

# Sexual Responsibility, Fatherhood and Discourses of Masculinity among Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Young Men in Ireland

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## Foreword

I am very pleased to present this report into the attitudes and behaviours of young men from lower socio-economic groups in relation to sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity.

A key strategic priority of the HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme is to promote evidence-based practice and policy development by producing high-quality research into crisis pregnancy and related issues. To this end the 'Research Award Programme' was launched in 2007. This scheme makes funding available for research into topics related to crisis pregnancy, sexual activity, contraceptive use, reproductive decision-making and health services.

Sexual responsibility, fatherhood and discourses of masculinity among socially and economically disadvantaged young men in Ireland is the second report to be published under the Research Award Programme.

The report explores sexual responsibility, experiences of fatherhood and constructions of masculinity among young men who come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in Ireland. The study also examines how sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity are represented in the popular media which young men watched, and the possible impact of these representations on young men's ideas and behaviours relating to sexual responsibility and fatherhood.

The report vividly captures the experiences, opinions and attitudes of the study participants in relation to sexual activity, their role as fathers and how they view themselves as men. Men can have a big influence on a couple's contraceptive practice and reproductive decision-making and have a key role to play within a family when they become fathers. However, to date little research in an Irish context has captured men's perspectives on crisis pregnancy, sexual responsibility and fatherhood. This study aims to address this gap.

The research is also significant in that it focuses on a group of men who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Low socio-economic status has been linked to a range of negative sexual health outcomes. The current study's findings reveal early sexual initiation, inconsistent contraceptive use and sexual risk-taking behaviours among many of the young men who participated.

It is my hope that by conducting in-depth research with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds we can improve understanding of the support and service needs of this at-risk group. This will enable sexual health and parenting supports and services to be designed and delivered in a way that will meet their clients' needs in the most effective way.

I would like to thank the authors of the study, Dr Elizabeth Nixon, Dr Pádraic Whyte, Joe Buggy and Professor Sheila Greene, from the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin, for their hard work and commitment. Thanks are also due to the research staff

of the HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme and members of the Research and Policy Subcommittee of the former Crisis Pregnancy Agency who offered support and feedback throughout.

Finally I offer my sincere thanks to the men and women who participated in the interviews and focus groups for the research – without their willingness to become involved the research would not have been possible.

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## Executive summary

This research set out to explore sexual responsibility, experiences of fatherhood and constructions of masculinity among young men aged 17 to 25 years from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in Ireland. The study was conducted against a backdrop of research that documents an important social-class dimension to sexual attitudes and behaviours. Lower socio-economic status and lower levels of education have been consistently associated with various indicators of risky sexual behaviour. Closely related to men's sexual experiences is the possibility for men of becoming a father. Little research in Ireland has examined young men's constructions of fatherhood, the influences on these constructions, or how men make the transition to fatherhood, especially following an unplanned pregnancy. This study seeks to address this gap.

A second aim of the research was to examine how sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity are represented in the popular media which young men watched, and the possible impact of these representations on young men's ideas and behaviours relating to sexual responsibility and fatherhood. This goal reflects the belief that the media is a powerful agent in the production of cultural norms in society. An in-depth examination of media representations of fatherhood and sexuality provides an added layer to our understanding of men's experiences in these important domains of their lives.

The first research aim is described in Part I of the report; the second in Part II. A qualitative methodology was adopted for the research. The primary method of data-collection for Part I of the report was a series of individual interviews which were conducted with 41 young men. Part II data was mainly gleaned from a close text analysis of selected media. Focus-group data informed both parts of the study.

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit participants. Recruitment was primarily undertaken with the assistance of gatekeepers from agencies that worked with young people who experienced socio-economic disadvantage. Young men were identified as disadvantaged on the basis of a range of indicators including level of education completed, current occupation and receipt of social welfare benefits, housing tenure when they were growing up and parents' occupation.

A total of seven single-sex focus groups were conducted across five recruitment sites. Seventeen young men and seventeen young women, aged 17 to 26 years, from Dublin and Waterford, participated in the focus groups. Following the focus groups, a series of semi-structured individual interviews was conducted with a sample of 41 young men (20 fathers and 21 non-fathers) aged 17 to 25 years, from Dublin and Waterford. This sample was separate from the sample of young men who participated in the focus groups. The aim of the focus groups was to gain a general overview of the perspectives of young men and women in relation to sex, fatherhood and constructions of masculinity. In contrast, the interviews explored individual men's experiences of sexual relationships, fatherhood and their associations with constructions of masculinity.

For the second part of the research, the study team undertook a close textual analysis of a selection of media consumed by the study participants. Arising from the focus group

discussions of popular media, ten media texts were identified and selected for detailed content analysis in relation to the themes of the research. During the individual interviews, the young men's responses to various media representations of men were also explored. This exploration revealed the perceived influence of the media on men's attitudes and behaviour, and the extent to which men identified with and/or rejected dominant representations of men in the media.

Key findings from both parts of the study are presented below. Key findings focused upon men as sexual partners, men as fathers, and men's interpretation of popular media.

## Part I - Key findings

### *Men as sexual partners*

- The majority of men interviewed had first sex before they were 17 years old. Half of the men had their sexual debut by the age of 14, with approximately one-third of the sample having had first sex by the age of 13.
- Less than one-third of the young men interviewed had used condoms during their most recent sexual intercourse. Twenty-two of those interviewed stated that they did not use a condom during their most recent sexual intercourse, while only 13 men had used a condom. Indeed, condoms were used inconsistently by a majority of the sample. Few of the men engaged in safe sex all of the time and less than one-third of the men used condoms as a regular part of their sexual practice.
- Men's use of condoms was heavily influenced by the context of men's sexual relationship with their sexual partner. Some men in long-term committed relationships did not use condoms, and instead relied upon methods of female contraception.
- Various factors underpinned men's non-use of condoms, including: the consumption of alcohol; not having access to them in a sexual situation; too expensive; purchase embarrassment; being in the 'heat of the moment'; being sexually selfish; actively trying to have a child; having a knowledge of their partner's sexual history; and reliance on other forms of contraception, including the withdrawal method.
- Of concern was the fact that a number of men discussed how their decision about whether or not to use condoms with a particular partner was based upon their assumed knowledge of their partner's sexual history. Concerns regarding contracting STIs and the need to use condoms were eliminated on the basis of a belief that they 'knew' the woman's sexual history.
- Some men were educated about sexual health risks, and had condoms on their person, yet still failed to use them during intercourse. Many claimed that they were simply caught up in 'the heat of the moment' and were reluctant to interrupt their sexual activity and use a condom. When probed further about the non-use of condoms, many men often responded with 'that's the way it is'. Thus, the men appeared to align their behaviour with what they perceived was a cultural norm.

- Men had a range of procreative experiences: 25 had experienced a pregnancy scare, 17 had experienced an unplanned pregnancy, 11 had experienced a miscarriage, and two men experienced abortions. For some men, experiences such as miscarriages, pregnancy scares, and/or unplanned pregnancies did not impact in a long-term manner on their unsafe sexual practices. In contrast, for a minority such experiences represented turning points in their lives and prompted an enhanced awareness of the need to engage in safe sex.
- Sixteen men had been tested for STIs and six of these had contracted an STI. Twenty-five of the men had never been tested for STIs. Many of the group did not attend sexual health clinics because they did not experience any symptoms. Several men were unaware of the steps they should take if they were to contract an STI and the majority did not attend sexual health clinics as part of their sexual health routine. There was little evidence that the experience of being tested for or having an STI was linked to increased sexual responsibility.
- Only a limited number of men had previously engaged with services, including sexual health clinics and family planning clinics. One man had availed of the Positive Options service to receive information on crisis pregnancy counselling.
- It emerged that many men were unaware of available services. Several young men felt that expressing emotions and talking about intimate or personal details was often seen as inappropriate behaviour for a man. The lack of willingness among men to communicate and talk about intimate or personal issues affected their approach to dealing with issues such as sex education, mental health problems, use of contraception, and their access to services.

### *Men as fathers*

- In the majority of cases, men unexpectedly found themselves as prospective fathers, although in almost all cases this was within the context of a romantic relationship with their sexual partner. For the majority of men, the news of their partner's pregnancy was met with apprehension and concern about how family members would react, how their life would inevitably change, and whether they were ready to fulfil the obligations of fatherhood.
- The majority of men was involved throughout the pregnancy and in the early stages of their child's life. These represented important opportunities for the young men to prepare for their transition into fatherhood.
- Patterns of changing emotional responses emerged throughout the pregnancy and over the first months of their child's life. Men's initial reactions of anxiety and fear were often replaced with positive emotions.
- None of the men in the study expressed regret over their unplanned fatherhood. The majority of fathers had regular and almost daily contact with their children, and were also heavily involved in the day-to-day care of their child. A small number of fathers

had restricted or no access to their children and felt despair and loss as a result of the situation.

- Several fathers who spoke about their own fathers in positive terms were determined to emulate aspects of their father's parenting role, while men whose fathers had been absent during their childhood endeavoured to be better fathers to their own children.
- For many of the men, fatherhood represented a turning point in their identity as men. Fatherhood contributed to their development as mature, responsible individuals. A high proportion of fathers abandoned their previous lifestyle patterns characterised by unsafe sexual behaviour, alcohol and drug use, and anti-social behaviour. Some of the men continued to engage in unsafe sexual practices after becoming fathers.

## Part II - Key findings

- The young men interviewed were exposed to a wide range of ideas and perspectives on masculinity, fatherhood, and sex.
- The media played a central role in creating or validating many of the opinions held by the young men. The majority of the young men's perspectives on homosexuality were validated and endorsed by the media under analysis. Close textual analysis of identified texts revealed that texts play a role in perpetuating myths regarding the role of drugs and alcohol in sexual encounters and the interpersonal negotiation of sexually responsible behaviour.
- While the texts depict a plurality of masculinities, hegemonic masculinity is often to the fore. This hegemonic masculinity still emphasises the importance of behaving in a particular manner which involves avoiding feminine behaviour, focussing on success, and being emotionally distant.
- Many of the texts analysed rely on stereotypical constructions of male and female characters. In general terms, women are predominantly represented as mothers, annoying partners or seducers, while men are predominantly portrayed as aggressive, inept, and unable to understand or see the female's perspective.
- Very often fathers are represented as absent from their families, and there is little or no explanation of the reasons for their absence. Many fathers are also depicted as having caring relationships with their children, but on several occasions the characters require assistance from their female partners in order to complete domestic duties.
- Simple, stupid, inept and laddish representations were central to many plots. Storylines often centred on a male who must prove himself worthy and responsible. An assumption was usually presented that the men and fathers were incapable and incompetent unless they proved otherwise.

- While some men accept the ideologies presented to them in the films and television programmes, other men actively reject them. Thus, not all of the texts were read or interpreted in the same way, suggesting that those interviewed engage with and read the media in diverse, complex and often contradictory ways.
- The study concludes with a series of recommendations arising from both parts of the research. The recommendations concern sexual health service provision, the age of consent, information needs relating to contraception and STIs, barriers to condom access and use, delivery of sex education programmes, young men as fathers, media and advertising, and future research.

## **INTRODUCTION: Context, research aims, and structure of the report**

### **Introduction**

This study is concerned with how sexually active young men in Ireland who are living in socio-economic disadvantage think about sexual responsibility and fatherhood and how their activities and behaviours are influenced by constructs of masculinity within society. In addition, the research explores dominant representations of sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity in popular media and examines men's interpretations of selected media. The research presented in this report has sought to address a gap in our understanding of factors underpinning sexual responsibility and engaged fatherhood, specifically among socially and economically disadvantaged young men in Ireland. This chapter sets out the background to and rationale for the research and briefly outlines the social and policy context within which the research was undertaken. The aims of the research are then described, followed by an outline of the report.

### **Social and policy context**

Sex and sexuality are fundamental components of human experience, and sexual behaviour carries important consequences for psychological well-being as well as physical health. Learning about sexual development and what it is to be sexual is a key developmental transition that comes to the fore during adolescence and early adulthood. While research on sex has been ongoing for many decades in the UK and USA, there had been little research on this issue within an Irish context prior to the 1990s. Early research conducted in Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s revealed that Irish people had very limited knowledge and understanding about sex (Humphreys, 1966; Sweetman, 1979), while later research found that a high proportion of women had never received any sex education when they were younger (Wiley & Merriman, 1996). Sex had been culturally ascribed to take place within the context of marriage in Irish society, and when sex education did take place its focus tended to reflect a religious moral discourse based on Catholic Church teaching (Inglis, 1998). Learning about sex and sexuality was confined to learning about the biology of the reproductive systems, and the parameters of appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour. Little attention was given to the personal experiences, needs and interests of people as sexual beings, and sex was not talked about in public life or in the media (Inglis, 1998).

Since then, we have seen dramatic changes in Ireland's social landscape, and talk about sex and sexuality has come to permeate public life in Ireland. In this time, the media, as opposed to the Catholic Church, have become a dominant influence on the discourses that have shaped the knowledge and understanding of sex and sexuality among young people in Ireland today. The Catholic Church's "monopoly over morality" (Inglis, 1998, p. 169) has gradually eroded, attitudes to cohabitation and pre-marital sex have altered dramatically, contraception is now widely available and homosexuality has been decriminalised. A school-based Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme commenced in second-level schools in 1997, although a recent study has indicated that the programme is not fully implemented in many schools (Mayock, Kitching & Morgan, 2007).

The increased visibility of sex and sexuality within the public domain has also arisen from emerging public health issues, most notably rising levels of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Significant increases in the incidence of sexually transmitted infections occurred throughout the 1990s: there was an almost fivefold increase between 1989 and 2003 (Health Protection Surveillance Centre, 2005). Since then the numbers of probable and confirmed cases have remained relatively stable, with approximately 10,000 notifications of cases of sexually transmitted infections per year (Health Protection Surveillance Centre, 2006, 2007). By the end of 2006 there were almost 4,500 HIV diagnoses in Ireland, with 337 cases occurring in 2006 alone, representing a 6% increase on the 2005 figure (Health Protection Surveillance Centre, 2007). The most common route of transmission in recent years has been via heterosexual intercourse (38%). While the absolute numbers of HIV infections remain low in Ireland relative to other western European countries, the data indicate that there is a spread of infection in the young heterosexual population in Ireland (National Aids Strategy Committee, 2008), with certain groups identified as exhibiting an elevated risk for infection, such as early-school leavers, young offenders, drug mis-users and those with untreated STIs (National Aids Strategy Committee, 2000). It was in the context of increases in HIV and STIs that the Crisis Pregnancy Agency commissioned the Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships (ISSHR). The ISSHR (Layte, McGee, Quail, Rundle, Cousins, Donnelly, Mulcahy & Conroy, 2006) was a landmark study in Ireland, which provided a comprehensive description of sex and sexual behaviour, knowledge and attitudes among a nationally representative sample of Irish adults. The study documented significant shifts in the sexual attitudes and behaviours of young people over time, although these changing attitudes were not matched by more comprehensive levels of knowledge of sexual health and relationships. This study revealed a clear trend towards younger age at first sex in recent times, which was in turn associated with poorer health outcomes, both at the time and in later life. For example, those who had first sex before the legal age of consent of 17 years were less likely to consistently use contraception and were more likely to experience a crisis pregnancy, abortion and/or STI in later life.

A clear social-class dimension to sexual attitudes and behaviours also emerged within the study. In line with international literature, the ISSHR found that levels of sexual health knowledge were lower among respondents with lower educational attainment or in the manual social classes. Higher levels of risk behaviours were also evident within these groups, including a lower likelihood of using condoms, a lower likelihood of seeking advice about STIs and an earlier age at first sex, although education and social class were weakly related to the likelihood of experiencing a crisis pregnancy. One hypothesis linking social class with risky sexual behaviours is that young people's motivation to avoid risk is constrained by what they perceive as limited opportunities for advancement in their lifetime. However, Cousins, Layte and McGee (2008) have emphasised that the processes underpinning the relationship between social class and sexual knowledge and behaviour are varied and complex. Lower levels of education and lower social class categorisation are linked with less sexual knowledge, reduced access to sex education, lower levels of parent-child communication, as well as greater vulnerability to risk situations. While a knowledge deficit may account for some of the higher levels of risk behaviour among those from lower social classes, Cousins et al. (2008) suggest that more research is needed to tease out the specific impact of knowledge deficits on the sexual behaviour patterns of those from lower socio-economic groups.



Despite the increase in the visibility of sex and related issues on the policy and research agenda, in general there has been a neglect of research on men's experience of sex and sexuality relative to women's. More recently men are increasingly seen as an important focus for research of this type, and the emergence of a small but growing body of Irish research, which includes men's experiences of sexuality and related issues, is a welcome trend (Layte et al., 2006; Ferguson & Hogan, 2007; Mayock & Byrne, 2004; Hyde & Howlett, 2004). Mayock and Byrne (2004) found that young men were considerably more likely to be initiated into sex by the age of 17 than young women, and for many, sexual activity was associated with exposure to risk of STIs and pregnancy. Hyde and Howlett (2004) similarly uncovered some degree of "risky" sexual activity among school-going teenagers, mirroring findings of other survey-based research in Ireland (MacHale & Newell, 1997; Dunne, Seary, O'Mahoney & Grogan, 1997). More recently, Ferguson and Hogan (2007) reported significant risk taking in Irish men's sex lives, driven by a pressure to be seen as "actively heterosexual" (p. 8) coupled with a lack of grounded knowledge about sex. Key findings emerging from these studies have highlighted that the shaping of men's and women's sexuality are distinct processes. The studies indicate the importance of exploring the sexual lives of young men in Ireland and the need for sexual health initiatives and services targeted specifically at men.

Increased attention to men's sexual health can be positioned within a broader national and international framework which seeks to advance men's health at policy and service levels. A disproportionate representation of men within certain health statistics (such as those on cardiovascular disease and alcohol related illnesses) as well as gender differences in mortality and suicide rates have been apparent for many years, but it is only more recently that men have been specifically identified as a target population group for health care planning (Department of Health and Children, 2001). Men's health initiatives have begun to emerge, such as the Western Health Board's Regional Men's Health Strategy (Western Health Board, 2000), the establishment of the Men's Health Forum and the publication of an All-Ireland Men's Health Directory (Institute of Public Health in Ireland, 2004). However, there still remains an overall lack of development of men's health policy and practice at a local level (Richardson, 2004).

Another important context for the present study relates to the changing nature of families and father roles in contemporary Irish society. One significant consequence of sexual vulnerability and unprotected sexual behaviour is the possibility of pregnancy and fatherhood for men. The Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships (Layte et al., 2006) reported that three-quarters of women became a mother after their crisis pregnancy, which means that a similar proportion of men became fathers. Little is known about how men experience the transition from a crisis pregnancy to fatherhood or how fathering roles develop over this time, a gap that the current study seeks to address.

Demographic trends in recent years indicate that over one-third of children are born to unmarried mothers (Fahey & Russell, 2001, Central Statistics Office, 2008). While this figure is likely to under-estimate the number of children born into two-parent families, (where, for example, parents are co-habiting but are not married), figures from the latest Census indicate that almost one-fifth of families are headed by a lone parent (Iona Institute, 2007). Among the families headed by a lone parent, 86% were headed

by a mother and 14% headed by a father. Almost 27,000 families were headed by a lone father (Central Statistics Office, 2007a). One of the most striking implications of these demographic patterns is that in many families traditional father roles have been eroded by changing work patterns and the uncoupling of parenthood and marriage. Many more fathers than ever before are likely to live apart from their children, while the fathering role of many non-resident and unmarried fathers continues to be undermined by a legal framework and Constitution which affords prominence to the family unit based on marriage. While resources that have gone into supporting teenage and lone mothers have improved greatly over time, resources aimed at fathers are severely lacking in comparison.

Little research to date has explored men's involvement in fathering or constructions of fatherhood in Ireland, particularly following a crisis pregnancy. A study of teenage sexuality in Ireland reported largely negative anticipated male responses to a pregnancy. In many cases, men's perceptions of their responsibility in the case of an unplanned pregnancy were related to the nature of the relationship with the woman, rather than a responsibility as a father to the child (Hyde & Howlett, 2004). Only more recently has the important role of men in crisis pregnancy been considered, including men's experiences of abortion and decision-making relating to crisis pregnancy (Ferguson & Hogan, 2007). Ferguson and Hogan (2007) have suggested a link between sexual behaviour and crisis pregnancies in that men may become more sexually responsible following particular turning points, such as unplanned pregnancies or pregnancy scares. While there may well be a link between constructions and experiences of fatherhood and behaviours and attitudes pertaining to sexual responsibility, this association is not well understood.

Changing attitudes toward sexuality and fatherhood in Ireland have been accompanied by a change in perceptions of masculinity and the construction of male and female gender identities. Indeed, the histories of sexuality, fatherhood and masculinity in Ireland are inseparable. As noted by De Brún (2000), traditionally the Catholic Church's influence and power over matters of sexuality impacted upon the roles and expected behaviours designated to both men and women in families and in Irish society. As a result, a specific type of masculinity was constructed that was particular to a socio-historical Irish context. Up until the 1960s, the collaboration between cultural nationalists and the Catholic Church "fed unequally into the disempowerment of Irish women as citizens, ensuring their continued subjugation to Irish male citizens. This served to buttress and support hegemonic forms of masculinity rather than challenge them" (De Brún, 2000, p. 11). Feminist movements and debates regarding gender and social equality have led to changes in traditional expectations of male and female behaviour. As gender relations alter, so too do concepts of masculinity. As a result, rather than there being a fixed masculinity, a variety of masculinities is recognised in Irish society. This is not to suggest that traditional concepts of masculinity no longer exist, but that the changing nature of Irish culture has allowed for a plurality of masculinities. Such changes are reflected in the establishment of non-traditional family structures, the introduction of equality legislation, and the publication of a Civil-Partnership Bill that offers heterosexual couples an alternative to marriage and provides a degree of legal recognition to same-sex couples. Consequently, the altering of cultural expectations of fatherhood and sexuality in Ireland

impacts upon concepts of masculinity and expectations of what is 'appropriate' male behaviour.

In conclusion, given the dearth of research on men's sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviour in Ireland and the important social-class dimension that has emerged in relation to these issues, the present study focuses upon sexual attitudes and behaviour among young men who experience socio-economic disadvantage in Ireland. The study is concerned with how men address the consequences of their sexual behaviour, including experiences of STIs, pregnancy, and fatherhood, and how these consequences subsequently and reciprocally link back to their sexual behaviours. An overarching framework for the research is the burgeoning study of masculinities, which focuses upon the unique nature of men's lives and relationships, and what it means to be a man within a particular location, social class or occupation, or of a certain age or sexual orientation, for example (Connell, 1995). Thus, the young men's sexual behaviours (e.g. whether a man engages in risky sexual behaviour) and fathering behaviours are explored in relation to their constructions of masculinity or what it means for them to be a man within the context of their lives.

Finally, there is little doubt that social and cultural change has taken place in Ireland, reflected in more liberal attitudes towards sex outside marriage, having multiple sexual partners, homosexuality and abortion. According to Inglis (1998, p. 87), "The main source of a liberal perspective on sexuality comes from within the media". Therefore, the study also explores the influence of media on the young men's attitudes and behaviours in relation to sexuality, fatherhood and masculinity.

### **Aims of the research**

The objective of this research was the exploration of attitudes and behaviours relating to sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity among young men aged between 17 and 25 years in Ireland. The study was specifically targeted at young men who are socially and economically disadvantaged in Ireland.

The aims of the research were to:

- Examine the sexual attitudes and patterns of sexual behaviour among the young men and to explore whether sexual responsibility has been influenced by experiences of becoming a father
- Investigate constructions of fatherhood among the young men
- Examine how ways of thinking and talking about sexual responsibility and fatherhood are related to constructs of masculinity among the participants
- Explore the fathering roles of the young fathers in the study and examine the influence of the men's own fathers or other male role models on their fathering roles
- Identify popular media which young men frequently watch or read and examine dominant representations of sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity therein

- Explore whether and how media representations of sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity influence young men's sexual responsibility and fathering behaviours.

## **Structure of the report**

The report is divided into two parts. Part I of the research is concerned with the sexual behaviour patterns of the young men, and their experiences of and perspectives on fatherhood. Part II of the report focuses on masculinities, fatherhood, and sexual responsibility in selected media watched and read by participants.

### **Part I - Sexual responsibility, masculinity and fatherhood among disadvantaged young men**

Chapter 1.0 is a literature review of both national and international literature on sexual activity among socially and economically disadvantaged youth, fatherhood among young men, and sexuality and fatherhood in the context of masculinities. Key theoretical constructs which guided the design of the study and analysis of the findings are also outlined. The methodology of this part of the study is presented in Chapter 2.0, including research design, methods, sampling and recruitment strategy, and characteristics of the study participants.

The findings are presented in Chapters 3.0 and 4.0. Chapter 3.0 explores the patterns of sexual behaviour among the young men who participated in the study. A key focus of this chapter is the extent to which the men practise safe sex and the factors which underpin their use or non-use of various forms of contraception. Men's perspectives on their sexual health and procreative responsibility are also considered, such as knowledge and experiences of STIs, experiences of abortion, planned and unplanned pregnancies and men's orientation to fatherhood. Associations between these themes and men's sexual and contraceptive responsibility are explored.

Chapter 4.0 focuses upon the fathers in the study. We outline the men's pathways into fatherhood and describe the fathers' living and contact arrangements with their children. We explore how the young fathers have made the transition to fatherhood, the extent to which they are engaged with their fathering role, and the models of 'good fatherhood' which they draw upon in their fathering role. A key focus in the chapter is whether fatherhood has represented a turning point in how they perceive themselves as men. Fatherhood as a turning point is also explored in terms of men's behaviour and sexual responsibility. Each of the findings chapters concludes with a summary of key messages that have emerged from the analysis. In Chapter 5.0, findings of Part I are discussed in the context of relevant literature in the area.

## **Part II - Representations of sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity in the media**

Chapter 1.0 introduces the rationale for the media analysis and presents a review of literature specifically related to media and cultural studies. Chapter 2.0 details how the media analysis was conducted, including how texts were identified and selected for analysis, the analysis process itself, and the elicitation of participants' perspectives on media.

In Chapter 3.0, findings from the close text analysis of the popular media watched and read by participants in the study are presented. The analysis presented focuses upon representations of masculinities, fatherhood, and sexual responsibility in the media. In this chapter, the perceived influence of the media in young men's representations of fatherhood, sexual responsibility and masculinity is also explored and we examine how some of these texts were interpreted by the participants in the study. The discussion of findings arising from the media analysis is presented in Chapter 4.0.

### **Recommendations and concluding comments**

In the concluding section of the report, implications for policy and practice arising from both parts of the research are discussed and a series of recommendations are presented.

## **PART I - SEXUAL RESPONSIBILITY, MASCULINITY AND FATHERHOOD AMONG DISADVANTAGED YOUNG MEN**

### **1.0 Review of the literature**

This chapter presents a brief overview of national and international literature of relevance to the study of young men's sexual activity and perspectives on fatherhood. Research on sexual attitudes and behaviours of young men, research on young men as fathers, and the study of masculinities or the nature of men's lives in society are considered. The literature review is concerned specifically with research that has focused on our target population: young men who are socially/economically disadvantaged.

### **1.1 Sexual activity among socially and economically disadvantaged young men**

In recent years the sexual health of young men (and women) has received increasing attention, arising from public health concerns about common and potentially negative consequences of sexual activity including unplanned pregnancy and transmission of STIs. Given the prevalence rates of STIs in the population, it is clear that many people do not engage in safe sexual practices. Furthermore, individuals classified as being socially and economically disadvantaged appear to exhibit an elevated risk of these negative outcomes. It is the sexual practices of young men from this group that are of key concern in the present study. Prior to exploring some of the literature, it is important to consider how sexual risk/responsibility and socio-economic disadvantage have been defined and conceptualised within the literature. The complex and multidimensional nature of these constructs represents an important backdrop to the present study.

#### *1.1.1 Concept of socio-economic disadvantage*

Socio-economic status (SES) and socio-economic disadvantage are nebulous concepts that tend to be used in different ways across different academic disciplines. Central to the construct of SES is access to resources – these include material and social resources and assets, such as income, educational qualifications, and wealth. SES also denotes prestige-based constructs, which are typically evaluated with reference to people's occupation, income and education level. These prestige-related characteristics pertain to relative position or status within a social hierarchy (Krieger, Williams & Moss, 1997). Individuals who are socio-economically disadvantaged are characterised by factors that increase the probability that they will experience adverse outcomes such as poverty, economic vulnerability or multiple deprivation (Whelan, Maitre & Nolan, 2007). Being unemployed or having a low level of education are examples of such characteristics.

There has been much debate within the literature about how best to measure SES and socio-economic disadvantage. It has been suggested that there is no one best SES measure and the most common markers for SES are education, occupational status and family income (Smith & Graham, 1995). Krieger and colleagues have emphasised that measurement of SES should incorporate not only individual characteristics (such as education level and occupation status), but also socio-economic position at the household level (e.g. aggregate family income, housing tenure) as well as factors at the neighbourhood level. Neighbourhood-based measures of SES characterise aspects of people's living conditions that may not be easily captured by individual- or household-level measures. Indicators of neighbourhood-SES include ethnic heterogeneity, rates of early

school-leaving, percentage of single-parent families, as well as 'social' dimensions of neighbourhoods, such as crime rates, percentage of vacant housing units and presence of gang activity, etc. (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

While there is no agreement on a definitive measure of SES, the consensus seems to be that there are multiple indicators of SES (Liberatos, Link & Kelsey, 1988) and this is reflected in how SES is measured and utilised both nationally and internationally. For example, the principal socio-economic results of the most recent Census in Ireland included discussion of labour market participation, nature of occupation and level of education (Central Statistics Office, 2007b), while the EU-Survey on Income and Living Conditions (Central Statistics Office, 2007c) also considers income levels, receipt of social welfare benefits and other indicators of socio-economic disadvantage (such as having a night out or buying new clothes). Other national surveys have also tended to rely upon these indicators of socio-economic status. For example, both the Survey of Lifestyles, Attitudes & Nutrition (SLÁN) (Morgan et al., 2008) and the Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships (ISSHR) (Layte et al., 2006) utilised education level and classification of occupation status to indicate SES.

While SES is a multi-dimensional and continuous variable, individuals are often categorised into low and high SES groups, depending upon distinctions associated with education, occupation, income, and housing tenure. Individuals categorised as being socio-economically disadvantaged are essentially those at risk of experiencing economic and social vulnerability and typically have a lower educational attainment, a lower occupational status and/or a lower income than those who are not disadvantaged. In line with much of previous research that has identified samples based on SES, the approach adopted in the current study utilised some of the most common indicators of SES, including education level, nature of occupation, housing tenure and receipt of social welfare benefits. Further details on the parameters of the sample are described in Chapter 2.0 of the report.

### *1.1.2 Concept of sexual risk and responsibility*

Studies of sexual behaviour have indicated that some individuals engage in unsafe sexual practices, thereby exposing themselves to the risk of unplanned pregnancy and the contraction of STIs. Within the literature, sexual risk-taking is indicated by a number of factors, the most central being contraceptive practices, including condom and birth control use. However, contraceptive practices, though key, are not the only indicator of sexual risk-taking. Other indicators include having multiple sexual partners simultaneously, frequent changes in sexual partners and younger age at first sex. In recognition of the fact that not all behaviours represent equal risk for negative outcomes, Metzler, Noell and Biglan (1992) devised an index of risky sexual behaviour. In their study, they assessed a range of activities which they classified as 'high risk' and 'moderate risk' sexual activities. Included in the 'high-risk' category were number of sexual partners in the past year, history of STD infection, non-use of condoms, sex with promiscuous partners, sex with intravenous drug users, sex with partners not well known and anal sex. Included in the moderate-risk category were factors such as having ever had sex, frequency of sex in the past year and non-use of birth control. Their research illustrated

that behaviours in the high-risk categories tend to cluster together, thereby indicating an overall pattern of high-risk sexual activity.

Most frequently, however, research tends to conceptualise sexual risk based upon two key indicators: a history of sexual intercourse involving multiple partners and/or non-use of condoms (Luster & Small, 1994; Rodgers, 1999; Guo, Ick-Joong & Hill, 2002; Huebner & Howell, 2003). Operationalising sexual risk-taking in this way takes into consideration the fact that consistent condom use decreases the likelihood of contracting STIs, while an increased number of sexual partners is associated with increased risk of STI contraction (Huebner & Howell, 2003). Younger sexual debut is also a commonly used indicator of sexual risk-taking, in that positive associations have been found between early onset of sexual activity and both inconsistent or non-use of condoms and greater number of sexual partners (Ku, Sonenstein & Pleck, 1993).

In one study, Hiller, Harrison and Warr (1998) identified two broad themes underpinning the meaning of safe sex for young people: safe sex means using condoms or some other form of contraception/protection and safe sex means trusting your partner and knowing their sexual history. The findings from this study highlighted the significance of the relationship between the two sexual partners and the context of the sexual encounter. Thus sexual risk-taking is often linked to perceptions of 'trust' and 'knowing' a sexual partner (Skidmore & Hayter, 2000). Indeed, central to our understanding of sexual risk and responsibility is the process by which individuals negotiate their sexual encounters and an acknowledgement that safe sex may not always be a simple matter of choice involving two autonomous individuals (Hiller et al., 1998). Rather, decisions around safe or unsafe sexual practices are influenced by the complex interplay among individual risk perceptions, the negotiations that characterise interactions between sexual partners and the broader contexts within which sexual encounters occur.

For the purpose of this research, safe or responsible sexual activities are those that prevent unplanned pregnancies and the transmission of STIs. In the following section, we consider research that has examined patterns of unsafe or risky sexual practices, and related factors that inhibit or promote safe sex, particularly among young men from lower socio-economic groups. Drawing upon previous literature, specific indicators of sexual risk/responsibility that are examined in the following section include the age at first sex, the number of sexual partners and the use of condoms.

### *1.1.3 'Risky' sexual activity and contexts of disadvantage*

As a starting point in understanding safe or unsafe sexual practices, it is important to consider not only the individual, or even the interdependent sexual partners, but also the broader social contexts within which development as a sexual being takes place (Marston, Juarez & Izazola, 2004). Circumstances of social and economic disadvantage and their relation to an individual's health, including sexual health, have received particular attention in the literature. Previous research into sexuality and related issues has highlighted the impact of contexts of social and economic disadvantage on sexual behaviour and attitudes (Layte et al., 2006). International research has indicated that lower socio-economic status and lower levels of education are clearly associated with risky sexual activity. For both men and women, being educationally disadvantaged is associated



with an earlier age at first intercourse, less reliance on or poor use of contraception and a higher incidence of STIs (Singh, Darroch & Frost, 2001; Upchurch, Levy-Storms, Sucoff & Aneshensel, 1998; Harwick & Patychuk, 1999). Research has consistently documented socio-economic status differentials in STI prevalence and incidence (Fenton, Johnson & Nicoll 1997; Buffardi, Thomas, Holmes & Manhart; 2008). Similar trends have been observed in relation to unplanned pregnancy, where compared to high-income women, low-income women are more likely to have an unplanned pregnancy and an unplanned birth (Gold, 2006; Forrest & Frost, 1996).

The associations between socio-economic disadvantage and poorer sexual health that have emerged in the literature are in line with a substantial body of research which documents the link between SES and health (Kaplan & Lynch, 2001; Cooper, 2002). Much attention has now been given to the link between social inequalities and health inequalities, and SES is now a central factor in understanding the epidemiology of disease and illness (Oakes & Rossi, 2003). According to these authors, a greater understanding of the relationship between SES and disease aetiology paves the way for new approaches to screening at-risk groups, delivering more effective medical intervention and developing more appropriate public health policy. Despite the growing interest in SES as a correlate to health outcomes, little is known about the exact ways in which SES may influence different health outcomes, although a number of mechanisms have been hypothesised (Kaplan & Lynch, 1997; Oakes & Rossi, 2003). Low socio-economic status may affect health by limiting an individual's access to resources, such as adequate nutrition, and educational and medical/health services. On the other hand, health may be positively related to employment status (through social inclusion) and education (through access to knowledge and information sources) (Case, Lubotsky & Paxson, 2002). It has also been argued that income inequality and relative socio-economic disadvantage may affect health through an individual's perception of his/her place in the social hierarchy (Lynch, Smith, Kaplan & House, 2000). Individuals who experience higher levels of deprivation relative to others may internalise this experience, leading to a sense of frustration, social exclusion, disempowerment and a loss of social capital (Kaplan & Lynch, 2001).

As highlighted previously in relation to sexual health, the sexual vulnerability of those who are economically and/or socially disadvantaged has emerged as a key theme in the research conducted to date. Mayock and Byrne (2004) have discussed how social inequality factors may play a key role in influencing young people's access to information about contraception and safe-sex practices. Specifically, these authors highlight the heightened degree of sexual vulnerability among young people from lower socio-economic groups, as sexual knowledge and activity may be contingent upon individual circumstances and broader social contexts, such as literacy skills, financial resources and access to related education programmes other than those provided at school. In support of these findings, the Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships reported that people with lower levels of education and/or from lower socio-economic groupings were less likely to have received sex education, thereby compounding the potential vulnerabilities of these groups (Layte et al., 2006).

It is clear that the relationship between socio-economic context and propensity to protect oneself during sex is multi-faceted and complex. Factors such as cost of contraception

and protection, lower levels of education and knowledge, and less communication about the subject of sex may militate against safe sexual practices. According to Layte et al. (2006), "Social deprivation and limited lifetime opportunities for advancement are associated with increased fatalism among young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds" (p. 282). As a consequence, young people may not be predisposed to protect themselves against risks associated with unsafe sexual practices. Thus, how young people position themselves and are positioned by others within their social context mediates their attempts to protect themselves from risk. This idea is very much in line with Kaplan and Lynch's (2001) hypothesis about individuals' perceptions of relative disadvantage and their decreased propensity to protect themselves from risk and look after their health. One study that empirically tested the relation between perceptions of position in a social hierarchy and sexual behaviour was conducted in Canada by Shoveller, Johnson, Langille and Mitchell (2004). They found that youths of a lower social standing in a community were commonly the brunt of negative stereotyping and expectations of undesirable sexual patterns. This social positioning tended to exacerbate the young person's difficulty in establishing sexual behaviour patterns within acceptable norms.

Thus, in terms of the sexual behaviour and responsibility of young men who experience socio-economic disadvantage, it is important to consider that not all individuals experience the same degree of freedom to make healthy choices. Rather, individuals are constrained by their social context and by what they perceive as real possibilities in their everyday lives (Williams, 2003). In the following sections, research that has explored a number of different features of young men's sexual activities is considered, including age at first intercourse and use and non-use of contraception. The research reviewed is predominantly - though not exclusively - concerned with young men who experience socio-economic disadvantage.

#### *1.1.4 Age at first sexual intercourse*

Sexual activity now begins in the teenage years for a substantial proportion of young people. A series of Irish quantitative survey-based studies conducted in the 1990s have revealed that a significant proportion of Irish teenagers have had their sexual debut by the age of 18 years. Bonner (1996) found that almost one-third of 16-18 year olds had had their sexual debut, while MacHale and Newell (1997) reported that 21% of 15-18 year olds had had sex, with boys twice as likely as girls to have had sex. Similarly, Dunne et al. (1997) reported that 32% of men experienced first sexual intercourse by the age of 16. These studies, however, were conducted over a decade ago and may not reflect current levels of sexual activity among young people in Ireland. Moreover, the studies were not based on nationally representative samples of the population. More recently, the ISSHR study, which was based on a nationally representative sample, reported that half of 18- to 24-year-old men had experienced intercourse before they were 17, and a clear pattern of decreasing age at first intercourse emerged across the different age cohorts (Layte et al., 2006). A study conducted in Scotland, also based on a nationally representative sample, similarly reported an average age of first intercourse of 17 years among 16- to 24-year-old men, a decrease from the age of 20 reported by the 55- to 59-year-old men in the study (Burtney, 2000; Health Education Authority Scotland, 1998). Indeed, the findings from both of these studies reflect the reduction in the age at first sexual intercourse that has been reported

worldwide (Bozon, 2003; UNICEF/UNAIDS/WHO, 2002), a trend that has been associated with other sexual risk-taking behaviours.

While specific research in Ireland into the experiences of socio-economically disadvantaged young men remains sparse, findings from the ISSHR study have highlighted an association between social and economic disadvantage and earlier first intercourse (Layte et al., 2006). Being in a manual and particularly unskilled-manual social class was associated with an earlier sexual debut, and lower levels of education were significantly associated with a greater probability of sex under the age of 17. UK-based research has similarly indicated that lower academic achievement is associated with early sexual activity (Mitchell & Wellings, 1998; Burtney, 2000). Similarly, a Canadian-based study of over two thousand adolescents aged 15-19 years found that early sex in young men was associated with family-based indicators of socio-economic disadvantage including lower maternal education, lower paternal employment and non-intact family structure (Langille, Hughes, Murphy & Rigby, 2005).

Early engagement in sexual activity is of concern because it is likely to be associated with a range of behaviours that have adverse health outcomes. A number of studies have found that earlier initiation of sex is associated with inconsistent or non-use of contraception, an increase in the overall number of sexual partners and greater feelings of regret. Analysis of a nationally representative survey of almost two thousand 15- to 19-year-old men in the United States found that those who began sexual activity early were less likely to use any form of contraception during first intercourse (Ku, Sonenstein & Pleck, 1993). With each year that first intercourse was delayed, the odds of condom use increased by 23% and the odds of other effective contraceptive use increased by 31%. Based on a sample of more than ten thousand men and women aged 16-44 years in Britain, Wellings et al. (2001) reported that non-use of contraception increased with declining age at first intercourse, and early age at first intercourse was significantly associated with pregnancy under 18 years. The ISSHR found that younger age at first sex was associated with a lower likelihood of using contraception, while men who reported first sex before the age of 17 were almost five times more likely to report ten or more sexual partners in their lifetime, almost three times more likely to report three or more partners over the last five years, and almost three times more likely to have had multiple partners in the past year (Cousins et al., 2008).

In conclusion, findings from these studies suggest that early initiation into sex appears to be related to a pattern of risky sexual behaviour that includes a greater number of sexual partners and less consistent use of condoms. Furthermore, early initiation into sex appears to be reliably associated with a number of indicators of socio-economic disadvantage.

#### *1.1.5 Use and non-use of condoms*

Central to safe sex practices are contraceptive and protective practices. Based on ISSHR findings, Cousins et al. (2008) reported that 27.5% of men had always used a condom during sex in the past year, while over half of their random sample of 18- to 64-year-old participants had never used a condom during sex in the previous year. Younger men and men who were not in a relationship were more likely to report using condoms in the past

year and during their last sexual encounter. In interpreting these findings, it is important to bear in mind the important distinction between contraception and protection, highlighted by Layte et al. (2006). The non-use of condoms does not necessarily mean that unsafe sex was practised (in terms of pregnancy risk), as other forms of contraception may have been used. The use of condoms is an effective means of preventing transmission of STIs as well as pregnancy, while other contraceptive practices may prevent pregnancy but do not offer protection against STIs. Thus condoms offer the best protection against both unplanned pregnancies and the transmission of STIs. This section is primarily concerned with young men's use and non-use of condoms as a form of contraception and protection, as opposed to other forms of contraception.

Research has indicated that overall condom use has increased in recent years. International research has documented trends towards the increased use of condoms as the primary method of contraception (Martin & Wu, 2000; Toulemon & Leridon, 1998; Dawe & Rainford, 2003; Sonenstein, Ku, Lindberg, Turner & Pleck, 1998; Dubois-Arber, Jeannin, Konings & Paccaud, 1997). Analysis of trends over time in adolescent sexual behaviour based on four large nationally representative US-based surveys documented a significant rise in condom use over time (Santelli, Lindberg, Abma, McNeely & Resnick, 2000). A comparison of findings from the British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL) conducted in 1990 and again in 2000 found increases in consistent condom use (Johnson et al., 2001). In line with these international trends, findings from ISSHR reported that higher proportions of younger men were more likely to consistently use condoms than older men. Comparing the younger and older cohorts of men, a clear increase in men's use of contraception was found across all social-class groups for the younger cohorts, suggesting that condom use has become more common in recent years (Cousins et al., 2008). Notwithstanding these encouraging trends, research has also indicated that condom use occurs inconsistently and infrequently for a proportion of the population. Moreover, based on the comparison between the findings from NATSAL 1990 and NATSAL 2000, Johnson et al. (2001) reported an increase in a wide range of behaviours associated with increased risk for STI transmission including increasing numbers of heterosexual partners and concurrent partnerships. Also, the proportion of the population who reported two or more partners in the past year and did not use condoms consistently had increased between the surveys.

Socio-economic disadvantage and education level appear to be related to condom use. Cousins et al. (2008) reported that condom use on the last occasion of sexual intercourse was related to education level, where those with higher levels of education were more likely to have used condoms. This finding supports research across a number of countries (DuBois-Arber & Spencer, 1998). For example Langille et al. (2004) reported that condom use was higher among young Canadian men whose fathers were in employment, while in Spain, Castilla, Barrio, de la Fuente and Belza (1998) reported that consistent use of condoms was associated with higher educational levels. Based on an extensive meta-analysis of 121 studies of the correlates of condom use among heterosexual individuals, Sheeran, Abraham and Orbell (1999) reported that education level and socio-economic factors have a small association with condom use. These authors suggest that these socio-economic factors may be important moderators of the relationship between condom use and other predictors such as sexual knowledge and communication about

condom use. Supporting this idea, Stone and Ingham (2002) found that young people's ability to communicate about contraception with their partner was central to their use of contraception and most predictive of their use of contraception at first sex. However, men's ability to communicate was associated with their degree of social deprivation, in that men with higher levels of social deprivation were less likely to be able to talk to their partner about contraception.

These studies underline the significance of socio-economic factors in risky sexual activity and consequently poor sexual health and related outcomes. As of yet, however, the exact nature of the association between risky sexual activity and social disadvantage has not been fully elucidated. Furthermore, in addition to socio-economic factors, a series of personal and contextual factors that militate against consistent condom use have been identified in the literature, including lack of adequate knowledge about condoms, lack of access to condoms, the use of drugs or alcohol and social norms around the use of condoms (Mayock & Byrne, 2004; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001; Cousins et al., 2008). Thus, a thorough understanding of the inconsistent use of condoms is likely to invoke a range of factors and processes. For example, unsafe sexual practices cannot solely be attributed to lower levels of sexual knowledge or lack of sexual education among those who have lower levels of education. Jones and Haynes (2006) found that despite high levels of knowledge about STIs, many young people still engaged in risky sexual activity. These authors suggest that despite awareness of the likelihood and consequences of STIs, many young people do not consider that they can personally be at risk of infection. Rather, these young people consider themselves as invulnerable to STIs. Skidmore and Hayter (2000) have argued that young people engage in unsafe sexual practices because they 'know' their sexual partners and do not consider themselves to be at risk. In support of this, based on ISSHR data, Cousins et al. (2008) reported that 'trust that one's partner did not have an STI' was the most commonly cited reason for not using a condom on the most recent occasion of sexual intercourse. Furthermore, this was not just the case for individuals in long-term relationships. Significant proportions of men (38%) who had not previously had a sexual relationship with their partner stated that they trusted that their partner did not have an STI. Indeed, recent Irish research has indicated that many men may rely upon untrustworthy social cues and 'local' knowledge to determine whether a potential sexual partner is likely to have a sexually transmitted infection (Hyde, Drennan, Howlett & Brady, 2008). Of concern is the fact that many young men may base their decision about whether or not to use condoms on this assumed knowledge of their sexual partner.

In conclusion, the research to date has highlighted a reliable association between social and economic disadvantage and unsafe sexual practices, including earlier first intercourse and inconsistent use of condoms, and lower likelihood of using condoms. However, as stated, the specific processes underpinning the relationship between indicators of socio-economic disadvantage and risky sexual activity are far from clear.

## **1.2 Fatherhood among socially and economically disadvantaged young men**

One important consequence of sexual vulnerability and risk-taking behaviour is the possibility of pregnancy and fatherhood for men. Relative to research with women, little research has explored men's thoughts and feelings about sexual and procreative experiences (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002; Ferguson & Hogan, 2007). Men's perspectives on these issues are central to an understanding of the processes involved in an unplanned pregnancy and potential child-bearing. A key question is how young men view 'responsibility' and come to negotiate their sexual roles as well as their potential procreative and paternal roles (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002).

### *1.2.1 Readiness for fatherhood*

The majority of what we know about what young men think about fatherhood comes from studies of men who are acknowledged as fathers and playing a father role. A smaller body of research has explored perceptions of sexual and contraceptive responsibility, pregnancy resolution and visions of fatherhood and children among men who have not yet fathered children (Gohel, Diamond & Chambers, 1997; Marsiglio, & Hutchinson, 2002). In their qualitative study of young men aged 18 to 30 years in the U.S., Marsiglio and Hutchinson (2002) found that many men had not considered the prospect of fatherhood, despite being sexually active. Based on a study of teenage sexuality in Ireland, Hyde and Howlett (2004) reported largely negative anticipated male responses to a pregnancy, and in many cases, men's perceptions of responsibility if a pregnancy did arise was contingent upon the nature of their relationship with the woman, rather than responsibility as a father to the child. Many young men in their study constructed early fatherhood as a barrier to furthering their education and career, and as a disruption to their lives. This research suggests that young men hold negative constructions of early fatherhood; however, to date little is known about where these constructions come from, or how they may be changed by the experience of early fatherhood.

Marsiglio and Hutchinson (2002) found that for those young men who had thought about fatherhood, their vision of an ideal fathering situation was closely linked into the type of romantic relationship they sought with their partner, as well as their financial situation. While some men described a readiness to become fathers and were eager to make the transition to fatherhood, other men distinguished between being ready for fatherhood and being willing to take on the responsibility of paternity. Participants highlighted several indicators of good fathering: economic provision was clearly important but equally important was the man's desire to be actively involved, spend time with his child and be a measured disciplinarian. Men's own fathers served as important reference points in refining their visions of themselves as future fathers: the qualities they appreciated in their own fathers were the ones they hoped to emulate, while men who described absent fathers in their own childhood were determined to be involved fathers. In comparing attitudes towards parenting between young fathers and young males who had not become fathers, Gohel et al. (1997) found that respondents who were not yet fathers reflected visions of fathering that somewhat exceeded the actual role played by men who were fathers. This suggests that fathers may have more realistic perceptions of the extent to which they can and do engage with their parenting role than men who are not yet fathers.

### *1.2.2 Young men as fathers*

Research on young men who have become fathers has identified them as a group who are at risk of abdicating their parenting role or becoming disengaged from their children over time (Lerman, 1993; Moore & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Young fathers are more likely than older fathers to be socially and economically disadvantaged, to live apart from their children and to lose contact with their children (Speak, Cameron & Gilroy, 1997). In Ireland, unmarried fathers are afforded no legal rights to their children and their role as father is offered no protection under the Irish Constitution. Interventions aimed at supporting young (unmarried) mothers and their children struggle to engage fathers in their services, such that teen fathers seem to be the most invisible part of parenting (Riordan, 2002). A recent evaluation of a Barnardos initiative (the Da Project) has detailed the constraints upon men's opportunities to be positively involved in their children's lives. The report also highlights the multiple barriers faced in engaging young fathers in services that have typically focused on working with children and mothers (Barnardos, 2006). Significantly, the recent Barnardos report highlighted the extreme importance of engaging fathers in services to support them to be involved in a meaningful way in their children's lives. However, a significant gap remains in the research in that many aspects of young men's roles in teenage births and adolescent parenthood are not well understood (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998; Ferguson & Hogan, 2007).

To date, relatively little research has explored young men's involvement in fathering or constructions of fatherhood, particularly in an Irish context. A recent study of time-use among men and women in Ireland reported that fathers spent approximately two to three hours per day engaged in childcare activities, and fathers spent significantly less time than mothers in caring activities. However, this research was not restricted to young fathers (McGinnity & Russell, 2008). A handful of international studies have indicated low rates of marriage and financial responsibility of male adolescents and young men for the babies they father (Wilson, 1996). Further exacerbating the risk of disengaged fatherhood among young men are conditions of social and economic disadvantage. Numerous studies have found that fathers with a high number of negative human capital characteristics (such as fewer years of education, low-income jobs, or unemployment) are less likely to be involved with their children (Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Coley (2001) suggests that a father's positive human capital characteristics may reflect his ability to fulfil the traditional provider role, or may signify greater levels of responsibility or adherence to societal norms.

To date, a small body of literature has documented the experiences of young men who struggle to fully engage with their parenting role. Allen and Doherty (1996) revealed how the African American 15- to 19-year-old fathers in their study cited responsibility, 'being there' and the importance of fathers to families, as significant aspects of their perceptions of fatherhood. Many fathers encountered a range of barriers to their involvement with their children, including strained relationships with the mother of their child, and a bias towards mothers inherent in many social institutions. Similarly in the US, Summers, Boller, Schiffman and Raikes (2006) reported that low-income resident fathers in their study, most of whom were younger than 30 years, conveyed a strong sense of commitment and intentionality in their plans for interaction with their children. All fathers had a clear image of a 'good father' with multiple dimensions encompassing roles as provider, nurturer and



teacher. Traditional roles of providing and protecting were supplemented with new roles such as 'being there', spending time with children and providing emotional support.

Speak et al. (1997) explored levels of 16- to 24-year-old single non-resident fathers' involvement with their children in the UK. Of the 68 fathers contacted for the study, 30 reported having little or no involvement with their children, while 31 saw their children at least once a week. These authors concluded that being young and not in a stable relationship did not necessarily lessen a father's willingness to be involved with his children, although there were a number of barriers to father involvement associated with social and economic disadvantage. One particular difficulty was the lack of suitable independent accommodation for developing the type of involvement they wanted with their children. Another difficulty pertained to low income and lack of regular or full-time work. For these young men, poverty meant that they could not provide for their children as they wanted to and eroded their sense of confidence in their ability to be a good father. Marsiglio and Pleck (2005) suggest that "when men are unemployed or underemployed, they often find it difficult to feel good about themselves as fathers because the provider role continues to be an important feature of hegemonic images of masculinity and men's fathering experience" (p. 260).

One unpublished Irish study clearly portrayed a willingness among the sample of teenage fathers (average age 17 years) to share parental responsibilities for their children (Smyth, 2001). Findings of research such as this suggest a degree of diversity in young men's constructions of fatherhood and parental responsibility; yet this area of research remains largely unexplored in the Irish context. In another rare example of work with young disadvantaged fathers (18 to 27 years), Corcoran (2005) found that almost all fathers had a sense of commitment to their children and to a fathering role, despite social and economic barriers. However, fatherhood for these disadvantaged young men was not about creating and sharing a family home; rather fatherhood entailed occasional child care, provision of some financial support if possible, and buying presents for their children.

### *1.2.3 Changing images of fatherhood*

The aforementioned research calls into question the applicability of dominant images of fatherhood across diverse samples and highlights the importance of considering how men themselves construct fatherhood in their relationships and everyday practices. Due to historical shifts in family life, such as the increasing diversity of family structures and economic shifts towards urbanisation and industrialisation, popular conceptualisations of fathers' primary roles have gradually experienced changes over time (Fahey, 1998). Theoretical models of fatherhood have thus shifted to account for patterns and practices of men's parenting in today's society. An emergent 'essentialist perspective' on fatherhood (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999) argues that the role of fathers has been radically devalued and eroded in contemporary society, and the resulting phenomenon of varying degrees of father absence represents a harmful demographic and cultural trend that affects child well-being (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996). On the one hand, contemporary constructions of 'responsible fatherhood', encompassing the provision of financial and emotional support, direct care of the child, and the establishment of legal paternity, reflect expanding father roles that are increasingly embedded within a diversity of family circumstances (Doherty, Kouneski & Erickson, 1998). On the other hand, modern



discourses of fatherhood also incorporate the notion of a 'deadbeat dad' or 'feckless fathers', reflecting the observed trend that many men do not fulfil any parenting role in relation to their children. Thus, contemporary images of fatherhood often carry strong negative connotations (McKeown, Ferguson & Rooney, 1997). Overall, changing father roles and the strong influence of sociocultural context on fatherhood means that men increasingly lack a clear template for how fathering should be performed (Kiely, 1996). For men who are fathers beyond the boundaries of a two-parent household, or who are faced with economic and social barriers to parental involvement, role confusion may be further exacerbated. Furthermore, with changing family trends and the evolution of single-parent families into step-parent families, many fathers are becoming 'social fathers' to their partner's children. Adopting the role of stepfather, which is often less clearly defined, represents an additional challenge to the father role of an increasing number of men (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002).

### **1.3 Sexuality and fatherhood in the context of masculinities**

Themes of sexuality and fatherhood among young men cannot be discussed without reference to gender and masculinity. Prior to considering this, however, a brief introduction to the study of men and masculinities is provided.

#### *1.3.1 Background to the study of men and masculinities*

Over the past 20 years, debates surrounding the position of men and masculinity in culture have received increased attention. Theories relating to sex and gender are complex and range from extremes that view masculinity and femininity as essences that are part of "nature", to perceptions of gender as something that is socially "nurtured" (Macnamara, 2006, p. 25). While the term 'sex' is used to refer to differences between males and females in physiological and biological terms, gender is used to refer to the cultural meanings attached to this biological difference (Kimmel, 1992; Connell, 2005; Craig, 1992a). Since the 1960s theorists have argued that ideas of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed rather than 'natural' (Newbold, Boyd-Barrett & Van Den Bulck, 2002). In this sense, it is claimed that gender can be understood as a cultural construction, which is simultaneously linked to and separate from biology (Reynolds, 2002). In general terms, it is argued that there are certain social rewards for behaving in a particular way as a man or a woman, thus indicating that biological and social constructions are not entirely separate (Mackinnon, 2003). It is also well established that concepts of masculinity and femininity vary widely depending on the cultural context, the historical period, and even can change over the individual's lifespan (Kimmel, 1992). Perceptions of masculinity and its relation to fatherhood and sexual activity can change over time and from situation to situation (Ang, 1996).

Feminist theories led the way in deconstructing concepts of gender and exposing various power relations in society. While feminism served to make visible oppressive male power structures within society, masculinity studies served to re-negotiate the position of men and masculinity in a changing world, often revealing diverse and contradictory discourses. Later, gay and lesbian studies also played a role in making visible the manner in which dominant power structures simply served to reinforce the status quo and were made to appear normal (Mackinnon, 2003). The media and ideas of representation were essential to such debates, and many critics saw film and television as central in constructing or

reinforcing perceptions of appropriate behaviour for men and women. In this sense, it can be understood that media does not simply reflect but actively participates in discourses of gender. In terms of feminism, critics conducting content analysis reached the conclusion that media can contain harmful images which can lead to sexist socialisation, with many feeling that oppression can be related to representations of women in the mass media. The study of masculinity is thus influenced by this feminist thinking, and discussions of women, men, masculinity, sexuality, gays, and lesbians are all intertwined. In effect, feminist and gay and lesbian studies offer added insights and methods of analysis for the examination of constructions of masculinities. This process includes challenging the invisibility of both male power and male suffering and highlighting the fact that suffering can also be experienced by members of the group that dominates (Ging, 2005; Faludi, 1999). Queer theory has also been central in proposing the idea that gender is a performance of identity, and that identities are not fixed (Gauntlett, 2002; Butler, 1990).

Debates surrounding ideas of masculinity are also extremely complex and problematic (Craig, 1992a). Mackinnon (2003) notes that theories of masculinity emerged in two main areas in society: the university sector and men's movements. Similar to the polar extremes surrounding gender in general, theories of masculinity are also split along the lines of nature and nurture. While critics such as RW Connell argue that masculinities are constructed and that gender is a product of social action, writers such as Robert Bly in his work *Iron John* (1991) have claimed that manhood is an eternal essence in men and womanhood in women. Bly blames feminism for the disempowerment of men and calls for the pursuit of a 'lost masculinity'. Both views have received criticism. Many critics support the backlash against feminism and claim that Connell's theories are part of a feminising of men and the construction of a misandric world where men and masculinity are devalued (Macnamara, 2006). Others believe that Bly's arguments are fundamentally flawed, claiming that attempts to be 'real' men or trying to regain something that is 'lost' expose it as a social rather than a biological construction (Mackinnon, 2003).

Although there are exceptions, traditionally society has attached distinct qualities to men and women, with men seen as aggressive, autonomous and active while women were viewed as caring, warm, and passive (Newbold et al., 2002). Masculinity theory serves to deconstruct these simplistic binaries and indeed argues that masculinity is not a monolithic identity, but that there are multiple and contradictory masculinities. These may include black masculinities, white masculinities, middle-class masculinities and working-class masculinities. Drawing upon the work of Kimmel, Newbold et al. (2002) note that despite the recognition that there is a plurality of masculinities and that masculinities change over time, it can still be claimed that hegemonic masculinity - which "provides normative attributes against which other forms of masculinity are measured - still means to a great extent avoiding feminine behaviour, focussing on success, being emotionally distant and taking risks" (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 288). Hegemonic masculinity is presented as the norm, but is very often an idea that very few men adhere to. Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1987) refer to it as "how particular men inhabit positions of power and wealth and how they legitimate and reproduce social relationships that generate dominance" (p. 179). Hegemonic masculinity can be understood as a "currently accepted strategy", the masculinity that "occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position that is always contestable" (Connell, 2005, p. 77-78). In other

words, hegemonic masculinity is the masculinity that lies at the top of a gender hierarchy among men, with homosexual masculinities usually placed at the bottom of this hierarchy. Critics claim that dominant ideologies of masculinity are perpetuated in the media and that very often there is a failure to acknowledge the diversity of cultural norms (Newbold et al., 2002). While recent film and television have engaged with 'softer' images of men, these more 'feminised' men are only slight adaptations of hegemonic masculinity. As Newbold and colleagues argue, "Representations of hegemonic masculinity change simply in order to maintain the hegemonic status of masculinity and, no less important, to retain audiences" (p. 289). In this sense, the hegemonic must adapt in order to maintain its dominant status.

Social class has been widely acknowledged as a major influence on the formation of masculinities (O'Donnell & Sharpe, 2000). In his seminal text, Willis (1977) described how working-class boys become men by imitating the toughness, solidarity and physicality, associated with their fathers. However, the relationship between class and masculinity has become more complex in recent times, with the decline of clear occupational titles and careers for life, the decline of the male breadwinner model and increased mobility across classes. While class differences may have emphasised different ways of 'doing' masculinity, Morgan (2005) argues that there is no single masculinity that can be identified with those from the lower social classes, although some dominant themes do emerge which primarily pertain to a 'failed masculinity', such as violent men or absent fathers.

### *1.3.2 Sexuality and masculinities*

Being male or female leads to obvious differences in the experiences of the biological processes of sex and pregnancy; however, the distinct psychological experiences associated with sex and parenthood for men and women are partly socially constructed. Gender influences young people's expectations about sex, their sexual behaviour, how they learn about sex, and the meaning attached to sexual encounters (Aggleton, Ball & Mane, 2000). Constructions of masculinity and femininity permeate how sexual relationships are negotiated between men and women. Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thomson (2000) found that the experience of first intercourse for men in their study was a landmark step towards manhood and a positive expression of their masculinity. In contrast, young women experienced more feelings of ambiguity, as they were concerned with lost virginity, feelings of disempowerment and regret. In a similar vein, findings from the ISSHR study reported that among those who had first sex before the age of 15, a higher proportion of women (78%) than men (47%) expressed regret at the timing (Layte et al., 2006). However, because sexual activity is perceived as an achievement for young men, it is often associated with anxieties about performance and sexual skills (Forrest, 2000). Forrest (2000) has argued that sex education may fail to address the needs of boys and young men because they are pre-occupied with the pursuit of sexual excellence, rather than understanding about contraception, sexual health outcomes, and how to negotiate emotionally meaningful and responsible sexual relations. Thus, current debates and theories surrounding the position of men and notions of masculinity in society are central to understanding sexuality and fatherhood among young men.

It is clear that in relation to sexuality, particular discourses of masculinity can lead to risk-taking and can impede the negotiation of sexually responsible practices between men and women. Men are under pressure to conform to an acceptable idea of masculinity in order to demonstrate and maintain their reputations within their peer group. Within certain contexts, sexual conquests are perceived as one particular and powerful manifestation of masculinity. Indeed, previous research has suggested that one of the main contributors to young men's sexual vulnerability is their attempt to live up to an ideal of masculinity that they have internalised in relation to sexual performance (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson, 1998). Pleck, Sonenstein and Ku (1993) suggest that condom use is associated with a boy's perception of masculinity. They reported that boys with a more traditional conception of manhood used condoms less consistently, viewed them more negatively in terms of male sexual pleasure, were less concerned with their partner's urging for contraception, and believed that males were not responsible for contraception. Another consequence of pressure to demonstrate sexual knowledge and experience is that men are reluctant to seek out accurate information and engage in open discussions about sexual activities within their male peer group - thus, much of their knowledge is ill-informed and acquired incidentally, and their degree of sexual responsibility is compromised (Forrest, 2000). Overall, the research suggests men's sexual practices can usefully be interpreted in terms of constructions of masculinity.

### *1.3.3 Fatherhood and masculinities*

While some links have been drawn in the research between constructions of masculinity and sexual responsibility and practices, less work has considered the relationship between masculinity and fatherhood. However, the connection of these two areas of research begs interesting and important questions concerning how fatherhood is linked to manhood, how external expectations and societal discourses about masculinity and fatherhood influence fathering roles and procreative responsibility, and how experiences of fatherhood influence how men perceive themselves as men. To date, there is little available evidence about how paternity and fatherhood is associated with constructions of masculinity. Numerous participants in Marsiglio and Hutchinson's (2002) study asserted that any man can make a baby; thus fathering a child, by itself, did not represent a transition from boyhood to manhood. Rather, manhood was evaluated on the basis of how the men engaged with their fathering role and treated their children. Thus, as the authors comment: "Biological paternity was not seen as an emblem for masculinity...the bigger challenge is to assume responsibility for their children and families" (p. 205). Moreover, the men in the study suggested that their fathering role incorporated a range of paternal responsibilities, but for many of the men, taking on the provider role for the family was the key component of manhood. Marsiglio and Pleck (2005) suggest that many men who become fathers at a young age and particularly those from lower social classes are forced to face up to their inability to be a provider for their families. Given that the provider role is inextricably linked to adult models of masculinity, young fathers from lower social classes may shy away from this responsibility rather than risk being 'emasculated' by failed attempts to assume it (Marsiglio & Cohen, 1997). Thus, the social context within which young men live can affect their opportunities to achieve particular masculine ideals associated with fathering.

In conclusion, given the relative dearth of research on men's sexual experiences relative to women's, and the significant social class dimension that underpins sexual risk-taking, this research hopes to contribute to our understanding of the sexual activity patterns of young disadvantaged men in Ireland and the contextual influences on their behaviours. In addition, while little research in Ireland has examined how young men deal with procreative experiences arising from sexual activity, such as a partner's pregnancy and the transition to fatherhood, this study examines how the young men prepare for and adjust to fatherhood. Fatherhood as a turning point for men's sexual and social relationships and their identities as men is also explored. Finally, the study examines how men's experiences of sex and fatherhood are intertwined with societal constructions of masculinity and what it means to be a man in Ireland today. In this way, the study seeks to understand how constructions of masculinity are reflected in men's roles as sexual partners and as fathers. The methodological approach and methods of data collection for this part of the research are described in Chapter 2.0.

## **2.0 Methodology**

The objective of this part of the study was to explore the attitudes and behaviours relating to sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity among young men aged between 17 and 25 years who come from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds in Ireland. The research sought to explore the sexual behaviour patterns of the young men and how these behaviour patterns relate to experiences of becoming a father. The research design chosen for the study was directly informed by the goals of the research. Overall, a qualitative design was adopted to enable an open-ended and flexible approach to eliciting young men's perspectives and experiences. In the following sections, the research design and methods are described. Sampling and recruitment strategies are outlined and a description of the demographic characteristics of the young adults who participated in the study is provided. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the study's ethical issues and methodological challenges and limitations.

### **2.1 Research design**

Given the exploratory nature of the study's aims and the emphasis upon participants' experiences and perspectives, the study used a qualitative research design, incorporating a combination of focus groups and individual interview methods, as well as a content analysis of media (covered in Part II of the report). Qualitative research is broadly concerned with the experience of living and how participants make sense of their own everyday realities and is well suited to delve into the inner worlds of men's lives as sexual partners, as fathers and as men. Qualitative approaches are characterised by openness and inclusiveness, and seek to eliminate many of the constraints imposed by pre-structured, quantitative methods and methodologies. As far as possible, researchers' expectations and assumptions are set aside to pave the way for generating knowledge based on the participants' accounts of their experiences and their subjective worlds of meaning and understanding. The use of a qualitative approach follows in the tradition of similar research on these issues with men (Mayock & Byrne, 2004; Hyde & Howlett, 2004; Ferguson & Hogan, 2007; Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002).

By adopting a qualitative methodology within the present study, the voices of the young men who are situated within a particular social and economic context in Ireland were clearly positioned at the centre of the research. Initially a series of exploratory focus-group discussions was conducted with young men and women from lower socio-economic groups. The aim of the focus groups was to gain a general overview of the vocabulary and attitudes of men and women in relation to sex, fatherhood and masculinity, specifically with a view to guiding the individual interviews with young men. Following the analysis of the focus-group data, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to explore individual men's experiences of and perspectives on sexual activity and fatherhood, and related responsibilities.

### **2.2 Sampling and recruitment strategy**

The sampling and recruitment strategy adopted to identify and recruit participants was similar for the focus groups and the individual interviews.

### *2.2.1 Identifying the sample*

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to recruit participants for the focus groups and individual interviews. With purposive sampling, researchers are not concerned with representativeness or ability to generalise to broader groups. Rather, a purposive sampling strategy involves identifying and accessing individuals who can help to understand particular experiences. The first step in purposive sampling is to define the characteristics for participation.

The study's key target group was young men who are socio-economically disadvantaged. For the focus groups, we aimed to recruit 14 young men and 14 young women from Dublin and Waterford. We focused on two cities in Ireland to ensure that the sample reflected some diversity in terms of geographical location. Initial inclusion criteria were that the young men and women were aged 17 to 25 years and self-identified as sexually active. An additional criterion for inclusion was that the young men and women were socio-economically disadvantaged. For the interviews, the aim was to recruit a sample of 40 young men from Dublin and Waterford. Criteria for inclusion in the interview stage of the research was that the young men were aged 17 to 25 years, self-identified as sexually active and were socio-economically disadvantaged. For the interviews, we sought to recruit 20 young men who had become fathers and 20 young men who were not fathers. Men who had participated in the focus groups were not included in the interview phase of the research.

One of the first priorities in terms of recruitment was to define clearly the parameters of 'socio-economic disadvantage'. From the outset, we recognised the complexity and sensitivity of the issue and were wary of applying any labels to participants. However, the nature of the research required that we use such terms in order to develop a coherent approach to sample recruitment. In identifying our participants we conducted significant research into various definitions of 'disadvantage' in an Irish context and also noted the complexities of defining 'disadvantage'. As detailed in the previous chapter, it is clear that socio-economic status (SES) is a multi-faceted variable that can be defined and measured in different ways. SES is often treated as a continuous variable, so one may have a higher or lower SES depending upon basic differences associated with education, occupation, income, and housing tenure.

The term 'socio-economic disadvantage' suggests the classification of individuals at the lower end of the spectrum of SES into a discrete group. However, it is also clear that those who are classified as having a lower SES are not a homogenous group. As a result, rather than measuring socio-economic disadvantage by a single indicator, such as education level, a composite of a number of factors was considered during the recruitment process. Furthermore, given the age range of participants, it was clear that different indicators may apply depending upon their age or life circumstances. For example, the socio-economic classification of a 17 year old who still attends school may be defined by the occupational status of his parent(s). In contrast, the socio-economic classification for a young man in his twenties who no longer lives at home may depend upon his own occupational status as opposed to that of his parents.

The following information was sought from potential participants and used to determine their socio-economic status: level of education completed; current occupation and receipt of social welfare benefits, housing tenure when they were growing up and parents' occupation. Questions tapped into a range of indices of socio-economic status, which, when combined, may be used to classify socio-economic disadvantage. The specific questions on education level, occupation and housing tenure were based on those asked in the 2006 Census (Central Statistics Office, 2007a), and an additional question about receipt of social welfare benefits was also included. Initially, participants who met at least one of the following criteria were considered as socio-economically disadvantaged: early school-leaver (i.e left school before completing the Leaving Certificate), in receipt of social-welfare benefits, or in an occupation classified as manual-skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled. Following this, information regarding family background was also considered such as housing tenure, parents' employment and occupation status, as well as location where they grew up. Therefore, identification of young men who were socio-economically disadvantaged was not solely based on a single index of disadvantage. Rather a composite of factors was taken into account to highlight the complexity in defining 'social and economic disadvantage' and to allow for diversity within the group. Following delineation of the characteristics that define eligibility for participation, the next step was to develop a recruitment strategy that would facilitate contact with these groups of men and women.

### *2.2.2 Recruiting participants for the study*

Recruitment of participants began in October 2007 and was primarily undertaken with the assistance of gatekeepers from agencies that worked with people who experienced socio-economic disadvantage. Location was the key starting point in this process, as service providers from specific areas and neighbourhoods were targeted. An initial focus on specific neighbourhoods is in accordance with international approaches to defining and conceptualising socio-economic disadvantage (Pickett & Pearl, 2001; Oakes & Rossi, 2002; Stafford, Gimeno & Marmot, 2008). In this study, selection of a location as predominantly socially or economically disadvantaged was based on whether the area was targeted under the RAPID initiative (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development). This programme targets the most disadvantaged urban areas and provincial towns across the country, and is implemented through the Government Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

Contact was made with gatekeepers in numerous services/organisations in Dublin and Waterford designed to meet the needs of young people who experience social or economic disadvantage within these areas. The work conducted by these services was generally not related to the aims of the research, although a number of organisations that work to assist single parents and young fathers were specifically targeted. Generally, the services/organisations were involved in youth training projects, third-level access programmes, and projects for young men who have been in trouble with the law. For the interview stage, a wide range of services, clubs and projects were contacted in the hope of recruiting men with diverse interests and a variety of life experiences. For example, contact was made with various sports clubs and organisations: groups that specifically catered for gay and bisexual young men, unemployment services, youth and community projects, youth theatres, sheltered accommodation, health projects, fathers' groups, scouting groups,



Foróige clubs<sup>1</sup>, day-care centres and services for those seeking asylum in Ireland. A page was also created on the social networking site Bebo asking young men to contact us if they were interested in participating in the study.

Gatekeepers were fully informed about the aims of the research and what participation in the research would entail. In general, we received a very positive response from agencies, and most were happy to distribute our information sheets and 'flyers' to the young adults with whom they worked. As detailed below, gatekeepers played a different role in the recruitment of participants, depending upon whether we were seeking to recruit participants for focus groups or individual interviews.

#### *Recruiting focus group participants*

For the focus groups, we emphasised to gatekeepers that we needed to recruit at least four participants within any individual site in order to make up one group discussion. We also attempted to minimise bias in the selection of potential participants by requesting that gatekeepers target as broad a range of individuals as possible and not only target individuals whom they thought would be uninhibited speakers in the group discussions. Much of the recruitment work for the focus groups was carried out by gatekeepers as they coordinated groups of young adults to come together at a pre-arranged time, on our behalf. They contacted young adults whom they considered met our criteria to inform them about the study and invite them to participate in one of our focus groups. As a result, we were somewhat constrained in the extent to which participants could be 'screened' for our inclusion criteria prior to participation. For example, one 26-year-old man, who was older than the upper age limit of 25 years, turned up to participate in a focus group. Nevertheless, it would have been inconsiderate to turn him away, given that he had expressed an interest in participating. Table 2.1 below illustrates the recruitment sources for the focus group participants and details the gender breakdown of participants recruited from various sources.

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<sup>1</sup> Foróige clubs are purposely structured youth development groups made up of young people from the local community. Foróige clubs normally consist of less than 30 young people, aged 12-18 years, and voluntary adult leaders.

**Table 2.1: Recruitment sources for participants in focus groups (N = 34)**

Recruitment source	Number of participants	Number of men	Number of women
Youth training and education centre	5	-	5 (3 mothers)
Community based youth project	4	4	-
Third-level access programme	5	5	-
Youth centre	12	5	7 (1 mother)
Participants identified through a personal contact in an inner-city community	8	3 (2 fathers)	5 (3 mothers)

#### *Recruiting individual interview participants*

For the individual interviews, gatekeepers distributed our information leaflets to young men. At this stage, we also attempted to avoid bias in the selection of potential participants by targeting as many individuals as possible. Various gatekeepers who assisted with recruitment of participants for the focus groups also facilitated the interview stage of the research. With the permission of gatekeepers, we also conducted visits to various services and organisations to meet with young men, inform them about the nature of the research and what participation would involve. If a young man expressed a willingness to participate, he could contact the researcher directly, or pass his contact details onto the researcher via the gatekeeper. At this point, a brief 'pre-screening' survey took place to ensure that each participant met the inclusion criteria for the study. Usually, this involved a telephone call where the researcher asked a series of questions relating to educational attainment, occupational status, receipt of benefits, age, father status, and family background information. Where participants met the criteria for inclusion in the study, an interview was arranged, either at the recruitment site, in the participant's home, in a public place in their locality or in the Children's Research Centre.

In order to ensure that a diverse sample of young adults participated in the study, a range of agencies was approached to facilitate recruitment. Furthermore, snowball sampling was used as a companion to purposive sampling, whereby participants themselves were asked to facilitate the recruitment effort by recommending others who fit with the criteria for participation. By adopting this approach we sought to ensure that not all participants were engaged with youth services. Participants from one RAPID area were also accessed through a personal contact of one of the research team and were not attending a specific service in the area. Table 2.2 below highlights the recruitment sources for the men who were interviewed.

**Table 2.2: Recruitment sources for individual interviewees (N = 41)**

Recruitment source	Number of participants	Number of fathers
Community based youth projects	9	5
Youth training and education centres	7	3
Sheltered accommodation	6	2
Services for those seeking asylum	1	1
Services for the unemployed	1	1
Sports organisations	1	0
Participants identified through personal contacts in two communities	11	3
Snowballing	5	5

### 2.3 Research methods

As stated in the opening of the chapter, the research methods were comprised of focus groups and individual interviews.

#### 2.3.1 Focus group discussions

Focus groups were used to explore behaviours, attitudes and discourses pertaining to sexual responsibility, fatherhood and constructions of masculinity. While the study was concerned with men's experiences and perspectives, we also decided to conduct a number of focus groups with women. The rationale underpinning this was that masculinities are formed and performed in relation to women, as well as other men. Gaining women's perspectives on these broad issues is central to an understanding of how men position themselves and are positioned as fathers and sexual partners.

The aim of the focus groups was to identify, from the perspective of young men and women, dominant discourses pertaining to sexual responsibility and fatherhood, and their relationship to a range of potential constructions of masculinity. Furthermore, focus groups give an important entrée into the kind of language that young people use when talking about these issues, and provide an opportunity for new issues and angles to arise on questions already identified as important.

In the context of research into sensitive issues, such as sex and sexuality, focus group interviews may not seem like the obvious choice for eliciting participants' perspectives. In the focus group format, privacy, confidentiality and a non-condemnatory attitude cannot be guaranteed (Wellings, Branigan & Mitchell, 2000). However, focus groups offer many advantages for conducting research on this issue and have been used in previous research on similar topics (e.g. Hyde & Howlett, 2004; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001). Within focus groups, participants may be exposed to perspectives that diverge from their own and the interactive dynamics within the group may reveal new insights into the topic under investigation. Focus groups also enable dominant discourses to be challenged

and interrogated by those with oppositional viewpoints (Hyde, Howlett, Brady & Drennan, 2005). Thus, according to MacPhail and Campbell (2001), “focus groups reveal the way in which particular individuals’ opinions are accommodated or assimilated within an evolving group process” (p. 1618). Another advantage associated with focus groups is that the context informing participants’ experiences and perspectives can be revealed (Smith, Buzi, Weinman & Mumford, 2001). Finally, it has been argued that focus groups may be especially appropriate for studying phenomena that are socially negotiated (such as sexual behaviour (MacPhail & Campbell, 2001)) and taboo topics because less inhibited members may facilitate more reserved individuals to speak more freely (Kitzinger, 1995).

A total of seven single-sex focus groups were conducted. Each focus group was conducted at the recruitment site and lasted approximately one hour. Men’s groups were facilitated by two male researchers, while the women’s groups were conducted by two female researchers. All focus groups were digitally audio-recorded. The location, recruitment site, gender composition and mean age of participants in each focus group is outlined in Table 2.3 below.

**Table 2.3: Composition of the focus groups**

	Location/recruitment site	Frequency/ gender of participants	Mean age (years)
Focus Group 1	Dublin: Youth centre	5 men	18.8
Focus Group 2	Dublin: Third-level access programme	5 men	17.4
Focus Group 3	Dublin: Personal contact in inner city	3 men	23.0
Focus Group 4	Waterford: Community based youth project	4 men	19.8
Focus Group 5	Dublin: Youth centre	7 women	20.1
Focus Group 6	Dublin: Personal contact in inner city	5 women	20.4
Focus Group 7	Waterford: Youth training centre	5 women	21.8

Following a review of the literature, two focus group topic guides were developed for the men’s and women’s focus groups. Both guides addressed broadly similar topics, although some questions were phrased differently for the men’s and women’s groups (See Appendix 1 for focus group topic guides). All questions addressed general topics, and participants were not asked about details of their lives as sexual partners or parents.

The focus group discussion guide was organised under the following headings:

*Part I: Masculinities and ways of being a man*

Different types of men, acceptability of different types of men, influences on 'being a man' (friends, family, girlfriends/partners, media), male role models, pictorial prompts (use of a range of celebrities to elicit perspectives on different types of men).

*Part II: Sexual activity and relationships*

Meaning of sexual responsibility (What does 'being sexually responsible' mean to you?), views on contraception and condom use, factors influencing contraception and condom-use, decision-making relating to contraception and pregnancy, sexual responsibility and masculinity (Is it 'manly' to take responsibility?).

*Part III: Fatherhood*

Expectations and stereotypes about young fathers, definitions of a 'good' father, influences on whether a man becomes engaged as a father (What role do men's own fathers play? Why are some fathers not involved with their children?), perceived importance of fathers to children, influence of fatherhood on men.

*Part IV: Media*

Favourite films and television programmes, use of Nielsen data prompts (to explore whether participants had watched any programmes listed in the ratings), portrayal of men and fathers in the media (positive or negative representations, particular storylines, realistic or unrealistic), possible influence of media on behaviour as a man, favourite books and magazines.

*Part V: Conclusion*

Discuss any relevant issues that were not addressed in the focus groups, experiences of taking part in the group discussion.

The intention with the focus groups was to elicit general views relating to the themes of the study which could then be explored in greater detail through the individual interviews. The seven focus groups were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following transcription, the data were subjected to a thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data relating to similar concepts and issues were grouped together and themes pertaining to particular behaviours and attitudes were identified and collated. Following an analysis of the transcripts of the focus groups, a wide range of topics was identified that were directly related to the broad content areas of the study.

Themes relating to masculinity that emerged included: physicality/appearance, maturity, independence, homophobia, sexual relations with women/conquests and aggression/control, avoidance of femininity. Among the key themes that emerged relating to fatherhood were: father roles as nurturer and as provider, essential nature of father role, absent fathers, men's own fathers and mothers as parenting models, self-perception as a man and father-mother relations. Key themes relating to sexual responsibility and sexual risk-taking included: promiscuity and faithfulness, distinctions between men's

and women's roles in sexual encounters, barriers to safe sex and conquest masculinity. Generally, the themes that emerged within the focus group data confirmed many of the themes that had emerged from the review of the literature. However, through analysing the focus group data the prevalent discourses and perspectives surrounding these issues among this demographic of young men and women were highlighted. The focus group data and analysis provided the research team with important insights into how young men and women position themselves in relation to these issues and the language that they use to talk about them.

Data arising from the focus group discussions also played a central role in compiling a list of popular media texts watched and read by participants. Subsequently, this list formed the basis for selecting texts for a close textual analysis. This component of the research is dealt with in Part II of the report.

### *2.3.2 Individual interviews*

Following the focus groups, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 41 young men, 20 of whom had become fathers. This sample was separate from the sample of young men who participated in the focus groups. Building upon the general themes that emerged from the focus groups, the aim of the individual interviews was to explore in depth young men's experiences of sexual relationships, pregnancy and its outcomes - including fatherhood - and the associations between sexual responsibility, fatherhood, and constructions of masculinity. The interview structure allowed for a detailed exploration on an individual level of issues that had been raised in general terms in the focus groups. Among the topics explored were: men's sexual patterns, experiences of pregnancy and other procreative experiences, how men perceive fatherhood, how external expectations and societal discourses about masculinity and fatherhood influence fathering roles and sexual practices/responsibility, and how experiences of fatherhood influence how men perceive themselves as men.

A further objective of the interviews was an exploration of how the young men interpret some of the media identified. Specifically, extracts from two films were screened briefly in the interview, and men were requested to interpret certain scenes, thereby revealing their understanding of how fatherhood and sexual responsibility are represented in these media extracts. This aspect of the research is discussed in detail in Part II of the report.

Interviews in qualitative research have been described as "a conversation with an agenda" (p. 32), an agenda set by the researcher's need to inquire about an aspect of the participant's reality (Daly, 2007). The interview was semi-structured in nature, with an outline of questions and possible prompts that gave some organisation and direction to the interview, but with an appropriate degree of open-endedness and flexibility to enable participants to expand upon issues of particular salience to their lives. Although all of the questions were more or less personal, we began the interview with general issues, such as education and employment history, living arrangements and social interests, before moving onto more intimate aspects of participants' lives, such as sexual behaviour, sexual risk-taking, experiences of pregnancy and fatherhood. At the outset of the interviews, we emphasised to participants the confidentiality of their responses and outlined the steps that would be taken to protect the anonymity of participants. Participants were reminded

that they were free to withdraw from participation at any time and could indicate if they did not wish to answer any question. Many of these strategies are central to building rapport and establishing trust in qualitative interviews. Drawing upon the work of Marsiglio and Hutchinson (2002), who also used semi-structured interviews to explore issues relating to sexuality and fatherhood with young men, we built in a number of “prefatory warnings” (p. 46) in order to alert the participants to potentially sensitive lines of questioning. For example, prior to asking about recent sexual relations, we prefaced the questions by stating, “Now we are moving onto the area of sexual relations. Some of the questions are very personal and if there is any question you do not want to answer, that is no problem at all.”

Individual interviews lasted approximately one hour and all interviews were digitally audio-recorded. All interviews were conducted by one of the male researchers on the study team. The interviews took place in a range of locations, including the participant’s home, the Children’s Research Centre, or at the site of recruitment. The interview schedule was organised under the following headings (See Appendix 2 for the complete interview schedule):

*Part I: Education, occupation, lifestyle and leisure*

School history, receipt of social welfare benefits, occupation, family background, leisure and free time, use of alcohol and drugs, relationship status.

*Part II: Masculinity*

How would you describe yourself as a man [in terms of physical appearance, your body, personality, skills/talents]? Discussion of focus group themes relating to masculinity: whether violence/aggression in men is natural, existence of homophobia within the peer group, importance of responsibility and independence from family, ways to treat women.

*Part III: Sexual behaviour*

Details of last sexual encounter, use of contraception and/or condoms, factors influencing contraception and condom-use, decision-making relating to contraception, history of unsafe/risky sex, experiences of pregnancy and other procreative experiences, history of STI testing, consistency of sexual patterns over time.

*Part IV: Fatherhood*

Expectations and stereotypes about fathers, definitions of a ‘good’ father. Impact of fatherhood/or potential to be a father on sexual behaviour. Influences on whether a man becomes engaged as a father (What role do men’s own fathers play? Why are some fathers not involved with their children? What areas of your child’s life have you had an influence on?). Perceived importance of fathers to children. Influence of fatherhood on men (Have people treated you differently since you became a father? What expectations do people have of you in your father role?).

*Part V: Influence of media on men*

Discuss programmes included in media analysis, and show and discuss excerpts from *Knocked Up* and *American Gangster*. Discussion of male and father characters that

stand out. Perceived influence of TV/film on behaviour as a man, sexual partner, father? Exposure to and perceived impact of advertisements for safe-sex.

#### *Part VI: Conclusion*

Discussion of any other supports that young men may need and any other relevant issue that was not addressed in the interview. Discussion of experience of taking part in the interview.

### **2.4 Ethical considerations**

Prior to commencing fieldwork, ethical approval for the study was granted by the TCD School of Psychology Ethics Committee. We were concerned about ensuring that young adults were fully informed about the aims of the study and what participation would entail. Each young adult was given detailed information about the study, either in verbal or written format (an information sheet) and was required to give informed consent by signing a consent form prior to participation in a focus group or in an individual interview. Participants were assured that the data would only be used for the purpose of the research, would not be shared with any third party (such as gatekeepers who had facilitated access) and that any identifying information would be changed in order to preserve anonymity. Following participation, they were offered a debriefing form with contact details of the researchers and telephone numbers, along with website addresses of various organisations that give advice and support relating to sexual health, parenting, and mental health issues. All participants received a gift voucher as a token of appreciation for their time.

### **2.5 Characteristics of the sample**

In this section, the profile of the sample of young men and women who participated in the focus groups and the young men who were interviewed is described. The information presented here was collected from the participants prior to participation in the focus groups and interviews. As stated previously, 'screening' of participants for our inclusion criteria was not always possible prior to participation in the focus groups.

#### *2.5.1 Profile of the focus group sample*

Seventeen men and 17 women, who ranged in age from 17 to 26 years, participated in seven focus groups (total n = 34). Seven single-sex focus groups were conducted, four with men and three with women. The mean age of the men who participated was 19.4 years (standard deviation = 2.32), while the mean age of the women was 20.7 years (s.d = 2.26). Some demographic characteristics of the focus group participants are outlined below.



**Table 2.4: Demographic characteristics of the focus group participants (N= 34)**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Aged between 17-20 years	14	9
Aged between 21-26* years	3	8
<b>Education</b>		
Left school prior to completion of Leaving Certificate	8	6
Attendance at youth training/education	11	12
<b>Occupation Status</b>		
Unemployed	3	1
Working full or part-time	3	4
In receipt of benefits	7	11
<b>Relationship Status</b>		
Single	17	17
Currently in a relationship	11	9
Cohabiting with partner	2	3
<b>Parenting Status</b>		
Parented a child	2	7
Resident with child	1	7

\* As noted previously one 26 year old man turned up to participate in one of the focus groups.

As highlighted in the table, nine of the focus group participants (two men and seven women) were parents. Fourteen of the participants had left school prior to completion of the Leaving Certificate, and the majority of participants were attending youth training and education programmes. Just over half of the participants were in receipt of social welfare benefits. Only seven of the 24 participants were in full or part-time employment. Two of the female participants identified themselves as bisexual. Twenty-four participants still lived at home with at least one of their parents. The table below outlines some detail on the family backgrounds of the focus group participants and illustrates that many of the participants had experienced some degree of socio-economic disadvantage while they were growing up.

**Table 2.5: Family background characteristics of the focus group participants (N= 34)**

	Total	Men	Women
<b>One-parent family</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
Single parent working	6	3	3
Single parent not working	9	4	5
<b>Two-parent family</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>
Two parents working	4	2	2
One parent working	8	2	6
Neither parent working	7	6	1

Fifteen participants grew up in a one-parent family and in nine of these families the single parent did not work. For the nineteen young adults who lived with both parents while they were growing up, 12 of their fathers were unemployed at some point during their childhood. In three of these families, mothers worked either full- or part-time while they were growing up. For those participants whose parents worked during their childhood, parental occupation was classified into socio-economic groups using CSO guidelines. With the exception of three cases, parental occupations were classified into semi-skilled, manual skilled or unskilled socio-economic groups. As noted previously in the chapter, we were somewhat constrained in the extent to which focus group participants could be pre-screened prior to participation in the focus groups. However, taking into account contemporaneous circumstances, as well as the young people's family background, all participants experienced some degree of socio-economic disadvantage, although some to a greater extent than others.

### 2.5.2 Profile of the interview sample

A total of 41 young men were interviewed individually. This sample of young men was separate from the sample of young men who participated in the focus group phase of the study. Twenty men in the sample had become fathers, while the remaining 21 men had not become fathers. Four fathers and three of the men who had not yet become fathers were expectant fathers – their sexual partners were pregnant at the time of the study. Three fathers who had biological children also engaged in a step-fathering role with their partner's children/siblings. The fatherhood status of the men is illustrated in Table 2.6 and the demographic characteristics of the sample are outlined in Table 2.7.

**Table 2.6: Fatherhood status of the men (N = 41)**

	Frequency
Not a father	18
Expecting a baby at the time of the study	3
Father – of biological child(ren) only*	17
Father – of biological and step child(ren)	3

\* Four of these fathers were also expecting another baby at the time of study

**Table 2.7: Demographic characteristics and indicators of socio-economic status of the interview participants (N = 41)**

	Total	Non-fathers	Fathers
<b>Age</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>20</b>
Aged between 17-20 years	26	15	11
Aged between 21-25 years	15	6	9
<b>Education level</b>			
Left school before completing Junior Certificate	13	5	8
Left school before completing Leaving Certificate	13	6	7
Still at school completing Leaving Certificate	2	2	0
Completed Leaving Certificate	13	8	5
<b>Receipt of benefits</b>			
Receipt of Unemployment Benefit*	16	6	10
Receipt of Back to Education Allowance	16	9	7
Medical card holder	29	15	14
Grew up in local authority housing	26	13	13
<b>Occupation status</b>			
Attendance at Youth Training/Education	22	15	7
Unemployed	14	6	10
Working full or part-time**	9	5	4
<b>Living/relationship situation</b>			
Single	17	14	3
Currently in a relationship	24	7	17
Cohabiting with partner	6	0	6
Resident with child	6	0	6

\* Two men who received unemployment benefit engaged in casual work on a part-time basis, so are not categorised as being unemployed.

\*\* There is some overlap among the categories. The 'Working full or part-time' category includes two men who were still at school doing their Leaving Certificate at the time of the interview and two men on training courses, who were also working part-time.

The men who were interviewed were aged between 17 and 25 years, with a mean age of 20.2 years (s.d. = 2.30). Twenty of the young men (49% of the sample) were aged between 17 and 19 years, 14 of the young men (34% of the sample) were aged between 20 and 22 years, while the remaining seven young men (17% of the sample) were aged between 23

and 25 years. Almost three-quarters of the sample was from Dublin (n = 30) while the remaining 11 men lived in Waterford. All of the men identified themselves as sexually active, all were heterosexual in orientation and all had had a sexual encounter with a woman in the year leading up to the interview. Seventeen of the men classified themselves as 'single' at the time of the study, while 24 of the men were in a relationship.

As indicated above, 26 out of the 41 men had left school prior to completing their Leaving Certificate. Thirteen of these men left school before completing their Junior Certificate, while 13 men left school following their Junior Certificate. Two of the young men were still at school completing their Leaving Certificate, while thirteen of the men had sat their Leaving Certificate. Twenty-nine of the men had a medical card, while 25 of the men were in receipt of either unemployment benefit or a back-to-education allowance. Twenty-six of the men had grown up in local authority housing. Finally, six of the men had experienced out-of-home care [residential care, living with extended family] or homelessness [hostels, refuges, on the streets] during their childhood/adolescence.

Similar numbers of fathers and non-fathers were in receipt of State Benefits, and had left school prior to completing their Leaving Certificate. However, about twice as many non-fathers than fathers were attending a youth training or education programme, and more of the fathers than non-fathers were classified as being unemployed. Some clear differences emerged between the fathers and non-fathers in terms of their relationship status: a larger proportion of the fathers than non-fathers were currently in a relationship and all of the men in the sample who were cohabiting with their partners were fathers. None of the non-fathers were cohabiting and the majority of men classified as 'single' were non-fathers. While it is important to consider these patterns as a context in interpreting the findings that are presented, the sample size is small, so the distinctions between the two groups must be treated with caution.

As illustrated in Table 2.7, the sample of men who participated was not a homogeneous group. While all may have been categorised as socio-economically disadvantaged, the degree of disadvantage associated with their education levels and current occupation status was not equivalent across all participants. At one extreme of the continuum were 11 young men, all of whom had left school before completing their Junior Certificate, were currently unemployed and in receipt of unemployment benefit. At the other end of the continuum were the men who had completed second-level education and were undergoing apprenticeship training and the young men who were still attending school and had aspirations to advance their educational attainment. Nevertheless, all of these men grew up in areas characterised by high levels of social disadvantage.

## **2.6 Data analysis**

Similar data analytic techniques were used for both the focus group and interview data. All focus groups and interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following transcription, the next stage of analysis involved repeated readings of the transcripts in order to gain an overall sense of the key findings. Transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis, where smaller meaningful chunks of data were categorised through open coding, and themes relating to behaviour, attitudes and feelings were identified and collated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). New data were compared

with existing themes to allow new concepts and the characteristics that comprised them to emerge. In this way, themes were continuously defined and refined by the method of constant comparison. The coding and development of themes was conducted as a joint activity by three of the researchers to enhance the transparency of the interpretive work inherent in the qualitative analysis.

## **2.7 Methodological challenges and limitations**

Many researchers have highlighted the challenges associated with conducting research on the sensitive subject of sex and sexuality. Young people can find it difficult and embarrassing to talk about this private aspect of their lives, and young men appear to find it particularly challenging (Mayock & Byrne, 2004). It is natural for interview participants to vary in the extent to which they are inhibited in expressing their perspectives, experiences and emotions. Understandably, some young men struggled to translate their private experiences into a narrative during the course of an interview with an unfamiliar researcher. However, the majority of the participants were open and willing to give their views and narrate their experiences. While participants were assured that the principles of anonymity and confidentiality were central to how their stories would be used in the research, participants often sought reassurances about this during the interviews, suggesting that they were sensitive to the highly personal nature of some of the information that we sought.

As highlighted previously in the chapter, the goal of our purposive and snowballing sampling strategy was to recruit a group of young men who had grown up within a particular social context in Ireland. Despite some commonalities across the participants, the achieved sample was far from homogeneous. Rather, it was clear that not all of these 'disadvantaged' men had experienced equivalent degrees of social or economic adversity in their lives. We do not claim that we have captured experiences that represent all men who could be classified into a similar social stratus. As with all qualitative research, caution should be exercised when extrapolating findings from this relatively small sample to all men who experience socio-economic disadvantage.

A further limitation of our sample pertains to the fathers in the study. All but two fathers in the study had regular contact with their children. Fathers who have contact with their children may be more likely to come forward to participate in a study about fatherhood. We know that many fathers separated from their children in Ireland do not have access to or regular contact with their children. This suggests that the sample of fathers who volunteered to participate in our study may be biased in some way. It is likely that their experiences will not reflect the experiences of many fathers in Ireland. Thus, the extent to which the experiences of these fathers can be generalised to other groups of fathers remains open to question. We do not claim that their views are representative of all young fathers in Ireland.

In the following chapters, the findings from the analysis of the focus groups and individual interviews are presented. Young men's perspectives and experiences are illustrated through the use of excerpts from the interview transcripts, while data from the focus group discussions with both men and women are also used. Given that the main function of the focus group stage was to inform the interview stage of the research, rather than

elicit detailed findings on men's experiences per se, the findings are predominantly discussed in relation to responses from interviewees rather than responses from the focus groups. However, some themes that emerged in the focus group discussions are illustrated throughout the report in order to illustrate and elaborate upon themes from the analysis where appropriate.

In all cases, direct quotations are reproduced with minimal editing in order to represent participants' spoken word. Interview participants are identified by their age and by whether or not they are fathers, while focus group respondents are identified by gender only. Names are not used throughout the text and any identifying information is changed in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

### 3.0 Findings: Young men's sexual behaviour and attitudes

All of the men interviewed for the study were sexually active, with many having their first sexual intercourse at an early age. In this chapter we present findings of the research on issues, concerns, practices and behaviours of these 41 young men in relation to their lives as sexual beings. During the interviews, it emerged that the men had a diverse range of sexual experiences and histories and that their use of contraception and protection during sexual intercourse varied greatly. Some men used contraception and protection on a regular basis while others revealed that condoms or contraception were not an important aspect of their sexual practice. Throughout this chapter, we examine some of the influences that have impacted on the men's decision-making processes, the consequences of some of the choices they have made, their engagement with support services, and their perspectives on wider cultural issues regarding sexual health and education. Finally, we explore men's encounters with various procreative experiences, such as unplanned pregnancies, pregnancy scares, miscarriages and abortions. We examine the extent to which these experiences represent turning points in men's sexual pathways that influence their sexual responsibility. While the findings presented primarily centre upon men's experiences as elicited during the interviews, relevant perspectives arising from the focus group discussions have also been incorporated into some sections of the findings chapters where appropriate. This has been done in order to provide further illustration of selected themes that emerged in the interviews and to reveal prevalent discourses surrounding some of the issues.

#### 3.1 Overview of sexual behaviour

This section provides an overview of the men's patterns of sexual activity, and sets the context for an in-depth exploration of men's use of contraception and protection during sex. During the interviews the young men were asked questions related to their sexual behaviour and experiences of pregnancy. While some of these were direct questions, others were open-ended in nature. Such a strategy allowed for an engagement with themes that we believed were directly related to the study, while also permitting new themes to emerge from the young men's descriptions of their sexual experiences. Furthermore, rather than initially asking men about their sexual behaviour in general terms, we addressed specific questions on two discrete sexual occasions, which we hoped were particularly salient to the young men: men's first sexual intercourse and men's most recent sexual intercourse. The sections below outline the findings which emerged relating to these two discrete sexual occasions, and include: the age at which they first had sex, the point in time of their most recent sexual encounter, and their use/non-use of contraception and/or protection during their sexual debut and most recent sexual encounter.

##### 3.1.1 *First sexual intercourse*

Men were asked to give the age at which they first had sex. Within the group interviewed the age of first sex ranged from 11 to 19 years old. Some were unable to provide an exact age. Table 3.1 summarises the responses of the participants.

**Table 3.1: Age at first sexual intercourse (N = 41)**

Age	Frequency
13 and younger	12
14	6
15	6
16	9
17	1
18	1
19	1
Unknown	5

These findings indicate that generally the men were young when they first had sexual intercourse. Of the 36 men who reported their age at first sexual intercourse, half had had their sexual debut before the age of 15 years, and almost all of the men (n = 33) had their first experience of sexual intercourse before the legal age of consent of 17 years. The table also shows that one-third of those who reported their age at first sex had had sexual intercourse by the age of 13<sup>2</sup>. Of those who knew their age when they first had sex, the mean and median age of their first sexual intercourse was 14 years. Given the high proportion of men who had first sex at an age that was younger than the legal age of consent, it is important to note that the majority of those interviewed had no knowledge that 17 years was the legal age of consent. It is evident that a large number of interviewees were uninformed in relation to this issue. In response to questioning about the legal age of consent, several men identified the correct age, while an almost similar number believed that the age differed for males and females. All of these men thought that the correct ages of consent were 16 years for males and 17 years for females. Several men also guessed that (for both males and females) 16 years was the correct answer, while a small number thought it was 18 years. Not one of the respondents reported that being under the age of consent acted as a barrier to them or to other young people who decided to engage in sexual intercourse. One man noted that people will have sex at any age, regardless of the law:

*I don't, I think any barrier you give to them they are going to do it anyway. I think no matter what age you give them they will do it.... So I think trying to set an age is OK but they will do it either way, no matter what you say. [Non-father, 22y]*

A small number of the men found it difficult to recall whether they had used any form of contraception or protection during their sexual debut:

*I: How old would you have been when you first started having sex?*

*R: I think I was 13.*

<sup>2</sup> Three men in the category 13 years of age and younger were unsure of their exact age at first sexual intercourse but knew that it had occurred when they were between 11 and 13 years old.



*I: Would you have used johnnies then, can you remember?*

*R: I don't think I used them, my first time I didn't use them then. But from then on I started using them. [Father 22y]*

Such a finding may suggest that, based on this inability to recall, for many men protection or contraception did not necessarily feature as an essential component of their first sexual experience. The majority stated that they did not use condoms during their first sexual intercourse, particularly those men who had sex before the age of 17. Similar to the above participant, one man stated that when he first started having sex at the age of 12 years he did not use a condom, but that his behaviour subsequently changed:

*I: When would you have started using condoms, then?*

*R: Pretty soon after I started having sex, like, but not on the first one or two people. I didn't really know anything about it. [Father, 20y]*

In contrast to this, only a small number of men reported that they had used a condom the first time they had sex. As a result, it is possible to argue that for many, contraception and protection are not viewed as a priority during their sexual debut.

Overall, these findings indicate that despite the young age of the men, many of them had considerable sexual experience; some had a sexual history that exceeded ten years. The majority of the men did not use a condom the first time they had sex, particularly those who had first sex at a younger age.

### *3.1.2 Most recent sexual intercourse*

One of the essential inclusion criteria for the study was that the men were sexually active. The young men were asked when they last had sex and details about this sexual encounter. Focusing on the specific details of one discrete experience provided a forum for men to begin talking about their sexual experiences and their behaviour throughout their sexual history. Table 3.2 outlines the time frame of the young men's most recent sexual intercourse prior to being interviewed.

**Table 3.2: Most recent intercourse before interview (N = 41)**

Occasion of most recent intercourse	Frequency
Day of interview	1
Day before	5
Two to seven days before	19
Two to four weeks before	9
One to three months before	2
Three to six months before	2
Unknown	3

It is evident from Table 3.2 that 25 men stated that they had sexual intercourse in the seven days prior to the interview. Further to this, 34 of the 41 men had sex in the four weeks prior to the interview. These findings suggest that these men have active sexual lives. Men were also asked about the context and location of their sexual activity. Several men revealed that they had had a casual sexual encounter or a 'one-night stand' while many had sexual intercourse within the context of a committed relationship. All of the men had sexual intercourse with a female partner. Sexual activity occurred in a range of locations including cars, pubs, toilets, fields, bedrooms, sitting-rooms, and laneways. Of key concern to us was whether or not the men had used contraception during the most recent occasion of sexual intercourse. Analysis of this specific occasion provided a gateway to discussion of factors affecting the use or non-use of contraception more generally. Thus, in relation to their most recent sexual encounter, the young men were asked to describe whether or not they used contraception. If contraception was used, they were asked to specify the type. Table 3.3 details the findings from this discussion and outlines the absence or presence of contraception during their last sexual intercourse and the type of contraception used. The table below only refers to their most recent sexual behaviour and does not necessarily reflect the young men's contraceptive habits.

**Table 3.3: Use of contraception during most recent sexual intercourse (N = 41)**

Type of contraception	Frequency
No contraception	14
Condom only	5
Condom and a type of female contraception	8
Female contraception only	8
Unknown	6

The table reveals that 21 men used at least one form of contraception during their most recent sexual intercourse. Five men had used condoms as a form of contraception, although one man had very little recollection of the event due to excessive alcohol consumption at the time, but believed that he had used a condom. Eight men used condoms in conjunction with a female form of contraception, while eight men relied solely on female contraception during their last sexual intercourse. Four different types of female contraception were used: the oral pill, the bar (contraceptive implant), the coil (intrauterine contraceptive device- IUCD) and the injection. No interviewee indicated that his most recent sexual partner availed of the emergency contraceptive pill or post-coital IUCD during the period following sexual intercourse. However, it should also be noted that in some instances the female may have acted alone in this regard and not informed her sexual partner of her actions. Four men in the 'no contraception' category had their most recent sexual intercourse with a pregnant partner and thus commented that there was no need to use contraception.

Less than one-third of the young men had used condoms. Table 3.4 shows that 22 of those interviewed stated that they did not use a condom during their most recent sexual intercourse, while only 13 men had used a condom.

**Table 3.4: Use of condoms during most recent sexual intercourse (N = 41)**

Use of condoms	Frequency
Condom used	13
Condom not used	22
Unknown	6

Overall, these tables provide an overview of aspects of sexual behaviour and activities of these young men. Over three quarters of the men had their first sexual intercourse by the time they were 17 years old, with a mean age of 14 years. It is also evident that all the young men were sexually active, with over three-quarters of them having had sex in the month preceding their interview. Approximately half of the young men stated that at least one form of contraception was used during their most recent sexual intercourse. However, the use of condoms was quite low, with over half of the young men stating that they did not use a condom. The following section explores the young men's perspectives on condom use and attitudes toward 'contraception' and 'protection'.

### 3.2 Condom use

One of the key themes that emerged throughout the study was in relation to the use and non-use of condoms during sex. The majority of the men had been having sex for a number of years, some with one or a few long-term partners and others with many different partners. Analysis of the men's narratives revealed that the use of condoms depended upon the context of the sexual encounter; for example, whether the man was in a long-term relationship with his sexual partner or whether the sexual encounter was more casual in nature. Thus, the relationship context was an important factor underpinning condom use among men. Furthermore, a range of factors emerged that acted as barriers to men's use of condoms. The reasons given for the use or non-use of condoms depended on a range of factors, from personal choice to external influences.

In an interview setting, many of the young men found it difficult to accurately identify how often they had used condoms throughout their sexual history. This was particularly difficult for many of the men who had been sexually active for over ten years. Despite these problems, the interviewers tried to establish a general overview of patterns of condom use. In the form of a direct question, participants were asked to estimate their use of condoms in percentage terms. Table 3.5 provides an overview of the young men's responses.

**Table 3.5: Estimate of regularity of condom use (N = 41)**

Percentage of time that condoms are used	Frequency
81%-100%	12
61%-80%	8
41%-60%	3
26%-40%	2
0%-25%	10
Unknown	6

For those who indicated that they used condoms more than 80% of the time it is reasonable to say that using a condom is a regular part of their sexual practice. Of the 12 men in this category, six were non-fathers and six were fathers. However, some of those who fitted into the 81%-100% category had experienced unplanned pregnancies; four of these men, who claimed that they regularly used condoms, had children who were unplanned. One of these four stated that there was only one occasion when he did not use contraception. It was this one occasion that resulted in a pregnancy.

Almost a quarter of the men indicated that they wore a condom less than a quarter of the time. For these men it is fair to say that wearing a condom is not a regular part of their sexual practice. Of these men almost all of them indicated that they had either never used condoms or had only used them once or twice. The comments of one man, who had experienced an STI and become a father, were typical of this group. When asked how often he used condoms, he responded as follows:

*R: I don't use contraception 'cos I don't see or feel the need for it. I find contraception is only to stop you from getting diseases.*

*I: OK. So would you yourself have ever used condoms or anything like that?*

*R: Yeah but I just find they are not worth the hassle 'cos they keep falling off, they don't stay on but they say they do.*

*I: So you find that they don't..?*

*R: No just pull out that is all.*

*I: That is the method that you might use?*

*R: Yeah.*

*I: Would that be the main method you would use, the withdrawal method?*

*R: Yeah.*

*I: OK. So say would you have used condoms at the start, or anything?*

*R: Never, I used condoms when I was about thirteen and that was once and I haven't used them since.*

*I: That was the last time?*

*R: Yeah. [Father, 22y]*

It is evident from these figures that a large number of the young men did not use condoms on a regular basis. Just over half of the sample use condoms less than 60% of the time, and less than one-third of the sample use condoms more than 80% of the time.

Such a finding demonstrates the inconsistent use of condoms by many of the men, and that condoms are not seen as an essential component of their sexual practice. Many of the young men believed that this irregularity of condom use was an accepted norm of sexual behaviour. When asked about his inconsistent use of condoms, one father responded as follows:

*It just works that way, you know. I mean, I know people are saying that's what you use, but in most situations that's, you're in a gaff on your own with a bird or somewhere with the bird on your own and one thing leads to another and there is no condoms, you don't care, you know what I mean. You don't think, you don't think until, eh, till afterwards, you know what I mean, that's just the way it is. You know yourself, you don't think till afterwards and eh, that's just the way it was. [Father, 20y]*

This attitude of 'that's just the way it is' was echoed by the many of the men interviewed. Despite follow-up and probing questions from the interviewer, many of the men could not identify or articulate the reasons for their inconsistent use of contraception and protection. This suggests that many of those interviewed are reluctant to reflect upon such issues or to question their patterns of behaviour, and instead believe that their sexual practice is in accordance with dominant cultural norms:

*R: Yeah I used to use a condom sometimes, you know what I mean, and sometimes not.  
I: And would there be any reasons why sometimes you wouldn't have used them or...?  
R: It's just the time of the moment, you know what I mean [...] It just happens, like, you know what I mean. [Non-father, 20y]*

However, while their use of condoms may be inconsistent, many of the young men were clear about their reasons for deciding, at times, to use condoms. The men's narratives revealed two main reasons that underpinned condom use: not wishing to contract a sexually transmitted infection and not wanting to impregnate a female partner. Interestingly, while some men said that both reasons were important, a sizeable number of men gave preference of one over the other. This is discussed in the following section.

### *3.2.1 Perceived function of condoms: Why do men decide to use condoms?*

Almost one quarter of the men interviewed indicated that not wanting to contract an STI was the main reason that they wore a condom when having sexual intercourse. The men presented different rationales for this, ranging from an awareness of the health risks of STIs, which they learned about during sex education in school, to a concern that their sexual partner had not disclosed the truth about her sexual history. Anxieties about contracting STIs were apparent during several interviews and many spoke about their use of condoms as protection. One man stated it succinctly:

*Not catch anything, simple as. You don't want to be walking with crabs or getting chlamydia, I'm quite well aware. [Father, 25y]*

A smaller number used condoms primarily as contraceptives, rather than as a protection from STIs. Some fathers remarked that they used condoms because they did not want to have another child at that point in their lives. Many non-fathers used condoms to prevent pregnancy, as they did not feel they were ready to become fathers, but were open to this happening at a later time. Half of the men that gave this reason were among the younger participants in the study, aged between 17 and 18 years. A small number of men stated that they used condoms for both reasons:

*R: ... I don't want, I would love to be a father but I don't want to be a father at the age of 17.*

*I: Oh right, so that would be a factor when you were having sex, is that why you would use condoms ultimately?*

*R: And, like, I know her; I know her for a long time and, like, I know who she has been with in the past but, like, just to be safe, like, so I don't get, like, and STIs or AIDS or anything like that. [Non-father, 17y]*

It is evident that this man's fear of consequences, his reluctance to become a father at a young age, his awareness of his partner's sexual history, and his knowledge regarding the transmission of STIs have all played a role in his decision to use a condom as both protection and contraception. In contrast to the above statement, of all the men interviewed for this study, only a minority of men stated that they wore a condom both as contraception and protection. This may suggest that many men have not assimilated the message that condoms can be used as an effective method to prevent both pregnancy and the contraction of STIs. There was no clear distinction in terms of demographic characteristics or sexual patterns between the men who focused upon the role of condoms as a protection from STIs and the men who highlighted the role of condoms in the prevention of pregnancy.

During the focus group discussions, sexual responsibility and the use of condoms was conceptualised both in terms of avoiding unplanned pregnancies and protecting against sexually transmitted infections, as revealed in this men's group:

*I think it just means you don't have babies unplanned. Not catching diseases. That's the way I think of it. [Respondent from men's focus group]*

One focus group participant also felt that using a condom was a positive expression of his respect for himself and his way of looking after himself:

*I think it is more manly to wear a condom. Because you are looking after yourself then as well. [Respondent from men's focus group]*

Describing a man who protects himself as 'manly' links condom use with a seemingly positive understanding of masculinity. Throughout the focus groups' discussions aspects of both contraception and protection were mentioned, and some men prioritised condoms as a form of protection while others used it primarily for contraceptive purposes:

*I: What do you think is the main concern for most people, then? Is it preventing STIs? Is it not getting the girl pregnant? What is the main thing?*

R4: *Condoms prevent ...*

R2: *Mainly it would just be the baby. Most STIs as they are, you probably think subconsciously, 'Oh they are curable'. Babies aren't but STIs are.*

I: *Would that be the main thing?*

R3: *I'd be afraid of my willy falling off, in fairness.*

I: *STIs, then, for you?*

R3: *Yeah. Once you get hepatitis or AIDS or something like that, you know what I mean? HIV, sorry. That's more serious.*

I: *That would be your biggest motivation for wearing a condom then, would it?*

R3: *Ah yeah. Just when you see what them diseases can do to you, you know what I mean.*

I: *So for some people it is more the baby.*

R5: *That's what you would be thinking of, would be the baby.*

[Men's focus group]

As illustrated by this dialogue, it is clear that some men within the groups maintained a focus upon the function of condoms as a form of protection against STIs whereas other men are concerned with the role of condoms in preventing pregnancy. This is similar to what emerged throughout the individual interviews.

### 3.2.2 *Nature of sexual relationships as a context for condom use*

In the interviews, many of the young men also stated that their use of condoms depended on the context of the sexual relationship. Men displayed different patterns of condom use, depending upon whether they were in a long-term, committed relationship or were engaged in more casual sexual relations. It also emerged from the interviews that many of the men altered their sexual practice and condom use depending on the number of sexual partners that they had at any one time. Some men claimed that they would use condoms if they were being unfaithful, while others admitted that no condoms were used when they cheated on their partners. One man described a situation where he might hypothetically cheat on his girlfriend, but insisted that if he was unfaithful, he would use a condom. In this case, his use of a condom was motivated by a fear of contracting an STI and transmitting it to his girlfriend. However, two men spoke about cheating on their girlfriends and stated that they did not use condoms. One man talked about the importance of using condoms when he was having sex with multiple sex partners at the same time:

*But with the likes of a threesome, with two birds, yeah, you'd use a condom, or if it was me and me mate and the two girls you'd use a condom.* [Non-father, 25y]

A small number of men in a committed relationship stated that they had stopped using condoms because they and their partner had wanted to conceive a child. Several men felt that because they were in a committed relationship they had no reason to use condoms. One man described such a scenario, where he had stopped using condoms quite early in a relationship, with the result that his girlfriend became pregnant within a couple of months of meeting him. Other men in relationships mentioned longer time-frames, with many saying that it was over a year into the relationship before they decided to stop using condoms.

These findings indicate that to some extent men's use of condoms was contingent upon the context of men's sexual relationships with their partners, although no clear pattern emerged which indicated that men who had one-night stands or multiple sexual partners consistently used condoms.

However, a number of men discussed how their decision about whether or not to use condoms with a particular partner was based upon their assumed knowledge of their partner's sexual and life history. For example, men who came from the same locality as their sexual partner believed that as a result they had full knowledge of the woman's previous sexual experiences and relationships. For some of these men, they were confident that they knew the woman's sexual history and believed that she did not have any STIs. Consequently, this eliminated their own concerns regarding contracting STIs and thus their need to use condoms.

*To use a condom, I suppose if you didn't know someone: like, most of the people I have been with I have known them. I know they weren't sleeping around or I wasn't going to catch, I know it is a silly thing to say, like, you can catch an STI. [Father, 24y]*

This quotation from a father also reveals some of the contradictions and anxieties that men experienced. While he is relatively confident that because he knows the woman that he is having sex with he will not contract an STI he simultaneously acknowledges that there are continued risks with this strategy. One other man also expressed his awareness of the risks involved in making assumptions about sexual history:

*You know the way girls say they haven't been with another fella, a girl isn't going to tell you that when she is with you. [Non-father, 21y]*

However, the majority of the young men did not reveal such doubts and many relied on an assumption that they had full knowledge of their partner's sexual history. These findings suggest that many men did not rely upon open communication with their sexual partners about the use of contraception or the potential consequences of risky sexual behaviour. Rather, they based important decisions on unreliable social cues and 'local knowledge'. A further illustration of how the specific context of the relationship affected men's use of condoms emerged when men talked about how they sometimes used condoms to increase the likelihood that a potential new sexual partner would have sex with them. When negotiating the early stages of sexual seduction, whether for a one-night stand or the early stage of a sexual relationship, some of these men simply accessed and used condoms in case their partner would otherwise refuse to have sex:

*If she says, 'No - not unless you have contraception,' straight to the pub, like [to buy condoms], you know what I mean. [Non-father, 25y]*

In this sense, using a condom placed the woman in a more secure and comfortable position where she was more willing to engage in sexual intercourse. In these cases, men admitted that they used condoms not as a means of protection or contraception, but rather to present themselves as being sexually responsible. A discussion within one of the women's focus groups indicated how this might work:



*R1: Yeah, it shows maturity, it really does.*

*R3: Well it's like this: if they don't have a condom, you'd be thinking to yourself, right, he's after probably going off with other people and he had no condom, like...*

*R1: Yeah.*

*R3: I personally wouldn't go near him, like, you know what I'm saying.*

[Women's focus group]

Thus, women may view a man more positively if he insisted upon using a condom. The context of the men's relationships with their sexual partners also emerged as a key factor underpinning condom use within the men's focus group discussions.

*R2: ... If she wants, if she says wear a condom, not a bother. If she doesn't then that's it.*

*I: So would you leave it up to her, then? Is it her decision?*

*R1: Yeah, well, it depends, like. If it is a dirty auld yoke that you are after meeting for the first time and you just want her to open her legs for you, you make sure you are wearing a condom.*

*R2: Yeah. If she wants to get pregnant that is her problem, if she doesn't want to get pregnant then she should tell you wear protection. [...]*

*I: Do you want her to get pregnant?*

*R2: If she wants to, not a bother. Send her up to the Rotunda [maternity hospital].*

*R1: That's with your bird you do that. But if it is just some tart, if you go home and get the legs... what happens [if] she's been like that with every other man. You don't know how many pricks has been inside her without a johnny on.*

*R3: If it is your girlfriend or a girl that you know is clean, it is all right not to wear a condom. You know that they haven't got anything. But if it is only some damp auld yoke that you are after meeting in a nightclub then you are going to put two or three on you, wouldn't you?*

[Men's focus group]

This exchange demonstrates that the young men have diverse views on the use of condoms and that the nature of the relationship with their sexual partner is often central to their rationale for using condoms. In general, findings relating to the nature of the sexual relationship as a context for condom use highlight that condoms are not merely conceptualised as a tool for engagement in safe sex. Rather, the decision about the use of condoms may involve negotiations between sexual partners, taking responsibility, and consideration about how one wishes to be perceived by a [potential] sexual partner.

### *3.2.3 Taking responsibility and negotiating the use of condoms*

One clear theme that emerged in the men's interviews was how women directly influenced men's use of condoms, as reflected in the excerpt from one of the women's focus groups above. A sizeable number of men reported that sexual partners and girlfriends were proactive about them wearing condoms when having sex. Thus, in some cases, men wore condoms because their sexual partners insisted upon it, while some men encountered women on one-night stands who asked them to wear a condom:

*Well she said did I have one and did I want to use it and I said, 'Yeah.'* [Non-father, 19y]

For other men who were in relationships the woman was sometimes the one who regularly bought the condoms:

*We'd use the condoms, she would organise it, you know what I mean. [Father, 24y]*

Frequently, discussions centred on the use of condoms were contingent upon the nature of the relationship. It emerged from the interviews that the vast majority of men who had discussed the use of condoms did so when they were in a relationship. For some this discussion occurred before they had sex:

*The very first time we had sex, yeah, we would have talked about it. I would have said, 'Do you use condoms?' probably, like, and stuff like that, and I would have definitely used one, like. Talked about it all right. [Non-father, 18y]*

For a small number of men there was no discussion about contraception before having sexual intercourse. They claimed that sexual intercourse had occurred before a discussion could take place.

*It wasn't really anything, it just kind of happened. They [condoms] weren't really spoken about, we were just sitting there and, like, it happened, really. [Non-father, 17y]*

Another young man felt shocked when he realised that he had unprotected sex for the first time with his partner. This prompted the couple to have a discussion about contraception:

*It just happened and we ended up having sex without it. But she wasn't on the pill and then after the sex we were like, Jesus, maybe we shouldn't have done that, maybe you should go on the pill. [Non-father, 20y]*

The claim that 'it just happened' is present in both statements and reflects the wider view of participants that such practices are part of an accepted cultural norm. It is possible to interpret such a claim as a deflection of responsibility. By viewing it as 'just happening' the participants are not framed as active agents, but see themselves as simply part of a culture where these things 'happen' on a regular basis.

In contrast, several of the young men who regularly engaged in one-night stands stated that they often asked their sexual partners whether or not they were currently using a type of female contraception. One man reported that he asked this of every girl with whom he had sex:

*I asked her, I did; I did indeed, as I always do. [Father, 23y]*

Another man explained his reasons for asking women about their use of contraception and his strategy in attempting to obtain a truthful answer from them. When asking his potential sexual partner about her contraceptive practice, he also told her that he had two children by two different women. He felt that a woman would not consider lying to him as he believed that the fear of having a child with a man who has two children by two other women would ensure that they told the truth about their own use of contraception.

It emerged that many of those interviewed placed great importance on discussing and reflecting upon their own sexual experiences and practices. Some men were willing to discuss their experiences with peers and family while others reserved such conversations for their sexual partners. However, as highlighted previously, others did not necessarily talk about such issues but based their decisions regarding contraception and protection around an assumed knowledge of their partner's sexual history and behaviour.

The process of negotiating the use of condoms and taking responsibility for condom use was also reflected in the focus group discussions. As highlighted in the previous section, women frequently took responsibility for obtaining and providing condoms and this was a theme that emerged repeatedly within the focus groups. Indeed, in both men's and women's focus groups, it emerged that it was the responsibility of both the man and the woman to carry a condom:

*I: So what do you think about, like, who should carry condoms, for example?*

*R1: Both.*

*R3: Both of them. Like, if it was a girl going out and saying, like, obviously they're going to plan on having sex.*

*R2: Yeah and is thinking she's going to have sex, yeah.*

*R3: Bring a condom with you. [Women's focus group]*

Despite both male and female participants agreeing on this issue, they also believed that there was a stigma attached to women carrying condoms:

*I: Who do you think should carry the condoms?*

*Several voices [immediately]: Both.*

*R5: But mostly men.*

*R1: I do know a good few girls who do carry condoms.*

*R2: But the thing is, women who carry around condoms, it is good in one sense, but I would call them sluts. It looks like they are going out looking for their hole<sup>3</sup>.*

*R1: I don't agree with that. I think that they should take them out, definitely. I wouldn't consider a girl a slut; I would consider it smart, like. At the end of the day she is the one who is going to get pregnant or end up with an STI. She doesn't want to get that either, like.*

*R5: I think it depends on the type of girl, like. If she is known to be going around everyone and she is carrying a condom then you know, but if she is very independent, works, has her own car is independent and everything, and she has the condoms then you wouldn't think she is slutty or anything. [Men's focus group]*

It is evident that various viewpoints are presented in relation to this issue. Many feel that both women and men should carry condoms, but that women are often stigmatised as a result. Others believe that this stigma depends on the background or appearance of the woman and not solely on whether or not she carries condoms. Therefore, the statements above from focus group participants (both men and women) and from interviewees reveal that many view responsibility for carrying condoms as lying with both men and women. It

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<sup>3</sup> "It looks like they are going out looking for their hole" is a phrase used to refer to going out with the intention of having casual sex.

is also evident that both men and women are viewed in predominantly positive terms when they carry condoms.

In addition to carrying condoms, the issue of talking about the use of condoms or discussion of other forms of contraception was also raised in the focus groups and interviews. Many men talked about the discussion, or lack of a discussion, in relation to using contraception with their sexual partners. In one of the women's focus groups the participants discussed their reluctance to negotiate the use of condoms with their partner and revealed differing views of the situation:

*R1: So basically is it hard for us to tell him to put on a condom?*

*I: Yeah, well is it or is it something that you talk about?*

*R1: Lads, it is embarrassing.*

*R3: It all depends on them and it all depends on how much drink intake people have as well.*

*R2: I believe that does have an effect on some people.*

*I: But you were saying that it is kind of embarrassing.*

*R1: It is. [...] Yeah I think it's mortifying.*

*R1: It kind of ruins the whole mood, 'Do you have a condom?' Do you know what I mean, like?*

*I2: And would men bring it up or would women bring it up in that situation?*

*R1: No, men definitely... they wouldn't.*

[Women's focus group]

Similar views regarding the reluctance to discuss using condoms also emerged in the men's groups.

### **3.3 Barriers to the use of condoms**

Despite an awareness of the function of condoms, only 13 of the men interviewed had used a condom during their most recent sexual intercourse, as illustrated in Table 3.4. As highlighted previously in the chapter, condom use differed greatly across the sample, with some men stating that they wore them infrequently and one man claiming that there was just one occasion when he did not use a condom. It was clear that many men did not use condoms, and further analysis of the interviews revealed a range of factors which militated against the men's consistent use of condoms. These factors will be explored in the following sections.

#### *3.3.1 Reliance on other methods of contraception*

Many of the men reported that they did not use condoms because alternative methods of contraception were available to them. They commented that female contraception was an acceptable contraception for them. During the interviews, the discussion of female contraception often arose when one of the young men spoke about how he had fathered a child and consequently his partner decided to start using contraception. The three most common forms of contraception mentioned in relation to this were the coil, followed by the pill and the bar (contraceptive implant). Only a small number of these new fathers used condoms in conjunction with the female contraceptive after a birth. The remainder of the sample stated that they solely relied on female contraception and found that this was sufficient. As one man pointed out:

*She has the coil so we don't have to use anything really. [Father, 22y]*

Non-fathers spoke about the use of female contraception in multiple contexts. A very small number of those in relationships used both condoms and female contraception. Other men in committed long-term relationships were content to stop using condoms as long as their partners continued to use a form of contraception. However, for one man this did not prove to be reliable:

*Yeah the first time I was just eighteen and the girl I was with she was on the pill and the second time then with [name], she was on the pill as well and then we said, 'Right. We will get something probably a little bit more safer contraception-wise,' so she got the coil in and then managed to get her pregnant again. [Father, 24y]*

As well as the use of both condoms and female contraceptives, several of the men also thought that the 'withdrawal method' was an effective means of avoiding pregnancy. Almost half of the men who talked about the withdrawal method reported using it at various stages in their sexual histories and to varying degrees. For one man it was his method of choice during sexual intercourse:

*Well I don't use condoms so, but I will pull out, like, 99% of the time anyway. [Non-father, 19y]*

Only a very small number of these men acknowledged that a female could still become pregnant as a result of using this method:

*I withdrew. But then again, that's not safe enough. I remember them saying back at school once you are going to penetrate a woman, like, if you are going to semi-ejaculate, I don't know what it is called. [Father, 19y]*

As a result of his experience of a pregnancy scare and the shock he had received, one man described how he changed his sexual behaviour. For a short period of time he used the 'withdrawal method' in conjunction with condoms and believed that this was an effective method of contraception.

It is evident from the interviews that many of the young men were unaware of the various risks involved when having sex without a condom, including those who used the 'withdrawal method'.

### *3.3.2 Drugs and alcohol*

Drugs and alcohol were relevant to the lives of many of those interviewed and also seemed to play a role in relation to their sexual activity and use of condoms. During the interviews, the men were asked about their consumption of alcohol and how this might relate to their sexual behaviour. A range of responses emerged. Some reported that on the majority of occasions when they ended up having sex at the end of a night out, they usually had consumed a large amount of alcohol. Others said that they had never been drunk while having sex. Several of the men commented that getting drunk on a night out contributed to the likelihood of them having sex at the end of the night:

*You go off drinking then and you would go off with anybody when you are full of drink, on a session. [Non-father, 22y]*

A similar claim was made in relation to drugs, with one man describing the impact that cocaine ('coke') had on his libido:

*R: Aw definitely, yeah, yeah, the coke would make you mad horny, probably when I was on it at the time I wanted it [sex] four or five times a day.*

*I: Right OK, and so any of the girls you would have been with at the time, would they have been on drink or drugs?*

*R: Yeah, we would all be on the same buzz and all drinking the same stuff. [Father, 22y]*

Two of the men stated that alcohol was irrelevant when it came to having sexual intercourse. One man rarely drank and had never had sex after consuming alcohol. Alcohol consumption was the main reason given for not using a condom. This explanation was given by fathers and non-fathers and by those who were single and in a relationship. Some men talked about how the consumption of alcohol was tied in with forgetfulness:

*I would have been a little bit drunk, you know what I mean, and you just didn't think. [Father, 20y]*

Another man claimed that he usually used condoms but as a result of alcohol consumption on one occasion he did not. This resulted in a pregnancy:

*I was using johnnies, then one night we were drunk and I didn't use them and that is how she got pregnant. [Father, 22y]*

It is evident that the young men had a diverse range of experiences regarding alcohol and sex and it is impossible to identify a distinct pattern among the group of young men interviewed. Several of the men were drunk when they first had sexual intercourse, while a number of others had not consumed alcohol. For some alcohol was a central part to a night out that they hoped would end in a sexual conquest. For others, particularly a number of men in committed relationships, alcohol consumption had no relation to their sexual activity.

### *3.3.3 Accessibility of condoms and 'the heat of the moment'*

One-quarter of the men indicated that accessing and obtaining condoms was problematic, while almost one-quarter of men said that if a condom was not immediately available or accessible to them, they would still engage in sexual intercourse. Not having a condom immediately accessible and being caught up in the moment were presented as valid reasons for not using a condom. During the interviews, several non-fathers noted that a condom may have been accessible, but not necessarily on their person, and so they decided to have unprotected sex:

*We used to go and stay in the sitting room downstairs and just once or twice, you know, I didn't have them or they were upstairs and just too far away, you know that way. [Father, 19y]*

One man argued that for him contraception was only a choice if he had a condom on his person. Other than that he did not think about it:

*Contraception is only a choice if you have one. If shit's going down and you don't have it you don't think about it. [Non-father, 25y]*

These statements suggest that this behaviour is viewed as a normal part of sexual activity, and getting caught in 'the heat of the moment' is justification for not using a condom. Similar to the discussion of the inconsistency of condom use, the reaction from participants was that 'that's just the way it is'.

In one of the interviews, one man talked about how his "sexual energy" takes over in the moments preceding sexual intercourse, thus preventing the access and use of condoms. Similarly, many of the men described how, despite having a condom within easy access, they were reluctant to interrupt their sexual intimacy with their partner:

*I don't know - sometimes I'd have it in my pocket and I'd just be....caught up in the moment. [Non-father, 20y]*

A small but sizeable number of men could also be described as 'sexually selfish'. They would not use condoms because they claimed that condoms inhibited their sexual pleasure and fulfilment:

*Cos it takes the pleasure out of it when you do use it. [Non-father, 25y]*

In support of these themes relating to accessibility and 'the heat of the moment', similar issues arose during the focus group discussions. Men in one focus group admitted that they would still have sex even if condom was not available or accessible to them:

*R3: It's like if it is not there, it is almost not going to bother you.*

*R2: Yeah, if you haven't got one you are going to say ...*

*R1: Fuck it.*

*R2: I'm here for the enjoyment of it; I'm going to go through with it. It doesn't actually matter if I don't have a condom. That's what most people think of when they are in that situation.*

*Obviously, though, it is more important to wear a condom, but at the time and the moment it doesn't come into your head. You don't really care. It just goes straight out of your head.*

[Men's focus group]

One male focus group participant similarly expressed how he disregarded the thought of needing to use a condom:

*A standing dick has no conscience. [Respondent from men's focus group]*

By this he meant that when a man is sexually aroused all other concerns are secondary and he does not necessarily consider the implications of his actions, or think about condoms: The focus is simply on having sex.

From the views expressed, particularly in the focus groups, it is evident that there are still significant personal and social barriers to gaining access to condoms, as revealed in one men's focus group:

*I know a lot of lads that are afraid to even walk up and buy condoms in shops. They won't even go to their doctor and do it. [Respondent from men's focus group]*

Several male focus group participants noted both the price of condoms and embarrassment at purchasing them as factors which prevented them from obtaining condoms. For some of those men who considered them expensive they erroneously believed that condoms were priced at between €10 and €12 for a packet of three, whereas they are actually much cheaper. It was also evident that men were particularly embarrassed when purchasing condoms from a female member of staff in a pharmacy. It also emerged that a number of men felt that the placement of condoms near the prescription counter in a pharmacy was particularly inappropriate. They explained that they were embarrassed purchasing condoms in this area as it was often crowded with people waiting for prescriptions.

### **3.4 Sexually transmitted infections**

As indicated in the sections above, many of the men engaged in risky sexual activity – high proportions of men did not use condoms on a regular basis, and some men engaged in unprotected sex on a regular basis. One adverse outcome of risky sexual activity is the contraction of sexually transmitted infections. In the interviews the young men were asked whether or not they had ever contracted an STI or attended a sexual health clinic. Once again, responses across the group varied greatly. Some felt that they had no need to attend a clinic for testing while others said that they were regularly tested as part of their sexual health practice. Sixteen men had been tested for an STI, while six men had been treated for an STI.

Of the 41 men interviewed, 25 had never been tested for a sexually transmitted infection. These men provided a number of different reasons for not being tested. Some men felt that they had knowledge of their sexual partner's sexual history and were convinced that she did not have an STI, and therefore they felt that they could not contract one. Such men believed that there was no reason for them to attend a clinic. In this sense, some of the men displayed what has been termed an 'egocentric view' when it comes to sexual relations, as actions are perceived as less risky simply because the men felt they knew or could trust their partner (Skidmore & Hayter, 2000). Men did not use condoms because they presumed that they knew their partner's STI status. One man stated:

*No, there is not really much reason 'cos, em, I know, like, the people who I went out with don't have them kind of diseases, like, you know what I mean. [Non-father, 18y]*

Another young man believed that it was possible to ascertain somebody's STI status by 'looking at them':



*I don't need one. The birds I do be with, like, they're clean. They don't be, like, going around with every other fella ... They're not like the ones that have anything, you just know by looking at them. [Father, 18y]*

These ideas that "You just know by looking at them" or "I know, like, the people who I went out with" refer to the men's assumed knowledge of their sexual partners on the basis of particular social cues. The most common social cue referred to by the men in the interviews was the woman's reputation about number and nature of her previous sexual partners. Men did not refer specifically to the way women dress or their behaviour in social situations, although it is likely that these factors contribute to the woman's reputation. As discussed previously, for some men, women who carry condoms are perceived to be sexually promiscuous. Thus, carrying condoms may be an example of a particular behaviour that is used as an indicator of the woman's sexual history. It seems that many men managed their sexual health practices based on assumptions regarding the perceived behaviours, lifestyles, and appearances of their sexual partners. Other young men had never considered attending a sexual health clinic. For these men STIs are not a part of, or a potential consequence of, their sexual practice or routine:

*I: Oh right, and have you ever had an STI test or anything like that?*

*R: No.*

*I: You haven't had one, and is that because you don't think it is necessary, or...?*

*R: I just never, never really thought about it, like, honestly. [Non-father, 17y]*

Allied to this, a minority of men displayed bravado when presented with the suggestion that they could contract an STI. In one sense they believed that they were invulnerable and would never contract an STI:

*Because I don't think I could pick up anything, you know. [Non-father, 20y]*

This bravado was also revealed in another interview, where one young man believed that he may have contracted an STI, but felt that it was sufficient simply to wash himself the morning following the sexual intercourse:

*I: Have you ever had an STI test or anything like that? Have you ever gone to get tested or anything, would you think of it?*

*R: No, no need.*

*I: You just don't think you have anything?*

*R: I know I don't. I don't, I think positive. [Laughs]*

*I: So there is nothing, it's your own choice, is it?*

*R: Once I thought I did because I was with one certain person, but no - then I knew I didn't so then I was all right. I scrubbed myself the next morning. [Father, 19y]*

This statement reveals a lack of knowledge regarding the transmission and treatment of STIs. Several of the men remarked that they had never had symptoms of an STI and therefore felt that there was no need to get tested. Not one of them directly stated or showed an awareness of knowledge that not all STIs have symptoms.

Sixteen of the men stated that they had gone for an STI test at some point in their lives. One man was tested for STIs when he entered the country as an unaccompanied minor seeking asylum. Three men said that they noticed symptoms that indicated that they had contracted an STI and consequently went for a test. Two other men also talked about how they discussed their recent sexual activity with their peers, who subsequently advised them to go to a sexual health clinic.

For a small minority of men, going for an STI test was a part of their regular sexual health practice. One man outlined why this was important for him:

*I just feel I need to go to get a check up. I have no symptoms looking down or whatever, but I think I need to go. I like to get myself checked; I like to know what is happening.*

[Non-father, 18y]

This regularity of testing ranged from every three months to once a year. It is also interesting to note that many of the young men were unaware of the various services available. Several said that they would not know what procedure to take should they suspect or discover that they had contracted an STI.

### **3.5 Turning points in sexual behaviour**

The findings discussed thus far have revealed the diversity of sexual experiences of the young men in the study. This section considers a number of experiences that may represent turning points that affect the young men's sexual pathways and patterns. It emerged from the interviews that while many of the men changed their sexual patterns as a result of particular experiences, others did not. Once again, this finding highlights the diversity of views, experiences, and behaviours of the young men across the sample group.

One outcome of sexual behaviour is pregnancy. While most boys have acquired a basic knowledge about sex and its links to paternity by the end of puberty, they may still have limited awareness of how their sexual and procreative experiences are linked (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002). For some men, impregnating a sexual partner marks a turning point in their awareness of the association between sexual and procreative processes and their potential to become a father. Being aware of one's procreative potential may lead some young men to become more sexually responsible and use contraception more consistently. For some men, however, "procreative consciousness" (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002, p. 75) does not translate into sexually responsible behaviour.

Among our sample of young men, we explored a range of experiences that may represent turning points for men's procreative awareness, and may affect their sexual responsibility. In particular, we explored men's experiences of pregnancy scares, miscarriages, abortion, and the impact of these experiences on men's contraceptive attitudes and behaviours. The extent to which men had these experiences is outlined in Table 3.6. It was clear that some

of the men had complicated sexual histories and had experienced two or more of these events with one or more women.

**Table 3.6: Frequency of men's procreative experiences**

Procreative experiences	Frequency
Pregnancy scare	25
Unplanned pregnancy	17
Miscarriage	11
Abortion	2

We also examined whether men's experiences with STIs impacted upon their contraceptive practices.

A significant proportion of the sample (25 men) had experienced a pregnancy scare at some point in their lives, and some of these men had had multiple experiences. Of these men, five explained that they later found out that the woman had merely pretended to be pregnant. The men's reaction to such a revelation was varied. Some spoke about the anger they felt toward the woman, others commented that they were relieved, while several claimed that they were indifferent to the situation. In response to a direct question, one man who had experienced several pregnancy scares, initially tried to deny that he was the father:

*I: So, how did you feel about the scares, when you were first told? What was your reaction?*

*R: I probably lied through my teeth, 'It's not me, you are riding everyone else,' or something, you know what I mean.*

*I: So was it that you weren't ready to have a child or you just didn't want to?*

*R: No, it was probably because I didn't give a fuck about it, like. [Father, 22y]*

The same man stated that his feelings toward an unplanned pregnancy with his girlfriend were different from those prompted by the previous pregnancy scares:

*I: The way you reacted then, was it different than the way you reacted now?*

*R: Oh yeah, definitely. I suppose when it happened, I didn't want it to happen but it is with a girlfriend I am sexually attracted to and I love, so it was totally different, like.*

*[Father, 22y]*

It is evident that the context of the relationship had an impact on his reaction to the situation.

Consideration of whether an experience of a pregnancy scare impacted upon their sexual behaviour revealed that for many of these men a temporary change occurred in their sexual activity. For example, men described how they ceased having sexual intercourse for a period following the pregnancy scare.

*Yeah it does, yeah, it does in a way because you kind of get a bit shocked you know, saying, there was a time when I was just actually afraid to have sex for a while with that girl.*  
[Father, 18y]

*No, at the start I did, at the start I was put off sex or whatever and eh for about three weeks and then I got back into it [unprotected sex] again.* [Non-father, 25y]

Overall, however, this appeared to be a temporary change, and most men resumed having sex again after a number of weeks. For other men, changing sexual practice following a pregnancy scare resulted in increased use of contraception. These men were increasingly vigilant when it came to having condoms with them and using them:

*I suppose I would probably check that I had condoms with me the whole time; make sure, make sure there would be no more scares like that.* [Father, 21y]

For other men, however, no lasting change occurred in their sexual practice, as demonstrated by the number of young men who experienced multiple pregnancy scares, often with different partners. Indeed, the most typical pattern was for men to report that their experiences of pregnancy scares did not impact in a long-term manner on their sexual practices. For example, one man described his thoughts and feelings during a pregnancy scare:

*I had the scare, didn't I? So I was obviously, for a couple of days it was going over in my head like, loads. I was just like I'm going to have to drop every plan that I've made and I'm going to have to get a job and it was just torture it was, I didn't like it at all. I felt like I was trapped, I didn't like it. I would have done the right thing, though, do you know what I mean, looked after the child. But when I think about it, that girl wasn't for me and that's obvious now. But when I think back I think, God, imagine if she did have that kid and I'd have to be a part of her life because I'm attached to her through a child. That would kill me, man. I'd hate it. Because I hate her, you know what I mean.* [Non-father, 20y]

However, when asked whether the experience of a pregnancy scare had altered the likelihood that he would use contraception, his response was, "Well, no, not really, no."

While the interviewee claimed that there was no great change in behaviour, the use of 'not really' suggests that some change may have occurred. His follow-up qualification of this also reveals that change had occurred at some level:

*You'd be a bit more wary about if she's taking the pill and she hasn't missed it. Because that's what she was doing at the time, do you know what I mean? And she still missed her period so you're thinking, God, does this pill even work?* [Non-father, 20y]

His statement that 'you'd be a bit more wary' also reveals a heightened awareness to issues of contraception and protection following the pregnancy scare. Therefore, while he may not be able to identify a clear change in his pattern of behaviour, his heightened awareness may be understood as a change in itself.

For a small group of men, however, having a pregnancy scare did represent a key moment whereby they realised and acknowledged that the transition to fatherhood lay in their immediate rather than distant future. In these cases, men came face to face with their lack of readiness for fatherhood. Learning that their partner was not pregnant became a wake-up call for the men in terms of their sexual practices. This man described how it “clicked” in his head:

*Well basically what happened was, it was basically a close encounter. I had sex with one of me girlfriends, it was kind of on and off, we fell in love together, well, puppy love, and she was late by two weeks and I was very afraid. So that's another reason to use protection. I was 15 then. But once or twice it clicked in me head to start using protection, seeing kids with kids, like. I never really noticed how easy it was till it happens to you. [Non-father, 18y]*

Overall, this small group of men were more conscientious about using contraception. Another man described how his sexual behaviour was influenced by a pregnancy scare:

*It felt like a weight lifted but at the same time if it was that easy what is to stop it happening again if we don't use condoms or the pill and all. I felt relieved at the same time and nervous about doing it again, just to make sure. Like, even when I had the condom on I would use withdrawal and all and kind of, it does give you a scare, it really does give you a scare. [Non-father, 22y]*

In general, however, pregnancy scares did not represent key turning points in men's sexual responsibility.

Other opportunities for changing sexual practices occur when men experience abortion, miscarriages or STIs. Only two men in the study had had an experience of abortion, in quite distinct circumstances. One man was only 14 when it happened. He played no role in the decision or in the abortion itself, and had no contact with the girl afterwards. He described his experience in the following way:

*Well I was only 14 and a lot of people don't really know. I just kept it to myself. I was 14; it was a girl in my class; she was a little older and she got pregnant .... She was a very posh young one and, eh, her dad didn't like it so he sent her over to England.... I couldn't give a fuck about it 'cos I never had the chance to get attached to it like she would have, you know. That probably sounds bad and all but I was only 14.... It didn't bother me, like; from the second I found out, about an hour later she was getting rid of it. [Father, 18y]*

In the second case, the abortion happened within the context of a long-term relationship. The direct impact of these abortion experiences on subsequent sexual behaviour was not clear, although one of the men continued to have sex without contraception following the abortion.

Eleven men had experienced a miscarriage, and some of these men had more than one experience of a miscarriage. For one man, this experience represented a clear turning point. He described how an initially unplanned pregnancy, which ended in a miscarriage, precipitated the couple's desire to become parents and subsequently led to a planned

conception and birth of their child. In this case, the miscarriage, which took place in the context of a loving relationship, represented a turning point in the man's realisation of his readiness for fatherhood. In the other cases, men expressed disappointment as they were already in the process of preparing for fatherhood. One man described how his sexual patterns changed following one pregnancy scare and one miscarriage:

*Yeah, it made me more aware of what I'm doing and even if I am drunk I tend not to be ... to be a bit more strict with myself ... [in terms of] ... contraception. [Father, 20y]*

There was little evidence that experience of being tested or having an STI was linked to increased sexual responsibility. As reported previously in the chapter, 16 of the men had been tested for a STI, and six had been treated for one. Few of these men reported how their visit to the STI clinic, or being diagnosed with an STI led to increased use of condoms. Indeed, three men reported that following their visit to the STI clinic, they continued to have unprotected sex. One young father, who has only ever used a condom once, described his experience of having chlamydia:

*My penis was very sore. There was cuts and I went to get an STI [test] and it was chlamydia. I got it treated very quick and thankfully it's gone, nothing came out of it anyway. Lesson to be learned, though obviously I still haven't learned it. [Father, 19y]*

For some men, experiences such as miscarriages, pregnancy scares, and/or contracting an STI had no impact on their sexual responsibility. In contrast, for a minority such experiences represented turning points in their lives and prompted a change in their sexual patterns. In addition to consideration of these procreative experiences as turning points for men, the narratives also revealed some insight into men's readiness to become fathers. The majority of the non-father participants in the study reflected on the nature of their preparedness for fatherhood and its responsibilities. Most men had desires to become fathers in the future, despite not feeling ready to do so now:

*I'd be a great dad but I don't want kids till I'm at least 35. I'm too young to have kids. [Non-father, 25y]*

In reflecting upon their readiness for fatherhood, the majority of the non-fathers cited their life circumstances, which were not conducive to parenting, and a desire to enjoy life and travel before settling down and having children:

*Yeah, not yet though. I want to get a proper stable good job. All these people bringing kids in, struggling to bring them up; why would you want to struggle to bring a kid up? I want to enjoy it - do you know what I mean? Make it nice and easy for him and for me and for the family. [Non-father, 20y]*

In other cases, men's readiness for fatherhood was related to the type of relationship they wanted. In these cases, children were viewed as an extension to a loving relationship with a partner. In the majority of cases, where men had become fathers, the pregnancy was unplanned, so men were faced with a transition to fatherhood, despite not feeling

ready. However, as will be explored in Chapter 4.0, this did not mean that the men did not embrace the consequences and responsibility of paternity.

### 3.6 Men's engagement with services

Throughout the interviews, we explored men's engagement with services and formal supports as they navigated their way through a range of sexual and procreative experiences, including accessing contraception, pregnancy scares, unplanned pregnancies, miscarriage, and abortions. Table 3.7 illustrates the frequency of use of various services.

**Table 3.7: Frequency of men's use of sexual health and information services**

Type of service	Frequency
Sexual health clinic	14
Family planning clinic	3
General health clinic	2
Positive Options text service	1

It emerged that a number of men had used the services available to assist them through various experiences. These services ranged from sexual health clinics to family planning centres to general health clinics. The majority of fathers said that they did not use services related to pregnancy or fatherhood, while one said that he had received free condoms from a drop-in clinic in the UK. Very few men highlighted barriers that might prevent them from accessing support services or obtaining information.

A very small minority of men availed of services related to experiencing an unplanned pregnancy. One father said that he had texted Positive Options and had received information regarding services, but did not utilise them:

*I text that number loads of times, just to see, cos it's a free number and a free text. I always text it a load of times, just to see your local office and all. Just give you details and all, but I didn't do anything, I didn't ring up or anything like that. But in me house, on my own time I'd look up kind of little things, but I wouldn't go, like. I wasn't going to go to this crisis pregnancy centre and talk about it and all.... [Father, 20y]*

The young man indicated that he did not avail directly of the services but was happy with his experience with Positive Options:

*Yeah, they text you all the numbers for all the ones [crisis pregnancy services] in Dublin and they know what part of Ireland you are in. You write Dublin and you write the number in and they give you all the information and all, you know what I mean. It's a good service, like. [Father, 20y]*

Four men talked about how a crisis pregnancy situation resulted in a decision to have an abortion, although in only two of these cases did the crisis pregnancy situation result in

an actual abortion. Two men discussed their experience with services in these situations. One man described how he and his partner went to a family planning clinic to arrange an abortion but after further discussion they decided against it. He felt supported by the service that he received at that time. Another man also described his visit to a clinic in the UK for an abortion. Both men reported feeling happy with the service they received. Four of the men interviewed stated that they were not aware of any services and others admitted that they would not know where to go if they had an STI. Sixteen men had gone for an STI test, with some going on more than one occasion.

Three men related experiences of obtaining emergency contraception ('the morning-after pill') following unprotected sex. One non-father spoke about visiting a Well-Woman Clinic with his girlfriend in order to avail of emergency contraception. Overall, he was satisfied with his treatment by the service providers:

*I felt really awkward going in 'cos there was just all girls there, people you know and all, 'cos it is a local one and they are just looking at you, like .... They asked if I wanted to come in but she said she wanted to go in on her own and then while I was out I had to wait in the waiting room on my own because you couldn't go into where all the women were so had to wait in your own waiting room, and then the nurse came out and asking and gave me a leaflet about how to be a father and I was like 'I don't really want this yet' but she was explaining to me how it works and how the pill works and the morning-after pill and all. It just kind of, it helped a bit in terms of that I wasn't in the dark. [Non-father, 22y]*

Another man mentioned that following a one-night stand he encouraged his sexual partner to obtain emergency contraception, but he did not accompany her on her visit to the health clinic. She took emergency contraception, but it did not work, and she became pregnant.

An overwhelming majority said that they did not know of any services for young fathers and young men, and recommended that services be put in place. They were asked to suggest the nature and function of services that they would like to see put in place. Several of these services already exist, a fact which suggests that some young men are not aware that they can access these services. The responses, and the types and roles of the proposed services, varied greatly:

- Local youth centres to hold information meetings to discuss STIs
- General support services specifically for unmarried fathers
- Groups for young men who have gone through similar experiences
- Clinics for handing out free condoms
- More male-focused groups for 18-25 year olds
- More services for men who are victims of domestic violence
- Services to show parents how to bond with their children, not be their friends
- A service simply for talking

In suggesting the final point above, one father felt that the interview process for the project was an opportunity for him to express himself and his concerns. He commented that there should be a service where there is:



*Someone there that you can talk to, even if it's only about what you did in the day, even something like talking here. [Father, 19y]*

It is evident that the majority of those interviewed were not aware of services available to them. It should also be noted that one man suggested that there were too many services to mention, the problem was that young men just did not know about them. Three of the men interviewed also stated that they had discussed their pregnancy scares with friends who had had similar experiences. The majority of fathers relied on family members rather than services for support and advice. Two fathers had availed of counselling, but these were not directly related to issues relating to sex or parenting.

### 3.7 Talking about sex

In addition to men's engagement with formal services, the extent to which men sought support informally from friends and family was also explored in the interviews. An important context for these informal support mechanisms was the dominant constructions of masculinity encountered by the men. Traditionally, hegemonic masculinity constructs men as unwilling or unable to talk about sensitive or personal issues. This was a dominant theme throughout many of the interviews. As one father argued, men do not talk to each other about sex and relationships:

*Well I think everybody needs to talk but... When you go out with the lads you go out to talk about football. The last thing you want to start doing is talking about your bird walking out, that is what you are getting away from, isn't it? [Father, 22y]*

A non-father felt that there was still a stigma attached to young men talking openly about such issues, suggesting that "some fellas feel that opening up, it is gay to open up to someone, and don't feel it is right and all" [Non-father, 22y]. In these terms, 'gay' is not used in a positive sense, and talking about certain issues is placed at the bottom of a hierarchy of masculinity. A number of men also indicated that it was essential for young men to talk and express themselves rather than "bottling it up" [Non-father, 22y]. A small number mentioned that they could discuss sensitive issues with many of their friends or with their fathers. This highlights the fact that, despite an awareness of the need to talk, many of the young men feel that they cannot speak about sensitive issues.

In considering having an abortion, one father was reluctant to speak to his friends about it, but felt comfortable talking to his boss:

*I was talking to a few people about it, me boss and all, not the lads really, he is all right, and that. [Father, 22y]*

Several noted that they would discuss intimate and personal issues with their girlfriends, but not with their male friends.

Another father described issues relating to talking about sex and sex education in school and the reluctance of the boys in class to take it seriously, primarily because it took place in a classroom "full of lads":

*I got a bit of sex education in school. But we were just more sort of laughing about it ... a whole classroom full of lads, just sort of laughed it off. If you took people out one by one and explained to them the consequences of stuff that could happen, then you could probably get the message across a bit better. When you are with a group of lads, we were all teenagers and the teachers talking about having sex and stuff like that we were just joking and laughing about it really. [Father, 22y]*

Many of the fathers felt that sex education from parents was an awkward experience and consequently talked about the necessity of having sex education in school. Contrary to this, several men suggested that sex education would be taken more seriously if parents discussed it with their children. Some men argued that sex education should happen at an earlier age. Suggested ages for sex education ranged from seven years to early teens. One man remarked that he had had sex education in sixth class but at that age was unable to comprehend it all. A similar issue was raised in the focus groups, with one respondent believing that sex education should be given in first year in secondary school:

*When you start school and you get your code of ethics and all that, there should be a sex education pamphlet with every code of ethics books, or even within the code of ethics. Then you won't even have to wait until you get your sex education. Your half an hour of some girl talking to you and telling you how to put on a condom and stuff. You actually have it in your code of ethics so it would be there for you to read. [Respondent from men's focus group]*

Many argued that sex education needed to be more detailed in a number of areas:

- STIs needed to be explained
- The risks of pre-ejaculation should be spelled out
- The intricacies of using condoms should be explained
- Information sessions should be delivered by people their own age and those who had experienced STIs

Several of the men, many of whom were early school-leavers, had received no formal school-based sex education. Nor had they received any sex education from their parents. They stated that they had learned about sex from a range of sources such as pornography films, walking in on their parents having sex, from older friends, and through personal experiences of sex.

In terms of knowledge of sexual health and practice, no clear or distinct pattern emerged when comparing the responses of those who had received formal sex education at school and those who had not. It is evident that the men learned about sex from a variety of sources and that some thought that their sex education was inadequate. Many felt that they could openly discuss issues with friends and family, while several believed that such behaviour was unacceptable from men. Others remarked that they would only discuss intimate and personal issues with their girlfriend.

### 3.8 Advertising and the promotion of sexual responsibility

All those interviewed were asked to comment on safe-sex advertising and whether or not they felt it had an impact on the intended audience. Two men said that they had never seen any advertisements for safe sex. Five men believed that the advertisements had an impact on their intended audience. However, the vast majority stated that safe sex advertising had little or no impact. Several men cited the current Think Contraception 'Garden of Eden' television advertisement as an example of an advertisement that did not 'get the message across':

*No, there is no sense in it, like. It's just a fucking tent in a field and the Garden of Eden, what's [...]? I can't see the message in the ad, I couldn't.* [Father, 19y]

This father, in common with some of the other participants who passively accepted certain behaviours as normal, believed that nothing could be done to change the situation, as exemplified by his comment, 'It's just the way it is.'

*I: What do you think needs to be done to encourage young people to, say, like, have safe sex or to, you know, avoid unplanned pregnancies?*

*R: I don't think that will ever happen, I don't.*

*I: But do you think that, like, anything could be done to encourage people or anything like that?*

*R: That will never change, it's like the way drugs in Ireland will never change either. It's a part of the culture isn't it?*

*I: Even something like sex education or anything like that, would that, does that help; does that have an impact?*

*R: Nothing. It's just the way it is, like.*

[Father, 19y]

Once again, this statement reflects the refusal to take responsibility as an active agent. There is an adherence to an idea that these things are a cultural norm; events that cannot be controlled, that simply 'happen'.

Other men felt that the advertisements were not necessarily bad, but that that the audience did not take the messages on board:

*You see them all, they tell you what'll happen if you're not careful but it comes in one ear and out the other.* [Father, 20y]

Similarly, many of the men remarked that the advertisements would never have an impact, that it was simply part of our culture and that - irrespective of the content of an advertisement - people will make their own choices in the heat of the moment. In contrast, a significant number of men cited a safe-sex advertisement on MTV as memorable. They described how it centred on a soccer match and showed both a positive and a negative outcome to sexual intercourse. One man suggested that similar advertisements should be created that show both the "good" and the "bad" side [Father, 21y] while another argued that "shock tactics" were needed [Non-father, 18y].

The majority of fathers suggested that the advertisements be made more explicit or graphic, an opinion echoed by many of those who were not fathers. In their discussion, they referred to the graphic nature of advertisements to promote safer driving, when illustrating their point:

*There is only one way to fuckin' really get at people. Did you ever see them ads where the people are crashing the cars from speeding and they are really fuckin' proper and you actually see the cars creaming them and all? Things like that. The way they are really heavy, like, when you look at that and it's really fuckin' wow, you know. Maybe an ad like that, you need to look at something, you need to see something like that: that was really fuckin', that really catches your eye. [Father, 20y]*

Some men made similar comments and recommended that a greater emphasis be placed on STIs:

*The ones where you see people getting infections and all that stuff over things; they have an effect, definitely, yeah ... I reckon the message you get across is the more gory they are. If it could show the worst-case scenario to people they would be saying, 'Oh Jesus! I don't want that to happen.' [Father, 22y]*

Other suggestions included:

- Safe-sex advertisements should target women in particular
- Women should be encouraged to carry condoms
- Condoms should be sent to every home
- Advertisements need to feature childbirth and screaming babies
- Advertisements should be placed on social networking sites such as Bebo
- Sexual health clinics should also be shown
- Advertisements should have a recognisable jingle

As with the list of possible services, it should be acknowledged that some of these strategies are already in place and that some men were simply unaware of their existence. Several of the young fathers also stated that handing out free condoms was an excellent means of advertising safe sex and that this was particularly effective when it occurred at music concerts such as Electric Picnic and Oxegen.

Overall, it appears that young men do not feel that safe-sex advertisements have an impact on the sexual behaviour of the target audience. Their views suggest a desire to see advertisements with content that explicitly engages with issues of STIs and unplanned pregnancies.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored a range of issues relating to young men's sexual behaviour, practices, and attitudes, from their first sexual experiences to their views and opinions on the promotion of sexual responsibility. Men's narratives revealed diverse sexual histories, attitudes and practices within the group. In terms of views expressed, no distinct patterns emerged in relation to factors such as the participants' level of education or employment status. It is evident that the sample is not an homogenous group but is made

up of men with diverse and often conflicting perspectives on issues of sexual activity and responsibility. Many of the participants could articulate their views and opinions in a clear and coherent manner, and it was evident that they were questioning and engaging with ideas surrounding their own sexual behaviour and patterns. However, it was also clear from the interviews that, despite the interviewer asking probing questions, many of the young men were unable to articulate their views on the subject and several failed to engage with or to question aspects of their sexual behaviour. When asked about several of the issues, men often responded that 'that's the way it is', and the men aligned their behaviour with what they perceived was a cultural norm. This was identified as a significant finding in itself.

Many of men had considerable sexual histories, having had their first sexual intercourse in their early to mid teens. A significant proportion of the sample had had their sexual debut by 13 years of age, and the median age of first sex was 14 years. This is substantially lower than the median age of 17 years for first intercourse among young men aged 18 to 24 years, cited in the ISSHR study (Layte et al., 2006). The majority of the young men appeared to have active sex lives, and most had engaged in sexual activity in the month preceding the interview. One-third of the sample had not used any form of contraception or protection during their last sexual encounter, and less than one-third had used condoms at that time. Again, these figures contrast starkly with those cited in the ISSHR study where over 90% of men aged 18 to 24 years reported using some form of contraception during their most recent sexual intercourse. Together, these findings suggest that a higher proportion of young men in this study engage in unsafe sexual practices compared with the general population of men in Ireland. Indeed, it emerged that condoms were used inconsistently by a majority of the sample, and few of the men engaged in safe sex all of the time. As a result, it appears that condoms are not viewed as an essential component of every sexual encounter. The inconsistency of condom use was seen as a cultural norm. Indeed, less than one-third of the men used condoms as a regular part of their sexual practice. Many of the men did not use condoms and instead relied on female contraception as a means of preventing pregnancy. It also emerged that a number of the men believed that the withdrawal method was a viable and valid means of preventing pregnancy. It was clear that many men lacked education in this regard and that the myth of withdrawal as a method of preventing pregnancy was prevalent.

Almost two-fifths of the sample of men had previously been tested for an STI. This represents a higher proportion of men than that reported in the ISSHR study, which found that ten percent of 18- to 24-year-old men had been tested. Various reasons underpinned the men's decision to be tested for an STI: having symptoms, being advised by friends, discovering that their partner had cheated on them, and as part of general contact with health services. Over half of the men in the study had never been tested for an STI. Underpinning this decision was a sense of invulnerability to STIs and an absence of symptoms. Of particular concern was the pattern that some men relied upon assumed knowledge of their partner's previous sexual history in deciding whether or not they were vulnerable to contracting an STI, or whether or not they needed to use condom. This trend clearly resonates with Hyde et al.'s (2008) findings that young men judged sexual risk in terms of a young woman's public sexual biography. Many men in this study simply expressed the view that STIs were not relevant to their sexual practice.

Various reasons underpinned men's non-use of condoms, including the consumption of alcohol, not having them on their person in a sexual situation, cost, purchase embarrassment, being in the 'heat of the moment', being sexually selfish, actively trying to have a child, having a knowledge of their partner's sexual history, and being in a committed and loving relationship. One of the more striking findings was that many of the young men did not use the condom despite being well-informed about sexual health issues and also having a condom on their person. Being 'in the heat of the moment' was a key deterrent to condom use, but was also seen as a standard and common form of behaviour.

In contrast, when men did use condoms they were motivated by a variety of factors: avoidance of contracting an STI; avoidance of unplanned pregnancy; insistence by the sexual partner that one be used; and the knowledge that a female partner might only agree to have sex if a condom was used. It also emerged that during many of these sexual encounters, the young men discussed issues of contraception and/or protection with their partners. However, it should be noted that the majority of those who stated that they discussed these issues were in long-term and committed relationships. The complicated nature of women's role in carrying condoms was also explored. While the majority felt that it was a good idea to encourage women to carry condoms, some felt that there was a stigma attached to women who did. This is similar to Mayock and Byrne's (2004) finding that women who carry condoms are perceived as being promiscuous.

Only a minority of the men accessed the services that were available to them, and several indicated that they had no knowledge of services that they could access. A large number of those interviewed said that they would seek support and advice from family and friends rather than attending a service, while several commented that the discussion of intimate and personal matters would only take place between them and their sexual partner. Many men suggested that more services be put in place that specifically engage with the needs of young men, and also called for a change in the current methods of educating men about sex and sexual health.

Most of the men remarked that they were aware of advertisements relating to sexual health and responsibility, but an overwhelming majority believed that these advertisements had little or no impact on their target audience. They proposed a number of ways that the promotion and advertising of sexual responsibility could be improved. These suggestions ranged from specifically targeting young women and encouraging them to carry condoms to making the content of television advertisements more graphic and their message more explicit. It is clear that many of those interviewed have a desire to see advertisements in the media that are relevant to their own sexual activities and that directly relate to them as young men and/or young fathers.

Finally, as a result of men's sexual activities they encountered a variety of procreative experiences, including pregnancy scares, miscarriages and abortions, and, for half of the sample, becoming a father. For some men, these significant events came to represent turning points that resulted in a shift in sexual behaviour and led to greater levels of sexual responsibility and more consistent use of contraception. For other men, however, these experiences left little lasting impact on their sexual activities. Of course, one of the most significant outcomes of men's sexual activities was becoming a father. How men dealt with this procreative experience is the focus of the next chapter.

## 4.0 Findings: Young men as fathers

Twenty men in the study had fathered a child, while a further three men were prospective fathers at the time of their interview. Eighteen men had not yet become fathers. This chapter is concerned with what the young fathers (including prospective fathers) in the study think about fatherhood. Contrary to our expectations, not all of the pregnancies that resulted in the birth of a child were unplanned, as some men and their partners discussed their desire for parenthood and planned accordingly. In the majority of cases, however, men unexpectedly found themselves as prospective fathers. We examine these pathways into fatherhood for the young men; fathers' living arrangements and contact and relationships with their children are then described. We then move to consider how the young fathers talk about the ideal father, and special attention is paid to the role of their own fathers in the construction of this image. We examine how the men dealt with or are dealing with the prospect of becoming fathers, the extent to which they are engaged with their fathering role and what fatherhood means in the lives of the young men. In the final sections of the chapter, we explore whether becoming a father represented a turning point in men's sexual responsibility and specifically whether the men were more likely to use contraception following the birth of their children. The chapter primarily draws upon the individual interviews with the 20 fathers and three prospective fathers, although data from the men's and women's focus groups are also discussed in relation to specific themes.

### 4.1 Pathways to fatherhood

This section explores men's experiences of becoming a father and includes data from the three men who were first-time prospective fathers at the time of the study. In addition to biological fatherhood, three of the men had already become fathers through informal step-fathering arrangements. In 19 cases, men's partners were their girlfriends, although the length of time of the relationship at the time of conception varied considerably, from two months to six years. Only one of the pregnancies had come about as a result of a one-night stand. Analysis of the interviews revealed that the men underwent different processes in becoming a father. Their experiences were largely underpinned by different relationship contexts, different life circumstances and their perceptions about having a child and the possible consequences for their lives.

An initial distinction emerged between those whose pregnancies came about as a result of planning and those for whom the pregnancy was unplanned. Six of the fathers described the pregnancy as being actively planned. By this, we mean that the desire to become pregnant had been discussed between the couple, and they had unprotected sex with the objective of conceiving a child. In some cases, active planning occurred following a previously unplanned pregnancy that had ended in a miscarriage. In these cases, the shared pain of the miscarriage acted as an impetus for planning another pregnancy:

*She had a miscarriage so, eh, after that, so after that she was very upset, you know, and she was kinda like, she kinda wanted a baby, because of what happened, so I didn't care about condoms that time so, then she got pregnant again. [Father, 20y]*

In other cases, the couple had made a joint decision to try to conceive a child. This process appeared to be closely related to the nature of the couple relationship and the desire to strengthen the interpersonal bond:

*After two years of being with her we decided to try for a child ... we reckoned we were strong enough to manage if we had any kids, so she came off the pill and I stopped using condoms.*  
[Father, 21y]

In other cases the planned pregnancy appeared to be largely underpinned by the partner's desire to have a child and the man's willingness to go along with this: "She was looking for a child and she got one ... it was a planned pregnancy." [Expectant father, 25y] Overall, it was clear that men's willingness to commit to the father role prior to conception was closely associated with the nature of their relationship with their partner.

Seventeen fathers described the pregnancies as being unintended or unplanned pregnancies. In most cases, the couple was not using contraception. As one man described, "I'll take my chance, like." [Father, 19y] However, in a small number of cases, the man was using a condom, which split, or the woman was taking the contraceptive pill:

*One of the condoms actually broke and she got pregnant. I don't want to be saying my son was an accident because I'm proud of him, I'm happy I have him.* [Father, 20y]

#### 4.1.1 Initial responses to the pregnancy

Initial reactions to the news of their girlfriends' pregnancies were mixed and to a large extent dependent upon whether the pregnancy was planned or unplanned. In a small number of cases, where the pregnancy was planned, men described feelings of delight and happiness at the news of their partner's pregnancy:

*Excited, very excited. A small bit worried about having everything ready for the child once she got here but I would say mainly excited.* [Father, 21y]

However, even when pregnancies were planned, men's reactions to their status as prospective fathers were mixed. Thus, just because a pregnancy was planned did not mean that the men automatically felt ready to fulfil their fatherhood obligations. Given that the majority of the pregnancies were unplanned, the dominant emotional response of the men was one of shock, nervousness and fear. The association between non-use of contraception and pregnancy was realised for these men.

*I suppose it was a shock. At my age, you know: A child having a child, everyone slagging you. From myself I was negative about it, you know. We were still teenagers having child. When she got pregnant her family was disappointed at her age having a child.* [Father, 19y]

One man described how "disaster struck" [Father, 20y], while another man stated that "It was a bomb scare that blew up." [Father, 19y] Following a number of pregnancy scares and the non-use of contraception, this man described how he was not that surprised when his girlfriend told him that she was pregnant. Given their consistent non-use of contraception, the unplanned pregnancy was not totally unexpected.



*I: How did you feel when you first found out that you were going to be a father?*

*R: I was sort of expecting it. I laughed at first, nerves, sort of. Then when I started thinking about it, I started shitting meself. [Father, 19y]*

Anxiety about the unknown appeared to permeate many of the initial reactions described—fear about parents' reactions to the news, fear about not being able to fulfil their fathering role, and fear about the changes that the birth of their child would bring about for their lives:

*Now to be honest with you, I wasn't meself for about two months ... I didn't know what way to explain it to the family, you know, what way to break it to me da, and that, you know, and I tried to avoid it as much as I can until I bleedin drove meself mad. I don't know, just couldn't tell them that way, just, sort of still in shock, you know. [Expectant father, 25y]*

This man's response to the pregnancy was influenced by the anticipated response of the family. A minority of fathers also reflected a similar theme of fear of telling their parents or their partner's parents about the pregnancy. As one man stated: "I was afraid to say it, what was I going to say to me ma?" [Father, 20y] On the one hand, this fear appeared to be largely underpinned by a sense that the family would feel disappointed that an unplanned pregnancy had happened. On the other hand, as reflected by one participant, this fear may have been related to the need to ensure that the family would be supportive of the pregnancy:

*What would her parents think? That was hard to deal with. To get in with her dad and talk to her ma and accept the fact that we're going to have to try and make this work. [Father, 25y]*

Fear about telling the family was not a dominant theme, however, as the majority of the men did not highlight this as an issue.

More commonly, some of the men expressed a fear of not being able to fulfil their fatherhood obligations, and questioned their ability to provide for the child economically, as well as play a nurturing role in their child's upbringing.

*When it was a bit closer I was shitting a brick then. I was very immature for my age; until that time I was very immature. I could barely look after myself, never mind a child, you know what I mean. I was worried about not being able to pay for it, wouldn't be able to feed it or even raise it. I have a bit of a temper. I would probably get thick if it started crying, just things in my head...or money-wise. [Father, 22y]*

As will be discussed later in the chapter, a key immediate concern for some of the men related to their ability to provide for their child and partner. Men's perceptions of their financial status influenced their perception of their readiness for a child. This is likely to be related to the low levels of educational attainment and poor employment prospects for some of the men in the sample.

*My reaction at the start? I didn't know what to think. What am I doing? What am I going to do? At the time I was on a FÁS course, I was only 18. I had to get myself a proper job, in order to do that I'd have to go back to school and how could I cos I was having a baby, like? Loads of thoughts went around my head; after a few weeks I just accepted that I was having a baby. [Father, 19y]*

Other substantive concerns about prospective fatherhood were fuelled by how friends reacted to the news. For example, a typical response that men received from their peer group was that their lives as they knew it would come to an end:

*Yeah I had it all, had it all. Yeah your life is over now and no more life for you, no more going out for you, you are going to be struggling and you are fucked, things like that. It hit me all right, it was on me mind but I let it pass by me. [Father, 23y]*

As will be discussed, however, for many of the men, these initial anxieties dissipated following the birth of the child and their ongoing adjustment to the fathering role.

#### *4.1.2 Men's role in decision-making around the pregnancy*

An important part of preparation for fatherhood was the men's role in decisions at that time, as well as involvement in hospital appointments during the pregnancy and their presence at the birth. One of the initial decisions faced by the men in the study was the decision to keep the baby. In some cases, there was no question that the pregnancy would end in any way other than with the birth of the child:

*No, cos she was six weeks pregnant when she found out so she was saying it has its hands and all, so there was no other option but having it. [Expectant father, 19y]*

Some of the men had discussed abortion with their partners. Four of the men strongly indicated that they were opposed to abortion and so there was no choice about whether or not to keep the baby. Two men described how they had initially discussed travelling to the UK for an abortion, but then changed their mind:

*We were actually thinking about going over to England to get an abortion. Me and the mot<sup>4</sup> talked about it and said 'Ah no.' It was more I got a shock and a fright. I always wanted to wait till I was a bit older. But we talked about it and ended up having a baby. [Father, 22y]*

Three fathers discussed the issue of abortion following pregnancy scares subsequent to the birth of their child. One father was strongly opposed to abortion:

*I wouldn't allow an abortion, I wouldn't allow that. That is out of the question for me. A few weeks ago before she put the coil in, eh, the periods were very late again, you know, and she's saying, 'What if I'm pregnant?'... and she said, "I'm having an abortion," and all. We were talking about abortion. Even though at the end of the day I wouldn't allow it, I'd still talk to her about it but I wouldn't let her have one. I'd say, "Listen, two kids at 20, I don't care." There would be no abortions involved, you know what I mean. [Father, 20y]*

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<sup>4</sup> Term used to refer to female partner.

Another father felt that he would be unable to cope with another child at this time:

*We thought she was pregnant; everything fell apart. In the end she wasn't. If she gets pregnant right now, we can't keep the baby, we can't afford another baby. Maybe go for an abortion but we are not planning on having another baby, definitely. [Father, 19y]*

One couple had had an abortion after she became pregnant again following the birth of their child, and this was a shared decision between the couple. Another man's sexual partner had had an abortion following an unplanned pregnancy at the age of 14. Her family had made the decision and he had no role or say in the abortion. These were the only two experiences of abortion within the sample.

It appears that the majority of the fathers were involved in initial decisions about whether or not to keep the child. In only one case was the man excluded from the decision about whether or not to have an abortion. His girlfriend had arranged to travel to the UK for an abortion without discussing this with him, but then subsequently changed her mind. The issue of men's involvement in decision-making around an unplanned pregnancy was also discussed within the focus groups. The key message that emerged from these discussions was that there was no clear consensus among the men or women about the extent to which men should be involved in making decisions about an unplanned pregnancy. This discussion among one group of men highlights the contradictory nature of the young men's perspectives:

*R1: He should have some sort of a say.*

*R2: I think it is the woman's body.*

*R1: I think it takes two to tango.*

*R3: I think the woman should have more of a say because it is her body at the end of the day ... she has to go through all that pain...*

[Men's focus group]

On the one hand, there was the view that "it takes two to tango" and because both the man and the woman have played a role in conceiving the child, both have a role to play in deciding the outcome of the pregnancy. According to this perspective, men's role as biological father constrains women's rights to decide the outcome of the pregnancy without the man's involvement or consensus:

*I don't think that girls should have the authority to tell a man that she is getting an abortion.*

*Right, you are after getting this girl pregnant at the age of sixteen, it's a mistake, but, I mean, you are still going to love a kid if it is your kid that is coming into the world.*

[Respondent from men's focus group]

On the other hand, it was considered that decision-making in relation to an unplanned pregnancy ultimately rested with the mother, as she is the one whose body is affected by the pregnancy: "It's her decision...totally...it's her body." [Respondent from women's focus group]

A third perspective was also discussed, where participants endorsed the view that men's involvement in decision-making was contingent upon the nature of his relationship with

the woman and on the extent to which he would engage with his fathering role. Ultimately however, it was the woman's decision:

*R1: You know, like, the majority of single fellas just fuck off and leave the woman there on her own so I think she's just thinking herself whether I'm able like to actually bring up the child and that sort of stuff.*

*R2: It depends on what the father is like - if he's a good father that would help or whatever; if it's a bad father, I would say the mother should decide.*

[Women's focus group]

Inherent in these quotations is the idea that the outcome of any decision relating to an unplanned pregnancy ultimately affects the woman, as the responsibility for rearing the child lies with the woman, and men have the freedom to leave the situation. However, this perspective on men abdicating their parental responsibility was not dominant, and each of the groups of women also talked about some men's willingness to take responsibility for their children.

#### 4.1.3 *Men's involvement in the pregnancy*

Men's involvement in hospital visits and their presence at the birth represent important opportunities for expectant fathers to prepare themselves for fatherhood. All but two fathers attended hospital appointments and scans with their partner, while 16 of the men were present in the hospital for the birth of their child:

*Everything: Every doctor's appointment and every scan I went to. I took time off work and went to every one of them, went to the delivery ward, the whole lot. I was there holding her, yeah.*

[Father, 23y]

In one case, the man had split up from his girlfriend during the pregnancy and she did not permit him access to the delivery ward. In other cases the girlfriend's mother attended the birth, instead of the young man. In a small number of cases, the men went to antenatal classes with their partners. One man described his anxiety about what other people in the class would think about them, because they were so young:

*I went to the parent teaching class ... I was up to ninety. People are going to think it's children giving birth to another child. People are going to be talking about us. They weren't. They were just excited about their baby. Most of them it was their first ... So they weren't bothered. But I went to the hospital and I was there when the birth [happened].* [Father, 20y]

Overall, the opportunity to become involved during the pre-natal phase was something that appeared to be important to the young men in helping them to prepare for fatherhood:

*I just wanted to be there the whole time. Because there is other fellas out there that don't have the chance to do it."* [Father, 18y]

A key theme that emerged in terms of the how the men negotiated the transition to fatherhood was changes in their feelings about the pregnancy over time. As stated, the dominant emotion experienced by the men after learning of their partner's pregnancy was

one of shock and fear. Men appeared to deal with this in different ways. One man described how he went into denial for a period as he did not feel ready to face up to the responsibility of parenthood:

*For the nine months she was pregnant, I kind of went a bit crazy, you know, on the weekends. I was running away from my responsibility then. I think that's how I was dealing with it. But as soon as [child] came along no-one seen me for two years then; I was just devoted, so. Kind of scared but at the same time I was well aware that now I had a responsibility. It was hard to deal with, at the time. [Father, 25y]*

In the majority of cases, however, men became accustomed to impending fatherhood over time:

*When I first found out she was pregnant, I thought my world was going to end; like, I've ruined myself and all, but when the baby comes along, it's not that, it's not that situation, that's not the case. It's something good instead of ruining yourself. [Father, 20y]*

As soon as the baby was born, feelings of shock were replaced with feelings of happiness, or as one man described, "It just falls into place." [Father, 22y] Another man described it as "probably one of the happiest days of my life". [Father, 20y] The changing nature of men's emotional responses was clearly illustrated in the case of one man, who described his initial response at the news of his girlfriend's pregnancy in terms of fear and devastation:

*I first felt, 'fuck I'm bolloxed', like, you know what I mean. I was devastated, I didn't want a child...I was very young, and all. [Father, 20y]*

Following this, his girlfriend had a miscarriage, which affected him quite seriously over time. When she became pregnant again, he described an emotional response that contrasted starkly with his response to the first pregnancy:

*It was brilliant when I first found out. I was really excited and all. She was only three months pregnant and I was saying I can't wait another six months and all and I'll be able to bring him out and all, very excited about coming, seeing what he's like and all, who he looks like and all. [Father, 20y]*

Overall, these findings illustrate the processes that men go through as they make the transition to fatherhood. Emotional responses ranged from shock and fear, to eventual acceptance, and joy and happiness at the birth of their child. In most cases, men described wanting to connect with and support their partner through their pregnancy. These findings suggest that even when pregnancies are unplanned or experienced initially as a crisis, this significant life event can take on a positive meaning in the lives of the young men as they embrace their role as fathers.

#### **4.2 Fathers' relationship status and father-child contact arrangements**

Eighteen of the fathers had one child and three of these fathers were expecting their second child. Two fathers already had two children, and one of these fathers was

expecting his third child. Ten fathers had boys, while nine fathers had girls. One father had two boys, and one father had a boy and a girl. In addition, two fathers played a fathering role for their partners' children, while one father played a fathering role for his partner's brothers and sisters.

In most cases, the children were still very young: 12 of the children were still infants, less than one year of age, while four children were aged 13-18 months. Five of the children were aged 2-6 years. Generally, the age at which the men became fathers was 18-20 years. Three men were in their early twenties when they became fathers, while one man was 16 when he became a father.

Fifteen of the 20 fathers were still in relationships with their children's mother. In five cases the relationship had dissolved – in three of these cases, the men were single. In the fourth case, the man was in a relationship with another woman, who was expecting his second child. In the fifth case, the pregnancy had come about as a result of a one-night stand. This man was expecting his second child, as a result of another one-night stand, and he was currently in a relationship with a different girl. None of the fathers was married.

In terms of fathers' living and contact arrangements, four patterns emerged. The most common pattern was one where the father was still in a relationship with his child's mother, but was not living with his girlfriend and child. Contact with them was very regular – daily in most cases. Following this was a pattern where fathers were cohabiting with their child and partner. Thirdly, in two cases where fathers were no longer in a relationship with their child's mother and were not living with their child, they still maintained very regular contact with their child, having contact every second day. Finally, in two cases, where fathers were not in a relationship with their child's mother, fathers were cut off from their children and were struggling to secure appropriate access. These patterns are illustrated in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1: Fathers' relationship status and father-child contact arrangements (N = 20)**

	Frequency
<b>Relationship/living arrangement</b>	
In a relationship with mother of child/not cohabiting	9
In a relationship with mother of child/cohabiting with partner and child [including step-child in three cases]	6
Single	3
In a relationship but not with mother of child [both expectant fathers]	2
<b>Contact with child</b>	
Daily/every second day	17
Once a week for two hours	1
No contact	2

Thus, the majority of fathers had very regular contact with their children – seventeen of the 20 fathers had very regular contact, seeing their child every day or every second day of the week. Three fathers had less contact with their children: one father of a four-month-old child had access visits once a week for two hours. In the second case, the father of a seven-month-old child had never seen his child. In the latter two cases, fathers were in the midst of legal proceedings to secure access and visitation rights. In one final case, the man had only seen his child on a number of occasions and contact had ceased a year ago. The three men who were first-time expectant fathers were still in relationships with their girlfriends, but were not cohabiting with them.

#### **4.3 Men's engagement with fatherhood**

In this section, we consider men's involvement in the lives of their children. As illustrated above, contact between fathers and their young children was both frequent and regular, with the majority of fathers having daily contact. This sample of involved fathers may not be representative of all groups of young fathers. Certainly the picture of involved fathers which has emerged in this study diverges somewhat from patterns of estranged fatherhood documented by other research on young fathers in Ireland (e.g. Corcoran, 2005). An important context for the high levels of contact observed was that the children were still very young and the majority of the men were still in relationships with their child's mother. Previous research has indicated that men's parental role is highly contingent on the inter-parental relationship, more so than women's parental role (Parke, 2002). There is little doubt that the men's ongoing relationship with their child's mother facilitated their engagement with their fathering role.

The concept of father involvement has been expanded in the literature beyond consideration of the frequency of contact between fathers and their children to incorporate fathers' availability to and responsibility for their children (Lamb, Pleck & Levine, 1985). Furthermore, distinctions can be made among the different types of activities in which

fathers and their children engage (e.g. play, caregiving routines) (Palkovitz, 1997). 'Responsible fathering' is now constructed in terms of providing financial support, emotional support and care, establishing legal paternity and provision of support to mothers (Doherty et al., 1998; Flouri, 2005). As a starting point for exploring the men's engagement with their fathering role, we examine whether or not the men's visions of the fathering role reflect this broader conceptualisation which has emerged in the research.

#### 4.3.1 Visions of fatherhood

During the interviews, men were asked to rate the importance of a variety of roles associated with parenthood. Having unconditional love for your child, being a role model and spending time with your child were rated as very important by the highest number of fathers, while roles such as disciplining your child, not spoiling your child, showing affection and 'giving up your old way of life' were rated as less important aspects of the fathering role. We also asked fathers to identify the three most important aspects of the fathering role. Spending time with children, supporting the child's mother and going out to earn money were most frequently identified as the most important aspects of the father role. These findings illustrate that from the perspective of these fathers, being a good father goes far beyond the provider/breadwinning role traditionally associated with fathers. Rather, fathers acknowledge that the fathering role is multi-faceted, encompassing financial, emotional, and practical support.

Open-ended questions about what being a good father entailed further revealed the multi-dimensional aspects of the fathering role:

*I think fathering is a basic thing. It is hard but the rules are kind of basic: money-wise be there for him, emotionally be there for him, spend the quality time with him so he knows who his dad is when he is growing up. [Father, 22y]*

In response to 'what makes a good father', the most common response was simply being there for the child to see them growing up.

*For starters, to be there to listen to your child, you know? Stimulate them. Always take yourself to their level. Let them be a child, for starters, and obviously be there somewhat financially, do you know what I mean. Being able to do things and show them things and being able to bring them away; it's not everything but it helps. Basically really being there for the child. Not undivided attention but just being there, because I know what it's like not to have your father around. [Father, 25y]*

An ongoing presence and availability to the child was considered important in order for the child to feel secure in their father's love for them. Related to this was the importance of not just being there, but actually spending time interacting with the child and being engaged in activities with the child.

*Just spending time with your daughter. That's how you get to understand your child, what she needs and what she wants. I think spending time with your daughter. [Father, 19y]*

Other fathers talked about specific tasks involved in caring for their child:



*Looking after the child, that's it... Feed them, change them, put them to sleep, play with him.*  
[Father, 19y]

Underpinning fathers' narratives about the 'ideal father' was the importance of facing up to your responsibility and obligations as a father. "I know I have a responsibility, I try to do as much as I can, when I can" [Father, 19y]. Along with this responsibility comes the recognition that life is forever changed and that their child is now the priority in their lives:

*[Good dads] actually hang around with their child, like. Just most of their responsibility is their child, like, and nothing else matters.* [Father, 25y]

For most of the men, becoming a father and attempting to live up to this ideal fathering vision represented a turning point in their lives, where their identities and perspectives on life shifted to take account of their new role as fathers. This issue of turning points will be discussed later in the chapter.

Similar visions of what makes a good father emerged within the focus group discussions. Both men and women described the multi-faceted role which men as fathers were expected to perform. These roles included fathers as economic providers, as well as carers:

*R1: [Being a good father is]...when they're loving and helping out, and they're working.*  
*R2: Bringing in a decent wage.*  
[Women's focus group]

In addition to the aforementioned roles of provider of financial, practical and emotional support, the role of men as male role models for their children permeated each of the men's focus group discussions.

*A father is usually the main role model, like, for a son. You're the man at the end of the day and he's going to watch you at soccer.* [Respondent from men's focus group]

For these men, their vision of fatherhood incorporated being admired and looked up to by their children and representing a male figure, especially for their sons. Also, central to the men's ideals about fatherhood was an acceptance of paternal responsibility:

*R1: Basically someone who does his job...who is a father.*  
*R2: Who steps up and takes his place. Who doesn't run off and hide...takes responsibility.*  
[Men's focus group]

#### 4.3.2 Fathers as providers

An important consideration for the fathers in the study, many of whom were unemployed, was the significance of the provider or breadwinning role in their conceptualisation of the father role. On the one hand, the traditional dichotomy of mothers as expressive nurturers and fathers as breadwinners has gradually faded, in light of women's increased participation in the work force and the broadened conceptualisation of the father's role. On the other hand, in low-income families, the priority of the traditional provider role may

become prominent where fathers perceive themselves as less than adequate providers (Summers et al., 2006). Among the young fathers, it was clear that the provider role remained central to the father's own sense of his role as a good father:

*I think it's really important for me to be able to provide for my son and have some sort of security. [Father, 25y]*

Fathers did indeed recognise that their ability to provide for their children may be limited. Regardless of this, however, what mattered to these men was that they tried their best within their means, and continued to "be there" for their children:

*A good father does the best he can for the child; if he doesn't have a job that he always tries to do what he can money wise or emotionally, he has to be there for the child. [Father, 22y]*

Thus, the fathers spoke about compensating for the constraints in their financial resources by providing for their children in other ways that mattered: emotionally and practically, rather than just financially:

*People think it is just going out working and providing for kids but the play time and letting them know they are loved is a bigger aspect of having kids, like; it is important for being a dad, you know. [Father, 23y]*

It could be concluded that these men, whose ability to fulfil the breadwinning role was constrained by their limited employment and education opportunities, had benefited from the expansion of father role expectations.

However, it was clear that for some men a failure to fulfil the provider aspect of the parenting role affected their perception of themselves as fathers, and indeed as men. As a result, men experienced feelings of disappointment in themselves, depression, and a pressure both internally and externally from family members to gain employment:

*So at the moment I'm not working and I see myself as not being the man, you know what I mean. I should be the man, to look after me family, you know what I mean. That is a big pressure on me now at the money, to get a fuckin, to get a job. [Father, 20y]*

The pressure that this father and a number of other non-working fathers mentioned may relate to a desire to conform to traditional definitions of masculinity and models of the male- (or father-) as-breadwinner. The significance of the provider role to the men was also apparent in the case of one young father who was fighting for access visits with his child. According to him, his employment status provided evidence of his willingness to accept his parental responsibilities and his ability to fulfil at least some of his fathering obligations. For him, having a job was equated with demonstrating his responsibility as a father.

*He [solicitor] thinks I have a very good chance cos I'm working. He says when he is in court over other custody battles, the fathers don't have a job and that is what he says affects them*

*more. A job means responsibility, so if they can see that you are responsible in your job, then you are responsible with the kid, like. [Father, 19y]*

A number of men also spoke with pride about how they were able to financially provide for their children, even when they were not in employment or were in receipt of social welfare benefits:

*My job's just, whatever he needs he gets.... When [girlfriend] was pregnant I was putting fifty euro away. So I saved up around two thousand euro and that paid for the christening and the afters thing.... And now I have a thousand euro in the post office. [Father, 20y]*

In conclusion, the provider role was a prominent dimension of fathering for these men, and many of the fathers in the sample were constrained in their ability to live up to this aspect of the fathering role. However, the extent to which this appeared to affect their identity of themselves as 'good fathers' varied. On the one hand, where men's father role perceptions encompassed multiple roles, they compensated the provider role with other fathering roles, such as being involved in caregiving and spending time with their children. Thus, having a broad conceptualisation of the father role served as a protective factor for these men. On the other hand, having the provider role as a defining expectation of themselves as fathers represented a risk to the men's psychological well-being and father-identities, particularly when they struggled to fulfil this obligation.

#### *4.3.3 Fathers' involvement in caregiving, discipline and decision-making*

Reflecting the breadth of father roles, many of the men in the study described how they provided day-to-day care for their children. Given the young age of the children of the men in the study, they most often referred to bathing, changing and feeding the baby:

*When I come home I probably get three, four hours with the baby before she goes to bed. I come home and cook the dinner and play with the baby. If her nappy needs to be changed I change it then, but my girlfriend does most of it during the day. [Father, 22y]*

In the majority of cases, particularly where fathers were working, mothers were identified as the child's primary carer; in a number of cases, however, shared parenting arrangements had been established. For example, where fathers were not co-resident with their children, some fathers described taking the baby overnight or for weekends and involving their parents (paternal grandparents) in the care of the child:

*So I would be down for about four hours a day and I take him on the weekend for the whole day or the weekend, I take him. I'll take him all day Friday for over night, you know what I mean. I would like to see more of him because we don't live together. [Father, 20y]*

The perceived importance of spending time with children previously alluded to was clearly reflected in the many descriptions of fathers playing with their children. While a number of fathers stated that they were limited in what they could do with their very young children, other fathers described how they played on the floor with their baby:

*Say if I have him now and the girlfriend is off somewhere, I'd be with him down and let him roll around the floor give him a few toys and all. Watch a bit of telly myself, tickle him a bit.*  
[Father, 19y]

Fathers also described going on outings with their children, such as to the park or swimming. One father of a slightly older child described:

*Like, we go fishing. He's not too keen on football yet. I tried to play football with him and stuff like that. He loves drawing because I like art myself and I think he's going to be good at that because he's already showing good signs. He goes to Beavers and stuff like that. Like I bring him, I've encouraged him to join these things. He can swim and he's only six.* [Father, 25y]

Play, outings and recreation appeared to play an important role in how fathers interacted with their children. Less prominent in the fathers' narratives was reference to the father's role in disciplining and teaching their children. This may have been because of the young age of the children. As one father described:

*He is only young, you know what I mean. When he gets to the age of five I'll tell him, 'You can't do that.' He is too young to understand now, you know what I mean.* [Father, 24y]

However, some of the fathers envisaged that their role in teaching their children right from wrong would become important as their children became older:

*Discipline the child, I think that is one of the most important for me...because I'd hate my child to grow up spoiled and just cry whenever he wants something. I would discipline him very hard for that.* [Father, 22y]

Involvement in decisions was also mentioned as an important responsibility, but only by a handful of the fathers. Generally, fathers reflected that given the young age of the child there had been few requirements to make important decisions. However, one father was adamant that he would be heavily involved in any decision that affected his child's life:

*Every decision that involves me child is fifty-fifty, you know what I mean, and if I don't like a decision she makes I'll say it and it won't be made, you know what I mean, and if she doesn't like a decision that I want to make, it won't be made, until the two of us can agree on the decision that is the best for him. I told her that, that's the way it goes. I said it to her even before the baby is born, 'Listen, no matter what, we are together and all the decisions on the child are fifty-fifty, you know what I mean, mother and father, equal, right, at the end of the day, you know, so.'* [Father, 20y]

Another father appeared to adopt a more passive role in decision-making, which may have reflected his lower levels of involvement in day-to-day care of his child:

*I have an opinion, like, I'd say, 'I don't think that's right,' but I just let them make the decisions, like, the girlfriend and her ma 'cause they look after the child the most.* [Father, 19y]

In conclusion, in addition to the prominent provider role, the men's role as fathers was multi-faceted, primarily incorporating the provision of care and play. Men's reflection on their current role as a father related very much to their children's needs, given their young age and specific stage of development. Their role in making decisions and as teachers and disciplinarians for their children formed part of the vision for their future fathering role. There was little doubt that these men were deeply committed to their parenting role: they considered that fathers matter and have an important contribution to make to their children's lives, especially as their children grow older. When asked about their perceived impact on their children, a number of the fathers stated that their child was "too young to know" [Father, 19y] or "it's hard to say at that age" [Father, 23y]. They looked forward to their continued involvement in their children's lives, when their potential to impact upon their children would be even greater:

*I can't wait until he is older. I suppose I always wanted to have kids to teach all the manly things, sports and that kind of stuff, bring him to school, buy him all the new clothes, bring him to the park, all that kind of stuff. [Father, 22y]*

The importance of fatherly love and care for one's child permeated many of the men's narratives:

*Just the biggest impact is just being there for him really, just loving him, you know: just love them, look after them. [Father, 20y]*

Another man described his impact on his child's life through "caring probably, that's about it, cos I have nothing to give him, not financial." [Father, 19y] The salience of the caring role may have been heightened for men who perceive themselves as less than adequate breadwinners for their families. These findings suggest that in the context of social and economic disadvantage, men invoke a range of parenting roles to define the meaning of "good fatherhood".

#### **4.4 Models of good fatherhood and the influence of men's own fathers**

In this section we consider how men develop visions of fatherhood and models of 'good' fatherhood. Men may draw on many models from their own generation of fathers, as well as fathers from past generations. Discussion of this issue during the focus group phase of the research highlighted that the association between men's relationships with their own fathers when they were growing up, and their fathering role with their own children was not straightforward. One key theme emerged from these discussions: a man's behaviour as a partner and as a father is influenced by his experiences with his own father, but it is not a matter of simply modelling the behaviour of their own father:

*You can't blame it on anybody how that father is going to be, that's his own, he's his own person, you know, he's his own mind; if his father was there, or if he wasn't there, he still has to do his own thing. [Respondent from women's focus group]*

Thus, men have a choice to make: they may choose to emulate or reject their father as a model father or partner:

*R1: If you see your father, I don't know, maybe he influences you a bit or a lot. It could go both ways. Say for example your father is treating your ma bad, well, you could go one way and think that is acceptable, or go the other way and think 'I don't want to be like that to my other half'.*

*R2: You can make your own choices, so I think it is how you want to react is the way you will react. [Men's focus group]*

Given the salience of these themes within the focus groups, these ideas were explored in depth in the interviews with the young fathers in the study. Of key significance to the interviewees' images of what makes a good father was how the young men assessed their own fathers and the quality of their relationship with their father. Three patterns of relationships between the young fathers and their own fathers emerged within the interviews: young fathers whose own fathers were absent from their lives while they were growing up; young fathers whose own fathers were physically present for most of the time while they were growing up, but were lacking in nurturing in their fathering role; and finally, young fathers whose own fathers were present and played a positive role in their lives. It was clear that the men's fathering roles were influenced by their experiences with their own fathers, but in markedly distinct ways. The aspects of the fathering role in which the men found their own fathers lacking were the ones they wished to improve upon. On the other hand, they sought to emulate facets of their father's role which they admired. A small number of fathers described their own father's absence from their lives. As a result, having not had their fathers present, these fathers were aware of the consequences of father absence and vowed not to be absent themselves:

*I wouldn't run away. I wouldn't run away and leave me child behind, I wouldn't do that. Never leave, I would never be able to leave me child ... You want to be there to see your child. My dad didn't see me grow up, you know what I mean. He never seen me from when, like, my da wasn't with me from when I was three or something, you know what I mean.*

[Father, 20y]

A further group of young fathers described their own fathers as being present to various degrees while they were growing up. However, despite their physical presence, many of their fathers were lacking in their availability and were low in nurturance. This was the case for young fathers who, as children, had witnessed or experienced varying degrees of violence in the home. Two men said that they had been slapped or smacked as children. Of these, one talked about his father smacking him but not his sister, and that he too would smack his son, but not his daughter. Two others talked about being beaten by their fathers. In some extreme cases, the men's own fathers suffered from alcoholism or drug addiction, or spent time in prison.

*I know what it's like not to have your father around. My dad was always in and out of prison and he was never around, basically. He's never really been there for me. I've missed him all my life; I haven't really benefited from having one, do you know that way. Because he had a drug problem as well, I think his mind is just that fucked up from all the drugs over the years, you know, so. [Father, 25y]*

This group of men endeavoured to compensate for what they missed out on from their fathers:

*I am not going to end up being an alcoholic. I am not going to fucking treat your child like shit and things like that. [Expectant father, 18y]*

Finally, several of the men described close relationships with their fathers while they were growing up. For these men, their fathers represented positive role models for their own fathering role.

*I reckon I would go on like him [his father]. Everything he has done has rubbed off on me. When I was a kid he used to give out to me, if I done something bad I'd get a smack. As I got older I realised that I deserved them smacks, I probably was a little bastard when I was a kid. He was always there. I always had everything I needed. He was a good carer; I had everything I needed. If I had a young fella, I probably would give him a few smacks. [Father, 22y]*

However, even where fathers chose to emulate aspects of their own father's parenting role, they may be faced with different circumstances than those which their own fathers faced in establishing their fathering role. Thus, the fathering identity which men develop for themselves has to fit with the circumstances within which they are embedded. The men in the study appeared to piece together an image of fathering from different sources, drawing on their experiences with their own fathers, as well as their personal characteristics. One young father described how his own father "was never loving and affectionate, but he was always there if I needed money". He proceeded to describe how his fathering approach will be similar in some ways to how his own father was with him, for example, by providing for his son financially and encouraging his participation in sports. However, unlike his own father, he hopes to be more emotionally available to his child:

*I suppose similar [to his own father] I will put him [son] in, start him in any organisation as soon as I can because I think it is good to be playing young kids from the start because then you have friends when you are older. The emotional, I'll be there for the child if he needs to talk, if something is wrong or anything like that I'll be there as well, so, the emotional side from myself and the financial side from my father. [Father, 22y]*

Indeed, even when the young men had positive memories of their own fathers, a number of them described how they nevertheless wanted to do better as fathers. Despite their positive relationship they wanted to develop certain facets of their fathering role on the basis of how they felt they missed out themselves:

*I wouldn't really change anything; the only thing I would like to add in would be that he would have spent more time with me when I was younger, even for a game of football. [Father, 19y]*

*He used to bring me places, used to bring me up the road to football matches, Saturday, a day out...but I'd like to try do something better, yeah, just things that he couldn't do for me, I would like to do for my son, bring me away on holidays, you know. [Father, 24y]*

It is clear that men's relationships with their fathers represent a key influence on their developing father identity. Of course, while men's own fathers were a dominant influence on men's fathering roles, they were by no means the only influence. Other influences on men's fathering role came from within their peer group, as well as from benchmarks or norms observable within their community. In a small number of cases, men referred to other young fathers within their neighbourhood:

*You would see a lot [of fathers] around here. Some people where their kids are going around and they are clean. They are always well dressed so you know the father is a good father, he is always working and there to support the kid. Then you would see junkies going around and their kids do be manky and all their fathers do is rob to get a few quid. [Father, 22y]*

Other fathers referred to their friends as models of good fatherhood.

*I have two main friends, one of them is a very good dad, he is always there for her, he wouldn't leave her side...my other friend is a bit too rough on the child, like. He is probably better in different ways that I don't see. [Father, 22y]*

However, men's own fathers represented the major influence on their fathering role, beyond friends and those in their community. It is interesting to consider how men's talk about their relationships with their fathers and the influences of their fathers reflect different discourses of masculinity. Traditional forms of masculinity construct males as unable to express their emotions or unable to talk about sensitive and personal issues. It is useful to analyse father-son relations in these terms and explore the extent to which the fathers interviewed conform to or deviate from such ideas of masculinity. Many of the young fathers commented on their close relations with their own fathers, with one noting:

*I can talk to him about anything [...] He is the only person I trust in the world, he is the only person who has done anything for me, the only person who has been there for me. [Father, 19y]*

One man referred to the fact that since growing up he has forged better relations with his own father. This idea was echoed by another man who believed that now that he was older and a man he had greater respect from his father:

*It's a lot better now ... I am older now so he respects me as a man and treats me like one. [Father, 22y]*

It is possible to read this statement as an expression of male bonding in traditional hegemonic terms. Similarly some men spoke of having pints with their fathers and watching football. One man claimed that he can now talk to his father about personal things, while another believed that, since having the child, he could better relate to his father. In explaining his relationship with his father, another of the men expressed the difference in their respective behaviours:

*I suppose I would be more emotional than my father ... so I am glad I am not like him that way. [Father, 22y]*



As a result of his relationship with his own father, this young man wanted to have a more emotional connection with his son. Consequently, it is evident that in terms of masculinities, the young fathers expressed a range of views about their relationship with their own fathers and how this might impact on their approaches to parenting. Two routes of influence emerged from the interviews. On the one hand, men modelled themselves after their own fathers, especially when they recalled positive memories of their father's involvement and his influence on their life. On the other hand, men who experienced deficiencies in their relationships with their own fathers sought to compensate by becoming more responsible, involved fathers with their children.

#### **4.5 Fatherhood as a turning point**

In this section of the chapter, we explore the extent to which becoming a father represented a turning point in the lives of the young men. In the context of this study, turning points refer to key transitional experiences relating to men's ability to impregnate, procreate or become fathers, which result in men seeing themselves in a new light or adopting a significantly different perspective on some aspect of life (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002). While some men will claim that they have changed dramatically as a result of a turning point, for other men the turning point will result in more subtle shifts in who they are. What ultimately matters is whether the individual is aware on some level that these events and related processes have altered his or her identity and perspective. Specifically, we explore whether fatherhood has altered men's sexual and social relationships, and their identity as a man.

##### *4.5.1 Fatherhood and sexual responsibility*

The key question here is whether becoming a father represented a turning point in men's sexual responsibility. A small number of the young men identified becoming a father as a critical juncture in changing their sexual behaviour patterns. A number of the fathers highlighted their increased awareness of the need to use contraception in order to prevent another pregnancy. For example, when asked whether having a child impacted upon the use of contraception, one man responded: "Definitely, all the time, it's the lesson we learned." [Father, 19y]

Overall, men and their partners were likely to use contraception following the birth of their child. Most commonly, this involved the use of female contraception. Indeed, as highlighted in Chapter 3.0 the most common context in which female contraception was used was following the birth of a child. However, it is important to note that the use of female contraception following the birth of a child did not necessarily occur as a result of a turning point for the man. In some cases, the doctor recommended that their girlfriend use a form of female contraception. In one case, the girlfriend's mother arranged for her daughter to go on the pill. Thus, in these cases, changing sexual patterns were not as a result of men's altered perspectives.

*Since we had the baby, she went straight away and said, 'What's the best thing I can get?' 'The coil,' they said. So she got it done and that's it. [Father, 22y]*

*After she had the baby, we talked about it, she was going to get some weird yolk, I can't remember the name, so we said we would use the bar and condoms to be extra safe...to stop her from having another baby; her da would bleedin' kill me. [Father, 18y]*

Another motivation for the use of contraception following the birth of the child related to the nature of the relationship between the father and his partner and the sense that the men had too much to lose by being sexually unsafe. Specifically, two men discussed the need to engage in safe sexual practice when having sex with women other than their child's mother. The potential to get another girl pregnant or to contract a sexually transmitted infection was a deterrent from being sexually irresponsible. The men had a sense that there was too much at stake to risk not using contraception when they were with other women:

*Because we'd split up, like, but because I had a son I knew when I was going out there, I'm not getting other girls pregnant. Plus I always knew in the back of my mind that I'd need to get back with my girlfriend. So if I was out there playing away, without ballying up<sup>5</sup>, as you say it, I'd only run the risk of giving my girlfriend something, do you know? [Father, 25y]*

In these cases, it was clear that becoming fathers had shifted the men's perspectives on the importance of safe sex.

In a small number of cases, however, it was clear that fatherhood did not represent a turning point in men's sexual behaviour patterns. For example, two men experienced pregnancy scares soon after the birth of their child. In a further two cases, fathers were going through second unplanned pregnancies with a woman other than their child's mother. In one case, a man had had four unplanned pregnancies with three different partners, two of which had ended in a miscarriage, one in the birth of his child, and the fourth pregnancy was still ongoing at the time of the interview. In another case, an eighteen-year-old father of one, who was expecting his second child at the time of the interview, had experienced 13 pregnancies with four different partners, ten of which had ended in miscarriages and one in an abortion.

A further insight into whether fatherhood represents a turning point in sexual responsibility can be gained from exploring how men respond following unplanned pregnancy 'scares'. In a minority of cases fathers reported changed sexual practices directly as a result of a pregnancy scare. These changes included lower frequency of sexual intercourse, and increased use of contraception. One man described: "We are careful, very careful; I'm not ready to have another one, like." [Father, 25y]

In other cases, however, it was clear that some fathers still had unprotected sex, despite having one child, and a number of pregnancy scares. One man described: "Still wouldn't think, still wouldn't think about using contraception, still wouldn't think." [Father, 23y]

Another father described his response to regular pregnancy scares:

*I shite myself; when she does get them [her periods] a month or two after, the scare is gone. I'd get a few cans into me and I'd be back to me old self, ole fucking devilment ... we are straight back at it again [unprotected sex]. [Father, 19y]*

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<sup>5</sup>"Ballying up" is a term used to refer to putting on a condom

It is clear that in these cases, pregnancy scares and indeed becoming fathers did not have a dramatic and lasting impact on the men's views and actions pertaining to sexual responsibility.

#### 4.5.2 *Fatherhood and identity as a man*

While fatherhood did not represent a turning point for many of the men in terms of their sexual patterns, analysis of the data indicated that fatherhood did give rise to a number of important transitions in the young men's lives. Three shifts were identified: how men perceive themselves as men, how men are perceived by others and the type of lifestyle the men engaged in.

In a number of cases, men experienced fatherhood as a turning point in their identity as men. In several cases, fatherhood became equated with a new status in manhood, reflected not only in the achievement of biologically fathering a child, but, more importantly, reflected through their growth as mature and responsible men who were living up to their fathering role obligations:

*She made me realise what beautiful children I can make. She has changed me a lot. I absolutely love my daughter. She has made me more of a man, a responsible man, not just a careless person; that is how I used to be, careless, hanging around with my friends all the time, not caring about what I had to do for myself in the future, no plans and stuff. I don't know if it's the baby itself, but I think she really changed me. [Father, 19y]*

The idea that being a 'real man' was associated with fulfilling family obligations was also reflected by one young man who described how his identity as a man was still in the process of being formed:

*A real man is someone who takes care of his family. Have a child and put food on the table, that's what my definition of a man is, from me dad and all but I haven't found the definition meself. It will take me a while yet. [Father, 19y]*

For these men, fatherhood forced them to grow up - it was only by fulfilling their father role that men proved their status as men:

*I have a child; I had to become a man. I couldn't be a child anymore and go around doing childish things, you know what I mean. I've got to accept my responsibility as a man, you know what I mean. That's just the way it is. [Father, 20y]*

For many of the men, this challenge upon them to grow up and assume their fatherhood responsibility was internally driven, underpinned by the realisation that another person was dependent upon them:

*Well kinda the thing about pregnancy time is the baby coming and maturing and thinking about it. That never happened before - I never thought about anyone but myself and just trying to do the best for him, give him, buy him as much as I can, do whatever I can. So totally changed, totally matured through it. [Father, 22y]*

For other men, how they were evaluated by others appeared to matter. One father stated:

*I have been told by my girlfriend's parents now, I have exceeded their expectations, so they see me as being a good dad. [Father, 21y]*

Thus, becoming fathers also represented a turning point in how men are perceived and treated by others. For some men, there was a sense of new belonging since becoming fathers:

*I get a lot more respect off them and support off them than I did before my girlfriend got pregnant. [Father, 23y]*

Related to this, men described how they were more drawn towards associating with other men who were fathers and many had distanced themselves from their peer group:

*A lot of things changed. I wasn't able to go out anymore, like, really. I was in all the time with the baby and me girlfriend. I had to - I had a baby, I wasn't just going to leave the girlfriend with the baby. [Father, 19y]*

For a significant number of the fathers interviewed, alcohol and drugs had played a large role in their lives. Twelve of the fathers explicitly stated that since becoming a father their lifestyle and behaviour have changed dramatically. Several of the fathers revealed that they no longer spent much time drinking with their friends:

*She [the baby] calmed me down a bit. I was going out all the time, going on mad ones, I don't anymore. I was going to the pub every weekend with the lads and I was always smoking hash and taking drugs; I don't anymore. [Father, 22y]*

This view was echoed by many fathers, and some also acknowledged that their friends understood the situation:

*When you have a young child the best thing for me is to be at home and all that, but they know I won't be around as much as I have more responsibilities and this, that, and the other. [Father, 22y]*

Indeed, this shift in lifestyle that occurred as a result of fatherhood was common within the peer group:

*All the lads I know that became dads at younger ages have grown up to be more responsible, gotten out of the drinking and the drugs, that kind of stuff. [Father, 18y]*

However, not all the fathers had left this behaviour behind and many remarked that they still took drugs. One father revealed that he took a large amount of drugs and consumed a significant amount of alcohol during the pregnancy, but that his behaviour had altered since the baby was born. Only one father whose girlfriend was expecting his second child stated that drink - and drug-related aspects of his behaviour had not changed:

*"Yeah, because...I've changed a bit since I became a father, like. I have started putting away money and all, in savings and all. But as regards to the drinking and hanging out with my mates, like, that hasn't changed and that won't change for a long time 'cause I'm still young and I'm still going to enjoy myself 'cause it may sound bad to some people but, like, I'm not with her anymore and that means I barely ever get to see the baby so I still have my life, you know kind of, but then my responsibilities are back on the weekend. Only one day of the weekend, like, for now, but hopefully in the future it'll be more, like.... So that's why I don't need to change right now 'cause I actually still have the time on my hands. [Father, 20y]*

Other changes, reflective of greater levels of maturity and responsibility, included saving money, not getting into fights and taking care of their mental health problems.

In conclusion, meeting the challenges of fatherhood represented a significant turning point in the young men's lives. Men's identities as fathers evolved through significant changes that happened in their lives following the birth of their child, including changes in how often and with whom they socialised, turning away from drugs and alcohol, and changes in how they were perceived by others. For many of the men, being a father came to represent a significant emblem of manhood. Of particular significance was the fulfilment of the obligations of fatherhood, rather than just fathering a child. Overall, it seemed that fulfilling one's fathering role brought with it an enhanced sense of maturity and responsibility.

#### **4.6 Young fathers as vulnerable men**

In this final section of the chapter, we consider a number of other issues that emerged in both the focus group discussions and in the interviews with the young fathers, which are together subsumed under the common theme of 'young fathers as vulnerable men'. A small number of the fathers directly experienced marginalisation in their role as fathers. Many other fathers who had no direct experience of these issues were nevertheless vocal about them, commonly relaying stories of friends whom they considered vulnerable fathers.

##### **4.6.1 Fathers' rights**

Central to this theme of vulnerability were discussions concerning fathers' access to their children, fathers' rights, and a vulnerability to mental health problems. As noted previously in the report, the majority of fathers in the study had regular contact with their children. Only three of the 20 fathers did not see their child regularly: one father has never seen his child, one father had not seen his child in about a year, while one father had only recently secured a weekly access visit with his child. Two of these fathers were currently involved in the legal system trying to secure more satisfactory contact arrangements. The emotional burden of this on the young men was plainly evident:

*To be honest, I feel shite every day. I am a father, like, say [friend], he gets to see his kids every Sunday and then me other friend gets to see his kid every weekend. When they go and see their kids I do feel like shite. Even last week was Father's Day and they went to see their kids, I was just snapping all day at everyone...It makes me feel like shite every day: I want to see me daughter but I can't. [Father, 19y]*

Many other fathers were aware of other fathers who had similar experiences to this young man. One man described his friend's situation:

*It's the worst ever in his life, he is up in the bird's house. Every one of the family members are in the sitting room watching what he is doing. And he feels really uncomfortable because they are telling him, 'Don't hold the baby this way, hold him like this.'* [Father, 18y]

Discussion of situations such as these highlighted the issue of fathers' rights in Ireland. For example, when discussing the issue of birth registration, many of the fathers felt angry that the unmarried father's name did not automatically go on the birth certificate, describing the situation as "completely wrong" [Father, 24y; Father, 21y], "disgraceful" [Father, 25y] and "a silly law" [Non-father, 18y]. Some men were keenly aware that their rights as unmarried fathers were impoverished, when compared with married fathers:

*The whole issue of rights. Like, there's not many rights for unmarried couples, for unmarried fathers anyway. Like, when you're married it seems then that you have half the rights to the baby but just because you're not married, just because the piece of paper doesn't say you're married, you've no rights to your own child. That's bollocks, like, utter bollocks.* [Father, 20y]

One father was aware of ongoing campaigns to improve the rights of fathers.

*Stuff like the birth cert, more rights for dads, cos they don't have nearly any rights. I was down on O'Connell Street and it was saying, 'When is a father not a father? - When he is Irish', 'A father is for life, not just for Saturdays', stuff like that, trying to get rights for fathers.* [Father, 18y]

However, not all fathers in the study were concerned with the issue of fathers' rights, and some unmarried fathers did not appear to be aware of their rights in relation to their children. Furthermore, it did emerge that a number of the men were misinformed when it came to these issues. For example, there was a misconception that having a father's name on the birth certificate may interfere with the social welfare entitlements of the mother:

*My name wasn't on the birth certificate at the start, cos we weren't sure if she would get her benefits, like would they start taking money off me and the shitty wages I'm on.* [Father, 19y]

Other fathers were of the view that the rights of the father were dependent upon the nature of his relationship with his child. One father, who was step-father to his partner's child, felt that fathers needed to earn their right to be named on the child's birth certificate:

*I think it depends on the situation at the time. With what happened with her [partner] with [step-son], she hasn't got him [biological father] on the birth cert. With myself being there for her I think I deserve to have it on it, but if I was anyway of a cunt I think it is right not to have the kid associated with the person.* [Father, 23y]

One father also felt that some men who were unwilling to take on the responsibility of fatherhood would not be bothered by their lack of rights.

*It depends, like: you can find some fathers who wouldn't want to take responsibility for their kids and for them it's a good thing. [Father, 19y]*

Reflecting several of these issues that arose within the individual interviews, both men and women in three of the seven focus groups expressed concern about the situation of young fathers, many of whom were struggling in their role as fathers. There was a sense from these discussions that young fathers' rights were not well protected in the law.

*Again, from people I know, like. That guy, when he had the kid they were still together and then they split up... He supports and pays for everything, and he gives her money on top of that, like. She turned around wanting to get back or whatever and he says, "No I can't do this," and she, to hurt him, took the kid away from him and all, said he wouldn't be able to see him. It all ended up messy, having to go to court. He did get rights of the kid at the end of the day, but I don't think that's right how women can use the kid to get at him. I think the fella should have as much right to see the kid as the girl does. [Respondent from men's focus group]*

This also emerged in discussions around placing the father's name on the birth certificate:

*Because if the father is not on the birth cert he hasn't got a right to a lot of things if the kids gets sick...like, if the kid goes into hospital and the mother says that he has to have an operation and you don't think it is right you don't have a fucking choice in the matter. [Respondent from men's focus group]*

Within the women's focus groups, unmarried fathers' rights to have their name on the birth certificate were also discussed. Generally, women were of the opinion that men have some rights in this regard:

*I think the man's name, whatever, it is the father of the child, should be on the birth cert, for the child's sake. [Respondent from women's focus group]*

However, the nature of fathers' rights was considered to be dependent upon the nature of their commitment to their fathering role, and the nature of the relationship between the man and the woman at the time of the conception:

*Well if he wants to be there and you are in a relationship, but it's different when you have sex and you're pregnant with someone that you're not with, then it's your say. [Respondent from women's focus group]*

As was the case with some of the interview data, misconceptions about the relation between being named on the birth certificate and social welfare entitlements were evident among the focus group respondents:

*Most women you get, especially down this area, they don't want your name on the birth cert, because if you do they can't get the single mother's bleedin' pension book. [Respondent from men's focus group]*

It is clear that the issue of fathers' rights is a very real one for many fathers in Ireland, and for a small proportion of the men in our study. While the majority of men were not in a position where they had to fight for their rights to see their children, they were aware of the wider context, where many men found themselves in this situation. How young fathers were generally positioned within society had important implications for fathers' emotional well-being and mental health. Indeed, the theme of men's mental health came up in a number of the interviews, and a key message to emerge was that many men experience mental health concerns, relating to pressures of fatherhood and other sexual and relationship experiences.

#### 4.6.2 Concerns about mental health

Throughout the interviews, several of the men volunteered views regarding the mental health problems and emotional vulnerability of men in their social circle, and a small number referred to their own experiences. Many of the young fathers felt that there was a pressure on them to conform to the traditional model of the male-as-breadwinner. This pressure came from a range of sources such as their own family, their partner's family, or sometimes simply from themselves. For two fathers, not being able to live up to this masculine ideal caused them to feel depressed:

*It's a big factor, especially if you are not working: you feel a bit, it makes me feel a bit, a bit down. It makes you feel, more, less of a man. Not having the money to be able to go and say here is this and here is that. But that's a big factor for me anyway... I see myself as not being the man. I should be the man, to look after me family, you know what I mean. I haven't got a job now, cos work is a bit slack at the moment. [Father, 20y]*

He also spoke about the distress that resulted from his partner having a miscarriage and how he was reluctant to reveal his emotions in front of her. He admitted that the only time he could express himself was when he got drunk. Another father spoke about the emotional stress that arose when his partner took an overdose and induced a miscarriage following an argument. He said that he "went off the head for a few weeks" [Father, 20y]. Another talked about the stress that resulted from an abortion as a "mental thing for me, but it was physical for her." [Father, 23y] Issues surrounding mental health were also brought to the fore by a young father who admitted trying to commit suicide and committing acts of self-harm. The necessity of services that deal with mental health issues for young men was highlighted by another father:

*I think there's a great concern about young male's mental health. You know, where they are in society. Where they think they are. I think there's so many males out there that need help and they need help quick, but they are not willing to get it ... I know there's a great ad for the HSE and all, saying 'look after your mental health', and all, but I think young men should be targeted because there's a lot of fucked up youngsters around there. I've got a load of friends who are locked up, and all. I've got a friend who committed suicide, another friend who died, another friend who got shot. Like, this area is crazy. But a lot of things like that, if you've grievances like that, losing friends and all, it ruins other mates. [Father, 25y]*

In terms of addressing mental health concerns and other issues relating to men's marginalisation within society (such as fathers' rights), the topic of services and supports



for young men was discussed. Overall, it was clear that service usage among the fathers was low. Only a limited number of fathers had used the services available to them. The majority relied on family members rather than services for support and advice. One father mentioned that he had texted 'Positive Options' for information when he found out he was going to be a father. One other father felt that the Citizen's Information Centre was helpful during his attempts to gain access to his child:

*The Citizen's Advice Centre have very good knowledge on stuff like this. There is stuff out there, you can find information, get help and get pointed in the right direction, and all. The Citizen's Advice Centre set me up with a meeting with a solicitor, and all, and now I have a good solicitor coming to court with me now the next time. There's enough out there for you to help yourself. It's just a matter of helping yourself, you know what I mean? [Father, 20y]*

Many of the fathers attended the births of their children or were present in the hospital at the time. The majority did not complain about the way they were treated by hospital staff, but one felt that staff members were rude to him:

*Well I asked one of the nurses for a bit of help and she made a face and 'tutted' at me, and all that, but it's her job.... They were very cheeky and a couple of them made faces and one of them ignored me when I was talking to her as well; they wouldn't let me up to her either at the reception, they wouldn't give me my card to go up, they were saying there is no card for you, but there was a card. They were just taking the piss out of me at the hospital, so I was very frustrated in there, yeah. [Father, 19y]*

This young man described how young fathers need services to enable them to enjoy more regular contact with their children:

*There should be more support for the father, they should get to see their children more often, like, there is fathers out there that get to see their children once a week for an hour or so and it's not fair, you know, it's not fair. There should be something done so that they could see their children more often anyway. [Father, 23y]*

From the focus group discussions a perception emerged that support for young men as fathers was either non-existent or difficult to access, relative to the support available for young women:

*There's no help for single fathers or nothing. [Respondent from women's focus group]*

*R1: But my mate, he had to go through a lot, solicitors and that. Dragging him up to the court. There was no-one he could actually ring to get advice. Girls can ring thousands of lines.*

*R2: It is more easy for a woman to get support than it is for a man. [Men's focus group]*

Given that service usage among fathers in the study was relatively low, these perceived barriers to accessing appropriate services and lack of knowledge about available services is a noteworthy finding.

#### 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has documented the pathways into fatherhood for the young men in the study and explored how they negotiated the transition to fatherhood. In the majority of cases, men unexpectedly found themselves as prospective fathers, although in almost all cases, this was within the context of a romantic relationship with their sexual partner. For the majority of men, the news of their partner's pregnancy was met with apprehension and concern about how family members would react, how their life would inevitably change, and whether they were ready to fulfil the obligations of fatherhood. In a small number of cases, men had discussed prospective parenthood with their partner and the pregnancy was planned. Notwithstanding this, however, many of these men still felt anxious about impending fatherhood. Central to some men's concerns about prospective fatherhood was their perception of themselves as immature, irresponsible and not equipped to provide financially and emotionally for their partner and child.

Men's preparation for fatherhood began in the early stages of the pregnancy and involved attendance at hospital visits, and eventually, for the majority, presence at the birth of their child. For the most part, men's stories reflected changing emotions following the birth of their child, as fear and denial were gradually replaced by a plethora of emotions ranging from acceptance, contentment, an overwhelming euphoria, and for some, a new sense of purpose to their lives. These findings draw attention to how unplanned pregnancies that may be initially considered a crisis point in the lives of the young men eventually come to represent important turning points that pave the way for new roles and identities as fathers. Similar findings were reported by Mahon, Conlon and Dillon's (1998) study of women's experiences of an unplanned pregnancy. These authors reported that women who decided to keep their babies following an unplanned pregnancy underwent a process of adjustment over the course of the pregnancy, during which the crisis pregnancy had evolved into a wanted baby.

A high proportion of the fathers in the present study had regular (almost daily) contact with their young children and were heavily involved in the day-to-day care of their child. This picture of involved fathers is somewhat discrepant from the stereotypical expectations of low-income fathers as 'deadbeat dads' who are typically absent from their children's lives (Coley, 2001). Rather, patterns of involvement among the group of men in this study are consistent with what is emerging from more recent qualitative studies on low-income fathers' involvement in their children's lives (Summers et al., 2006; Jarrett, Roy & Burton, 2002). However, because we interviewed a purposive sample of socially and economically disadvantaged young men, we can do no more than speculate about the extent to which low-income fathers in Ireland generally do engage with their fathering role and have frequent contact with their children. Men who are more involved as fathers may be more likely to come forward and participate in a study on fatherhood, and this is an important caveat in any interpretation of our findings.

Important findings to emerge from this chapter are concerned with how fathers construct the ideal fathering role and the extent to which they attempt to live up to this ideal. Of key significance to the men's images of a good father were experiences with their own fathers. Typically men attempted to improve upon what they experienced with their own fathers, even when they considered that their own father had been a good role model for them.

Analysis of which parenting roles are central to fathering indicated that the traditional provider role remained at the forefront of many fathers' role expectations. For the fathers in the study who were either unemployed, reliant upon social welfare payments, or who had limited educational experience, some attempted to compensate for their limited ability to financially support their children by drawing upon broader conceptualisations of the father role, which included being an emotional support to the child and his/her mother, being a playmate, and being involved in daily caregiving activities. Possibly because of the young age of the children, fathering roles such as disciplinarian and moral guide were emphasised as important by fewer of the fathers. For some fathers, however, the provider role was a prominent dimension of fathering. That they had constrained financial resources represented a source of anxiety for the men, and led to feelings of inadequacy as fathers. Furthermore, in the small number of cases where men had restricted or no access to their children and were denied the right to exercise their fathering role, the sense of loss and despair for these men was apparent. The fathers in the study were intensely aware of the vulnerability that exists among groups of young fathers in Ireland and the marginalisation that men experience at the hands of a legal system that they perceive to be unfair.

Overall, there was little doubt that these men exhibited a strong commitment to their role as fathers and a belief that fathers mattered in the lives of their children. Fatherhood represented a clear turning point in the lives of these young men, and brought about changes in their social lives, how they were received by others in their family and social circle, and how they felt about themselves as men. Being a responsible father living up to his familial obligations was a sign of being a 'real man'. For many of the men, however, fatherhood did not bring about changed perspectives on sexual responsibility, and a number of the men continued to engage in unsafe sexual practices.

## 5.0 Discussion of findings on sexual responsibility and fatherhood

This overview summarises the main findings arising from this part of the study. We discuss key themes that have emerged from the analysis in the following areas: young men and sexual responsibility, turning points in men's sexual responsibility and young men as fathers.

### 5.1 Young men and sexual responsibility

The study reveals that all of the men interviewed were sexually active, with many having had sex at an early age. The median age of first sex was 14 years, substantially lower than the median age of first sex reported in ISSHR by Layte et al. (2006). Thus, early (and unprotected) first sex was a characteristic of the majority of the group of young men in the study. There was considerable confusion over the legal age of consent, with many men believing it to be 16, or thinking that the age of consent differed for men and women. (The age of consent is 17 for men and women.) Given the lack of clarity around the legal age of consent and that the majority of men had sex prior to this age, it was clear that it did not feature in the young men's decision to have first sex and did not act as a deterrent to first sex. Our findings suggest that by the early teen years, a substantial proportion of young people will already have had their first sexual experience. Many of the men indicated that at first intercourse, they were not clearly aware of what they were doing or the risks they were taking. There is a clear need to begin sexual education at an earlier age than is currently the practice. Obviously, the manner in which primary school children are educated about sex will need to be developmentally appropriate and will be different from sexual education during the teenage years. While the delivery of sex education may generate some concern that young people will be encouraged to have sex earlier, our data indicate that young people are curious about sex regardless and are already having sex at a young age.

The majority of the men had sexual intercourse during the month immediately preceding the interview. It emerged that men in the group used condoms inconsistently and less than one-third used them as part of their regular sexual practice. Over half of the men did not use condoms during their most recent sexual intercourse. Such findings are in keeping with those of other research in the field, with Layte et al. (2006) noting that there is a lower likelihood of using condoms for those who have a low educational attainment or who are in the manual social classes. However, it is also evident that some men used a variety of methods of contraception and protection throughout their sexual histories, and several stated that they used condoms on a regular basis. While a number indicated that they primarily used condoms as contraception, others said that they used them to prevent the contraction of STIs.

It emerged that female sexual partners had an important role to play in condom use during sexual intercourse. Some of the men mentioned that their partners bought the condoms and others recalled being asked to use one during casual sex. It was also evident that for some men condoms were used as a means of encouraging their partner to have sex with them. Where men feared that women would not have sex with them unless they wore a condom, their motivation for condom use was heightened. These findings suggest

that specifically targeting women to carry condoms and insist upon men's use of condoms may be a viable way of increasing condom use.

A number of barriers to condom use were identified in the study. Many of the men who were simply concerned with avoiding pregnancy were satisfied that their sexual partner was using a form of female contraception, and thus did not believe that condoms were necessary. A significant number of the group claimed that the consumption of alcohol prior to having sex resulted in their failure to use a condom during intercourse. Rundle, Leigh, McGee and Layte (2004) and findings from the ISSHR study (Layte et al., 2006) also revealed that alcohol was a contributory factor in the non-use of condoms during sex. Having consumed too much alcohol not only increased the likelihood that men would have sex, but also increased the likelihood that condoms would not be used. Our findings indicated that young men felt that alcohol or drug use detracted from personal responsibility for safe sexual practices and oftentimes men invoked excessive alcohol consumption as a justification for their non-use of condoms.

Several other significant barriers emerged in relation to the use of condoms. Some of the young men, despite being educated about sexual health risks and having condoms on their person, still failed to use condoms during intercourse. Many claimed that they were simply caught up in 'the heat of the moment' and were reluctant to interrupt their sexual activity and use a condom. Corresponding to the findings of Sixsmith et al. (2006), other factors that acted as barriers to condom use included the price of condoms and embarrassment when purchasing them. Placement of condoms behind the counter of many shops and pharmacies seemed to prevent some young people from buying them. While selling condoms through vending machines was welcomed by participants, the location of these machines in pubs means that many young people in their early teens who are not permitted into pubs will not be able to access them in these locations and will be required to go into the pharmacy or shop in order to purchase them.

Sixteen men stated they had been tested for STIs at some point in their life. This represents a higher proportion of men than reported in the ISSHR study (Layte et al., 2006). One potential explanation for this is that given the early sexual debut and inconsistent use of condoms among the sample of men, they may, as a group, exhibit a heightened risk of contracting STIs when compared with the general population. Indeed, six of these men had actually contracted an STI and the onset of symptoms prompted these men to attend a sexual health clinic. A small minority of men attended on a regular basis as part of their sexual health practice. The frequency of their visits ranged from attending once every three months to attending once a year. It is clear that such a routine is not part of the lives of the majority of the young men. Twenty-five of the men had never been tested for STIs. Many of the group did not attend clinics because they did not experience any symptoms.

Paralleling other studies (Jones & Haynes 2006), a small minority of the men interviewed did not believe that they could contract an STI. Several of the men were unconcerned about matters relating to STIs, particularly those who were in long-term relationships. Others based their decision not to use condoms on an assumed knowledge of their partner's sexual history, and thus believed that they could not contract an STI from them

(Skidmore & Hayter, 2000). Similar findings emerged from Hyde and Howlett's study of teenage sexuality in Ireland. These authors reported that young men judge a woman's sexual risk in terms of local knowledge about her sexual history (Hyde et al., 2008). These findings are also consistent with those reported by Marston and King (2006, p. 1582) who note that "studies repeatedly showed that young people assess the disease risk of a potential partner by how well they know their partner". Similarly, the young men in this study based their decision about using condoms upon unreliable social cues and local knowledge of the woman they were with.

The interviews also revealed that for a majority of the men there are many barriers to communicating about sexual and personal issues. This problem can be understood in terms of constructions of masculinities and perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour of men (Connell, 2005), with many young men feeling that discussing intimate or personal issues was unacceptable. This issue permeates a range of areas in young men's lives; for example, their use of support services, their communication with family and friends, their discussions with partners, and the form of sex education that they receive. The benefits of encouraging men to communicate about such issues are noted by Stone and Ingham (2002), who found that the ability of young people to have a discussion about contraception was very important to their subsequent use of contraception and protection. Young people sometimes avoid discussing sex with their sexual partners and as a result this can impede safe sex practices (Marston & King, 2006).

It also emerged from the interviews that only a limited number of men had used the services available to them and that several men were unaware of support services that they could access. Often young men are not clear about the role and function of existing services and do not realise that services support both young men and young women. Unless services clearly identify men as one of their target client group, it is likely that this situation will continue. While only a small number of men in the study had been treated for an STI, the majority of the men in the study had never visited a sexual health clinic, despite significant levels of risky sexual activity. Some men revealed that they would not know where to go to receive such a service. This suggests that there is a lack of clear information about the whereabouts of sexual health clinics and the cost and range of services they offer. Some men noted the gaps in their own knowledge and recognised the need for more services where they could obtain information regarding sexual responsibility.

Findings from the study highlighted considerable confusion and persistence of myths surrounding a number of issues. Some men assumed that withdrawal was a safe method of contraception and were unaware of the risks associated with pre-ejaculation. Some men also assumed that sexually transmitted infections were visible, so that you "would know by looking at someone" whether or not they had an STI. Some men also assumed that because they were asymptomatic they could not have an STI. Some men relied upon "local knowledge" of their partner's reputation and sexual history in order to ascertain whether or not they needed to use protection during sex. Our findings also indicate that men were not always clear about the distinction between contraception and protection. While all men understood the word 'condoms', their understanding of the word 'contraception' was less clear. Men rarely cited prevention of pregnancy as well

as protection against STI as reasons for using condoms. The high levels of risky sexual activity prevalent among our sample of young men suggest that the message about safe sex is not getting through, at least to some groups of young people. The specific language used in safe-sex advertisements or in education programmes is central to ensuring that young people are not left confused.

It is obvious that the various forms of sex education that the men received were often inadequate to meet their information needs, and a desire to see change in the methods of educating men about sexual health and practice was expressed. Sex education needs to be grounded in the reality of the young people's lives and delivered by individuals with whom young people can identify. Young men in the study recommended that sexual education for boys be delivered by young men who have had experiences of STIs and a range of procreative experiences. Furthermore, young men in the study identified a need for specific information, delivered in clear, straightforward language, on the technical aspects of sexual activity; for example, putting on a condom.

Contradictory messages about the optimal site for sex education emerged from the study. By focusing on the school environment as the site for sexual education, it was clear that early school-leavers will miss out on these learning opportunities. On the other hand, relying on mothers and fathers to provide sexual education may not be optimal. Parents will need support and skills to enable them to discuss sex and relationships with their children and to encourage open communication with their children about sex and related issues. Notwithstanding this, in some homes, parents will be physically and emotionally unavailable to provide sex education to their children, due to imprisonment, drug and alcohol addiction, mental health problems, or other difficulties. Additionally, many young people may feel embarrassed about receiving sex education in the home. Community-based youth services who work with early school-leavers or those at risk of social and economic disadvantage may be well-placed to deliver sex education programmes. Ideally, sex education should not be the responsibility of one group - rather, a comprehensive approach to sex education needs to be developed, which incorporates various key agents in young people's lives, including parents, schools, and youth workers based in local communities.

Many of the men also wanted to see changes in the current sexual health advertising system and called for advertisements that were explicit in their meaning and that delivered a message about sexual risk and responsibility in a clear and effective manner. One clear message to emerge from the study was that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach may not be appropriate. Messages about safe sexual activity need to be nested within the popular culture that young people engage with, and consultation with young people about the design and delivery of safe-sex messages and advertising campaigns is important. Young men suggested that a variety of outlets for advertising and communication of safe-sex messages could be considered, including mobile phones and social networking sites, such as Bebo and Facebook. Findings from the study indicated that when safe sex messages are subtle or embedded within a complicated plot of an advert, the intended message often gets lost. Many of the participants referred to the explicit nature of advertisements used to promote safer driving behaviour among young people. Some suggestions from the young men on improving advertisements included showing explicit

'gory' symptoms associated with sexually transmitted infections, or showing screaming babies. However, advertisers also need to balance explicitness with a potential stigma that may be attached to having sex, having an STI or being a young parent.

In conclusion, key messages arising from the study highlight that many of these young men from low SES backgrounds engaged in behaviours associated with high-risk sexual activity: many of the men had a young sexual debut and were inconsistent in their use of condoms, two factors that have been identified as key indicators of risk. Given that these were a group of men from low SES backgrounds, these findings converge with the well-established association between sexual risk-taking and low SES. Furthermore, these qualitative findings offer some insight into the hypothesised mechanisms underpinning this association. For example, it is evident from the interviews that many of the young men are not aware of the risks that they are taking during their sexual activity and that a large number are ill-informed regarding issues of contraception and protection. Thus, lack of information and education may explain somewhat the association between socio-economic disadvantage and sexual risk-taking.

However, caution must be exercised in how we interpret this association, because despite the prevalence of myths and the lack of knowledge of some of the men, it was clear that lack of knowledge was not the only barrier to safe sexual practices for these young men. Many of the participants were well-informed in relation to these issues, yet still displayed a lack of responsibility during their sexual activity. This was particularly evident in their inconsistent use of condoms, a practice which many saw as a standard form of behaviour, or a cultural norm - something that 'just happens'. This exposes a failure to engage and reflect upon their individual sexual practice and represents a deflection of responsibility on their part. Perceptions about what is 'normal' within their social context are highly significant. The key message to emerge is that while education and information are important, they should not be the only target for intervention.

## **5.2 Turning points in men's sexual responsibility**

In the study, we drew upon the concept of turning points to refer to critical experiences that played a role in men's lives with respect to having sex, procreating or developing a fathering identity (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002). We dealt with men's experiences of pregnancy scares, miscarriages, abortions, pregnancies, births, and becoming a father. Of key concern was whether or not these experiences were perceived as turning points, which led to the adoption of safe sexual practices.

A substantial proportion of the sample had experienced pregnancy scares, miscarriages and unplanned pregnancies. Generally, the men did not ascribe much meaning to pregnancy scares and for most of the men pregnancy scares did not have a lasting impact on their contraceptive or sexual practices. A small number of the men did report increased sexual responsibility following a pregnancy scare. In contrast, miscarriages did become significant turning points for a small number of the men. As these men were in the process of preparing for fatherhood, learning that they were not going to become fathers was a source of loss and disappointment. In a number of cases, this loss, shared with their partner, precipitated further attempts to conceive a child. Only two men had experiences of abortions and it was not clear whether or not these represented significant



turning points in the men's lives. Neither was there evidence that being tested or treated for a sexually transmitted infection impacted upon men's sexual responsibility. These findings are partly consistent with those reported by Marsiglio and Hutchinson (2002), who also found that miscarriages, especially in the context of a planned pregnancy and a romantic relationship, were likely to be perceived as turning points. Similarly, these authors reported that pregnancy scares often did not represent turning points in men's procreative consciousness (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002).

Perhaps the most significant turning point occurred when men fathered a child. There was little doubt that these fathers were strongly committed to their fathering role. For many of the men, fatherhood represented a turning point, as it led to changes in how fathers perceived themselves as men. Being a father to their child and fulfilling familial responsibilities afforded men a certain status as a man. These changes may also have been triggered by how the fathers lived up to others' expectations of them as fathers. Fatherhood contributed to men's development as mature, responsible individuals. Many of the men abandoned previous lifestyle patterns characterised by socialising with friends, alcohol and drug use, and violence and anti-social behaviour. For these men, especially in the context of social and economic disadvantage, becoming fathers represented an opportunity to have a better life and become a 'real man'. These findings support those reported in other Irish research. Corcoran (2005) reported that for some of the younger disadvantaged men in her study, becoming a father brought order and stability into lives otherwise characterised by chaos and instability. Ferguson and Hogan (2007) reported that an unplanned pregnancy and prospective fatherhood represented an opportunity for some young men, especially in the context of social exclusion, failure in education and limited employment opportunities. For a minority of the men, however, fatherhood did not bring about more responsible sexual behaviour. A number of the men continued to engage in unsafe sexual practices, as evidenced by the men who had pregnancy scares, and in one case, an abortion, following their transition to fatherhood.

The key findings indicate that experiences such as unplanned pregnancies, pregnancy scares, miscarriages and abortions may represent important learning opportunities by which men can become more sexually responsible. However, the findings suggest that men's procreative consciousness and sense of sexual responsibility are not necessarily activated by their procreative experiences. It appeared that pregnancy scares generally did not represent turning points in men's sexual responsibility, and where change did occur, it was generally short-lived. For some men, miscarriages following an unplanned pregnancy resulted in a desire to conceive another child, as these men were already undergoing preparation for fatherhood. By far the most significant turning point occurred when men became fathers resulting in changes in their self-perception and in how they were perceived by others, although not necessarily changes in their patterns of sexual responsibility. One of the most significant patterns of change to emerge was that men gave up their previous way of life in order to embrace their fathering role. These findings suggest that what may initially be perceived as a crisis in the lives of these young men can represent positive turning points for their lives.

### 5.3 Young men as fathers

Half of the men we interviewed had become fathers, while a further small group of men were first-time prospective fathers at the time of the study. We were concerned with what these young men thought about fatherhood, how they made sense of their new roles as fathers and the factors that influenced their engagement in their fathering role. Findings from our research revealed the process by which men negotiated the transition to fatherhood. Central to this transition was whether the pregnancy was planned or unplanned, the man's readiness to become a father, and the relationship with their partners. The majority of the young men unexpectedly faced the transition to fatherhood, either due to unsafe contraceptive practice or, in a small number of cases, due to contraceptive failure. Most pregnancies occurred within the context of an ongoing relationship. Approximately one-quarter of the pregnancies that resulted in the birth of a child had been planned. One of the most striking findings from the research was the extent of the men's involvement throughout the pregnancy and in the early stages of their child's life. Involvement prior to the child's birth represented an important opportunity for the men to prepare for impending fatherhood, despite not feeling ready to do so. A clear pattern of changing emotional responses emerged: throughout the pregnancy and over the first months of their child's life, men's initial dominant emotional reactions of fear, anxiety, and denial were replaced with feelings of contentment, happiness and in some cases overwhelming joy.

According to Marsiglio and Hutchinson (2002) the gendered physiology of reproduction means that men have fewer opportunities than women to think about impending parenthood during the pre-natal stage. This highlights the importance of maximising men's pre-natal involvement in order to facilitate their readiness for parenthood. While it was the case that the majority of the men in this study – both fathers and non-fathers – indicated that they were not yet ready to become fathers, all of the young fathers whose children were unplanned had nevertheless embraced fatherhood. None of the men in the study expressed regret over their unplanned fatherhood. These findings resonate with those reported by Marsiglio and Hutchinson (2002), who argue that a distinction should be made between being ready for fatherhood and being willing and able to accept the consequences of paternity.

Levels of involvement between fathers in the study and their children were relatively high, with the majority of fathers having almost daily contact with their children, and being heavily involved in the day-to-day care of their child. These levels of involvement need to be interpreted in light of recent Irish research which found that fathers of children younger than five years spent approximately two to three hours per day involved in childcare activities (McGinnity & Russell, 2008). It was clear that fathers in the present study were parenting in circumstances which were conducive to father involvement and co-parenting. Previous research has identified a number of reliable predictors of father involvement in their children's lives. These include close proximity to the child (if the father is non-resident), positive perception of the parenting role, and the quality of the romantic relationship between the father and the child's mother (Flouri, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Amato & Rezac, 1994). Many of the fathers were co-resident with their children and almost all of the fathers in the present study were still romantically involved with their child's mother. Even where fathers were not living with their children, many of them remained living in the

same neighbourhood. There is little doubt that these factors facilitated fathers' high levels of involvement in their children's daily care. Levels of father involvement also need to be interpreted in light of findings from a recent Irish study comparing men's and women's time spent on childcare activities. This study found that men spend far less time caring for their children than women (McGinnity & Russell, 2008). Although we did not compare men's involvement with their children relative to women's involvement, it was clear that no man identified himself as the primary carer of his child, despite the men's involvement in daily caring activities.

Findings emerging from this study are important because this picture of involved fathers diverges somewhat from stereotypical expectations of disadvantaged men who are 'deadbeat dads', typically absent from their children's lives (Coley, 2001). For example, in the only Irish study of its kind, Corcoran (2005) described how the disadvantaged fathers did not make a commitment to their partner, nor did they strive to create a family home. For the fathers in her study, fatherhood was expressed through occasional childcare, buying gifts for the children and providing occasional financial support. In contrast, the findings from the current study reflect high levels of involvement, similar to those reported from recent US-based qualitative studies on low-income fathers' involvement in their children's lives (Summers et al., 2006; Jarrett et al., 2002).

One difficulty in interpreting the findings from the present study is the lack of available comparative Irish data on levels of father-child contact and father involvement in children's lives. Indeed, it is possible that our findings over-estimate young fathers' involvement in their children's lives, given that committed fathers may be more likely than disengaged fathers to participate in a study on fatherhood. On the other hand, in the absence of reliable data based on larger representative samples of fathers, our findings may just reflect high levels of involvement that characterise contemporary Irish fathers. Whatever the case, the picture of involved and committed fathers which has emerged in our study challenges us to question stereotypical assumptions that depict young men as uninvolved, uninterested fathers.

Only two fathers in the study had restricted or no access to their children. Again, this may be a characteristic of the sample, and we make no claims that these experiences are representative of the broader population of fathers in Ireland. The despair and loss experienced by these two men was palpable. In addition to these cases many young men in the study relayed stories of friends whose right to access to their children was constrained. Related to this, many men discussed the vulnerable position of Irish fathers and the lack of protection afforded to young unmarried fathers in the law. The stories told in the interviews were similar to those reported by Corcoran (2005) in her study of non-resident fathers in Ireland. A number of the men in her study similarly described how they struggled through the court system, which they perceived as biased in favour of women, to gain better access rights to their children.

Further exploration of men's engagement as fathers in the present study revealed the intrinsic rewards that men experienced as fathers. Thus, what was initially perceived as a crisis in the lives of some of the young men eventually came to represent one of the most significant events in their lives, and a turning point in how they perceived themselves as

men. Ferguson and Hogan (2007) similarly reported how not all unplanned pregnancies are experienced as a crisis, and some unplanned pregnancies eventually become wanted pregnancies and wanted children. These findings also resonate with those reported by Mahon et al. (1998), who described how mothers' feelings about an unplanned pregnancy changed over the course of the pregnancy, as they prepared for motherhood.

In evaluating their competence and performance as fathers, men in the study drew upon models of good fatherhood and visions of the ideal father. Central to these models were their relationships with their own fathers. Men whose fathers had been highly involved in their upbringing talked about emulating aspects of their fathers' parenting role, while men whose own fathers had been physically or emotionally absent during their childhood endeavoured to be better fathers with their own children. These findings, similar to those reported by other researchers, indicate that fathers play an active role in constructing their unique vision of themselves as fathers and do not simply replicate their own childhood experiences (Parke, 2002).

Another important aspect of the men establishing their father identity was their reliance upon cultural models of fatherhood. It was clear that some men drew upon traditional models of father as breadwinner, while other men drew upon more contemporary models of fatherhood that emphasise involvement as well as financial investment (McKeown et al., 1998). For those men for whom the traditional breadwinning role was a central feature of their fathering role, their reliance upon social welfare payments, their unemployed status, and their lack of education generated anxiety about their ability to adequately fulfil this dimension of their parenting role. In these cases, the prominence of the breadwinning role in the context of a relatively low socio-economic status for these men represented a risk factor to the father's feelings of competence as a parent. These men described 'feeling less of a man' because of their perceived failure to adhere to this cultural expectation of fathers as providers. On the other hand, other men drew upon broader constructions of the fathering role to compensate for their limited ability to provide financially for their children. They realised the value that they could offer to their children's lives by being physically present and being involved in daily caregiving, and assimilated these roles into their construction of 'a good father'. Again, these ideas of fatherhood can be read in terms of cultural constructions of masculinities and expectations of male behaviour. These men equated 'being a man' with facing up to their familial responsibilities, and taking care of their children and partners. These findings indicate the importance of questioning cultural constructions of parenting roles, and their role in inhibiting or facilitating men's engagement with fatherhood.

Recommendations arising from these findings are considered in the concluding chapter of the report.

## **PART II - REPRESENTATIONS OF SEXUAL RESPONSIBILITY, FATHERHOOD AND MASCULINITY IN THE MEDIA**

### **1.0 Sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity in the media: a review of the literature**

Part II of the report deals with the identification and examination of popular media and, specifically, dominant representations of masculinity, sexual responsibility and fatherhood therein. This aspect of the study is based on the premise that media such as film and television can influence our understanding of cultural norms and expectations of behaviour in society. These include expectations of masculinity, fatherhood and sexual responsibility. Therefore, if young men are behaving in ways that they feel are encouraged or endorsed by their cultural surroundings, then it is important to investigate the possible role and function that these aspects of culture can play in their lives.

This chapter presents a review of literature that specifically engages with media and cultural analysis. However, the analysis is also framed by a broader literature review that engages with aspects of sexual responsibility and young men as fathers in society. Therefore, the review of literature detailed in Part I (Chapter 1.0) is also integral to the following discussion of the media watched and read by young men.

#### **1.1 The role of the media**

Much has been written on the possible role, function and influence of media in the production of cultural meaning in society (Macnamara 2006, Newbold et al. 2002, Abercrombie, 1996; Ang, 1996; Craig, 1992b; Fiske, 1987). The core argument revolves around the idea that film and television do not merely represent reality but also play a huge role in constructing or producing our sense of reality (Newbold et al., 2002). In representing reality, media texts use a series of signs and symbols to convey meaning, presenting the viewer with recognisable norms and identities that preserve and create a series of cultural meanings. Very often these representations meet the spectators' expectations of reality and contribute to how they see themselves, how they view others and how they understand the world (Newbold et al., 2002). It is generally agreed that media texts do influence people, but it is an extremely complex and varied process (Macnamara, 2006). Macnamara traces the development of media research, from early theories that assumed a message was directly transmitted by a producer to a passive viewer, to the refuting of such claims and presenting arguments for the limited effects of media (Macnamara, 2006; Adorno, 1991; Fiske, 1987). While some theorists claim that meaning is simply embedded in the texts, others argue that the audience is the primary producer of meaning - that spectators are not passive observers but are active participants. Drawing upon cultural theory, Macnamara argues that the interpretation of a text occurs through a complex system of coding by the producer and decoding by the spectator. The encoding refers to the subtleties of the content of the text such as narrative structure, characterisation, and the various sign systems or semiotics of the text. The decoding can be understood as the context and position of the spectator and the factors that may play a role in influencing his/her interpretation of a text (Hall, 1973). The viewer's belief systems, values, ideas of common sense, expectations, and life experience all play

a role in how meaning is constructed from a text. The audience can both accept and resist certain readings, and not all texts are read in the same way (Fiske, 1987). Therefore, watching a media text is a complex process.

In the construction of reality on screen, signs and symbols are used to present recognisable aspects such as places, people and cultural identities (Fiske, 1987). This also includes establishing what are perceived as societal or cultural norms. Ideas of gender, fatherhood, and sexual activity are also part of this construction of reality. It is argued by many that the more a viewer watches television, for example, the more he or she will base his/her ideas of reality on what is represented to them rather than on what he/she experiences in the world (Newbold et al., 2002). However, these representations are selective and limited with regard to what aspects of reality they include and exclude. As a result, representations are mediated, and it can be understood that texts do not reproduce reality, but a dominant sense of reality. Thus, media texts simply provide the viewer with a version of reality. Realism in film and television is made up of a series of discourses by which and for which a sense of the real is constructed (Fiske, 1987). This in turn plays a role in constructing our own sense of reality. The interpretation of representations of reality in the media thus contribute to our understanding of what is 'real', ideas of 'common sense' and what are perceived as cultural 'norms' (Mackinnon, 2003). As a result, certain ideologies are produced and reproduced in media texts. In turn, this mediated reality can then inform the viewers' concept of their own reality.

While there is a general consensus that media representations do influence people's views of reality, it is likely that the nature of this relationship is complex and mediated by various factors such as social class. To date, little research has been conducted exploring class differences in Irish young men's use of the media. Given a typically lower level of literacy in lower SES males (Shiel, Cosgrove, Sofroniou & Kelly, 2001), books and broadsheet newspapers may not be widely accessed. De Roiste and Dineen (2005) reported that in their sample of Irish teenagers, males from lower SES backgrounds spent far less time reading than did females and teenagers from higher SES backgrounds. When teenage boys do read newspapers their main focus is on the sports pages. Media literacy is not universally or extensively taught in Irish schools and it is likely that the capacity of many teenage males and young men to interrogate and critique the media is limited. MacKeogh (2004) reported that the 16- to 19-year-old Irish respondents in her study were knowledgeable about the media but not good at interrogating them.

### *1.1.1 Constructions of masculinity and the media*

Debates regarding men and masculinity have received increased attention in recent decades. Feminist theorists led the way in deconstructing concepts of sex and gender, while cultural critics also discussed the importance of film and television studies in analysing various power relations that exist in society. Within such debates, concepts of masculinity have also proved to be extremely complex. There is a recognition that there are multiple and contradictory masculinities, although hegemonic masculinity is often presented as the norm. Hegemonic masculinity is the masculinity that generally lies at the top of a gender hierarchy among men. It is widely acknowledged that individual constructions of masculinity can be influenced by a range of factors, depending on cultural background and life experiences. In relation to this study, socio-economic status can

also be related to a person's construction of masculinity. Masculinity can have an impact upon sexual responsible practices, while fathering roles and behaviours can be shaped by adhering to particular masculine ideals. In terms of media studies, many critics claim that dominant ideologies of masculinity are perpetuated in film and television and that there is often a failure to recognise the diversity of cultural norms (Newbold et al., 2002). Various cultural texts such as film and television influence perceptions of masculinities and femininities. Therefore, it is possible to argue that these cultural texts have played a role in constructing the gender perceptions of young men. Mackinnon (2003) notes:

*The way we think about gender, and about so many other features of our lives, is both reflected in and produced by the images that surround us in our culture. Popular conceptions are vitally concerned with popular culture.* (Mackinnon, 2003: p. 23)

Despite this general agreement that media does play a role in how we construct ideas about ourselves and the world we live in there is no consensus on how powerful audiences are at resisting or rejecting ideas about gender, fatherhood and sexual responsibility (Ging, 2005; Mackinnon, 2004; Craig, 1992b; Connell, 2005; Macnamara, 2006; Gauntlett, 2002; Butler, 1990). Of course, media texts are just one source of images of gender in society and therefore one aspect of what we use to construct ideas of gender (Nixon, 1996). Central to construction of ideas of gender is the use of stereotyping (Newbold et al., 2002; Neale & Krutnik, 1990). However, stereotyping can also lead to an oversimplification, where people are not seen as individuals and there is an assumption that certain characteristics belong to a whole group. Through repetition, 'types' can be immediately established and many argue that through this repetition negative images of certain groups can be reinforced, leading to prejudice and discrimination (Newbold et al., 2002). The danger arises when the perceived image of the spectator matches the mediated 'reality' that is presented. However, it can also be argued that stereotypes are not necessarily always false or bad and that it largely depends on the manner in which they are used in specific texts. In terms of gender and masculinities Femiano & Nickerson argue:

*Stereotypes are powerful because they affect our expectations of what men should and should not be like. They are damaging because they narrow our notions of what men can be and do. They affect women's expectations of men in relationships and men's expectations of other men in work settings or in friendships. Media stereotypes have extra impact because they create images based on these assumptions, helping to shape men's own views about how they should act and how successful they are as men.* (Femiano & Nickerson, 2002)

As will be discussed, a similar case can also be made in terms of the representations of fathers, as stereotypes of fathers also construct expectations regarding behaviour. Buckingham and Bragg argue that media do not necessarily impose stereotypes but can act as a resource in the "active construction of gendered identities" (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; p. 71). Elements of gender can also be made normative by the media, such as masculine authority and feminine nurturance (Connell, 2005).

### 1.1.2 *Fatherhood and the media*

In his study of men in the media, Macnamara (2006) claims that there are predominantly negative images of men in mass media, including portrayals of fatherhood. He suggests:

*The highly negative representations of men in areas such as fatherhood, domestic violence, and child abuse and the imbalance in discourse are likely to lead to an imbalance in data that inform policy-making. The result of such an imbalance is highly likely to be imbalanced policies. (p. 197)*

For Macnamara, the limited representation of positive fathers in the media has an impact on how fathers are perceived and treated in society. He believes that there is a demonisation of men in the media which is part of a misandric world that devalues men and fathers in society. Burgess (1997) also argues that “real men, as studies of TV images of masculinity repeatedly show, are overwhelmingly found in the world of objects rather than family and relationships” (p. 110), creating the impression that men are not part of the domestic sphere. Also, several critics have discussed the frequent representation of fatherhood as a problem in many Hollywood films and comedies (Matthews, 2000) and the tendency to depict fathers as inept for comic effect. This is evident in popular television programmes such as *The Simpsons* and *Malcolm in the Middle*. Lupton and Barclay (1997) note the class issues involved in such representations and claim that in many comedies fathers from working-class backgrounds have no respect from their wives or their children.

### *1.1.3 Sexual activity, sexual responsibility and the media*

Several researchers have argued that representations of sex are plentiful on television and that talk about sex as well as depictions of sexual behaviour can influence the spectator’s attitude towards sex in variety of ways. As with gender and fatherhood, much of these interpretations depend upon a number of factors such as the viewer’s own cultural experience, life history, perception of cultural norms, and belief systems. It is also claimed that:

*The bulk of sexual actions occur between characters who are not married to each other and include little mention of safe sex, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases .... In addition, depictions of courtship and sexual relationships are often stereotypical, frequently featuring sex-driven males competing with each other for females, who are viewed as sexual objects or conquests. (Ward, 2002: p. 2)*

In an Irish context, Carol MacKeogh notes that television functions as a source of information about sex for young people. Her findings from a content analysis revealed that females were the primary instigators of sexual activities on television and that “while television may be providing ‘scripts’ for females to be self-assertive, this does not appear to be the case for males” (MacKeogh, 2004; p. 13).

After an analysis of nearly 1000 programmes from the 2004-2005 television season in the US, The Kaiser Family Foundation Report *Sex on TV 4* revealed that 70% of texts included at least some reference to sex (Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely & Donnerstein, 2005). Of these, 14% also referred to some aspect of risk or responsibility. Consequently, the authors argue that there is a “lack of frequency and a lack of prominence” of representations of sexual risk and responsibility on television (Kunkel et al, 2005; p. 59). In conclusion, Ging (2005) notes that while many studies of young men in Ireland make reference to the impact of entertainment media “there is a dearth of empirical work



in this area” (p. 29). Similarly, while authors such as Barton (2004), Pettitt (1997) and Murphy (2003) have broached the subject, film and television studies in Ireland have failed to publish any significant and detailed analysis of masculinity in Irish media. The analysis of fatherhood in Irish media tends to focus on the troubled relationship between fathers and sons rather than on any concepts of masculine identity. This absence is also apparent in Hyde and Howlett’s (2004) report *Understanding Teenage Sexuality in Ireland*, which notes the role of the media as an information source for young men, but only in general terms. Although Ging’s work marks significant progress by interviewing young men and identifying popular texts to which they are exposed, the study is only intended as a preliminary mapping of the field. Her research identifies texts from 2003 that were popular amongst young men in Ireland but did not engage with any close textual analysis of particular programmes, films or books or the possible meanings produced from their representations of masculinity.

To date, no study has examined media representations of fatherhood and sexual responsibility and their impact upon young men and young fathers in Ireland. The present study seeks to address this gap by identifying the dominant modes or patterns involved in reading forms of masculinity in the media and exploring how these readings are adopted or rejected in the young men’s own performance of masculinities, specifically in relation to fatherhood and sexual responsibility. In the following chapters, a close content analysis of various media and how they relate to the themes of the study is presented. While the media analysis offers a snapshot of some of the readings that may be gleaned from certain texts, it does not serve as a comprehensive analysis of the extremely multifaceted processes involved in media consumption. Similar to the approach adopted by Ging in her 2005 study of the consumption of media by teenage boys, this media analysis is based in a specific social and cultural context in Ireland in 2007/2008 (Ging, 2005).

The methodological approach adopted for this part of the research is described in the next chapter.

## 2.0 Methodology

The objective of this part of the research was to explore how sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity are represented in the media which young men frequently watch or read, and to examine the perceived influence of these representations on young men's behaviour. The media analysis was directly informed by both the focus group discussions and the individual interviews, described in Part I. This chapter describes the stages involved in the media analysis. The process of identifying and selecting texts for analysis is first described. Following this, the researchers' method of analysing the media texts is detailed. The final stage of the media analysis, involving the exploration of the young men's interpretation of a selection of the media texts, is then presented.

### 2.1 Identification and selection of media texts

#### 2.1.1 Focus groups

Seven focus groups were conducted with 34 young men and women, who were classified as socio-economically disadvantaged. Details of how the sample of young men and women were recruited and the characteristics of the sample have been outlined in Part I (Chapter 2.0) of the report. The aim of the focus groups, which were exploratory in nature, was to gain a general overview of the perspectives of young men and women in relation to sex, fatherhood and masculinity. A second key aim of the focus groups was to identify different forms of media that young men and women most frequently watch and read. A selection of media identified by the focus group participants then became the focus of the close textual analysis.

Identification of texts was conducted on a group level rather than an individual basis, as the purpose was to provide a general overview of viewing habits among the target group. Two approaches were taken: Firstly, the participants were asked open-ended questions to elicit the names of favourite films and books as well as television programmes that they watched on a regular basis. The responses were noted by the facilitator. Secondly, television ratings were presented to the group. Participants were asked whether they regularly watched the ten most popular television programmes on each of the four Irish channels (RTE1, RTE2, TV3 and TG4), as listed in the AC Nielsen ratings data from April to September 2007. This was based on viewers aged 15 to 30 years. The responses were noted by the facilitator. The use of television ratings is in line with previous research, such as that of MacKeogh (2004), which also used data from television ratings when identifying texts watched by particular age-groups. Thus, rather than simply analysing texts listed in the data, it was important to note how these texts related to the target group. Presentation of Nielsen data, which is based on a national sample that is not distinguished by socio-economic status, enabled us to ascertain the extent to which the television ratings reflected the viewing habits of this particular socio-economic group of men and women. Presentation of TV ratings and discussion of commonly watched TV programmes also gave rise to more general conversations about the portrayal of men and fathers in the media and whether representations of men and fathers were realistic/unrealistic or positive/negative, and the possible influence of media on the behaviour of men. Books and magazines were also discussed, although to a lesser extent than films/TV programmes.

### 2.1.2 Selection of media texts

In identifying films, books and television programmes for the close textual analysis the results of both the open-ended questions and the questions related to the Nielsen data were analysed. This approach provided a broad overview of texts to which the target group were exposed. A total of 68 television programmes/films were identified, and 15 magazines/books were mentioned in response to the open-ended questions and the questions related to the Nielsen data. A complete list of media identified in the focus group discussions is outlined in Appendix 3. These media were classified into a number of genres, as illustrated in the table below.

**Table 2.1: Genre classification of the texts identified in the focus groups**

Genre	Frequency
Soaps	7
Comedy	7
Drama	10
Documentary/reality television	10
Sport programmes	2
News/current affairs show	2
Films	30

To analyse all of the texts in detail was beyond the scope of this research. A range of factors was taken into account when choosing the specific texts that would undergo a close analysis. Although the number of participants in the sample is too small to be representative of viewing trends, the overlap of Nielsen data findings with texts listed by the participants was seen as a central component in identifying television programmes. As satellite channels are not represented in the Nielsen data, it was decided to narrow the focus of the television analysis to regularly viewed texts on terrestrial television. Specifically, the following aspects were taken into account during the selection process:

- The popularity of the text within the focus group: Participants in the focus group were asked to list films and television programmes that they enjoyed watching, or watched on a regular basis. If a text was generally revealed as popular within the group, this was noted by the facilitator.
- Whether or not the popularity of the text was also reflected in the Nielsen ratings: Findings from the Nielsen ratings were read out to participants and members of the group were asked whether they watched the programmes on a regular basis. If participants did watch a programme that was listed as popular among this age-group, it was assumed that this text was viewed by members of this demographic, and thus relevant to the study.

- If a particular aspect of the text that related to the main themes of the study was discussed in a focus group: Some of the texts chosen were only mentioned once or twice in the focus groups, and yet were included in the analysis. This was an attempt to engage with all themes of the study. Therefore, several texts that dealt explicitly with issues of masculinity, fatherhood or sexual responsibility were directly targeted (e.g. *Knocked Up*).
- The genre of the text: As themes of masculinity, fatherhood and sexual responsibility are treated differently by various genres, it was necessary to investigate a range of texts and not limit the analysis to a specific type of film or programme (e.g. such as not focusing exclusively on soaps).
- Whether it was women or men who claimed to have watched it on a regular basis: In both the men's and the women's focus groups participants were asked the type of media they watched or read. The texts viewed by women were deemed extremely relevant to the study. It is possible to argue that these texts play a role in constructing the female's expectations of male behaviour. MacKeogh (2004) notes that "Young people attend to many programmes in a way that they would not consider as 'viewing' – they may be dancing to the programme or making fun of characters rather than watching attentively" (p.31). Similarly, many of the men within the focus groups admitted watching specific television programmes in the company of their partners or female family members. Thus, while these texts may not necessarily be listed by men as favourite programmes, they are nevertheless viewed by men (e.g. *Desperate Housewives*). As demonstrated by MacKeogh's work, this is recognised within the discipline of media and cultural analysis as a valid approach to identifying texts for investigation.

In light of these considerations, the following ten texts were selected for detailed analysis:

- Five television programmes: *Desperate Housewives* (Drama), *Prison Break* (Drama), *EastEnders* (Soap), *The O.C.* (Drama), and *Scrubs* (Comedy).
- One sports programme: *The Premiership*.
- Three films: *Knocked Up*, *Accelerator*, and *American Gangster*.
- One book: *The Joy*.

The table below illustrates the reason underpinning the selection of each text.

**Table 2.2: Texts selected for media analysis**

	<b>Reason for selection</b>
EastEnders (Soap)	Most commonly mentioned soap opera, mentioned in six focus groups/Also listed in Nielsen ratings
Scrubs (Comedy)	Most commonly mentioned comedy, mentioned in four focus groups/Also listed in Nielsen ratings
Prison Break (Drama)	Most commonly mentioned drama, mentioned in three focus groups/Also listed in Nielsen ratings
Desperate Housewives (Drama)	Mentioned in two focus groups (women's groups only)/Also listed in Nielsen ratings
The O.C. (Drama)	Mentioned in two focus groups (men's groups only)/Also listed in Nielsen ratings
The Premiership (Sport)	One of two sports programmes mentioned/Also listed in Nielsen ratings
Knocked Up (Film)	Mentioned in one focus group/Selected as the film deals explicitly with theme of sexual responsibility
American Gangster (Film)	Mentioned in one focus group/Selected as the film deals explicitly with themes of masculinity, violence and fatherhood
Accelerator (Film)	This was the only film mentioned in two focus groups (men's groups only)
The Joy (Book)	This was the only book mentioned in two focus groups (men's groups only)

For the television programmes, two different sampling methods were used to identify particular episodes for analysis: 'Random Sampling' and 'Targeting'. This approach to media analysis is widely accepted by media scholars as a beneficial method in media research (Mackeogh, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002; Macnamara, 2006; Newbold et al. 2002). Within this study, random sampling as a method involved designating a number to each episode of a television programme and then utilising a statistics programme to generate a list of random numbers and selecting the episodes whose numbers correspond to the random list of numbers. These episodes were then analysed for themes related to the study. A random sampling approach was used to select recent episodes of Desperate Housewives and Prison Break.

'Targeting' refers to the selection of specific storylines that directly engage with the themes of the research. Specific episodes of The O.C., Scrubs, and EastEnders were targeted based on their relevance to the research themes. A number of methods were used in directly targeting specific storylines. This included watching the latest series of a programme or several episodes currently being broadcast, and also by reading synopses of episodes of the most current series, which are available on the internet. Episodes that engaged with themes directly related to the study were noted and then analysed in detail.

A recent broadcast of *The Premiership* was chosen at random, while the three films were identified based upon the number of participants who claimed to have seen it and the relevance of the content of the film to the research themes. An outline of the selected texts is as follows:

1. *EastEnders*: Omnibus broadcast 16/12/2007 (4 episodes). RTE 1: This was identified as a relevant text as it was discussed by a number of participants in several groups and is also listed in the Nielsen ratings. A targeted omnibus of the British soap screened before Christmas 2007 was analysed. Set in East London, the storyline centred on different types of fathers as various characters challenged each other on their fathering skills.

2. *Prison Break*: This was mentioned in several focus groups and was listed in the Nielsen ratings. Using random sampling on seasons one and two, three episodes were identified and analysed. Images of male physical violence and aggression, as well as rebellion against figures of authority, were to the fore. Themes of fatherhood were also evident, particularly in terms of absent fathers trying to protect their children.

Season 1, Episode 14 - *The Rat*

Season 2, Episode 4 - *First Dawn*

Season 2, Episode 11 - *Bolshoi Booze*

3. *Desperate Housewives*: This U.S. comedy drama (also referred to as a 'soap') was noted in all the female groups and was listed in the Nielsen ratings. Therefore it was chosen as an example of predominantly female viewing. Also, many of the men said that they regularly watched the programme in the company of their girlfriends. The series centres on the lives of five women living in suburban America: Edie, Gaby, Bree, Susan, and Lynette. Representations of men and fatherhood are primarily constructed in relation to the experiences of these women, and the spectator's understanding of the male characters is very often filtered through the perspectives of women characters, or through the female narrator, Mary Alice. It is also through these relationships that ideas of fatherhood and sexual responsibility are revealed. Background research suggests that aiming the text at a female audience influences the representation of men in the text. Focusing on the last two seasons (i.e. the most recent screenings), three episodes were chosen using random sampling.

Season 2, Episode 9 - *That's Good, That's Bad*

Season 2, Episode 12 - *We're Going to Be Alright*

Season 2, Episode 20 - *It Wasn't Meant to Happen*

4. *The O.C.*: The U.S. teen drama *The O.C.* was also mentioned in several groups and is listed in the Nielsen ratings. In the focus groups, participants discussed the character of Ryan and the relationship with his father and his adoptive parents. As a result, several episodes were targeted to explore these themes. Ryan is originally from a working class background and has now become part of the Cohen family in the wealthy area of Orange County. The series (which has now been cancelled) centred on the activities of Ryan and his step-brother Seth in this wealthy neighbourhood. In contrast to many of the other texts, *The O.C.* also directly engaged with issues of sexual responsibility. The following episodes were selected:

Season 4, Episode 6 - Summer Bummer  
 Season 4, Episode 8 - Earth Girls are Easy  
 Season 4, Episode 9 - My Two Dads

5. *Scrubs*: This U.S. comedy is set in a hospital. *Scrubs* was listed in Nielsen ratings and in the focus groups. Four episodes that dealt specifically with issues of fatherhood, masculinity and sexual responsibility were targeted. This was achieved by reading plot summaries of the series and then identifying the relevant episodes. The series contains themes of fatherhood, sexual conquest, homophobia, inept males, appearance, physicality, and youth. During the interviews, several respondents highlighted the friendship between two male characters, Turk and J.D., and emphasised the importance of such male friendships in their own lives. The following episodes were selected:

Season 2, Episode 10 - My Monster  
 Season 3, Episode 8 - My Dirty Secret  
 Season 6, Episode 2- My Best Friend's Baby and My Baby's Baby  
 Season 6, Episode 21- My Rabbit

6. *The Premiership (Broadcast 22/3/2008, RTE 2)*: The Premiership was referred to in several groups, and one screening was viewed. This broadcast dealt with the highlights of seven football matches in the English Premier League, with three male panellists discussing the games. In particular the programme draws attention to representations of the male physical body, to ideas of power, and the impact of such constructions on wider social relations.

7. *Knocked Up (Dir. Judd Apatow, 2007)*: Mentioned in one focus group, the U.S. film *Knocked Up* deals with issues that are extremely relevant as it directly engages with themes of fatherhood, masculinity and sexual responsibility. This comedy centres on an unplanned pregnancy arising from a one-night stand. The film engages with ideas of maturity, sexual negotiation, inept fathers, power, stereotypes, homophobia, abortion, turning points, peer influences and alcohol.

8. *Accelerator (Dir. Vinny Murphy, 1999)*: *Accelerator* is an Irish drama that was mentioned in two focus groups. It follows two groups of young people, men and women, from lower SES backgrounds, who steal cars and race from Belfast to Dublin. There are various types of masculinities represented. The most significant themes that arise are the behaviour of the men, their hatred of the police, their relationships with the female characters, and portrayals of aggression and violence.

9. *American Gangster (Dir. Ridley Scott, 2007)*: Set in 1970s Manhattan, this drama is based on a true story about drug dealer Frank Lucas (Denzel Washington) and the honest policeman Richie Roberts (Russell Crowe), who seeks to expose the main drug dealers in North America. The film engages with aspects of war, violence, physical appearance, loyalty, sexuality, class, race, corruption and power.

10. *The Joy (Paul Howard, 1996. O'Brien Press, Dublin.)*: *The Joy* was listed by participants in two groups who had read the text while they were in detention centres. Based on a true story, the novel documents a prisoner's experience of life in Mountjoy prison. Events are

narrated from the prisoner's perspective. The novel engages with aspects of sexuality, violence, physical appearance, fatherhood, homophobia, drugs, and the distrust of figures in authority.

These selected texts allowed for an exploration of the themes of the study across a range of genres and reflected the varied tastes and interests of the participants of the focus groups. By combining methods of random sampling and targeting, this approach allowed for a general snapshot of some texts, but also permitted a close analysis of storylines that were deemed to be directly relevant to the research. As many of the participants referred to recent storylines, the majority of the texts were screened on television in the past 12 months. *Knocked Up* and *American Gangster* were released on DVD in the latter part of 2007 and early 2008 respectively, while *Accelerator* was released in 1999. The specific nuances of each genre were taken into account during the media analysis.

There are a number of limitations inherent in the identification and selection of texts for the media analysis. Due to time and resource constraints, the types of media selected for analysis were largely restricted to film and television programmes. Selection of the texts was conducted in a systematic fashion, taking into account the frequency with which various programmes/films were mentioned. Relative to television programmes and films, only a limited number of books were mentioned and only one book was mentioned twice. This book was also selected for close textual analysis. It is important to note that an analysis of other media, such as newspapers, radio, internet and advertising would also be extremely relevant to the goals of the research. However, as the field of media studies is wide-ranging and diverse, it was necessary to narrow the focus of the media analysis, and a decision was taken to primarily focus upon television programmes and films.

## **2.2 Media analysis**

### *2.2.1 Close textual analysis*

The aim of the media analysis was not only to reveal participants' general views of the media, but also to investigate specific texts themselves and present possible alternative readings and ways of understanding the films and television programmes. Specifically, the close textual analysis focused upon representations of fathers, masculinity and sexual behaviours within the media consumed by the participants in the study. The examination of films, television programmes and one book followed the basic approaches to textual analysis, which are well established within media and cultural studies more broadly. The following steps were undertaken for the textual analysis:

As a starting point and as previously described, themes and discourses related to views of sexual responsibility, fatherhood and constructions of masculinity were identified in the focus groups and a list of media to which focus group participants were exposed was compiled.

As a second step, critical reading was conducted in relation to theories of media and cultural analysis, particularly in relation to themes which emerged from focus group discussions. Combining this reading with findings from the analysis of focus group discussions, a broad range of themes was established. These themes included violence, muscular appearance/physique, types of men, war, authority, males and females,



instigators of sexual intercourse, corruption, class, race, fathers, sexual intercourse, sex and money, sport, contraception, peer group influences, performing identity, language, and gender stereotypes.

The third step involved viewing texts in their entirety several times. Throughout the viewing the texts were examined in terms of their engagement or lack of engagement with the main themes of the research: constructions of masculinity, fatherhood, and sexual responsibility. As well as analysing the themes identified prior to viewing, the basic framework also allowed new themes to emerge from the texts as they were being viewed. Subcategories were then established such as: father/child relations, presence/absence of lower SES groups, sexual content/innuendo, sexual responsibility, instigator of sexual activity, position of viewer, role models, stereotypes, violence/aggression, competitiveness, homophobia, male friendships, turning points, and alcohol and drugs. Scenes that dealt specifically with these issues were analysed in detail.

### *2.2.2 Individual interviews*

Following the close textual analysis, a series of individual interviews was conducted with 41 young men, 20 of whom had become fathers. The characteristics of this sample of young men have been outlined in Part I (Chapter 2.0) of the report. The aim of the individual interviews was to explore men's experiences with sexual relationships and fatherhood, and to examine their perspectives on constructions of masculinity. A further objective of the interviews was to explore the manner in which representations of men in the media are adopted or rejected by young male viewers, and how these representations relate to young men's behaviours as men, as fathers and as sexual partners.

During the individual interviews, in order to prompt discussion relating to representations of the study's themes in the selected media, participants were shown two extracts. A scene involving sexual intercourse was screened from *Knocked Up*, while a scene related to issues of an absent father was screened from *American Gangster*. Both scenes were chosen because they encapsulated discourses at the core of the research in a short time frame, and could therefore be easily incorporated into the interview process. Specifically, we asked the young men to respond to the scenes, to reveal their understanding of how fatherhood and sexual responsibility is represented in these extracts and to examine the perceived influences of these representations on their own behaviour. Discussion of these texts also gave rise to more general questioning within the interviews about the perceived influence of media on men's behaviour and discussion of other male characters within some of the other selected texts. The interview process allowed for more detailed responses to specific texts than was possible in the focus groups.

In conclusion, the methodological approach adopted for the media analysis sought to provide a general idea of participants' views of certain texts through the focus groups and interviews, while the textual analysis sought to investigate the texts themselves and present possible alternative readings and ways of understanding the films and television programmes. Each approach has its limitations: Interviewees may not have the critical skills or vocabulary to express their views on aspects of the text in question, or may not necessarily be able to recall in detail the specifics of each text. In contrast, during the close textual analysis, the researchers have the texts on hand and utilise critical

approaches to identify a vast number of interpretations which may be taken from the texts. The researchers' analysis can be understood as providing a series of 'hypothetical' interpretations, and presents readings that may not have emerged during the interviews but which could be made by other viewers. However, the interviewees' perspectives can be used to relate the textual analysis back to the lived experience and understanding of the sample group. Therefore, rather than simply relying on one method, merging these approaches allows for both a broader and deeper understanding of the possible influences of the films and TV programmes and how the representations relate to the participants' wider cultural context.

In the following chapters the findings from the media analysis are presented and discussed. In writing the findings, the various themes represented in the texts were discussed in relation to broader critical and cultural theories in the area as well as in relation to responses from the men and women in the focus groups and the men in the individual interviews. Thus, the findings chapter focuses on an independent close textual analysis of media content. Where appropriate the analysis also draws upon the interviews and focus group discussions with both men and women to elaborate upon themes from the analysis. Direct quotations are reproduced with minimal editing. Interview participants are identified by their age and by whether or not they are fathers, while focus group respondents are identified by gender only. Any identifying information is changed in order to preserve the participants' anonymity.

### 3.0 Findings from a media analysis: representations of masculinities, fatherhood and sexual behaviour in the media

In this chapter, findings from the media analysis are presented. The chapter focuses on representations of masculinities, fatherhood, and sexual responsibility in selected media watched and read by participants in the study and poses questions such as: what happens when we watch television and films and how does this affect the way we relate to the world around us in terms of masculinity, fatherhood and sexual responsibility? The main media examined were films and television programmes. Specifically, the analysis centred on three films and six television programmes identified during the focus group stage of the research, with reference to one novel to support relevant arguments. The term 'text' is used throughout to refer to individual films and television programmes, as well as the novel. The analysis examined the possible interpretations of each text; the implications that this has in the construction of wider cultural expectations regarding gender, fatherhood, and sexual responsibility; and the manner in which these findings related to the perspectives of the participants.

#### 3.1 Perceived influence of the media

As outlined in the literature review, in analysing participants' perceptions of media texts, it is important to understand the extent to which media can impact upon our ideas of 'common sense' and what we see as 'normal' or expected behaviour in society. It is possible to argue that film and television can influence perceptions of masculinity, sexual responsibility, and fatherhood in society and in diverse and varied ways can create, perpetuate, and/or validate the behaviour of young men. This section outlines the participants' views on the perceived influence of the media in their lives.

As a starting point in exploring the role and function of the media in constructions of masculinity, fatherhood and sexual responsibility, the study participants were initially asked for their views on whether or not the media had an influence on people and specifically whether or not it impacted upon people's behaviour as men, fathers, or sexual partners. There was a series of diverse and contradictory responses.

Some believed that media do not have an impact on behaviour:

*I don't think TV has an influence on behaviour or a manly behaviour or that, I think men just behave as men, women behave as women, no matter what they see on the telly...*

[Non-father, 25y]

Many felt that the media had an influence on children but not adults:

*I think that when you're younger, when you're a kid, you might see Spiderman or Superman and think they're Spiderman or Superman. At that age, yeah, but when you are older, you're your own person ... You're old enough to think for yourself what you want to do. So I don't think films have an effect on it.* [Non-father, 19y]

Others felt that film and television had a large role to play in their formation of ideas about the world they lived in:

*Maybe films and stuff does have an impact on men if you are watching it. Like, not as if they are deliberately changing because they have seen that film, but in the back of your head you might just start changing yourself. I don't really know. [Father, 22y]*

The participants in one of the men's focus groups summed up the complicated nature of this debate by acknowledging that media had a large influence on people's lives, but that it was one of many cultural influences:

*I: So, you would think then that the media has a huge impact on the audience?*

*Several respondents: Yeah...yeah...definitely.*

*R1: The media controls the way everyone thinks, like. They control the papers, the TV.*

*R2: Yeah. You still have control over what you do as well, but the media definitely influences you a lot.*

*R3: I think that the media influences you a little bit, but I think the main influences would be your parents.*

*[Some mutterings of disagreement.]*

*[Men's focus group]*

Thus, it is evident that many of the young people are aware of the extent to which media can play a role in their lives, while others are possibly unaware of such processes, or reluctant to believe that their engagement with film and television may affect their perceptions of 'common sense' and thereby influence their expectations regarding gender, fatherhood and sexual responsibility.

### **3.2 Content analysis of selected texts**

In this section the content of the various texts are discussed under a number of themes: Masculinity and Violence, The Hegemonic Male, Masculinity and the Incompetent Male, Masculinity and Homosexuality, Masculinity and Class, Masculinity and Stereotyping, Masculinity and Sport, Fatherhood and Masculinity, Fatherhood and Pregnancy, Uninvolved Fathers, Fatherhood and Turning Points, Adoptive Fathers and Biological Fathers, and Sexual Responsibility and Contraception. As detailed in the previous chapter, these themes emerged following repeated reading/viewing of each individual selected text in conjunction with a review of the literature on the role of the media in constructing cultural ideas about gender, masculinity, stereotyping, fatherhood, sexual activity and sexual responsibility. Furthermore, discussions of the individual texts within the focus groups and interviews were analysed with these themes in mind. While many of the texts deal with a range of themes on a number of levels, the following analysis draws upon examples from texts where these themes were particularly striking and were to the fore of the representation. The discussion of the treatment of specific themes in various media incorporates the researchers' 'hypothetical' interpretations, secondary reading relating to specific cultural and social issues, and the participants' perspectives on the various texts.

#### **3.2.1 Masculinity and violence**

Instances of the association of masculinity with violence were to the fore in five texts, detailed below. Many critics have highlighted the association of violence with masculinity and that violence functions as "part of a system of domination" (Connell, 2005; p. 84). Violence is seen as a form of power that both in reality and in representations is largely

gender-specific (O'Donnell, 1999). Boyle (2005) argues that perpetrators and victims of on-screen violence are predominantly white males and it is often believed that violence is a "natural, practically genetic component of masculinity" (Mackinnon, 2003: p. 12). Many of the texts under analysis correspond to this idea that violence is an essence of masculinity and male behaviour. These texts often feature stereotypical representations of men. In relating such ideas to the lives of the participants, on a simplistic level, it is possible to argue that while some men may reject ideas that violence is an inherent part of masculinity others may accept the association of masculinity with violence as a natural and even desirable part of being a man.

In *Desperate Housewives*, the character Carlos is initially presented as a reformed man. Recently released from prison, he claims that he has dealt with his 'rage issues'. This is predominantly represented by his engagement with religion and the church. It is possible to read this scenario in a number of ways. On the one hand, his rage issue and aggression can be seen as something that is constructed and depends on the environment of the individual. Alternatively, it is possible to understand it as an 'essence' that can be controlled. On further viewing of the series, the idea that this violence is an essence of Carlos is to the fore as it later transpires that despite his efforts Carlos cannot control his rage. When his wife's ex-boyfriend (Scott) places pictures of her on pornography websites, she asks Carlos to beat him up. Carlos is reluctant. Instead, he decides to reason with Scott. He claims that if his wife (Gaby) really loved him, she would not ask such a thing of him, while Gaby argues that if he really loved her she would not have to ask. It is evident that the female character has an expectation that her husband should defend her using force and aggression.

Scott is presented as reasonable, but is of the opinion that Gaby's pictures are not of the standard he wants for the website anyway so he is happy to take them off. Enraged by such comments, Carlos throws Scott through a glass window, revealing his aggressive and violent nature and consequently Gaby is delighted with such a result ("That's my boy!"). Although constructed in terms of comedy, the storyline reinforces Gaby's perspective. In this instance, the series establishes the female character as desiring protection from her husband. It is through violence that he proves his love for her. While Gaby is manipulative throughout this situation, she will not confront Scott herself, but feels it is Carlos's role. Thus the female and her desires have an impact on the behaviour of the male character. Ultimately Gaby has power and control in this situation. This is a reversal of the position in which she is placed at the beginning of the scenario where she unwillingly becomes part of the pornography industry. While the female character has control in quietly manipulating her husband, male power is associated with physical violence. Such violence is supported and encouraged by the female character, thus reinforcing the notion that this behaviour is a natural and acceptable component of masculinity, and is actually desired by females. While discussing the role of women in men's behaviour in one of the men's focus groups, such a perspective was endorsed:

*R1: Most women are very influential to what a man does.*

*R2: Influences, what women want.*

*R3: Mostly what we think of ourselves we also want it to appeal to the opposite sex.*

[Men's focus group]

It is possible to argue that such representations reinforce the idea that men should act violently to impress women. A similar view was expressed in a female focus group: "Women like a bad boy" [Respondent from women's focus group]. The representation of Carlos and Gaby's relationship can be read as reinforcing the idea that women like aggressive men.

Similarly, in *Accelerator*, the character Whacker is constructed as violent and aggressive. He is introduced into the narrative when he joyrides along the beach. All of his actions and language are aggressive, while his behaviour is unpredictable. When teased by another character, JT, he reacts by head-butting him. As his girlfriend (Louise) moves away from him towards JT, it is evident that Whacker is not set up as a desirable or likable character and thus his form of violence is not established as something that is attractive in the character.

His masculinity is associated with aggression but it is aligned with the violence that surrounds him in society such as the army and the Gardaí, again demonstrating the role that societal influences can play in justifying and provoking violence in men. He is the only member of the group that carries a gun and also has a hatred of authority; he refers to the British army as "arsewipes in uniform". His violent nature comes to a climax at the end of the film as he tries to ram a checkpoint where he is shot and killed in a hail of gunfire. The character's behaviour can be read as being part of a wider culture of violence while also suggesting that such actions can lead to self-destruction. The majority of those interviewed had seen the film. Many saw it as 'realistic' and as a text that they could easily identify with:

*R1: If you have anything in common with any of them you've [something] in common with that [...]*

*I: Yeah?*

*R1: Cracking film, man, swear to God. It was about growing up, down here and robbing cars, you know, chasing them around. Brilliant.*

[Non-father, 25y]

It is possible to argue that seeing the film in such realistic terms constructs ideas about acceptable or expected behaviour of young men.

Physical violence is also central to the lives of the prisoners in *The Joy*. According to the narrator, such violence is seen as more important than verbal negotiations (p. 107), and he claims that respect is gained through acts of physical violence and "standing your ground" (p. 129). Thus violence is established as a necessary part of life and for survival in prison. Distrust of authority figures ("bastards", p. 44) can be understood as a natural reaction to those who are often aggressive and violent when handling the prisoners. This is also

true of the male characters in *Prison Break*, as violence is established as necessary for survival. In a focus group discussion of *Prison Break*, several of the women raised this point:

*R2: They're not criminals by choice.*

*R4: No, they're not.*

*R1: They're trying to break out of that thing for about two years now.*

*I: OK, but overall you think they are good, kind of?*

*R2: Yeah, and he shows his emotions.*

[Women's focus group]

This extract reveals that violent characters can also be represented in positive terms, and that sometimes violence is justified.

Characters in other texts also engage in acts of violence, such as Ryan in *The O.C.*, a character that was mentioned in several interviews. As one of the respondents noted, "Ryan sticks up for himself". As with Carlos in *Desperate Housewives*, Ryan struggles to control his rage, and his violent or non-violent behaviour seems to depend on his environment. Once again, anger seems to be part of his character, yet it is also suggested by the programme that social environment and upbringing have a role to play in displays of violence and aggression. One of the respondents believed that watching Ryan's violent behaviour had a cathartic and positive impact on him:

*I thought he was good. It's better to see fights then get into fights because at least you're not getting hurt - they're getting hurt. So I thought it was good. [Father, 20y]*

Therefore, it is also possible to argue that representations of violence do not necessarily function as models of expected behaviour for young men, but can be used as a catharsis, to work through or channel violence without becoming violent.

These representations offer varied images of violence as an integral part of masculinity. In terms of Carlos, Whacker and Ryan, violence can be read as something that is innate and needs to be controlled or can be managed. In the case of the prisoners in *The Joy*, the text suggests that violence is justified and that it is a necessary mechanism for survival. It is evident that representations of violence can be interpreted in a number of ways and that engagement with violence varies from viewer to viewer.

It is also important to relate these themes of violence and aggression to participants' responses during the interviews. Many of the young men felt that being violent was a natural part of being a man, something that people were born with, while others argued that it was a cultural construction. It was suggested that experiences during childhood as well as family and community circumstances might influence violent behaviour. Others commented that it was a combination of nature and nurture: that it was innate in men, but could also be brought out by environmental factors:

*I think everybody's born with a certain level of violence and aggression, but from what I've experienced, people learn more violence than they would just knowing it...and when I was*

*growing up I was just subjected to violence all the time in the house and when I was out on the street so I picked up violence. But my brothers and all were raised a bit different and they're not fighters or anything, like. [Father, 20y]*

Two of the participants talked about their own violent behaviour and how they found it difficult to control their rage. Very often they expressed their anger by punching walls. Two participants noted that they became violent when drunk.

### 3.2.2 *The hegemonic male*

Three texts, examined below, highlight particular issues relating to the hegemonic male. As discussed previously, hegemonic masculinity is the masculinity that lies at the top of a gender hierarchy among men. Many of the television programmes feature males that do not conform to hegemonic masculinity and this is often done for comic effect. As Connell (2005) notes, hegemonic masculinity is an idea that the majority do not correspond to. These male characters and their situations can be read on a number of levels. Tasker (1998) notes that comedy can subvert structures of authority and thereby make them visible. Therefore, the spectator may laugh at the predicament of the character and the absurdity of trying to live up to an unrealistic expectation of male behaviour, and thus dismiss the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Alternatively the audience may not laugh at the idea of hegemonic masculinity, but at the character's failure to be a 'real' man. This varies from programme to programme, and viewers can engage with the text on multiple levels. In terms of encoding the text, the majority of programmes analysed appear to combine these two approaches by subverting and satirising the very idea of hegemonic masculinity and also the character's attempts to adhere to such ideals.

The first episode of *Scrubs* centres on JD's loss of his sex drive or, as he terms it, his 'mojo'. Much of the comedy of the series arises from JD's attempts to participate in hegemonic masculinity. Failing to get an erection is established as the ultimate crisis of manhood, which suggests that sex drive is an essential part of being a man, an idea which can also be applied to Tom's vasectomy in *Desperate Housewives*. Loss of sex drive is constructed as something to be ashamed of. The end of the episode brings closure to the situation and can be read as a restoration of his masculinity as JD has sex with Elliot, a nurse with whom he has an on-off relationship.

A similar situation occurs in the character of Seth in *The O.C.* as his masculinity is constructed in opposition to Ryan's. He is represented as a comic-book geek, does not have the muscular physique of Ryan, and can be understood as having a 'softer' or more feminised masculinity (Mackinnon, 2003). Their friendship is established when Ryan punches those who are bullying Seth. Much of the humour of the series derives from Seth's acknowledgement that he does not have the same masculinity as Ryan. When his girlfriend (Summer) is suspended from college, Seth feels the need to live up to an ideal and defend her honour. The episode suggests that it is something he feels compelled to do rather than something that comes naturally, and thus the series suggests that there are different ways that men can behave. He tells Summer that he is going to find Che (the man who got her suspended) and "go all Ryan Atwood on his ass"<sup>6</sup>, aligning Ryan's masculinity

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<sup>6</sup> By this, Seth means that he will adopt Ryan Atwood's aggressive behaviour, typical of Ryan's character, and physically beat Che.



with power, violence and vengeful behaviour. While Seth feels that there is an expectation to perform a particular type of masculinity, the fact that it is out of character suggests the absurdity of such an expectation.

At one stage Seth and Che spend a weekend in the woods in order to re-discover their essence as men. This event is presented in a satirical manner and thus can be read as an undermining of the idea that there is an 'essence' to manhood. A dismissal of such theories on masculinity is found in Robert Bly's *Iron John*.

Much comedy derives from the subversion of ideas of the hegemonic. The programmes and films rely on the audience's awareness of these cultural assumptions and stereotypes for the production of humour. If the stereotypes and expectations of masculine behaviour did not exist, then it would be impossible to derive humour from their subversion. There is an acknowledgement that such expectations are present in wider society. Therefore, young men are presented with representations that often treat the idea of hegemonic masculinity as absurd. It is possible that many of the men are encouraged to question concepts of the hegemonic male and its position as an ideal within society.

### 3.2.3 *Masculinity and the incompetent male*

The representation of the incompetent male can be found in many, if not the majority, of the texts under analysis. Examples of specific instances and texts are detailed below. It could be argued that the repetition of such a stereotype on television and in film can have an impact upon how we view men and expect them to behave in society.

The representation of an incompetent male has an established history in television. For example, during the 1990s a major stereotype to emerge was that of the stupid or incompetent male, epitomised by the characters in *Men Behaving Badly* (Macnamara, 2006; Ging, 2005). It is evident from the texts under analysis that this stereotype still exists. Macnamara (2006) has criticised such a trend:

*A double standard is emerging: while it has become less acceptable or unacceptable to objectify, trivialize, marginalize or otherwise negatively represent women, it appears to be increasingly common and popular to portray men and male identity in highly negative ways.* (p. 90)

There are many examples of representations of males which could be considered 'negative' in Macnamara's terms. Boyle (2005) also identifies a trend of "male-bashing" in popular television programmes (p. 35). This is significant as it contributes to the construction of men and masculinity in society and can establish expectations of behaviour. As Macnamara (2006) notes, "It can be concluded that sustained negative portrayals of men and male identity... are likely to have long-term cumulative effects as well as immediate impact" (p. 187). The majority of the texts feature characters that conform to this masculine identity. Whelehan argues that the cultural acceptance of 'laddish' representations of men as simple, beer-drinking, and sexist is a mechanism employed to evade issues of gender inequality. She continues to argue that such lad culture is a backlash against feminism and political correctness: that those who do not see the humour of such representations are accused of not understanding the irony of

the sexist portrayal and are branded as humourless (Whelehan, 2000). She states that “feminism is emptied of any significance beyond being associated with a bunch of dour ageing women who only want to spoil men’s fun” (p. 60). It is useful to draw upon these debates in the analysis of portrayals of inept males and question the role of the texts in perpetuating or challenging male stereotypes.

The idea that men are incompetent - particularly in the domestic sphere and in relation to raising children - is a common theme in many of the films and television programmes examined. The character of Tom in *Desperate Housewives* can be read as unable to cope with domestic duties. He is established in contrast to his wife, Lynette, who is continually depicted as being under pressure as she attempts to manage her professional life and her household. Much of this pressure arises from Tom’s inability to cope at home as a house husband. For example, he calls Lynette in a panic with the result that she must return home from work. Tom is unable to stay in the house because the children have chicken pox and he fears that he will catch it. His concern arises from the possible sterility that may arise if he does catch it. The symbolism of this is quite evident: by staying home and looking after the kids Tom may become sterile or emasculated. As a result, the mother is forced to take time off work. Lynette does not see why he is so concerned as they do not plan to have any more children. The female character is unable to comprehend the male’s predicament and thus the series establishes a binary between the two sexes, corresponding to a bio-determinist idea that masculine and feminine behaviour can be understood simply in terms of biological differences and ignoring the social processes involved in the construction of gender. While it can be understood that the male character may be justified in his decision, much of the scenario is framed from Lynette’s perspective, thus encouraging the audience to identify with the view that Tom is unable to manage the household and it is the female’s responsibility to restore order.

The binary between male and female perspectives is developed further as Lynette asks Tom to have a vasectomy, and he agrees, reluctantly. However, in the end he refuses to have it because “it felt like I was being emasculated”, an idea which is dismissed by Lynette. He continues, “I don’t make the money round here anymore, I don’t provide for you and the kids, and I wasn’t going to snip out the last thing that makes me a man.” It is evident that the character does not feel that his status meets the cultural expectations of what a man should be. Although Lynette tries to placate him by saying that “staying at home and taking care of the kids doesn’t make you less of a man, that’s crazy”, the programme seems to entertain Tom’s concerns. It does not debate any positive aspects associated with being a house husband and promotes a form of hegemonic masculinity with the male as breadwinner. In the final episode analysed, Tom is at work, as is Lynette, who has a more senior position than him. Rather than maintaining the representation of the house husband, the programme undermines such a concept. However, it can also be argued that the show does not simply revert to traditional gender stereotypes. Instead of replacing the house husband with a housewife, both father and mother are placed in the public sphere of work. Overall, the programme represents Tom as constantly struggling in the shadow of his wife. Indeed, it is Lynette rather than Tom who is associated with masculinity. Similarly, in the workplace, Lynette must cope with pressures from her boss as he asks for her help. She tries to assist him in reigniting his sexual relationship with his wife by sending suggestive emails to her. This can be read as the male character being

inept, or having a lack of understanding about the sexual needs of females, therefore reinforcing a simplistic binary.

In *The O.C.* Summer feels that Seth fails to take her needs and desires into account. He has nothing planned for New Year's Eve and she is reluctant to tell him that she may be pregnant as she fears he won't cope with the news, thus establishing assumptions about expectations of male behaviour. As a test of his parenting skills she challenges him to care for a pet rabbit for several days. The assumption from the outset is that as a male he is incompetent, and he must prove himself.

The majority of the male characters in *Knocked Up* are also inept, or there is an expectation on the part of the female characters that the men will be unable to fulfil certain duties. In the opening credits sequence, Ben and his friends participate in a number of leisure time activities, establishing their daily routine and revealing that they do not have jobs. When not participating in *Gladiator* re-enactments in the backyard or taking drugs, they are working on a business idea for a website. It is explained that people can log on, do a search for a film or actress and are provided with the exact time within the film when the actress appears naked or there are shots of particular female body parts. As a result of these stereotypical portrayals, the construction of their masculinity can be understood as hegemonic, as they objectify females through 'laddish' behaviour. Their actions continue in this manner throughout the majority of the film. However, their behaviour changes at the end and serves to highlight this immaturity at the beginning of the film.

Such immaturity can be read in several ways. Some viewers may identify with the characters, believing that this is a natural way for men of their age to act. Because of the comedy genre of the film, other spectators may see their behaviour as parodic, and laugh at them, rather than with them. It is also possible for the audience to read some of the scenes in terms of parody, while simultaneously identifying with other aspects, thus actively viewing some elements as satire and some as 'normal'. Overall, the men are represented as having to overcome immature behaviour in order to be accepted by the female characters.

Ben's masculinity is established as being in line with that of the rest of the group. He lacks ambition and goals, has no job or income, takes drugs, makes homophobic comments, makes inappropriate remarks to women, has limited sexual experience, and is represented as inept throughout the majority of the film. The film suggests that his slightly over-weight physique is not one that women desire and is in contrast to strong physical bodies associated with hegemonic masculinity. In the beginning, his character is very much defined in opposition to that of the female protagonist, Alison. Alison represents traits that Ben lacks, traits that are traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity. Alison is strong willed and independent, an ambitious career woman who seems to be very much in control of her life.

By the end of the film Ben has matured and so have his friends. This maturity has resulted from Alison's influence and her desire for Ben to behave in a particular way. It is possible

that the film suggests that men are naturally more immature than women and that male behaviour can change depending on the desires of the female partner.

Simple, stupid, inept laddish males feature prominently in many of the texts and, drawing upon Macnamara's argument, can be understood as negative portrayals of men and masculinity. Depending on the position of the viewer it is possible to read the laddish behaviour as ironic, or to see it as a literal representation of 'real' male behaviour (Faludi, 1999).

Men are constructed as unable to understand the perspectives of women, thus establishing male and female relationships in simplistic binary terms. This is a common feature in *The O.C.*, *Scrubs*, *EastEnders*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Accelerator*, *Knocked Up*, and *American Gangster*. Many of the storylines revolve around the idea that the male must prove himself worthy and responsible. Young men are repeatedly presented with stereotypical inept male characters. Rather than there being an assumption at the beginning that men are fully capable and competent, there is a suggestion that men are naturally hopeless until they prove themselves otherwise.

#### *3.2.4 Masculinity and homosexuality*

As is discussed below, four of the texts analysed engage directly with aspects of homosexuality and masculinity. Connell (2005) and others have posited that expressions of homophobia are a means of proving or policing manhood. Establishing gender identity involves a process of exclusion and defining yourself in relation to what you are not. As a result, and because of the links between issues of gender and sexuality, the process of constructing hegemonic masculinity often involves distancing from the feminine and from homosexuality (Hanke, 1992). Consequently, the exclusion of homosexuality becomes naturalised and it is constructed as something that is 'outside' traditional masculine behaviour. Gauntlett (2002) observes that gay characters are more accepted, but are generally uncommon in films; Gamson (1999) notes that the majority of representations of homosexual men are highly stereotypical. Representations of homosexual characters are extremely limited in the texts under analysis, and those that do feature have minor roles and can thus be read as 'outside' of the mainstream. As a result, it is possible to argue that when young men are presented with limited representations of homosexuality, it is not seen as a 'norm' or an acceptable form of masculinity.

In *The O.C.* a minor character named Conor appears in one episode. He is presented as a stereotypical jock character with a muscled physique, an identity that is usually associated with hegemonic masculinity. However, the programme subverts such an expectation and establishes the character as gay. Conor's homosexuality adds a layer of contradiction to this masculinity, as homosexuality is represented as capable of being a normal part of this masculinity. In many ways, such a portrayal can be read as normalising homosexuality within sport and school, as the homosexuality of the character is immediately accepted by his peers.

*The Joy* mentions a bisexual prisoner, Tommy, who can be read in a number of ways. While the presence of the character signals another form of masculine identity, he is treated with a curiosity by the narrator who refers to him in a derogatory way as a 'steamer',

thus normalising the term as part of everyday speech. Their questions about Tommy's sexual activity reveal stereotypical attitudes toward men who have sex with men. As they share drugs, the narrator and another prisoner accept Tommy in their company, but acknowledge that this is not normally the case. As this is the exception rather than the rule, the idea that those who are not heterosexual should be treated differently is reinforced. However, by interacting with Tommy, the prisoners change their opinion that those who are not heterosexual "should be shot along with the grasses and the rapists" (p. 171).

There is also confusion between terms that are used in the novel to refer to homosexuals. Hulk and Boyo are rapists, but there seems to be a hierarchy of rape. While Hulk "did some really terrible things to birds" (p. 90), Boyo is "not just a normal rapist. He raped auld ones and kids as well" (p. 90). While Hulk's sexual violence toward women is not condoned, Boyo's actions are represented as being much worse. Hulk refers to Boyo as "faggot" and "queer" and thus homosexuality and paedophilia are aligned, an association that is not contradicted by the narrator. As a result, stereotypes and misconceptions regarding homosexuality are reinforced by the novel.

In the second episode of *Scrubs* JD is worried about not sounding straight and admits that he is having a 'gay day'. In one sense this can be read as homophobia as the suggestion is that this is not the desired or appropriate behaviour and thus signifies that there is a form of behaviour that is appropriate. His actions during his 'gay day' are aligned with femininity: Dr Cox makes a comment and indicates that JD put it in his 'people who make me feel like a little girl scrapbook'. As a result, being gay is aligned with femininity and females and is not seen as a part of masculinity, thereby perpetuating a stereotype about gay men and their behaviour. Similarly, in one of the women's focus groups' discussions about the character of JD, one woman believed that men would not see JD as a role model because of his 'sensitive' nature:

*I: Do you think he would be a guy that men would kind of look up to or even boys?*

*R1: They'd call him a sissy because he's sensitive. [Respondent from women's focus group]*

Throughout *Knocked Up*, the male characters make homophobic comments and jokes. This can be read as policing their masculinity by excluding the possibility of homosexuality. It is a deliberate affirmation of their heterosexuality, which is defined in opposition to homosexuality. The analysed texts place gay characters on the margins, align homosexuality with femininity, or have characters making homophobic jokes which are not challenged or interrogated. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that young men are presented with texts that create stereotypes and misconceptions about homosexuality for the viewer/reader. *Knocked Up* also suggests that homophobia among male friends is an accepted and appropriate manner to assert a particular gender identity. These texts may play a role in influencing young men's perceptions of appropriate forms of masculinity and behaviour.

It can also be noted that the attitudes of those interviewed towards homosexuality were largely reinforced and validated by the texts analysed. When asked a direct question about their opinion on homosexuality a large number said that they had 'no problem' with

gay men. Several qualified this statement by saying that they had nothing against gay men as long as they were not propositioned by them, and seemed unaware of the latent homophobia in their qualifying statement:

*I have no problem with gay people, just once they don't come on to me.*

[Respondent from men's focus group]

Some remarked that it was abnormal, while one said he did not approve of it for religious reasons. An overwhelming majority commented that amongst their friends they would 'slag' gays and make homophobic remarks. Some men said that they had gay friends who would also participate in slugging and joking about homosexuality and that it was not intended to offend. Others spoke about their acceptance of homosexuality but still used derogatory language such as 'queer' and 'faggot' to refer to gay men. Overall, the attitude toward homosexuality revealed in the interviews appeared to conform to that represented in *Knocked Up*, where homosexuality appears to be outside the norm and homophobic comments are presented as appropriate and acceptable.

### 3.2.5 Masculinity and class

Drawing upon film theory, Mackinnon (2003) argues that machismo is often left unquestioned when associated with working-class masculinity. It is claimed that hypermasculinity is constructed as more acceptable when it is aligned with working-class men. This is evident in many of the characters in *The O.C.*, the one series analysed where issues of class are brought to the fore for the audience.

Ryan is originally from a working-class background and has now become part of the Cohen family in the wealthy area of Orange County. His character is constructed as having managed to control his violent and aggressive tendencies, but there is always the suggestion that he may relapse at any moment. His masculinity links his working class background, violence, and perceptions of women. In one sense he can be read as a stereotype, having erotic fantasies of a girl, Taylor, and being unwilling to admit that he likes her. His fantasies include images of Taylor dancing erotically on the kitchen counter, a wet Taylor soaping his windows, and Taylor on roller skates coming toward him. She is scantily clad in all three episodes. Seth later tells him that his fantasies are "pretty pedestrian ... but I guess they call them classics for a reason". On one level, the series can be read as subverting such stereotypes of women by revealing that they are out of date and something to be laughed at. On another level, Ryan's fantasies can be read as images that he can't control, that just arise naturally in the male character, and thus stereotypes of both men and women are reinforced. Within the context of the series as a whole that plays with ideas of pastiche, this scenario can also be read as an attempt to establish humour. Nevertheless, the character of Ryan, with his muscular physique, Taylor's desire to use his body as a "jungle gym", and his tendency toward violence, is continually established in terms of hegemonic masculinity. During the interviews, many of the respondents referred to Ryan in positive terms and could identify with the character:

*When I watch The O.C., like, I feel to myself, I would say, Jaysus, your man Ryan's life is just like mine, like ... nothing goes right for him.* [Non-father, 22y]

As a result, it is evident that several of the respondents could relate Ryan's experiences to their own lives. It is possible to argue that many of the viewers would interpret Ryan's behaviour as 'typical' or a norm. Such an understanding would justify and normalise the character's sexual fantasies and perceptions of women and perpetuate such stereotyping in real life.

His aggressive behaviour is established as part of his background and family history and not with the upper-class suburbs of Orange County. Despite being in trouble with the law himself, he has managed to turn his back on his past, control his rage, and go to university. This could be read as a rejection of a particular type of masculinity as he moves from one class to another.

A similar process occurs in the life of Sandy, Ryan's step-father. Now living in the upper-class community of Orange County, Sandy comes from a working-class background in the Bronx, New York. He can be read as overcoming many of the obstacles faced by working class communities in terms of education. He is now a lawyer, has little interest in money, and is represented as always fighting the side of the 'little man' or those who are marginalised or excluded. He is presented as a likeable character, committed to his family and his wife. In general, he is not represented as aggressive or violent; however, he does punch Frank (Ryan's father), which is seen as going against his normal behaviour. Sandy acknowledges that he has a history of violence and used to fight people when he was growing up, again linking his class and background to a violent form of masculinity. However, he claims that such violence is no longer part of his life. While this can be understood as an admission that he has reformed and can control his temper, it can also be read that there is an innate form of violence and aggression that must be brought under control. Both Sandy and Ryan are represented as coming from working-class backgrounds and having violent temperaments.

It is possible to read these events as suggesting that violent behaviour is a natural part of growing up in a working-class background and is not accepted in the upper-class community. It can also be read as somewhat patronising, a clichéd story about men who leave their working class lives behind them. As a result, the programme may reinforce and create particular stereotypes about men from working-class backgrounds. However, a discussion in a male focus group suggests that such a plot can also appeal to certain viewers. In a discussion of possible role models in the media, the young men named celebrities that had grown up in their neighbourhood. They admired such men for their successes in life:

*R1: It means it is possible, with him just growing up down the road. For him to make it that far, there is a chance for anyone.*

*I: Is there something about someone coming from our own area and doing it?*

*R2: Yeah.*

*R1: Something about that, one of our own, if he can do it, then...*

*R3: Yeah.*

*R4: Yeah.*

[Men's focus group]

This discussion demonstrates that while such storylines (that depict young men leaving their background behind them) may be read as patronising, some viewers may see them as inspirational.

### *3.2.6 Masculinity and stereotyping*

As mentioned above, many of the texts suggest that there are significant distinctions between male and female behaviour and ways of thinking. This stereotyping is particularly apparent in two texts: *Accelerator* and *Desperate Housewives*. As Connell (2005) has noted, gender relations are played out through a series of complex power struggles in society (Foucault, 1990, 1980; Gauntlett, 2002). These power struggles are evident in a number of texts identified and it could be argued that they promote or reinforce certain expectations of gender relations in society and so construct stereotypes (Dyer, 1993). The male characters in *Accelerator* appear to be in positions of power in relation to the female characters. Whacker tells Louise what she can and cannot do, although she does eventually stand up for herself, suggesting a shift of power in certain situations. Overall, the film resorts to gender stereotyping. While the males discuss the race, the females discuss what they will wear during the race. This stereotyping is also present as Sharon employs the objectification of the female body as a means of gaining power and control over men. Several stereotypes are at work, and there is an expectation that the men will submit to her desires, thus reinforcing hegemonic masculinity in the male characters. By unzipping her top, Sharon performs a particular type of femininity and distracts the cashier while Anto robs the shop. Anto is willing to do anything for her because he fancies her. But in the end, it is Anto who instigates flirting with her and there is a slight shift in their power relations. As many of the respondents felt that this film was relevant to their own lives and backgrounds, it is possible to argue that the stereotyping within the film perpetuates stereotypes in society and validates or justifies expectations of behaviour in reality.

In terms of sex in *Desperate Housewives*, Lynette's boss, Ed, admits that he has been thinking about 'hookers', thus establishing him in stereotypical terms, a man who is not getting sex from his wife turns to paying for sex. In this sense, for Ed women are constructed as sexual objects. There are no sex scenes between Tom and Lynette, although they do flirt with each other over email. Lynette tells Ed that she will be too exhausted to have sex when she goes home, so will just lie there while Tom will "go to town". It is interesting to note that while Lynette is seen as breaking from stereotypes in her role as a working woman, when it comes to sex, she adopts a passive role. Thus, her character can be read as reverting to a traditional gender role, but one which results from her exhaustion brought about by challenging traditional gender boundaries.

The examples above illustrate that men in our study were provided with a range of representations of female and male relationships, and that power and control are continually shifting for various reasons. However, throughout these power negotiations, the texts predominantly represent stereotypes of male and female behaviour. As is evident from the discussion above, in general terms, female characters are established as seducers, mothers, or nagging partners, while the males are predominantly portrayed as inept, aggressive, or unable to see the female's perspective.



### 3.2.7 Masculinity and sport

One sports programme, The Premiership, was examined. Sport is an important site for defining and representing gender (Connell, 2005; Sabo & Curry Jansen, 1992). Many critics have argued that sport and mediated sport is a male-dominated terrain and often associates masculinity with violence and aggression, where gender meaning is aligned with bodily experience (Connell, 2005). In his discussion of the emergence of sports movies in the 1970s, Mackinnon positions sport as an arena where aggression, strength and competitiveness construct that kind of masculinity as natural (Mackinnon, 2003). Similarly, Connell (2005) claims:

*The institutional organization of sport embeds definite social relations: competition and hierarchy among men, exclusion or domination of women. These social relations of gender are both realised and symbolised in the bodily performances. Thus men's greater sporting prowess has become a theme of backlash against feminism. It serves as symbolic proof of men's superiority and right to rule. (p. 54)*

In this sense Connell argues that sport promotes a version of masculinity that is closely linked with the hegemonic (Mackinnon, 2003). Many critics have argued that mediated sport associates the body and physical prowess with masculinity and that it creates a ritualised and rule-bound violence for male participants (Sabo & Curry Jansen, 1992). This analysis does not detract from or undermine the achievements of female athletes and sportswomen, nor does it deny that there are many positive aspects to sport, from health benefits to working as a team. However, the emphasis in this section is on sport in the media and the manner in which males are overly represented as both presenters and participants. Most notably, despite the world-class achievements of women in sport, many critics, such as Sabo and Curry Jansen, highlight the fact that the majority of sports coverage is conducted by men and that the majority of high-profile sporting events focus on male participants. This is evident in coverage of soccer on television. Many critics have discussed the relationship between sport and masculinity on a number of levels, both in positive and negative terms.

For example, Mackinnon has written about the violence and aggression of mediated sport both in terms of athletes and fans. He sees sports-watching as a badge of masculinity that provides a socially-sanctioned form of gossip for men. He focuses on the manner in which sports are mediated and claims that media and sport are combined with patriarchy and focus on male prowess, competitive dedication and excellence (Mackinnon, 2003). His arguments regarding sport in American culture can equally be applied to the broadcasting of The Premiership on television in Ireland, particularly in relation to the commentators and analysts. While Mackinnon claims that mediated sport often excludes female commentators, RTÉ had one female commentator on The Premiership. Despite this, it is still a male dominated programme. The commentators and analysts adopt terms of war and violence to describe the actions of the players with terms such as 'battle' and 'fight for survival' corresponding to Poynton and Hartley's view:

*Sport expands values that are continually prescribed in the rhetoric of war, industry, nationalism and ultimately masculinity – values such as competitiveness, discipline, strength, aggression, valour, implacable optimism, mateship, disrespect for constraining adult*

*authority and an uncompromising determination to win.* (Poynton and Hartley, 1990. Cited in Mackinnon, 2003: p. 102).

Sports programmes such as The Premiership adhere to this argument as there is an exclusion of women, an emphasis on language of war, and an assumed heterosexuality and masculinity. In particular, in terms of the role of the spectator and the position of sport in wider culture, it is possible to argue that such representations help to generate specific ideas about masculinity and violence outside the sporting scene (Mackinnon, 2003). Some of the respondents saw the exclusion of women from sport as perfectly acceptable, with one commenting that: "I think it is just like for father and son and they are out with the lads" [Non-father, 21y]. It can be argued that this attitude is reinforced by the media's predominant exclusion of women from certain sporting events.

In terms of the representation of violence and aggression, several of the participants noted the complex nature of aggression in sport. In a discussion of the footballer and manager Roy Keane, the following views were expressed:

*R2: He's got a hard attitude. You wouldn't want your kids to have that ideal, losing the head a lot and getting into fights.*

*R5: But he loses the head in a controlled manner most of the time. Now, he was beaten 7-1 there last week, he went out in front of the press, he didn't hide away in his house and cry about it. He said, 'Right, this was one of the worst days in my life, but we are going to build upon it. What are we going to do? We are after losing, but we are going to build on this.' I just think his attitude is spot-on. Everything he does he wants to be perfect at it. He doesn't do something just for the sake of it. He knows that he is the best at it or that he is going to do his best at it.*

[Men's focus group]

The first respondent refers to the possible negative influence that certain sports stars can have on people, while the second sees aggression, when channelled, as a positive character trait.

However, there are many other ways that mediated sport can impact upon the fan and the viewer. In *The Joy*, the narrator describes the sense of unity that sport can bring in his description of the prisoners watching Ireland play in Italia '90 soccer World Cup tournament. Throughout this sequence sport seems to build bonds and bring people together. This is in contrast to the descriptions of the pool games in the novel, where competitiveness leads to violence. During the interviews, many of the respondents talked about their passion for football and also football as a source of role models. Footballers such as Ronaldo were mentioned and admired in terms of their appearance, their ability to attract women and also because of their wealth. Ronaldo and Beckham were also dismissed as being "big-headed and only interested in money" [Father, 19y]. In this manner, the role of football can be understood on a number of levels. It is possible to argue that it perpetuates ideas of masculinity that are identical to the hegemonic (Mackinnon, 2003: p. 113) and that reinforce violent and aggressive behaviour both on and off the field. It can also be understood as a forum for bonding and inclusion.

However, there is still an exclusion of females from mainstream mediated football and an assumption of heterosexuality among the players.

### 3.2.8 *Fatherhood and masculinity*

The manner in which fatherhood engages with ideas of masculinity was to the fore of one programme analysed, *EastEnders*. Much of the following analysis on fathers draws upon theories of masculinity and applies them to characters who are fathers, as their representations as males and as fathers are often intertwined. Dienhart (1998) claims that there are a number of positive images of fathers in media. However, of the fathers identified in the texts, the majority have had troubled relations with their children or have not been involved in their children's lives. As a result, it is possible to argue that many of the portrayals of fatherhood can be viewed, in Macnamara's terms, as somewhat 'negative'. Because of its focus on domestic and family issues, *EastEnders* explores a range of themes and issues related to fatherhood (Lupton & Barclay, 1997).

*EastEnders* presents the viewers with a number of fathers, many of whom do not fulfil their duties as carers or are absent from their children's lives. Max is not present when Tanya goes into labour, but later redeems himself by delivering the baby at home (in dramatic terms this is to set up his downfall in subsequent episodes). Later in the hospital, he is hailed as hero by Tanya and Bradley. However, his heroic status is undermined as he is shot next to his daughter-in-law Stacey, with whom he is having an affair, reminding the viewer of his hypocritical and contradictory nature as a father. During the interviews many of the respondents listed Max as an example of a 'bad' father:

*R: Max is a bleedin' dope. I swear to God, if I ever seen him in real life I'd punch him in the mouth.*

*I: Why is he a dope?*

*R: Why? He thinks he can flirt with anything, he thinks he's the bees knees, he's nothing, he's a dope, you know. Goes off with his son's girlfriend and how he bleeding does that to his kid, you know. He's a crap father, goes out and uses the kids to get back at the ma, you know. Sap. [Non-father, 25y]*

The various ways of interpreting Max's character were revealed in a women's focus group:

*I: So how are men portrayed there, is that positively or negatively?*

*R1: Max is like a good father, but he's not good enough.*

*R2: Oh my God, he's the worst father you could ever want.*

*R1: No, but he's good to his kids.*

*R2: He's having sex with his fucking, kid's fucking wife.*

[Women's focus group]

Two other characters in *Eastenders*, Jack and Phil, are interesting representations of fatherhood. Jack's power and control is associated with his physical and muscular appearance. An ex-policeman, he also has a violent past. He is in control in his relationship with his business partner Ronnie, who has a sexual interest in him. Combining these traits constructs Jack in terms of hegemonic masculinity: muscular, violent, powerful, and sexually desirable. Although some of the characters see Jack as likeable, Phil's comments during the game of pool suggest that Jack is not an ideal father.

Phil claims that Jack walked out on his child and is no longer allowed to be in the same room as her. Again, being a bad father is established as something to be ashamed of. The examples listed above reveal that the majority of father figures in *EastEnders* have strained relationships with their children and their partners and many are not involved in their children's lives. However, some of the respondents also referred to 'good' fathers and those who made an effort to be a good father. One participant believed that Jack was a 'good' father:

*I suppose a good one would be his brother Jack. In the programme he misses his daughter when he found out she is moving to France. I think he's very close with Tanya's kids and he's starting stuff with Tanya now. So he'd be a good father now. [Non-father, 19y]*

Therefore, depending on the perspective of the viewer, Jack can be understood in positive or negative terms.

Phil, a single father, spends little time with his son, Ben, and Ben is mostly cared for by Phil's mother or cousins. Female characters are left to look after the child. Jack also points out that Phil has missed out on raising Ben, thus revealing that Phil was an absent father for the majority of Ben's life. In a retort, Phil comments, "I will always be there for Ben." He states, "They need certainty, security," and he adds, "Kids need to know that they are safe." While also acting as a cutting remark to Jack, Phil's statement outlines some of factors he feels should be a priority in fathering.

Several respondents view Phil in positive terms:

*The likes of Phil Mitchell, his son Ben, whoever he was supposed to marry a while ago, she was going to kill Ben and Phil ended up killing her; he threw her off a roof. In a way that's a good characteristic for a father because you know that the father is always going to be there, to look after him and make sure he is safe. [Father, 19y]*

Many of the respondents talked about Phil in terms of masculinity and fatherhood. They referred to a particular storyline where his son Ben wished to be a dancer, but that Phil tried to make him play football instead, with one respondent referring to it as "another Billy Elliot" story, where Phil "would probably be a good da but he needs to calm down a little" [Non-father 25y]. Others believed that Phil should let his son do what he wants, while one respondent noted the negative effect that Phil's actions would have on his son:

*Because he wants the child to be manly like him [...] Child loses trust in the father so the father just wants the child to be into sports, boxing. [Non-father, 18y]*

Relating it to his own life, another respondent said that he would prefer his son to be interested in football, but would ultimately support him in whatever he chose to do, thus revealing an understanding of Phil's perspective but not necessarily agreeing with his actions. It is evident that young men are provided with a range of types of fathers and read the various characters in differing ways.

### 3.2.9 *Fatherhood and pregnancy*

Themes relating to fatherhood and pregnancy were particularly apparent in two texts: *Scrubs* and *Knocked Up*. Many of the programmes portray the experiences of fathers during a pregnancy. Similar to portrayals of the inept or incompetent male, men involved in a pregnancy situation are very often, from the female character's perspective, expected to fail from the outset. This can be understood as a continuation of an idea found in many films of the 1980s and 1990s, the idea that a man taking on the duties of caring for a child is amusing. As Lupton and Barclay (1997) note, "The implication is that men should not be expected to know instinctively about baby and child care." (p. 71).

In *Scrubs*, JD and girlfriend Kim are having a baby and there is much negotiation about the issue, with father and mother having an equal say in whether they should keep the baby or have an abortion, indicating that both parents are responsible for making decisions regarding the pregnancy. The short period of their relationship is also an influential factor. The influence of peers, other parents and situational factors are represented as significant in coming to a decision, as they decide to keep the baby once they see Carla and Turk's child. JD's participation in the decision-making process constructs him as a father willing to become involved in the pregnancy. However, this is subsequently undermined in the final episode as he continually runs away from Kim, his now heavily-pregnant girlfriend. Some of the respondents also read JD's character as immature:

*R: Ah, well, JD is becoming a dad but I don't think he is mature enough to be a dad.*

*I: Why not?*

*R: It's just his attitude - he is just like a kid himself. I know he's a doctor but he's a doctor who acts like a kid. And Turk as well, Turk said it to him, that he's not mature enough to be a father.*

[Non-father, 19y]

The male character is firmly established as incompetent. Again, in this scenario, the programme is basing its humour on the construction of a male stereotype as being unable to cope with the prospect of fatherhood.

As JD accompanies Kim to the ultrasound, her delight that he is there suggests that the father's supportive role in the mother's life throughout the pregnancy is viewed in positive terms. How to treat Kim is also a central theme, as Turk indicates that "when it comes to babies, women are crazy" and Carla advises that "she is pregnant, you are supposed to tell her what she wants to hear". The implication is that women act differently when they are pregnant and men should take this into account while also answering their every call. The male characters also agree with this. The programme suggests that males and females have designated roles to play during the pregnancy.

This idea that men should automatically accept and accommodate the wishes of pregnant women was countered by an interviewee:

*Why do women think that because they're pregnant, you know what I mean, they can bitch and moan and get away with shit, you know, like give out and think the men want to sit there and take it? Fair enough, they have temper tantrums because of the pregnancy and all that but*

*they shouldn't be fucking given too much 'cause they're pregnant [laughs].*

[Non-father, 25y]

Therefore, the scenario in *Scrubs* is relevant to the lives of many men, and the viewer can accept or reject the particular view of gender relations represented.

The role of friends and peers is also presented as significant. JD's understanding of fatherhood is aided by advice from Turk and Dr Cox, who reveal that "having a kid changes the way you think about everything" and "you start seeing the world differently". JD's own personal history also has an impact on his attitude towards the pregnancy. He feels that he had a negative childhood because his parents were divorced and consequently gets back together with his girlfriend believing that this is the best thing for the child. As a result, an idea is constructed that two-parent families are more beneficial for the child. When Turk's wife Carla goes into labour, like many of the male characters mentioned above, Turk is established as inept, unable to be there to support her. He forgets her suitcase and then gets his arm stuck in a drinks machine. Despite this, Turk makes it to the birth just in time, suggesting that, despite his failures, he is there for Carla and the baby in the end. Corresponding to such a view, one of the interviewees gave his reasons for reading Turk as a 'good' father:

*He stops all the play-acting; he becomes responsible because he knows he has responsibilities.* [Non-father, 19y]

As with Max in *EastEnders* and Ben in *Knocked Up*, many of these storylines centre on a basic narrative structure: the male is fearful of becoming a father; he does not fulfil his duties (designated by the partner) during the pregnancy or at the moment of labour; he eventually becomes responsible and proves to his partner and to others that he is worthy of becoming a father; he is delighted and proud to be a father and his partner is happy that he has proved himself. As a result, the father is established in negative terms from the outset, and there is an assumption that he will be a bad father and partner unless he proves otherwise. Many gender stereotypes are generated of both the male and female characters with the result that myths and roles may be perpetuated. Fatherhood is presented as something to be proud of, as a positive moment in a man's life, as a turning point, and as also having an impact on friends and peers.

### *3.2.10 Uninvolved fathers*

The issue of uninvolved fathers was raised in several focus groups and interviews. Participants demonstrated awareness that there may be multiple reasons for a father's absence:

*I: Why do you think, then, that some fathers don't get involved in their kids' lives, or aren't involved?*

*R3: They are afraid. They are too young.*

*R1: They are just not ready.*

*R5: Just not ready, they are too immature.*

*R4: They have better things, not that they have better things but they feel they have other things on their mind.*

*I: You were saying that they are afraid. What are they afraid of?*

*R3: Responsibility.*

*R4: They won't be a good enough father to the child because they are so young, they haven't got a job, they can't support them.*

*R3: I'd say it is very daunting to be in that situation. You are sitting there and your girlfriend is pregnant and wondering what am I actually going to do? I'm here in college and all, or even in school. You are in school, you are studying for your Leaving Cert and you have to think 'I am going to be a father. What the hell am I going to do?'*

[Men's focus group]

Absent fatherhood as a theme is also present in many of the texts; there is little or no reference to absent mothers. Single mothers are represented, but few single fathers. The reasons for the father's absence are very rarely explored. Three of the texts analysed engaged directly with issues of uninvolved fathers.

In *The O.C.* other characters talk of Ryan's father, Frank, before he appears in the series. He comes from a working-class background, has spent eight years in prison, and used to beat his wife and children. The other characters dislike him for this reason. He is initially represented as devious and cunning, by spying on the Cohens and then lying that he has cancer in order to spend time with Ryan. This can be read in several ways, either as exploitative and insensitive, or as a desperate last resort to re-establish contact with his son. He claims that he is a reformed man and that "sometimes the system works". He has educated himself and is now set to prove that he has changed. The programme suggests that a good man is equated with change and self-betterment through education, an interpretation that was also acknowledged by a participant in one of the focus groups:

*One of the programmes in the O.C., and Ryan, his da, he used to batter him when he was younger. Then he went to prison and in the last season his da got out and his da started having a relationship with him then. It was good - he stopped drinking, and all.*

[Respondent from men's focus group]

Similarly, *Prison Break* features a number of absent fathers. Linc is father to LJ and feels bad that he was not there for his son. Before he is due to go to the electric chair, Linc is almost in tears while on the phone to his son. The impact of the tears can only be read in opposition to his usual demeanour as strong and silent. However, outside of prison, Linc is depicted protecting and caring for his son. When leaving LJ, Linc promises that he will return soon, LJ reminds him, "Isn't that the same thing your dad told you?", to which Linc responds "Yeah, but I mean it", and they hug. By drawing attention to the family history in this way, the film suggests that fathers are not necessarily bound to repeat the behaviour of their own fathers. As a result, several of the participants read Linc's character in positive terms, and linked this positive element to ideas of masculinity:

*Burrows [Linc], I think he would be more of a proper man, the way he looks after his son. He would be. [Respondent from men's focus group]*

Linc is seen as a 'proper man' because he cares for his son.

It is evident that Scofield and Linc have not seen their father in a long time and Scofield is almost emotional when reunited with his father, signifying the importance he places on having a relationship with his father. Many interviewees referred to this storyline and cited Linc as a 'positive' representation of a father because of his efforts to do the best for his son.

In American Gangster Richie is a non-resident father and the film suggests that his obsession with work and cleaning up society has left him with little time for his wife and son. This is represented in a scene set in the park where his ex-wife reveals that she is taking her son and moving to Las Vegas, and also that Richie has failed to turn up for visits with his son. During this conversation, Richie becomes distracted by a group of young men breaking bottles in the park. He interrupts his conversation with his ex-wife and reprimands the men, thus proving her point that he is more focused on caring for society rather than his own family. This could be read as an attempt to construct Richie's behaviour as 'natural' for men: he becomes aggressive with the youths, and threatens to pull out his gun. These are established as expected actions of men within the film. It could also be interpreted that the neglect of fatherly responsibilities is also 'typical' male behaviour.

During the interviews, the young men were asked to watch this extract from American Gangster and to comment on it. Once again, there were multiple interpretations of the scene. Many felt that it was a negative portrayal of a father. Some suggested that the child's mother was correct in moving to Las Vegas with the child, while others argued that she had no right to do so. It was also claimed that while Richie may be seen as a 'good' man because of his morals and his devotion to his work, this did not necessarily make him a 'good' father:

*He is a good da, but just when it suits him .... He is kind of, has a short temper, but he means well.* [Non-father, 22y]

The son's reaction was also noted in the film and many said that Richie's behaviour was inappropriate in front of his son: "He looked too violent anyway, threatening to shoot everyone in the head in front of his child. He's not a father" [Father, 23y]. Others suggested that he needed to show more affection: "He needs to look for a new line of work, especially if he wants to keep his kid ... When his kid left there he should have shown a little more affection." [Non-father, 25] Overall, interviewees felt that the child's mother was in control of the situation and that Richie had little say in the matter. It was also suggested that perhaps Richie was finding it difficult to balance work and his family life and that he was doing his best:

*He is trying to make an effort but he doesn't have time because he is a cop. He wants to make the time, but he can't.* [Father, 19y]

In the custody battle in court, Richie apologises to his wife and thinks that she is angry because he never gave them enough money, and was not corrupt, while his ex-wife accuses him of being dishonest. As his lawyer begins to defend him, Richie declares that his wife is correct, that he is an unfit father and his lifestyle does not provide a safe



environment for his son. This can be read in multiple ways. On one hand, Richie looks beyond his own personal desires of having access to his son and prioritises the welfare of his child. He realises that his son would be better off in Las Vegas, away from him. However, this scene could also be interpreted as reinforcing the stereotype of the non-resident father, as he is unable or unwilling to live with and care for his son. In this sense, the role of the father is not established as one of nurturing in a domestic environment. The working world (dominated by men) is his priority and, the film seems to imply, the natural and necessary place for this man.

Throughout these representations there is little or no exploration as to why many of the fathers are absent. The large number of fathers who are absent from the storylines could imply that this is a natural or accepted part of life. As a result, females are established as the primary carers for children in the texts, a pattern that could contribute to creating or perpetuating ideas about gender roles, or devalue the role of the father in the child's life.

### 3.2.11 *Fatherhood and turning points*

Themes of fatherhood as a turning point emerged in two texts in particular: *Scrubs* and *Knocked Up*. As is evident in the discussion of *Scrubs*, fatherhood is established as a turning point for many of the characters. This generally involves the father becoming more caring and affectionate toward the child and supporting the mother. This was a theme that was discussed in many of the focus groups:

*I: Do you think when a fella does become a father, do you think that changes the way he acts as a man?*

*R3: Yeah. You can actually see it now over the past couple of weeks with a man that had a baby. Actually the fucking change in him was a lot, boy.*

*R2: He quietened down.*

*R3: He quietened down.*

*R1: He changed into a family man.*

*R4: He changed his lifestyle around.*

*I: What did he do to change his lifestyle?*

*R2: He could be a lazy bastard up until the child was born, like, and then go off and get a job or something.*

[Men's focus group]

This change can also be identified in many of the films and television programmes viewed by young men. In *Knocked Up* Ben's becoming a father is depicted as an initiation or as a process of development and his behaviour as a man is very much transformed by the end of the film. This does not simply arise from him becoming a father, but from the moment that he decides he should become a responsible man. Therefore, his behaviour is influenced not simply by becoming a father in the biological sense, but his realisation that he must adjust his lifestyle in order to become a particular type of father, i.e. a 'good' father. As part of this process Ben finds a job, moves out of the home he shares with his friends, gets an apartment and starts to read the parenting books that he has bought. In this way the film suggests that there are at least three necessary components to being a good father: being financially independent, having your own home/space (free of drink and drugs) for the child, and being informed and educated about ideas of parenting. In this way

Ben takes control of his life, which impresses Alison and ultimately results in her allowing Ben to play an active role in the birth of the child.

Some of those interviewed, who had seen the whole film, found the character of Ben and his transformation unrealistic:

*They changed the way he is. I don't think that would happen. If you like to have a laugh the way he did in that film, you'd sort of continue that on when he had the baby, but he seemed to just stop altogether, but you have to have a bit of that in your life - you can't just completely change. [Non-father, 19y]*

There are many stages to this transformation, much of it relying on the power-relations between Ben and Alison. When Alison discovers she is pregnant, she is reluctant to tell Ben, and only does so after her sister Debbie persuades her to, suggesting that the mother has the power in decision-making processes. Alison's mother advises her to have an abortion, demonstrating the role that the maternal family can play in decisions made during an unplanned pregnancy. Alison blames Ben for the pregnancy, while he claims it was her fault that he did not use a condom. As the interviews with young men reveal, there are multiple readings of this but ultimately it adheres to the image that Ben is inept. Alison informs Ben that she is keeping the baby (again, it is her decision), and he replies, "My job is to support you in whatever you want to do." The father is therefore assigned a more passive role in the process. Yet Alison insists that it is "not my situation" but "our situation", revealing her desire to have him involved. Debbie argues that Alison must "train him", a theory she got from Oprah. This points to the influence of the media and also constructs the male as incapable of providing positive support without pressure from the female partner.

Throughout the film it seems that Ben's involvement with the pregnancy can only happen at Alison's discretion. From Alison's perspective, Ben will not be a good father because of the lifestyle he leads. At times the audience are encouraged to side with this view. While Alison has the power in the relationship, her authority is often undermined as she is frequently constructed as emotional and controlling. Therefore, depending on their position, the audience can identify with Ben as victim, with Alison as victim, or see both perspectives simultaneously. The viewer can move between identification and dis-identification (Hanke, 1992).

At the end of the film, Ben and Alison adopt traditional gender roles. Alison calls Ben because she needs his help, representing her as a dependent female, in contrast to the independent working woman she was at the beginning. The ending can be read as a formulaic patriarchal myth as Ben comes to her rescue in her time of need, and thereby has the opportunity to prove himself and win her approval. Ben knows what to do during the birthing scene and he takes control of the situation, adopting the role of male protector. Ben's transformation has a knock-on effect on his peers, as they end their betting, thus representing a move toward maturity.

The film ends with a montage of baby and family pictures, suggesting that Ben plays an active role in his child's life for years to come. The 'happy' ending associates happiness

with both parents staying together and raising the child together. In general, the film ultimately resorts to traditional gender stereotyping and suggests that a good father is one who acts as a protector for his female partner. Once again there is an expectation that Ben is going to fail and that he must prove himself. Therefore, it is possible to read the film as reinforcing certain expectations of masculinity and male behaviour as it resorts to stereotyping males and fathers as essentially incompetent unless they prove otherwise.

### 3.2.12 *Adoptive fathers and biological fathers*

The analysis also included an examination of representations of biological and non-biological fathers, a theme which arose in two texts.

In *The O.C.* Sandy acts as Ryan's adoptive father. Committed to spending time with his family, Sandy is not afraid to express his feelings and love toward his wife Kirstin, adopted son Ryan or biological son Seth. He is magnanimous in his behaviour and becomes Ryan's legal guardian. He tells Ryan, "You are my family, what's important to me is you." As a result, he can be read as a loving and caring father who puts his family first and treats his son and his adoptive son the same. During an interview, one of the respondents noted his admiration for Sandy as a father, but also suggested:

*He wouldn't really, the stuff he does, you wouldn't really get most das doing. He is kind of mellowed out about things. [Non-father, 22y]*

*Desperate Housewives* also engages with this issue of adoption. Gaby and Carlos are represented as devoted to the child that they are trying to adopt (Gaby more so). The biological father (Dale) turns up and requests that, as he has not signed the consent form, the child should be returned to his custody. The character of Dale is constructed as a 'dumb jock' as he was delayed in reaching Gaby and Carlos because he was on a drinking holiday with his male friends. This is similar to the construction of Ben and his friends in *Knocked Up*. Dale is established as weak and inept. Gaby tries to convince him that he will ruin his life if he keeps the child and attaches a stigma to young parenting. This approach fails and she consequently makes a speech about how he has committed a sin. This also represents a form of stigmatising, but is positioned within the context of a dominant patriarchal myth. As a result, Dale succumbs to Gaby's demands and signs the consent form. Despite this, the biological mother and her boyfriend (Frank) return for the child. Issues of class are introduced, as are ideas of transformation. The birth mother tells Gaby, "Frank has really stepped up .... Frank quit using [drugs] and got a good job down at the plant." The suggestion is that this transformation will allow Frank to become a 'good' father to the baby. Frank and the birth parents are peripheral characters in the series and Frank claims that he only wants the baby so that he can get back together with the mother. As a result, the audience are encouraged to identify with the perspective of Carlos and Gaby and to view the young parents in negative terms.

The texts reveal a negative portrayal of young parents and attach this to a couple from a working-class background. It could be argued that such a representation encourages the formation of stereotypes in society. The texts also demonstrate the love and care that adoptive parents have for their children and implies that there is no distinction between fathering an adopted child and fathering a biological child.

### 3.2.13 Sexual responsibility and contraception

Themes of sexual responsibility and contraception were absent in many of the texts identified, corresponding to Kunkel et al.'s view that there is a lack of prominence of sexual risk and responsibility on television (2005). This under-representation can be understood in several ways. It is possible to argue that many of the texts do not engage directly with aspects of sexual responsibility and contraception or that films and TV programmes analysed very often contain suggestions of sexual activity rather than explicit representations. In an effort to engage with themes of the study, several texts were directly targeted for analysis. This included the film *Knocked Up*, which was mentioned in one of the focus groups. Several of the interviewees also said that they had watched the film. Four texts in total were identified as representing issues related to sexual responsibility and contraception: *Knocked Up*, *The O.C.*, *American Gangster*, and *Scrubs*. Themes of sexual responsibility are to the fore of *Knocked Up*. The moment of conception is not represented in romantic terms but is clumsy and drunken. Having met in a nightclub, Alison acts as instigator by inviting Ben back to her house, and there is no communication in relation to sex. Some of the interviewees described Alison in negative terms because of her control and power in the situation:

*With me, I would be the one who would make the first move all the time, unless you get lucky and she makes the first move, but that rarely happens, you know what I mean, unless she is a slapper. [Father, 20y]*

This participant reveals negative perceptions of a woman who instigates a sexual situation. Alison asks Ben if he has a condom, again suggesting that the female takes control of the situation and is sexually responsible. Ben has a condom and can thus be read as sexually responsible. He cannot seem to get the condom on so Alison, frustrated by the delay, yells at him to "just do it already". He throws the condom away and they have unprotected sex. Ben says, "Good thing I am drunk, this is lasting forever," suggesting an immaturity or lack of sexual experience on his part, while Alison responds with, "Stop talking," signalling a desire for sex rather than intimacy.

During the interview, respondents were shown this extract from the film and asked to comment on several aspects of the scenes. The majority believed that Alison was in control of the situation, having invited Ben back to her place. Thus the female character can be read as instigator of sexual relations. Many also believed that Ben was to blame for the crisis pregnancy as he did not wear the condom. Others felt that Alison should have checked to make sure that Ben was wearing a condom, while the majority gave the opinion that both Ben and Alison should accept equal responsibility.

There was also a mixed response to whether or not this was a realistic portrayal of sexual activity. Some focused on the nightclub and the consumption of alcohol, arguing that this was the usual way that sex occurred for them. One respondent claimed that:

*I suppose it happens a lot, kind of thing. In a club you get drunk, you bring them to the quickest place possible...You don't care about a johnny or anything, just having sex. [Father, 22y]*

This view was echoed by many of the interviewees. Some found the scene unrealistic but could identify with aspects of it, such as not being able to get the condom on when drunk. Some felt that the discussion of contraception before sex was unrealistic:

*Some people don't even ask. They just do it ... Using a condom, most people don't really ask.*  
[Father, 19y]

Following this scene, the next morning Alison seems to regret the experience while Ben is depicted as being socially inept with a female and makes comments that Alison finds inappropriate.

The word 'abortion' is not mentioned but they use the term "a-word" instead, possibly constructing a form of censorship and attaching a stigma to abortion. Some characters are in favour of abortion, while others are against, thus ensuring that members of the audience are not alienated.

In answer to a direct question, the majority of respondents noted that Ben's character was a predominantly negative portrayal of a man, with participants referring to him as a "shithead" and "jackass". Of those who had seen the whole film, some commented that the representation was negative in the beginning but that by the end of the film Ben's character could be viewed as a positive representation.

Similarly, the idea of abortion is left open in *Scrubs* and a certain viewpoint is not enforced on the audience. JD and Kim's discussion of abortion suggests that there are options when it comes to unplanned pregnancies. However, the statue of Jesus talks to JD and condemns abortion, and thus an anti-abortion stance is aligned with religious beliefs. Another female character, Jordan, admits that she had an abortion after getting pregnant when she was nineteen. By the end of the episode, Jordan is established as a voice of reason and advises JD and Kim that "it is not a logical decision .... If it is right you will feel it on your heart". Consequently, ideas regarding abortion are neither promoted nor rejected.

Sexual responsibility is also a major theme in one of the episodes of *The O.C.*. Summer has missed her period and fears that she is pregnant, although she is reluctant to take the test as the possibility of confirmation frightens her. The pregnancy is unplanned and no contraception was used. Summer claims that she did not use a contraceptive pill because of her ethical beliefs in relation to pharmaceutical companies, and that no condom was used because they "smell funny". Taylor responds with, "So do diapers," implying that there is a greater inconvenience associated with child-rearing than there is with using contraception. When using the test, the programme goes into great detail about how it works as the instructions are read aloud, giving the viewer an indication of the processes involved. In this regard the programme can be understood as a form of educational entertainment (Buckingham & Bragg, 2003). The pregnancy scare also has a knock-on effect on Taylor, as she postpones sleeping with Ryan.

Seth is depicted as an insensitive man. He does not realise that it is his girlfriend's test, he asks Summer to celebrate that it is not their problem. Later, he admits that he "freaked

out” when he heard the news, possibly alluding to the idea that the male character is unable to cope with such situations, a trait that is found in many of the male characters from other texts. In what he terms as “trying to be a man” he proposes to her before they get the test results. In this sense ‘manhood’ is equated with ‘trying to do the right thing’. Other aspects of sexual responsibility are evident throughout the series. During a pool party Summer’s friend Che throws a condom at two kissing teenagers and says, “If you are going to consummate your union, be safe.” One possible reading is that this is a warning to teens of the importance of safe-sex. In terms of power-relations Taylor buys herself some lingerie so that she looks good for Ryan when they have sex for the first time. There is no suggestion that Ryan has to look good, which possibly suggests that women need to make an effort for men, but it is not expected that the men will do the same.

Another character in the series, Julie, begins to run a prostitution ring through her dating agency where young men are paid to sleep with older female clients. Although established for comedy value, as Julie gets herself into an awkward predicament, there is no suggestion that males are being exploited for sex and money. While this storyline may be designed to establish humour, if it were female prostitutes and older male clients, then the reading would be different. On one level, the programme may suggest that there is a distinction between acceptable male and female behaviour and that the objectification and sexual exploitation of men is acceptable. As Mackinnon (2003) notes, the new man may simply be an updating of the old man without the sexism, but it does not make females any more powerful. In fact, he argues that it has led to disempowerment of males, who are now also exploited through ideologies rooted in consumerism.

While there is no specific reference to contraception or sexual responsibility in *American Gangster*, women and men are portrayed in stereotypical terms. Richie’s many sexual conquests are suggested throughout; for example, in one scene he has sex with his lawyer in several areas of the kitchen. Women are placed in subordinate positions throughout and are primarily depicted as objects of sex - such as lapdancers, trophy wives, prostitutes and sexual conquests - or as mothers and carers. The majority of women in the film are often shot naked or wearing very little clothing. There are no strong female characters in this male-dominated world. While Richie’s lawyer is female, and could possibly represent a challenge to traditional gender stereotyping, she later begs him during sex, thus transforming her into a sexual object in the film.

Most of these examples engage with sexual relations in stereotypical terms. There is an exploitation of both men and women in terms of the sex industry. However, the exploitation of men is used for comic effect. When women have power in sexual situations it is usually to the detriment of the male character. There are also many myths regarding sexual activity and contraception, and there is an attempt to educate the viewer of *The O.C.* in terms of the intricacies of using a pregnancy test.

### 3.3 Summary of findings

The following are some of the possible ways in which the texts can be read, depending on the position, expectations, and cultural experiences and beliefs of the viewer. As is evident from this chapter, many are hypothetical readings, arrived at from a combination of the content analysis and critical reading. These readings are then related to responses from participants in both focus groups and individual interviews. As a result of this process, it is apparent that the group of texts analysed provide a range of varied and diverse representations of masculinity, fatherhood and sexual responsibility, for young male viewers.

Irrespective of readings adopted, it is possible to argue that the following messages are present in specific instances within particular texts. It is noteworthy that many of these messages often contradict each other:

- A number of texts suggest that violence is inherent to masculinity and several posit that violence and aggression can be controlled
- The O.C. associates violence and aggression with a working-class masculinity
- Accelerator may suggest that young men have a distrust of authority figures
- Many films and books depict drugs and alcohol as common and normal parts of the lives of young men
- The Premiership corresponds to critical arguments that sports coverage tends to focus on male participants and assumes heterosexuality
- On viewing The Premiership, it is possible to argue that soccer participates in the language of war and aggression and that soccer also perpetuates ideas of hegemonic masculinity
- A large number of texts analysed are based on the premise that men are incompetent in many ways, but particularly as fathers and sexual partners, unless they prove otherwise
- Several programmes and films engage with the idea that men cannot live up to the hegemonic model and that hegemonic masculinity is something to be laughed at and dismissed
- According to representations within a number of texts, an idea is promoted that men and women think and act differently because of their biological make-up. Other texts propose that masculinity and femininity are social constructions and that ideas about masculinities and femininities change and shift from situation to situation. Some texts engaged with the notion that individual masculinities must be understood within the wider cultural context in which they are positioned

- Representations of homosexuality often align it with femininity and portray it as 'outside' of the mainstream, while *Knocked Up* suggests that homophobic comments are appropriate and acceptable
- Texts construct notions about what is 'common sense' and what are accepted norms and behaviours
- Several of the texts represent fathers as having strained relationships with their children and many fathers are portrayed as absent from their children's lives. Some programmes present mothers as primary carers and many plots are based on the premise that fathers are too incompetent to share caring responsibilities.
- Many of the films and television programmes represent becoming a father as a proud moment and fatherhood as a turning point in men's lives. Some scenes analysed depict the impact that becoming a father can have on friends and peers. Many of the father characters are represented as caring and making important contributions to children's lives
- In one text, an anti-abortion stance is aligned with religious belief
- Several texts, particularly *Knocked Up*, suggest that alcohol has an impact on decision-making processes during sex, while others focus on the idea that condoms should be used during sex. Many of the texts show the sexual exploitation of both men and women and link sexual activity with power
- A majority of texts engage with the ideas that women tend to 'nag' men and that men are sexist. Some texts represent women and men as sexual objects.

It is evident that the spectator is capable of accepting or rejecting these ideas represented in the texts. While young men may be exposed to these ideas, it is not necessarily the case that they agree with them.

### 3.4 Conclusion

The role that the media can play in constructing our sense of reality is an extremely complex process. Film, television and literature not only reflect debates and anxieties in society but are also part of society, and contribute to constructing perceived cultural norms and expectations of behaviour. Central to this research project is an examination of the construction of stereotypes by the media and the impact that this may have on creating expectations regarding young men and fathers. As discussed above, researchers have argued that stereotypes in the media not only help shape men's perceptions of themselves and other men, but also women's expectations of men in life, in relationships, and during sexual activity. Depending on the perspective of the viewer, it can be argued that media texts can function on a number of levels and reflect, construct, perpetuate or reinforce ideas about men in society. As is demonstrated above, young men are exposed to a wide range of ideas regarding masculinity, fatherhood, and sexual responsibility. Not all of the texts were read or understood in the same way. As is evident from the direct comments



made during the interviews, the perspectives on and interpretations of the texts vary greatly within this group of young men.

It is also important to note that, although not commented on directly, much of the content of the media texts is related to experiences and attitudes within the men's own lives.

Themes identified during the content analysis also emerged throughout the interviews, particularly in relation to violence, homosexuality, fatherhood, sex, power and drugs. Other significant themes emerged and can also be related to comments made by the young men in their interviews. The use of alcohol and drugs, which featured in many of the films and television programmes, was prevalent in the lives of several of the young men. When referring to watching or playing sports, the majority of the men stated that they did so with their friends or fathers, but not their female partners. As a result, this corresponds to the argument that mediated football is a male-dominated terrain. Themes of pregnancy and fatherhood as discussed in Part I (Chapter 4.0) are also explored in the texts analysed. For example, Turk and JD's apprehension and fear around becoming fathers echoes many of the anxieties revealed by the young fathers interviewed. Both *Scrubs* and *Knocked Up* can be related to the young fathers' discussions of fatherhood as something to be proud of, as a turning point in a man's life, and as having an impact on friends and peers. *American Gangster* also engaged with custody battles and father's rights, an issue pertinent to a number of the young fathers interviewed. In relation to sex and sexual responsibility, *Knocked Up* dealt with several issues that the young men talked about. As discussed in Part I of the study (Chapter 3.0), those interviewed revealed that there was very little if any discussion regarding contraception prior to having sex, particularly if it was a one-night stand. However, many felt that the extract from the film was 'realistic'. The chapter reveals that the young men interviewed are exposed to a wide range of ideas and perspectives on masculinity, fatherhood, and sex. The most notable finding is the plethora of inept or incompetent male characters that appear in film and television. In general, when related to the findings from the interviews, it becomes apparent that while some men accept the ideologies presented to them, others actively reject them. It can be argued that some of the content reinforces certain ideas when it meets with the viewer's/reader's perception of cultural norms while, alternatively, media content can be rejected if it does not correspond to some of the spectator's/reader's expectations. This reveals that those interviewed are not a homogenous group but a group of individuals that engage with and read the media in diverse, complex and often contradictory ways.

#### 4.0 Discussion of findings from the media analysis

The processes involved in constructing meaning from media texts are extremely complex but it is generally agreed that, as part of popular culture, media can have a central role in producing or constructing our sense of reality (Craig, 1992b; Fiske, 1987). Media texts contain certain ideologies which can inform the viewer's own sense of reality or understanding of cultural 'norms' and ideas of 'common sense'. This is a complicated process, and viewers cannot be understood as simply passively accepting material to which they are exposed. As the quotations from the interviews revealed, while some of the viewers may accept certain ideologies presented in the media, others actively reject specific representations. Throughout the interviews, it also emerged that the young men had varied views on the extent of the influence of media on their own lives. Some men accepted that ideologies in the media can impact upon their perceptions of 'norms' within culture, while others were reluctant to acknowledge that films and television programmes could shape their perceptions of 'common sense' and cultural expectations.

Some participants were reluctant to engage with questions regarding the impact of media or to comment on the specific extracts that were screened during the interview. Many could not see the relevance of the questions and often gave the response that "it's just a film" and signalled that it had no relation to decisions that they made in their own lives. However, as Macnamara (2006, p. 13) has noted, media content is never ideologically innocent or "simply entertainment", a view which only a minority of young men expressed. Several of the young men directly engaged with aspects of the discussion and demonstrated a clear proficiency in media literacy. However, the majority of the men from the sample did not identify or articulate views on the construction of gender and fatherhood in the media. It is possible to argue that these young men do not actively deconstruct the ideological forces at work in films, television programmes and books. Despite this, it was evident from the interviews that the media, in its construction of a sense of reality, had a potential role to play in creating or validating many of the opinions held by the young men. This was particularly to the fore during discussions regarding violence. The 'rage issues' and violent activities of some of the men could be found in programmes such as *Prison Break*, *Desperate Housewives* and *The O.C.*, with one man directly identifying with the character of Ryan from *The O.C.* The young men's descriptions of football and watching football as predominantly male activities correspond to many of the images from programmes such as *The Premiership*, which establish soccer as an arena for male commentators, analysts, spectators and players. This adheres to Mackinnon's (2003) discussion of the exclusion of women in mediated sport.

It is also possible to argue that the majority of the young men's perspectives on homosexuality are validated and endorsed by the media under analysis. The characters in *Knocked Up* make jokes and homophobic comments which are never undermined or challenged by the text. Similarly, many of the men stated that they would often 'slag' gay men. In one sense, individual perspectives on homosexuality are irrelevant to this debate and what is important to note is that a hierarchy of masculinity is constructed (Connell, 2005). By dismissing behaviour that is often associated with homosexuality, the text reinforces an idea that there is an accepted form of male behaviour that men should adhere to. Such constructions of gender present the male viewer with a narrow set of

possibilities in life and provide him with limited options available when performing his masculine identity.

Many of the texts analysed rely on stereotypical constructions of male and female characters. While the texts depict a plurality of masculinities, hegemonic masculinity is often to the fore. This hegemonic masculinity still emphasises the importance of behaving in a particular manner, which involves avoiding feminine behaviour, focusing on success, and being emotionally distant (Newbold et al., 2002). The construction of gender binaries and gender stereotypes were evident in many of the texts such as *Desperate Housewives*, *Knocked Up*, *The Joy*, *Scrubs*, *The O.C.*, *EastEnders*, *Accelerator*, and *American Gangster*. In general terms, women are predominantly represented as mothers, annoying partners or seducers, while men are predominantly portrayed as aggressive, inept, and unable to understand or see the female's perspective. Very often, fathers are represented as absent from their families, and there is little or no explanation of the reasons for their absence. Many fathers are also depicted as having loving and caring relationships with their children, but on several occasions the characters require assistance from their female partners in order to complete domestic duties.

One of the most striking findings from the analysis was the number of inept male characters found throughout the texts. Simple, stupid, inept and laddish male characters featured in many of the films and television programmes and correspond to Macnamara's (2006) claim that negative images of men and fathers dominate the media. The plots of these texts often centred on a male who must prove himself worthy and responsible. From the outset, an assumption was presented that the male was incapable and incompetent unless he proved otherwise. This representation of the incompetent male was also a component of many of the father characters in the texts, particularly around the birth of their child and their transition to fatherhood. The implications of such representations are significant in terms of how young men view themselves and are viewed by society in general.

If such images of men are repeated across a number of texts then stereotypes are constructed which can affect our expectations of male behaviour. These stereotypes can also have an impact on the self-perceptions of young men, on how women view men, and how men view each other. Such expectations can be normalised by the media (Connell, 2005) and influence male and female relationships as well as father-child relationships. As a result, these constructions of masculinity can have an impact on matters relating to fatherhood and men's sexual behaviour.

While there were many references to sex and sexual activity, the majority of the texts did not directly engage with issues of sexual responsibility. This is in keeping with the Kaiser Foundation's finding of a lack of prominence of sexual risk and responsibility on US television during the 2004-2005 season. *The O.C.* was the main television text that specifically engaged with issues of sexual responsibility, detailing the intricacies of using pregnancy tests and making references to using condoms. In many ways, the programme can be understood as a source of information for young people and demonstrates the potential role that media can play in informing its audience about such matters (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004).

In one sense, *Knocked Up* can also be read as a text that informs and educates its audience about the consequences of having unprotected sex and the pressures of becoming a father. *Knocked Up* also dealt with matters that, as became evident during the interviews, were directly relevant to the sexual activities of the young men. When the character Ben has unprotected sex, his actions are not based on a lack of knowledge regarding sexual responsibility nor are they a result of condoms being inaccessible to him. Similarly, many of those interviewed were fully aware of the risks involved and yet, despite having a condom on their person, decided not to use the condom because they were caught in "the heat of the moment". Ben's actions and his decision to have sexual intercourse because of his belief that his female partner was willing to have unprotected sex, was a trend also found in many of the interviews. Several of the young men based their decisions regarding the use of contraception on whether or not their sexual partner insisted that one be used. It is possible to argue that the depiction of such a scenario in *Knocked Up* reinforces the idea that such behaviour is expected and typical of young men. Finally, research has revealed that as a result of a reluctance to talk about such issues amongst their peers, young men are often ill-informed about sexual activity and methods of contraception and protection (Forrest, 2000). During the interviews, it also emerged that many of the young men lacked the correct information regarding aspects of contraception, particularly in relation to the withdrawal method. *Knocked Up* also depicts young men discussing sexual intercourse and supposed methods of natural contraception. One character claims that women cannot become pregnant if they are in a particular position during sex. The statement is incorrect but is never challenged by any other characters. For viewers who do not realise that the comment is untrue, they could possibly interpret it as fact. As a result, the film can be seen as perpetuating myths regarding contraceptive practices.

It is also important to note that media texts are just one source of images of gender in society and one element that can be drawn upon to aid the construction of gender identities. Young men may form their attitudes toward masculinity, fatherhood and sexual responsibility from a range of sources, as evidenced for example by the role that young men's own fathers played in their construction of their own fathering vision. However, the media analysis presented in this report has supplied a detailed insight into some of the themes and issues that are directly relevant to the lives of these young men, and demonstrates that media texts can play a central role in helping to create, perpetuate, challenge or validate young men's concepts of masculinity, fatherhood and sexual responsibility.

In conclusion, key messages arising from the media analysis point to the role of the media in perpetuating gender stereotypes. The dominance of male and female characters engaging in stereotypically male and female behaviour was evident throughout the texts analysed. One of the most striking messages was the dominance of incompetent male characters engaging in laddish, inept behaviour who must prove themselves to be competent and responsible. This theme was a component of texts relating to sexual relationships as well as fatherhood. The findings suggest that prevailing gender relations and constructions of masculinity in popular culture may shape young men's sexual, relationship and parenting experiences, although the men had varied perspectives on the extent of media influence on their lives. While some men rejected the influence of media

on their lives, other men acknowledged the potential role of media representations in creating cultural norms relating to men's behaviour. Thus, the dominant representations of incompetent men and fathers prevalent in the media may have a negative effect on how men perceive themselves and are viewed in general by society.

Greater attention needs to be paid to how hegemonic constructions of masculinity constrain and limit the possibilities of men and women in their roles as sexual partners, romantic partners and parents. Findings from the study point to the need to educate about the distinctions between gender and sex, and raise awareness of how expectations associated with being male and female are often only culturally prescribed rather than naturally determined. Challenging prevalent gender boundaries and the expectations inherent in cultural norms has the potential to contribute to greater sexual responsibility, for example by removing stigma for men to engage with sexual health services or by encouraging women to carry condoms. Similarly, challenging traditional constructions of father-as-breadwinner and mother-as-homemaker parenting roles opens up possibilities for men to engage with their fathering role in a variety of important ways. This may be especially important for men whose ability to financially support their families is constrained by limited educational and employment opportunities.

Recommendations arising from parts I and II of the research are considered in the final section of the report.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This chapter considers recommendations and concluding comments arising from both parts of the study. This report has presented the findings of a study of socio-economically disadvantaged young men's sexual activities and engagement with fatherhood. Based on individual in-depth interviews with 41 young men (aged 17-25 years), half of whom had become fathers, we explored men's sexual patterns, their use of contraception and protection, their knowledge of sexual health and engagement with sexual health services, their constructions of fatherhood and their engagement with the fathering role. We used the concept of 'turning points' to explore whether experiences such as pregnancy scares, miscarriages, abortions, and becoming a father changed men's approaches to sexual responsibility (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002). We also examined how constructions of masculinities and expectations regarding male behaviour can impact on issues related to sexual responsibility and fatherhood. Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of the popular media watched and read by participants documented the dominant representations of sexual responsibility, fatherhood and masculinity therein, while interviews with the men explored the extent to which the young men accepted or rejected the ideologies presented in the media and used them to guide their own behaviour. In this way, we hoped to examine the relationship between the media and young men's sexual behaviour and fathering roles.

### Recommendations arising from research

Based upon the findings of the study, key recommendations arising from the research are considered under the following headings: service provision, legal age of consent, information needs relating to contraception and STIs, targeting barriers to condom access and use, delivery of sex education programmes, young men as fathers, media and advertising, and future research.

#### *Service provision*

- We recommend that existing services do more to specifically promote their accessibility to young men. Service providers need to be explicit about their role and function, and clearly identify men as one of their target client groups.
- We recommend that information be made available to young men about the whereabouts, cost and range of services offered by sexual health clinics.

#### *Age of legal consent*

- Young people need to be clearly informed that seventeen years is the legal age of consent for both men and women.

#### *Information needs relating to contraception and STIs*

- We recommend that clear information be given about the risk of using withdrawal as a method of contraception.
- Explicit messages are needed via advertising or sexual health programmes in order to dispel prevalent myths surrounding the asymptomatic nature of some STIs and how STIs are transmitted.

- We recommend the promotion of messages about the role of condoms in both preventing pregnancy and protecting against STIs and about the need to use different forms of contraception and protection in conjunction with each other. A 'Think Condoms' campaign may help to distil these messages.

#### *Targeting barriers to condom access and use*

- We recommend that the cost of condoms be reduced, and their placement in shops behind or near the counter be re-considered. Ideally condoms should be available at a lower cost, or free of charge from vending machines, which are situated in a variety of locations where young people socialise, not just pubs/nightclubs.
- We recommend a continuation of the distribution of free condoms at music festivals/ concerts and an extension of this practice to social/pub venues, or drop-in health clinics.
- We recommend specifically targeting women to carry condoms and insist upon men's use of condoms.

#### *Delivery of sex education programmes*

- We recommend that formal sex education begins in the later years of the primary school cycle and not be left until secondary school.
- Sex education needs to be grounded in the reality of the young people's lives and delivered by individuals with whom young people can identify.
- Sex education should be delivered in clear straightforward language and should include a focus on the technical aspects of sexual activity; for example, putting on a condom.
- We recommend that community-based youth organisations and organisations such as Youth Reach and FÁS continue and extend their delivery of sexual education programmes.
- We recommend that youth workers be trained and their organisations appropriately resourced in order to ensure that the sexual health needs of all young people are addressed.
- A general education programme within schools needs to challenge traditional gender stereotypes. Specifically, sex education programmes need to address stigma that men may experience engaging with sexual health services or that women may experience as a result of carrying condoms.

### *Young men as fathers*

- Men need to be made clearly aware of their legal rights in relation to their children. Myths regarding the naming of fathers on birth certificates and the effect this has on social welfare entitlements need to be dispelled.
- A specific campaign targeting young men with mental health issues is recommended.
- We recommend that young people be educated about the important and multiple contributions that fathers make to their children's development, in addition to the traditional breadwinner role.
- We recommend that fathers be supported and encouraged to be involved in the pre-natal care and birth of their child.
- We recommend that through contact with services at events such as abortions, miscarriages, pregnancy scares, and being screened/ treated for STIs, men should be encouraged to consider their long-term visions for fathering, education, employment, sexual and relationship issues and other family-related matters.

### *Media and advertising*

- Advertisements about safe sexual activity need to be nested within the popular culture that young people engage with, and young people should be consulted upon the design and delivery of safe-sex messages and advertising campaigns.
- We recommend that future advertising campaigns adopt a more explicit and direct approach which targets specific behaviours.
- Media producers and broadcasters need to be encouraged to represent multiple masculinities and multiple femininities, rather than limiting possibilities for men and women by consistently representing masculine and feminine binaries.

### *Future research*

- We recommend that in-depth qualitative research be carried out that incorporates other groups of young people who may be vulnerable or experience social exclusion, including non-nationals, refugees and asylum seekers, people with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth.
- We recommend that more research is conducted on sexual experiences during the early teenage years.
- We recommend that follow-up studies and longitudinal designs be used to track young people's initiation into sex, and the evolution of distinct sexual pathways for individuals.
- Longitudinal research is needed to examine men's pathways into fatherhood, and the factors which facilitate or inhibit men's continued involvement in their children's lives,



particularly if the man's romantic involvement with their child's mother changes, new partnerships are formed or as their children grow older.

- Further research is needed to examine how best to address the challenges that alcohol and drugs bring to sexual encounters.
- More research is needed on audience interpretation of media content, and on the specific sexual and relationship content in popular television programmes shown in Ireland, and in other media, such as film, radio shows, magazines and books.

### **Concluding comments**

This research on a small purposive sample of disadvantaged young men has highlighted the complex, socially negotiated and often-times risky nature of men's sexual relationships. Much remains to be learnt about the association between sexual risk-taking and low SES, as many men in the current study were educated about sexual risk and were cognisant of their risk-taking, but nevertheless perceived themselves as invulnerable to these risks. For other men, various sexual experiences had taught them about the cost of sexual risk-taking and for some men these experiences represented significant learning opportunities and turning points for them.

Finding oneself unexpectedly on the pathway to fatherhood emerged as one of the most significant turning points for men. The high proportion of men in the study who were heavily involved with their children's lives represents a challenge to the dominant stereotype of low-income fathers as typically absent from their children's lives. Fulfilling paternal obligations was a sign of 'manhood' for many of these men, as they aligned themselves with cultural constructions of fatherhood that emphasised being physically present and involved in daily caregiving.

The research also revealed that young men (and women) are exposed to a broad range of perspectives on masculinity, fatherhood, and sex in the media. Unfortunately, however, the inept or incompetent male character predominated in film and television. Nonetheless, it is apparent that while some men are accepting of these images presented to them, other men actively reject them and seek out alternative constructions of masculinity. This suggests that men in the study are active media consumers who engage with the media in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

To conclude, a caveat in interpreting the findings arising from the research is warranted. Our research is based on a small purposive sample of socio-economically disadvantaged young men and we can only hypothesise about the extent to which our findings can be extrapolated to the general population of disadvantaged young men and fathers in Ireland. There is little doubt that future research with larger and more diverse samples of men in Ireland will continue to reveal the complex manner in which men negotiate and engage with their roles as sexual partners and as fathers.

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### Appendix 1: Focus group topic guide

[Not all questions were asked within every group, although every topic area was discussed. Many of the questions included below were used as prompts when necessary to stimulate discussion within the groups.]

#### *Part 1: Masculinities and ways of 'being a man'*

1. What are the different ways of 'being a man'?
2. What different types of men are there?
3. Are there different types of men or masculinity that are generally more accepted/less accepted than others?  
What are these? Why are these types accepted/ not accepted?  
What is acceptable/unacceptable behaviour for men?  
How should men behave in order to be 'a man'?  
What way do you think men should behave in order to be a man? Is there a difference in how you 'be a man' among friends or with your family, or with a partner/girlfriend? Is there pressure to be a certain type of man?
4. What influences the way we think about 'being a man'?  
What influence do friends have?  
What influence do family have, especially fathers?  
What influence do the media have?  
What way do women expect men to behave?
5. What male role models are there for men?  
Who do young men admire/want to be like? Why?
6. Pictorial prompts – What kind of a man do you think X is? [present group with images of selected celebrities/sports stars men?]  
David Beckham, Roy Keane, Graham Norton, Mike Tyson, Hugh Grant, Daniel Craig as James Bond, Cast of Prison Break, Bill Gates, 50 Cent, Rhydian [contestant on X-Factor], Zach Braff [JD from Scrubs], Pete Doherty.  
How do these men differ from each other in terms of how they behave as men?  
Are there any that you would admire?

#### *Part 2: Sexual behaviour and relationships*

1. What does being sexually responsible mean to you?
2. What do you think about men carrying condoms? Whose role is it to decide whether to use condoms? Is it the man's role to carry/provide condoms, or the woman's or both? Is it the man's role to decide whether to use condoms, or the woman's or both?
3. Is it 'manly' to take responsibility? Why? Why not? Do you think about STDs or pregnancy, both, or neither?
4. What do you think about a man talking to a girl about contraception, like using condoms or taking the pill? Is this something that happens? Does it depend on whether the couple are in a relationship, and for how long they have been together?
5. If a couple are in a relationship, is it ok for the man to sleep around? Is it natural for men to sleep around? Is it OK for the girl to sleep around?

6. If a girl gets pregnant, do you think the man has a right to say what happens, for example, whether she should keep the baby or not? Is it the girl's responsibility if she gets pregnant?

### *Part 3: Fatherhood*

1. What do you think people in general think about young fathers? Is there a stereotype? Is there a truth in this stereotype?
2. What makes a good father? Where do these ideas come from? What role do young men's own fathers play? Do men learn from their own fathers?
3. Why do you think some fathers are not involved with their children? What causes this to happen? Do you think fathers should always play a role in the lives of their children?
4. Do children need fathers? Are fathers important for children? Why? Do boys need fathers more than girls need fathers?
5. In Irish law, the unmarried father's name does not have to be on a birth certificate, and the father has no automatic legal rights to his children? What do you think about this? Should it be up to the mother to decide about care and access? Are mothers more important for children than fathers?
6. Does becoming a father change the way a man thinks of himself as a man? In what way?  
Does becoming a father make you 'a real man' [higher status] ?  
Do men act differently once they become fathers [responsibility] ?  
Is it acceptable for a father to stay at home and look after his children while the mother goes out to work? Is being a father about being a provider/breadwinner?  
Are you aware of any support services for fathers?

### *Part 4: Media*

1. What are your favourite television programmes/ films?
2. Do you watch any of these programmes...[use AC Nielsen ratings on top 10 programmes between April and September 2007 on RTE1, RTE2, TV3 and TG4] Any other programmes that you watch regularly, that haven't been mentioned.
3. Overall, how are 'men' portrayed in the TV/films that you like to watch? Are men treated positively/negatively, fairly/unfairly, stereotyped/realistically in TV/films?  
Any storylines that come to mind?  
Does TV/film affect the way men think about themselves and act as men?
4. Overall, how are fathers portrayed in the TV/films that you like to watch? Does TV/film affect the way fathers think about themselves and act as fathers?
5. What do you think about the way men are portrayed in magazines? Or books you have read?

### *Part 5: Conclusion*

1. Anything that you would like to add that has not been raised?
2. Experiences of taking part in the group discussion.



## Appendix 2: Individual interview schedule

[Not all questions were asked of all participants, although every topic area was covered in depth with each participant. Many of the questions included below were only used as prompts when necessary to help participants develop a narrative around their experiences.]

### *Part 1: Education, occupation, lifestyle and leisure*

1. What area of the city do you come from? Tell me a bit about the area where you grew up.
2. Can you tell me about your school history? What school did you go to? Did you sit any state exams in school? Junior Cert? Leaving Cert? Did you do any college courses? What level completed: Certificate, Diploma, Degree? FETAC levels?
3. Do you receive any social welfare benefits? Do you have a medical card?
4. What is your current occupation? Unemployed? Work? Full-time/part-time? What do you do at work? Role: manager, supervisor etc?
5. Family background: Who did you live with growing up? Did your parent(s) work? Were they in full-time/part-time when you were growing up? Role: manager, supervisor, etc? What did they do at work?
6. Do you still live with your parents? Who lives in the house with you? Is it rented or owned?
7. Tell me about how you spend your free time: What do you do in your free time? Do you hang out or stay in? Who do you hang out with? What would you normally do when hanging out? What sort of fellas do you hang out with? How often? Do you drink? How often? Have you taken or do you ever take drugs? How often? What type?
8. Are you in a relationship? Are you seeing anyone? Is there anyone you might meet up with every so often? How long has it been going on? When did it end? What do you do together? Where do you spend your time together? Would your girlfriend/boyfriend hang out in the same group with you and your friends? Or would you see him/her separately?

### *Part 2: Constructions of masculinity*

1. We want you to think about how you would describe yourself as a man - How would you describe yourself? What kind of man would you say you are [in terms of physical appearance, your body, personality, skills/talents, what qualities in you do you think women are most attracted to, what qualities do you think your friends like in you]?
2. Discussion of focus group findings relating to masculinity
  - Violence/aggression [is it nature v nurture]
  - Homosexuality [does homophobia exist in your peer group]
  - Responsibility [are you financially independent from family?]
  - Sexual relations with women [what are appropriate/inappropriate ways to treat women?]
  - Appearance [importance of physical appearance to men?]
3. How important are these qualities to you in how you think of yourself as a man? [Rating of each quality on a 7-point Likert scale from (1) not at all important to (7) very important] Being able to physically stand up for yourself, having a muscular appearance, not being seen as 'gay', being good at slagging, being seen as someone

not to be messed with, being independent of financial support from family, caring, being good at sport, being attractive to women, being faithful in relationships, being able to 'pull' women Can you select the three qualities that are most important to you in terms of how you think of yourself as a man? Can you select the three qualities that are least important to you in terms of how you think of yourself as a man?

### *Part 3: Sexual behaviour*

1. When did you last have sex? Can you tell me about it? When, where, with whom? Was it a new partner? Regular partner? Someone you are/were going out with?
2. Had you taken any drink or drugs? How much/What? Did this influence or affect your behaviour, do you think?
3. Did you use a condom or any type of contraception? Who had the contraception? Did you talk about using contraception? Why/why not?
4. Why did you use contraception/why did you choose not to use contraception? Do you normally use contraception? In percentage terms, how often would you say you use contraception: 50%, 80%, 30% of the time?
5. Why would you use it in one instance and not in another?
6. What type of contraception would you normally use? Every time? Would you use different types of contraception in different circumstances? Tell me about it.
7. Have you ever had unsafe or risky sex? Can you tell me how that happened? With partner/casual encounter? Did you talk about the use of contraception before/during sex?
8. Have you ever had sex without a condom? Can you tell me how that happened? With partner/casual encounter? Did you talk about the use of condoms before/during sex?
9. Pregnancy scares: Have you or your sexual partner ever thought that she might be pregnant? Can you tell me about it? Who, When, What happened, how did you feel? What was the outcome? Was there any involvement of services? Would you do something different if found yourself in a similar situation in the future? After that happened, did your sexual behaviour change?
10. Have you ever had an STI test? What were the reasons that you got tested? Did you choose not to go or were there other reasons stopping you?
11. How old were you when you first had sex? Have your sexual activities/patterns changed over time? Why? Tell me about it.

### *Part 4A: Fatherhood [men who are not fathers]*

1. What do you think makes a good father? Are any of your close friends fathers? Do you consider them to be a 'good father' or not a 'good' father/'bad' father? Why? Of the fathers you know, who is a good father and why? Who is a bad father and why? Where have your ideas about 'good father' and 'bad father' come from? Peers? Family? Media?
2. Discussion of focus group findings relating to father roles  
What makes a good father? [Rating of each quality/father role on a 7-point Likert scale from (1) not at all important to (7) very important] Going out to earn money, spending time with children, supporting child's mother, not spoiling child, showing affection, giving up 'old way of life', being involved in making decisions, disciplining child, unconditional love for child, being a moral guide/

role model, being involved in daily caregiving routines.

Can you select the three qualities that are most important for being a good father?

3. Can you tell me about your relationship with your own father when you were growing up [refer here specifically to biological father ]?
 

If biological father was absent, probe whether there was another person who adopted a 'social' fathering role [step-father, uncle, grandparent]?

Did he live with you? To what extent was he involved in your life? What aspects of the parenting role did he have? Are there any particular areas of your life that you can see now that your father has influenced?
4. Can you tell me about your relationship with your father now? How often do you see him? How do you spend your time together? Has your relationship changed as you have gotten older? How?
5. Do you consider your father to have been a 'good father'? Why? Probe for distinctions between biological father [if absent] and social father [grandparent, step-father etc.].
6. Do you ever think about becoming a father yourself? How does the idea of becoming a father make you feel? How do you think it might impact on your life? If you did become a father, what aspects of your fathering role would you keep the same as your own father? What aspects would you do differently? [If relevant probe distinctions between absent, biological and social fathers.]
7. Do your thoughts and feelings about becoming a father influence your sexual behaviour? How? More likely to use contraception? Less likely to use contraception? Does it "enter into the equation"?

#### *Part 4B: Fatherhood [Men who are fathers]*

1. How did you feel when you found out that you were going to be a father? Discuss initial decisions [Keep baby, Abortion] If so, what prevented involvement in decision-making [Personal decision, Situational]?
2. Tell me about your involvement at the pre-natal stage, before the baby was born [Active role in decision-making, any role of support services, check ups, baby care product purchase, emotional support for expecting mother].
3. Were you present at the birth? Why/Why not? What was that like?
4. Looking back at this first stage, how would you reflect upon the process of becoming a father? And how you dealt with it then? Have your feelings about being a father changed over time? [PROCEED TO QUESTION 6]
5. [FOR THOSE INVOLVED IN A STEP-FATHERING ROLE ONLY] Tell me about how you became a step-father/father to.....? How have you dealt with taking on this role? How do you feel about it? What were the challenges in taking over this role? What helped? Have your feelings about being a father changed over time?
6. Are you currently living with your child? [If not, what is nature of access?] [FOR FATHERS WITH NO ACCESS OR CONTACT, PROCEED TO QUESTION 15]
7. Who is the child's primary carer [Mother, father, both] ? Tell me about your child's daily routine.
8. Can you tell me about your relationship with your child(ren)? How do you spend your time together?
9. Are you involved in decisions around the child(ren) [discipline, daily caregiving, future important decisions]?

10. How are you involved in special occasions in the child(ren)'s life [Birthdays, Christmas, Communion] ?
11. Are you accessible to your children? [Prompt here for issues around accessibility – may depend upon age of child, but who decides when, where etc the father spends time with his children]. Who initiates contact? Can children contact him if they want to? Is it always left up to father? How would you know if something happened to your child?
12. Do you feel supported in your parenting role? Is your child's mother happy to share roles? [What about her family, what about your family? What happens when there are disagreements about parenting? How are they resolved? Is there room to negotiate around certain issues?]
13. What areas of your child's life have you had an influence on [practical, emotional, financial]? How have you made a difference to your child's life [contributing financially, providing practical/emotional support to mother, practically helping child develop skills [e.g. sport, reading], educationally [e.g. helping with homework, encouraging attendance at school], socially, emotionally [listening to child's problems], other?
14. How has your child made a difference to your life? [PROCEED TO QUESTION 18]
15. FOR FATHERS WITH NO CONTACT WITH THEIR CHILDREN [instead of 7-14 above].  
There are many fathers who do not have contact with/who are not involved in the lives of their children and there are many reasons why fathers are not involved with their children. I want to explore these issues with you now. What is the main reason that you do not see your child [at all/regularly]?  
Prompt for intra-individual factors [feelings, choice, loss of power, control, overwhelming, (in)dependence, maturity, not ready for responsibility].  
Prompt for issues around his current life situation [unemployment, poverty, drug, alcohol issues, location].  
Prompt for issues around relationships [relationship with mother of child, relationship with new partner, relationship with peers, family and family of child's mother].  
Prompt for broader contextual barriers to contact [system issues]
16. How do you feel about this situation? How do you think this situation will be in the future? [Is change a possibility? What would they like to happen in the future?] Are they taking any action in relation to this? [Through court system, mediation?]
17. Has having a child made a difference to your life? Do you think fathers are important or necessary in children's lives?  
[ALL FATHERS]
18. What do you think makes a good father? [Where have your ideas about this come from - peers, family, media? Do you live up to this 'ideal'?]
19. Discussion of focus group findings relating to father roles  
What makes a good father? [Rating of each quality/father role on a 7-point Likert scale from (1) not at all important to (7) very important] Going out to earn money, spending time with children, supporting child's mother, not spoiling child, showing affection, giving up 'old way of life', being involved in making decisions, disciplining child, unconditional love for child, being a moral guide/role model, being involved in daily caregiving routines.  
Can you select the three qualities that are most important for being a good father?
20. Can you tell me about your relationship with your own father when you were growing up [refer here specifically to biological father ]?

If biological father was absent, probe whether there was another person who adopted a 'social' fathering role [step-father, uncle, grandparent].

Did he live with you? To what extent was he involved in your life? What aspects of the parenting role did he have? Are there any particular areas of your life that you can see now that your father has influenced?

21. Can you tell me about your relationship with your father now? How often do you see him? How do you spend your time together? Has your relationship changed as you have gotten older? How?
22. Do you consider your father to have been a 'good father'? Why? Probe for distinctions between biological father [if absent] and social father [grandparent, step-father etc.].
23. What aspects of your fathering role are similar to or different from your own experiences with your father?
24. Do your thoughts and feelings about being a father or becoming a father again influence your sexual behaviour? How? More likely to use contraception? Less likely to use contraception? Does it "enter into the equation"?
25. Have people treated you differently since you became a father? What expectations do people have of you in your father role? Are there any tensions between expectations from friends, own family, child, child's mother [peer group, child's mother, neighbourhood and society]? Do you meet those expectations?
26. In Irish Law, the unmarried fathers do not have any automatic legal rights to their children. [Has this ever come up in talking about access or social welfare benefits? Naming father on the birth certificate?]

#### *Part 5: Influence of Media on Men*

1. Do you watch any of these programmes? [Prompt for programmes included in media analysis: EastEnders, Scrubs, Desperate Housewives, The Premiership, The O.C., Prison Break] Have you read a book called The Joy? Have you seen any of these films? [Knocked Up, Accelerator, American Gangster]?
2. In these programmes or films, are there any particular male characters that stand out for you? Why? What is significant about these characters? Their story lines? Any particular father characters that stand out for you? Why? What is significant about these characters? Their story lines?
3. Show and discuss excerpts from Knocked Up and American Gangster.  
 Scene from Knocked Up depicting sexual encounter between two main characters: What is the first thing that comes into your head after watching that scene? Any thoughts or words? Which character do you think is in control in this situation? Who is to blame for not wearing the condom? What do you think about the way the film represents the male character? Is it realistic? Is this how men behave during sex? Is this how you behave during sex - what is similar/ what is different? After watching this, would it change or influence the way you act in sexual situations? Overall, do you think it is a positive or negative portrayal of a man?  
 Scene from American Gangster depicting a main character arguing with his wife over access to his child.  
 What is the first thing that comes into your head after watching that scene? Any thoughts or words? Which character do you think is in control in this situation? What do you think about the way the film represents the male character? Is it realistic? Is this a natural way for men to behave? Is he a good father? A good man?

Why/ Why not? What do you think of the relationship between the father and mother? Who is in the right? What do you think of his relationship with his son? Is he right in what he does? Overall, do you think this is a positive portrayal of a father?

4. Overall, do you think TV/film influences people? Do you think it influences the way people behave/act? Do you think TV/film influences the way you think of yourself - as a man, a father, a sexual partner?

Are there certain male characters that you want to be like? Who? Why? In the programmes/films that you watch is there a pattern in the type of male characters/ are they similar? Do you think that watching these has an impact on how you behave as a man?

Are there certain father characters that you want to be like? Who? Why? In the programmes/films that you watch is there a pattern in the type of father characters/ are they similar? Do you think that watching these has an impact on how you behave as a father?

When it comes to watching sex in film or on TV, are there certain characters that you want to be like? Who? Why? In the programmes/films that you watch is there a pattern in the way men behave during sex, or toward women? Do you think that watching these has an impact on how you behave as a man during sexual activity or in your treatment of women?

5. Have you ever seen any advertisements for safe sex? Where? Do you think they encourage men your age to have safe sex? Do they have any impact? If you think the ads could be improved, can you suggest any changes that could be made to improve the ads?

#### *Part 6: Conclusion*

1. What do you think needs to be done to encourage young men to be sexually responsible [education, cost, peer influences, advertising]? What is the best site for sexual education [parents, school, sex ed. books, peers, TV, internet] ?
2. What advice would you give to somebody going through a situation where...
  - ... there is an unplanned pregnancy?
  - ... difficulty gaining access to their children?
  - ... pregnancy scare?
  - ... sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?
3. What kind of supports should be available to young men? Is there enough support? Are there any barriers to support and services? Are you aware of the legal age of consent? Could that be a barrier?
4. Is there anything we haven't asked about that you think is relevant or should be included?
5. Were there any questions you found difficult to answer, or you think should be changed?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix 3: Texts identified in focus group discussions

Media	Number of Groups who Identified Media	Men's Groups				Women's Groups		
		FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG1	FG2	FG3
<b>Soaps</b>								
EastEnders	6	•	•	•		•	•	•
Home & Away	3	•				•		•
Coronation Street	5	•	•			•	•	•
Fair City	1	•						
Emmerdale	4		•			•	•	•
Neighbours	1							•
Hollyoaks	1						•	
<b>Comedy</b>								
Killynascully	1	•						
Friends	2	•		•				
Scrubs	4	•		•	•	•		
Simpsons	2	•			•			
Family Guy	1			•				
Phonejacker [E4]	1			•				
My Wife and Kids	1			•				
<b>Drama</b>								
Sopranos	2	•		•				
CSI	1					•		
Desperate Housewives	2					•	•	
Ugly Betty	1						•	
Prison Break	3			•	•		•	
The O.C.	2			•	•			
Heroes	1			•				
Nip Tuck	1			•				
Six Feet Under	1		•					
The L Word	1			•				
<b>Film</b>								
Goodfellas	1						•	
Godfather	1						•	
Pursuit of Happiness	1						•	
Evelyn	1						•	
Braveheart	1	•						
Gladiator	1	•						

Media	Number of Groups who Identified Media	Men's Groups				Women's Groups		
		FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG1	FG2	FG3
<b>Film continued</b>								
Under Siege	1	•						
Marley and Me	1	•						
A Few Good Men	1	•						
Car Films: Accelerator	2	•	•					
Get Rich or Die Tryin'	1	•						
The Hurricane	1	•						
Boyz in the Hood	1			•				
Juiced	1			•				
American Gangster	1			•				
Knocked Up	1			•				
Star Wars	1			•				
Thirteen	1			•				
Kids	1			•				
Father	1			•				
Kidadulthood	1			•				
Jingle all the Way	1			•				
I Am Sam	1			•				
IRA Films	1		•					
I Spy	1		•					
You, Me & Dupree	1		•					
Platoon	1		•					
Daddy Daycare	1		•					
Triple X	1		•					
<b>Documentary/Reality</b>								
Forensic Detectives [Discovery]	1	•						
Deadliest Catch [Discovery]	1	•						
National Geographic [not specified]	1	•						
FBI Files [Discovery]	1	•						
Ross Kemp on Gangs	1	•					•	
Road Wars [Reality]	1	•						
Street Wars [Reality]	1	•						
Bear Grylls Born Survivor [Nature]	1			•				
Ray Mear's Extreme Survival [Nature]	1			•				
Ninja Warriors [Reality]	1			•				



Media	Number of Groups who Identified Media	Men's Groups				Women's Groups		
		FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG1	FG2	FG3
<b>Sports</b>								
Premiership	1			•				
Martial Arts Shows	1			•				
<b>News/Talk Show</b>								
Six O'Clock News	1							•
Xpose	1							•
<b>Pornography</b>								
Pornography (not specified)	1			•				
<b>Books and Magazines</b>								
Roy Keane Biography	1			•				
George Best Biography	1			•				
Charlie Chaplin Biography	1			•				
PlayStation Magazines	1			•				
Da Vinci Code	1			•				
Angels and Demons	1			•				
Gangland	1	•						
The Joy	2	•	•					
Pathways to Freedom	1		•					
Take a Break	1						•	
Chat	1						•	
Men's Health	1						•	
Cosmo	1						•	
Zoo	1						•	
Nuts	1						•	





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