had ‘failed’ (Nairn, Munro & Smith, 2005). Nevertheless, Nairn, Munro and Smith (2005) argue that ‘failed’ research can tell us a lot of information about
how power fluctuates in schools. For instance, some teachers decide that their students will take part in research without discussing this with their students (Valentine, 1999). Nairn, Munro and (Smith, 2005) explain that in interviews, one way young people resist this involuntary participation is by not contributing. I extend this and argue that the five participants in the girls’ school may have only written two or three word ‘narratives’ as a resistance to their teacher’s insistence that they fill in the narrative forms (Nairn, Munro & Smith, 2005). Consequently, even though the young women’s narratives did not generate a large amount of data, they did provide me with insight into how teachers co-opt students into participating in research, as well as how young people resist this involuntary participation (Nairn, Munro & Smith, 2005).

I also propose two additional factors that may have contributed to the students’ reluctance to fill in the narrative forms. Firstly, when I envisioned going into schools and talking about my study with students, I thought that I would have an entire period to introduce my project. However, due to the busy workload of teachers, I was allocated five to fifteen minutes in each of the three schools. Because I only had a small amount of time to introduce the project I concentrated on trying to gather peer researchers and interview participants. Consequently, I may have failed to provide the students with clear instructions on my expectations for the narratives. Secondly, the students may have been reluctant to fill in the narrative sheets because they felt that it was too much like schoolwork.

Despite the students’ ‘narratives’ not producing the large amounts of data I intended I was still able to gather limited information from them. For example, some students wrote itemised lists of how much money they were going to spend on aspects of their formal preparations. A number of students also simply wrote the words ‘after party’, in response to a question about what aspects of the formal night they were most looking forward to. However, since the majority of students did not write in any depth, I subsequently decided that their responses could not be classified as narratives. Ultimately, the students’ ‘narratives’ were similar to questionnaire responses.
Interviews with students.

I interviewed the student participants twice, before and again after the formal. Since the interviews were semi-structured, I came up with two interview schedules. The first interview schedule included questions to elicit information on the students’ expectations for the night as well as how they were going to prepare for the event (Appendix B). The second interview schedule contained a number of questions, which centred on students’ experiences of the formal (Appendix C). However, the interview schedules acted as guides only and the participants’ responses determined how the interview proceeded.

The interviews with students were conducted from May through to September in 2008 at each of the three participating schools, during the participants’ free/study periods. At the start of the first interview I read through the information sheet and got the participants to sign the consent form. The participants were asked to choose a pseudonym that would be used in the thesis. The participants were also told that they could withdraw from the project at any time without disadvantage and that they could refuse to answer any questions if they felt uncomfortable.

The interviews I conducted ranged from 25 minutes to 50 minutes in duration. I transcribed the interviews and a transcript was delivered to each participant so that they could remove any passages that they did not want included in the analysis (although none did). I conducted a total of 19 interviews before the formal and 11 interviews after the formal. The difference in numbers participating in the two interviews was due to the five peer researchers doing a photo-elicitation interview in the boys’ school instead of a second interview. However, three other participants were only interviewed once. Of these three students, two had originally volunteered to be peer researchers but one was too busy with schoolwork to continue in the role of peer researcher and the second had a change of circumstances, which meant that he was not going to the formal. One student who volunteered to be an interview participant was an exchange student and she returned to her home country during the course of the fieldwork, which meant she was only interviewed once.
I was also aware that one student who participated in the study was openly queer at school. Since one of the research aims of the project was to investigate how schools/students reinscribe heteronormativity at the site of the school formal, I felt it would be useful to contextualise his accounts of the school formal more generally into how he experienced school as a queer student. He agreed to take part in an interview in which I specifically asked him questions on whether he felt the school was inclusive of sexual and gender diversity.

I tried to establish rapport with the young people in two ways. Firstly, a number of the participants in the boys’ and girls’ schools were involved in a combined school production. I decided to go to the production so that I could use this as a conversation starter. Secondly, I also gave the participants my cellular phone number so that they could contact me by text message.

During the interviews I noted examples of how power circulated in my research journal (Hesse-Biber, 2007a; 2007b; DeVault & Gross, 2007). For example, during one interview with a male participant, I decided to place my chair next to him on the same side of the desk. I believe that because I was sitting next to him he felt uncomfortable, so he got up and moved his chair to the opposite side of the desk to me. However, as the interview progressed I became very aware that he was staring at my breasts throughout the interview, which made me feel uncomfortable.

Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002) argue that in order to perform a legitimate masculinity in society, a man needs to be seen as exhibiting authority. However, in an interview, the interviewer “sets the agenda, asks the questions, controls the flow of talk, and probes for information”, so they are usually viewed as having more ‘authority’ than their participant (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002, p. 206). Some men may feel threatened by their lack of authority in the interview and will try to ‘regain their control’ through a variety of means (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002). In an interview where the interviewer is female and the participant is a heterosexual male, one way they may try to take control is to make sexual remarks that serve to reduce
the control of the female interviewer and restore the male to a position of authority (Arendell, 1997; Lee, 1997; Pascoe, 2007a; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002).

I believe that the young man who stared at my breasts during the interview did so because he felt threatened by his lack of control in the interview. This young man laughed and said is that the right answer after his responses, which made me think that he was experiencing a level of anxiety in the interview. Although he did not make any sexual remarks, I contend that by staring at my breasts he was using my body as a tool to reinscribe his control in the interview, and therefore his masculinity (Pascoe, 2007a).

**Interviews with senior staff members in charge of organising the formal.**

In order to gain a more thorough understanding of young men’s/women’s actions at the school formal, I also thought it necessary to include information on the rules, policies and procedures put in place by schools, which mediate students’ behaviour on the night. Principals have the final responsibility in regards to the rules implemented at the school formal and therefore I conducted individual face-to-face interviews with principals or their delegated colleagues to ascertain this information.

The interviews were carried out during May through to September in 2008. The interviews ranged in duration from 50 minutes to three and a half hours. I transcribed the interviews and delivered a copy to two of the three senior staff members, but the third did not want to see the transcript. Transcripts were also delivered to the young people I interviewed, but it was considered to ethically problematic to return interview transcripts to the peer researcher’s interviewees. Transcripts were returned to the participants so they could delete any passages that they did not want included in the analysis, which none of them did.

---

6 See Appendix Three for the interview guide.
The advantages and disadvantages of using peer researchers in the study.

The use of peer researchers in the study had a number of advantages. Firstly, in some of the interviews conducted by the peer researchers with their classmates, their participants talked about such aspects as their dresses falling off and drug and alcohol consumption at the formal. I believe that because the peer researchers were interviewing people who were the same age, and people who they had established relationships with, the participants trusted the peer researcher enough to discuss these aspects. I think that the students would have been reluctant to discuss such matters with me because I was an outsider.

Furthermore, the peer researchers at the boys’ school took a number of photographs in which students were depicted making faces, which indicates the formal goers were relaxed having their photograph taken. If I had taken their photographs the students may have felt they had to formally pose for the camera because of my positioning as an outsider and a researcher.

However, there were also problems that I encountered with the use of peer researchers in the study. A number of the interviews conducted by the peer researchers with their peers were very short. Some only lasted five to ten minutes, which meant that I was not able to gather a lot of information from some of these interviews. Only three or four peer researchers asked their participants to elaborate on their responses and asked questions that were not on the interview schedule. Furthermore, in one incident I set up a time to meet with a peer researcher to pick up the cassette recording of the interview she had done with a student, which she left on a chair in the seventh form (year 12) common room for me to pick up. Even though I explicitly spoke to the peer researchers about the need for anonymity in the thirty-minute training session I conducted with them, this incident highlighted this was not enough to ensure that they fully understood the need for confidentiality (Nairn & Smith, 2003b).
The photo-elicitation interviews.

The peer researchers at the boys’ school handed in their disposable cameras after the formal for the photographs to be developed. The peer researchers therefore, did not see the photographs they had taken at the formal prior to the photo-elicitation interviews. I asked the peer researchers three broad questions in relation to the photographs: why did you take the photograph, what is happening in the photograph and how do you think these photographs show typically gendered behaviour? The interviews lasted between 25 and 50 minutes and the peer researchers were given a copy of the photographs they had taken at the formal after the interview. All of the photographs taken by the peer researchers were included in the photo-analysis interviews.

Problematic aspects of photography and photo-elicitation interviews.

There were a number of problems that I encountered when using photographs and photo-elicitation. Firstly, I had provided the male peer researchers with a disposable camera that had an inbuilt flash. Nevertheless, a number of photographs did not turn out because the formal venue was too dark. Secondly, although the peer researchers did take a small number of snapshots of aspects of behaviour that they saw as typically gendered at the formal, the majority of photographs were of their friends or formal partners making faces and posing for the camera. These photographs did not necessarily or always provide information on the peer researchers’ understandings of gendered behaviour. Finally, in some of the photographs a number of young women were depicted taking snapshots at the formal with the disposable cameras that I had provided for the peer researchers. Some of the male peer researchers explained that they gave their cameras to the young women concerned because they considered taking photographs as something associated with young women, based on the assumption that young women like to capture memories and emotions associated with the night, which young men do not care about. Such comments highlight gendered understandings and behaviour, but unfortunately I could not use any photographs taken by the girls because they would not have read
out the paragraph explaining that any snapshots that they took would be used to inform a research project.

**Conducting observations at the formal.**

I decided to write field notes at the formals because I believe that if I did not, then I would be making my role as researcher covert. A common critique of this method of data collection is that participants may act differently when they feel like they are being observed (Burns, 2000; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). In order to lessen the influence my presence had on formal goers’ behaviour I decided to follow the same techniques used by Turner and Manderson (2007) in their observations of how a number of law students acted in a social space called Coffee House. Coffee House is “a weekly social event sponsored for half the year by Canadian law firms who supply free alcohol and food to the students attending in an effort to ‘brand’ their firm” (Turner & Manderson, 2007, p. 761). Turner and Manderson (2007) decided to write down what they remembered seeing and hearing “every ten minutes in a discrete location” (Turner & Manderson, 2007, p. 765). However, this proved to be difficult at both formals I attended.

At the boys’ school formal I sat at the teachers’ table, where a number of teachers talked to me about my project during dinner. I felt unable to excuse myself while people were talking to me during dinner to go and write my observations. I had been at the formal for two hours when I eventually did manage to excuse myself and found a discrete spot on the staircase that led into the venue and began recording my observations. However, while I was writing my observations a staff member who did not know I was there, came out with a student and proceeded to tell her off for drinking in the toilets. I was uncomfortable overhearing this so I got up and walked back into the venue.

The security guards also came to see what I was doing when I was writing my observations on the stairs. This was because students were not allowed on the stairs and the security guards mistook me for a student. After being interrupted a number of times, I tried to look for another discrete location in the venue itself where I could
record my observations, but I could not find one. This meant that I wrote my observations sporadically during the night and the majority of my field notes were written after the event.

Recording my observations at the co-educational school formal proved to be even more difficult. This formal venue consisted of one big room and there were no separate spaces where I could record my observations with any discretion. This meant that the only discrete place that I could find to record any observations was in the toilet cubicles, which was not ideal so I positioned myself at the back corner of the formal venue. However, while I was writing my observations a number of students came up to me and specifically asked me what I was recording in my notebook. Because my presence was having an effect on the students I put away my notebook and recorded everything directly after the formal.

At both formals I was able to record the conversations that I had with the teachers and security guards as they happened. I also observed the same two sites at each formal. These were the dance floor and the area where the professional photographer was taking photographs. This allowed me to observe gendered patterns in dancing and how students posed for photographs.

A specific ethical issue arose during the fieldwork in regard to informing students, formal partners and parents that I would be conducting observations at the formal. I had drafted a letter that was to be attached to the students’ formal tickets informing them as well as their partners that I would be conducting observations at the formal. I also drafted a second letter that was to be sent home with students who were eligible to attend the formal, informing parents that observations were going to be conducted at the formal. However, in both schools the letters never got attached to formal tickets or sent home with students, which meant that parents and some formal goers did not know that I was conducting observations on the night.

As the time for the formal approached at the boys’ school, I asked permission from the senior staff member to attach the letters to the formal tickets. However, the senior teacher said that students would not read them and they would lie dormant in the students’ school bags. Instead of attaching the letters to the formal tickets it was
suggested I put the letters on the tables at the formal itself. On the night of the formal I arrived early, specifically to put the letters on the tables but the senior staff member said that it was not necessary. I was alarmed because I knew that some students would not know that I was conducting observations at the formal and therefore my observations could be seen as covert and therefore unethical. Nevertheless, I felt unable to challenge the senior staff member because I was not a member of staff at the school and if I was to do so, then this may have compromised my research project.

At the co-educational school, the year 13 students knew that I was conducting research on the formal because I had spoken about my project when calling for volunteers. Consequently, I felt that if the year 13 students saw me at the formal then they would have some idea that I was there in the role of a researcher. At the formal principals, teachers, security guards and professional photographers knew I was conducting observations at the event. Therefore, although year 11 and 12 students were not informed that I was conducting observations at the event I could still use my observations to inform my study, even though the situation regarding informed consent was not ideal.

The problems that I encountered when trying to inform students that I would be conducting observations at the two school formals, highlight some of the difficulties of doing research in schools (Valentine, 1999). In schools, Valentine (1999) argues that teachers/principals often decide the levels of contact researchers can have with pupils. She also states that teachers/principals think that they have the ‘authority’ to speak for students and often they will do so without consulting their pupils (Valentine, 1999). By not attaching letters to formal tickets and telling me not to put the letters on the tables, senior staff were making the decision for their students to participate in the study without discussing the project with them, thus taking away the students’ rights to give or withhold their consent.
Discourse Analysis of the Written Data

Transcribing.

In order to begin conducting a discourse analysis of interview material it is firstly necessary to transcribe the interview itself (Cameron, 2001; Wood & Kroger, 2000). While transcribing initial patterns that may occur across the participants’ accounts can be discovered and therefore I chose to transcribe the narratives, interviews and field notes myself (Wood & Kroger, 1998).

When transcribing the interviews I recorded such aspects as the participants’ laughter, hesitancies (…), musings (mmm, umm) and stresses on particular words that I heard on the audio-recordings of the interviews (Cameron, 2001). Instances where the peer researchers or myself interrupted our interviewee/s were noted in the transcripts (Cameron, 2001). When transcribing the narratives, I was careful to reproduce visual images such as ‘smiley faces’ that the participants had drawn on their narrative sheets as well as particular words they had capitalised because these aspects provide additional data for analysis (Ashcroft, 2006). As I was transcribing, I also kept a notebook beside me, where I recorded initial patterns or themes that I noted were occurring across the participants’ responses (Smith, 2006). These initial themes were used as a basis for the preliminary organisation of each form of data. I then began to undertake a more detailed thematic analysis. I decided to undertake thematic analysis in conjunction with discourse analysis in order to make working with the large amounts of data manageable. Therefore, I was identifying specific discourses of gender and sexuality that the participants were drawing on and/or resisting as I was undertaking a thematic analysis.

Analysis of the participants’ responses.

Since the student participants’ narrative responses were influencing the questions I asked in the interviews with student participants, then a thematic analysis of the student narratives was necessary before the interviews were conducted at each
of the participating schools. In order to facilitate the analysis of the narratives, I created six computer files, which corresponded to each of the six questions on the narrative form. Each participant’s response to individual questions were then word processed into one of the relevant files, which meant that each participant’s response to each of the six questions could be compared and contrasted.

After the data collection had been completed at all three participating schools, the interview transcripts were examined multiple times in order to identify commonalities in participants’ accounts (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Taylor, 2001; Wetherall & Potter, 1992; Wood & Kroeger, 2000; also see Smith, 2006). However, in an effort to ‘capture’ the diversity within the participants’ responses and perspectives, variations in these patterns were additionally recorded (Wetherall & Potter, 1992). I then made a list incorporating the themes I recorded when transcribing and reading the interview transcripts and used this as a basis for organising the data. Some of the initial themes I identified were related to the research questions and the focus of the study (Davidson & Tolich, 1997; Taylor, 2001; Wetherall & Potter, 1992). However, I also identified other themes in the transcripts (Wetherall & Potter, 1992).

When organising the student participant and peer researchers’ interview transcripts, I used the computer qualitative data analysis programme TAMS analyser (Text Analysis Mark up System). This is because qualitative data analysis software makes working with large amounts of data easier and there were 40 transcripts to code (Neuman, 2006). Computer copies of the interview transcripts were pasted into TAMS, where colours were attached to excerpts that reflected each of the initial themes that I had identified (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Since there were only three staff participant interview transcripts to analyse, coding of this data was undertaken more manually. Transcripts were colour coded using highlighter pens with each colour representing a different theme (Smith, 2006).

As I was undertaking this initial analysis, new themes emerged and therefore I read the interview transcripts several times and attached new colours to excerpts that reflected the newly identified themes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Smith, 2006). I
created numerous computer files, for each pattern I identified (Smith, 2006). Passages that reflected each theme were then cut from computer copies of the transcripts and pasted into the appropriate file (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Smith, 2006). The excerpts in each thematic file (Davidson & Tolich, 2007, p. 174) were then read over to see how they related and if the excerpts were too divergent, other files were created into which these excerpts were pasted (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

A total of 82 themes were identified in the student participant and peer researcher interviews. In order to make working with this number of themes more manageable, I grouped the themes into nine overarching categories, which are listed in table three. In my analysis of the staff participant interviews I identified eight themes, which are also listed in table three.
Table 3

Themes identified in the student and staff interviews as well as the field notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student interview discourses</th>
<th>Staff interview discourses</th>
<th>Field note discourses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Discourses of romance/weddings</td>
<td>4. Discourses of romance/weddings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alcohol</td>
<td>5. Danger-drinking and the after party</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Popularity</td>
<td>8. Neo-liberal discourses and school reputation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Families</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Field note analysis.

At the two formals I attended, conversations I had with specific people or conversations I overheard, as well as particular things I saw happening, were recorded without any interpretation (Neuman, 2006). Consequently, in the process of transcribing and reviewing my field notes, I began to make links between what I saw and heard and the theoretical frameworks guiding this thesis (Neuman, 2006).

When undertaking a thematic analysis of my observations, I concentrated on the conversations I had or overheard with adults where sexuality and gender were
mentioned. I also focused on my observations of students/teachers engaging in, embodying or resisting normative gendered/sexualised practices. After conducting a theoretical analysis of the field notes, I identified three themes which are listed in table three (above). When I had finished conducting the analysis of all the written data, I turned my attention to the photographs taken by the boys’ school peer researchers at the formal.

**Analysis of the photographs and the photo-elicitation interviews.**

The peer researchers at the boys’ school took a total of 77 photographs. However, after looking through the snapshots I decided to eliminate some snapshots from the research study. I chose to exclude snapshots where people are depicted turning away from the camera, because the peer researchers stated in the photo-elicitation interviews that the person did not want to be photographed. Photographs taken by the peer researchers of their friends making various finger and facial gestures were excluded from analysis, because although they did provide information about the peer researchers’ understandings of gender, it was not what I was most interested in. I then began to analyse the content of the images.

There are few guides on how to conduct a photographic analysis in conjunction with research participants’ interpretation of images (Higgins et al., 2009). However, in this research study Rose’s (2007) work on visual methods proved to be a useful starting point. Rose (2007) states that “there are three site(s) at which the meaning of images are made; the site of production of an image, the site of the

---

7 Of these seven images, two depicting young people making peace signs and two showing formal goers pulling faces, were excluded from the analysis. This was because equal numbers of young men and women were depicted engaging in these behaviours and therefore, the images did not tell me anything about gendered behaviour. Two snapshots depicting young men with open mouths with chewed food inside and another snapshot of a young man doing ‘the finger’ were also excluded from the analysis. These snapshots were excluded because I thought that they showed the young men in a negative manner and considered the extreme closeups of chewed food in young men’s mouths to be too unpleasant to be included. Upon comments of a reader I revisited these snapshots however, I now realise that I was excluding important data by eliminating the images of the young men with chewed food in their mouths, as well as the snapshot of a young man doing the ‘finger’. On reflection I can see how these images relate to the theme of ‘gendered eating’ and a peer researcher’s comment that young men are more likely to challenge the rules than girls (see Chapter Eight). Consequently, researchers working with photo-elicitation need to be careful when they decide to eliminate photographs from their analysis because they may be eliminating important data.
image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences” (p. 13, emphasis in original). I considered each of these three sites when interpreting the photographs. In doing so I focused not only on the image itself, but also on how the task asked of the peer researchers impacted on what they photographed (Croghan et al., 2008). When I discuss individual images in the findings chapters of this thesis, I also report on how my role as a potential audience for the snapshots may have impacted on how and what the peer researchers photographed.

Since the peer researchers were asked to take snapshots of their formal preparations, aspects of the formal they thought were particularly interesting, as well as behaviour they deemed to be ‘typically’ gendered on the night, the photographs taken by the peer researchers were heavily influenced by this task (Croghan, et al., 2008). However, within these parameters the peer researchers did have considerable leeway in regard to what they chose to photograph (Croghan, et al., 2008). Consequently, the photographs and subsequent discussion of the images in the photoelicitation interviews, gave me insight into how the peer researchers prepared for the formal, the social activities they engaged in prior to the formal and their understandings of gendered behaviour at the formal (Croghan et al., 2008).

The majority of photographs taken by the peer researchers at the boys’ school formal fitted the conventions of personal “fun photography” (Croghan et al., 2008, p. 348) in which snapshots are likely to portray “upbeat and positive” (Croghan et al., 2008, p. 348) subject matter. In the peer researcher’s photographs the formal goers are photographed in close-up or mid-shot (McCleland et al., 2005), with smiling faces and in poses suggesting they are having fun prior to, at and after the formal (Croghan et al., 2008:).

However, a large number of photographs were also taken prior to the formal by the peer researchers’ parent/s in their family homes. In these snapshots the peer researchers and their partners, as well as friends and their partners, stand in front of closed curtains and pose in a more formal manner, similar to how people would stand for a professional photographer. The shots, unlike those taken by the peer researchers, were primarily long shots, which enabled me to view the entire comportment and appearance of the people depicted in the snapshots and the surrounding environment.
(McCleland et al., 2005). However, because the formal goers were posing in a more formal manner and were photographed at a distance, these photographs did not evoke the same feelings of intimacy as those taken by the peer researchers (Croghan et al., 2008).

Since I could not ascertain whether parents knew that their photographs would be used to inform this project or whether they had gained the permission of people depicted in the snapshots before they took their photograph, I initially decided to exclude these snapshots from the research. Despite my initial hesitation however, I did choose to include these in the analysis because of the ‘gendered differences’ in the way young men and women posed for these snapshots, as well as the contrasts between these photographs and the snapshots taken by the peer researchers. However, I also decided not to publish any of these snapshots in the thesis due to ethical concerns and decided instead to write about what was happening in the images.

The largest group of photographs however, were those where the peer researchers could not explain what was happening in the image, nor the reasons why they decided to take the photograph. Although the lack of discussion provides no information about the peer researchers’ formal preparations or understandings of gendered behaviour, I found a number of gendered practices were reflected in the content of these photographs. Since these snapshots primarily depicted groups of formal goers engaging in various behaviours at the formal (dancing, sitting, standing and gazing into space), I decided to include them in the thesis because they gave me insight into how the peer researchers’ friends/classmates were performing their gender at the specific moment the photograph was taken.

After deciding which photographs to include and exclude from the research study, I viewed the photographs and read the peer researchers’ descriptions of the images numerous times. I then turned my attention to the content of the images noting for example, how people posed in the snapshots and the spatial arrangements between subjects (Rose, 2007). I also looked at how the peer researchers photographed their subjects. If a person is shot at “low- or mid-angle” (Croghan, et al, 2008, p. 349) this can indicate the photographer has an equal status with their subject.
As I was doing this, I noted a number of ‘gendered’ patterns occurring across the content of the snapshots (Magno & Kirk, 2008). I then created four questions based on these initial patterns I had identified that were informed by my research questions, which I used as a guide to help me interpret the information contained in each image (Magno & Kirk, 2008). I viewed the images again and used the questions to analyse their content. The questions included:

1. How are the people depicted in the image performing their gender at the specific moment in time the snapshot was taken?
2. Are the people depicted in the snapshots shaping their bodies in accordance with normative discourses of masculinity/femininity?
3. Are there differences in the way the female and male formal goers are depicted in the snapshots?
4. What readings do I take from the photograph and are they consistent/different from the meanings the peer researchers’ attach to the photographs?

This generated three broad categories, which included gendered embodiment, gendered space and gendered practices at the event. I then placed individual snapshots into one of these categories based on their content.

As I was viewing the images and sorting them into categories, I also conducted a deeper analysis of the photographs. For example, I noted how particular images reflected aspects such as hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity and the male gaze. I then created a table (table 4), which listed each category, a description of the images I had grouped under each category and the number of snapshots that showed similar behaviour, as well as my initial theoretical reading of the snapshots. The letters PR are used in the table to identify the small number of snapshots that the peer researchers stated showed gendered behaviour. I found it useful to refer back to this table when writing about particular images, because it gave me an initial theoretical analysis, which I could expand upon in the findings chapters.
When deciding which photographs to include in this research study, I selected those images that highlighted a particular ‘gendered’ theme or practice because of the research study’s focus on gender and sexuality (Harper, 1994). However, in order to comply with ethical commitments to the participant’s anonymity, all distinguishing features in the photographs, such as faces, dresses, corsages and bracelets were either cropped out of the image or disguised (Harper, 1994; Mason, 2002; Rose, 2007).

It should also be noted that in some cases my interpretation of the peer researchers’ photographs differed to the explanation the peer researchers gave in the photo-elicitation interviews. I specifically chose photographs and photo-elicitation interviews to gain insight into the peer researchers’ understandings of gender (Croghan et al., 2008). In some instances photographic content can be considered as “evidence in its own right by the researcher, either in dialogue with or to set against and strengthen interpretations of talk and silence in the interviews” (Yates, 2010, p. 289). Researchers need to explore what is missing in the photographs taken by their participants and subsequent explanations of the images (Libenberg, Didkowski & Ungar, 2012). Researchers should also examine specific aspects or behaviours that their participants consider to be ‘normal’ and therefore take for granted (Libenberg, Didkowski & Ungar, 2012). Consequently, when photographs are included in this thesis, the peer researchers’ interpretations of the images are presented along with my own (Libenberg, Didkowski & Ungar, 2012). This is because I wish to present the differing perspectives on the snapshots to the reader without favouring one interpretation over another (Libenberg, Didkowski & Ungar, 2012).

Photographs, like every text, have multiple readings (Close, 2007; Mason, 2002; Yates, 2010). Mason (2002) argues that because researchers are seldom depicted in the photographs, which they publish in their studies, their role in the analysis and interpretation of the images is frequently overlooked. Therefore, it is important to state that my readings of the photographs included in this thesis, although enhanced by the peer researchers’ discussion of the images, is my interpretation (Stokrocki, 1985). My readings of the images are grounded in the various subject positions in which I am located (such as researcher, lesbian, feminist, student and woman) and therefore, I invite readers of this thesis to come up with
additional/oppositional interpretations of the photographs (Magno & Kirk, 2008; Pink, 2001; 2007).
Table 4
The themes and an initial theoretical reading of the images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gendered embodiment</th>
<th>Differences in the gendered poses in pre-formal photographs-boys depicted straight on looking at the camera, girl’s bodies are turned inwards with many eyes averted (12 images).</th>
<th>Boys with arms around girls’ waists and over other boy’s shoulders.</th>
<th>Differences in male/female formal preparations (5 images).</th>
<th>Images of boys’ suits or in their suits.</th>
<th>Boys depicted with boxes/cans of alcohol.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial theoretical interpretation of images</td>
<td>Averted gaze looks can indicate objectification (Croghan et al., 2008).</td>
<td>Masculine pose suggests ‘ownership’ of girls’ bodies.</td>
<td>Beauty/body work as female concern (Best, 2000; Bordo, 1993b).</td>
<td>Boys are concerned with fashion and appearance</td>
<td>Hegemonic masculinity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered Space</td>
<td>Girls hugging and kissing girls, boys hugging boys. PR says girls allowed to be close but if boys hug it does not mean they are gay (4 images, 2 girls/2 boys).</td>
<td>Boys surrounding girls on the dance floor (1 image).</td>
<td>Girls dancing in group with their shoes off (1 image).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial theoretical interpretation of images</td>
<td>Hegemonic masculinity/heteronormativity.</td>
<td>Boys have ‘authority or control’ of ‘public space’ (Duncan, 1996a; 1996b).</td>
<td>Girls’ resistance to male control of public space.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered practices at the formal</td>
<td>Girl looking at herself in a spoon (1 image).</td>
<td>Girl texting friends PR says this is because girls are closer to their friends than boys (2 images).</td>
<td>Girl’s judging girls’ outfits (2 images).</td>
<td>Eating pictures- PR says there are different gendered eating patterns (6 images).</td>
<td>Boys fixing or playing with cufflinks (2 images).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discourse Analysis

Discourses not only inform peoples’ language and thoughts, they are also embodied, shaping how we act, walk and perform our subjectivities in particular contexts (Gee, 1996; Kamler, 1997). Therefore Kamler (1997) argues that when conducting a discourse analysis it is necessary to concentrate on “reading the embodied text rather than the linguistic text alone” (p. 385). Since photographs and field notes were used as data collection methods to provide information on how the student participants performed their gender on the night, and therefore how they embodied/resisted normative gender codes at the formal, a detailed discourse analysis of these texts, as well as the verbal interview and written narrative data was undertaken.

The language people use to discuss specific aspects of their lives is actually a product of larger societal discourses, which are shaped by different interest groups (Cameron, 2001; Quinlivan, 2002a, Smith, 2006). These discourses are so pronounced that people take them for granted as the only way to discuss and think about particular things/objects (Cameron, 2001). Researchers who undertake discourse analysis critique these taken for granted understandings in an effort to disrupt them (Cameron, 2001; Luke, 1995).

Janks (1997) explains that discourse analysis “seeks to understand how discourse is implicated in relations of power” (p. 329). Gee (1996) also argues that a central tenet of discourse analysis is to identify discourses that function to create hierarchies in society, which privilege particular subjects/groups over others. Consequently, when conducting a discourse analysis of the participants’ responses/photographs I located specific discursive practices operating in the three schools that reproduced societal divisions. I also identified how heteronormative discourses were being reproduced and contested by the participants.

Since the heterosexual/homosexual and masculine/feminine binaries are responsible for the ‘authority’ of heterosexuality and masculinity in society, I
examined the participants’ responses for instances where they were reproducing and/or resisting these binaries (Sedgwick, 1990; Seidman, 1996a; 1996b). For example, I looked at the excerpts to see how the participants framed other students whose sexuality and gender performances could not be mapped easily onto these binaries. I also identified specific excerpts where they constituted other students as particular types of subjects through their language (Gee, 1996). I noted how the labels homo, skank, slut, nerds were used to categorise young women and men as inferior/abnormal because they chose to perform their gender in non-hegemonic ways, thus highlighting how the participants were using language and discourses to create particular subject positions (Gee, 1996; Jagose, 1996).

Furthermore, when conducting a discourse analysis it is important to make connections between discourses, and therefore I looked at how media discourses constitute the school formal and whether the participants’ language reflected these discourses (Carabine, 2001). For instance, I noted whether the participants took up or contested media constructions of the school formal as a “feminine space” (Best, 2000, p. 35) and a site of heterosexual “fairy tale romance” (Best, 2000, p. 26) for girls.

Gee (1996) also states that discourses are “a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instruction on how to act, talk and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize” (p. 127). Consequently, when conducting the analysis of the photographs and field notes, I paid attention to how the participants were creating themselves as legitimate masculine/feminine subjects through wearing the correct gendered attire, engaging in various gendered bodily and beauty work practices as well as acting in gender ‘appropriate’ ways.

Furthermore, the incorporation of incongruous and contradictory data is important in feminist research (Nairn, 2002). Consequently, I endeavoured to locate inconsistencies in the participants’ accounts as well as between the staff and student responses. I also identified “counter-discourses” (Carabine, 2001, p. 281) that were present in the participants’ responses, which highlighted how they were resisting normative societal discourses of sexuality and gender.
Writing

Richardson (2000) explains that writing “is also a way of ‘knowing’-a method of discovery and analysis” (p. 923) and therefore writing was the final stage in the data analysis (Smith, 2006). Because she utilises “writing to think” (Richardson & Hesse-Biber, 2005, p. 970), Hesse-Biber notes that for her writing is a central component of data analysis. When I was writing I was also thinking about how to theorise my findings and ensure that I included data from each of the data collection methods selected for the study.

Before she was able to start writing Laws (2004) states that she had to get over her concern about theorising her findings (also see Smith, 2006). I too was initially hesitant to start writing because of the lack of published research on the school formal in the New Zealand context and on school dances/proms more generally. The scarcity of academic literature meant that I had to look at the broader research on young people, gender performances, alcohol consumption and so forth. Furthermore, my on-going reading while I was writing influenced the writing process (Laws, 2004; also see Smith, 2006). For example, new literature was published on the prom in the United States (Zlatunich, 2009) and photo-elicitation (Allen, 2009a; 2009b), which gave me new ideas for analysis.

Conclusion

This chapter provides an account of the methodology and data collection methods selected for the study and justifies why multiple methods of qualitative data collection were chosen. I outline the difficulties that I encountered when trying to secure approval from The University of Otago Ethics Committee to begin my fieldwork because of my decision to include young people in the study, as well as photographs as a method of data collection. This was followed by a description of how the data collection methods differed at each of the participating schools, due to
some of the participating principals being uncomfortable with photographs being taken and observations being conducted at the formal.

The process of recruiting individual participants and how the data collection proceeded at each of the three participating schools is detailed. I also included a discussion of a specific ethical issue that emerged during the fieldwork in regard to principals and other staff members not informing formal goers that I would be conducting observations at the two formals. Finally, in this chapter I have explained how I went about analysing and identifying themes in the data. These themes will be unpacked and discussed in further detail in Chapters Five to Nine.
Chapter 5: Queer Students, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and the School Formal

Introduction

In Chapter One I reported that there is some debate in the media on whether same sex attracted students in some New Zealand secondary schools have to sign a form declaring they are lesbian/gay/queer before they are allowed to attend the formal with a same-sex partner. In a radio interview Serafin Dillion (2008, 2 September), the co-ordinator of Rainbow Youth (a youth support group set up for, and run by queer young people), reported that she works with a number of queer adolescents who state that their schools have implemented these forms. Dillion notes that it is primarily schools with religious affiliations and boys’ schools that have these forms in place.

In this study all the staff participants reported that their schools had not implemented these forms. Despite not having these forms in place however, the senior staff member of the boys’ school stated that her school would discourage young men from attending the formal with male partners. This supports the findings of other researchers and academics who claim that co-educational and girls’ schools are more likely to be inclusive/accepting of queer students than boys’ schools (Brutsaert, 2006; Nairn & Smith, 2003a; Woody, 2003).

In this chapter, I discuss the official policies of the three participating schools in regards to students attending the school formal with same sex partners. I also examine how the gendered make up of each school affected how heteronormativity and normative gender codes surrounding the formal were inscribed. Additionally, I report the student participants’ perspectives on how they and other students within their schools would react if same sex attracted students attended the formal with same sex partners. Finally, I examine how students worked to police (or not) compulsory heterosexuality and normative gender codes surrounding the school formal.
The Official Policies of the Co-educational and Girls’ Schools in Regard to Students Taking Same Sex Partners to the Formal

When I initially met with the staff member of the co-educational school to discuss my project, she said that there was “zero tolerance for homophobia, sexism, racism and gender-stereotyping” in the school (Research journal entry, 28 March, 2008). When I interviewed her she explained that because of the climate of protection of diversity within the school:

there’s a lot of acceptance of girls taking girls [to the formal] if they want to, or girls going by themselves, or boys going by themselves, or boys going with boys and I think that’s terrific and I will never discourage it because I don’t see, I know for example at one girls’ school, the girls have to take a male partner and I don’t necessarily see why they have to take a male partner if they don’t want to take a male partner, or if they don’t want to take a partner.

By permitting students to take same sex partners to the formal, the senior staff member is acknowledging that sexualities of all types exist in the school and she is not constructing the school formal as a heteronormative site (Epstein et al., 2000-2001). Griffin (2000) argues that there is considerable societal pressure placed on teenage girls to find a ‘boyfriend’ and privilege their heterosexual romantic relationships over their female friendships, which may result in the dissolution of some young women’s friendships. By allowing students to attend the formal with same sex friends, the school is not pressuring its female students to privilege their heterosexual romantic relationships over their friendships.

The senior staff member at the girls’ school said that the school had no policy in regard to students taking partners of the same gender to the formal:

No… in taking a same sex partner I don’t make any assumption about their sexual orientation or otherwise, some, a number of our students just bring their friends you know. In fact one girl said to me now I want you to know…that I’m taking so and so but it doesn’t mean that I’m actually gay
or that because I understand, I think at other schools you sort of have to declare, oh we’re cool, don’t worry, it’s all fine umm but quite a number of our students came with other students in the school, or in a sense they came by themselves but they sort of, when they came in the door they said this is my partner…ha ha and they you know introduced each other and they would be friends at school.

The SSM states that she makes no assumption about students’ “sexual orientation” if students turn up to the formal with same sex partners and/or friends. She goes on to explain that a lot of girls within the school choose to attend the formal with their female friends rather than taking male partners. It is interesting to note that although the school permits students to go to the formal with same sex ‘partners’, at no time does the SSM mention that lesbian/bisexual students exist in the school and that they may wish to attend the formal with their girlfriends (in this sense meaning romantic/sexual partners). Perhaps this is because as Watson (1996) argues, girls’ schools are perceived “to be able to offer educational success to girls but…there is always a threat that they will do so at the expense of the heterosexual imperative” (p. 125). Furthermore, Griffin (2000) explains that female only spaces such as girls’ schools are traditionally constituted as lesbian domains. Therefore, even though the school permits students to attend the formal with same sex ‘partners’, the SSM’s lack of reference to lesbian students attending the formal with their girlfriends and her qualification that girls go to the formal with their female friends, can be read as an attempt to reassert the heterosexuality of students in the school.

The SSM also mentions a young woman who brings a female friend to the formal. The young woman explains to the senior staff member that bringing a friend does not mean that she is gay. The student’s comment shows that she is aware that some schools may require students to declare their lesbianism/homosexuality if they wish to attend the formal with same sex partners. There are two other readings of the student’s comment. Firstly, Griffin (2000) argues that heterosexual femininity is “formed partly in reaction to the ‘spectre’ of lesbianism” (p. 238). By saying that she is not gay, the student is reinscribing her own ‘normal’ heterosexual femininity by rejecting any notion that she may be lesbian (Griffin, 2000; Hey, 1997). Secondly, Hey (1997) explains that girls “do experience their relations with each other as a
passion” (p. 114, emphasis in original). In her research into girl’s friendships, she found that some young women and men used the term lesbian to police young women’s heterosexuality and to hinder the possibility that same sex passions between female friends will become sexual (Hey, 1997). Therefore, perhaps this particular young woman refers to herself as ‘not gay’ because she is avoiding the possibility that the passion she feels for her female friend may be romantic and/or sexual (Griffin, 2000; Hey, 1997).

The SSMs of the co-educational and girls’ schools reported that they had no policy in place that prevented same sex attracted students from attending the formal with same sex partners. This contrasts with the comments of the senior staff member of the boys’ school, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

The Acceptance/Policing of Students Attending the Formal with Same Sex Partners by Students in the Girls’ and Co-Educational Schools

In their research study into how safe lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) students were perceived to be in one quarter of New Zealand secondary schools, Nairn and Smith (2003a) found that more staff than student respondents reported that they thought LGB students would be safe at their school. Nairn and Smith (2003a) contend that this highlights how discourses of acceptance are not filtering down to students themselves. With this in mind I decided to ask the student participants in the co-educational and girls’ schools how they and other students in their schools would react if a student turned up to the formal with a same sex partner.

All of the student participants in the co-educational and girls’ schools reported that students in their schools would be accepting of same sex attracted students bringing same sex partners to the formal. The following excerpts from Grace and Hungus (co-educational school) and Jessie and Jen (girls’ school) typify these comments:
Grace: I don’t think they’d react very adversely I think, I’m trying umm to think if anyone did it last year, I don’t think they did but I know there are a couple of gay guys in our form and most people are aware that they’re gay so they wouldn’t really think twice about it ‘cause they’d know anyway.

Hungus (female): I don’t think people would really care in this day and age they’d just think oh yeah cool that’s cool that they’re out about it if it was that sort of relationship, but otherwise they’d just think oh they’re just mates.

Jessie: … there’s one girl in our form whose going out with a sixth former (year 12) and everyone’s just sort of accepted it like it’s not really a big deal anymore.

Jen: I don’t think it would matter like there’s a couple of girls in our form that I know are taking people of the same sex and like we don’t care we don’t judge them on it.

Lee: Is that just friends or partners partners?

Jen: Ahh partners.

In New Zealand secondary schools, same sex attracted students are often subjected to psychological and/or physical bullying from their classmates, because they are perceived as queer or different (Nairn & Smith, 2003b; Painter, 2008; Quinlivan, 1994; 1996, Stapp, 1991; Smith, 2006; Town, 1999; Vincent, 1995; Vincent & Ballard, 1997). Many queer students are so afraid of being bullied or rejected by their peers (as well as family and/or friends) that many wait until they have completed their secondary schooling to declare their queerness (Smith, 2006; Vincent & Ballard, 1997). However, the extracts from Grace, Jessie and Jen above, in which they state that they have knowledge of same sex attracted students in their classes, counters the notion that all queer students avoid being ‘out’ at school (Smith, 2006). The above excerpts also highlight that not all students are homophobic and some openly accept their queer classmates (Jordon et al., 1997; Smith, 2006; Nairn & Smith, 2003b). This counters much of the research on queer students’ experiences in New Zealand high

---

8 These are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.
schools, which depicts same sex attracted youth as lonely and socially isolated (Quinlivan, 1994: 1996; Smith, 2006; Stapp, 1991; Vincent, 1995; Vincent & Ballard, 1997; also see Britzman, 1997).

Furthermore, Anderson (1994) argues that in American popular culture and media, depictions of lesbians/gay men are becoming increasingly common. As a result he argues that young people are now declaring their queerness earlier than in past generations. In New Zealand society, there are numerous ‘out’ queer entertainers (Anika Moa, the Topp Twins), politicians (Chris Finlayson and Grant Robinson) and other notable public figures (Tamati Coffee and Alison Mau) (Vincent & Ballard, 1997). Lesbian/gay/bisexual characters are also common on New Zealand television programmes (for example, Shortland Street and ‘Bro’ Town). Perhaps because of the increasing visibility of queerness in New Zealand, then lesbianism/homosexuality/bisexuality is becoming more accepted. An example of this is the implementation of the Civil Union Act in 2004, in which same-sex couples were given the right to have their relationships recognised by law. This may be the reason why Hungus states that no one “cares in this day and age” if same sex attracted students bring same sex partners to the formal. It may also be a reason why the gay/lesbian students mentioned by Grace, Jessie and Jen are able to be ‘out’ at school without the fear of being harassed.

In his interview with the peer researcher Travis (co-educational school), Ziggy, an openly queer male student at the co-educational school, also stated that students at the co-educational school “wouldn’t care” if same-sex attracted students attended the formal with same sex partners.

**Travis:** So how do you think students would react if they came with a same sex partner? Would they be pretty laid back?

**Ziggy:** Girls get on, girls are seemed to be allowed to do that pretty easily, I think lots of girls, well lots of my friends are going to go together and that’s fine, yet rarely [do you] find boy on boy action at the formal. Sometimes, every now and then you might get it where I think they’re pretty sort of like oh my goodness there’s a boy and boy but they wouldn’t care at [names the co-educational school], somewhere like [names a boys’
In all male groups and environments, such as boys’ schools, young men’s behaviour is heavily influenced by discourses of hegemonic masculinity, which promote homophobia and sexism (Epstein, 1997b; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; O’Higgins-Norman, 2009; Pascoe, 2007a; 2007b). However, there is some research evidence to suggest that the presence of young women in co-educational schools serves to reduce the levels of sexism, homophobic violence and bullying that occurs in boys’ schools.

‘Dave’ a participant in Martino’s (1999) study on young men’s masculinities reported that he experienced high levels of homophobic violence at the boys’ school he previously attended, but not at the co-educational school he was presently attending. ‘Dave’ attributed the reduced levels of homophobia at the co-educational school to the presence of young women in the school, who he stated were more likely to denounce male violence and homophobic bullying (Martino, 1999, also see Keddie & Mills, 2009). Furthermore, O’Higgins-Norman (2009) and Dickson et al. (2003) explain that young women are generally more accepting of same sex attraction than young men. Therefore, at the co-educational school with the presence of young women and a policy of protection of diversity, it was possible for same sex attracted students to attend the formal with a same sex partner. However, in an interview that I conducted with Ziggy, he contradicted his statement that students in the co-educational school “wouldn’t care” if same-sex attracted students bought same sex partners to the formal:

**Ziggy:** … I think it would definitely be safe enough for them to do it but most of the time they generally don’t just because while it would be safe there would always be some comments here and there and stuff like that. Why would you want to spoil your night kind of thing and put yourself in that position? It’s just that sort of position where people just don’t really want to put themselves in. They would rather be all relaxed than thinking about the whole worrying about [what] people were saying behind them.

**Lee:** Do you think it’s fair if a student umm a queer student would, that there would be comments made that…?
Ziggy: Would make them feel uncomfortable?
Lee: Yeah do you think that’s fair?
Ziggy: Not necessarily but I think it’s just the way it is, there’s no really escaping it (laughs), so it’s not as fair as it could be but it’s just going to happen anyway so if they choose to deal with that and they’re okay with that that’s fine. I was thinking about doing it and then I thought to myself well actually, I just want to have a great night and not think about it, not think about what people are saying, just don’t really care, I don’t really care so I’m just taking my friend [names female friend], which is nice and easy.

Ziggy’s decision to take a female friend in order to avoid the comments that would be made if he took a male partner, highlights how some queer students are unable to attend the formal as same sex attracted young people (Best, 2000; Boyer, 2004). The comments that Ziggy suggests would be made if same sex attracted students attended the formal with same sex partners highlights how peers reinscribe heteronormativity (Quinlivan, 1996; Smith, 2006). In order to avoid the comments that would be made if Ziggy took a male partner, Ziggy decides to take a female friend to the formal. This shows that the discourses of acceptance being reported by the co-educational student participants were not consistent with Ziggy’s experiences. This may be because the views of the research participants were not representative of the wider student body. Whatever the reason for the inconsistency between accounts, Ziggy’s comment “it’s just the way it is, there’s no really escaping it” reveals how heteronormativity is such a pervasive force in society, as well as his school, that he simply takes it for granted and cannot see any alternatives to the sexual order (Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Warner, 1993).

The Use of the Terms Gay/Lesbian to Police Gender Norms

When I asked the participants in the co-educational school if students would have the same reaction to two young men or two young women attending the formal as partners, all of the participants stated that it would be harder for a young man to
bring a male partner. The following excerpt from Natasha (co-educational school) typifies their comments:

**Natasha:** I mean there are lots of girls taking other girl friends from other schools and everyone knows it’s, you know taking a friend. If a guy took another guy, if he took his friend then it wouldn’t really be a big deal either, it might be kind of funny but not really, but if everyone knew that was like, they were in a relationship, or that was, you know something then it would be kind of, I don’t know people might talk about it… especially if it was someone who went to your school and then they took someone you’d just be interested, I don’t know… but like people would definitely talk about it I think yeah it might be harder for, I think it would definitely be harder for guys…

**Lee:** Okay how come do you think it’s okay for girls to take their girl friends but if a guy takes a guy then it would be sort of a joke… well not a joke but funny…?

**Natasha:** I don’t know I guess they’d just make jokes about them being gay.

**Lee:** Okay.

**Natasha:** If it was like, I don’t know if they would but it just is much, I don’t think a guy feels as comfortable taking, even if it’s his friend and it’s just common for girls who want, I don’t know how to explain it, it’s just a, yeah it’s just not common for guys, guys want to take girls, they just don’t want to go with a guy.

In order to perform hegemonic masculinity a man/boy must be heterosexual (Connell, 2000; Kehily, 2001; 2002; Martino, 1999). Furthermore, ‘Dave’ a participant in Martino’s (2000) research on young men’s masculinities reported that young men are able to construct hegemonic masculine subjectivities if they are perceived as desirable to girls and seen as effortlessly able to ‘pick up girls’. If a young man takes a male partner to the formal then he is challenging these normative discourses of masculinity and is more susceptible to jokes about being gay. This shows how the use of the term gay as well as homophobic humour serve to construct and police hegemonic masculinity (Dalley-Trim, 2007; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996).
Despite the co-educational school participants stating that it would be harder for two males to attend the formal together because they would have jokes made about them being gay, Ellen (girls’ school) went to the formal with a female partner and also had jokes made about her sexuality. This shows that young women as well as young men are subjected to homophobic humour (Charlton, 2004; also see Smith, 2006).

In my initial interview with Ellen she reported that she was going to the formal with a young man who took her to his school formal. She said that she had decided to go with this young man, even though she was hesitant about taking him:

**Lee:** Who are you going to go to the formal with?

**Ellen:** The guy who took me to the [names co-educational school] formal, I said I’d take him.

**Lee:** Why did you decide to go with this person?

**Ellen:** Well he asked me to his so I thought oh well okay. It’d be you know, it’d be fair kind of if I take him to mine. Oh we kind of had a little thing going but it’s nothing now it’s just really just as friends but yeah it’s kind of, like I’m kind of like, oh I don’t know if I want to take him now ‘cause he’s, he was real weird at the other formal so I don’t know.

**Lee:** How come he was weird?

**Ellen:** ‘Cause he was wasted (laughs)...so I’m not really happy with him at the moment (laughs) because he can’t, you can’t, oh he didn’t ignore me but he was kind of, he kind of just felt that he had to like go because I’d be partnering him to come [inaudible] and stuff it wasn’t like he wanted to and yeah but he was so drunk and it was, it wasn’t nice yeah.

**Lee:** Yeah so you feel quite obliged to take this fellow?

**Ellen:** Yeah a little bit not (laughs). I feel like, it’s only just come on to me now that I don’t really want to take him...

Perhaps because of the pressure placed on young women to construct a heterosexual identity during adolescence (Griffin, 2000), Ellen felt forced into taking this young man as her partner, even though she was reluctant to go to the formal with him.
However, in the second interview I conducted with Ellen after the formal, she said that she actually went to the formal with her female friend:

**Lee:** Did you have a good time with your partner at the formal?

**Ellen:** Yep I changed my partner…

**Lee:** How come?

**Ellen:** Because I didn’t like who I was taking so I decided I’d rather go out and have a good time, but I took a girl (laughs) as well…and it was the best move I ever made, it was so much better.

**Lee:** How come?

**Ellen:** ‘Cause well we were just really good friends and, and like it’s just like going out for dinner with your friend and like having a good night with your friend which is awesome, it was so much better.

Ellen’s decision to take her female friend, rather than the young man who she felt obliged to take, can be seen as agentic and it meant that Ellen had a good time at the formal. However, Renew (1996) states that in order to perform a recognisable and legitimate version of femininity in society, then a girl/woman must position herself in relation to masculinity. Ellen transgressed normative codes of femininity by taking a female partner to the formal because she did not make masculinity the focal point of her formal experience (Renew, 1996; Smith, 2006). Since Ellen was not performing her gender in accordance with normative femininity, a number of male formal goers made jokes about her sexuality (Renew, 1996; Smith, 2006):

**Lee:** So did you get a hard time or anything for taking another girl?

**Ellen:** (Laughs) yep all the boys they go like obviously joking but yeah, they’re all the whole I didn’t know you were that way inclined type thing going on but I just played along with it quite well (laughs). We’d just tell them we were together and stuff, obviously joking but it was funny (laughs).

**Lee:** So were you hassled by girls or just guys?

**Ellen:** Just the guys (laughs) and it wasn’t anything mean it was just jokes.
Ellen’s attendance at the formal with a female partner challenges “dominant masculinity” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 171) because it shows that young women do not need male partners in order to have a good time. Holland et al (1998) argue that when girls/women defy authoritative masculinity their resistance is contained by heteronormativity. This is because heteronormativity favours and perpetuates male understandings, which in turn police gender performances (Holland et al, 1998). Since Ellen’s decision to take a female partner to the formal threatens dominant masculinity, the male formal goers make heteronormative jokes about her sexuality in order to regulate her gender performance. The jokes are heteronormative because Ellen’s sexuality would not be the subject of humour if she attended the formal with a male partner. This shows how the authoritative positioning of masculinity in the binary construction of gender and heteronormativity intersect to contain women’s/girls’ resistance to dominant masculinity (Holland et al, 1998).

I also propose a second reading of this excerpt. Ellen did not challenge the heteronormative jokes made by the male formal goers. In fact Ellen pretends that she was in a relationship with her female friend. By playing along with the male formal goers’ heteronormative jokes, Ellen is helping to reinscribe the authority of masculinity to regulate femininity (Holland et al. 1998). It should also be acknowledged however, that by pretending to be a lesbian and “playing along” with the young men’s jokes, Ellen’s behaviour is also transgressive (albeit in a limited way). This is because Ellen is blurring the boundaries between heterosexuality and lesbianism when she ‘played along’ with the joke, which challenges the inflexible heterosexual/homosexual binary (Smith, 2006). Furthermore, Ellen’s performance of lesbianism shows that anyone can take up sexuality categories regardless of their sexual attractions, which highlights the “fluidity and changeability” (Quinlivan & Town, 1999, p. 522) of all sexual identity categories.

Although, Ellen was the target of male formal goers’ jokes because she attended the formal with a female friend, the policing of students being able to attend the formal with partners of the same sex was far more pronounced in the participating boys’ school. This will be discussed in the following section.
The Policy of the Boys’ School Regarding Students Taking Same Sex Partners to the Formal

The boys’ school policy in regard to students taking same sex partners to the formal was less ‘accepting’:

**Senior staff member**: Yeah we would discourage that. They’ve never actually, I don’t think they’ve ever actually asked to do that.

**Lee**: How come you would discourage it?

**Senior staff member**: Umm we, we would rather than that, we would just say like look buy two single tickets buy a single ticket each but they’re certainly not allowed to bring umm a male partner from another school?

**Lee**: Even if they’re in a relationship?

**Senior staff member**: Yeah even if they were in a relationship… …we haven’t moved with the times that much yet I think.

**Lee**: Can I ask how come?

**Senior staff member**: Umm I actually think it would be to protect them from comments that other students might make through ignorance more than anything else umm and there’s a lot that young people put up with that they don’t need to put themselves in those sort of situations. It might be a situation that they would come to regret because even if they were in umm a relationship with that person umm at this age, it’s not necessarily something that they would want talked about umm and umm I said before that boys are just as good as gossiping as girls are argh and I, yeah I think, I do honestly think it’s for their own protection umm in days, weeks and perhaps months to come.

The SSM’s comment that students are discouraged from attending the formal with other young men for their “own protection” illustrates how homophobic students within the school can dictate a school’s official course of action (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Smith, 2006). The SSM also states that students who are same sex attracted do not “need to put themselves in those sort of situations”. This comment implies that the harassment the young men might encounter would be their fault for taking a same sex
partner to the formal in the first place (Hinson, 1996). Furthermore, the SSM attributed the bullying encounter to “ignorance”, which implies that those students doing the harassing do so because they simply do not know any better (Hinson, 1996).

The SSM’s comment that the school would discourage young men from attending the formal with male partners also shows how students in the boys’ school are policing heteronormativity and regulating any representations of sexualities that do not fit the heterosexual norm (Quinlivan, 1996; Smith, 2006). It highlights how student groupings may have more authority to regulate ‘unacceptable’ gender and sexuality performances than “governmental decrees or school rules” (Epstein & Johnson, 1994, p. 223).

**Students Reproducing Heteronormativity and Hegemonic Masculinity at the Boy’s School**

When I asked the student participants in the boys’ school what would happen if a student turned up to the formal with a male partner they all stated that the student would be harassed. The following excerpts from Bob and Freddie typify the student participants' responses:

**Lee**: How do you think students would react if a boy turned up with another boy as a partner?

**Bob**: Argh (laughs) well ah that’s quite interesting umm they’d be like oh shit he’s gay (laughs) they’d be like gob smacked, Oh My God, a gay guy came to the formal Jesus umm but they’d get over it pretty quick apart from the whole ripping the crap out of them, which they would get to this day but I guess after a while, but as long as they didn’t stand there and slow dance and hook up in the middle of the thing, if they did that then that’s almost like social suicide (laughs) when it comes to argh a male school’s formal, two guys OKAY.

**Lee**: What about if it’s like not a boyfriend but just like a mate?

**Bob**: No one would care, they’d get a bit of stick, oh are you two homos or something (laughs) and they’d be like no, no, right (laughs) just like that sort of thing but yeah, but if it’s like that no one would really care I s’pose.
Lee: How do you think students would react if a boy turned up with a male partner?

Freddie: (Laughs) …yeah I probably wouldn’t, people would probably still be teasing them for it like years, in years time (laughs).

Martino (1999) argues that in male peer groups hegemonic masculinity is reinscribed through aggression and bullying of young men who choose to perform their gender/sexuality in non-normative ways. Martino (1999), Mac An Ghaill (2000a) and Phoenix et al. (2003) also contend that in order to be read as legitimately masculine in society then a young man must detach himself from femininity and homosexuality. Bob’s comment that same sex attracted boys would get harassed if they attended the formal with other boys, and Freddie’s comment that a boy who bought a male partner to the formal would be ridiculed for years to come, show how young men in the school are reinscribing hegemonic masculinity as well as their own status as ‘real heterosexual’ men through harassment (Martino, 1999). The boys doing the harassing are removing themselves from homosexuality (Mac An Ghaill, 2000a; Martino, 1999) while simultaneously (re)producing same sex attracted young men as others to their own ‘normal’ heterosexual masculinity (Kehily & Nayak, 1997).

Furthermore, Phoenix et al. (2003) argue that hegemonic masculinity regulates young men’s interactions. In the above excerpt Bob states that if two boys attended the formal together as friends then they would get a “bit of stick” and be labelled as “homos”. The term homo in this instance, serves to police the levels of closeness that are permissible between boys/men in society (Phoenix et al., 2003)

Despite all of the student participants in the boys’ school stating that students bringing male partners to the formal would be harassed, Simon reports that in some cases it would be acceptable for two young men to attend the formal together:

Simon: Umm again depends who it was. If it was umm I dunno names out of a hat [names two boys] everyone would just crack up and they’d be
having a good time but if it was a random kid that no one knows and you
know suspiciously feminine looking guy then I don’t know what people
would say, they discourage that because like with the whole signing a gay
form or whatever that’s, which we heard the other day was that they don’t
want everyone just taking their mates, like they want just [names the
school] guys there really and like only, they only, the school only wants, or
only would let you take a guy if you were actually gay and most probably
in a relationship, like they’re not, they don’t want to encourage [that]
yeah… but we all thought it was real like you [know] discrimination and
all that but apparently yeah it’s just so, so it’s to stop people taking the piss
and doing it.

Simon mentions two popular high profile boys in the school who could attend the
formal with male partners, without being harassed for being gay. Simon states that
these popular boys can bring a male partner because other students would see it as
humorous. Since the two young men mentioned by Simon are popular students then
they have the necessary sub-cultural capital⁹ (Thornton, 1995) to attend the formal
with another young man and have it seen as a joke rather than an indication of their
sexual preferences. Kehily and Nayak (1997) argue that young men construct and
display their heterosexual masculine subjectivities through joking and humour (this
issue will be discussed further in Chapter Eight). Therefore, if these two young men
did bring a male partner to the formal, and other students thought that this was
humorous, then ironically these two students could be constructing their own
heterosexual masculinity through attending the formal with male partners.

Simon also said that if a young man who “was suspiciously feminine looking”
brought a male partner to the formal then he does not know how students would react.
Simon’s comments highlight how he equates being gay with being a feminine male.
Simon cannot comprehend that a boy/man can be sexually attracted to another
boy/man and still be a masculine subject (Sedgwick, 1993). This is consistent with
larger societal discourses of sexuality and gender, in which anyone “who desires a

⁹ Subcultural capital (an adapted form of Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital) is a term coined by
youth researcher Sarah Thornton (1995). Sub-cultural capital refers to the body styling (haircuts,
makeup, deportment, piercings), fashion sense, possessions, knowledge, vocabulary and music tastes,
which may give a young person status among their peer group (Thornton, 1995).
man must by definition be feminine, whether that person is a man or woman” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 72). Simon’s comment also highlights how he is trying to assign femininity onto the male formal goer, in an attempt to match up the male formal goers’ gender performance with the object of the male student’s sexual attractions. In doing so Simon is reinscribing the heterosexual matrix, in which there are only two gender categories, masculinity and femininity, that are formed as oppositional categories on the basis of assumed heterosexual attraction (Butler, 1990; also see Epstein, 1997a).

Furthermore, under the framework of the heterosexual matrix a young man can only be considered masculine if he desires a member of the ‘opposite’ sex (Butler, 1990; also see Epstein, 1997a). In accordance with the heterosexual matrix, if a young man desires a member of the same sex then others may read him as performing a failed masculinity, since his sexuality does not follow from his gender or sex (Butler, 1990; 1993; 1999a, 1999b; 1999c). Consequently, the young man is likely to experience abuse or ridicule because he is not seen as a legitimate human subject within the framework of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990; 1991; 1993; 2003).

Simon also mentions that the boys’ school has a form that gay students have to sign before they are permitted to go to the formal with a male partner. Although the SSM at the boys’ school pointed out that the school would discourage students from attending the formal with other young men, she also said that the school did not implement these forms. Simon’s comments highlight how widespread the belief is that schools do have these forms in place. Although there was no definitive proof that the forms existed, four other student participants mentioned these forms. All of the participants who said that schools have these forms in place also stated that they were discriminatory, as Simon did above. Therefore, although these forms (real or not) serve to restrict the possibility of same sex attracted students attending the formal with their partners, they also alert young people to discriminatory practices that exist in schools in regard to queer students.

However, not all the student participants in the boys’ school reported that they personally would have negative responses to students attending the formal with male partners.
Lee: How do you think students would react if a student turned up with a same-sex date?

John: Probably would have a wee\(^{10}\) bit of a laugh argh ask a few questions. I don’t think umm, I don’t think, well our year, my years pretty all the guys are pretty open about their sexuality to be quite honest so, I mean sure there’s still going to be a few people who are going to be like what the hell but depends on your upbringing really.

Lee: Do you know if you do have any gay seventh formers?

John: Umm not that are out, I mean there’s always suspicions.

Lee: How come?

John: The way they act.

Lee: And do they get any flack or…?

John: If, if they’re out and proud at our age then they’ll be loved by their peers I reckon, because I mean if you have that confidence to drop a bombshell like that at an all boys’ school then you’ve got to be, you know someone that’s, they can take anything and still keep on running.

Students who choose not to perform their sexuality/gender in normative ways in boys’ schools are more likely to experience bullying and harassment from their male peers (Brutsaert, 2006; Martino, 1999). Consequently, although homophobic and sexist violence/abuse is associated with “normal displays of masculinity” (Mills, 1999, p. 109) in most secondary schools, in all male environments such as boys’ schools, this behaviour is likely to be more pronounced (Brutsaert, 2006; Epstein & Johnson, 1994). This is why John states a boy who ‘comes out’ at a “boys’ school” needs to be able to “take anything and keep on running”.\(^{11}\)

Young men who perform their gender in accordance with normative discourses of hegemonic masculinity frequently have high standing among their male peers, while those who perform their sexuality/gender in non-normative ways are harassed as a means to increase the masculine status of the harasser (Martino, 1999; 2000). John was one of two student participants from the boys’ school who defined

\(^{10}\) Wee is a term of Scottish derivation that means small or little.
himself as popular (the other being Simon). John was a member of the first fifteen rugby team, held a leadership position at the school and had a steady girlfriend, which are aspects traditionally associated with a hegemonic masculine subjectivity (Hokowhitu et al., 2008; Martino, 1999; 2000; Phoenix et al., 2003; Smith, 1997). John’s comment that a student “would be loved by his peers” if he came out at school, indicates that a “high-status masculinity” (Martino, 1999, p. 249) does not necessarily depend on the harassment of young men who enact non-normative sexuality/gender performances.

John’s comments also suggest that a gay student who is brave enough to ‘come out’ in a hostile all boys’ school environment, and has the resiliency and inner strength to endure any consequences that may occur, can also be popular or alternatively admired by his peers. John’s comments are consistent with a discourse that is seldom mentioned in the literature reporting on masculinities in high schools, and this is that some gay young men do ‘come out’ at school and are accepted by their male peers (Phoenix et al., 2003). They are able to do so because they exhibit qualities “associated with real ‘manhood’” (Epstein et al., 1997b, p. 108), such as sporting prowess, or in this case bravery and stoicism, which gives them high standing amongst their male peers.

John also said that some students would respond negatively to young men attending the formal with male partners but this would “depend on your up-bringing”. John’s comments indicate that even in a boys’ school, which is more likely to be homophobic (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; 1998), there are some students who would accept, befriend and indeed like/love gay students (also see Nairn & Smith, 2003b; Smith, 2006).

It is also interesting to note John’s comment that all the young men in his year are “pretty open” about their sexuality. However, when I asked him if there were any gay students in year 13 he said there were no ‘out’ gay students although some might be. Therefore, John’s comments indicate that the students who are open about their sexuality are heterosexual students. Perhaps the young men are open about their sexuality because they are trying to secure their status amongst their male
peers by talking about their sexual feats with young women (Connell, 2000; Kehily, 2002; Pascoe, 2007a; 2007b). However, John’s comment that there were no ‘out’ gay students in the seventh form highlights the invisibility of gay students in the school and a homophobic/heteronormative learning environment.

**Attending the formal without a partner.**

The reinscription of hegemonic masculinity by pupils in the boys’ school, however, also meant that students could not attend the formal without a partner. In the boys’ school, all of the student participants stated that it would be embarrassing and shameful for a young man to turn up to the formal on his own:

**Dean:** They would probably laugh at them…

**Mark:** I think people would be laughing at him but it would be more argh this would be more of an embarrassing thing for him. I think he would be very uncomfortable…

**Simon:** …if they turned up without a date everyone would just go shame.

**Freddie:** That person that came by himself, [he] would be absolutely ridiculed, yeah most of the guys would be ripping him out for at least a few months.

**Bob:** It would depend on the circles, if they [were] with umm close friends they’d be like don’t worry about it, at least you’re here, but if you got like some other circles would be like ha ha shame you couldn’t get a girl, you suck ha ha, they’d take the piss.

Connell (2000) argues that displaying “heterosexual success” (p. 161) gives young men status amongst their male peer group. If a young man attends the formal by himself, then other young men may read him as being unable to, as Bob points out “get a girl”. Since displaying success with young women is a necessary requirement for the performance of a legitimate masculinity, a young man who attends the formal
by himself would be the target of jokes and mocking by his male peers (Connell, 2000).

The harassment directed at young men if they attend the formal on their own shows how hegemonic masculinity is negotiated amongst young men themselves (Robinson, 2005). Young men who attend the formal without a partner are read as performing an inferior version of masculinity (Dalley-Trim, 2007) and therefore are positioned on the bottom of the “hierarchy of masculinities” (Martino, 1999, p. 246). Consequently, these young men may be used by other young men who are more ‘authoritatively positioned’ to reinscribe their own high social standing (Martino, 1999; Dalley-Trim, 2007).

Robinson (2005) argues that a legitimate performance of hegemonic masculinity requires men/boys to show hostility toward women/girls and men/boys who perform ‘inferior’ versions of masculinity. One form this hostility takes is sexual harassment, which Robinson (2005) defines as:

any physical, visual or sexual act experienced by a person from another person at the time or later, which asserts a person’s sexual identity over their identity as a person, which makes them feel all or any of the following: embarrassed, frightened, hurt, uncomfortable, degraded, humiliated or compromised; which has the further result of diminishing a person’s power and confidence. (p. 21)

In “taking the piss” and “ripping out” young men who attend the formal without a partner, the harassers are constructing the sexuality of students who go to the formal alone as more important than other dimensions of their ‘identities’. Laughing at and mocking young men who go to the formal alone is likely to make them feel embarrassed, humiliated as well as victimised. Consequently, the comments directed at young men who attend the formal alone can be seen as an example of sexual harassment, which in turn serves to consolidate the perpetrators’ own masculinities (Robinson, 2005).

However, Travis a male participant at the co-educational school, said that he intended to go to the formal on his own, unlike the young men at the boys’ school:
Lee: Okay, who are you going to go to the formal with?
Travis: Umm probably no one at this stage.
Lee: You’re going to go by yourself?
Travis: Yes, I’ll be the guy in the corner watching other people. No, I’ve got umm, I’ve got dances all set up for me.

Travis’s comments attest to how masculinity is performed differently and subjected to different levels of policing depending on the school (Brutsaert, 2006; Martino & Frank, 2006). I contend that Travis is able to attend the formal on his own without harassment from his peers because co-educational schools do not exacerbate “masculine attitudes and behaviours” (Brutsaert, 2006, p. 638) to the same-extent as boys’ schools. However, Travis’s comments also show that he is aware that going to the formal without a partner is disrupting normative discourses of hegemonic masculinity, which is why he said he has organised a number of dances (presumably with young women) despite going to the formal on his own.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have reported on the official policies of the three participating schools in regards to students attending the school formal with same sex partners. The senior staff members of the girls’ and co-educational schools stated that they had no policies in place that would inhibit students taking same sex partners to the formal. However, the senior staff member of the boys’ school said that her school would discourage young men from attending the formal with male partners because of potential harassment from their peers if they did so. The official schooling cultures of the co-educational and girls’ schools were therefore more accepting of sexual and gender diversity than the boys’ school where homophobia remains unchallenged. This indicates that the boys’ school would be an unsafe learning and social environment for queer students.

In the boys’ school, all of the student participants reported that if young men bought male partners to the formal, or if young men attended the formal without
partners, they would be harassed. This shows how students in the school regulate compulsory heterosexuality and gender norms through harassing young men who perform their sexuality or gender in non-normative ways (Dalley-Trim, 2007; Martino, 1999; Mac An Ghaill, 2000b; Phoenix et al., 2003). It also highlights how young men in the school construct their heterosexual masculinity through harassing other young men who perform their sexuality/gender in non-normative ways (Dalley-Trim, 2007; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Martino, 1999; 2000; Mac An Ghaill, 2000b’ Nayak & Kehily, 1996).

In the co-educational and girls’ school, all of the student participants stated that if a same sex attracted student bought a same sex partner to the formal then he or she would be accepted by students in the school. Nevertheless Ziggy, an openly queer student in the co-educational school, said that he chose to go to the formal with a female friend in order to avoid the comments that would be made if he bought a male partner. Therefore, the acceptance of queer students attending the formal with same sex partners reported by the student participants, as well as the staff member at the co-educational school, were inconsistent with Ziggy’s experiences as a same sex attracted student in the school. Warner (1993) explains that heteronormativity is entrenched in society and therefore students may learn from other sites, such as their families or the media, that it is acceptable to make disparaging remarks about gay men and lesbians. Consequently, even a school that strives to protect diversity cannot guarantee that queer students will be accepted.

The terms lesbian/gay/homo/queer were used to police normative constructions of gender and highlight the “the mutual constitution, of gender and sexuality in contemporary school life” (Youdell, 2004, p. 490). In all three schools a number of student participants stated that if male students attended the formal with same sex partners then they would either be called gay, homos or have their sexuality questioned. A female participant was also subjected to jokes about her sexuality because she attended the formal with a female friend as her partner.

The male participants in the boys’ school were more likely to reproduce discourses of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity than young men in the co-educational school. Interestingly however, young men in the boys’ school were
also more likely to view the school formal as a site of heterosexual romance than the student participants in the other two participating schools. This will be discussed in further depth in the following chapter.
Chapter 6: Coming of Age and Romance at the School Formal

Introduction

In the New Zealand media the school formal is depicted as the “closest many teenagers will come to a rite of passage” (Tay, 2007, p. 6). In the first half of this chapter I report on how the participants reproduced the construction of the school formal as a rite of passage and how this impacted on their decision to attend the event (Best, 2000). All three of the staff participants made comments suggesting that they either viewed the formal as a rite of passage, or as an event that signified a coming of age for students in their schools. A number of the student participants also stated that they viewed attending the formal as an important step in their journey towards ‘adulthood’.

Since the student participants were also in year 13 and 2008 was the final chance for them to attend their school formal, a number of the participants stated it was vital to attend the event because it was one of the last opportunities they had to socialise with their friends and classmates (also see Best, 2000). One participant made comments suggesting that the formal made her aware that schooling was about to finish for her and bought up anxieties about her post school horizons (Best, 2000). A number of participants also constructed the school formal as a space of unity and “togetherness” (Best, 2000, p. 32), as well as “a night to remember” (Smith, 2008, p. 10).

In American popular culture the prom is constructed as a night of “fairy tale [heterosexual] romance” (Best, 2000, p. 26). In New Zealand popular culture and media, the school formal is also depicted as an event filled with the potential for heterosexual romance (see Hewson, 2009; Marker, 2007; 2008; Tay, 2007). In the second half of this chapter I explore how the participants either reproduced or rejected this construction. Slightly less then half of the student participants stated that they viewed the formal as a romantic event. The majority of female participants who did mention romance suggested that the formal could be a romantic night for students who were in relationships. Some of the male participants constructed the event as
romantic and were more likely to discuss romance at the formal in a personal manner than the female participants. This is an interesting finding because the school formal in New Zealand popular culture and media is frequently portrayed as a night of romance for young women and not young men (see Marker, 2007; 2008; Tay, 2007; White, 2007).

The School Formal as a Rite of Passage

Since the school formal is often constituted as a coming of age event in New Zealand popular culture and the media (see Chateau, 1990; Tay, 2007; White, 2007), it was not surprising that a number of the participants also constructed it this way. The SSM at the girls’ school explained why her school held an annual school formal that:

I think it’s about acknowledging that the students are young women, or moving into adulthood and it’s a formal occasion, which is an acknowledgement of our recognition of them as young women. I think it’s something that’s, it’s a social function for the school and… I said to them, it’s a formal occasion and we expect you to behave as if it was a formal occasion… so it’s about I guess getting an opportunity to see and model really adult forms of appropriate behaviour.

In Western societies ‘adolescence’ is constructed as a specific period in the life span (Best, 2000; Boëthius, 1995) that is located “between childhood and adulthood” (MacGillivray & Wilson, 1997, p. 43). During this period it is generally assumed that young people are forging their adult subjectivities (Boëthius, 1995), and will eventually exit ‘adolescence’ as independent, mature and responsible adults (Boëthius, 1995; Harris, 1999; Valentine et al., 1998). However, this construction of ‘adolescence’ serves to constitute adulthood as the more valued subject position and implies that young people only have worth because they are ‘transitioning’ from children to adults (Frankenberg, 1992, as cited in Valentine et al, 1998).

In the above excerpt the SSM draws upon and reinserts the societal construction of ‘adolescence’ as a specific life period in which young people are
thought to be forging their adult ‘identities’ (Böethius, 1995; Valentine et al., 1998). Since the SSM sees her students as in the process of developing their adult ‘identities’, she views the school formal as an important learning opportunity for the young women to see and model appropriate forms of adult behaviour. Consequently, the school formal was constructed as a coming of age ritual (Tay, 2007; White, 2007).

Vanessa and Joanne (girls’ school) also made comments suggesting that they viewed the school formal as a rite of passage:

**Vanessa:** Can make you mature more I think yeah like it’s on that journey to like getting more older, you know wiser and I’m trying to think of the word to say, it’s more basically you think of everything yourself for the formal like what you want like, what dress you want, what everything you want and in the future when you’re older you sort out things more for yourself as well, you don’t have your parents with you doing all this stuff and in a way it helps you more, like some people you know just get your parents to do everything for you but most people, yeah everything’s done by themselves, they’ve booked everything and it makes you mature.

**Joanne:** The formal is definitely the first real grown up experience that you do where you dress and do your own make up. [It is] definitely the last bit of being a kid.

During ‘adolescence’ it is generally assumed that young people develop characteristics such as independence, maturity and self-responsibility, while simultaneously leaving behind the dependency and immaturity of childhood (Allat, 1996; Atwool, 1999; Boëthius, 1995; Harris, 1999; Kennedy et al., 1996; Valentine et al., 1998). However, Harris (1999) argues that such a definition of ‘adolescence’ is based on essentialist understandings and fails to take into account how subject positions are discursively constituted. Harris (1999) also argues that this construction of ‘adolescence’ favours men. This is because independence and autonomy are traditionally aligned with masculinity in Western societies (Davies, 1990; Harris, 1999). Since young women are encouraged to take up and are “rewarded for their supporting” (Harris, 1999, p. 120) or dependent roles, then they are frequently framed
as more immature than young men when they are measured against “masculinist standards of development” (Harris, 1999, p. 113).

Despite Harris’s (1999) criticisms of this societal construction of ‘adolescence’ and ‘maturity’, because it is so embedded in society, it is not surprising that Vanessa draws on it in the above excerpt when she explains how going to the formal can make young people more mature. Vanessa states that going to the formal is “on the journey to like getting more older, you know wiser”. Consequently, Vanessa is reinscribing the societal construction of ‘adolescence’ as a time of transformation from the immaturity associated with childhood to ‘wise’ and mature adulthood (Boëthius, 1995; Harris, 1999; Valentine et al., 1998).

Vanessa also explains that most young people book everything for the formal and choose their own dresses without the guidance of their parents. Joanne states that the formal is the first “grown up” experience where students “dress and do [their] own make up”. Such comments indicate that Vanessa and Joanne view the school formal as a site where young people are learning to be autonomous and independent from their parents. Therefore, Vanessa and Joanne are constructing the event as a coming of age experience for themselves and other students in the school.

However, at the time I interviewed Vanessa and Joanne, they were seventeen years of age and therefore likely to have had considerable experience choosing their own clothes, making their own appointments and putting on their own make up. Consequently, because the school formal is constructed as a coming of age event in New Zealand society (see Tay, 2007; White, 2007) then Vanessa and Joanne may view the event through this lens and fail to see how they are already skilled in some of the ‘proficiencies’ they associate with adulthood.

Since the school formal is constructed as a coming of age event in New Zealand culture, then some students’ parents may also view the school formal as a rite of passage for their daughters/sons (see Tay, 2007; White, 2007). For example, when I asked the SSM of the co-educational school whether she viewed the formal as a rite of passage for students she replied from her perspective as a parent:
Well for a rite of passage you know, it’s not a one off event is it…having had two boys I think it would be naïve to say that the formal changed attitudes to gender, sex, partnership, adulthood, maturity and so on. It certainly impinges on those things yes and I’d have to say as far as my own son was concerned I’d never seen him in a formal, in formal attire for example, until he went in sixth form [year 12] so for parents, and often parents say to me oh my son or oh my daughter looks so grown up at the formal so in that sense yes it is a rite of passage because maybe they haven’t had an equivalent occasion to dress up before and so that occasion provides umm the expression of the rite of passage…but] yeah so I guess you know there’s value in that [construction].

In the above excerpt the SSM at the co-educational school states that there is value in the construction of the school formal as a rite of passage but such rites are not one off events. She does not believe students’ attitudes to sexuality and relationships are altered through attending the formal, although the occasion touches on these aspects. Consequently, this SSM appears to view rites of passage as involving change or undertaking practices, which are associated with adulthood over the long term.

Entwistle (2000b) argues that “the body and dress are now crucial arenas for the performance and articulations of identities” (p. 327). Although the link between gender and dress is tentative, in Western societies wearing particular clothing such as “long evening dresses” (Entwistle, 2000a, p. 21) mark people as feminine subjects and “dinner jackets and trousers” (Entwistle, 2000a, p. 21) as masculine subjects. I extend this: wearing evening or cocktail gowns, as well as tuxedos and tailcoats, can also be viewed as defining an adult subjectivity. Since cocktail and evening dresses, as well as tuxedos, tailcoats and ties, are associated with adult dress codes for formal social occasions in Western societies, and the majority of students wear this attire to the school formal, then this may be the reason why parents commented to the senior staff member that their daughter/son looks so “grown up”. Furthermore, because students get to dress up in adult formal attire perhaps for the first time at the school formal, the staff participant perceives the formal as an expression of a rite of passage. Consequently, particular styles of dress can be seen as playing a vital role in demarcating a border between childhood and adulthood (Entwistle, 2000a).
When I asked the SSM at the boys’ school if she considered the school formal as a rite of passage for students, she said:

**SSM:** I think it’s very important…it may be that some of these boys never ever have this occasion again until they’re married or one of their friends gets married and they’re invited to a wedding.

**Lee:** Okay then, do you think the school formal is a rite of passage for students?

**SSM:** Definitely do yeah because…the socialising process is part of growing up and that you know they need to move into formal situations, that a lot of these students will be asked to be best men at their friends’ weddings and if they know how a formal sort of meal and dance actually occurs then that takes away some of the pressure they can expect, they can have some idea, yeah okay there, this next event may be similar to the school formal and I know how to behave there so, and the fact that they are expected to introduce their partners to somebody else and learn how to do that…

In stating that attending the school formal will be useful for boys because they will gain some understanding of how to behave at their own future weddings, the SSM is assuming that her students are heterosexual and will ultimately develop heterosexual relationships with young women (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; 1998). In making such a heternormative assumption (Epstein & Johnson, 1994), the SSM is failing to acknowledge the diversity of sexualities that exist in the school (Epstein et al., 2000-2001). The SSM’s association between the school formal and students’ future weddings suggests that she views heterosexuality as the only valid sexuality in her school (Smith, 2006). By linking the school formal with her students’ future weddings, the senior staff member is also constructing the boys’ school formal as a coming of age event for heterosexual students as well as a night that has the potential for heterosexual romance (Best, 2000). The construction of the formal as a site of heterosexual romance will be discussed in further detail in a later section titled the school formal and romance.
Youth, friendships and leaving school.

John a participant from the boys’ school also drew upon traditional discourses of youth when he discussed why he decided to go to the formal:

John: Since you’re young everyone says that you know, don’t look forward to being old too much, the freedom you have at school is like nothing else you know, and then, so schools obviously, you need to enjoy it and all your mates and stuff having them all still around you and the formal is sort of you know one of the best nights of the year with your mates that you probably won’t see that often, especially I think sixth form if you don’t go then it’s not that bad but seventh form…I think everyone should definitely [go] since you won’t see a lot of people after school or university. Everyone goes off and does their own thing [so] it’s best to enjoy it while you still have them there.

References to freedom reinscribe the discourse of youth as a carefree period, in which young people have “freedom from the responsibilities associated with adulthood” (Valentine et al., 1998, p. 3). However, John participated in numerous activities at school as well as outside of school, which demanded high levels of self-responsibility. He represented the school in a number of sports and cultural activities, worked part-time and was involved in tertiary study. In the first interview John said his extra-curricular activities were “quite a bit to handle but I do alright”. Since the discourse of youth as a carefree period in which young people are exempt from “the realities of adulthood” (Valentine et al., 1998, p. 4) is so entrenched in society, John views his positioning as a young person through this discourse. As a result, John fails to see that he participates in numerous activities that require commitment and responsibilities associated with an adult subjectivity.

In Western societies young people are also frequently viewed as embodying qualities that adults once possessed and now long for, such as “authenticity, strong feelings and passions, physical strength and sexual vitality [as well as] a future full of possibilities” (Boëthius, 1995, p. 50). Boëthius (1995) argues that adults frequently
deflect their own uncertainties and anxieties about their positioning in the adult world onto young people. Therefore, the people who have said to John “don’t look forward to being old too much, the freedom you have at school is like nothing else you know” may be transferring their own remorse over their perceived loss of freedom as well as their anxieties on to John and what he symbolises as a young person (Boëthius, 1995).

Natasha, a participant in the co-educational school also made comments suggesting that attending the formal was especially important for her in her final year of schooling. When I asked why she chose to attend the formal she said that:

**Natasha:** Just because, I don’t know it’s just like one, it’s only once that you do something like that in your high school career and I think especially getting to the end of seventh form, I just want to be as much involved in school as possible ‘cause you kind of like get sick of school, but also you realise that it’s going to end soon and it’s actually quite good you know, it’s fun and just getting to know everyone and it’s like why not go to the formal (laughs)…it’s scary and sad I know that I’m leaving, it’s sort of like, so soon yeah umm I’ve sort of thought about it and it’s just weird knowing that you won’t go to school everyday and see, ‘cause like other than your best friends, you’re not going to see the people who you went to school with and who you spent five years with so that’s sad I guess, it’s just strange to think ‘cause I’ve just been here for so long.

It is interesting to note how when I asked Natasha why she had decided to go to the formal she talked in depth about her feelings about leaving school. In the United States, Best (2000) argues that the prom is an event that is socially constructed as signifying a ‘moving on’ from the ‘past world’ of secondary school to more uncertain post-school horizons. Natasha’s comments indicate how for some New Zealand students, the school formal is also an event that fosters anxieties about leaving school and the uncertainty of the future (Best, 2000).

In the United States the prom is also an event that induces feelings of sadness in regard to losing friends and exiting secondary schooling (Best, 2000). Natasha’s
comments highlight how the school formal may alert year 13 students, to the inevitability of saying goodbye to friends at the end of the schooling year and provides a space for them to reflect on leaving school (Best, 2000). Natasha’s comment that students usually go to the formal once, ignores the fact that many attend as year 12 students and demonstrates the event held a special significance for her in her final year of schooling (Best, 2000).

Perhaps because the school formal was one of the last opportunities students had to socialise with their friends and classmates (Best, 2000), John and Jackson (boys’ school) and Travis (co-educational school) made statements suggesting they viewed the school formal as a space of unity with their friends and classmates. I asked John, Travis and Jackson what aspects of the formal were most important and they said:

**John:** It’s the one time of the year where everyone is in high spirits and you’re not going to find any trouble, and there’ll be no fights, just everyone sort of getting on with everyone. I think it’s a shame that some kids in the school who may be grouped as sort of you know losers or something like that, they tend not to go to formals just because, oh you know, I can’t get a date or these guys won’t like me going, but what they don’t actually realise is that they need to get over that and actually go because everyone is being nice to everyone and you know they can make a whole lot of new friends, meet a whole lot of new girls even.

**Travis:** I think it’s really good that it’s the whole thing and it is just spending time with mates and getting to know people that you didn’t know as well before, you get to the formal and everyone isn’t the same, like no one cares anymore. If you’re there and you didn’t talk to someone you start talking to them and say oh cool.

**Jackson:** The most [important] part I think is mostly spending time with your friends I reckon, ‘cause there’s not many events in the year that you can all get together at the same time and it’s always good that ‘cause, at the formal I’ve
found, the one’s I’ve been to previously I’ve found that you can get to know people better, like some person you might not really talk to at school it’s a lot easier ‘cause you might be in a situation where there’s nobody else to talk to and you’re forced to talk to somebody else that you’re not really like known to but it’s quite good that it opens gateways to know people.

John states that there are no fights at the formal. Travis and Jackson make similar comments that at the formal, young people can establish relationships with people who they do not necessarily talk to at school. In all three of these excerpts the young men are constructing the school formal, like the prom in the United States, as a “celebrated moment of togetherness” (Best, 2000, p. 32) where everyone gets along and differences do not matter.

Although John explains that “everyone gets on with everyone” at the formal, students who are grouped as “losers” do not tend to go. This statement highlights how students may have varying degrees of investment in the formal depending on their status within the peer group (Best, 2000). John’s comments suggest that students’ social standing amongst their peers is irrelevant at the formal and infers that those students framed as ‘losers’ may actually be able to overcome their low social standing by meeting friends and girls at the formal. I argue that perhaps because the school formal in New Zealand popular culture, like the prom in American popular culture, is constituted as a night where young people can undergo fairy tale “transformations” (although this is usually in relation to young women’ appearances) (Best, 2003, p. 405), then perhaps John is taking up this construction when he suggests that a student’s low social status can be overcome at the formal. John also ignores the reality of sub-cultural capital that constitutes some young people as more popular than others (Thornton, 1995).

In addition, young men can in part, construct a hegemonic masculine subjectivity through having a girlfriend (Brutsaert, 2006; Connell, 2000; Mac An Ghaill, 2000a; Martino, 1999; Redman, 2001). ‘Dave’ a participant in Martino’s (2000) research on young men’s masculinities, noted that part of what constituted a “high status masculinity” (p. 226) was the ability to attract young women. John’s
association between those students positioned as “losers” and their inability to get a date highlights how he considers these young men as performing an inferior version of masculinity (Martino, 1999). John’s comment that the young men he calls ‘losers’ may not be able to secure a date for the formal, may be why he positioned them as ‘losers’ in the first place. By suggesting these young men can overcome their status as ‘losers’ at the formal, John fails to acknowledge the role he may have played in positioning some of his male peers as ‘losers’ in the first place.

A night to remember

In New Zealand media the phrase “a night to remember” (Smith, 2008, p. 10) is used to describe school formals and therefore it is not surprising that some of the participants drew upon this depiction of the event. Vanessa (girls’ school), Travis and Hungus (co-educational school) said that they would regret it if they chose not to attend the formal:

**Vanessa:** If you don’t go then you won’t know what it’s like and you might have missed out on a really cool night that everyone will remember … it’ll be a memory you remember for the rest of your life.

**Travis:** I think it’s going to be one of those things that everyone’s going to be kind of like talking and saying oh you weren’t at the formal when I was there back in 2008 formal but I’d say oh I, I didn’t go to that, I’d feel really bad ‘cause I didn’t go.

**Hungus** (female): I would definitely regret it if I chose not to go to the formal just because it’s something you sort of, I mean even if it’s not that much of a memorable night you’d definitely remember it your whole life, I mean your parents talk about their school formals and stuff yeah.

In her research on the prom in the United States, Best (2000) reports that many of her participants constructed the prom as a night that they would remember in later life. The construction of the prom “as a night to remember” (Best, 2000, p. 31) is formed
through adults reflecting on their own high school proms and their experiences as young people. Young people take up the construction of the prom as “a night to remember” (Best, 2000, p. 31) and use it as a basis for investing in the event. As illustrated by Hungus in the above excerpt, this also appears to be the case in New Zealand in regard to the school formal. Hungus makes reference to her own parents talking about their school formal. As significant adults in her life, her parents have clearly had an impact on her positioning the formal as an event to attend.

The School Formal and Romance

In American popular culture and media the prom is constructed as an event filled with the potential for heterosexual romance (Best, 2000). This is also the case in regard to the school formal in New Zealand popular culture, media and society (see Tay, 2007; Hewson, 2009; Marker, 2007; 2008; White, 2007). Given this association I decided to ask the student participants whether they thought the school formal was a romantic event. The peer researchers also asked their interview participants if they thought the formal held the potential for romance. Of the twenty-five student participants who were interviewed by the peer researchers or myself, twelve rejected any notion of romance in relation to the formal. The majority of these students reported that the school formal was more about socialising with their school friends, perhaps for the final time, rather than romance (Best, 2000).

Best (2000) reports that most of her male participants failed to discuss romance in relation to the prom. However, in this research study young men were more likely to view the school formal as a space of heterosexual romance than their female counterparts. For instance Mark (boys’ school), said that the school formal was similar to a wedding:

**Mark:** It’s a wee bit like almost remembered to a wedding (laughs), I see some yeah I, you always have to think about it ‘cause it’s dressing up and you’ve got a nice looking couple and yeah I think it’s especially nice to have a girlfriend to go with [to the formal], yeah.
Lee: Do you think it will be different going with this girl who you don’t know than going with a girlfriend?
Mark: Yeah, yeah I think so.
Lee: How come?
Mark: I think like it would be a wee bit more romantic and when you would go with your girlfriend [to the formal], more important [it] would be kind of like a step in your relationship.

Dominant discourses of heterosexuality construct young men as exclusively interested in the sexual aspects of their relationships (Allen, 2003; 2007c; 2008; Giordano, et al. 2006; Redman, 2001). Young women in contrast are constituted as being more focused on love and romance than the sexual component of their relationships (see Allen, 2003; 2007c; 2008; Fine, 1992; Giordano, et al. 2006).

Mark views the school formal as a romantic night comparable to a wedding. He suggests that there are similarities between the formal and a wedding because they both involve nice looking couples and dressing up. He also explains that going to the formal with a girlfriend rather than a blind date (he was attending the formal with a young woman he had not met), would be more romantic and a step in a young person’s relationship. By discussing the formal in this way Mark is highlighting how he sees romance as important and is not positioning himself in accordance with the usual binary of boys want sex/girls want love (Allen, 2003). This illustrates how young men’s sexualities are more varied than the ‘boys only want sex’ discourse suggests (Allen, 2003).

In addition, Ingraham (2008) argues that “viewing the various sites in popular culture where images and messages concerning white weddings dominate, it becomes clear that the intended audience is women, particularly white women, and that weddings are the domain of the feminine” (p. 221). In New Zealand popular culture and media, images of weddings are commonly associated with the school formal so that some young women come to view their school formals as “mini weddings” (Tay, 2007, p. 6). However, Mark also compares the school formal to a wedding, which suggests that he does not view the formal, and indeed weddings, as feminine territory
Mark’s comments highlight how some young men also take up popular depictions of the school formal as similar to a wedding.

In Allen’s (2003) research into the “sexual subjectivities” (p. 215) of 515 New Zealand young people, she reports that her male participants were less likely to frame sex as the most important component of their relationships during individual interviews with her than during focus groups. She explains how the young men may have felt they had to perform their gender in accordance with discourses of hegemonic masculinity when they were discussing sexuality with their peer group (Allen, 2003). Perhaps Mark felt able to discuss romance and weddings in relation to the formal in an individual interview with me, because he felt less pressure to perform his gender in accordance with discourses of hegemonic masculinity, than if he was interviewed with his peers (Allen, 2003). However, it is interesting to note what happened in the following exchange when Travis, a peer researcher in the co-educational school, asked The Frenchman whether he thought the school formal was a romantic night:

**Travis:** Do you think a formal is a romantic night?

**The Frenchman:** It could be.

**Travis:** It could be (laughs)?

**The Frenchman:** Depends.

**Travis:** Why?

**The Frenchman:** I don’t know.

**Travis:** Or why not?

**The Frenchman:** Well it could be because if you’re with your partner and you know, it could just get you know, just a fun time with your partner…

**Travis:** [interrupts] Okay (laughs) question nineteen.

**The Frenchman:** Oh whatever.

In this excerpt The Frenchman states that the school formal is a social event that could be romantic for couples. However, before he finishes explaining why he thinks the school formal could be romantic Travis interrupts him, laughs and moves on to the
As stated previously young women are conditioned by society to expect romance in their personal relationships (Giordano et al., 2006). However, young men are more likely to be mocked by other young men for desiring emotional attachments and showing affection for young women (Giordano et al., 2006). By claiming the school formal is a site of potential romance, The Frenchman and Mark are stepping over into a sphere that is socially constructed as the territory of the feminine (Allen, 2003; 2007c; 2008; Giordano et al., 2006). Although Travis does not ridicule The Frenchman for discussing romance, I contend that his laughter and haste in moving on to the next question before The Frenchman has finished explaining why he thinks the school formal could be romantic, indicates that Travis finds it uncomfortable or inappropriate for Travis to discuss romance, or both. Whatever the reason for Travis’ laughter and haste in moving on to the next question, his interruption silences The Frenchman’s discussion of romance and therefore his interjection serves to police the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity.

I also pose a second reading of the above excerpt. The Frenchman’s repetition of the words “you know” could indicate that he is alluding to the possibility of sex in relation to romance and the formal. Since young men endeavour to construct a hegemonic masculine subjectivity through bragging about their sexual “encounters with girls” (Kehily, 2002, p. 135) then The Frenchman’s implicit references may be an attempt to constitute himself as a legitimate masculine subject. Consequently, Travis’s interruption of The Frenchman’s potential discussion of sex on the night of the formal can also be read as undermining The Frenchman’s attempts to constitute himself as a legitimate masculine subject.

The female student participants who did discuss romance in relation to the formal generally made the same sort of comment, that the school formal could be a romantic night for students who were in relationships. For example, when I asked Tasha and Natasha (co-educational school) and Jessie (girls’ school) if the school formal was a romantic night they said:
Tasha: I mean it can be for people who are going with dates that would have something, or if you’re going with a boyfriend or girlfriend yeah.

Natahsa: It depends I guess ‘cause it’s the whole couples thing. They make you go as a couple, so obviously it’s going to be somewhat romantic.

Jessie: Maybe for couples yeah (laughs), I think everybody expects different things though and the expectations of what you have are a lot higher than what it actually turns out to be.

All three of these young women reported that they were attending the formal with male friends as their partners, rather than a partner with whom they were romantically involved. Nevertheless, in all three excerpts above, the young women are constructing the school formal as a night filled with potential romance for students who are in relationships, albeit in slightly different ways (Best, 2000). By stating the school formal could be a romantic night for couples these three participants are also reinscribing the construction of the school formal as a romantic setting (see Marker, 2007; 2008; White, 2007).

It is interesting to note Jessie’s point that students have different expectations for the event. Her comment implies that some students expect their formal to be romantic, while others do not. It also suggests that some students may reject the construction of the school formal as a romantic night altogether. This highlights that students are not a monolithic group who have the same expectations for the formal, and are active in constructing their own understandings of the occasion (Zlatunich, 2009).

Jessie also claims that expectations of the formal might be “a lot higher than what it actually turns out to be”. I argue that this may be because the school formal is constructed as the “key event on the calendar of every school” (Hathaway, 2007, p. 25). Moreover, phrases such as “glamorous affair” (Smith,
2008, p. 10) and a “night to remember” (Smith, 2008, p.10) are commonly used to
describe school formals in the New Zealand media. Such phrases serve to
romanticise the formal and construct it as one of the most special nights of a
secondary school student’s life (Best, 2000), which may contribute to
unrealistically high expectations of the formal.

Ellen (girls’ school) also said that the school formal could be a romantic
night for couples, but for her it was not romantic:

Ellen: Not in my case, I reckon it would be different if you were with the
person and you were like going out with them it’s definitely more special I
reckon, if you’re going out with them, but it’s cool like it, it’s, I really like that
it’s different from every other night but to me it’s not romantic, I kind of wish
it was but it’s, I don’t really see it that way.

Ellen explains that she does not view the school formal as a romantic night and
this is because, as stated in the previous chapter, Ellen decided to go to the formal
with a female friend. However, she suggests that for students who are in
relationships and who go to the formal as partners, the event would be “more
special”. She also explains that she “really likes” the school formal because it is
“different from every other night”, but for her it is not a romantic night, even
though she wishes that it was.

Ellen’s desire for romance is in keeping with Davies’ (1990) argument that
our “desires are constituted as central to each person’s gendered identity and to
the very maintenance of the gender order” (p. 501, emphasis in original). In
society our desires are heavily influenced by gendered scripts, which are socially
and discursively constructed (Davies, 1990). We are constructed as feminine or
masculine by societal discourses, and it is through our positioning as female or
male subjects that we are conditioned to desire or want certain things that define
us as gendered subjects in the first place (Davies, 1990). Furthermore, our desires
are “constituted through the narrative and storylines, the very language and
patterns of existence through which we are ‘interpellated’ into the social world”
In society, girls are socially conditioned to want romance and love (Giordano et al. 2006). Walkerdine (1990) contends that from the time they are in primary school young women are “prepared for their entry into heterosexual practices, and in particular romantic love” (p. 87). One way in which young women are educated to desire romance and love is through reading texts such as romance novels, girls’ magazines (Lehr, 2001) and girls’ comics (Walkerdine, 1990), which portray images of fairy tale romance. Through reading such texts, young women may come to see that their happiness as dependent upon ‘snaring’ their own ‘handsome prince’ (Walkerdine, 1990).

In the United States, Mazzarella (1999) notes that girls’ and prom magazines are filled with metaphors of “romance, fantasy and fairy tales” (p. 105). In New Zealand this also appears to be the case. In a special pull out feature focusing on the school formal in the New Zealand teen girls’ magazine Girlfriend (Marker, 2007), there was a full-page glossy photograph of a smiling young woman in a tiara, who is draped in a purple sash with the words prom queen written on it. She has her arm linked through that of a handsome young man in a purple crown saying prom king, who is leaning down and kissing her on the cheek. Funnily enough this image is used to market sanitary pads. Nevertheless, such images portray that for young women, the ideal school formal should be a night filled with heterosexual romance, which in turn “is dependent on securing the appropriate male date” (Zlatunich, 2009, p. 357).

In the above excerpt, Ellen reports that she does not perceive that the school formal will be a romantic night, even though she wishes that “it was”. This statement indicates that Ellen is shaping her desires in accordance with normative discourses of femininity that are embedded in societal texts such as girls’ magazines (Zlatunich, 2009). These gender discourses and texts condition Ellen, as well as other young women to want and desire romance (Lehr, 2001; Walkerdine, 1990; Zlatunich, 2009) especially in relation to the formal.
It is also possible that through reading societal texts that construct the school formal as a romantic night for couples, Ellen perceives that it is the norm for students to attend the event with partners with whom they are romantically involved. Therefore, Ellen’s comment that she wishes her school formal was romantic may reflect how she feels that she does not fit the norm and is ‘missing out’ by taking her friend. However, in this research study, only three out of the twenty-four female and three out of the ten male participants who were interviewed by the peer researchers or myself, reported that they were attending the formal with their boyfriend or girlfriend. Therefore, it appears that the construction of the school formal as a romantic night for couples, which is depicted in the New Zealand media and girls’ magazines, is inconsistent with how the majority of students experience the event.

However, two female participants Sarah and Sam (girls’ school) rejected the construction of the formal as a romantic space altogether:

**Lee:** Do you think the school formal is a romantic night?
**Sarah:** No (laughs).
**Lee:** Okay.
**Sarah:** It’s not like elegant, like high expectations like you know, you [don’t] have to do the ballroom dancing and that’s like the older people would have you know, [it’s] a party and you don’t have to do the waltzing and things.

**Jen:** Do you think the school formal is a romantic night?
**Sam:** Argh I think the teachers would like to believe it is, but no it’s a lot different from when they were kids and they had the whole debutante ball\textsuperscript{11} thing, in nowadays it’s just a party.

In making these comments, both Sarah and Sam are drawing on the historical link between public dances and romance in New Zealand society (White, 2005; 2007). However, by suggesting that students no longer waltz or view the school formal as

\textsuperscript{11}Debutante balls were traditionally held to signify a young woman of standing had reached a certain age where she could be publicly courted (Escalas, 1993).
a romantic setting, as their teachers or parents did, these young women perceive the link between public dances such as the school formal and romance as an adult construction ‘out of step’ with contemporary youth culture and society (White, 2005; 2007).

**Girlfriends and boyfriends.**

In contrast, two young men, Bob and Dean (boys’ school) who were taking their girlfriends to the formal stressed the importance of taking their girlfriends to the event. In the following excerpts I contend that both young men are constructing the school formal as a romantic night for themselves and their girlfriends, even though they do not state this explicitly:

**Lee:** Why have you decided to go to the formal?
**Bob:** Well…’cause I’m taking my girlfriend to her first ever formal so it’s quite important for both of us.

**Lee:** Who are you going to the formal with?
**Dean:** Okay, I’m going with [names girl] because she’s my girlfriend now and I thought it would be an experience for her as well before she moves back up north.

**Lee:** Mmm-mmm how come you think it will be an experience for her?
**Dean:** Because well it’s kind of an experience for us both us going together to a formal place and since she’s not going to be here at the end of this year, she’s going back up north and she won’t be having one back down here again… so I thought I’d take her for that reason.

In her research into the prom in the United States Best (2000) reports that the few male participants who did discuss romance in regard to the prom did so in relation to “how they treated women” (p. 66). The young men discussed romance in this way because they were hindered in their ability to discuss romance by discourses of hegemonic masculinity according to Best (2000). In the above excerpts I also argue that Bob and Dean are discussing romance in relation to the formal through the way
they talk about their girlfriends and their motivation for attending the event. Bob’s desire to take his girlfriend to her first formal, and Dean’s wish to take his girlfriend to the formal because he believes it will be an experience for her, highlights how the young men are operating in the “specific discourse of romance” (Best, 2000, p. 65) known as chivalry. By talking about their relationships through discourses of chivalry, Bob and Dean are constructing themselves as agentic and authoritative (Best, 2000; Redman, 2001). Since such qualities are valued in adult men, Bob and Dean are positioning themselves as legitimate ‘adult’ masculine subjects (Best, 2000; Redman, 2001).

In contrast to Bob and Dean, the female participants attending the formal with their boyfriends did not emphasise the importance of taking their boyfriends to the event:

**Lee:** How come you decided to go with your boyfriend?

**Jen:** I guess I might as well I don’t know... yeah he might as well go along for a good night.

**Lee:** Okay, who are you going to the formal with?

**Shannon:** My boyfriend (laughs).

**Lee:** And how come you decided to go with him?

**Shannon:** I thought that he’d be the right person to go to it [with] ‘cause he’s...the interactive type, so I won’t be afraid of him getting bored or anything ‘cause he’ll just talk and talk to randoms.

Jen’s (girls’ school) phrase she “might as well” take him so he can have “a good night” implies that she does not particularly view attending the school formal with her boyfriend as romantic, or a step in their relationship. Shannon’s (girls’ school) comment also suggests that she does not place significance on taking her boyfriend to the event. In fact her remark “I thought he’d be the right person to go [with]” suggests

---

12 Randoms is a slang term meaning strangers.
that Shannon may actually have considered going to the event with someone other than her boyfriend.

Shannon’s explanation that her boyfriend is “the interactive type” and who she does not feel responsible for can be read in two ways. Firstly, I contend that Shannon’s decision to take her boyfriend to the formal could have been based more on his personality rather than the fact he was her boyfriend. She may have decided to ask her boyfriend to the formal because his ability to talk to strangers would increase Shannon’s chances of enjoying herself at the formal and because she would not feel that she had to ‘look after him’ (Best, 2000). If this was the case then Shannon’s decision to attend the formal with her boyfriend can be seen as about her desires rather than her boyfriend’s.

However, Harris (1999) contends that in society women are frequently recognised and praised for their attention to others. She also argues that aspects such as “thoughtfulness, consideration, connectedness and compassion” (Harris, 1999, p. 120) are endorsed in women. In the above excerpt Shannon’s comment could imply that she sees it as her responsibility that her boyfriend enjoys the formal.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have analysed how the participants either reproduced and/or rejected dominant societal constructions of the school formal. Firstly, all of the staff participants and a large number of student participants did make comments that drew upon and reinscribed societal constructions of the school formal as a rite of passage (Tay, 2007; White, 2007). The SSMs of the girls’ and boys’ school stated that attending the formal gave their students practice in ‘adult ways’ of behaving in formal social situations, which the SSM of the boys’ school suggested students would need when they became ‘adults’. Two female student participants from the girls’ school also stated that attending the formal gave them the first opportunity to choose their own dresses, make their own appointments and do their own make up which were things they associated with ‘maturity’ and ‘adulthood’. In talking about the formal in such a way, the staff and student
participants were drawing on the societal construction of ‘adolescence’ as a specific period in the lifespan, positioned “between childhood and adulthood” (MacGillivray & Watson, 1997. p. 3), where young people are thought to be forging their adult subjectivities (Boëthius, 1995; Harris, 1999; Valentine et al., 1998).

Since the student participants were in the final year of secondary schooling, a number of them made comments suggesting they attached special significance to attending the formal. This was because it was their last opportunity to attend the event and it was also one of the remaining opportunities they had to socialise with their friends and classmates (Best, 2000). One participant’s comments suggested that the formal alerted her to the immediacy of finishing school and evoked feelings of sadness about leaving her school friends as well as anxiety about her post school horizons (Best, 2000). The young woman’s comments highlight the closeness of, and deep investment she has in her friendships (Hey, 1997).

Discourses of hegemonic masculinity make it hard for young men to forge close friendships and display their affection for one another for fear of being constituted as ‘gay’ (Epstein & Johnson, 1994). In this study, however, three male participants reported that the most important part of the formal was spending time with their ‘mates’. Such a comment shows that young men place considerable importance on their friendships, despite discourses of hegemonic masculinity making it difficult for them to show their affection publically. The comment also highlights how some young men resist peer pressure to talk about their plans for sex on prom/formal night, as a way to constitute their legitimate masculine status (Best, 2000; Kehily, 2001).

Perhaps because the school formal was one of the last opportunities the participants had to socialise with their friends and classmates, a number of male participants constituted the formal as a unified space of “togetherness” (Best, 2000, p. 32), in which social standing did not matter. Three male participants said that young people could potentially forge new friendships at the formal with classmates who they do not necessarily talk to at school. A participant at the boys’ school made comments
that suggested young men could overcome their low social standing at school by meeting young women and establishing new friendships at the formal. For this reason, he went on to state that students, who choose not to attend the formal because they think their classmates do not want them to go, should go anyway. Such a comment attests to how social standing and peer pressure impact on young people’s attendance at, investment in, and experiences of the school formal.

In the second half of this chapter I reported on how the participants reproduced and/or rejected New Zealand societal and media constructions of the school formal as a night of potential romance (Best, 2000; also see Tay, 2007; White, 2007). Interestingly the SSM of the boys’ school did constitute the school formal as a heterosexual rite of passage for young men in her school by linking the event with her students’ future weddings. Best (2000) states that in the United States the prom is constructed as a coming of age ritual for heterosexual youth. The SSM’s comments may indicate that this is also the case in New Zealand society. However, slightly less than half the student participants did not view the school formal as romantic. These students suggested that the school formal was more about socialising with their friends and classmates, perhaps for the final time before they left school (Best, 2000). Consequently, for the majority of participants, friendships rather than romance and sexuality were central to their formal experiences.

The female participants who did discuss romance at the formal generally made similar comments that the school formal could be a romantic night for students already in relationships who attended the event together. However, a number of male participants did make comments suggesting that they personally viewed the formal as a romantic night. One male student compared the school formal to a wedding and stated that attending the formal with a girlfriend would be a significant step in the relationship. In doing so he was transgressing traditional gendered constructions of (hetero)sexuality, in which young women are viewed as desiring romance and love in their relationships and young men are deemed to be focused on sex (Allen, 2003; Giordano et al., 2006).
Two male participants also discussed how attending the formal with their girlfriends was important for both themselves as well as their girlfriends. One male participant stated that his motivation for attending the formal with his girlfriend was because he wished to take her to her first formal and the other, because it would be an experience for her. In the ways they discuss their motivation for attending the formal, both young men are operating within the chivalrous “discourse of romance” (Best, 2000, p. 65). Interestingly, the female participants who did attend the formal with their boyfriends did not stress that it was a significant step in their relationships. Unlike Best (2000) who found her female participants were more likely to discuss romance in relation to the prom than her male participants, it was some of the young men in this study who constituted the school formal as romantic for them personally, despite the event being constructed as a night of fairy tale romance for young women in the media (see Marker, 2007; 2008; Tay, 2007; White, 2007). Two young women rejected the construction of the school as a romantic space, but the female participants did not abandon the association between the formal and fairy tale romance altogether. A number of young women did discuss fairy tales when they talked about their dresses and formal preparations. This will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter.
Chapter 7: Formal Preparations and Dress

Introduction

In this chapter I explore how the participants prepared for the formal. The majority of young women in the girls’ and co-educational schools said that they engaged in various beauty work practices for the formal. Unlike the participants in the girls’ school, however, young women in the co-educational school said that they were less likely to have their beauty work done professionally and I suggest a number of explanations for this. In addition, I detail how finding or making the perfect formal dress was a lengthy process for many young women. A number of female participants also stated that young women must choose dresses that are not too ‘revealing’ otherwise they may be labelled a ‘skank’ by their peers. Finally, I discuss how a small number of the female participants resisted the construction of the school formal as a site for “feminine consumption” (Best, 2000, p. 55), as well as an event where they can “solidify and display their feminine identities” (Best, 2000, p. 35).

The majority of the male participants reported that they did not engage in beauty or bodywork for the formal, although two young men did state that they spent considerable time and energy on their appearance. I also propose explanations for why the male participants wore the same general attire to the formal. Finally, I detail how many of the male participants ‘individualised’ their suits through wearing various accessories as well as how the majority of young men chose to wear tuxedos that co-ordinated with their female partners’ dresses.

The School Formal as a Fairy tale Space

As explained in the previous chapter, the school formal in New Zealand, like the prom in the United States, is constructed as a site of “fairy-tale romance” (Best, 2000, p. 26) especially for young women. Although Vanessa (girls’ school) did not

---

13 A skank is an alternative to the term slut and refers to a girl who has acquired a reputation for being sexually promiscuous (Bloustein, 2003).
view the school formal as site of fairy tale romance as reported in the previous chapter, she did draw on the fairy tale construction of the event (Best, 2000; Mazzarella, 1999). I asked Vanessa if she thought girls and boys enjoyed the formal in the same ways and she said:

**Vanessa:** I think girls enjoy it in a prissie fairy tale kind of way and guys just enjoy it, you know either ‘cause they’re making their partner happy or [because they are] having fun with their own mates who have come to the formal as well.

**Lee:** What do you mean enjoy it in a fairy tale kind of way?

**Vanessa:** Yeah I mean the formal is just like the, it is like a fairy tale like for me, it is like, it’s one night where your dreams can come true (laughs) and yeah I read a lot of fairy tales (laughs), yeah a lot of happy endings.

In American popular culture Best (2003) explains that the prom is constituted as a space where young women can transform themselves from ‘plain Janes’ to gorgeous prom queens. In New Zealand girls’ magazines and the media, the school formal is also portrayed as a site of transformation for young women (Best, 2000). For example, a newspaper article focusing on young women’s formal preparations features the following sub-heading “Cinderella only needed a pumpkin and a couple of mice to go from ashes to acclaim” (Hewson, 2009, p. 22).

Unfortunately, I did not ask Vanessa to elaborate on what she meant by the school formal as a fairy tale night where dreams can come true. However, I argue that since Vanessa rejected the construction of the school formal as a night of fairy tale romance and because she is immersed in New Zealand popular culture, then her statement may be a reference to the construction of the school formal as a site of “transformation” (Best, 2000, p. 35). Vanessa’s statement that young women enjoy the formal in a “prissie fairy tale kind of way” whereas boys just go to please their girlfriends, or to spend time with their friends, indicates that she assumes young men and women understand and enjoy the formal differently (Best, 2000).
Planning for the Formal

Perhaps because the school formal is constructed as a space where girls can consolidate their feminine subjectivities (Best, 2000; 2003), then there were significant differences in the way the majority of female and male participants reported how long they had been planning for the formal. I asked Jessie and Shannon (girls’ school) how long they had been thinking about and preparing for the event and they said:

**Jessie:** All my life (laughs). I don’t know it’s kind of like the, ever since the third form you go, I get to go to the formal soon and… what you think it’s going to be, and what you think you are going to wear changes every year. I remember in third form, when I thought about it, I wanted to wear a corset dress with a massive puff out (both laugh) but that was a long time ago but yeah I don’t know, I think girls think about it from the time they hit high school.

**Shannon:** Since the first time I heard about it I suppose (laugh), well that was only last year but I always thought about what I’m going to wear next year.

Both Jessie and Shannon spent several years thinking about the formal; however, it interesting to note how the participants’ thoughts about the event were in relation to what they were going to wear. I contend that because Jessie and Shannon were invested in trying to make an impression on the night (Best, 2000) and since dress is a site for potential judgement (Entwistle, 2000a; 2000b; Rossiter, 1994), then the young women may have spent years planning their ‘perfect’ formal dress in an effort to avoid the shame of wearing something considered ‘unfashionable’ by their peers or committing a fashion faux pas.

The male participants reported spending considerably less time thinking about and planning for the formal than young women, consequently a number of them stated that they thought young women’s formal preparations were ‘excessive’. Their comments are typified in the following excerpt from Simon (boys’ school). I asked
Simon if there was a particular buzz in the boys’ school prior to the formal and he said:

**Simon:** I think yeah kind of a, when the tickets come on sale or when there’s a thing in assembly people talk about it. But I remember last year at, our formal was in May and the [names participating girls’ school] was in July and I take two classes over at [names the girls’ school], so it was early May and late April and no one was really talking about the [names his school] formal [other than] they go, have you got your partner, yep ah sweet and that was about it. But they already [names girls’ school] girls had already sorted out their dresses and who they were going to stay with before and after, and it was like three months [away]. Why would you do that (laughs), why would you worry about that, I mean I haven’t even got my suit yet, I’m not going to get it to a week or two before the formal. There’s a bit of a buzz but you know not too much, (laughs) nothing silly.

Simon noticed that there was a bit of hype regarding the formal in the boys’ school, but that it was “nothing silly”, which can be seen as a reference to the formal preparations of young women at the girls’ school. Such a comment frames young women’s extensive planning for the formal as inconsequential (Best, 2003). However, because the formal is constituted as a space where young women can consolidate their feminine subjectivities (Best, 2000; 2003), I contend that Simon may frame the young women’s preparations in this manner because as a masculine subject he has less invested in the formal than the young women.

**Girls’ Body and Beauty Work Practices**

The female participants (and male participants) also thought that young women spend more time getting ready for the formal. I asked Vanessa, Ellen and Shannon (girls’ school) if they thought young women and men spend the same amounts of time, energy and money preparing for the event. They went on to explain how they and/or the majority of other young women engaged in various beauty work practices for the formal:
Vanessa: I think it’s easier for the boys because they just have to put on a tux, gel their hair and they’re ready to go. Girls we’re more picky I guess… for girls definitely I know there’s a lot of fuss definitely.

Lee: When you say fuss, what do you mean by fussing about?

Vanessa: Oh just everything to do with their appearance, girls getting spray tanning, pedicures, manicures, facials, sun bedding it’s yeah, there’s a whole lot of fuss, like you know makes them feel good, but probably not really necessary.

Ellen: Mmm I reckon you’d be surprised how long boys take I reckon, but definitely girls. Girls take time off school to go and do it. I reckon girls at least would take half the day, if not the whole day [off] to go and do their spray tan, do their hair, do their make up, get prepared…

Lee: So with the spray tan, make up and hair appointments whatever, how many girls do you think would do that out of the whole seventh form?

Ellen: At least half if not three quarters. A lot of people will be getting spray tans and a lot of people will be getting their hair done. I don’t know so much about make-up, but there will be at least half probably getting their make-up done, it’s quite big.

Shannon: Boys’ tuxes cost a lot …but girls they need to get make-up, hair, jewellery, dresses and shoes like they get more things to worry and pay for.

Lee: Are you going to get a fake tan?

Shannon: Yes (both laugh), I’m pasty white.

Lee: So are you going to get everything done, make up, hair…

Shannon: Everything, nails…getting a facial, getting blackheads removed, getting a wax and everything (laughs)…

Vanessa and Ellen suggest that girls spend considerably more time and energy, and for Shannon, money, on their formal preparations than boys. The male participants’ formal preparations will be discussed later in this chapter; here I contend that there are numerous reasons for why many young women undertake beauty work practices
and spend more time, energy and money on their formal preparations than young men.

Firstly, Bordo (1993a; 1993b) and Grosz (1994) argue that in Western societies women are more likely to be judged on their appearance than men. In fact MacGillivray and Wilson (1997) state that young women are “socialized to emphasize [their] appearance” (p. 43). Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of young women undertake various beauty and bodywork practices for the school formal in an effort to embody Western ideals of feminine beauty (Davies, 1991). Consequently, young women such as Shannon get their blackheads removed, a body wax, manicure and fake tan in order to embody culturally defined standards of tanned, hair and acne-free feminine beauty for the school formal (Chapkis, 1988). She may do so in an effort to be read by others as attractive and therefore a legitimate feminine subject (Bordo, 1993a; 1993b; Kehily, 2002). However, I also contend that because women learn from an early age that they are judged on their appearance then many “fuss” over their appearance (to use a phrase from Vanessa), in their everyday lives, and not just in relation to their formal preparations (Bordo, 1993a; MacGillivray & Wilson, 1997).

Secondly, Rasmussen (2004) argues that the prom in the United States, or alternatively the school formal in a New Zealand context, is “ostensibly designed as the preserve of heterosexuality” (p. 134). Consequently, some young women may engage in extensive beauty and bodywork practices for the formal in order to “express their heterosexual desirability” (Best, 2000, p. 47) at the event.

Thirdly, in the United States Best (2000) argues that the prom is constructed as a site for “feminine consumption” (p. 55). Included in two additions of the New Zealand teen girls’ magazine Girlfriend (Marker, 2007; 2008) are special pull-out features on the school formal. These features are full of glossy advertisements for such things as hair products, make-up, moisturisers, hair-straighteners, fake tans, fake nails, fake eyelashes, control briefs and bra enhancers. These advertisements highlight how the school formal in New Zealand is also constructed as a site for female consumption (Best, 2000). I contend that there are a number of messages behind such
advertisements. Firstly, in order for a young women’s formal to be ‘perfect’ then she must be attractive, which in turn is dependent on her buying and wearing feminine beauty products (Best, 2000; Mazzarella, 1999; Zlatunich, 2009). Secondly, the perfect feminine body is depicted as slim, toned and firm, and young women are encouraged to see their bodies as substandard if they do not match this illusionary ideal (Bordo, 1993a; Budgeon, 2003). In order to ‘fix’ their substandard bodies young women are encouraged to purchase garments that conceal ‘tummies, hips and thighs’ and accentuate breasts. Consequently, through teen girls’ (and prom) magazines, young women learn that their bodies “need improvement” (Zlatunich, 2009, p. 359).

Finally, Vanessa suggests that although it is not necessary for young women to engage in beauty work for the formal, many do because it makes them “feel good”. Vanessa’s comments highlight how some young women undertake beauty work because they enjoy it. Christian-Smith (1988), Fine (1992) and Holland et al. (1994; 1996) argue that young women are taught to deny their desires and place male wants/needs above their own. Furthermore, from the time their bodies start to mature, young women are subjected to an authoritative and ever-present sexualising male gaze (Rossiter, 1994). Despite the authority of the male gaze, however, I argue that some young women may enjoy engaging in beauty work practices for the formal because they experience pleasure as they shape their bodies in accordance with their own desires (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993a). Nevertheless, because of the authoritative positioning of masculinity in the gender order young women may enjoy shaping their bodies to fit with societal ideals of feminine beauty, which are actually determined by men, but are carried out by women (Bordo, 1993a; Smith, 1990; Young, 1990).

It is also interesting to note how Ellen suggests that half to three-quarters of the year 13 students at the girls’ school have their beauty work done professionally. In fact six out of nine female participants in the girls’ school who discussed their formal preparations, stated that they had their hair, make-up, nails and spray tans done by professional hair stylists or beauticians. In contrast only one out of seven female participants in the co-educational school who were interviewed by the peer researchers or myself said that they had their beauty work done by hairdressers or beauticians. They reported that female friends did their beauty work for them or that
they did it themselves. I pose three possible explanations for why young women in the girls’ school were more likely to engage in professional beauty work than their female counterparts in the co-educational school. It should be noted that the disparity in the numbers of female participants who had their beauty work done professionally between the two participating schools, cannot be attributed solely to social class.\footnote{Unfortunately social class cannot be discussed further because of the risk of identifying the schools concerned.}

Firstly, the majority of female participants in the co-educational school said that they were attending the formal with partners who were male friends from school. Because the young women see these young men everyday at school then perhaps they felt no need to make a particular impression on their dates and therefore they did not have their beauty work done professionally. In contrast, the single-sex nature of the girls’ school meant that the female participants had to arrange for young men from other schools, or young men in the workforce to be their formal partners. Since the young women in the girls’ school took more time securing a date, and because they might not have known their dates as well as the young women in the co-educational school, then perhaps they had their beauty work done professionally because they were more invested in trying to make a favourable impression on their partners. Secondly, as reported in Chapter Five, the co-educational school has a reputation for being inclusive of diversity. Consequently, young women in the school may place less value on emphasised femininity (Blaise, 2005; Connell, 1987) and therefore they had no interest in their hair or make-up being done by professionals.

When I conducted observations at the co-educational school formal I noted how the female formal goers were not as ‘made up’ as girls at the participating boys’ school formal. In the interview I conducted with the SSM at the co-educational school after the formal, I asked her if girls in the school did get their hair, nails, make-up and spray tans done professionally for the event and she said:

Yeah a few of them do but they’re not the, the intellectual ones (both laugh). I think we have a very diverse range of students so you do get some of the less secure girls doing that. The girls who are very secure with their
intellects, their bodies, their emotions and we have a lot of them (laughs), they are about five years ahead of the boys in terms of their chronological age, they’re just not as impressed with that sort of stuff (laughs), they’re true daughters of feminists (laughs) and you can see that they’ve got, you know a pretty thorough understanding that they can play the game, but they don’t need to be bound by it, and I’m talking about the gender game, yeah.

The SSM at the co-educational school is reinscribing the mind/body binary when she contends that girls who engage in beauty work for the formal are not intellectual and therefore are not interested in such practices (Budgeon, 2002). In making this statement the principal is “privileging the mind over the body” (Budgeon, 2002, p. 37) and reinscribing the body as the inferior term in the binary. Since the mind is traditionally aligned with the masculine, and the body with the feminine (Davies, 1990; Valentine, 2001), then suggesting girls who engage in beauty work are not intellectual serves to “negate the feminine” (Budgeon, 2002, p. 37), while simultaneously constructing young women who engage in bodywork as “outside the realm of the subject” (Budgeon, 2002, p. 37).

Davis (1991) also explains that there is a long tradition within feminism of viewing society’s emphasis on women’s beauty and physical attractiveness as a signal of women’s subjugation. It is interesting to note how the senior staff member states that young women who do not engage in beauty work for the formal are “true daughters of feminists” and therefore have no interest in beauty work. Perhaps because the senior staff member at the co-educational school views beauty work through a traditional feminist lens of female subjugation, she does not conceive that girls, some of whom may be feminists, may engage in beauty work because they find it pleasurable (Davis, 1991).

When the SSM states that secure, intellectual girls are five years ahead of boys who are the same chronological age, she is drawing on a traditional essentialist framework of maturity. During adolescence it is assumed young people develop ‘traits’ associated with adulthood such as independence and rationality as reported in Chapter Six (Harris, 1999; Valentine et al., 1998). Harris
(1999) argues that these qualities have traditionally been aligned with masculinity and are valued in men, so that when young women are measured against such a definition they are frequently constructed as lacking in maturity. However, when the senior staff member explains that academic girls, who are secure with their bodies and emotions, are five years ahead of boys of the same age, she is actually constructing girls as more mature than boys when measured against this “masculinist” model of maturity (Harris, 1999, p. 113). However, her statement serves to construct boys as a homogeneous immature group, when in fact some boys are just as academic, secure in their bodies and their emotions as some girls.

Finally, when the SSM suggests that intellectual girls know how to play “the gender game” but are “not bound by it”, she is implying that because some academic girls may understand how gender functions they can ‘freely’ perform their gender in whichever way they choose. However, Butler (1991) points out that subjects who perform their gender in non-normative ways will frequently experience “ostracism, punishment and violence” (p. 130). Therefore, even though intellectual girls may have some knowledge of how gender operates, they are not ‘free’ to perform their gender outside of normative femininity (Butler, 1990; 1991; 1999b).

**Beauty work as a shared female occupation.**

In contrast to the young women in the girls’ school, the majority of female participants in the co-educational school (five out of seven) reported that their female friends or brother’s girlfriends did their beauty work (as did two participants in the girls’ school). Hungus and Sarah (co-educational school) explain how they got ready for the formal:

**Hungus** (female): Yeah I got ready with my friends, well first of all we started off at my house, got all our stuff together, my brother’s girlfriend who is a make up artist she did [names friend] and my make up and then we went to [names another friend] [and] put on dresses.
Sarah: My friend came over to my house earlier in the day from another school and she did my hair and make up and nails, which was really nice of her and she did it really well as well, like just as good as if I went to a hairdresser I reckon.

The excerpts from Sarah and Hungus suggest that young women who have skills in hairstyling and make-up application possess a form of ‘feminine’ sub-cultural capital (Thornton, 1995), which is highly valued by their female peers, especially at the school formal. Having other young women do the participants’ hair, nails and make-up also highlights how women are key in creating a feminine appearance for the formal and how the “practices of femininity are passed” (Best, 2000, p. 45) between women.

One female participant at the co-educational and two at the girls’ school also reported that they did their own make-up and/or hair for the formal. The three young women said this was because they were good at it. In Western societies, hair (long, blonde and styled) (Weitz, 2001) and make-up (Dellinger & Williams, 1997) are often associated with heterosexually desirable femininity. This may explain why many girls/young women spend large amounts of time discussing cosmetics (Blaise, 2005), as well as practising hair styling and make-up application (Bloustein, 2003).

I asked one of these three participants, Grace (co-educational school), how she went about styling her hair and applying make-up for the formal. She said:

Argh well I think, I did my hair, I sort of like I have this set of hot rollers that I sort of practised with like a couple of times before the formal just to see what it was like and how it looked, so that’s how I sort of knew how to do that, and they come with instructions on how to put them in and stuff...I think the foundations kind of easy, you just sort of put it on your face and if you’ve sort of used it a bit before you kind of know what’s too much and what’s too little. The eye-shadow stuff it had a wee diagram on the back of it (laughs), saying where to put each colour (both laugh) that’s pretty much what I did, and you know lipstick’s pretty easy and I just put a wee bit of it on.
Grace’s excerpt highlights how a feminine appearance requires labour (Best, 2003) as well as skill (Smith, 1990) to construct. When I asked Grace what part of the formal she considered most important however, she went on to explain:

I think the preparation leading up to the formal is the most important because it’s something, to prepare you have to buy a dress and shoes, make-up, and figure out what you’re going to do with your hair, and I kind of like that bit the best in a way because it’s sort of something to do that almost seems like it’s being productive, but it doesn’t involve much brain action (both laugh).

Since concern with appearance is something that is constructed as a feminine concern and men are supposed to rise above such matters (Entwistle, 2000a), then Best (2000) argues that the work young women do for the prom (or the school formal in a New Zealand context) is “dismissed as trivial” (p. 36). Grace reinforces this construction when she suggests that buying a dress, accessories, make-up and deciding how to style her hair requires “little brain action”. In making this comment Grace is undermining the time and energy she spends on constructing herself as feminine for the formal and/or reflecting her awareness this labour does not really count (Best, 2000).

The Dress

A number of the female participants also said they spent numerous hours shopping for their formal dresses. Sarah, a peer researcher in the co-educational school, asked Hayley what she considered was the most important aspect of the formal and she said:

The dress I’d say, ’cause you’ve gotta take so much time to pick your dress and make sure no one will have the same dress, and make sure it accentuates your figure and Oh!
Hayley’s excerpt highlights how choosing the ‘perfect’ formal dress is a complex undertaking (Best, 2000). Young women must select a dress that is unique and therefore marks their individuality while at the same time emphasising their figure (Best, 2000). Since the prom or school formal in a New Zealand context is constituted as a space where young women wish to make an impression (Best, 2000), then I argue that wearing a dress that is unique and highlights a woman’s figure is necessary to achieve this goal. Furthermore, selecting a dress another young woman wears, or one that does not suit their figure, may mean young women come to view themselves as performing a flawed version of femininity because they are committing a ‘fashion faux pas’ (Butler, 1999b, Frost, 2001; Griggers, 1997).

Despite some female participants stating that shopping for the perfect dress was a time-consuming process, the majority of female participants reported that they were getting their dresses made by female relatives (one participant also said she was getting her dress made by a dress maker). The peer researchers or myself asked the following (girls’ school) participants how they decided what they were going to wear on the night and they said:

**Kaz:** I went dress shopping and there was nothing in town that I liked so I went to [names haberdashery shop] with my Grandma and we found a pretty pattern and we’re making it together.

**Vanessa:** Well my Mum she, she’s a really good sewer and she makes, she’s made like five of my sister’s formal dresses so she’s going to make mine this year. I’d be cool because it’s my last year at [names girl’s school], and probably my last formal, and so it’s going to be hard deciding what colours and what pattern, but yeah my Mum’s a pro so it should help (laughs).

**Jen:** I’m getting my dress made so I just looked at patterns and stuff that I like.

**Lee:** Are you getting it professionally made or like a friend of the family or your Mum or something’s going to make it?

**Jen:** My Mum sews so she is going to make it for me.
These excerpts highlight how mothers and grandmothers are key figures in young women’s formal preparations (Best, 2000). Furthermore, de Beauvoir (1984) argues that mothers and other significant adult women in girls’ lives are expected to initiate young women into the practices involved in becoming women. By making their younger relatives formal dresses, mothers and grandmothers are teaching the young women about appropriate attire for women in ‘adult’ formal social situations. Consequently, the participants’ grandmothers and mothers are passing on to their daughters a form of ‘feminine’ cultural capital, which may set them in good stead when it comes to other formal situations, such as official work dinners in the future. The excerpt from Kaz also shows how shopping for material, planning the dress and sewing it together can provide an opportunity for bonding with female family members.

Jen and Shannon (girls’ school) and many other female participants described in detail how the dress would look when it was finished and the material they had chosen:

**Jen:** For my dress I had to have a special material, it wouldn’t sit right with taffeta and there’s none in [names city] that sells plain taffeta, it’s all shot black, so I had to get it sent down from the North Island. My aunty went and looked at some material shops for me and sent down some samples and Mum rung up and got it couriered down once I’d chosen the material I wanted.

**Shannon:** The chiffon and silk material [I had chosen] it was just costing too much, like the chiffon isn’t that, as expensive, but the silk is like eighteen dollars per meter, but it’s going to be a big cost just to make it and time wise as well because it’s such delicate material, and I’ve never done sewing before so if I screw it up then I’ve gotta buy complete new material I think.

**Lee:** Yep have you any ideas of colours that you’d get for your dress?

---

15 Cultural capital is a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1997) and refers to knowledge, language, skills, habits, possessions and achievements, which a person initially acquires in their families and living environments. A person’s cultural capital is more likely to be rewarded if it is valued in a specific context, such as schools, workplaces and social groups like sports teams.
Shannon: I did have a white pearlie silk colour and also a purple colour. I’ve got it in my bag if you want to see it? I did get some cuttings of it.

Lee: Oh yeah that would be cool.

Shannon: I’ve had it in my bag here for ages (laughs). It’s basically all the expectations of the silk colour I wanted.

Shannon did not end up making her dress because of the cost involved, lack of time and her fear of ‘screwing it up’. However, it is interesting to note how Shannon explains that she was endeavouring to make her own formal dress even though she had not sewn before. Since sewing is a traditional feminine occupation or pastime (McRobbie, 1997) and the school formal is a “feminine space” (Best, 2000, p. 35) then Shannon may have planned to sew her own formal dress in an effort to show people that she was capable of performing a skill traditionally constructed as feminine. Carrying around swatches of material she had chosen for her dress in her school bag and showing them to me, also suggests that Shannon experienced pleasure in thinking about and planning how she was going to make her formal dress.

Furthermore, Smith (1990) argues that by wearing “the delicate, the floating, diaphanous fabrics” (p. 177) women constitute their bodies and therefore themselves as feminine. Jen and Shannon chose to make their dresses out of silk, taffeta and chiffon. Chiffon is a diaphanous fabric and depending on the weave of silk it can also be sheer. However, taffeta is not a diaphanous fabric but “its sheen, unique stiffness and semi-transparency means that it is also associated with femininity and feminine dress” (Dr. E. Webster, personal communication, 14 October, 2010). Consequently, I argue that by choosing to make their formal dresses out of such fabrics, the young women are constructing their bodies as feminine in accordance with normative gender discourses, so that others will read them as feminine on the night of the formal (Smith, 1990).

Both young women also experienced, or feared something going wrong with their dresses as they were being made. Shannon and Jessie stated they were also going to buy dresses in case they were unhappy with their finished dresses. I argue that the option of purchasing a ‘back up dress’ would not be available to girls who have less
financial capital and this highlights how social class can impact on formal preparations (Best, 2000).

Unfortunately, Vanessa (girls’ school) reported that she was unhappy with her dress when it was finished. I asked her how her parents were when she left for the formal and whether they made a fuss of her.

**Vanessa:** Oh well Mum did. I was actually really upset, I was really stressed out umm I was kind of crying (laughs), I hated, I hated my dress ‘cause I wanted my dress to be made and my Mum made my dress and she did a really good job and I, it was too low cut for me ‘cause I don’t wear low cut clothes and I just hated it, and I was like oh I was kind of getting real angry at my Mum but she wanted heaps of pictures, which made it even worse (laughs).

**Lee:** So you didn’t see your dress prior to that night?

**Vanessa:** I saw it, she finished it the night before so yeah, but I was too upset to do anything to it and that. I didn’t want to buy another dress because I know how much work went into it from my Mum, so it would be really rude if I didn’t wear it but it was alright yeah.

**Lee:** Were you a bit self-conscious?

**Vanessa:** Yeah I didn’t, I didn’t like… it was really low, like nothing was too revealing, but it was not what I’m used to.

Although Vanessa and her mother shopped for a dress pattern together, Vanessa was unhappy when saw the finished dress. Nevertheless, she appreciated her mother’s efforts and did not want to buy an alternative dress. These comments highlight how Vanessa is taking up the subject position of ‘nice’ girl. Part of what constitutes the prized form of girlhood is ‘niceness’ (Hey, 1997), which means girls should not be too assertive or express their anger outwardly (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005; Hey, 1997). Although in this instance Vanessa reports that she was angry with her mother, it is not clear whether she expresses this to her mother or not. In fact Vanessa’s comments that she was crying and upset when she saw the dress, suggests that she was internalising her anger. Since Vanessa does not ‘take out’ her anger on her
mother and does not let her emotions overtake her appreciation of her mother’s efforts, then I argue that she is performing the subject position of nice girl (Hey, 1997).

It is possible that Vanessa’s mother unintentionally made Vanessa’s dress too revealing and this was only evident when Vanessa tried on her dress. However, since the school formal is a site where young people are expected to produce themselves as exemplars of feminine heterosexuality (Epstein et al., 2000-2001), then Vanessa’s mother may have made her a “low cut” dress to construct her daughter as heterosexually alluring. Interestingly, Brown and Chesney-Lind (2005) argue that one way in which girls rebel against their parents’ control is through wearing revealing clothing that constitute them as “objects of male sexual desire” (p. 85). However, Vanessa’s comment that she prefers wearing clothing that conceals her body suggests that this is not always the case.

In addition, as they mature, young women soon come to realise that their bodies are beginning to be viewed in a sexual manner by men (Rossiter, 1994). Consequently, Bloustein (2003) argues that girls/young women conceal their bodies through clothing. Therefore, perhaps Vanessa felt self-conscious wearing a low cut dress to the formal because she feared her body being looked at in a sexual manner by men.

Skanks, sluts and dress choice.

Vanessa however, was not the only young woman who wore a low cut dress to the formal. When I conducted observations at the two formals I attended I noted how the majority of young women wore dresses that bared their upper chest, shoulders, arms and highlighted their cleavage. There are numerous reasons for why young women choose to wear formal dresses that reveal parts of the body, which are normally hidden (Best, 2000). These include a sense of pleasure in ‘showing off’ their bodies, or constructing themselves as sexually desirable feminine subjects, while others may do so because they feel such attire is the norm in this social setting (Best, 2000; also see Hey; 2007; Tay, 2007). However, a number of the female participants
made comments suggesting that young women must select a dress that does not show too much flesh otherwise they risk being labelled skanks by their peers. The peer researchers, or myself, asked our interviewees whether they thought young women or men were more likely to be judged on what they wear to the formal and who does the judging. Kaz and Sara (girls’ school) and Zelda and Grace (co-educational school) replied:

Kaz: I guess girls. If you’re wearing a really low cut top or a short skirt they’ll be just like oh skank, slut whatever.

Sarah: I think girls are because if someone like wore like a really revealing dress to the formal, where you’re meant to be wearing a ball gown they’d get judged as a skank.

Zelda: Guys do the judging on a level yeah I’ll bang her but girls do it on a level like oh she’s pretty blah, blah, blah she’s an ugly blah, blah, blah…

Grace: I think girls are judged more definitely and I think guys and girls do the judging.

Lee: What do you think girls are judged on?

Grace: How hot they look (both laugh) pretty much, you’ve got to get the balance between looking hot and looking kind of skanky, ‘cause yeah you can get criticised for looking skanky or ugly so you’ve got to get it just right (both laugh).

Lee: The balance between looking hot and skanky, would that be girls or boys doing that judging?

Grace: Oh I think it would be mainly boys for that one, but girls will definitely, girls bitch about someone who they think is looking quite skanky, but I don’t think many girls would criticise other girls for looking ugly it’s mainly the skanky thing, but guys will definitely rip into girls who they think are looking ugly.
There are multiple readings of these perspectives. Firstly, Grace explained that young men look at young women and rate them according to their physical attractiveness (‘hot’ versus ‘ugly’). Because of their dominant positioning in the “gender order” (Davies, 1990, p. 501) I argue that young men may feel entitled to gaze at young women at the formal and rank them according to their perceptions of the young women’s attractiveness (see Youdell, 2005). However, Zelda also states that young women judge each other on their physical appearance. Rossiter (1994) and Holland et al. (1998) state that because of the authoritativeness of the male gaze, young women come to internalise it and therefore Brown and Chesney-Lind (2005) contend that many young women evaluate each other in accordance with internalised masculine understandings of female attractiveness. As a result young women may categorise other young women according to internalised masculine perceptions of their physical attractiveness at the school formal (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005).

Secondly, in the above excerpt from Zelda, she explains that boys judge girls in regard to whether they “would like to bang” them or not. Such a comment implies that she thinks all boys look at girls in a sexual manner and are heterosexual. In making this statement Zelda is drawing on two traditional discourses; “boys want sex” (Giordano et al., 2006, p. 261) and the “male sex drive discourse” (Holloway, 1996, p. 85), which constitutes men as having a strong biological need to have sex (Holloway, 1996). It is interesting to contrast Zelda’s statement that boys judge girls on the basis of whether they want to have sex with them or not, and Kaz and Sarah’s comments that girls who wear clothing that is ‘too revealing’ are labelled skanks or sluts. It appears from the excerpt from Grace that young women are more likely to judge other young women as sluts on the basis of their dress. Kaz and Sarah’s comments imply that if a young woman did choose to wear ‘provocative clothing’ in an effort to attract a young man’s gaze (or perhaps another young woman’s gaze) then she would be subjected to societal policing. This attests to the differing codes that exist in society in regard to what is deemed socially appropriate dress and behaviour for males and females (Holland et al., 1996; 1998; Holloway, 1996; Smith, 2006).

Grace also suggests that boys and girls rank each other on a scale of being hot or “skanky”. However, Grace’s comments imply that boys judge girls more on their
‘looks’, whereas girls “bitch” about other girls if they look “skanky” or alternatively ‘slutty’. Bloustein (2003) explains how the term slut refers to a young woman who has acquired a reputation for being sexually promiscuous. However, Brown and Chesney-Lind (2005) point out that calling a young woman a slut frequently has little to do with her sexual practices. Instead they claim that it is a term young women frequently use against other young women who they consider “too different or too popular” (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005, p. 82), those who choose not to perform their gender in accordance with normative discourses of feminine passivity, or a “girl who is a threat” (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005, p. 82) to the young woman doing the labelling. They also explain that calling other young women sluts serves to reconstitute them “from a subject to an object [and] from girl to sexualised body” (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005, p. 82) while simultaneously permitting the labeller to construct herself as the epitome of “purity and goodness” (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005, p. 82). Therefore, it is possible that if young women are labelled sluts for wearing short skirts, low cut tops or dresses that are ‘too revealing’ to the formal, then the girl/s doing the labelling are constructing those girls as ‘others’ to their ‘wholesome’ femininity (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005).

**Young women judging other young womens’ outfits.**

Ellen (girls’ school) and Natasha (co-educational school) also suggested that girls actually dress for other girls and judge each other more harshly than boys.

**Ellen:** Girls definitely judge so much worse. The only, half the time we’re like, oh you don’t even dress up for boys, you dress up for girls because you don’t, you just wanna know what everyone else is wearing and what they look like, and do you look better or that doesn’t look good on her and that’s stereotypical, but it’s true.

**Natasha:** Probably girls more because girls tend to be more the judging sex than boys, ‘cause boys are just like yeah (laughs), but yeah I think girls judge each other more because that’s just natural jealousy or whatever you call it, you know that sort of thing.
There are numerous reasons for why Ellen and Natasha may assume that girls judge other girls’ dress and appearance at the formal more harshly than boys. Firstly, fashion and concern with appearance are aspects that are traditionally aligned with femininity (Entwistle, 2002a; 2002b; Jenkins, 2009). As a result, young women may evaluate each other’s formal attire because they wish to construct themselves as ‘fashionable’, thus highlighting their skills in this customary feminine practice (Entwistle, 2002a; 2000b).

Secondly, because of the authority of the male gaze, girls/women survey their appearance and actions in accordance with how they think others would perceive them (Rossiter, 1994). Since girls/women fear the embarrassment that results if they get their appearance or behaviour ‘wrong’, this anxiety may be deflected on to other girls/women (Rossiter, 1994). As a result, if young women do criticise the appearance of other young women at the formal, then perhaps they do so because of their own fear of ‘getting it wrong’.

Furthermore, in the above excerpt from Natasha, it is interesting to note how she perceives that young girls are “the judging sex” and girls are naturally jealous, to explain why they evaluate each other’s appearance more than boys do. Such a comment draws on pervasive societal discourages of girls being “‘nasty’, ‘catty’ and mean” (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005, p. 76) and always ready “to ‘take out’ their female competitors” (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005, p. 76). However, I contend that this is a stereotype that does not apply to all girls and that if young women do criticise other young women in relation to their dress sense, it is because they are bought up in a society that frequently “turns them against one another and against themselves” (Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005, p. 77).

Resisting the Normalised Hyper-Feminine Image at the Formal

However, not all the female participants reported that they purchased or had new dresses made for the formal. Sarah (co-educational school) said she bought a pre-loved dress from a ‘recycled clothing’ shop that was a “bit different but…not too
different”. Sarah’s comments indicate that she was deliberately marking her individuality through purchasing a second-hand dress (Best, 2000). Nevertheless, she was still buying into the expectation that she must choose a dress to “set herself apart” (Best, 2003, p. 412) from other young women.

Ellen (girls’ school) reported that she borrowed her formal dress off her friend and Sam (girls’ school) stated that she wore a dress that she already owned. Both young women said they did so because they did not want to spend money on an expensive dress that they may only wear once. Therefore, both Ellen and Sam resisted the construction of the school formal as a site for “feminine consumption” (Best, 2000, p. 55).

Sam (girls’ school) also resisted normative femininity when she chose not to wear make-up and spent little time on beauty work for the formal compared to her female counterparts. Jen, a peer researcher in the girls’ school, asked Sam what she did prior to the formal and Sam replied:

**Sam:** Before the formal I had a shower and got dressed and dealt with [names friend] when she came over and got dressed because she wanted to do my make-up and I said no.

**Jen:** So did you do the make-up or not?

**Sam:** No I didn’t (laughs).

**Jen:** I didn’t do my hair either, I just straightened it and everybody was saying it’s so boring, me and [names friend] were the only ones who straightened our hair.

**Jen:** How long did you spend getting ready?

**Sam:** Half an hour.

Smith (1990) argues that societal discourses of femininity do not have overarching authority to determine how women shape their appearances. She states that this is because “within discourse there is play and interplay” (Smith, 1990, p. 203) and women are agentic in how they take up or resist normative discourses of femininity. In stating this however, I wish to add that since the majority of women desire to be
viewed as ‘normal’ feminine subjects then their decisions are actually constrained by societal discourses of femininity (Jones, 1993). Since hair and make-up are signifiers of desirable femininity (Dellinger & Williams, 1997; Weitz, 2001) then Sam’s actions suggest that she has no desire to use the formal as a site to consolidate her femininity (Best, 2003).

Boys’ Body Work Practices

In contrast to the extensive amounts of time, energy and money the majority of the female participants reported spending on preparations for the formal, most male participants said that they got ready for the formal by having a shower, a shave and putting various products in their hair, before getting into their tuxedos. Interestingly Bob, a peer researcher from the boys’ school had his brother take the following snapshot of him shaving in preparation for the formal. Bob told me that he did prepare for the formal in this way, but the photograph was staged for my benefit.

Figure 1: Bob preparing for the formal

In the photo-elicitation interview I conducted with Bob I asked him what was happening in this image and how it showed gendered behaviour. He said: “I’m having a shave. I think it’s obviously gendered behaviour because I certainly don’t know if females shave (laughs) in the face as much as men do that”.
I provide two readings of this snapshot and Bob’s explanation of the photograph. Firstly, since facial hair has traditionally defined men as male, then Bob may have posed in a manner suggesting that he was shaving in the above photograph, to portray to me, as the viewer of the image, that he is a male subject (Fisher, 2001). Secondly, the ability to grow facial hair is traditionally seen as denoting that a male has become sexually mature (Campbell et al., 2005; Fisher, 2001). By imitating the act of ‘shaving’ in the mirror (with his shirt off), then Bob may be endeavouring to constitute himself as a sexually developed adult male for my benefit.

Bob and the majority of the other male participants also stated that they had a hair cut for the formal. Travis, a peer researcher at the co-educational school asked The Frenchman whether he thought it was more important for a girl or a boy to make an impression with what they wear to the formal. The Frenchman said:

**Frenchman:** No not really…pretty much everyone wants to make an impression, why do you think I’m cutting my hair?

**Travis:** So why is it important to make a good impression?

**Frenchman:** I don’t know just, it’s a formal, I mean I know it’s supposed to be you know well you have to be well dressed and that kind of thing so…it’s the formal plus it’s like always this competition between friends to look the best so it’s one of those things.

Despite The Frenchman stating that getting his hair cut for the formal was to make a good impression, I suggest other reasons for why The Frenchman and the majority of the other male participants had their hair cut for the formal. Firstly, the school formal is a space where young men are expected to construct themselves as exemplars of heterosexual masculinity (Epstein et al., 2000-2001). In his research into young masculinities in England, Mac An Ghaill (2000a) reports that a group of males associated short hair with masculinity and long hair with femininity. Consequently, many of the male participants may have had their hair cut for the formal because they wanted to embody hegemonic masculinity for the formal. It is also possible however, that many boys simply got a haircut because they wanted to look tidy for the formal.
It is also interesting to note how The Frenchman suggests that because there is competition between friends to look the best at the formal, it is therefore important for some young men to make an impression. In the literature reporting on the school formal/prom, there is mention of young women competing with each other in regard to securing dates and/or dresses for the event, yet there is nothing regarding young men competing with each other to look the best on the night (Best, 2000; Chateau, 1990). The Frenchman’s comments indicate that some young men, like some young women, also compete with each other regarding appearance.

**Boys who spend time on their appearance for the formal.**

Despite the majority of male participants reporting that they did not spend large amounts of time preparing for the formal, Mark (boys’ school) and Travis (co-educational school) did. I asked Mark if he was going to prepare for the formal in any other way apart from dressing nicely and he said that he was: “Going a wee bit to the gym before (laughs)...to look nice and sharp (laughs)”. In the literature reporting on the prom/school formal there are mentions of young women going on diets or going to the gym so they feel they can look ‘their best’ in their formal/prom dresses; however, there is no mention of young men engaging in such behaviours (Best, 2000; 2003; Chateau, 1990). Mark’s comments highlight how some young men do indeed engage in bodywork practices so they can look good at the formal.

Furthermore, Western societal discourses constitute the ideal male body as muscular, fit and strong, with the most muscular men being viewed as the most masculine and sexually desirable (McCabe, et al., 2006; Rohlinger, 2002). Therefore Mark may go to the gym to construct his body as an exemplar of strong and sexually desirable masculinity for the formal, and not simply as he says, to look “nice and sharp” for the event (Epstein et al., 2000-2001).

Travis (co-educational school), like Mark, also reported that he put a lot of time and energy into his formal preparations. I asked him how he got ready for the formal and he said:
Travis: Well it really started, I mean you know when I woke up on Saturday morning, I started doing stuff like making sure my suit was ready, making sure I had spare clothes and started packing my bag for what was going to happen at the formal, and before the formal, and I did all my stuff like you know put lots and lots of stuff in my hair, like all moisturiser stuff, yeah probably spent a lot more time than a lot of the girls who I knew [were] going there (both laugh).

Lee: So do you think that was quite unusual for you to spend quite a lot of time on your appearance because that’s something your typical bloke would do?

Travis: I normally try to spend enough time on my appearance and it was the fact that I had a day to kind of do it and it was, that was really cool, yeah it was just getting the hair ready, getting the face ready.

In recent decades, male fashion magazines (Bakewell et al., 2006) and male beauty products (such as men’s moisturisers, cosmetics and scents) have emerged (Harrison, 2008). The advertisements in men’s magazines and advertisements for male beauty products encourage men to focus on their appearance (Bakewell et al., 2006; Harrison, 2008). Recent decades have also seen the emergence of the metrosexual, which is a term used to refer to men who are interested in fashion and their appearance (Harrison, 2008). Because of the emergence of metrosexuals, changes in advertising (for example famous sportsmen promoting fashionable clothing) and retail patterns (men shopping), it is becoming more common and acceptable for young men aged between 18 and 25 to spend time, energy and money on their appearance than in earlier decades (Bakewell et al., 2006; Harrison, 2008). This may be the reason why Travis explained that spending a whole day grooming and putting energy into ‘looking good’ for the formal was “cool”. Travis’s comment that it was “cool” spending time on his appearance, also suggests that some young men may experience pleasure engaging in beauty work.

Bob (boys’ school) and Hungus (female, co-educational school), however, made the following comments about young men who do spend time and energy preparing for the formal:
**Bob:** I guess that’s, males take bugger all time to get ready for something like [the formal] unless they’re like pretty boys from [names boy’s school] (laughs)…

**Hungus** (female): I seriously doubt that guys spend as much time as girls do [preparing for the formal] and if they do it’s really funny (both laugh).

Bob’s comment that young men who spend time on their formal preparations are “pretty boys” and Hungus’s statement that it would be funny if young men spent the same amount of time on their appearance as girls, indicate that they both view young men who are invested in their appearance as performing an inferior form of masculinity (Jenkins, 2009). Bob and Hungus’s comments also serve to police normative discourses of gender because they reinforce the notion that young women should be more focused, and perhaps also judged more, on their physical appearance than young men (Bakewell et al., 2006; Bordo, 1993a; Harrison, 2008).

**The Tuxedo**

Unlike the female participants who primarily bought or had their formal dresses made, all of the male participants (except Simon (boys’ school) who had part of a suit at home) said they were hiring tuxedos for the formal. I asked the male participants whether it is more important for girls or boys to make an impression with their formal attire and most of the young men said it was more important for girls because boys usually wear the same general attire. However, Bob (boys’ school) went on to explain:

**Bob:** …it’s almost like males will wear a suit, a jacket, maybe wear a vest or a shirt or a tie or a shirt or long trousers and normally they’d be black, normally, some people, the odd year some of us may get white or the red suit or the pink, well not a pink suit, or the blue suit or what have you, they’re the individuals that would think yeah why not let’s go for it, but most guys will wear a black suit whereas… females because there isn’t really a, baseline sort of thing for
females dresses can vary from whether it finishes at the knee or whether it
goes down to the ankle, or whether one side goes down to the ankle and has
like a slight incline up to the knee or something like that... [if] it’s strapless,
non-strapless, the colour, the shape, whatever, there’s a lot of different sorts
of variations that the female can put into a dress that they wear to a formal,
whereas guys will wear something almost, there’s a baseline for males,
whereas there isn’t one for females.

Lee: Why do you think that guys have a baseline?

Bob: Argh... because it’s too easy for a guy to look like an idiot (laughs)
probably ‘cause umm if you wear the wrong thing like, when I went to
[names girl’s school] formal my partner was in a pink dress and I wore a pink
tie just to go with it and I kept getting shit because I was wearing a pink tie
and pink’s not really a masculine sort of colour. I think it’s more to do with
stereotypes, there’s a stereotypical nature to what a guy should wear, whereas,
I mean a female if she wanted to could wear a suit like a male, but a guy
couldn’t wear a dress it’s not the same. Guys dressing up as females it’s
laughable, you point and you take the, you rip the living daylights out of them
it’s so funny, but a girl dressing up like a guy I mean who cares, so the guy
has to dress masculine, whereas a female has a lot wider range with what she
can do with what she wears, if that makes sense?

I pose a number of reasons for why, as Bob explains, men have a ‘baseline’ for their
formal dress, which consists of a black suit, shirt, long trousers, a tie and a vest.
Firstly, Wilson (1990) explains that prior to the 1800s affluent men wore make-up,
“high heels and brightly coloured silks and satin” (p. 69). However, the late 1800s
saw the emergence of dandies who were men focused on transforming traditional
male attire (Wilson, 1990). Due to the impact of dandies, by the 19th century
masculinity “became associated with sombre dress” (Wilson, 1990. p. 69) and came
to mark a man as sophisticated and chic. By the nineteenth century brightly colourful
clothing also became “coded as irredeemably effeminate, and associated with
homosexuality” (Wilson, 1990. p. 69). Consequently, by wearing ‘sombre attire’ to
the formal (black suits, long trousers, shirts, vests and ties) the majority of young men
mark themselves as elegant masculine subjects in accordance with contemporary
dress codes (Wilson, 1990). Furthermore, since coloured dress is historically linked with homosexuality and effeminacy, then the majority of boys may wear traditional black suits to the formal to ensure they are not labelled as ‘gay’ or ‘girls’ (Jenkins, 2009; Wilson, 1990).

Jenkins (2009) also argues that “New Zealand men dress tribally rather than individually [and] few dress to maximise the opportunities for individual expression” (p. 24). Therefore, the majority of young men may wear black suits to the formal in an effort to mark their solidarity with their male peers (Jenkins, 2009).

Bob also explains that he “kept getting shit” at the school formal the previous year because he chose to wear a pink tie that matched his formal partner’s dress. Jenkins (2009) argues that traditional colours associated with masculine dress in New Zealand are “blacks, browns, blues and grays” (p. 24). In contemporary society, pink is a colour that is associated with femininity, but this has not always been the case (Entwistle, 2000; Wilson, 2005). Therefore, I argue that the people who harassed Bob for wearing a pink tie may have done so because they viewed him as failing to perform his gender in accordance with normative discourses of hegemonic masculinity because he chose to wear a ‘girlie colour’ (Jenkins, 2009). Their harassment serves to police normative discourses of hegemonic masculinity and the limited range of colours that are acceptable for males to wear in New Zealand society (Jenkins, 2009).

Furthermore, Bob suggests that if girls wear male suits to a formal then no one cares, but if a boy wore a dress then he would be laughed at. I argue that there are a number of reasons for why this may be the case. Firstly, if a boy wears a dress he may be viewed as performing an inferior version of masculinity (Barrett, 1997). This is because he is choosing to wear clothing constituted as feminine in Western societies (Entwistle, 2000a) and is thereby constructing himself as a feminine male rather than a ‘manly man’. Since girls/women are more likely to be socially accepted for performing ‘tomboyishness’ or masculinity than boys/men who perform ‘sissiness’ (for want of a better term) or femininity (Carr, 1998; Epstein, 1997b; Wyss, 2004) then boys/men are less likely to be accepted for wearing dresses compared to
girls/women who wear male suits. Furthermore, Western societies try to “eradicate feminine characteristics in boys and men” (Wyss, 2004, p. 710) and therefore a male who wears a dress to the formal may be ridiculed or assaulted by his peers for choosing to wear traditional feminine attire.

Secondly, as reported in Chapter Two, Butler (1999) argues that in order to be read as “intelligibly human” (p. xxiii) a subject’s gender performance must match with their biological sex, that is, a male must be masculine and a female feminine. However, if a young man wears a dress, he is not performing his gender in accordance with his biological sex, since dresses are constructed as female attire in Western societies (Butler, 1999; 2003; Entwistle, 2000a). In wearing a dress a young man also highlights how femininity does not necessarily have to correspond to a female body and can be performed by a male, which in turn threatens the binary construction of gender and sex (Butler, 1999; also see Smith, 2006). Perhaps because a young man wearing a dress threatens the binaries of masculinity/femininity and male/female, as well as the tie between sex and gender, then his peers may laugh at him because they cannot read him as a comprehensible person within the framework of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1999; also see Smith, 2006).

**Girls control what boys wear**

Eight out of eleven male participants also said that they were going to co-ordinate what they were wearing to the formal with their partner’s dress. For example, when I asked Dean, Jackson and Simon (boys’ school) what they were going to wear and if they were going to co-ordinate with their partners they reported that:

**Dean:** I’ve already decided what to wear it’s based on her dress. I usually base it on the partner’s dress or have something that matches the partner’s dress.

**Lee:** Yep. Could you explain what...?

**Dean:** Well she’s got a black shiny dress with pink on it. I’m not sure ‘cause she won’t tell me so I thought I’ll go with everything black besides the tie, which will be pink, which will match the dress and her corsage will be pink also.
Lee: And you haven’t seen the dress?
Dean: No, I’m not allowed to.
Lee: But how can you co-ordinate if you can’t see it?
Dean: I have to ask the colours of it. She was willing to give me, she said it’s black with little pink patches on it and that’s all I’m allowed to be told according to her, I have to find that out on the night.

Lee: So have you got any idea what your formal partner will be wearing?
Jackson: I got told a black dress.
Lee: A black dress, so are you going to co-ordinate with her or anything?
Jackson: Ah probably yeah, I’m getting a picture in a couple of days, I think yeah ‘cause you don’t want to be turning up in different colours, that might look funny.

Lee: So are you going to co-ordinate with her?
Simon: Yeah ‘cause some people don’t, but it looks kind of silly so you co-ordinate as much as you can be stuffed.
Lee: Do you know what she’s wearing already?
Simon: Yeah it’s… I’m trying to persuade her to go for the black and white dress ‘cause it would go better, otherwise it’s blue and then you know you’ve got blue and you’ve got blue so it’s hard to match them up and stuff.

Best (2003) explains that in the United States, young women will often choose suits for their male partners or exercise their influence over his choice of prom attire. She argues that young women can demonstrate their fashion sense and “express their feminine skills” (Best, 2003, p. 414) by selecting a suit that looks good on their male date and one that co-ordinates with their own dress. In this way, “Boys’ bodies, in addition to girls’ bodies, signify meaningful sites for the display and management of femininity at the prom” (Best, 2003, p. 414).

In the above excerpts all three male participants were going to co-ordinate their formal outfits with their female dates’ dresses. Although the young women do not explicitly tell the male participants which suit they should hire for the formal, I argue that by showing them a picture of their dress or telling them the colours of their
dresses so they can co-ordinate their suits, the young women heavily influenced their partner’s choice of suit (Best, 2003). Consequently, I argue that young women to some extent do use boys’ bodies to express their own feminine competencies (Best, 2000; 2003).

Furthermore, in the binary construction of gender, masculinity is constituted as the more dominant partner (Davies, 2000; Holland et al., 1998). However, since concern with fashion and appearance are socially constructed as a feminine domain, then I argue that young women are able to exert their ‘control’ over young men in this field (Entwistle, 2002a; 2002b; Jenkins, 2009). In the above excerpts the male participants said that they are endeavoring to co-ordinate their outfits with their female partners’ dresses, even though they had not seen the dresses. Simon also explains that he was trying to persuade his formal partner to go for a black and white dress instead of a blue dress, because selecting a suit that co-ordinates with her blue dress is complicated since there are numerous shades of blue. The male participants’ comments convey that when it comes to selecting formal outfits women are able to exercise ‘authority’ over men, despite their ‘less dominant’ positioning in the “gender order” (Davies, 1990, p. 501).

**Boys expressing their individuality through their dress.**

Despite being told that all the male participants were wearing black suits and observing the majority of young men wearing black tuxedos at the two formals I attended, a small number wore red, blue or white suits. At the boys’ school formal I noted one boy wearing a bright pink suit. However, when I asked Simon (boys’ school) if he thought any boys stood out in regard to what they wore to the formal he said:

Oh [names high profile boy] because he looked so good in his white hat and his pink suspenders and stuff and [the boy in the pink suit] stood out but he looked kind of silly because he wasn’t, you know he wasn’t quite cool enough to pull it off like you know… yeah you’ve gotta be, yeah like most guys can’t wear a pink shirt otherwise it just looks silly. I’d say I’d look kind of dumb in
a pink shirt, but some guys can wear a pink suit and make it look good and
[names the boy in the pink suit] was not one of those guys. He can’t wear a
pink suit and make it look good. He stood out, but not in a good way (laughs).

Simon’s comments suggest that young men who have high levels of sub-cultural
capital and a prominent profile in the school can wear pink and “make it look good”,
while boys with low levels can not (Thornton, 1995).

A number of the male participants, including Simon, also added accessories to
their black tuxedos to individualise their suits. For example Simon describes what he
wore to the formal:

**Simon:** Michael Jackson gloves ‘cause they’re cool. I originally thought
[names his date] was going to have a black and white dress so I decided to go
black and white so I’ve got a black shirt at home and a white tie, I got the
waistcoat, got the pants, got the shoes, I decided to get out the scarf because I
thought it would look cool and the gloves because that’d be cool and made
sure we were all wearing the stunners and the scarf didn’t work well in the
end. It looked kind of dumb, but the gloves were cool so yeah.

At the formal I noted that Simon wore one white sparkly glove in the mould of
Michael Jackson and a shiny white satin scarf. He also wore a pair of black stunners
(or sunglasses) to the formal, which were worn for aesthetic purposes since the formal
was at night and took place inside. I also noted some young men wore red, blue and
white suits, tailcoats, gloves and hats at the two formals where I conducted
observations. In New Zealand, Jenkins (2009) states that the majority of men dress
like ‘slobs’ and have no interest in fashion or their appearance. However, Simon’s
excerpt highlights how he desired to make a fashionable or ‘cool’ impression with his
formal outfit. In fact all of the male participants in this research study expressed a
wish to look good in what they wore to the formal, which is in contrast to Jenkin’s
(2009) assertion that New Zealand men have little interest in fashion or their
appearance.
Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the participants’ formal preparations. The majority of female participants said that they thought they, and other young women, would spend more time and energy on beauty and body work for the formal than their male peers. The majority of female participants did spend considerably more time and effort on their formal preparations than the majority of male participants. I argued that this is because the school formal is constituted as a “feminine space” (Best, 2003, p. 405) and women are judged more on their physical appearance than men (Bordo, 1993a). The female participants in the girls’ school reported that they primarily had their beauty work done by professionals, whereas the majority of young women in the co-educational school said their female friends did their hair, nails and make-up for the formal. I contend that because young women in the co-educational school mainly attended the formal with male friends from school as their partners, while the single-gender nature of the girls’ school meant young women in the girls’ school had to ask young men from outside of the school to be their partners, then young women in the girls’ school were more likely than young women in the co-educational school to have their beauty work done professionally in order to make a particular impression on their dates.

A number of female participants also talked about how shopping for a perfect formal dress that marked them as individuals, while simultaneously emphasising their figure, was a time consuming task (Best, 2000). However, the majority of young women reported that their mothers and grandmothers made their formal dresses, thus highlighting how female relatives are key figures in young women’s formal preparations (Best, 2000). The female participants were expected to choose their dresses carefully because if they were too revealing, then young women will be called skanks or sluts by their peers. Two female participants also suggested that young women dress for other young women because they are the “harshest critics” (Rossiter, 1994, p. 10).

In contrast to all the other female participants, one young woman chose not to wear make-up or spend considerable amounts of time preparing for the formal. Since
young women live in a society “that treats the surface of the body as central to expressing the feminine self” (Best, 2003, p. 198) and hair and make up are key signifiers of femininity (Barnes, 2001; Blaise, 2005), then this young woman was resisting the cultural assumption that young women will construct themselves as exemplars of heterosexual femininity for the school formal (Best, 2000; Epstein et al., 2000-2001). One female participant also stated that she was wearing a dress that she borrowed from a friend and another said she was wearing a dress that she already owned. These young women were resisting the construction of the school formal as a site for female consumption (Best, 2000; 2003).

The male participants generally reported that they spent less time preparing for the formal than girls, with the majority stating they had a shower, put various products in their hair, and put on their hired tuxedos. However, two male participants did state that they put considerable time and energy into preparing for the formal. This highlights how young men are not a homogeneous group who prepare for the formal in the same way. It also highlights how some boys are just as concerned with their appearance as some girls. Nevertheless, two participants made comments that pathologised young men who did spend a lot in preparation, which polices the societal expectation that (heterosexual) men should not be as interested in their appearance as women (Bordo, 1993a; Entwistle, 2000a; 2000b; Jenkins, 2009).

The majority of male participants commented that they had their haircut for the formal. Since the school formal is a site where young men are expected to produce themselves as exemplary heterosexual masculine subjects, and since long hair is traditionally aligned with femininity, then the young men may have had a haircut for the formal in an effort to embody discourses of hegemonic masculinity (Epstein et al., 2000-2001; Mac An Ghaill, 2000; Rohlinger, 2002).

All but one of the male participants also stated that they were hiring tuxedos for the formal. The majority of male participants reported that they chose to wear black tuxedos and I contend that this was because this ‘sombre’ form of clothing marks them as elegant masculine subjects (Wilson, 1990). Furthermore, when boys did wear pink, a colour associated with femininity, then they were subjected to harassment, except for boys who had high-levels of sub-cultural capital, who could
wear whatever they wanted because of their high social standing (Thornton, 1995; Wilson, 1990).

Despite the majority of participants wearing the same general black tuxedos to the formal, a number of the male participants did individualise their suits through wearing various accessories. This highlights how some young men wish to make an impression, even though the formal is constructed as a feminine site (Best, 2000).

The majority of male participants also said that they were co-ordinating their formal outfits with their female partners’ dresses, even though they were endeavouring to do so without seeing their partner’s dress. I contend that because concern with fashion is constructed as a feminine and not a masculine pre-occupation, then young women are able to exercise considerable ‘authority’ over young men in this area despite their ‘less dominant’ positioning in the binary construction of gender (Entwistle, 2000a; 2002b; Jenkins, 2009). However, perhaps because of the more authoritative positioning of masculinity in the gendered binary (Youdell, 2005) at the two school formals where I conducted observations I noted how young men controlled ‘public space’ at the formal venue itself through a variety of means, which will be discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter 8: Sexuality and Gendered Space at the Formal

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the major themes that emerged from my observations at the boys’ and co-educational school formals, which provide information on how formal goers performed their gender and sexuality at the formal. I also detail a number of dominant themes that presented in the photographs taken by the peer researchers at the boys’ school formal. As part of negotiating research at the participating girls’ school, however, I agreed not to conduct observations at the school formal and the peer researchers did not take photographs at the event.

In some Hollywood films, Best (2000) states that the prom is depicted as a special night where young people (mainly young men) lose their virginity. In this research study, however, none of the participants mentioned this assumption in relation to the school formal. Nevertheless, when I conducted observations at the boys’ and co-educational school formals, sexuality emerged as a pervasive theme, but it had little to do with sexual exchanges between students. In the first section of the chapter I analyse how teachers engaged in sexualised behaviours with their students or made sexual jokes about their student’s formal partners in order to construct themselves as legitimate masculine/feminine subjects. I also examine how teachers or other adults who were at the school formal in an official capacity worked to police traditional discourses of heterosexuality.

In the second section of this chapter I discuss my observations of young men engaging in “bodily displays of homophobia” (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p. 219) at both school formals I attended. Peer researchers at the boys’ school also made references to homosexuality when discussing the content of photographs they had taken at the formal.

In the final section of this chapter, I explore the theme of ‘gendered space’ at the formal. I discuss a conversation that I overheard while conducting observations at the boys’ school formal and a photograph taken by a peer researcher at the boys’
school formal that highlighted how young men ‘controlled’ ‘public’ space at the formal by engaging in “bodily performances” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 83) of hegemonic masculinity. I observed young women congregating in the ‘private’ space of the women’s toilets at both formals and I propose a number of explanations for why they may have done this. Finally, two snapshots taken by a peer researcher at the boys’ school formal, which depict young men and women occupying different amounts of space as they engaged in the ‘everyday’ practice of eating at the formal are analysed.

Sexual Exchanges Between Teachers and Students at the Formal

In schools, teachers are traditionally viewed as being devoid of a sexual persona (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Youdell, 2004). However, at the boys’ school formal, I observed the following:

Two female teachers were dancing when a boy came up behind them. The boy grabbed the younger of the two teachers from behind around the waist and pressed his body into her back. The boy started to rub his groin against the teacher’s backside in time to the music. The teacher, smiling, turned around and then began to ‘grind’ her pelvis with the student’s. After about twenty seconds of doing this, the boy walked off without saying anything to the teacher. The teacher returned to dancing with her female colleague a few moments later. (Field notes, 2008)

Epstein (1997a) argues that in order to be read as legitimately feminine in society, a woman must be sexually desirable to men. When the male student approaches the teacher and rubs his crotch against her, he is constituting her as (hetero)sexually desirable and therefore a valid feminine subject (Youdell, 2005). Perhaps because the teacher feels her heterosexual feminine status is legitimated by the young man’s sexualised body contact, she smiles and responds to his contact (Youdell, 2005).

It is interesting to note that the young man simply takes it for granted that he can come up behind the teacher and rub his crotch against her. Because of the
authoritative positioning of masculinity in the gender binary then the male student may feel free to engage in such sexualised behaviour with his female teacher in this space outside of school (Youdell, 2005).

By rubbing his crotch against the teacher, the student is also constructing his body “as active and capable, entitled and authoritative” (Youdell, 2005, p. 257) while simultaneously constituting the teacher as a sex object and her body as the passive recipient of his sexual/physical urges. However, by turning around and ‘grinding’ pelvises with the student, it can also be argued that the teacher is in fact thwarting the societal “requirement for the feminine body to at once defer to and fear the strength and authority of the masculine body” (Youdell, 2005, p. 263). The teacher’s reciprocation of the boys’ sexualised movements can be seen as agentic because it is a refusal to let the male student use her body as a passive vehicle for his own pleasure (Youdell, 2005). Perhaps because the student was expecting the teacher to protest his actions rather than reciprocate them, he soon walks away (Youdell, 2005).

At the boys’ school formal I also overheard two male teachers make the following sexual comments about young women at the formal:

The first teacher was looking around at the girls in their outfits and was asked a question by one of his colleagues. He said that he was “too busy perving at the moment” to answer the teacher, which was met with laughter from the other staff members at the table. A second male teacher was being teased by a female teacher for looking at the young women and he responded with “why eat out when you can eat at home”, which was also met with laughter by his colleagues. (Field notes, 2008)

These two comments highlight how the male teachers, like male students, construct their heterosexual masculinity through objectifying and making sexist jokes about young women at the formal (Epstein, 1997b; Lyman, 2001; Paechter, 2007; Skelton, 2001). Furthermore, the second teacher’s remark “why eat out when you can eat at home” is full of sexual innuendo possibly implying that he engages in oral sex with his wife (who was sitting next to him at the table). The comment may also be read as a metaphor to highlight how the male teacher was satisfied with the sexual component
of his marriage. Nevertheless, as highlighted in Chapter Two, heterosexual sex-talk is one way in which males consolidate their masculinity (Best, 2000; Kehily, 2002). Here I argue that by making jokes alluding to his sexual practices, the male teacher is consolidating his masculine status (Best, 2000; Kehily, 2002; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Skelton, 2001).

I also noted that none of the staff members who were sitting at the table challenged the two male teachers’ objectifying remarks/sexist jokes (Field notes, 2008). Lyman (2001) explains that men make sexist jokes in the presence of women in order to connect with other males. Perhaps the male staff members laughed at their male colleagues’ sexually objectifying comments to consolidate their ‘in group’ masculine status (Lyman, 2001). Yet the female teachers who were sitting at the table also laughed (Field notes, 2008). Since the male gaze is such an authoritative force in society (Holland et al., 1998; Rossiter, 1994), the female teachers may view the male teachers’ sexual jokes as normal and therefore they joined in the laughter. It is also possible however, that the female teachers feigned laughter because it was too difficult to challenge their male colleagues’ objectifying comments on this occasion.

In schools, Kehily (2002) argues that certain boundaries exist in regard to sexuality, which include; “teacher/pupil; public/private [and] adult/child” (p. 53), which determine those sexualised practices that are considered socially acceptable versus those that are deemed morally suspect. When the female teacher reciprocates the male student’s sexualised body movements and the two male teachers’ make sexist and objectifying remarks about young women at the formal, they challenge these three binaries. Perhaps they do so because the school formal is a non-compulsory school sponsored social event (Best, 2000) and therefore they do not feel these boundaries need to be so rigidly enforced in this setting compared with school itself. However, Wolpe (1988) explains that teachers frequently use “aspects of sexuality in the course of maintaining classroom control” (p. 128) and some teachers also deem it acceptable to flirt with their students. Furthermore, Epstein and Johnson (1998) state that “laddishness is often used between boys/young men and teachers to establish their relationships as men, to get the boys on the teacher’s side and, simultaneously, to control the girls/young women (and even women teachers) through the process of objectification” (pp. 125-126). Therefore, rather than seeing the
teachers’ sexualised comments and behaviour as unique to the social setting of the formal, I argue that they highlight how sexuality is often a shaping force in the interactions between teachers and their students (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Mac An Ghaill, 2000b; Wolpe, 1988).

**Policing ‘Traditional’ Gendered Discourses of Sexuality**

Despite the above incidents, Epstein and Johnson (1994) explain that in high schools it is more usual for teachers to discourage students from engaging in sexual activity. In high school sexuality education classes, young people are also encouraged to abstain from sex and they are taught traditional discourses of sexuality, which construct women as sexually passive and devoid of sexual desire, in opposition to active and potentially dangerous male sexuality (Allen, 2003; Charles, 2004; Chambers et al. 2004; Fine, 1992; Munro, 2000; Quinlivan & Town, 1999). During my observations at the boys’ school formal I noted how teachers and other adults who were at the formal in an official capacity drew upon and reproduced these traditional discourses of sexuality.

In a conversation I had with the teachers who were sitting at the teachers’ table at the boys’ school formal I said that I had seen a number of girls fixing their dresses with safety pins in the toilets. One of the female teachers then made the following comment:

> Even at junior dances thirteen year old girls are very forward and wear extremely revealing costumes. She said that some girls at junior dances wear such revealing costumes that they literally glue them onto their bodies. She also said ‘girls are so forward nowadays that boys are scared of them’. (Field notes, 2008)

In claiming that young women are “forward nowadays”, the teacher is constructing young women as sexual agents, which is not a subject position that is usually taken up by young women (Best, 2000; Chambers et al., 2004; Fine, 1992; Holland et al, 1994; 1996; Munro, 2000; Smith, 2006). Since the young women perform their gender
outside of normative discourses of passive femininity (Quinlivan & Town, 1999), the teacher’s comment about boys being scared, serves to pathologise young women’s sexual agency (Fine, 1992; Smith, 2006). It also reinscribes “male domination in sexual encounters” (Holland et al., 1994, p. 27) because it implies that the only ones who should initiate sexual activity are boys. However, another reading suggests that sexually assertive young women do challenge male authority in heterosexual sexual encounters so much so that young men are scared of them.

The teacher’s statements also indicate that she may be experiencing some anxiety about young women initiating and having sexual encounters at the age of thirteen. However, in a study of the sexual activities of a cohort of men and women born in New Zealand in 1972, Dickson et al. (1998) found that 28% of their 469 male participants and 32% of their 457 female participants reported having sexual intercourse before the legal age of consent, which is sixteen in New Zealand. Dickson et al. (1998) also report that the average age for first sexual intercourse is sixteen for young women and seventeen for young men, but young people are having sexual experiences at earlier ages than in past generations. Consequently, although the female teacher may be concerned about young women initiating sex at an early age, her apprehension appears out of step with contemporary New Zealand society, in which a third of young women in New Zealand have sex before they are 16 (Dickson et al., 1998). Perhaps the teacher’s apprehension is based on wider cultural discourses of sexuality, which encourage girls/women to be passive in sexual encounters and hold off engaging in sexual activity until they are of an ‘appropriate age’ (Fine, 1992; Leahy, 1994; Youdell, 2005).

The teacher’s comment also indicates her assumption that young women who wear “revealing costumes” to the junior dance do so for the benefit of young men. However, young women may also wear provocative costumes for the pleasure they receive in dressing up, the pleasure they receive in showing off their bodies to their classmates, friends and/or young men (Best, 2000). It appears, however, that because the school formal, like the prom in the United States, reinforces heteronormativity and emphasised femininity (Epstein et al., 2000-2001) where male desires are supposed to take precedence over female desires (Connell, 1987), these readings are less available in this setting.
At the boys’ school formal I also had a conversation with the head bouncer\(^\text{16}\) in which he, like the teacher mentioned above, drew on and reinscribed traditional discourses of (hetero)sexuality. I was writing my observations on the staircase leading into the venue, when the bouncer mistook me for a student and came out to tell me off since students were not permitted to be on the stairs. I told him that I was there because I was doing a research study on school formals and he said that:

He had been to numerous school formals because of his position as security guard. He also said that girls get extremely drunk at school formals as well as after parties. He explicitly told me to write down in my notebook, that girls need to be careful when they drink because they are with a bunch of sixteen and seventeen year old boys who are full of hormones. (Field notes, 2008)

The bouncer’s comments suggest that young women need to be careful when they drink because they run the risk of being sexually assaulted or raped. Although being drunk and vulnerable to sexual assault is a very real concern for young women, the bouncer appears to attribute the blame for any unwanted sexual activity to young women themselves for being drunk in the first place (Gavey, 2005).

Furthermore, when the bouncer claims that sixteen and seventeen year old boys are ‘hormonally driven’, he is drawing on what Hollway (1996) calls the traditional “male sex drive discourse” (p. 86). Hollway (1996) explains that central to this discourse is the notion that men are compelled by a strong “biological drive” (p. 86) to have sex. By stating that boys are hormonally driven, the bouncer is implying that boys are not always able to control their biological urges to have sex (Hollway, 1996). Therefore, he frames any unwanted sexual advances boys might make towards intoxicated girls as a ‘natural occurrence’, rather than sexual assault against young women who are unable to give their consent (Gavey, 2005).

\(^{16}\) Bouncer is an alternative term for a security guard.
‘Homo-sexuality’ and Homophobia at the Formal

At the co-educational school formal I introduced myself to the professional photographer and told him that I was undertaking research on school formals to explain my presence at the event. After conducting observations at the formal for approximately an hour and a half the photographer came over to me and said:

You can tell that this school “is a bit different with the whole lesbian dynamic”. There are girls “grabbing each other’s bits and having full on lip pashes”. He said there were “at least three lesbian couples” doing this open mouth kissing and fondling. (Field notes, 2008)

I was surprised by the photographer’s comment because I did not tell him that I was concentrating my study on gender and sexuality performances at the formal, and his comments had direct relevance to my project. Since the photographer did not know that I was researching these aspects, commenting on the young women’s same sex sexual practices highlights how important he felt it was to mention the students’ ‘unusual’ behaviour.

I also noted, however, that the photographer did not mention that “male and female students were [also] kissing and touching each other’s backsides when they were dancing, as well as [when] waiting in line to have their photographs taken” (Field notes, 2008). I contend that this is because the school formal, like the prom in North America is a “hyper-heterosexualised” (Grace & Wells, 2005, p. 248) event and therefore he considers it normal for young men and women to kiss and touch each other in a sexual manner.

Although, I did not personally see any female students engaging in the practices mentioned by the photographer, I pose two readings of the photographer’s comments. Firstly, his statement that there is a “lesbian dynamic” at the formal suggests that he sees the school as actively accepting, but perhaps also encouraging queer sexual practices (Quinlivan, 2002b). This is consistent with comments made by
two participants in Quinlivan’s (2002b) research into the strategy one New Zealand secondary school utilised to accommodate the needs of its queer students, which suggested that any school seen as openly “meeting the needs of its lesbian, gay and bisexual students could be perceived by the public as ‘promoting’ and ‘recruiting for’ queer sexuality” (p. 25).

The language the photographer uses to explain the sexual behaviour of the young women: “grabbing each other’s bits” implies that the young women are unable to control their sexual desires (Quinlivan, 1999; Smith, 2006; Vincent & Ballard, 1997). By engaging in same sex sexual practices at the formal, the young women mentioned by the photographer could be understood as constructing themselves as desiring sexual agents (Fine, 1992), a subject position not generally available to young women (Best, 2000; Chambers et al., 2004; Fine, 1992; Holland et al, 1996; Munro, 2000; also see Smith, 2006). Since the young women are thwarting normative discourses of passive female sexuality (Quinlivan & Town, 1999), the photographer’s comment “grabbing each other’s bits” pathologises the sexual practices of these young women (Quinlivan, 1999). This is because the comment frames the young women as sexually ravenous and unable to control their sexual impulses (Quinlivan, 1999; Valentine, 1993). The comment therefore reproduces pervasive societal constructions of same sex attraction as abnormal and same sex attracted subjects as deviant (Quinlivan, 1999; Quinlivan & Town, 1999).

The behaviour of the female students themselves can also be read in a number of ways, although any interpretation of the young women’s behaviour is speculative because I did not see them kissing and touching, nor talk to these young women at the formal. One reading of the young women’s actions is that these ‘lesbian’ students felt safe to kiss and touch their ‘girlfriends’ at the formal without fear of harassment. However, I asked Ziggy, the openly queer male peer researcher at the co-educational school if he knew any other ‘out’ queer students at school. He said that he was aware of a gay student in year 13, a lesbian student in year 12 and a number of lesbian/gay students in years 10 and 11. Since the co-educational school formal is solely for senior students, then according to Ziggy only one ‘out’ lesbian student would be eligible to attend the event. Perhaps the female students who the photographer saw kissing and touching did not categorise themselves as ‘lesbians’ (although the
students may have been lesbians, but were not ‘out’ at school). Some young women may engage in same sex practices without necessarily adopting the label lesbian, which challenges the heterosexual/homosexual binary because it highlights how sexuality does not have to be an “either-or choice” (Quinlivan & Town, 1999, p. 521). It also shows how sexuality categories are “fluid” (Quinlivan & Town, 1999, p. 522) and kissing a person of the same sex, or indeed the opposite sex does not necessarily define a subject’s sexuality.

Homophobic ‘humour’.

At both the boys’ and co-educational school formals I noted one incident where young men pretended to engage in homosexual sex acts while they were being photographed:

The first boy bent over from his waist and placed his backside in front of a second boy who was standing behind him. The boy who was standing behind the boy bending over moved closer to the first boy so that his groin was close to the first boy’s backside. The bending boy put his finger in his mouth, lifted up his eyebrows and put on a sort of quasi semi-smile. (Field notes, boys’ school formal, 2008)

A mixture of approximately ten male and female formal goers formed themselves into a line facing the photographer. They began to pose by placing their arms around each other’s shoulders (boys), waists (girls), or by making peace signs behind each other’s heads. However, the boy at the right end of the row started to ‘hump’, or thrust his groin in and out against the leg of the boy who was standing beside him. He smiled and laughed as he was doing this. (Field notes, co-educational school formal, 2008)

I contend that the young men who positioned their bodies in a manner suggestive of homosexual sex acts did so as a joke for the amusement of their peers (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). However, by imitating homosexual sex acts as a joke, the young men were deriding homosexuality (Kehily & Nayak, 1997), while at
the same time removing themselves from gay men and male same sex practices (Mac An Ghaill, 2000a). Since heterosexual masculinity is formed in part “through practices of homophobic othering and differentiation” (Martino, 2000a, p. 219), I argue that the young men were consolidating their own heterosexual masculine subjectivities through imitating gay male sexuality as a joke (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Martino, 2000).

Simon, a peer researcher at the boys’ school, took the following photograph (Figure 2) of two young men embracing at the single-sex boys’ school formal, which I argue also depicts two young men engaging in a “bodily performance” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 83) of homophobic humour.

![Figure 2: Two young men embracing](image)

When I asked Simon what was happening in the image he went on to explain:

**Simon:** Two men are sharing a bit of man love, a bit of a hug going on (laughs).

**Lee:** Why did you decide to take that photo?

**Simon:** Probably ‘cause they’re there and then I went and took a photo of them and then they just hugged so I took it, and to show that guys hug other guys and it’s not gay and yeah.

**Lee:** Okay do you think that shows typically gendered behaviour?
Simon: I think it does, I mean maybe because we’re at a boy’s school it’s more you know, you can hug guys and stuff taking the piss and no one cares, whereas if it was like a co-ed school [with] girls around may be you wouldn’t, but here we’re kind of used to it over the five years or whatever, so you know you can do kind of random stuff and everyone knows you’re not serious so it’s alright (laughs).

Lee: Yep so you wouldn’t hug another boy at the formal if you were at a co-ed school?

Simon: Oh no, maybe if I’d grown up in a co-ed school then I’d be more worried about that like you know, girls would rip you out or whatever, but here you know no one really cares like just, if you go around hugging guys all the time then that’s just gay, but you know if someone’s taking a photo and you want to hug like as a joke then that’s cool.

I argue that the young men depicted in Figure 2 posed for the photograph in a manner that suggested they have an intimate and familiar relationship. Simon’s statement that young men are engaging in “man love”, his laughter when encountering the image and his assertion that two boys can hug as a joke without meaning they are gay, suggests that he also views the boy’s pose in the photograph as homophobic humour. However, although this is purely speculative, I suggest that because Simon and the other participants at the boys’ school saw me attend the school formal with an ‘out’ lesbian staff member as my partner, and students made the assumption that we were romantically involved (according to the staff member), then Simon may have been reluctant to fully discuss the homophobic reading he may have attached to the above snapshot in the photo-elicitation interview with me.

Kehily and Nayak (1997) argue that heterosexual masculinity “is repeatedly struggled over within male peer groups” (p. 82). They also state that extroverted young men often attempt to construct their heterosexual masculine subjectivities through “homophobic humour” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 82). Through homophobic ‘jests’ young men disparage male same sex sexual practices and portray to other young men that they are distinctively ‘unfeminine’ and exclusively ‘straight’” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 82). Although the above photograph was taken in the mixed gender environment of the school formal, I contend that the young men depicted in
the snapshot may have posed in a manner suggesting they were involved in an intimate and familiar relationship in an effort to demonstrate their heterosexual masculinity to Simon the photographer. Since homophobic ‘humour’ is used as a means to construct a legitimate heterosexual masculine subjectivity and Simon reads the embrace of the young men as amusing (which is evident in his laughter when encountering the image and his assertion that two men can hug as a joke without meaning they are gay), then Simon is adding to the heterosexual masculine status of the two young men by reading their behaviour as they intended, that is, as a joke (Kehily & Nayak, 1997).

Simon also explains that he took the above snapshot to highlight how boys/men can hug and that “it’s not gay”. However, he goes on to state that boys who hug in order “to take the piss” when they are being photographed are “not serious” or alternatively actually gay, and therefore he views their actions as “cool”. Simon’s comments suggest that he is aware that young men frequently construct a “high-status masculinity” (Martino, 2000, p. 249) through homophobic abuse and humour, and that he finds this practice acceptable (Dalley-Trim, 2007).

However, according to Simon if young men do hug each other “all the time then that’s just gay” or alternatively, unacceptable. Simon’s comments highlight how he is aware that displays of affection between boys/men breach normative discourses of hegemonic masculinity (Mac An Ghaill, 2000a; Martino, 1999; 2000; Phoenix et al., 2003 Woody, 2003). Therefore, Simon calls the practice of boys/men hugging other boys/men “gay” (except when they hug as a joke) because it violates societal codes of appropriate masculine behaviour (Dalley-Trim, 2007; Woody, 2003). By labelling as gay the practice of young men hugging, I argue that Simon is reproducing hegemonic masculinity by policing the societal limits placed on displays of affection between boys/men (Phoenix et al., 2003; Woody, 2003). When Simon calls two males hugging gay, he also divorces himself from homosexuality (Mac An Ghaill, 2000a) and therefore constructs his own legitimate heterosexual masculine status.

Simon also explained that because young men at the boys’ school have shared five years of secondary schooling together then they will hug as a joke, but if he went to a co-educational school then he and other young men would be less likely to hug
because they fear ridicule from girls. Lyman (2001) states that young men will frequently make homophobic jokes to establish “an emotional line between the homosexual male bond and homosexual relationships” (p. 162). Drawing on the work of Lyman (2001) Kehily and Nayak (1997) argue that this permits the “intimate closeness of peer cultures to be sanctioned, without compromising on an overtly heterosexual group identity” (p. 83). Therefore performances of homophobic humour not only serve to construct the heterosexual masculine subjectivity of the ‘comedian’, they also “speak to the wider hyper-masculinity of the peer group” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 83).

Simon’s comment that he has “grown up” in a boys’ school where young men hug as a joke and do other “random stuff” in order to “take the piss”, suggests that not only is homophobic humour a feature at the single-sex boys’ school formal, it is also a pervasive aspect of the culture of the school. Simon’s statement also indicates that if young men at the boys’ school were “serious” or actually gay, and hugged in a similar manner to the boys depicted in figure 2, then they would not be accepted by their peers (Martino, 2000), which attests to the homophobic/heteronormative attitudes amongst young men in the school. Since homophobic humour serves to construct heterosexual masculine subjectivities and “create hierarchies in male peer groups” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 83) by separating insiders (heterosexual peers) from outsiders (gay students and those who engage in non-normative gender performances), then young men who perform homophobic humour at the boys’ school formal, such as those depicted in Figure 2, as well as at the school itself, are not only constructing their own heterosexual masculine subjectivities, but they are also policing the masculinities of their male classmates.

Furthermore, in male environments such as boys’ schools homophobia is more pronounced than in mixed gender environments (Brutsaert, 2006; Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Nairn & Smith, 2003a). Brutsaert (2006) argues that one reason for this is because young men in boys’ schools construct their masculinity through harassing “boys who do not measure up to the dominant masculine model” (p. 638). However, he goes on to state that in co-educational schools, young men are more likely to construct their heterosexual masculinity in relation to young women rather than to young men who perform their sexuality/gender in non-normative ways.
(Brutsaert, 2006). Consequently, in the single-sex environment of the boys’ school, young men may be more likely to hug as a joke in order to construct their hegemonic masculine status against homosexuality and “‘feminised’ versions of masculinity”, (Mac An Ghaill, 2000a, ¶ 1), without fearing that their peers will question their masculinity because they choose to do so. However, because young men in co-educational schools construct their hegemonic masculine status in relation to young women, then they may be less likely to hug as a joke because they fear their behaviour will be misconstrued as feminine, or that they may be perceived as gay because their behaviour may not be read as a joke.

In his research into young masculinities, Martino (2000) reports that one participant, ‘Dave’, explained that he was the target of homophobic violence at a boys’ school he previously attended but was not at the co-educational school he was presently attending. Dave attributes the differing levels of homophobic abuse between the two schools to the presence of young women who he implies serve to “‘nullify’ the violence that is enacted by boys against other boys” (Martino, 2000, p. 222). Consequently, I contend that the presence of young women in co-educational schools may not only mediate the homophobic violence that exists in boys’ schools, but may also deter instances of homophobic humour such as the ‘boy hug’ depicted in Figure 2.

Young men can in part construct their heterosexual masculinity by having a girlfriend or ‘boasting’ about their sexual feats with young women (Connell, 2000; Kehily, 2001; 2002). ‘Dave’, mentioned above noted that in his school, being seen as effortlessly able to attract young women is a signifier of “high-status masculinity” (Martino, 2000, p. 226). Therefore, young men in mixed gender environments may reject hugging as a joke because they wish to construct themselves as attractive ‘masculine men’ for a female audience and have their masculinity legitimated by young women (Martino, 2000).

In addition, Epstein and Johnson (1994) argue that in all male environments such as boys’ schools, young men may experience a combination of “embarrassment, fear and homoerotic desire” (p. 204), which they attempt to deflect through humour or aggression. Therefore, when young men at the boys’ school hugged as a joke their
actions may be fuelled by a sub/conscious desire to deflect any sexual attractions they feel for other young men.

Finally, because young men in the boys’ school have shared five years of secondary schooling together then it is possible that many would have forged close friendships. Since displays of physical affection between men are deemed socially inappropriate (Martino, 2000; Phoenix et al., 2003; Pascoe, 2007a) and because young men are afraid of being labelled gay (Kehily, 2002; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Pascoe, 2007b), perhaps young men in boys’ school are unable to express their affection for their male peers in any other way other than through resorting to “performative homophobias” (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p. 220) such as the young men depicted in figure 2.

**Policing acceptable displays of affection between young women.**

In Western societies, Epstein and Johnson (1994) argue that hegemonic masculinity makes it hard for boys/men to develop close friendships. In contrast, Harris (1999) contends that girls/women are expected to develop interpersonal relationships with others. At the boys’ school formal Bob took the following photograph of a young woman who was sitting at his table at the formal (Figure 3). Bob said he took the snapshot because the young woman was texting throughout the formal and this was something he considered typically gendered behaviour for young women. However, Bob makes implicit references to young women’s same sex sexual practices in his explanation of the image.
When I asked Bob what was happening in the photograph he went on to say:

**Bob:** Yeah I think females do tend to text more, just ‘cause, oh I think just relationships females have with their friends is different [to those] males have with their friends.

**Lee:** In what way?

**Bob:** Females tend to have closer friendships than males. By closer I mean physically closer not like mentally closer sort of thing, if that makes sense?

**Lee:** Not mentally closer would you say?

**Bob:** Yeah socially they’re, instead of yeah like feeling as if they’re closer to that person then they’re more physically closer, like they’ve, this is essentially bad, but they’ll touch each other more sort of thing, they’re more comfortable with physical contact whereas males, I know males are like *Na* (laughs) and I think that’s another thing, if you did that, because they’re so close they’ll text at a formal occasion (laughs). I mean I don’t think I sent a text throughout the formal at all.

Bob suggests that although young women and men have close emotional relationships with their same sex friends, young women are more likely to touch than young men. Bob’s says that “this is essentially bad” before he goes on to state that women will touch each other more than boys/men. I propose that Bob is linking the term bad with young womens’ touching and acknowledging the erotic
potential in young women’s same sex friendships (Griffin, 2000), which he constitutes as “bad”. Griffin (2000) also argues that women who have close same sex friendships are often labeled lesbians. Although, Bob does not use the term lesbian in the above excerpt, he is constructing young womens’ close friendships as sexual and same sex sexual practices as deviant. This provides an example of how the male gaze is so authoritative that it is able to name and define “those spaces which by their definition are girl only” (Hey, 1997, p. 129), which in this case are female friendships. However, in a second reading Bob may frame women’s touching as bad because he is aware of how his judgment may have sounded to me, the interviewer.

Bob also states that young women are comfortable with physical contact, but when it comes to young men touching they are “like Na”, which is followed by laughter. Although Bob does not specifically mention homosexuality in this statement, young men like Bob may express their opposition to touching because they are afraid of being constituted as gay if they do touch (Kehily, 2002; Pascoe, 2007b).

Bob goes on to suggest that because female friendships are closer than male friendships, then young women will text their friends while they are at the formal. Along with irrationality and emotionality (Davies, 2000) dependency is an aspect that is socially constructed as belonging to the ‘feminine’ and independence to the ‘masculine’ (Harris, 1999). Bob’s laughter after his comment that because young women are so close they will text at the formal and his assertion that he did not send a text throughout the formal, highlights how Bob separates himself from the ‘feminine’ construct of dependency on friends in order to construct himself as an autonomous, independent and therefore legitimate masculine subject (Harris, 1999).

When I conducted observations at the boys’ school formal, I also observed numerous girls sending and receiving text messages (Field notes, 2008). Although I did not ask any of the young women who I saw texting at the boys’ school formal why they chose to do so, I pose three explanations for why they, as well as the young woman depicted in Figure 3, may have sent and received text messages
at the event. Firstly, in their research into the gendered patterns of cellular phone usage by teenage New Zealanders, Cupples and Thompson (2010) report that one participant ‘Mark’ said that he sent text messages when he was bored. Therefore the young woman depicted in Figure 3, and the numerous other young women who I observed sending and receiving text messages at the boys’ school formal, may have done so because they had little interest in the formal.

Secondly, Cupples and Thompson (2010) also point out that young people view sending and getting text messages as signifying that they have a “social network [and] that they are popular and ‘loved’” (p. 6). Therefore, the young woman in the above photograph, and the other young women who sent and received texts at the boys’ school formal, may have done so in order to feel loved, or alternatively, as a strategy to avoid being constructed as unpopular by their peers (Cupples & Thompson, 2010). It is also possible that because some young women “do experience their relations with each other as a passion” (Hey, 1997, p. 114, emphasis in original), they sent text messages at the formal to share their experiences of the event with their absent friends (Cupples & Thompson, 2010).

By contrast at the co-educational school formal I did not see any young women (or young men) sending or receiving text messages. This could be explained by the differences in the gender make-up of students between the two schools. As reported in the previous chapter, the majority of co-educational school students chose to attend the formal with partners who were friends from school. However, the single-gendered nature of the boys’ school meant that students at this school asked young women from other schools to be their partners. Therefore, young women who attended the boys’ school formal as partners may not have known their dates as well as young women (and young men) at the co-educational school formal. It is also possible that young women who attended the boys’ school formal as partners did not know anyone apart from their dates at the event. Therefore, through sending and receiving text messages, I argue that young women at the single sex boys’ school formal were creating a private/personal space within the public setting of the formal venue itself in which they connected with friends by text, in order to make socialising in the setting easier (Cupples & Thompson, 2010).
Co-existent with the masculine/feminine binary in Western societies is the “public/private spatial distinction” (Duncan, 1996a, p. 8), which has led to the subjugation of women. This is because public space, which is aligned with such constructs as paid employment and politics, is conventionally constituted as a masculine territory and therefore the terrain of men (Duncan, 1996b). In contrast private, or alternatively domestic space, has been constructed as a feminine domain and therefore a women’s sphere (Duncan, 1996b; Massey, 1994). Because of this spatial partitioning, women have historically been denied entry into the male domain of work and many have been (un)willingly restricted to the space of the home (Duncan, 1996a; 1996b; Massey, 1994). Since the public/private spatial binary has led to women’s subjugation, Duncan (1996b) argues that it needs to be deconstructed. She also explains that the division of space into two distinct categories is inaccurate because “both public and private spaces are heterogeneous” (Duncan, 1996b, p. 129), which can be seen in the above example of young women who create a private space by texting their friends within the public space of the formal venue itself (Cupples & Thompson, 2010).

However, Duncan (1996b) also points out that gender performances take place in space/s and that “spatiality constrains, enables and is constituted by forces that both stabilize dominant relations of gender and sexuality and that unsettle the relations between them” (p. 5). In the following section I describe how young men and women performed their gender and negotiated space/s at the formal venues where I conducted observations. I also discuss an observation and a photograph taken by a peer researcher at the boys’ school formal that highlight how young men ‘controlled’ ‘public’ space at the formal venue through engaging in “bodily performances” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 83) of hegemonic masculinity. In addition a description of how young women at both the boys’ and co-educational school formals gathered in the women’s toilets is included and I provide a number of explanations for why the young women may have chosen to do so. However, since toilets are usually constructed as ‘private’ spaces and in an effort to avoid
the gendered public/private spatial binary (Duncan, 1996a; 1996b), I argue that because young women congregated in the toilets then in fact these can be considered semi-public spaces (Best, 2000).

‘Public’ and ‘private’ space at the formal.

At the boys’ school formal I was sitting at the teachers’ table when I overheard the following exchange between two female teachers:

The first teacher said to her female colleague that she was coming back from the toilet and got caught in a ‘boy scrum’, where a group of boys was throwing one young man up into the air and catching him in the middle of the group. The first teacher said to her colleague that it was ‘pretty scary’. (Field notes, 2008)

In order for boys/men to perform hegemonic masculinity, boys/men need to exhibit “control, competition, aggression, and physical strength” (Day et al., 2003, p. 311). Kehily (2001) also points out that “bodily contact” (p. 176) between men during “play introduces notions of solidarity, cooperation, and control of public space” (p. 176). Young men throwing one of their peers into the air and catching him is a playful act, yet such behaviour also requires group cooperation as well as a display of physical strength. Therefore, when the young men involved in the ‘boy scrum’ partake in such behaviour, they are engaging in a “physical performance” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 72) of hegemonic masculinity that marks their affinity with their male peers and re/produces the masculinity of the group.

The teacher’s use of the term “boy scrum” in the above excerpt is also interesting. A scrum is a play in a rugby game where the forwards on both teams bend over and place their arms around the shoulders or through the legs of their team members, in order to get the ball, which has been placed at their feet by the half-back (Black et al., 2009). In New Zealand schools, and boys’ schools particularly, being skilled at rugby frequently marks a young man as having high status (Hokowhitu, et al., 2008; Rout, 1992). Since I did not talk to any of the young men involved in the
“boy scrum”, then it cannot be ascertained if they played rugby or not. Nevertheless, the teacher’s use of ‘scrum’ highlights the significance of rugby playing as a component of authoritative masculinity.

The teacher’s use of ‘scrum’ also links the young men’s behaviour with the physical contact and aggression involved in a rugby game. In Western societies, Valentine (1989) argues that some men control public space “through assertive and aggressive behaviour which intimidates and embarrasses women” (p. 388). Although the young men involved in the ‘boy scrum’ did not direct their physicality or aggression at the female teacher who witnessed their behaviour, the teacher explains to her female colleague that she was scared by their actions. Since the female teacher felt, and perhaps other young women (and men) at the boys’ school formal may have also felt intimidated by the young men’s actions, then I contend that they would be less likely to access the foyer outside the toilets where the young men were engaging in this behaviour. This highlights how displays of aggression between men (Valentine, 1989), or alternatively physical contact in male play (Kehily, 2001), can lead to male domination of public space.

Simon, a peer researcher at the boys’ school, also took the following snapshot (Figure 4) of a young woman surrounded by three young men on the dance floor at the boys’ school formal.

![Figure 4: Young woman dancing surrounded by young men](image)

When I asked Simon what was happening in the image he went on to explain that:

---
17 This image has been altered using the computer application photo-shop to disguise the identities of those depicted in the photograph.
**Simon:** Yep my partner, two of my good mates and one of my other mates, they were probably all there and I go “photo” and so they all got into a pose and all round the girl and all smiling.

**Lee:** How do you think it shows typically gendered behaviour or do you think it doesn’t?

**Simon:** I guess so, all the guys around the girl, the girl doing this like random as pose and guys just doing like you know, whatever comes to mind (laughs), the girl would have probably worked on it beforehand.

**Lee:** On her pose?

**Simon:** Yeah you know, like done kind of a show pose or whatever, she looks like she’s doing a cabaret or whatever kind of thing or, and again the guys are all kind of you know arms over shoulder type thing yeah.

Valentine (1989) argues that men often ‘control’ public space through their “greater physical size” (p. 388) and by invading women’s personal space. In Figure 4 the three young men have formed themselves into a semi-circle behind the young woman in the centre of the image. The larger physical size of the three male bodies compared to the young woman’s body, evokes a sense that her body is being dwarfed, or alternatively ‘dominated’ by the three male bodies. The young man on the right of the image also leans in toward the young woman, which I suggest highlights how he is intruding on her personal body space. The position of the arms and hands of the young men on the left and right of the image also serve to encompass the young woman, which gives the impression that her bodily movements are being constrained by the boys’ outstretched arms. Since male bodies are constituted as more “entitled and authoritative” (Youdell, 2005, p. 257), than female bodies then the three young men depicted in Figure 4 may feel justified encroaching on the young woman’s body space and constraining her bodily movements, which in turn leads to her limited space on the dance floor.

The three young men depicted in the image also drape their arms around each other’s shoulders, which is a conventional masculine pose (Higgins et al, 2009). Through invading the young women’s body space and adopting this pose, the young
men appear to position the young woman as ‘other’ (Smith, 2007) to their group masculinity (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Frost, 2001).

The young woman’s smile, however, suggests that she is not intimidated by the young men’s actions, and that she is enjoying the interaction. In Chapter Five, I referred to Renew (1996) who suggests that in order to perform normative femininity girls/women must “make the masculine the focus and reference point for their construction or positioning of themselves” (p. 152). Therefore, by being a smiling participant in the photograph, I argue that the young woman is constructing herself as a recognisable feminine subject.

Simon also suggests that the young woman’s pose is similar to a cabaret or show pose. The young woman therefore may be engaging in a “bodily performance” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 83) of emphasised femininity, or alternatively Simon reads her gender performance in this way. In her research into sexuality and gender performances of children in one pre-school setting, Blaise (2005) found that girls’ performances of emphasised femininity were characterised by overstated body movements and sexualised bodily gestures, which she argues serve to reinscribe their less authoritative positioning in the gender binary. I argue that the bodily positioning of the young woman depicted in figure 4 indicates that she is performing emphasised femininity. Her elevated right hand and shoulder highlights how she is overstating her body movements and her pose suggests she may be acting in a sexually flirtatious manner with the three young men behind her. If this is the case then rather than this signifying her less authoritative positioning in the binary construction of gender as Blaise (2005) suggests, I argue that it highlights how she is taking herself up as a sexual agent (Fine, 1992).

Simon surmises that the young woman worked on her “show pose” beforehand, which may or may not be the case, in contrast to the three young men who pose by doing the first thing that “comes to mind”. In his analysis Simon is drawing on and reproducing the societal construction of women as conceited for being concerned with their appearance (Best, 2000; Entwistle 2000b).
However, Rossiter (1994) conducted research into the responses of a group of Canadian children (10-12 years old) after they received their “first invitation to a dance party” (p. 2). She found that her female participants reported experiencing high levels of anxiety after receiving their invitation because they feared being evaluated on their dress, their dancing, and did not know how to talk in this unfamiliar setting. In contrast, the male participants expressed little anxiety about attending the dance party and were not concerned about their outfits or behaviour at the event. Rossiter (1994) contends that the reason for the disparity in the levels of anxiety is because girls are “the objects of the male gaze” (p. 15), while boys are not subjected to the same levels of surveillance because they occupy the authoritative position in the gender binary. Consequently, the three young men depicted in Figure 4 may feel free to pose spontaneously because they are not subjected to constant surveillance, unlike the young woman in the image (Rossiter, 1994). Furthermore, if Simon is correct in his assertion that the young woman has practised her pose then this also highlights how the young woman might have internalised the male gaze (Holland et al., 1998; Rossiter, 1994) via her awareness of enacting an appropriate and recognisable “bodily performance” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 83) of femininity.

The toilets.

In her research into the prom in the United States Best (2000) noted how young women congregated in the women’s bathroom at the four proms where she conducted her observations. At both school formals I attended I also observed young women gathering in the toilets as well as large numbers of young women going to the women’s toilet in pairs (Field notes, 2008). At the boys’ school formal a female teacher said to me “funny how all the girls go to the bathroom together” (Field notes, 2008). At the co-educational school formal the professional photographer also laughingly asked me “why do girls do that?” after he saw two girls walking into the women’s toilet with their arms linked at the elbows (Field notes, 2008). Although I did not interview any young women who gathered in the women’s toilet, or who went to the bathroom in pairs, I provide a number of interpretations of their behaviour.
Firstly, because private space is constituted as belonging to the feminine and public space to the masculine (Duncan, 1996a; 1996b; Massey, 1994), then young women may have congregated in the toilets as a way of resisting male ‘control’ of the formal space, especially in instances such as the ‘boy scrum’ (Harris, 2001). Secondly, young women may have congregated in the ‘private space’ of the women’s toilets as a resistance to, or ‘time out’ from the continuous surveillance of the sexualising male gaze in the mixed gender public space of the formal (Bloustein, 2003; Holland et al., 1998; Rossiter, 1994). Thirdly, since surveillance by teachers and security staff was less pronounced in the toilets than in the formal venue itself, then it is possible that young women may have gathered in the toilets to engage in behaviour that was prohibited at the formal (Best, 2000; Bloustein, 2003). This issue will be discussed further in Chapter Nine. Finally, Bloustein (2003) argues that because it is common practice for young women to go into the women’s toilets together, then two female friends can go into this setting without being accused of lesbianism. Therefore, when young women went to the women’s toilets in pairs at the formal, they consciously or sub-consciously resisted the construction of the school formal as a heteronormative social space (Best, 2000; Grace & Wells, 2005).

Although toilets are usually constructed as ‘private spaces’, Bloustein (2003) reports that in her role as a monitor of the women’s toilets at a number of Blue Light discos in Australia, she observed how young women came together in the women’s toilet to discuss aspects such as personal problems, sexual propositions by boys and generally to ‘chat’ with friends. Consequently, Bloustein (2003) constitutes the women’s toilets as social spaces in this setting. Best (2000) also frames women’s bathrooms at the prom as “public/private settings” (p. 179), where young women gather to talk about their dresses and to conduct their beauty work. Therefore, rather than viewing women’s toilets as ‘private spaces’, they can also be considered public-social spaces (Best, 2000; Bloustein, 2003).

By gathering in the women’s toilets at the school formal I argue that the young women construct the toilets as public-social spaces. The young women may have

---

18 Blue Light discos are alcohol and drug free dances that are hosted by the police for young people.
gathered in the toilets at the formal to discuss the aspects mentioned by Bloustein (2003) and Best (2000) above, or simply to socialise with their friends. Since women’s toilets are female only spaces, then young women may have felt freer to converse in this setting than in the mixed gender space of the formal venue itself (Best, 2000; Bloustein, 2003).

Each time I went into the women’s toilets at both school formals, I observed numerous young women retouching their hair and make up, adjusting or looking at the back of their dresses in the mirror (Field notes, 2008). As reported in Chapter Two, during adolescence young women become aware that their bodies are beginning to be looked at in a sexual manner by men (Rossiter, 1994). Because of the authority of the male gaze (Holland et al., 1998), young women start to internalise it during their teenage years and judge themselves in accordance with how they think others would see them (Rossiter, 1994). Consequently, some young women become fixated on their appearance and in social situations such as dance parties, conscious of getting their behaviour and appearance ‘correct’ (Rossiter, 1994). Since the women’s toilets contained mirrors where young women could monitor their appearance, then they were also sites where young women could ‘perfect’ their ‘look’ and therefore construct themselves as exemplars of heterosexual femininity at the formal (Epstein et al., 2000-2001).

**Gender, Eating and Spatiality**

The final two snapshots I include in this chapter were taken by Freddie, a peer researcher at the boys’ school formal, and depict a young woman and a young man eating chicken at the event (Figures 5 and 6). The images highlight how young men and women took up differing amounts of space as they ate at the formal. Out of the six peer researchers who took photographs of aspects they considered to be typically gendered at the boys’ school formal, three took snapshots of what they deemed to be differences regarding they way young women and men ate at the formal. Therefore, for the peer researchers, eating was the practice they noted was gendered.
When I asked Freddie why he took the photographs and how the snapshots showed gendered behaviour he said:

**Freddie:** [Figure 5] is kind of paired with this one [Figure 6] so that she’s, the chicken like it was hard to get the meat off but she just had to use the knife and fork and all the guys were just using their fingers for it.

**Lee:** Okay how do you think this shows typically gendered behaviour?

**Freddie:** Like they’re, girls I guess [are] more perfect sort of thing, like everything they have to do it according to the rules or whatever, like whereas guys just get in there and just do it, like guys just eat, just pick up the chicken to get the rest of the chicken off, whereas the chicks will just use the knife and fork to get everything off, and if they can’t get everything off they’ll leave it so yeah.

Freddie makes the comment that girls are “more perfect” and therefore they are more likely to adhere to rules than boys, which is why the young woman depicted in figure
5 eats chicken with a knife and fork instead of using her fingers as the young man does in figure 6. I contend that the term ‘rule following’ denotes passivity (see Walkerdine, 1990). By constructing girls’ behaviour in accordance with “the rules” Freddie is therefore constructing young women as passive. In contrast, Freddie states that “boys just get in there and do it”, which constructs boys as active. In the above excerpt therefore, Freddie is reproducing the active/passive binary that accompanies the masculine/feminine binary in society (Sedgwick, 1990).

Freddie also calls young women chicks. Although I did not ask Freddie why he chose to call young women chicks, perhaps he did so because chick is the most widespread slang term used by young people of both genders to refer to girls/women (Grossman & Tucker, 1997; Hummon, 1994; Ku & Broghan, 1974). Nevertheless, when Freddie refers to women as chicks the term also serves to construct young women as child like (Grossman & Tucker, 1997).

Although Freddie explains that young women eat chicken with a knife and fork because they are rule followers, unlike young men, I provide another explanation for why the young woman depicted in figure 5, and other young women, may have eaten their chicken with utensils, in contrast to young men who ate it with their fingers. Bordo (1993b) argues that discourses promoted in Western media, popular culture and advertising construct male and female appetites differently. These discourses encourage boys/men to eat large amounts to appease their hunger, yet persuade girls/women to deny their hunger and to eat small amounts in order to match the societal ideal of the slim female body (Bordo, 1993b).

I contend that the way the young woman in figure 5 holds her knife and fork implies that she is taking her time eating and is more calculated in her approach to eating than the young man in figure 6. Since young (and older) people are immersed in media texts, then the young woman may have learned to keep her desire for food in check, which is why she eats her chicken with a knife and fork, while the young man eats with his fingers because he sees a healthy appetite as desirable in men (Bordo, 1993b).
Bordo (1993b) also explains that because women in Western societies are constituted as caregivers, then they learn to place the needs of others above their own and therefore any “self-nurturing and self-feeding [is considered] greedy and excessive” (p. 171). Societal discourses of femininity also construct self-restraint as a desirable quality in women (Burns, 2004). If the young woman depicted picked her chicken up and ate it in her fingers as the young man does then she would be visibly gratifying her desire for food (Bordo, 1993b). She would therefore, not be performing her gender in accordance with normative discourses of feminine self-restraint and thereby risks being perceived as greedy (Bordo, 1993b; Burns, 2004).

Figure 5 also highlights differences in the amount of space occupied by the young woman in the foreground and young man in the background of the image as they eat. The young woman’s hands are positioned close together above the food on her plate and are also drawn in towards her body. She appears to be compressing her movements and taking up little space as she eats (Youdell, 2005). This highlights how the young woman is embodying societal discourses of heterosexual femininity in which women/girls’ bodily actions are supposed to be small (Youdell, 2005) and feminine space is deemed to be “enclosed or confining” (Young, 1990, p. 151, emphasis in original). The placement of the hands and elbow of the young man sitting behind her in contrast, evokes a sense that the young man’s body position is open rather than closed and his movements do not appear to be confined like the young woman’s (Young, 1990). The position of his hand and elbow on the table also suggests that the young man is taking up more space as he eats than the young woman. Perhaps because masculinity is dominant in the gender binary then the young man does not feel he has to confine his bodily movements like the young woman depicted in the image (Youdell, 2005; Young, 1990).

Conclusion

In this chapter I analysed and discussed the dominant themes that emerged from my observations at the boys’ and co-educational school formals and those that presented in photographs taken by peer researchers at the boys’ school formal. A number of threads run through this chapter, the first being the sexual objectification of
women at the formal by male formal goers. I overheard two male teachers make sexually objectifying comments about young women at the boy’s school formal. I additionally observed a male student rubbing his pelvis against his female teacher at the boy’s school formal, which frames her as a sexual object. Furthermore, a peer researcher at the boys’ school made comments about female friends touching when describing the content of a snapshot he had taken of a young woman texting her friend on her mobile phone at the formal, which suggests he finds it more acceptable for two women to touch than two young men, and that he was eroticising young women’s touch (Diamond, 2005). Since hegemonic masculinity is formed in part through the “sexual objectification of women” (Bird, 1996, p. 122) these sexualised comments/behaviours act as a resource for the male formal goers to display and consolidate their masculinity.

A second thread running through the chapter is the pathological construction of active female sexual agency (Fine, 1992; Smith, 2006). A female teacher at the boys’ school formal made the comment that young women “are so forward nowadays that boys are scared of them”. The professional photographer at the co-educational school formal said that he saw a number of young women kissing and “grabbing each other’s bits” at the formal. Such comments construct active female sexuality as abnormal and abhorrent (Fine, 1992; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Smith, 2006; Valentine, 1993; Vincent & Ballard, 1997).

Nevertheless, there were also a number of incidents where female formal goers did exhibit sexual agency at both the school formals I attended. If there were young women kissing and touching at the co-educational school formal, then the young women concerned challenge societal discourses that construct female sexuality as passive (Fine, 1992; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Smith, 2006). A female teacher at the boys’ school formal also refused to allow her body to be used entirely as a passive recipient of her male student’s sexualised gestures and instead, she reciprocated his movements (Youdell, 2005). In doing so I also contend that she was positioning herself as a sexual agent (Fine, 1992; Quinlivan, 1999; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Smith, 2006). Furthermore, a photograph depicting a young woman surrounded by three young men on the dance floor is included in this chapter. The young woman’s smile and exaggerated bodily movements indicates that she may be acting in a
sexually flirtatious manner with the young men and therefore is taking herself up as a sexual agent (Blaise, 2005). All of these incidences highlight how some women resist the normative construction of female sexuality as passive and position themselves as sexually agentic (Fine, 1992; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Smith, 2006).

A further thread running through the chapter is a discussion of how male and female formal goers engaged in specific gendered bodily actions at the formal in order to construct and communicate their gender ‘identities’. At both school formals I attended I noted a number of young men engaging in “bodily performances” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 83) of homophobic humour while they were being photographed. Also included in this chapter is a photograph of two young men hugging in a manner that implies intimacy, which I argued is a further performance of homophobic humour. These homophobic performances highlight how a hegemonic masculine status is formed in part through disparaging homosexuality (Kehily & Nayak, 1997), which in turn serves to disassociate the performer from homosexuality and any suggestion that he may be gay (Mac An Ghaill, 2000b).

Other male students controlled public space at the formal venue through engaging in physical play, such as the ‘boys’ scrum’ (Day et al., 2003). Also included in the chapter is a photograph, which depicts three young men positioning their bodies in a manner that encroaches on a young woman’s body space, which in turn restricts her body movement and her access to the public space of the dance floor. These incidents highlight how a heterosexual masculine subjectivity is also formed in relation to women (Epstein, 1997b; Kehily & Nayak, 1997). Consequently, I argue that the young men’s “bodily practices” (Youdell, 2005, p. 256) and their “homophobic displays” (Kehily & Nayak 1996, p. 83), expose the notion of a fixed inner masculine being as illusionary and highlight how heterosexual masculinity is an “identity [that] is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p. 33).

Despite young men occupying more space as they ate at the formal and ‘controlling’ ‘public space at the event through engaging in “bodily performances” (Kehily & Nayak 1997, p. 83) of hegemonic masculinity, there were a number of instances where young women resisted male control of ‘public space’ at the formal.
Firstly, by gathering in the women’s toilets young women constructed what is usually considered a private space, as a semi-public space (Best, 2000: Bloustein, 2003). A number of young women also sent text messages on their mobile phones within the public space of the formal venue thereby creating private space within the public space of the formal venue. Such behaviour problematises the public/private spatial binary (which accompanies the masculine/feminine binary) by highlighting how space cannot be demarcated as exclusively public or private (Duncan, 1996b).

Furthermore, when young people went about the everyday task of eating at the formal their body positioning and movements referenced normative gender codes (Youdell, 2005). Included in this chapter is a photograph of a young woman eating chicken with a knife and fork at the boys’ school formal. A second photograph depicts a young man eating his chicken with his fingers. I contend that because self-restraint is viewed as a desirable quality in women (Burns, 2004) and the ideal feminine body is constructed as slender, then if the young woman ate her chicken in her fingers as the young man does she risks being read as unfeminine or greedy because she is choosing to perform her gender in opposition to normative gender codes (Bordo, 1993a; 1993b; Burns, 2004).

In the background of the photograph of the young women eating chicken, a young man is shown taking up more space as he eats than the young woman in the foreground of the image who compacts her bodily movements as she eats. This highlights how young people perform their gender in accordance with prevailing gender codes that construct male space as large (Young, 1990) and female space as small (Youdell, 2005) and constricted (Young, 1990).

In this chapter I have explored how the young men and women performed their gender at the two school formals where I conducted observations. However, the participants are also positioned as young New Zealanders. In New Zealand society alcohol consumption is virtually a pre-requisite for the display of a desirable sociability (Abel & Plumridge 2004; Nairn et al., 2006). In the following chapter I discuss the student participants’ alcohol consumption patterns on the night of the formal in order to explore how they navigate New Zealand’s binge drinking culture (Alcohol Advisory Council, 2005; Lyons & Willot, 2008). Since “drinking alcohol is
a gendered activity” (Lyons & Willot, 2008, p. 695), I also report on the differences in the way the male and female participants consumed alcohol on the night and discuss the gendered differences regarding how young men and women who consumed excessive amounts of alcohol were perceived.
Chapter 9: Alcohol Consumption on the Night of the Formal

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the student participants’ drinking behaviour and attitudes toward alcohol consumption at pre-formal activities, at the formal itself and the after party. When discussing the students’ alcohol consumption at these three sites I do not wish to portray young people in a negative manner. This is why I also investigate parents’ alcohol consumption patterns prior to the formal and teachers’ drinking at the formal itself, in order to highlight how young people’s alcohol consumption patterns are indicative of New Zealand’s drinking culture more generally (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2000; Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2002; 2005). Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al., 2006; The issue of young people drinking excessively is a concern, but if our youth drinking culture is going to change then excessive alcohol consumption amongst adult New Zealanders and their acceptance of drunken behaviour also needs to change (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2000; Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2002; 2005).

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section I document how a number of students had a drink or two with their parents and/or friends prior to the formal. I pose a number of reasons as to why having a ‘few drinks’ before the formal appears to be a necessary component of the formal night itself. I also document how two participants reported that their mothers were intoxicated at these pre-formal activities and argue that this provides an example of how drinking to excess is characteristic of New Zealand’s drinking culture.

In the second section I investigate two student participants’ attitudes towards students who they stated were drunk at the formal. Their comments are in direct contradiction to media portrayals of drinking to excess being the “dominant norm among young people” (Nairn et al., 2006, p. 288). I also document how I noted teachers were drinking at one school formal where I conducted observations despite students being forbidden from doing so. I pose a number of reasons for this ‘double
standard’. I finish this section by documenting a specific practice at one of the school formals where I conducted observations, which enabled some young women to partake in drug consumption at the formal.

In the third section I discuss issues that emerged in relation to the organisation of an after party at one of the participating schools as well as problematic incidents that happened at two of three participating schools’ unofficial after parties. I wish to emphasise that the problematic incidents that occurred at the two after parties relate to a small minority of students and the majority of students reported that they had a good time at these events. It should be noted that I agreed not to research the after party at the third participating school as a condition of negotiating research at the school.

Since some of the material in this chapter could reflect badly on individual students or schools if they were identified, I have not used any of the participants’ self-chosen pseudonyms in this chapter or identified the staff participants’ schools. I have chosen to do so in an effort to further blur the ‘identities’ of the schools as well as the staff and student participants.

**Prior to the Formal**

Prior to the formal the staff participants stated that the principals in all three of the participating schools held special assemblies in which they outlined the behaviour they expected from students on the night. At this assembly staff participant A said the principal emphasised how alcohol was not permitted at school events and because the formal was an extra-curricular schooling activity then there was to be no alcohol consumed at the formal. At the other two participating schools students and their parents had to sign contracts that stipulated rules that the students had to follow on the night. Some of these included no smoking, drinking or drug taking at the event. A number of schools in New Zealand have implemented these contracts (see Lewis, 2008; Munro, 2008) but it appears that girls’ schools are more likely to have these contracts in place because principals perceive that there is a greater threat to girls’ safety if they consume alcohol (see Munro, 2008). However, staff participant A explained that at her school students were told that the school would not penalise
them for having a drink at home with their parents or friends before they came to the formal. Staff participant B also reported that students at her school were told that “if parents would like to organise a small gathering before the formal so the kids can meet each other and go with each other if they have a few quiet drinks at that particular time you know then that’s okay”. Perhaps staff at these two schools tell students that they would not object to them having a drink or two at home with their parents prior to the formal because they felt students would be consuming alcohol in a responsible manner under the watchful eye of their parents.

Parents and drinking.

A number of student participants from each of the participating schools said that their parents organised pre-formal social gatherings involving their friends and their friend’s parents, as well as formal partners. At these gatherings, some of the participants had a glass of alcohol with their parents. Perhaps because parents viewed the formal as a coming of age experience then having a glass of alcohol with their son/daughter seemed appropriate to celebrate their coming of age (Best, 2000). However, peer researcher 1 asked student participants I and J how their parents were when they left for the formal and if their parents took their photograph. They replied:

**Student participant I:** Yes they took my photo, well my Mum didn’t but I went to see her before the formal and I guess, she was really drunk so she was like “You look beautiful” blah blah blah...

**Student participant J:** Umm my Mum was ‘cause this crazy friend of mine had decided that she really liked my Mum and so she was putting tequila shots down her throat and stuff so Mum was quite drunk and she was like “Yeah bring the party back here” and stuff and she took a few photos, no she didn’t ‘cause she didn’t have a camera, she just like, she was like oh you look pretty blah, blah, blah and like talking to all my friends and stuff, that’s it.

In New Zealand Nairn et al. (2006) argue that binge drinking is a concern “for some young people” (p. 288), and in the media is depicted “as a moral panic” (p. 288).
Room (2001) contends that young peoples’ drinking behaviour reflects more widely on societal attitudes towards alcohol consumption. Connolly et al. (1992) also assert that young peoples’ views on alcohol and their drinking behaviour are heavily influenced by their parents’ alcohol consumption patterns and their attitudes toward alcohol.

Student participants I and J said that their mothers were intoxicated prior to them leaving for the formal. Although the issue of young people drinking to excess is sensationalised in the New Zealand media (Nairn et al., 2006) the comments of student participants I and J indicate how excessive alcohol consumption may be seen as a feature of New Zealand’s drinking culture more generally (Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008; McCreanor et al., 2008; Nairn et al., 2006; The Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2000; 2005). Student participant K’s comment that some students sneak hip flasks into the formal because “it’s kind of normal to get pissed in New Zealand” can also be viewed as a reflection on New Zealand’s excessive drinking culture (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2000; Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2002; 2005).

**Drinking with friends.**

All of the student participants said that they gathered with their partners and friends prior to the formal and the majority had a ‘few drinks’. In fact three participants made comments suggesting that consuming alcohol with friends prior to the event was either a highlight of the night or a necessary component of the formal night itself:

**Student participant L:** Umm just before the formal getting like, drinking with all my friends beforehand and yeah (laughs).

**Peer researcher 1:** I think it’s part of the girls’ thing is preparation like doing your make up with your friends and drinking Champagne or cosmopolitans or something like that and it’s all part of the whole thing.
Student participant M: …the boys before the formal you know getting into your suits having a few beverages and then it’s the after party that’s the big, the big hypes…

Perhaps because consuming alcohol (MacDonald, 2009) and the school formal (Tay, 2007) are each constructed as a rite of passage for young people in New Zealand society, then the student participants who did consume alcohol prior to the formal with their friends may have done so because they associate drinking with the performance of an adult subjectivity (Nairn et al., 2006). Since alcohol consumption is primarily considered as an ‘adult’ activity in Western societies, then young people may feel that consuming alcohol marks them as independent and sophisticated (Nairn et al., 2006; Thornton, 1995).

In magazines, Lyons and Willot (2008) contend that drinks such as “cocktails, spirits, wine, and champagne” (p. 701) are portrayed as women’s drinks and are marketed as “glamorous and sparkling” (p. 701). Since the formal is also depicted as a “glamorous affair” (Smith, 2008, p. 10) then young women may drink cosmopolitans and champagne when preparing for the formal, as peer researcher 1 points out, because they feel these drinks match the glamorous nature of the occasion and mark them as feminine subjects (Lyons & Willot, 2008).

However, the student participants may have consumed alcohol with their friends prior to the formal for a number of other reasons. Student participants M and N made comments explaining why they think young people generally consume alcohol:

Student participant M: I think alcohol’s sort of, it’s done by everyone just to sort of really, really, it relieves your inhibitions as such and your nerves and that sort of thing. I think that’s why everyone does it…it gets you over the confidence barrier.

Student participant N: It umm reduces argh shyness you know like feeling uncomfortable with the other gender.
When, peer researcher 1 asked student participant J what expectations she had for the formal she said:

Student participant J: Well I’m a bit worried about my dress so I expect to umm what am I allowed to say on this?

Peer researcher 1: Anything.

Student participant J: Umm I expect to drink, not too much but not too little because I don’t want to feel uncomfortable around all those people in their big flash dresses yeah.

In New Zealand alcohol is constructed as a “social lubricant” (Lyons & Willot, 2008, p. 700). Participants M and N explained that young people drink to overcome their social inhibitions, nerves, lack of confidence and to make it easier to talk to the “other gender”. Student participant J views drinking the right amount of alcohol as reducing her discomfort in interacting with girls in dresses “flashier” than her own. All three participants were taking up the societal construction of alcohol as “oiling the wheels of sociability” (Abel & Plumridge, 2004, p. 493) and making socialising easier.

Alcohol/Drugs at the Formal

At the formals themselves school staff put in place strategies to prevent students who had had too much to drink at pre-formal gatherings entering the venue. The three staff participants said that they placed themselves strategically at the end of the formal greeting committee\(^\text{19}\) in order to conduct a ‘sniff test’ to identify any formal goers who may have consumed excessive amounts of alcohol at pre-formal activities. One principal also kept a “breathalyser unit in her/his pocket that [s/he] would use if necessary” (staff participant B) to detect students who may have consumed excessive amounts of alcohol prior to the formal. The practice of principals

\(^{19}\) On the greeting committee at each of the three schools were the principal, the associate principal, head students, the chairperson of the board of trustees and their partners who welcomed students and their partners to the event.
conducting sobriety tests and taking breathalyzers to the event appears to be a common occurrence at New Zealand school formals (see Beech, 2009; Chateau, 1990; White, 2007).

At two of the school formals, security guards searched some female formal goers’ handbags for alcohol and at the other formal, young women were required to leave their “handbags in a cloakroom at the entrance to the formal venue” (Field notes, 2008). Some of the male participants were asked to “turn out [their] pockets by the security guards who [were] looking for hip flasks” (student participant O). Nevertheless, student participants from each of the three schools reported that some girls took hipflasks into the formal by hiding them “down the backs of their dresses” (student participant P) and young men “gaffer taped them to their legs” (peer researcher 1). However, Chateau (1990) reports that as early as the 1970s students were bringing concealed hip flasks into school dances. Consequently, the students who took hip flasks into the event may have done so because they were drawing on the historical tradition of sneaking alcohol into school dances (Chateau, 1990).

Despite all three staff participants stating that they did not have to turn away students from the formal because they were intoxicated, student participants O and P reported that particular students arrived at the formal drunk. However, rather than discussing the ‘time immemorial’ student practice of getting drunk prior to the formal (see Ansley, 1988; Chateau, 1990; White, 2007), I wish to focus on the responses of student participants O and P to those formal goers who they considered were intoxicated at the event. I asked participants O and P were there any aspects of their school formals that they did not enjoy:

**Student participant O:** There [were] a few people that broke the rules and came drunk. I understand if people have a drink before or whatever, just one or two but when they come kind of trashed it kind of ruins the night and everyone’s like oh, I wasn’t really happy about it.

**Student participant P:** Yeah there was a couple of young women I know and they had quite a lot to drink and nothing much to eat and so she was a bit
silly and she said as much and fell over a bit or something and you know kind of slow on the uptake and that was bit kind of disappointing.

I pose a number of readings of these comments. Firstly, since the participants’ schools did have strict rules in regard to intoxicated students attending the formal, these participants’ disappointment might be attributed to the breaking of school rules (Valintine, 2009; Yurisch, 2009).

Secondly, drinking to excess is portrayed as a “dominant norm among young people” (Nairn et al., 2006, p. 288) in the New Zealand media and therefore a cause for alarm. Participant O and P challenge this depiction because their comments highlight how some young people do not drink to excess and are intolerant of their peers being intoxicated. Furthermore, in New Zealand culture there is a general “tolerance of binge drinking and intoxication” (The Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2005, p. 1). However, both participants are not conforming to this norm when they state they are unhappy and disappointed with intoxicated peers at the formal.

Butler (1992) argues that “subjects are formed through exclusionary operations” (p. 14), in other words subjects perform their ‘identities’ in ‘opposition’ to others. Student participant O states that students who are “trashed” have the capacity to ruin the night. Student participant P explains that a young woman who had too much to drink and nothing to eat prior to the formal was a “bit silly” and “slow on the uptake”. These two participants are constructing the intoxicated students at the formal as abject in relation to their own responsible drinking behaviours (both participants reported having a drink with their friends prior to the formal). The term abject was coined by Kristeva who in an interview with Baruch (1996) defines it as a particular thing that:

disgusts you, for example you see something rotting and you want to vomit - it is an extremely strong feeling that is once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to
distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that may menace us from the inside (p. 118).

I contend that student participants O and P are constructing their subject position as responsible drinkers in opposition to the abject behaviour of intoxicated formal goers.

Participant P was ‘disappointed’ with the behaviours of the intoxicated young woman at the formal. In New Zealand, Lyons and Willot (2008) contend that there is a “double standard” (p. 706) that exists in relation to the acceptability of men’s and women’s drunkenness. One reason for this is because women who are ‘drunk’ may be perceived as failing to perform their gender in accordance with normative discourses of feminine “self-policing and self-restraint” (Measham, 2002, p. 358). Consequently, participant P’s disappointment in the young woman’s drunkenness may actually be because s/he views the young woman as lacking self-control and therefore acting ‘unfeminine’.

Finally, young people “occupy (or try to occupy) both positions of child and adult, and in doing so they disrupt the boundary between child/adult” (Panelli et al., 2002, p. 25, emphasis in original). Participant O was the head student in her/his school and also on the formal organising committee and therefore part of the formal greeting committee. Given that participant O had responsibilities within the school and at the formal then s/he challenges both the child/adult and pupil/teacher binaries. Because of her/his leadership role and responsibilities, student participant O can be viewed as a ‘quasi-teacher’. Positioned in this role, participant O is likely to be invested in the school formal running ‘smoothly’, which may be a further reason why s/he reports disappointment with students who were drunk at the event.

**Teachers drinking at the formal.**

Despite all three schools prohibiting students from consuming alcohol at the school formal, I recorded the following observation at one of the school formals I attended:
Teachers were allowed to drink alcohol and there were bottles of wine on the teachers’ tables. I also observed teachers going up to the bar and buying drinks. One of the younger teacher’s partners came back to the table and said the bar staff would not serve her. Her partner said they probably thought the young woman was a [student or a students’ formal partner] and went and got her a drink from the bar…I talked to one of the teachers approximately an hour after dinner had finished and said that the teachers must have got bored because I noted that a number of them had left. This teacher said that the other teachers had gone to a bar for a ‘few drinks’ (Field notes, 2008).

During the interview I conducted with staff participant B, I asked her why her school held a formal and she explained:

I think that one of the strong points about having a formal, a school formal is to show the kids that it’s perfectly, you’re perfectly capable of having a good time at the [formal] without actually having alcohol, that you don’t need the alcoholic influence to enjoy yourself.

Although staff participant B states that a ‘strong point’ about having a formal is to show students that it is possible to “enjoy yourself” without alcohol, teachers at this school formal did consume alcohol and had bottles of wine on their tables. There are a number of possible explanations for this ‘double standard’. Since teachers occupy the dominant positioning in the teacher/student and adult/child binaries (Panelli et al, 2002) they may have thought they were not subject to the same rules as their students. Furthermore, because young people do threaten the adult/child binary, then teachers might be asserting their dominant positioning within this binary by consuming alcohol (Panelli et al, 2002). Through drinking, the teachers were portraying to their students that as adults they had the authority to drink, while students as young people, did not. Finally, in New Zealand culture it is the norm to drink alcohol at social events (Abel & Plumridge, 2004; Adolescent Health Research Group, 2000; Alcohol Advisory Council, 2002; 2005; Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al., 2006). In fact Bunce (2001) argues that alcohol consumption is “one of our prime forms of entertainment” (p. 13). Consequently, the teachers may have consumed alcohol at the
school formal, even when students were forbidden to do so, because they feel that they ‘should not be denied’ this form of entertainment.

Whatever the reasons were for teachers’ alcohol consumption at the school formal, their behaviour highlights how drinking is virtually a prerequisite for socialising in New Zealand culture (Abel & Plumridge, 2004; Bunce, 2001; Nairn et al., 2006). Instead of modelling to students that they do not need to consume alcohol in order to have a good time, teachers at this school formal reproduced the construction of alcohol as a necessary component for sociability by drinking at the event, and leaving early to consume more alcohol at a local bar.

**Drugs at the formal.**

As stated previously some secondary schools in New Zealand do have contracts in place that students and their parents have to sign before they are permitted to attend the formal. Recently, I was given a contract from a secondary school, which included the following clause: “I/we will not consume alcohol before, during, or after the formal, and will not bring any alcohol, or other illegal substances to the formal”\(^{20}\). Such clauses highlight that alcohol and drug consumption at the formal is an issue of concern for schools in New Zealand (Valintine, 2009; Yurisich, 2009).

In the following excerpt, peer researcher 1 asks student participant J if she saw any students breaking the rules at the school formal. His or her interviewee reported seeing girls “snorting” drugs in the women’s toilets. Initially I was reluctant to discuss the girls’ behaviour because of the illegality of their actions and the impact such material could have if it was traced back to the young women or the school concerned. Despite my hesitation I decided to include this excerpt and an observation that I recorded at this school formal because it highlights a practice that enabled such behaviour to occur at the event.

---

\(^{20}\) I do not include the reference for this quotation in order to protect the anonymity of the school concerned.
Peer researcher 1: Did you see any students breaking the rules on the night, if so was it mainly boys or girls or a mixture of both? Why do you think they were doing this?

Student participant J: Well I saw a few people breaking the rules and it was mostly girls ‘cause it was mostly done in the girls’ toilets and I think was it, why were they doing this, they were doing this because it’s more fun if you break the rules.

Peer researcher one: What did they do?

Student participant J: Am I allowed to say it?

Peer researcher one: Yeah [inaudible].

Student participant J: Well there was drinking from hipflasks and snorting BZP and Ritalin and stuff like that, that’s all actually I think.

Up until April 2008 BZP (benzylpiperazine) was a legal drug, but it was reclassified as a class “C1 controlled drug” (the same as marijuana) on the first of April 2008 (http://www.drugfoundation.org.nz/party-pills/law-and-penalities¶1). After April 2008, selling and using BZP or party pills containing BZP became illegal (http://www.drugfoundation.org.nz/party-pills/law-and-penalities). The school formal, where student participant J reports girls were snorting BZP and Ritalin in the toilets, was held soon after this date. The small lapse of time between BZP’s was reclassification and the formal itself, may have meant that the girls were unaware BZP was illegal.

Nevertheless, student participant J also reports that young women were snorting Ritalin (methylphenidate) in the women’s toilets, which is a class B drug (http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1975/0116/latest/whole.html#DLM436586) and is prescribed for the management of “attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)” (www.medsafe.govt.nz/consumers/cmi/r/ritalin-la.pdf, ¶7). When Ritalin is snorted or injected by those who do not have ADHD the risks include “toxic overdose reactions, psychotic episodes, irregular heartbeat, stroke, convulsions, circulation problems and respiratory complications, heart arrhythmia and death”
(http://www.add-adhd-help-centre.com/newsletters/newsletter, ¶9). When snorted it can also “damage nasal tissues and deteriorate nasal cartilage” (http://www.add-adhd-help-centre.com/newsletters/newsletter, ¶8). Since Ritalin is prescribed for children (and adults) with ADHD and is relatively inexpensive, it is readily available to young people (http://www.add-adhd-help-centre.com/newsletters/newsletter).

Although the young women did undoubtedly engage in a ‘risky’ behaviour if they were snorting Ritalin in the women’s toilets, I wish to discuss how the young women may have managed to do so at a school formal where security staff regularly checked on student behaviour in the toilets. Staff participant A organised a police youth aid officer to make an appearance at the beginning of the formal and security guards circulated throughout the venue all night. Nevertheless, when I conducted observations at this formal I noted how there were “no female security guards” at the event (Field notes, 2008). Consequently, some young women may have consumed alcohol and drugs in the toilets because they were not subjected to surveillance in this setting.

However, every secondary school is “ordered by codes of discipline and norms of conduct” (Best, 2000, p. 100). These rules serve to legitimise the school’s ‘control’ over students and students are expected to submit to these codes of conduct, regulating their behaviour accordingly (Best, 2000). As stated previously, all three participating schools made it clear prior to the formal that alcohol and other illicit substances were prohibited at the formal, yet student participant J saw students consuming alcohol and drugs at the formal and suggests that this was because it is more fun to break the rules. Participant J’s comments highlight how prohibition may encourage students to drink and take drugs at the formal, which is the reason why one secondary school in New Zealand states that it permits students to consume alcohol at the formal (see Valintine, 2009; Yurisch, 2009). Best (2000) also found that many of her participants said they broke prom rules by drinking, smoking and taking drugs prior to, or at the prom. One participant explained he did so because he saw the rules as enforcing adult perceptions of appropriate behaviour that dampened his fun (Best,

---

21 This website was originally accessed on 24 January 2009, but this information has subsequently been removed. You can see the new page at http://www.add-adhd-help-centre.com//ritalin_side_effects.htm.
Consequently, the young women may have consumed alcohol and taken drugs because they were rebelling against adult understandings of appropriate behaviour and adult authority (Best, 2000).

The After Party

In New Zealand culture it is commonplace for students to attend an after party on the night of the formal (see Chateau, 1990; Hewson, 2009; Valintine, 2009; Yurisch, 2009). For many students, Hewson (2007) and White (2007) claim the after party rather than the formal itself is the highlight. In the following excerpt staff participant A reinforced this notion:

A lot of students for example, see [the formal] as a necessary preamble to justify the after party and teachers have in the past have never looked at it that way…and teachers now have started to make that shift well, and they say to me well if it is only a preamble to the after parties, why do we hold the formal.

In making such a statement staff participant A frames the after party as more important to students than the formal itself. The peer researchers or myself asked students what aspect of the formal night, which included preparations, the formal itself and the after party, they thought was the most important. Only four out of the thirty-one student participants who were asked this question said that they thought the after party was the most important part of the night. The other student participants reported that the meal (eight students, mixed gender), enjoying themselves and having fun (seven students, mixed gender), formal preparations (five young women), a few drinks with their friends before the formal (five students, mixed gender), the dress (two students, mixed gender) and socialising with friends (four young men) were the most important aspects of the night. On this basis, staff participant A’s perception that the after party was more important to students than the formal itself is inaccurate according to the student participants in this study.
Nevertheless, it is possible, that the student participants said that they did not view the after party as the most important part of the night because it is associated with alcohol. If the participants reported that they thought the after party was more important than the formal then they may have been concerned it could frame them in a negative manner. However, since many participants seemed to be open in their responses to questions from the peer researchers and myself I am convinced that they did not view the after party as the most important aspect of the formal night.

**The organisation of the after parties.**

Staff participant B was aware that students on the formal committee in the school were organising an after party, but staff participant B explained that the school would not permit their name to be associated with this after party. Although I did not ask staff participant B for a reason, I pose two explanations for why this was the case. Firstly, as student participant Q explains:

Because alcohol’s involved with after parties ‘cause it’s a party, because there’s alcohol involved, the school can’t have anything to do with it, legally the school cannot have anything to do with it.

Since the legal drinking age in New Zealand is 18 and the after formal party could be attended by year 12 and 13 students, some party goers would have been under the legal drinking age. Therefore, as student participant Q explained the school cannot be seen as sanctioning underage drinking (Best, 2000).

In New Zealand, schools compete with each other for students because the majority of funding comes from the New Zealand government who allocate money on the basis of student numbers (Codd, 2005). In the New Zealand media there have been a number of reports on students’ alcohol consumption at the formal and after parties (see Beech, 2009; Chateau, 1990; Lewis, 2008; MacDonald, 2009; Valintine, 2009; Yurisich, 1990). These articles depict after formal parties as ‘drunken affairs’ that have “the potential [to] spiral out of control” (Conway, 2008, p. 23). For example, journalist Beech (2009) reports that teachers and the principal of one New
Zealand secondary school refute the claim that their school has a “‘booze culture’” (p. 17). The same journalist claimed that students, who organised the after party at this particular school, set up a “‘vomit room’” (Beech, 2009, p. 17) and students considered it a badge of honour to frequent this room. If the media depicts a school in a negative light, such as the one mentioned above, then this can damage the reputation of the school. This in turn may mean parents are reluctant to send their child/ren to that school and the school would lose funding. Since negative publicity can affect a school’s position in the “market-driven educational climate” (Quinlivan, 2002b, p. 19), then perhaps this is a second reason many schools do not permit their names to be associated with after formal parties.

The formal committee arranged the following at this participating school’s after party:

**Participant Q:** …the venue, food, the music, things like that…drinks (laughs) they organise what the limit is, there’s always a limit.

**Lee:** At the after party?

**Participant Q:** Yeah there’s always alcohol at the after party you can’t walk in and get absolutely mothered, they put in the limit, they go up to the limit, ’cause what we do is we don’t take our drinks to the door and take them in with us, we take them in…earlier on. When we buy the tickets we get a ticket with a number on it and we remember that number, buy our alcohol elsewhere take it in earlier on in the day, they write our number on it, on the box with the cans or bottles…and then if you want one you go up to the counter and display our number, they go to our box and pull out a can so there’s [parents who act as] sober counters, so that way they control if anyone looks too over it then they won’t give you anymore. Just…a responsible way of controlling it…They have, we do have security guards as well in case things get out of control, the bouncers would jump in and go right you, grab you by the cuff and throw you outside…

The students on the formal committee followed some of the suggestions laid down by the New Zealand police for ‘safe’ after parties. These include (amongst others) making sure there is food on hand, organising security, restricting the amount of
alcohol young people can consume at the event and the number of people allowed into the venue (see Conway, 2008). Participant Q explained that students on the formal committee also organised parent helpers to act as sober counters to monitor students’ alcohol consumption in an effort to ensure students could not get “absolutely mothered” at the after party. Nevertheless, problematic issues emerged at this after party, which will be discussed later in this section.

In contrast to one school where senior students on the formal committee organised an after party, a second participating school banned students and parents from hosting an after party. Staff participant A explained that this was because:

Our school [rules] say that we say no to alcohol, drugs or any banned substances in terms of any school event or school related, you know doesn’t need to be on site, any school related event… and so we don’t allow any alcohol to do with anything to do with the school… so how can [we] sanction an after party when there’s alcohol involved. Now the whole point of having a controlled after party is to control the amount of alcohol but [we] can’t even go there because of our [school rules].

Staff participant A’s school is not alone in prohibiting students and their parents organising an after party. A number of New Zealand secondary schools do ban after formal events, but judging from articles in the New Zealand media, they appear to do so in response to problematic behaviour that occurred at previous parties (see Chateau, 1990; MacDonald, 2009; Valintine, 2009; Yurisch, 2009). However, other schools also prohibit after parties because of issues regarding alcohol consumption and student safety (see Munro, 2009).

Staff participant A said that because the school banned an after party, the school fielded a number of calls from parents who said that:

I’d rather know that my seventeen year old or sixteen year old was going to a party where there were bouncers and parents and controlled alcohol usage, than to have [the school] actively undermining the organisation of… an after
party… and [the principal] explained to the parents that we can’t have anything to do with alcohol, our [school rules] forbid it and therefore…what we will organise is an alcohol free, drug free event…The parents have to accept that and the parents’ response at that point is oh well they’re going to drink anyway.

Staff participant A explained that some parents said that they would rather the school ‘support’ than ban an after party because they would know where their children were, and that they were drinking in a controlled environment. Such a statement implies that parents believe that their children, perhaps because of their age, are incapable of moderating their alcohol consumption (Best, 2000). The fact that some parents argue for an after party where students can drink in a context ‘relating to school’ also attests to the normalisation of alcohol consumption in New Zealand society (Abel & Plumridge, 2004; Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al., 2006).

Despite the school banning students from organising an after party, staff at the school knew a student and her/his mother were arranging an after party. Staff participant A interpreted this as a way to make money by selling tickets and alcohol at the event:

**Staff participant A:** Two parents…rang [the school] on the night before the formal…to say that their [children] had been accosted by an unknown seventh former at school during the week to buy ten dollar tickets for an organised after party … and I found out from a student who had bought a ticket that [the student] was selling a hundred and fifty tickets at ten dollars each…and therefore [the student] would make fifteen hundred dollars and when [names student who bought ticket] asked…where was the money going…[the student] told [the student who was buying the ticket it was] to hire the venue…[and] to pay for the alcohol that [the student] would then sell at the after party.

**Lee:** Was this [student] over eighteen?

**Staff participant A:** Just eighteen but [the student] had no licence to sell booze and [the student] has no licence to sell to under eighteens and it’s criminal to sell alcohol to under [age drinkers], so at that point [the principal]
phoned [around and] tried to get some more information...[The principal] finally worked out where the venue was because it wasn’t on the ticket and...tracked it down to this [student] whose mother and [the student] seemed to be professional party organisers. I could even go to the point of saying they were making a reasonably good income out of it...but anyway [the principal] phoned the mother...and...said look what’s the basis on which you’re holding this party and she said oh it’s my [child’s] eighteenth birthday and [the principal] said no it’s not...It’s an after party for the formal so you’ve timed it not on your [child]’s birthday...but straight after the formal...and [the principal] said to the Mother that it was illegal and the police would have to be contacted as she planned to sell liquor without a licence to minors and of course at that point she got the point and backed down.

The New Zealand media reports that some parents will organise pre and after formal parties for their child in defiance of those schools who ban these events (see Chateau, 1990; Hartevelt, 2008; Munro, 2008; Valintine, 2009; Yurisch, 2009). Parents who organise after parties appear to do so because, as reported earlier, they perceive that students will consume alcohol anyway and it is better that they do not “roam the street looking for somewhere to go” (http://tvnz.co.nz/national-news/college-bans-balls-after-boozy-party-2959189, ¶26). Some parents might feel that it is beyond the school’s jurisdiction to tell them what they can do with their children outside of official school time (see Valintine, 2009). Nevertheless, according to staff participant A one student’s mother appears to organise an after party, not out of concern for her child or students more generally, nor to assert her rights as a parent, but to make money. It should be noted however, that I did not talk to the student concerned or to his/her mother so it is possible that the mother did organise an after party out of concern for her child and/or as a means to assert her rights as a parent.

Nevertheless staff participant A explains that the student and her/his mother planned to sell alcohol at the after party. In New Zealand it is a legal offence to supply alcohol to minors (http://www. schoolball.co.nz/after-ball-info). Furthermore, under the Sale of Liquor Act anyone selling alcohol needs a licence (http://www. schoolball.co.nz/after-ball-info). If a person is caught selling alcohol without a licence
they can be imprisoned or fined (http://www.schoolball.co.nz/after-ball-info). Although the principal at staff participant A’s school thought the mother had “back[ed] down, on the night, the student and her/his mother did go ahead and organise a private ‘after party’.

Vulnerability of international students drinking to excess.

Although it is unlikely that international students were the only students drinking to excess at the two after parties, this was a specific theme that emerged in this research project. However, rather than framing international students in a negative manner, I suggest that this reflects more widely on the pervasiveness of alcohol consumption in New Zealand society (Ablel & Plumridge, 2004; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al., 2006; The Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2002; 2005). For example, when I interviewed student participant N from the school where students on the formal committee organised an after party, I asked her/him if s/he heard students talking about the formal and if so what were students saying.

Yeah it was I mean probably the after party more than anything because the formal was pretty mellow but there was you know, whenever there’s any alcohol involved with it there’s always a select few that over indulge and, there’s [an international student] that was at a function before the after party just down the road from there at one of the [student’s] houses and there was about sixty people there and they just walked down to the after party so yeah one of the [international students] didn’t quite make it to the [names venue]… because he over indulged.

In the following excerpt student participant R, an international student from the same European country as the international student mentioned by participant N in the above excerpt, compares the drinking culture in New Zealand with that of his home country. When I asked him if he thought there was an expectation for young men to drink in New Zealand he said:
Participant R: Yeah like you would stand out if you wouldn’t, like stand out yeah I know it’s quite sad actually but who needs it yeah?

Lee: Is it the same in New Zealand as it is in [your home country]?

Participant R: Oh they drink here harder I think, they’re all drinking and yeah and drinking to the maximum (laughs) just to drink as much as you can and yeah in [names home country] it’s not that hard.

Perhaps because alcohol consumption is something associated with the performance of legitimate masculinity in New Zealand culture (Campbell et al, 1999; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al., 2006; Phillips, 1996; Stewart, 1997), the international student mentioned by student participant N in the previous excerpt may have felt pressure to consume excessive amounts of alcohol in order to perform a recognisable masculinity. Student participant R also said that if a boy chose not to consume alcohol then he would stand out amongst his peers, a prospect that he finds “quite sad”. Yet he goes on to ask the rhetorical question “who needs it?” Student participant R’s comments highlight how the consumption of liquor is also necessary for adolescent sociability in New Zealand, however, his comment “who needs it” highlights how some young men and young people more generally, perform their ‘identities’ in opposition to this “powerful norm” (Nairn et al, 2006, p. 288).

A staff participant was also told of international students from an Asian country drinking to excess at the ‘private after party’ organised by a student and his/her mother. She explained that the firm doing security at the school formal was also hired as security for this private after party. Staff participant A explained that following the after party a security guard from this firm made an appointment with her as a representative of senior staff at the school. Staff participant A said this was because he agreed to do the security at the after party on the assumption it was an eighteenth birthday party. At this meeting staff participant A reported that the head of the security firm told her about the following incident taking place at this private after party:

Staff participant A: …the head security guard plus the other [security guard] took one very drunk international student home because she was so drunk she
couldn’t stand up and who was so drunk that she couldn’t even tell them exactly where her address was… And so they had to go in and find out from other international students who knew where she lived and then when they finally… got there… they tried to get her to stand up and she couldn’t, so they supported her to the footpath and said is this your house and she still couldn’t tell them. [They could not rouse anyone at the house] and the front door was open so… they had to literally take her to her bedroom and the head of the security firm said they don’t like doing that, not with a girl.

Lee: Yeah they could get themselves into trouble.

Staff participant A: Yeah and they finally got her into the bedroom they put her on the bed just as she was, put the blankets over her and they scattled. Now… the head of the security was quite upset over the fact that she started throwing herself at him and not only that she was losing her dress… So when she was vomiting… outside the party venue and the head security guard had to get… her [international girl] friends… to dress her ’cause her dress was right down to her waist. He said it was dreadful because… she was vomiting her heart out right, so they had to sort of hold her shoulders so she could not fall in her vomit basically and so [the] other girls… they dressed her properly… but unfortunately this girl kept throwing herself at the head [bouncer] and he said to her, hey don’t do that I’m a forty year old man, I’m happily married, don’t go there to the drunk girl… He said they [act] as security for all sorts of situations where a lot of people are drunk, that’s their job and… the way he put it a lot of drunk girls go for alpha males and he said it’s just part of the job…

There are a number of possible readings of this excerpt. Koyama (2005) reports that in American colleges, international students have been identified as more likely to misuse alcohol, than other students because they may have higher levels of stress due to being immersed in an unfamiliar culture. Therefore, perhaps the female international student became intoxicated at the after party in order to cope with the stress involved in being in an unfamiliar culture. However, rather than discussing the young woman’s ‘risky’ behaviour, my analytical focus here is on the statements made to staff participant A by the head of security. This is because if I were to discuss the
young woman’s conduct my analysis would be purely speculative because I did not interview her. Furthermore, if I did discuss the young woman’s behaviour it could construct her in a negative manner and may also reproduce the dominant societal construction of youth as a time of “risk-taking and adolescent turmoil” (Ayman-Nolley & Taira, 2000, p. 35).

Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that by taking the young woman home with a second security guard and placing her in bed, the head of security is acting ethically, ensuring that the young woman is safe, but doing so with a witness. By discussing in detail the actions he took to ensure the young woman’s safety, the head bouncer is constructing himself as a morally responsible adult masculine subject, who does not ‘take advantage of’ a young woman’s situation, for staff participant A.

But there are other readings. In society, Holloway (1996) argues that men are constructed as having strong biologically imprinted urges to have sex. In fact Potts (2001) contends that the penis is frequently represented as having “a mind of it’s own” (p. 147) that threatens to ‘overcome’ the rational minds of men. Since rationality is a quality associated with masculinity and valued in men (Davies, 1990), the ‘uncontrollable’ “penis brain” (Potts, 2001, p. 150) is inconsistent with a desirable performance of masculinity. By talking in-depth with a staff member about how he resisted the intoxicated female international student “throwing herself” at him, the Head Bouncer is in fact consolidating his masculinity through constituting himself as a rational subject who is in control of his ‘penis mind’ (Potts, 2001). In addition, I contend that through talking in depth about how the drunk international student “threw herself at him” and his attempts to resist her, the head of security is further consolidating his status as a legitimate masculine subject.

The head of security also makes the comment that “drunk girls go for alpha males”. One participant ‘John’ in de Visser’s (2009) research into young men’s masculinities reported how dominant masculinity was “‘personified by the alpha male’” (p. 368) who exhibit qualities such as “dominance, machismo, leadership and competitiveness” (p. 368). Through describing in detail the intoxicated female student’s sexual advances, I argue the head of security conveyed himself as an alpha
male, and therefore both a sexually desirable and responsible hegemonic masculine subject.

After the head of security had talked to staff participant A about this particular incident, he told her that he ran workshops on how young women can protect themselves in regard to the risks involved in drinking to excess. Staff participant A explained that:

The [security guard had] written a whole explanation of how girls protect themselves from these sorts of issues like drinking too much, being you know women more than anybody, he said if they’re too drunk and they can’t manage to get home what happens to them, you know, they may get picked up by a male and who knows what, so anyway he’s written this set of instructions and it’s like a workshop and [some] schools employ him to take that workshop [and deliver it to girls].

It is interesting to note that this security guard is employed by some schools to deliver his workshops to girls. I contend that this is unfortunate for three reasons. Firstly, his statement that intoxicated young women “may get picked up by a male” serves to place the blame for unwanted sexual activity that may occur when young women are too drunk consent, onto young women themselves (Gavey, 2005). Secondly, since the majority of sexual assaults are committed by men, then young men need to be educated that having sexual connections with women who cannot give their consent because they are intoxicated, constitutes rape (Gavey, 2005). Furthermore, men are more likely to drink and drive and subsequently die in car crashes or kill someone else while driving while intoxicated than women (http://www.alcohol.org.nz/NZStatistic_170204.aspx), which is a third reason why young men need to be alerted to the dangers of excessive drinking and therefore the head of security should be delivering his workshops on avoiding excessive drinking to young men as well as young women.

In concluding this section I wish to reinforce that the problematic incidents that I have discussed above which occurred at the after parties were in the minority.
The majority of student participants in all three schools said that they had a good time at the after party. Nevertheless, staff participant A also said that even though it might be “only one or two students” who drink and put themselves in dangerous or vulnerable situations (referring to the intoxicated female Asian international student) “in the end this is why we cannot support after parties”.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have reported on the student participants’ alcohol consumption at pre-formal activities, the formal itself and the after party. The majority of the student participants did have a drink or two with their parents and/or their friends and formal partners prior to the formal, which suggests that alcohol consumption is virtually a prerequisite for socialising in these pre-formal settings as it is more widely for socialising in New Zealand culture (Abel & Plumridge, 2004; Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al, 2006; The Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2002; 2005). Although the New Zealand media constructs school formals and after parties as dangerous by because many young people drink to excess at these events, two participants reported that their mothers were intoxicated when they left for the formal, which highlights how alcohol consumption is also a feature of adult drinking culture in New Zealand (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2000; Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand; 2005; Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008; McCreanor at al, 2008; Nairn et al., 2006; Valintine, 2009; Yurisch, 2009).

At the formals themselves I documented the practices adopted by the three schools to try and ensure that any students who had consumed too much alcohol at pre-formal activities were not admitted. However, two student participants reported seeing particular students who were drunk at their formals. The two participants were disappointed in the actions of their intoxicated peers, which challenges the media construction of drinking to the point of intoxication as the norm amongst New Zealand youth (Nairn et al., 2006). At one school formal I observed teachers drinking when students were forbidden to do so. By drinking, the teachers were modelling to their students that alcohol consumption is necessary for enjoyment in social
situations. I ended this section by discussing the observations of one young woman who said that she saw some young woman ‘snorting’ drugs at one school formal. I alerted the reader to the fact that because there were no female security guards who were conducting regular checks in the women’s toilets, the young women were able to take drugs in the toilets. I suggest that when schools employ a firm to conduct security at the school formal, they need to ensure that there are security guards of both genders who can conduct regular checks on formal goers in both the female and male toilets. Furthermore, having female security guards is also important for taking intoxicated young women home, as in the case reported by the male head of security.

At both after parties reported on in this chapter, I noted that some international students drank to excess, which I attributed to the anxiety of being in an unfamiliar culture (Koyama, 2005). However, the male international students mentioned in the chapter were from the same European country, come from a culture where comparable numbers of young people consume alcohol as young New Zealanders (Degenhardt et al., 2008). The participant perceives that the emphasis on masculinity and excessive alcohol consumption in New Zealand as something he considers unique to New Zealand.

In Asian countries, such as China and Japan however, the amount of alcohol consumed per capita is far less than it is in New Zealand (Karam Kypri & Salamoun, 2007; Degenhardt et al., 2008). By the time they are 15, 82.1% of New Zealanders, 31.7% of Chinese and 30.4% of Japanese young people have tried alcohol and/or other drugs such as cannabis, cigarettes and cocaine (Degenhardt et al., 2008). Consequently, although I did not ask which Asian country the intoxicated young woman mentioned by the security guard and Staff Participant A was from, I nevertheless argue that the young woman’s actions may in part be explained by her immersion in a strange new drinking culture (Nairn et al., 2006).

When young women are so intoxicated they need to be taken home from after parties, these events are clearly a concern for schools. In the concluding chapter I debate whether schools should ban after parties altogether or alternatively take an
active role in the organisation of the event, so that the chances of students engaging in 'risky' behaviour are reduced.
Chapter 10: Summary and Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter brings my research into sexuality, gender and the school formal to a conclusion. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the research findings. The second section lists a number of methodological insights that emerged during the project and provides suggestions for researchers who use peer researchers and photography as data collection methods in their studies with young people in schools. The final section outlines future research directions and discusses implications of the project for schools.

Summary of Findings

**Same-sex attracted students and heteronormativity at the formal.**

My findings suggest that the school formal is a site where heteronormativity is promoted, however, the degree to which it is depends on the gendered make-up of a school and a schools’ policy on sexual diversity. Young men in the boys’ school were more likely to police the expectation of heterosexual pairing and normative gender codes than the student participants from the girls’ and co-educational schools.

The senior staff member of the participating boys’ school said that her school discouraged students from taking same sex partners to the school formal because of the likelihood they would be harassed. The student participants in the boys’ school also suggested that students would be ridiculed if they attended the formal with same sex partners. In contrast the staff and student participants at both the co-educational and girls’ schools reported that same sex attracted students would be welcomed and accepted if they attended the formal with same sex partners.

There are a number of possible explanations for the disparity in levels of un/acceptance reported by student participants from the three schools. Firstly, New
Zealand society is generally more accepting of female than male same-sex attraction (Dickson, et al., 2003), which may explain the differing levels of un/acceptance reported by the student participants in the girls and boys’ schools. Secondly, boys’ schools also “tend to generate ‘laddish cultures’” (Brutsaert, 2006, p. 645) in which homophobia and sexism are pronounced (also see Rout, 1992). In boys’ schools young men who perform hegemonic masculinity are often held in high status by their peers (Brutsaert, 2006; Martino, 1999; 2000; Martino & Frank, 2006). Since hegemonic masculinity is formed in part through detaching the self from any notion of homosexuality (Mac An Ghaill, 2000a) students at the boys’ school were perhaps more likely to harass two young men who attend the formal as partners, because the harassment acts as tool for the harasser/s to enhance their positioning amongst their male peers (also see Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Martino, 1999; 2000; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Robinson, 2005; Rout, 1992).

Despite the student participants at the co-educational school stating that same sex attracted students would be accepted if they attended the formal with same sex partners, I observed young men engaging in “bodily performance[s]” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 83) of homophobic humour at the co-educational formal (and boys’ school formal). By enacting such displays the young men deride male same sex sexual practices (Kehily & Nayak, 1997) while at the same time removing themselves from homosexuality (Mac An Ghaill, 2000a), therefore constructing their own masculinity.

Furthermore, since the school formal in New Zealand, like the prom in North America, is a heteronormative site then it is expected that young men will produce themselves as exemplars of heterosexual masculinity for the event (Epstein et al., 2000-2001; Grace & Wells, 2005). Therefore, young men may have engaged in these “homophobic performance[s]” (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p. 225) in an attempt to convince others of their heterosexual masculine status. However, by performing homophobic humour the young men at the co-educational school, like their counterparts in the boys’ school, were negating homosexuality in the “sex/gender hierarchy” (Kehily, 2001, p. 178) and also reproducing the school formal as a heteronormative site.
Resisting the construction of the formal as a heteronormative space.

There were exceptions to the production of school formals as heteronormative spaces. A professional photographer reported that he saw three lesbian couples kissing and touching each other in a sexual manner at the co-educational school formal. If this was the case then the young women concerned are challenging the school formal as a heteronormative space. However, I also argued that the young women may have engaged in same sex sexual behaviours at the formal for a male audience (Diamond, 2005) and if they did so, then their behaviour reproduces the school formal as a heteronormative space.

A peer researcher at the girls’ school also chose to attend the school formal with a female friend as her partner and as a result young men from the boys’ school made a number of heteronormative jokes about her “being that way inclined”. By taking a female instead of a male partner to the formal, the peer researcher was resisting heteronormativity, authoritative masculinity and normative codes of femininity by refusing to make the masculine the focus of her formal night (Holland et al., 1998; Renew, 1996). Consequently, young men from the boys’ school made heteronormative jokes about her sexuality in order to police her non-normative gender performance (Holland et al., 1998; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996).

The student participants in the boys’ school said that young men who attended the formal without a female partner would be ridiculed. In order to perform hegemonic masculinity, boys/men must show that they are easily able to ‘get’ girls/women (Connell, 2000; Martino, 1999; 2000; Pascoe, 2007b). Consequently, young men who attend the formal without a female partner may be framed as ‘unable to get a girl’ and harassed because they are viewed as performing an inferior version of masculinity (Connell, 2000; Martino, 1999; 2000). However, a peer researcher at the co-educational school stated that he was planning to attend the formal without a partner, thus highlighting how heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity are subjected to different levels of policing depending on the school (Martino & Frank, 2006; Praechter, 2003).
Despite heteronormativity and machismo being pervasive features of the culture of the boys’ school, one student participant in the school said that if a young man ‘came out’ as gay at the school “he would be loved by his peers”. It is important to acknowledge the young man’s supportive comments because it challenges the pervasive homophobia that is reported in all male environments, such as boys’ schools (see Brutsaert, 2006; Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Nairn & Smith, 2003a).

**Male students and romance**

Some young men from the boys’ school also viewed the formal as a space of heterosexual romance for them personally, however, none of the female participants made similar comments. This is a surprising finding since New Zealand popular culture and media constitute the school formal as a space of heterosexual romance for young women (see Hewson, 2009: Marker, 2007; 2008; Tay, 2007).

At first glance, the male participants who constructed the school formal as a romantic space for them personally appear to transgress hegemonic masculinity because romance is constructed as a feminine rather than a masculine preoccupation (Christian-Smith, 1988; 1990; Allen, 2003; 2007c; Redman, 2001; Walkerdine, 1990). However, young men can demonstrate independence and maturity in their relationships with young women, which are aspects traditionally associated with a ‘grown up’ masculine subjectivity (Best, 2000; Redman, 2001). Although this is speculation, I suggest that in the interviews I conducted with the male participants, some may have discussed the importance of taking their girlfriends to the formal in an attempt to convince me of their adult masculine status (Best, 2000; Redman, 2001).

Male student participants were also more likely to view the formal in accordance with popular cultural and media depictions of the event as a space of “transformation” (Best, 2000, p. 35), which is usually related to young women’s appearances. A number of male participants stated that differences existing between students at school did not matter at the formal and students with low social standing
could triumph over their low social status at the event by forging new friendships and meeting girls.

There are numerous research studies exploring how young women read various popular cultural texts, such as teen and girls’ magazines as well as romance novels (Zlatunich, 2009). Zlatunich (2009) explains that most of this research simply assumes that girls/young women are “particularly vulnerable to the media’s influence and thus have little ability to contextualise media influences” (p. 352). However, in this research study most of the female participants rejected popular cultural and media depictions of the formal as an arena of heterosexual romance and transformation (Best, 2000; Zlatunich, 2009). Instead it was some of the male students who took up these popular cultural and media depictions. Perhaps because young women, rather than young men have been constituted as particularly vulnerable to the influence of the popular culture and the media, I was unable to locate any research studies focusing on how male students negotiate the readings they attach to popular cultural and media depictions of the prom/formal (Zlatunich, 2009).

**Gendered bodily practices and the formal**

The young people in my study generally shaped their bodies into exemplars of heterosexual masculinity/femininity for the event through engaging in specific forms of beauty/body work (Epstein et al., 2000-2001). These beauty/body work practices were influenced by normative gender codes but were not determined by them (Zlatunich, 2009).

**Young women’s preparations.**

The majority of female participants engaged in extensive beauty work for the formal, but there was variation in how young women from the girls’ and co-educational schools conducted this beauty work. The participants from the girls’ school reported that most young women in the school were having their beauty work done professionally for the formal, while most of the female participants at the co-educational school said that female friends and family members were doing their
beauty work for the event. The female participants from the co-educational school seemed more resistant to the marketing of the school formal as a site for “feminine consumption” (Best, 2003, p. 414) than young women at the girls’ school.

The majority of student participants of both genders also stated that young women spend more time and energy on their formal preparations than young men. Since the school formal in New Zealand, like the prom in the United States, is constituted as a “feminine space” (Best, 2000, pp. 15-16), then young women may engage in extensive beauty work because they want to blend in (or stand out) at the event. Furthermore, because femininity is tied to a woman’s physical attractiveness (Best, 2000; Bordo, 1993a; 1993b; Hey, 1997; Kehily, 2002; Zlatunich, 2009), many young women may spend considerable time and energy on their appearance work for the formal to construct themselves as beautiful and therefore recognisable feminine subjects at the event and/or because they enjoy it (Best, 2000; Zlatunich, 2009).

My findings also indicate that young women are not a homogeneous group who prepare for the formal in accordance with traditional gender scripts. One female participant spent little time on her beauty work for the event. In doing so she resisted the societal assumption that as a young woman she should be interested in the formal, in order to constitute her femininity (Best, 2000).

**Young men’s preparations.**

The majority of male participants prepared for the formal by having a shower, a shave and putting various products in their hair. Many of the male participants also had a hair cut for the formal. Since short hair is traditionally denoted as marking men as masculine (see Mac An Ghaill, 2000; Rohlinger, 2002) then some young men may have had a haircut for the formal in an effort to produce themselves as the epitome of heterosexual masculinity at the event (Epstein et al., 2000-2001).

Two male participants did spend time on appearance work for the formal. One went to the gym prior to the event, while a second spent considerable time dyeing, conditioning and grooming his hair. By spending time on appearance work, these
participants challenge the assumption that New Zealand men have little concern with their appearance (Jenkins, 2009). However, since concern with appearance is traditionally seen as a feminine rather than a masculine concern (Best, 2000; Bordo, 1993b; Entwistle, 2000a; 2000b; Wilson, 1990), some student participants made comments that mocked young men who spent time on appearance work for the formal. In doing so they reproduce appearance work as a feminine responsibility in the “gendered division of labor” (Best, 2000, p. 44).

**Formal attire.**

**Young women’s attire.**

For young women, older female family members were important figures in the formal preparations of their younger female relatives (Best, 2000). The female participants reported that they shopped for material and patterns for their formal dresses with their mothers or grandmothers. The combination of older family members making their daughters/granddaughters’ formal dresses, and female friends and relatives doing the beauty work of some of the female participants, highlights how preparing for the formal is a female group activity (Best, 2000).

The majority of student participants reported that young women are judged more harshly on what they wear to the formal than young men. Many of the female participants explained that young women must carefully choose their formal dresses, so the dress makes them look attractive but is not too revealing otherwise young women will be labelled as a ‘slut’ or ‘skank’ by their female peers. Since there is pressure to internalise the male gaze during the teenage years some young women become fearful of getting their appearance wrong (Rossiter, 1994). This fear is often deflected onto other young women and therefore they become each other’s “harshest critics” (Rossiter, 1994, p. 10). Consequently, the labelling of other young women who may choose to wear dresses that are too revealing by some young women, could be understood as deflecting personal anxieties about their own performances of femininity onto other young women (see Brown & Chesney-Lind, 2005; Youdell,
2004). However, such labelling serves to reinscribe different standards of appropriate male and female behaviour in society (see Holloway, 1996; Smith, 2006).

**Young men’s attire.**

Despite the majority of male participants wearing variations of the same general black tuxedo to the formal many of the male participants also chose to coordinate their ties and shirts with the colour of their partner’s dress, on the basis of their partner’s description. Others felt they would look silly if they wore ties or shirts that did not match their partner’s dress. Since concern with fashion is constructed as a feminine rather than a masculine pre-occupation (Entwistle, 2000a; 2000b; Jenkins, 2009), I argue that young women were able to exercise considerable authority over the colour of some aspects of their male partner’s formal attire despite their less dominant position in gender relations (Best, 2000).

All of the male student participants expressed a desire to look good in what they were wearing to the formal. A number of the male participants also wore accessories such as hats, gloves, sunglasses, braces and scarves that served to individualise their suits. One peer researcher explained that he wore particular accessories with his tuxedo because they looked cool. These comments show how young men in New Zealand are interested in fashion and what they wear to the formal.

There were also variations in young men’s compliance with hegemonic masculinity: some wore pink, a colour traditionally aligned with femininity in Western societies (Wilson, 2005). My findings indicate that some young men can wear pink to the formal and transgress colours traditionally associated with masculine dress (blue, black, grey and brown) without being harassed if they possess high levels of sub-cultural capital, while ‘less popular’ students cannot (Jenkins, 2009; Smith, 1990).
Adults and hetero-sex at the formal

The scarce amount of literature that is available on the school prom/formal only mentions teachers or security staff in the role of disciplinarians and surveyors of student behaviour at the formal. However, in my study teachers and other adults, who were at the two school formals where I conducted observations, were active in the creation of their own sexual/gender subjectivities at the event (Rasmussen, 2004).

By making sexualised comments and engaging in sexualised behaviour, some teachers challenged the distinction between teacher/student and adult/child. Others made comments that served to pathologise young women’s sexual agency (Fine, 1992) and also reproduced the traditional “male sex drive discourse” (Holloway, 2006, p. 86). In doing so they reinscribe the traditional societal constructions of young women as victims of dominant male sexuality, as well as the active/passive constitution of male/female sexuality (Fine, 1992; Holloway, 1996; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Smith, 2006).

Spatiality and gender performances

Public/private space.

At the formal male students reproduced their authoritative positioning in the gender binary through controlling ‘public space’ via “bodily performances” (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 83) of hegemonic masculinity. However, gathering in the toilets and texting their female friends on their mobile phones were ways in which young women resisted male authority in the ‘public space’ of the formal venue. By gathering in the toilets young women were turning a private space into a semi-public space and by texting friends, they were creating a private space within the public space of the formal, thus highlighting how public and private spaces are not readily distinguishable (Duncan, 1996a; 1996b).
In everyday practices such as eating at the formal, young people were performing their masculinity/femininity in accordance with normative societal gender codes, in which women’s space is small (Youdell, 2005), “enclosed or confining” (Young, 1990, p. 151, emphasis in original) and men’s open and large. The young people’s eating patterns also reflected the different societal depictions of male/female hunger in which men are encouraged to eat to satiate their hunger and women are expected to eat small amounts in order to stay slim and therefore meet the ideal of slender female beauty (Bordo, 1993b). If the young women ate her chicken with her fingers as the young man did, she would be publicly satiating her hunger and thereby failing to perform her gender in accordance with normative discourses of feminine self-restraint (Bordo, 1993b; Burns, 2004).

Negotiating societal constructions of youth

Along with normative discourses of gender, the student participants also drew upon prevailing societal constructions of youth in order to understand their positioning as young men/women and the formal itself (Best, 2000), as well as New Zealand popular cultural and media depictions of the formal as a “night to remember” (Smith, 2008, p. 10) and a “rite of passage” (Tay, 2007, p. C6). A number of student participants made comments that reproduced the societal construction of youth as a period when young people are thought to be creating their ‘adult identities’ and acquiring traits traditionally associated with adulthood (such as independence and maturity) (Boëthius, 1995; Harris, 1999; Valentine et al., 1998). Some participant’s investment in the formal was also influenced by the construction of youth as a “time of fun” (Croghan et al., 2008, p. 348), in which young people are not constrained by the “responsibilities of adulthood” (Valentine et al., 1998, p. 3). However, many of the student participants had numerous responsibilities typically associated with adulthood including employment.

Since the participants were in their final year of schooling, many explained that it was vital to attend the formal because it was one of the last times they had to socialise with their friends (Best, 2000). Other participants made comments
suggesting that the school formal alerts young people that school is about to finish with the inevitable prospect of having to say goodbye to friends at the end of the year (Best, 2000).

**Navigating New Zealand’s drinking culture**

Dominant discourses of youth impact on student participants’ investment in the formal and their behaviour on the night also referenced New Zealand societal attitudes towards alcohol consumption. In New Zealand, alcohol consumption is constituted as virtually a requirement for socialisation (Abel & Plumridge, 2004; Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al., 2006). It is also common for New Zealanders to socialise by having a “few drinks” (Lyons & Willot, 2008, p. 700) with friends. Some student participants positioned alcohol consumption as part of the ‘whole school formal experience’ indicating how they have incorporated wider societal attitudes to alcohol consumption (Abel & Plumridge, 2004; Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al., 2006).

The construction of alcohol as a “social lubricant” (Lyons & Willot, 2008, p. 700) is also widespread in New Zealand society. Some participants’ comments highlight how they have taken up the societal construction of alcohol consumption as easing social angst (Abel & Plumridge, 2004; Jones & Donovan, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008).

New Zealand society also has a general tolerance for intoxication and drunken behaviour (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2000; Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2002; 2005; Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008). However, some student participants expressed their disapproval of students who were intoxicated at the formal. In doing so they challenged the societal acceptance of drunken behaviour, as well as New Zealand media depictions of excessive alcohol consumption as the “dominant norm for young people” (Nairn et al., 2006, p. 288).

In the New Zealand media, after parties are constituted as ‘drunken affairs’ and therefore a site of trouble (Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2002; also
see Beech, 2009; Conway, 2008). Although it is unlikely that international students were the only young people engaging in problematic alcohol consumption on the night of the after party, some participants reported that there were a number of international students who consumed alcohol to excess prior to, or at the after party putting themselves in ‘risky’ situations. International students may be particularly vulnerable when they encounter New Zealand’s prevalent drinking culture and events such as after parties where young people are likely to consume alcohol, because they may be unaware of, as well as particularly susceptible, to the effects of alcohol (Nairn et al., 2006).

Summary-Conclusion

My findings highlight how the school formal is a complex social space, where young people navigate normative discourses of sexuality, gender and youth, as well as New Zealand cultural codes of sociability (also see Best, 2000; Zlatunich, 2009). For year 13 students the school formal is also an event that symbolises how the security and familiarity of schooling is about to finish, along with associated friendships that have been forged over five years of secondary schooling (also see Best, 2000). Consequently, the New Zealand media depictions of the school formal as a night of light-hearted fun (see Yurisch, 2009) is inaccurate, as it is also a social event where young people undergo important ‘identity work’ and think about their post-school horizons (also see Best, 2000).

My findings illustrate how the formal is a space where there is an expectation that young people will attend the event with an opposite sex partner and young women will engage in extensive beauty work for the event (see Best, 2000; Zlatunich, 2009). Even though this was the case, the student participants shaped their own understandings of the formal, which were influenced by New Zealand popular culture and media constructions of the event, but not determined by them (also see Zlatunich, 2009). In some cases the student participants challenged the construction of the school formal as a heteronormative arena and an event where young women are expected to invest in an emphasised version of femininity (Best, 2000; Connell, 1987).
Like the prom in the United States, the school formal is constituted as a “feminine space, conventionally thought to be the domain of girls” (Best, 2000, p. 35) (see Hathaway, 2007; Hewson, 2009; Marker, 2007; 2008; Tay, 2007). Therefore, it is assumed young women will be extremely invested in the event and young men will have little interest in it (Best, 2000). However, my findings stress that many young men are just as interested and invested in the formal as young women.

The relative scarcity of international and national research available on the school prom/dance, has reported on young women’s preparations for, and perspectives of the event (see Best, 2000; Zlatunich, 2009; White, 2007). However, choosing to study male and female participants’ conceptualisations of, and experiences of the school formal meant that young men’s understandings of the event are discussed alongside young women’s. This highlights how young men are just as interested in their appearance, what they wear to the event and in some cases are more concerned about romance at the event, despite romance being constituted as a traditional feminine domain (Christian-Smith, 1988; 1990; Walkerdine, 1990).

Methodological Insights

Photographs, peer researchers, observations and ethics.

Photography and photo-elicitation interviews, as well as the involvement of peer researchers in the data collection, were additional methods deployed in an effort to create a more “youth centred methodology” (Allen, 2009a, p. 398) where the student participants had “greater control over the data collection” (Allen, 2009b, p. 555). Photographs and photo-elicitation interviews were also selected in order to gain insight into how the student participants prepared for the event and understood ‘typically gendered behaviour’ at the formal, without me transposing my understandings of such aspects on to the young people (Croghan et al., 2008).

However, Allen (2009b) argues that schools and I extend this to universities often view photography as a more “dangerous than written texts” (p. 553) such as surveys and interview transcripts. This is because photographs are considered as
having “greater power to be inflammatory than students’ written and spoken thoughts” (Allen, 2009b, p. 553). The construction of photographs as ‘dangerous’ (Allen, 2009a; 2009b) in combination with the discourse of youth “as vulnerable, in need of protection from exploitative academic researchers” (Valentine, 1999, p. 150) both contributed to the lengthy process of gaining ethical approval for my research.

The University of Otago Ethics Committee placed conditions on the content of photographs that could be included in the thesis, such as the requirement to disguise formal attire. The peer researchers at the boys’ school took numerous snapshots in which the faces and tuxedos of young men were central. After disguising the faces and tuxedos of young men depicted in the images the content was unrecognisable and none were included in the study. Agreeing to disguise the formal attire of young people depicted, undermined my desire to create a more youth focused research design in which the young people had “greater autonomy in the research process” (Allen, 2009b, p. 551). However, because the majority of young men wore the same general black tuxedo to the formal their clothing was not identifiable and disguising their formal clothing was not necessary. Since photographs are perceived as having greater potential to identify participants than more traditional research methods (Allen, 2009a; 2009b; Close, 2007; Mason, 2002), then it is not surprising the Ethics Committee was cautious to protect the anonymity of research participants.

Allen (2009b) notes that schools are concerned about students’ “camera-use” (p. 553) in general and this explains schools unwillingness to participate in projects that utilise visual methods. This is because they fear students taking snapshots of questionable material, which “undermin[es] school authority” (Allen, 2009b, p. 553) and reflects badly on their school. Principals may have also declined to take part in this project because the perception of photographs as “dangerous” (Allen 2009b, p. 553) in combination with the focus on the ‘problematic’ school formal and associated after party was too fraught for the reputation of their schools.

Whatever the reasons for schools’ unwillingness to participate in the project, their reluctance and my subsequent abandonment of photography at two of the three participating schools is unfortunate because it means that only photographs taken by
the peer researchers at the boys’ school are included in the thesis. The photographs taken by the peer researchers at the boys’ school did yield interesting and surprising findings such as the number of snapshots depicting what they considered to be ‘gendered differences’ in the way young women and men ate at the formal. When I conducted observations at the formal I did not notice these ‘gendered differences’ in eating patterns and therefore involving the peer researchers in the data collection enhanced the study.

Young women are in a less authoritative positioning in the “gendered order” (Davies, 1990, p. 513), and therefore if the female peer researchers had had the opportunity to take photographs of what they deemed to be to be ‘typically gendered behaviour’ at the formal, the content of their images may have differed to the photographs taken by peer researchers at the boys’ school. This would have provided a further avenue to explore differences in gender performances at school formals.

Nevertheless, the use of photographs in the study did provide further information regarding gender performances. The principals of the participating boys’ and girls’ school made comments about the reluctance of young women to have their photograph taken by peer researchers and their anxiety about asking other young people for their permission to take their photograph. The peer researchers from the boys’ school stated that they considered photography as something young women do because they like to capture memories and young men are not concerned about this aspect. Therefore, researchers who do use photography in their research with young people should be aware that there may be gendered differences in the way young people conceptualise photography, how they feel about asking permission to take photographs of other people and their willingness to have their photograph taken.

**Peer researchers**

Employing the peer researchers as interviewers at the co-educational and girls’ school also resulted in rich data. Since the peer researchers knew their interviewees, students seemed to be more open in these interviews than in interviews conducted by me, an adult researcher who was unfamiliar them. In these interviews students
discussed aspects such as the teachers they liked and disliked, their plans for the after party, which was often followed by laughter and subsequent ‘shushing’ by the peer researchers, and aspects of the formal they found humorous. Consequently, employing peer researchers as interviewers enriched the research project.

But there were also problems that emerged in regard to the employment of peer researchers in the study. Some of the peer researchers at the boys’ school gave their disposable cameras to their parents, girlfriends and female friends who took snapshots on the night of the formal. In another case a young woman left a cassette recording of an interview that she conducted in a public area for me to pick up, after she ‘double booked’ herself and could not attend our arranged meeting. Despite stressing the need for anonymity in the training sessions I conducted with the peer researchers in both schools, these incidences highlight how a thirty-minute training session was not enough to ensure they understood the need for confidentiality. Nevertheless, since I was unable to negotiate a time during the school day for the peer researchers to attend a training session, the training had to take place during the lunch break at school and had to be brief as a number of the peer researchers had other commitments, such as rehearsals for the school musical, choir and sports practice.

If researchers are going to employ peer researchers in their studies they need to conduct more extensive training sessions stressing the need for confidentiality and the security of cameras and interview recordings (Allen, 2009a; 2009b). However, this training should be delivered in a way that is accessible to the young people and should not frame peer researchers as “‘irresponsible’ and ‘incompetent’” (Allen, 2009a, p. 399). In my study, it was my oversight not to inform the peer researchers that other people should not have access to their cameras.

The ethics of taking and presenting photographic images

In the initial training session I conducted with the peer researchers in the boys’ school, I explained that taking photographs without permission was unethical, as it was a breach of the person’s privacy and therefore, I could not use any of these
photographs in the thesis (Coad, 2011; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). As stated in Chapter Two, the peer researchers were asked to read out a paragraph explaining that any photographs taken at the formal would be used to inform a doctoral thesis on the school formal, to anyone who they wished to photograph prior to taking their photograph. After the formal the peer researchers were asked if they had the permission of the people depicted in their snapshots, to which they replied yes. However, because the photographic subject’s permission was given verbally then I cannot guarantee that the peer researchers did indeed have the permission of people depicted in their snapshots.

Researchers using photography and peer researchers in their research with young people (including myself), do so because it provides “a more prominent voice for young people” (Yates, 2010, p. 281) than more traditional research designs. This is because young people are employed as co-researchers in the data collection (Nairn & Smith, 2003a). Photographs nevertheless, have multiple interpretations and their meaning “requires recursive interpretation and attention to evidence” (Yates, 2010, p. 288). Whenever I include a photograph in the thesis, I have also reported the peer researcher’s explanation of the image, my own interpretation of the snapshot, as well as the peer researcher’s comments on the photograph. In this way, I hope to ensure that the young people’s understandings of gender and explanations of their photographs remain central to the project, but at the same time I wish their interpretations to exist alongside my own (Liebenberg, Didowsky & Ungar, 2012). In addition, I wish to invite the reader to come up with their own interpretations of the images included in the thesis, which are informed by both the peer researchers’ and my own readings of the images.

Photography and photo-elicitation methods have become increasingly common in research with young people (see Allen, 2008; 2009a; 2009b; Allen, 2012; Croghan et al., 2008; Lidenberg Didkowsky & Ungar, 2012; Lutterall, 2010; Smith, Gidlow & Steel, 2012; Yates, 2010; Youdell, 2004). In some photographs included in published articles young people are depicted without disguise or with minimal disguising so that identification is possible (see Croghan et al., 2008; Luttrellell, 2010; Yates, 2010; Youdell, 2004). I consider this to be problematic, especially when it
comes to publishing photographs of young people, some of who may be minors. Researchers have an ethical duty to protect the anonymity of their participants. I suggest researchers should form small collaborative research relationships, where researchers can show disguised photographs to gain opinions of whether identification might be still possible.

Researchers also need to ensure they obtain the informed consent from the people they study otherwise a research project can be considered ethically problematic (Christians, 2000; Silverman, 2004). At both schools where I conducted observations, formal goers were not informed that I was conducting observations at the event, because senior staff members did not follow through on previous arrangements. Since researchers are aware of the need to gain informed consent and the importance of voluntary participation in a research study, they need to make every effort to send out any information about their research study personally in an attempt to ensure their research is ethically sound (Christians, 2000).

By not following though on arrangements to inform formal goers that I would be conducting observations at the co-educational and girls’ school formals, the senior staff members were co-opting formal goers into participating in the research without their consent (Nairn, Munro & Smith, 2005). This ultimately undermined by desire to treat young people as agentic subjects capable of making their own decisions regarding research participation (United Nations General Assembly, 1989; Valentine, 1999). Researchers working with young people in schools need to be mindful that it is common for teachers to volunteer their students for research participation without consulting them (Valentine, 1999). I therefore suggest that prior to embarking on research projects with young people in schools, researchers should prepare a number of strategies, which they can utilise if it appears that teachers are not consulting with their students prior to agreeing to take part in a study. In this way, researchers are somewhat prepared if the opportunity to inform students is neglected or overlooked.

‘Failed’ Research Methods
It could be argued that my decision to employ photography and narratives as data collection methods in the research study had ‘failed’. Since schools are reluctant to participate in projects that employ visual methods (Allen, 2009a; 2009b) then having one school agree to participate in a project that employed visual methods could also be considered a success (Allen, 2012, personal communication).

When conducting research with young people, Nairn, Munro and Smith (2005) argue that researchers need to have “flexible multi-method approaches” (p. 237). The problems that I experienced trying to access schools willing to take part in the project because it employed visual methods, highlights how the ability to adapt research designs is important for researchers who are planning to use visual methods in their studies.

Researchers contemplating employing visual methods also need to be aware that because schools consider photography as more problematic than familiar data collection methods such as interviews (see Allen, 2009a, 2009b), securing schools willing to participate in their projects may be difficult. For this reason, I suggest that researchers should draft a second research strategy as an alternative.

Although the ‘narratives’ produced information that was more akin to questionnaire responses than narratives, they did provide me information about power dynamics between teachers and students (Nairn, Munro & Smith, 2005). I argue that the two or three word narratives written by young women at the girls’ school could be interpreted as a form of resistance to their teacher’s insistence that they write narratives. This highlights how ‘failed’ methods can provide researchers with data on aspects other than what was intended (Nairn, Munro & Smith, 2005).

**Areas for Future Research on the School Formal**

Future research on school formals needs to include the perspectives of those students who decide not to attend the event in order to provide a more comprehensive account of the ‘meaning’ young people attach to the event. Although I had prepared a
narrative form and interview guide for students who decided not to attend the formal, none of this group of students volunteered to take part in the study. Consequently, I was unable to discuss the reasons why some students decided not to go to the formal and any differences in the way these students understood the event. It would be interesting to explore whether students who decide not to attend the formal still construct it as a rite of passage like some of the student participants in this study, and if so do they feel like they are missing out by not going?

Future research on school formals would be enhanced by a wider cultural representation amongst student participants. Of the 46 student participants in the research study, who were interviewed by the peer researchers or myself, 42 identified as New Zealand European/Pākehā, one as Tongan-New Zealander, one as Chinese-New Zealander, and two were international students from the same European country. Due to the lack of cultural diversity amongst the student participants, specific cultural practices and how they may impact on the formal experiences of students from diverse cultural backgrounds were not discussed in this research study.

Future research on school formals needs to include schools with varying decile ratings. The three participating schools had similar decile ratings and consequently, social class and how this impacts on young peoples’ formal preparations and experiences of the event was not discussed in depth. It is likely, however, that social class would have an impact on young people’s formal preparations. For example, Tay (2007) reports that one young woman from an affluent suburb in Auckland spent $1200 on her formal dress, while some families go without food because of the costs involved in sending their children to the formal.

Van Kempen (2008) also reports that parents in rural centres frequently arrive at the formal venue to watch their children arrive and enter the venue. Therefore it appears that school formals in country areas may be more of a ‘family affair’ than they are in New Zealand urban centres. It would be interesting to explore any differences that exist between school formals in rural and urban areas in future research.
Implications for Schools, Parents and New Zealand Society

Heteronormativity and Same Sex Attracted Students.

The practice of discouraging same sex attracted students from attending the formal with same sex partners because of the likelihood that they would be harassed, highlights how the boys’ school in this study failed to respect the sexuality, as well as the safety, of their same sex attracted students. In New Zealand teachers are governed by a code of ethics (New Zealand Teachers’ Council, 2004), where they are legally required to “promote the physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual wellbeing of learners” (NZTC, 2004, ¶ 6). However, rather than addressing the homophobia amongst the students existing in the boys’ school, the senior staff chose to discourage same sex students from attending the boys’ school formal with same sex partners. Such a practice highlights how the senior staff are in violation of the professional standards required of teachers in a New Zealand context.

In 2003 the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers’ Association (NZPPTA) released a document titled Affirming Diversity of Sexualities in the School Community, in which they argue that most secondary schools in New Zealand affirm diversity amongst their students in regard to cultural/racial background, dis/ability, gender, religion, financial background or learning ability (NZPPTA, 2003). However, they contend that schools are less inclined to affirm, let alone recognise sexual diversity (NZPPTA, 2003). They also argue that homophobia is one of the last remaining forms of discrimination that goes unaddressed in many New Zealand secondary schools (NZPPTA, 2003).

The discouragement of same sex attracted students attending the formal with same partners by senior staff at the boys’ school is unfortunate because the NZPPTA (2003) argue that if “senior management, especially the principal, is seen to take a clear position affirming diversity and outlawing prejudice in all its forms, including homophobia, outcomes for students and staff will be far more positive” (p. 4). This is highlighted by the participating co-educational school, where the principal emphasised the school’s commitment to protection of diversity, which may be a
reason why all of the student participants from this school stated that they were aware of ‘out’ same sex attracted students in the school and same sex attracted students would be accepted if they attended the formal with same sex partners.

The NZPPTA lists a number of reasons why schools need to place priority on affirming student sexual diversity as well as eliminating homophobia. One is the growing body of New Zealand literature that reports the negative impact that homophobia has on same sex attracted youth (NZPPTA, 2003). This includes disproportionately high levels of suicide ideation, depression, self-harm, drug and alcohol abuse and unsafe sexual practices amongst same sex attracted youth (Le Brun, 2004; Quinlivan, 1996; Rossen et al., 2009; Smith, 2006; Stapp, 1991; Town, 1999; Vincent & Ballard, 1997). Therefore, secondary schools in New Zealand, such as the participating boys’ school, not only have a legal responsibility to address the homophobia and heteronormativity that exist in their schools, they also have a moral duty to do so (NZPPTA, 2003). One way schools can show their commitment to the valuing of sexual diversity, is to encourage same sex attracted students to attend the school formal with their same sex partners.

The After Party.

Alcohol consumption is virtually a requirement for adults to socialise in New Zealand (Abel & Plumridge, 2004; Bunce, 2001; Lyons & Willot, 2008; Nairn et al., 2006) and is often represented as one of our ‘favourite’ pastimes (Bunce, 2001). Despite many adult New Zealanders consuming alcohol as a recreational activity, those same adults also express concern about the drinking patterns of New Zealand youth (Bunce, 2001). If the problematic alcohol consumption patterns of some New Zealand youth are going to be addressed then Rebecca Williams, from Alcohol Health Watch New Zealand, argues that adult New Zealanders need to rethink their own liberal attitudes towards alcohol consumption and intoxication (http://tvnz.co.nz/national-news/auckland-schoolboy-dies-after-drinking-3534288/video).
In this research study many adults’ permissive attitudes towards their own and young peoples’ alcohol consumption, as well as their conceptualisation of alcohol as necessary for adults and young peoples’ socialisation was evident (Abel & Plumridge, Bunce, 2001; 2004; Nairn et al., 2006). Teachers and parents were consuming alcohol on the night of the formal and one staff participant said her school fielded a number of calls from parents, in response to the school’s decision to ban an after party, who said that they would rather the school allowed students to organise an after party because they would know that their child was drinking in a controlled environment. This highlights how parents view alcohol consumption as a necessary component of their son’s/daughter’s formal night, but also how parents are aware of the potential risks involved when their children do drink.

However, since some young people do consume alcohol to excess at after parties and engage in problematic behaviour while intoxicated, they are a concern for secondary schools across New Zealand, as well as the New Zealand police and other community alcohol/health organisations (Valintine, 2009; Yurisch, 2009). Consequently, the New Zealand police, in conjunction with the New Zealand Alcohol Liquor Advisory Council, youth workers, road safety organisations and health promoters have compiled a resource, which outlines a number of specific practices that schools, parents and students can implement in order to create ‘safer’ after parties (this resource can be accessed at http://www.schoolball.co.nz/after-ball-info). Some of these practices include, placing limits on the amount of alcohol young people can consume at the event, limiting the number of students who can attend, and ensuring food as well as non-alcoholic drinks are available at the venue. Other suggestions include informing police when the event is taking place so that police officers can be present when students arrive at the after party and leave, as well as making transport available to and from the after party in order to eliminate the possibility of students driving while under the influence of alcohol (http://www.schoolball.co.nz/after-ball-info).

Since media reports indicate that students are more likely to engage in risky behaviour at after parties organised by students when their schools prohibit them from doing so, then I argue that ideally schools need to take an active role in the
organisation of after parties. School staff could work collaboratively with parents and students to implement the strategies for creating a ‘safe’ after party, which are suggested by the New Zealand police and other community safety/health organisations. Not only would this reduce the chances of problematic behaviour that may occur at after parties it may also ease the concerns teachers/parents have for their students/children.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my findings indicate that discourses of hegemonic masculinity make it harder for two males, either friends or lovers, to attend the formal as partners, than it is for two young women to attend the formal together. Hegemonic masculinity is forged in part by removing the self from any notion of homosexuality, and harassing young men perceived as performing ‘inferior’ versions of masculinity (Mac an Ghaill, 2000a; Martino, 1999). Since hegemonic masculinity is the most desired form of masculinity that exists in contemporary society, young gay men and those who transgress hegemonic masculinity (such as those who would spend time on beauty and bodywork for the formal), will continue to be harassed, while those who make supportive comments about same sex attracted young men attending the formal together (such as John, Jackson, Travis and Ziggy (who identified as queer) are likely to remain a minority (Connell, 1987; Dalley-Trim, 2007). Consequently, hegemonic masculinity needs to be actively challenged if same-sex attracted young men and those who engage in non-traditional gender displays are to have greater societal acceptance and equality (Martino, 1999).

In stating this however, hegemonic masculinity is also forged in part in relation to girls/women and the negation of femininity (Bird, 1996; Dalley-Trim, 2007; Epstein, 1997b; Mac An Ghaill, 2000a). Therefore some young men engage in sexism, sexual harassment, and bodily dominance of women in an attempt to construct their own masculinity (Bird, 1996; Epstein, 1997a; 1997b; Gavey, 2005; Kehily, 2001; 2002; Lee et al., 1994; Lyman, 2001; Pascoe, 2007b; Robinson, 2005; Valentine, 1989; Youdell, 2005). In this study, a young man imposed his body on that of his female teacher, while others intruded on the physical space of young women at
the formal. Some, young men dominated public space at the formal through bodily displays of hegemonic masculinity and greater spatial occupation as they went about everyday activities like eating at the formal. Consequently, hegemonic masculinity needs to be destabilised if girls/women are also to achieve greater equality in gender relations, schools and society in general.

Martino (1999) argues that hegemonic masculinity should be placed on the school agenda because of its harmful effects on young men, and I add young women. However, it is not enough to teach students solely about hegemonic masculinity because to do so would only reinforce its dominant status. Students also need to be taught about normative discourses of femininity, which constitute girls/women as vulnerable, passive, weak, powerless and overly emotional (Davies, 1990; 1993) when this is not the case. Pascoe (2007b) also reports that young women who are heavily invested in emphasised femininity are more likely not to protest against male violence compared with young women who perform other versions of femininity. Although young men in schools should firstly be taught that male-female violence is unacceptable, young women also need to be made aware of their right to authority over themselves and their bodies (Pascoe, 2007b).

However, students need to be taught about the performative nature of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, as well as the multiple and varied ways people enact their gender in society (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002; also see Smith, 2006). This alerts them to the socially constructed and fluid nature of gender ‘identity’ categories, which in turn challenges the inflexible masculine/feminine binary, as well as the authoritative/subordinate status of the binary pair (Butler, 1990; Quinlivan & Town, 1999). One-method teachers can use to teach students about gender performativity and the binary construction of gender is to adopt and adapt the research methods feminist poststructuralist Davies (1993) outlines in her book Shards of Glass. In this text Davies (1993) outlines her research with groups of primary school children where she attempted to teach them how to speak, write and think beyond the gendered binary.

Davies (1993) firstly taught the children about discourses and how they create “storylines through which gendered persons are constituted” (p. 2). Critical readings
of texts such as *Snow White* were then conducted with the children in order to explore how the gendered storylines shaped the boys'/girls’ desires, what characters they identified with and how they saw their futures. Following this the children were read feminist stories in which girls/women were cast in the conventional male role of hero, which the girls enjoyed. However, Davies (1993) explains that perhaps because the boys were annoyed that a girl/woman was positioned in the traditional masculine role of hero, they soon began to engage in:

open attacks on the girls (as well as their attacks on the heroic female characters in the text) which usually took the form of sexualising them, making them vulnerable to sexual attack, presumably in an attempt to re-position them in the traditional romantic storyline where they not only know that place but desire that place. (Davies, 1993, p. 6)

Next the children wrote stories in groups in which they were asked to resist conventional gendered discourses and storylines. However, because the children were immersed in binary thought Davies (1993) states that “resisting the dominant discourse seemed to them to involve simple reversals, the use of whatever is opposite” (p. 6). For instance, if someone is not thin then they must be fat. During the story writing the boys continually tried to position males in protagonist roles, which was something Davies (1993) explains that she had to continually challenge. Finally, the children wrote individual stories, in which they were asked to resist dominant gender discourses and storylines.

Davies (1993) experiences problems in her study with boys continually trying to position males as the heroes in their stories and displaying antagonism when they were read stories in which the protagonist was female. Her study is particularly useful because it teaches students to recognise how discourses construct gendered subjectivities, desires and storylines, which impact on our life choices (Davies, 1993). This in turn results in young people being able to question and potentially resist conventional gendered discourses and the storylines they create. Furthermore, Davies’s (1993) study alerts students to authoritative/subordinate status of masculinity/femininity in the gendered binary, but also highlights their ability to
challenge and perhaps move beyond the binary construction of gender and the social injustice this creates.

If teachers were to utilise Davies’s (1993) research methods in secondary schools classrooms, I propose that they may not experience the same problems that Davies (1993) encountered. This is because young men in high schools are significantly older than the boys who took part in Davies’s (1993) study and therefore they may have a greater capacity to think, speak and write beyond normative gender scripts. In stating this however, male high school students may be more resistant to challenging conventional gender norms than their primary school counterparts, since they have been immersed in them for longer.

Since the school formal is a particularly gendered space, it is a perfect topic for teaching young people about normative gender discourses, gender performativity and the masculine/feminine binary. Instead of undertaking critical readings of Snow White as Davies (1993) does, teachers could have students explore how New Zealand teenage girls’ magazines use fairy-tale imagery, such as “Find your Cinderella hair” (Marker, 2007, p. 56) to market the formal and how these images may impact on young women’s appearance work for the event. The numerous articles that appear in New Zealand newspapers focusing on young women’s formal preparations (see Denhardt, 2009; Hathaway, 2007; Hewson, 2009; Tay, 2007) in which male preparations are notably absent, can be used as classroom resources to highlight how this depiction constitutes appearance work as a feminine and not a masculine concern (Best, 2000; Bordo, 1993; Entwistle, 2002a; 2002b; Jenkins, 2009).

Teachers could use the extensive coverage given to schools that ban same sex attracted students attending the formal with same sex partners in the New Zealand media, to teach students about the discriminatory practices that take place in New Zealand schools (Dillion, 2008; MacDonald, 2009; McCleod, 2008; McCullough, 2009a; 2009b). In this way the school formal, which is simply constructed as a night of teenage fun in the New Zealand media (see Smith, 2008; Yurisch, 2009), becomes a space where young people learn about politics and social justice (also see Best, 2000). After all, every student participant who mentioned schools having policies in
place that ban same-sex attracted students from attending the formal with same sex partners said this practice was discriminatory. I leave the reader with the following words from Jessie a participant from the girls’ school:

One of my friends is at [names girl’s school] and if they want to take a girl they’ve gotta get your parents in and sign to say they’re in a relationship and stuff, which is a bit over the top.
References


Allen, L. (2007c). ‘Sensitive and real macho all at the same time’: Young (hetero)sexual men and romance. *Men and Masculinities. 10*(2), 137-152.


Barrett, L. (1997). Black man in the mix: Badboys, heroes, sequins, and Denis


Fine, M., & Weis, L. (1996). Writing the wrongs of fieldwork: Confronting our own research/writing dilemmas in urban ethnographies. *Qualitative Inquiry, 2*(3), 251-274.


Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 393-402). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications


Nairn, K., Munro, J., & Smith, A., B. (2005). A counter-narrative of a 'failed' interview. *Qualitative Research, 5*(2), 221-244.


New Zealand AIDS Foundation, Rainbow Youth & OUT THERE (2004). Safety in our schools: Ko te haumaru i o tatou kura: An action kit for Aotearoa New Zealand schools to address sexual orientation prejudice. Wellington, NZ: OUT THERE.


York University Press.


Quinlivan, K. A. (1999). "You have to be pretty, you have to be heterosexual I think": The operation and disruption of heteronormative processes within peer cultures of two single sex girl's schools in New Zealand. *New Zealand Women's Studies Journal (Special Issue: Girl trouble/Feminist Inquiry into the lives of Young Women), 12*(2), 51-69.


Quinlivan, K. A. (2002b). Whose problem is this?: Queerying the frame of gay and lesbian secondary students within "at risk" discourses. In K. H. Roberston, J.


Yates, L. (2010). The story they want to tell, and the visual story as evidence: Young people, research authority and research purposes in the educational and health


Appendices
Appendix A

School Formal Study

I am interested in young people’s thoughts about the school formal and I would really appreciate your help! If you would like to help me out, please read the information sheet form, sign the consent form and fill in this questionnaire. When you have filled in the questionnaire please put it into the red box saying school formal study at the school office.

The questions do not have a right or wrong answer - I just want to find out how you think about, feel about and prepare for the school formal. If you do not wish to answer any questions then just leave them blank.

Completed questionnaires will not be shown to your teachers and will only be seen by the researcher. Any comments you make will be reported in a PhD thesis in way that does not identify you or your school. But I need to find out a few facts about you, such as your age, gender, and ethnic background, so I can describe the group who took part in this study.

If you would like to be interviewed or be a peer researcher then please circle the yes response to these questions.

Name:..............................................................................................
Age:…….. Gender:…………..  Ethnicity:..............................................
Are you interested in being interviewed?
    Yes/No (circle one)
Would you like to be a peer researcher?
    Yes/No (circle one)
If you have said yes to any of the above questions can you please write your contact details here:
.....................................................................................................................................(cellphone)
..............................................................................................................................(email)
.....................................................................................................................................(phone)

1.    Why have you decided to go to the formal?
2. How will you prepare for the formal (choosing what to wear and so on)? How much time, energy and money do you think you will spend getting ready for the event?
3. Do you think school formals are more important for girls, boys, or both? Please explain why you think so.

………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………

4. What would your ideal formal night be like (before, during and after the formal itself)?

………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………
5. What aspects of the formal are you looking forward to and what aspects are you not looking forward to?

6. How important do you think the school formal is to students and New Zealanders in general? (Please circle)
   1. Very important,
   2. Important,
   3. Neither important or not important,
   4. Not important at all.

Please explain

………………………………………………………………………………………
Appendix B

Interview questions for students who are going to the formal (Before)

*************Could you please choose a fake name for the study***************

Background

1. Could you please give me a little information about yourself, such as what particular interests you have and whether you like school?
2. Why have you decided to go to the formal?
3. What expectations do you have for the night?
4. Do you think that there is a particular buzz around school just before the formal? What do you hear the boys/girls saying?
5. If you look back when you’re older, do you think you would regret it if you choose not to go to the formal? Please explain.

Preparation and thinking about the night

6. Could you please explain to me what part of the school formal is most important to you and why this is so (this can be the preparations, activities you do before the formal, an aspect of the formal itself or the after party)?
7. Is it possible to have a school formal without an after party? Why/why not?
8. What are you planning to do before the formal?
9. Who are you going to the formal with? Why did you decide to go with this person?
10. How did you decide what to wear?
11. Did you go shopping with someone else for your formal outfit? If so who was it and why did you go shopping with this person?
12. Do you think it is more important for a girl/boy to make an impression with what they wear to the formal? Do you think this is fair? Why/Why not?
13. Are you buying your date a corsage/button hole? Why/Why not?
14. Do you think girls and boys spend the same amount of money, time and energy preparing for the event and getting ready?
15. Do you think it is fair that girls spend more money and time preparing for the event? Please explain.
16. Please explain whether you think that girls or boys are judged more on their appearance and what they wear to the formal? Who is it do you think that does the judging?

Formal Dates

17. Do you think the school formal is a romantic night? Why/why not?
18. How do you think students would react if a student turned up at the formal without a date?
19. How do you think students would react if a student turned up to the formal with a same sex partner? Would it be different for girls tuning up with girls than boys turning up with boys?
20. Do you think boys and girls enjoy the formal in the same ways?

Adults

22. Have you talked to your parents about the formal? What did they say?
Appendix C

Questions for after the formal

1. Can you describe what the formal was like for you?
   *What were the highlights and
   *What did you not enjoy about the formal?
2. Did your expectations come true or not on the night? Please explain.
3. Did you have a good time with your partner at the formal?
4. Did you have a good time with your mates at the formal?
5. Can you describe what you did before and after the formal?
6. How long did you spend getting ready?
7. Did you get ready with your friends? Tell me about it…
8. How were your parents when you left? Did they take your photograph…?
9. Who did you talk most to and dance with at the formal?
10. Can you describe any boys who stood out for you at the formal in terms of their outfits or behaviour? Why did they stand out?
11. Can you describe any girls who stood out for you at the formal in terms of their outfits or behaviour? Why did they stand out?
12. Did you and your friends behave in the same way at the formal as you do at school?
13. Did you talk to the teachers at the formal? If so how did they behave towards you?
14. Did you see any students breaking the rules on the night? If so who was doing so and why do you think they were doing this?
15. Can you describe to me briefly what the after party was like?
16. Did you enjoy the after party more than the formal?
17. Have the girls been discussing the formal and after party at school? If so what have they said?
Appendix D

Questions for principals/teachers organising the event.

1. Can you please explain why your school has a school formal?
2. What do you typically see when you go to a formal?
3. Do you notice any differences in the way boys and girls behave at the formal and talk about the formal? Please explain.
4. How important do you think the school formal is to students, Kiwi culture and the school?
5. Do you see the school formal as a rite of passage for students?
6. Can you please explain what the atmosphere is like in the school just prior to the formal?
7. Can you please explain what the atmosphere is like in the school just after the event?
8. Do you think boys enjoy the formal more than girls?
9. Are there any differences in your school formal than at other schools? Why is this so?
10. Who is responsible for organising the event, the music, deciding the venue, the ticket prices and the security?
11. Do the students get into organising the event?
12. Do you think that boys and/or girls enjoy the after party or the formal more?
13. What rules does your school put in place especially for the night? What happens to students and their partners from other schools if they break the rules?
14. Have you seen any changes in regards to the formal and student behaviour during your attendance at school formals?
15. Does your school have any policy regarding students taking same sex partners to the ball?
16. Does your school have a dress code in place for the night?