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Definition and Characteristic Features of a 'Cultural Flashpoint': A case study of Exploring Masculinities, a controversial gender and education programme in Ireland

Joan Hanafin
TobaccoFree Research Institute Ireland Technological University Dublin, jhanafin@tri.ie

Paul Conway
University of Limerick, paul.conway@ul.ie

Cormac O Beaglaoich
University of Limerick, cormacbegley@gmail.com

See next page for additional authors

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Definition and characteristic features of a 'cultural flashpoint': a case study of *Exploring Masculinities*, a controversial gender and education programme in Ireland

Joan Hanafin [a,b,c], Paul F. Conway [d], Cormac Ó Beaglaoich [d], Jack Hanafin [e] and Máirtín Mac an Ghaill [f]

[a]TobaccoFree Research Institute Ireland (TFRI), Technological University Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; [b]Department of Sociology, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland; [c]Inclusion in Education and Society Research Group, School of Education, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland; [d]School of Education, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland; [e]School of Linguistics, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; [f]Graduate School, Newman University, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

The concept 'cultural flashpoint' (CF) has not been fully defined or described. The authors test this concept through the prism of a controversial gender-focused Irish school programme, Exploring Masculinities (EM). Adopting an instrumental case study methodology, they use media content analysis to develop a temporal trajectory of the CF, describe its shape, explicit and implied contentious themes, and its process. They identify characteristic features of a cultural flashpoint: (i) a focal issue, event and/or object; (ii) conflict; (iii) bounded time period; (iv) the involvement of exo- and multi-sectoral individuals and groups; (v) randomness, opaqueness and conflation among its expressions; and (vi) broadly cultural and not confined to its sector of origin. They offer a definition of a CF and suggest it as a conceptual device for identifying, analysing and understanding contestation about educational (and other) change occurring in the context of wider and more long-standing cultural, social and political movements.

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Introduction

The concept 'cultural flashpoint' has occasionally been deployed in the academic and popular press but has not been fully described or defined. One such use (O'Sullivan, 2005) related to a controversial gender-focused Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum initiative in Ireland called *Exploring Masculinities* (EM). In this paper, we test the concept 'cultural flashpoint' through the prism of EM. To do this, we use EM as a case study and employ a media content analysis of the controversy about EM to describe the temporal shape of that cultural flashpoint, its explicit and implied contentious themes, and its process. Based on our analysis, we identify characteristic

CONTACT Joan Hanafin j.hanafin@tri.ie TobaccoFree Research Institute Ireland (TFRI), Technological University Dublin, FOCAS Research Institute, Aungier Street, Dublin 2, Dublin D02 HW71, Ireland
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features of a 'cultural flashpoint' and offer a definition which, we suggest, could be useful tools in analysing controversial instances in educational and other domains, including those that might be (or have already been) identified as cultural flashpoints.

To achieve our overall aim, we organise our paper in six sections. Firstly, we review the use of the term 'cultural flashpoint'. We then provide an account of the *Exploring Masculinities* (EM) programme and locate it within its curricular and cultural contexts, acknowledging that comparable programmes are recognised as being a longstanding locus of controversy in the 'culture wars' (Hunter, 2000; L. Allen & Rasmussen, 2017; Zimmerman, 2015, 2022). We describe our methodology and then present our analysis of the media debate that constituted the EM flashpoint, describing its temporal trajectory and identifying salient themes. From this analysis, we derive characteristic features of the EM cultural flashpoint, drawing on and extending putative characteristics identified in our literature review. We indicate how these characteristic features might be generalisable to educational and non-educational domains, in national and international contexts. Finally, we suggest a working definition of the concept cultural flashpoint that may be of use in other instances and domains where contestation about domain-specific issues take on a broader cultural significance.

Cultural flashpoints - an overview

The origin of the term 'cultural flashpoint' is attributed to the sociologist Michael Schudson (1992), after his work on the Watergate crisis and the collective national memory, forgetting and reconstruction of that series of events in the United States. For Schudson, cultural flashpoints 'generate collective, widely shared experiences through which people establish, and come to care about a relation to public discourse and public action' (p. 66). He considered Watergate a cultural flashpoint that rivalled the traumas of the John F. Kennedy assassination and the Challenger disaster among others. In his work, a cultural flashpoint is a symbolic moment that inspires reflection on societal norms, hopes and fears. In the context of gestalt image perception, one might think of 'flash-points' as the *figure* best perceived and only understood in the *ground* of wider social, cultural and political change.

We draw also on the small number of named examples of cultural flashpoints in non-educational domains including the domains of medicine, social history, religion and culture. For example, in a review of the *Oxford Handbook of Bioethics* published in *The Lancet*, Arthur Caplan asserts that bioethics 'continues to be a cultural flashpoint where disagreements run deep, the stakes continue to be high, and the voices and sources of authority diverse' (Caplan, 2008, p. 107). Equally, in her full-scale study of the circus as a Victorian cultural epiphenomenon *The Circus and Victorian Society*, Assael (2005) finds in the circus 'a cultural flashpoint for Victorian ideas about (among other things) class, gender, the body, and the foreign' (E. Allen, 2007, p. 196). Again, Wiygul (2008), in her introduction to an issue of *Historical Reflections* that brings together six distinct French, American and Bulgarian perspectives on the headscarf phenomenon, says that 'the headscarf has become a cultural flashpoint, a freighted symbol of many of the central social, cultural, political, and religious tensions of this first decade of the twenty-first century' (p. 1). Similarly, Fagrell and colleagues (Fagrell et al., 2012), in the only example

that we have found of a named cultural flashpoint in the educational domain, suggest that a cultural flashpoint arising from mandated co-ed teaching of PE 'reflects problems in society rather than problems in the gym' (p. 101).

A number of features of a cultural flashpoint may be discerned from the foregoing examples. For Caplan, conflict, high stakes and multiple diverse sources are features, while Assael's cultural flashpoint seems to be more about conflation and, perhaps, a focus on changing social norms that caused discomfort and therefore became the object that simultaneously caused and constituted the flashpoint. Similarly, Wygul et al. and Fagrell et al. both point to the broader social and cultural contexts for the cultural flashpoint, with Wygul et al. in particular attributing to the headscarf a symbolic power to capture the most important and broadest range of tensions. The foregoing examples contain elements of a cultural flashpoint, but do not interrogate the notion of the cultural flashpoint itself. Our brief review suggests the following possible features of 'cultural flashpoints': focused on topics about which deep disagreement evolves; which are symbolic of social, cultural, political or religious tensions; which may be 'high stakes' in terms of cultural change; conflation of ideas about class, gender and race; involvement of diverse voices and sources of authority; and reflective of broader societal problems rather than, or as well as, domain-specific ones (e.g. education, politics, medicine).

To our knowledge, however, the features of a cultural flashpoint *per se* have not been discussed. Instead, it has been considered a self-evident concept that is easily understood across a range of contexts. Additionally, despite some features of cultural flashpoints being discussed in the above authors' work, a comprehensive definition and framework have not been offered. Consequently, we attempt to identify characteristic features of a cultural flashpoint and to define it, testing the concept 'cultural flashpoint' using a case study of an educational initiative, the *Exploring Masculinities* (EM) programme. We first describe EM, locating it within its broader curricular, historical, social and cultural contexts.

The Exploring Masculinities (EM) programme

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is provided in the Irish curriculum from the beginning of primary schooling (aged four years) to the end of secondary schooling (aged 18 years). EM is one of a number of SPHE optional modules offered to boys in single-sex schools during the senior cycle of secondary schooling in Ireland (aged 16–18 years). The EM programme reflected the aim of senior cycle SPHE, namely 'to support learners in making choices for health and wellbeing now and in the future' NCCA [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment] (2011), p. 7), and is built around five areas of learning, viz., mental health, gender studies, substance use, relationships and sexuality education (RSE), and physical activity and nutrition.

During the 1980s and 1990s, immediately prior to EM, gender issues, particularly relating to co-educational and single-sex schooling (a result of the churches' legacy of a high proportion of single-sex schools), were a notable feature of educational research and debate in Ireland (Hanafin, 1991, 1998; Hannan et al., 1996). Around the time that EM was introduced as an intervention for boys in single-sex schools (1999–2000), there were 353,860 students in secondary schools in Ireland. Of these, 16% ($n = 56{,}632$) were boys in single-sex schools (Department of Education, 2002). EM was developed between

1995 and 1997 by the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI). Materials were developed and piloted over an initial two-year period (1995–1997) and further developed and positively evaluated (Gleeson et al., 1999) during 1998–1999.

EM consisted of a 420-page resource pack with teacher guidelines and student resource materials, as well as a 40-minute videotape. The resource pack provided material on seven broad themes organised in units around key questions: communication skills; work; power and violence; sport; health, relationships and sexuality; and role models. Typically, the units contained extracts from a wide range of sources in the public domain, including literary texts, newspaper articles, textbooks, current affairs commentaries, policy documents and existing development education materials.

The stated aims of EM were to explore different perceptions and experiences of masculinity; promote understanding and respect for diversity; promote equality among and between the sexes; provide opportunities for males to develop enhanced interpersonal and social skills; promote healthy lifestyles; and to raise awareness of life choices, changing roles in society, work (paid and non-paid), relationships, health and sexuality, violence against women, men and children, and sport.

During its development and piloting, so much public debate was generated by the programme that it took only one month following its launch for the Minister for Education to announce a review of the programme, which we undertook (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2004). In our review, we collected data from multiple sources. We analysed several distinct aspects of EM, focusing on issues that arose at classroom, school, community and public levels. We carried out an international comparative analysis of EM materials as well as a study of teachers' views of implementing EM. We also carried out an analysis of the media attention on EM that provided the data for this paper. Our review was positive overall regarding the programme and we concluded that the quality of the materials was excellent. Against this backdrop of deep familiarity with the programme materials and key actors, we focus on the media controversy about EM, utilising it as a case study of a cultural flashpoint.

As part of our review, we identified 96 items of media attention (letters, articles, opinion columns), of which 57 items were published during a four-month period in 2000. This degree of public interest in a small initiative was exceptional in the educational domain in Ireland. To put this in the local context, we point to three other media analyses undertaken in Ireland around the same time. First, a study of the Irish print media response between 2000 and 2004 to the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland identified 188 relevant articles for analysis (Breen et al., 2006). Second, a paper examining how Irish national identity was constructed in press discourse over an eight-year period (1996–2004), set against a background of demographic, social and economic change brought about by immigration, identified 136 relevant articles for analysis (Conway, 2006). Third, an analysis of a national intervention in the health domain to introduce a ban on smoking in the workplace in Ireland (the first such ban in the world) generated 1154 items of media attention, with 586 news stories (Fahy et al., 2012). Thus, the EM initiative was exceptional both within the education domain and within the broader societal context in terms of the degree of media attention paid to it.

As a curricular initiative, EM's broad range of aims together with its placement within Social, Personal and Health Education, suggested something broader than sex education

per se. However, when EM was piloted, the focus (in the media) on reading it as a sex education programme rather than, for example, as a less contentious sport and physical health programme, led it into the territory of 'culture wars'. Although less than 10% of the programme could be construed as a sex education programme, and although the education stakeholders, teachers and students were by and large very positive about it, it was this public understanding of EM that in no small part led to the start of the controversy. We now provide a brief account of the place of sex education programmes in cultural controversy.

Culture, controversy and sex education

In the eponymous 1991 text credited with the term, *Culture Wars*, Hunter (2000) described a traditionalist vision that holds truth to be rooted in an authority outside of the self in conflict with a 'post-Enlightenment' progressive vision that rejects authoritative traditions and prioritises freedom, especially for groups seen as oppressed by tradition. Many of the 'cultural skirmishes' described by Hunter continue to remain at the centre of politics (Curran et al., 2019). Hunter identified Education as one of five areas where the culture wars rage with particular ferocity, and education has continued to be identified as a key site of culture wars (Curran et al., 2019). Within the education domain, along with race and religion, gender and sex education are prominent among the major conflicts and have repeatedly been at the front line of controversy (L. Allen & Rasmussen, 2017; O'Sullivan, 2005; Peppard, 2008; Petley, 2019; Zimmerman, 2015, 2022). In *Too Hot to Handle*, a global history of school-based sex education programmes since the early twentieth century, Zimmerman (2015) identifies sex education as one of the most controversial issues across and within cultures.

By the early 2000s, nearly every country in the world addressed sex in its official school curriculum, although each major wave of sex education around the world over the past century was met with an 'entangled array of criticisms' (Blount, 2016, p. 524). Compared with the US, UK and other countries where school-based sex education has been in place for over a century (Zimmerman, 2015), school-based sex education in Ireland was relatively late, dating to the early 1990s (Kiely, 2005) and, as elsewhere, its introduction and implementation led to controversies (Inglis, 1998; Kiely, 2005). At the time that RSE was introduced sexual morality was a highly contentious issue in Irish society and, particularly, in Irish education (Kiely, 2005).

In Ireland, in the wider social arena, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programmes are more likely to become a focus of conflict than other curricular areas (O'Sullivan, 2005). SPHE programmes and, in particular school-based sex education, were contested politically and, traditionally, teachers have not been entrusted with the responsibility for this curricular area (Inglis, 1998; Kiely, 2005; McCormack & Gleeson, 2012; O'Sullivan, 2005). Catholic conservative individuals and groups actively opposed RSE programmes on the grounds that they conflicted with Catholic teaching in the area of sexual morality while 'liberal and secular forces in Irish society' defended it (Kiely, 2005, p. 256). Such oppositional views generated heated public debate and marked the introduction and implementation of the programme in the public mind as highly controversial and divisive (Kiely, 2005). Ireland's controversies about RSE and SPHE mirror cross-cultural situations worldwide where the presence of sex education in

schools 'has been freighted with heavy cultural symbolism and political controversy . . . [and] has, in effect, become a major outpost in the extended culture wars of our time' (Blount, 2016, p. 523).

Nordic approaches to sex education have been considered less controversial and more successful (Zimmerman, 2015) but, even there, local critiques suggest that the 'seeming political harmony in Northern European approaches to sex education' are 'a relatively new phenomenon' (Svendsen, 2017, p. 138). In a chapter on sex education in the Nordic context, Svendsen argues that shifts in the cultural politics of sexuality have made 'culture' a more pressing concern for sex education. In part, this has entailed focussing on undoing 'the frequently conflated binaries of . . . modern/traditional, secular/religious, sexually liberated/sexually oppressed, gender equality/patriarchal hierarchy and West/East' (Scott, 2011 in Svendsen, 2017), including religious motivation in explaining controversy (Collins, 2006) and a reconsideration of how secularism and religion interrelate in debates about sex education (Rasmussen, 2010, 2015).

In the context of our original media analysis of EM, O'Sullivan (2003) had suggested that we use the concept of a 'cultural flashpoint' to capture the cultural, political and educational significance and temporal trajectory of the public and media attention to EM between 1998 and 2001. In his text *The Cultural Politics of Irish Education*, he later wrote that EM demonstrated how

> whatever the substantive status of social, personal and health education themes in school initiatives, their presence in material works, programmes and practices are prone to being deployed to function as cultural flashpoints around which further cultural battles, of the broadest kind about issues of religion and correct living, can be publicly staged. (O'Sullivan, 2005, p. 209)

Methodology

Our overall approach involved testing the concept 'cultural flashpoint' through a detailed analysis of EM, using EM as a case study of a cultural flashpoint. Below, we first provide a rationale for our use of EM as a cultural flashpoint and then interrogate the media controversy about EM to reveal the shape of a cultural flashpoint. From that, we identify the characteristic features of a cultural flashpoint and offer a working definition of a cultural flashpoint that could be applied to other events/situations/contexts in education and non-education domains.

While a full account of the concept 'cultural flashpoint' remains in doubt, our own initial characterisation of EM as a cultural flashpoint suggested that it had some of the characteristics that we identified in our review of literature earlier in this paper: being focused on topics about which deep disagreement evolves; which are symbolic of social, cultural, political or religious tensions; which may be 'high stakes' in terms of cultural change; conflation of ideas about class, gender and race; involvement of diverse voices and sources of authority; and reflective of broader societal problems rather than or as well as domain-specific ones (e.g. education, politics, medicine). In addition, we justify our choice of EM because of the large scale of media controversy generated by this small curriculum initiative, compared with other contemporary cultural controversies (described in Section 2). Finally, we consider EM a generative example of a cultural

flashpoint because, by contrast, several other gender interventions in education aimed at girls during a much longer time period, from the 1980s to the period in question, garnered limited or no educational or broader public attention (Mac an Ghaill et al. 2004).

As such, EM offers us an example of a 'single instrumental case study' (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). Thus, while our media analysis of EM (a bounded case) is useful for understanding the case itself (EM), we propose in this paper that the analysis is also useful for understanding more than just that particular case; that it is also useful for explicating the idea of the cultural flashpoint. In using the case of EM to tease out features of a cultural flashpoint, we follow the protocol for an instrumental single case study in that we focus on one issue (i.e. EM as a cultural flashpoint); one bounded case (EM) is used to illustrate the issue (cultural flashpoint); and the case provides insight into an issue and/or helps to refine a theory or conceptual framework (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995).

Media content analysis, a specialised sub-set of content analysis (Neuendorf, 2015), is a well-established research methodology. As Harwood and Garry (2003) note, it was first used in the nineteenth century to analyse hymns, political speeches, newspaper articles and advertisements. Significantly for our analysis, we note that Max Weber saw media content as a means of monitoring the 'cultural temperature' of society (Hansen et al., 1998, p. 92). As such, we employed both quantitative and qualitative techniques in order 'to understand the meanings and possible impacts of media texts' about EM (Macnamara, 2005, p. 6), thus producing systematic counts of numbers of media articles, timeframes, contributors and topics (Neuman, 1997), and generating broad themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Neuendorf, 2015).

Data

We identified contributions to the public debate about EM in Ireland through online searches, hand searches and information received from interested individuals and organisations (e.g. representatives of Gay/HIV News; Parents and Teachers for Real Education [PATRE]) whom we interviewed as part of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) consultative forum on EM. Online archive sources included national daily and Sunday newspapers, television and radio archives, government websites, and archives of debates and ministerial question time in the lower and upper houses of the Irish Parliament, that is, the Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann respectively. Keyword search terms used were 'masculinity', 'masculinities', 'exploring + masculinities'. Non-electronic searching of the archives of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was also undertaken to identify contributions made as part of the NCCA consultative forums. Each item retrieved by the keyword search, and determined to be data for this study, was categorised as one of the following: letters to the editor; news article; opinion column; other. We created a database of media contributions (detailed in Supplemental File Table S1).

Analysis

In our analyses, we characterised the media debate from multiple angles. In addition to the type of contribution (letter, article, etc.), we identified the source of the contribution

(individual, organisation, etc.) (Supplemental File Fig. S1), whether it was positive or negative; and when exactly it occurred during the EM debate, i.e. a chronological analysis in which we categorised the items sequentially in terms of type and frequency as they occurred over the time period 1998–2002. All data were initially coded by the first author and subsequently re-coded three weeks later for intra-rater validation. Additionally, sections of the data (temporal trajectory and emergent themes) were coded and analysed by the second and fifth authors ('peer checking') for inter-rater validation (Creswell, 2012).

The shape of the cultural flashpoint

We contend that the media items published about EM between late 1998 and 2002 represent the evidence for EM as a cultural flashpoint. They consisted of, in total, 96 published items about EM (Supplemental File Table S1), in the Irish national and dedicated (educational/Catholic/etc.) press, published between late 1998 and 2002. Of these, 79 were in the mainstream national print media (daily and Sunday newspapers). Contributions consisted of letters, articles and opinion columns. Of these, letters made up the largest single type ($n = 40$) of contribution. About two-thirds of the contributions were negative about the EM programme. We base our analyses and derivation of the characteristic features of a cultural flashpoint from the data included in these tables and figures (Supplemental File).

Temporal trajectory

We analysed the chronology of the EM media controversy to generate what we called a 'temporal trajectory', showing the course of the controversy over time. We identified four distinct phases shown in a summary table (Supplemental Table S2). These were:

(1) Signification Phase (Winter 1998–1999): *Identification of the Flashpoint Object*
(2) Smouldering Phase (January 1999–September 2000): *Little Attention to the Flashpoint Object*
(3) Substantive Phase (Autumn 2000): *Peak of the Flashpoint*
(4) Dissipation Phase (December 2000 onwards): *Waning of the Flashpoint*

This examination of what was happening at different time points made visible the phasic nature of the cultural flashpoint, and the subject matter of what was happening at each phase. The shape of the temporal trajectory is graphically represented in Supplemental File Fig S2.

Signification phase: identification of the flashpoint object

Unusually for a curricular initiative, by December 1998, while it was still being piloted in schools, information about EM was already in the public domain. During this first phase, we identified six contributions, mainly by journalists, five of which were positive about EM. The first, written by the *Irish Times* Education Correspondent on 22 December 1998, appeared under the headline 'Masculinity Topic for Teenage Boys'. It called EM a 'programme to help boys explore their masculinity', the aims of which included raising boys' awareness of their changing roles in society, and promoting

equality, understanding and mutual respect among all young people. This Signification Phase acted to identify and name EM as a point of interest to the wider public. The initial coverage of EM was generally positive, used phrases such as 'help teenage boys', 'pioneered', 'first of its kind in the European Union', 'welcome', 'pity . . . that this programme is confined to a relatively small number of schools'.

Although characterised as a novel, positive and uncontroversial initiative for boys and young men, the object which was to become the focus of the cultural flashpoint was signified in the broader social and cultural domain, beyond its educational domain of origin, through references to it being 'an RSE programme', 'a gender equality programme' and 'a programme to help teenage boys explore their masculinity'.

Smouldering phase: little attention to the flashpoint object

The Signification Phase effectively ended in January 1999, at which point there was a lull in attention to EM. Except for one item in a specialist Higher Education newsletter (June 2000) and one short article in the *Irish Independent* (May 2000) entitled 'Boys Target of Sexuality Programme', there was no further mention of EM in the mainstream print media during the 20 months between January 1999 and September 2000. We called these 20 months the Smouldering Phase of the temporal trajectory because, during this time, attention to EM remained but was scarcely noticeable. At this point, EM could either have disappeared from the public consciousness or become a more fully developed event. The subsequent trajectory of media attention, however, showed that EM's symbolic capacity remained present, ready to be activated at some later stage, with our analysis suggesting that likely sources of acceleration included statements such as that in the news item above describing EM as a programme dealing with 'gender and sexuality issues'.

Substantive phase: peak of the flashpoint

The third, and main, phase of public attention to EM lasted less than four months. It began in September 2000, peaked in October 2000, and by December 2000 was largely complete. This Substantive Phase began immediately following radio and newspaper coverage of the launch of EM (materials and video) and the executive summary of the Limerick Evaluation in September 2000. Although this phase represented only a short period of time (September to December 2000) in the overall temporal trajectory (1998–2002), it accounted for the majority of the media attention ($n = 57$ items).

There are two reasons for considering this period the Substantive Phase of media attention. Firstly, it was numerically the most concentrated phase, generating by far the largest number of items of any phase, more than 60% (57 of 96 items) of all items identified. In that sense, this period represented the peak of the flashpoint. Also, during this phase, attention was given to the substance of EM. Articles published during the Substantive Phase considered curricular issues such as content, method and rationale.

We summarise now the main themes from this phase (a complete account is described in Mac an Ghaill et al., 2004). Very early in this phase, gender as a controversial topic was evident. An (anonymous) teacher was quoted as saying that the programme's content was 'shocking', 'politically correct' and an 'example of a global radical feminist agenda'. One letter from this phase introduced most of the criticisms (explicit and implied) that would endure throughout the controversy: that EM was designed by feminists (and this

was a negative thing); boys were portrayed negatively; domestic violence was represented in an unbalanced manner; parents and the public were excluded from input into the development and approval of curriculum materials; classrooms should not be used as therapeutic arenas; and the notion of masculinity as a social construct underpinned the programme and was flawed. Later contributions repeated these criticisms, for example, EM's 'explicitly feminist and left liberal agenda', its 'active promotion of homosexuality', the programme 'falsely portrays men as violent and abusive and women as victims of an oppressive male patriarchy' and 'the private morality and emotions of the individual are no business of educators or the state. Education should be left to educators and social work to social workers. With EM, the roles become blurred'.

EM was seen as an attempt to incorporate 'politically correct secular ideologies' into Catholic secondary school programmes. 'Values programmes', it was argued, should be 'vetted by the Dáil' (Parliament) and 'should not be delegated to experts' (such as teachers). Values education– 'indoctrination and brainwashing' – was seen to encapsulate 'many of the more malign trends in contemporary Western societies'. The issue of relativism in the context of values education forms part of a larger discussion in Irish education reflecting the tensions between theocentric and market/secular influences in Irish society (O'Sullivan, 2005). This is evident in earlier discussion about values clarification in the 1980s, as well as in disquiet expressed about SPHE-type programmes, Stay Safe and RSE programmes in the early 1990s (O'Sullivan, 2005).

Of all the contentions, 'feminism' and 'masculinity as social construct' received the most mentions, often together. EM was a 'grievously misguided attempt at social engineering, based on offensive feminist dogmas about the nature of masculinity' and young male deaths by suicide could be attributed to 'a feminist State, underpinned by a misandrist culture'. As regards masculinity, on page one of the Limerick Evaluation, Gleeson, et al. (1999) state that 'it is a fundamental premise of the Exploring Masculinities programme that masculinity is a social construct'. Although this is not stated anywhere in the EM materials themselves, the term was regularly referred to right throughout the media attention, for example, social constructionism is 'a core belief of radical feminism'. Despite the number of contributions that referred to 'construction', 're-construction', 'deconstruction', 'unreconstructed', and so on, it was not apparent what contributors meant when they used those terms. A consequence of a lack of engagement with social constructionism at a theoretical level was that the term was used to soak up different meanings, and to communicate in a vague way a range of possible, largely negative, interpretations.

Dissipation phase: waning of the flashpoint

From January 2001 onwards the EM flashpoint waned, with little mainstream media attention and some (mainly negative) references in dedicated Catholic and specialist outlets. Most of the 31 items during 2001 were about broader concerns about gender, boys and social change, with EM itself receiving only passing mention. By the end of 2001, EM had dwindled into near anonymity, and it has been absent from public discourse since 2002, showing that the flashpoint was time-bound. Between then and now, more than 20 years, media attention to EM has been absent. Anecdotal evidence from teachers whom we interviewed for our review indicates that some of the materials

continued to be used un-controversially for some years by teachers of SPHE in boys' single-sex schools. No further reviews of EM were undertaken.

The absence of media attention in the period since the end of the dissipation phase makes clear the bounded nature of EM as a cultural flashpoint. Thus, we find that EM was a defining cultural, policy and curricular moment in Irish education, wherein the apparent curricular contestation was, in essence, a vehicle for the playing out of anxieties about changing social and cultural norms. In the remainder of this paper, we utilise EM both to characterise and define the concept cultural flashpoint.

Characteristics, definition and value of the concept 'cultural flashpoint'

Using insights from the analysis, we suggest the following characteristic features of a cultural flashpoint.

Involves a focal issue and/or object

The first key feature is that the cultural flashpoint is centred around a focal issue, event and/or object. In the case of EM, it was both the (i) teachers' manual and (ii) the introduction of the programme in Transition Year single-sex boys' schools. In the context of this paper, 'the materials', in this case the teachers' manual and associated programme video, became the focus of extensive attention in the media commentary on EM. The focal event/object does not need to be either important or enduring. EM was a small curricular initiative and the passage of time showed that it left little cultural trace and was of minor educational importance. This did not preclude it from being a cultural flashpoint because its symbolic power meant that it could be a lightning rod for wider social tensions.

We have described EM, the focal issue, in some detail in Section 2 and noted its fairly wide range of SPHE aims dealing with physical, psychological, emotional and sexual health. Notwithstanding its wide range of aims, it remained at the time of the media controversy a very small programme, in terms of the number of schools in which it was used and its time allocation. Nonetheless, the range allowed for it to become a container for many of the issues raised in the media controversy. In particular, although less than 10% of the programme related directly to sex education, its reading as such by critics was significant in terms of it becoming a focal object of the cultural flashpoint.

Our analysis of the media content showed that nomenclature was another factor that led to controversy. Sex Education programmes have sometimes been named in anodyne ways to turn attention away from them. In the US, for example, schools that introduced sex education curricula 'learned to give innocuous names to their programs to minimise scrutiny' (Blount, 2016, p. 524), but with EM, the opposite occurred with its title. The use of the plural form – Masculinities – was readable as supporting a social constructionist view of gender, and put together with 'exploring' suggested a fluidity about gender that underpinned the criticisms of many contributors.

Our analysis found that there was confusion around what kind of programme EM was. It was assumed variously to be: a gender equality programme; a health education programme; a personal development programme; and it also had a broader equality focus, dealing as it did with issues of race, disability, sexual orientation and family. This

confusion about the meaning of the focal object likely contributed to its usefulness in containing many distinct and overlapping cultural anxieties and tensions.

Conflict derived from contestation

The second key feature of a cultural flashpoint is that an object or idea that has come into the public consciousness leads to conflict. The conflict derives from contestation about the object or idea and does not necessarily occur immediately; the idea may percolate for some time. Without the existence of conflict or controversy, there is no flashpoint. The conflict may take the form of argument, disputation or a war of words. Antipathy and ill-will is likely to be expressed towards those who express oppositional views.

In the case of EM, the programme came into the public consciousness during the Signification Phase, during which time and attention given was limited and largely positive. Following a Smouldering Phase, the beginning of the Substantive Phase was triggered by media coverage of the formal launch of the EM programme and its (positive) evaluation. As described earlier, the main contestation occurred during this period, and antipathy was evident in the views expressed and language used. As described earlier, conflict arose from contestation about gendered violence, masculinity as a social construct, parental exclusion from curriculum development and access to materials, classrooms as therapeutic arenas, and feminism generally. Such polarised discourses 'are at the heart of the culture wars' (Irvine, 2000, p. 60).

Bounded time period

The temporal trajectory of the media attention was a noteworthy feature of the EM case, making visible phases of a cultural flashpoint that started with an almost unnoticed nomination and identification, then seemed to fade from public attention, but returned to develop to a peak where the flashpoint was most salient, and ended with a dissipation of attention and interest. The phasic nature illustrated by our chronological analysis gives us a more nuanced understanding of a cultural flashpoint. The flashpoint may be time-bound but it has a temporal trajectory; there are times when it is more salient, there are times when it might fade away and even fail to peak, and there are times when it does fade away. These four phases, we suggest, may be useful in interrogating other instances of cultural flashpoints.

Flashpoints have a beginning and endpoint, and, so, are temporally bounded. In this they differ from cultural controversy and conflict and clash which may or may not have a defined temporal boundary. Cultural flashpoints illuminate cultural discontent closely related to the controversial matter (e.g. EM) at hand, but also draw in and shine a light on satellite cultural concerns. Their beginnings may occur suddenly or may burn more slowly before exploding into the public consciousness. In the case of EM, the temporal trajectory of the cultural flashpoint stretched over a three-year period but the short Substantive Phase, during which the main heat of the cultural flashpoint was generated, lasted only a little over three months. The clear start point and the clear end point were visible, of course, only in hindsight.

Although the peak of the flashpoint was time-limited, a high degree of continuity was apparent in the contributions that made up the media attention over the entire period of

the EM phenomenon. Many of the contributions also reflected continuity over a much longer time period, echoing earlier and later debates about RSE and life-skills programmes in Ireland (Kiely, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2005).

Exo- and multi-sectoral involvement

When we examined who contributed to the mainstream print media that brought about media controversy, we identified four distinct groups: journalists (37); organisations (14); academics (11); and others (17). Eight journalists accounted for 57% of the 37 contributions made by journalists. Most of the contributions from academics consisted of letters to the editor published in the *Irish Times*. More than a third (36%) of the letters were written by just three people. Organisations represented by letter writers included the ASTI (Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland), AMEN (a service supporting men experiencing domestic violence in Ireland), National Parent Teacher Alliance, Catholic Secondary Schools Parents Association and the Rape Crisis Network. Special interest groups, particularly AMEN, played a significant role in keeping EM in the public eye. Almost entirely absent from the media attention were the male students who had participated in EM. As suggested by the available empirical data (the Limerick Evaluation, our surveys and interviews with teachers), male students were generally positive about the programme.

A fourth feature of the cultural flashpoint that therefore emerges from our analysis of this case of curriculum contestation is exo- and multi-sectoral involvement. Many different constituencies were represented in the cultural flashpoint. Individuals and groups (e.g. journalists; academics; educational, social and church organisations) from outside of the education sector were as, or even more, involved as those within. Crucially, in that sense, this was not an educational flashpoint, but a cultural one. Sensibilities and values from many groups were brought to bear on this small curricular intervention. Had the debates remained solely within the professional realm, in this case among education policy makers and ministry officials, this defining feature of a cultural flashpoint would have been lacking.

Randomness, opaqueness and conflation among its expressions

A fifth key feature is that randomness, opaqueness and conflation are among the characteristics of the focal object or idea. In the case of EM, initial concerns expressed about materials were displaced by the wider social anxieties about changing thinking around gender, boys' and men's experience, as well as domestic violence towards men, among others. The unexpected range of concerns that percolated into the media attention to EM gave the media attention a distinctly unpredictable tenor. Evident in a number of ways, conflation ultimately operated as an effective mechanism for pulling in many issues unrelated to EM; EM served to materialise other concerns and interests. Abstract issues, such as 'global feminist agendas', were made apparently concrete through the programme, often through the use of the 'list approach' (below), vivid imagery and satire. As such, EM became a tangible, recognisable, nameable phenomenon capable of holding and conveying unease and disagreement about social change. A consequence of this, especially in terms of what remained unengaged with, undefined and unexplained, was that EM took on an amorphous character, implicated in social discontents originating at national and global levels.

Significant conflation of issues occurred in the EM media attention in relation to social concerns, as well as school and curricular concerns. It was facilitated by a general lack of understanding of, and imprecision about, curriculum materials and the nature of teachers' work, as well as apparent lack of trust in teachers (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2004). First, much of the criticism of EM reflected concerns about broader *societal* issues that were not specific to EM, but which EM was understood to exemplify (e.g. feminism). Second, much of it developed from broader *educational* concerns not specific to EM, but which EM was understood to exemplify (e.g. roles of the school and parents in RSE). Third, conflation was compounded by vagueness and ambiguity about curriculum and the nature of teachers' work, particularly in relation to SPHE.

A key characteristic of contributions that were negative about EM was the use of what we call 'the list approach'. We came to understand the list approach as a rhetorical device whereby new ideas are embedded in lists of (often unrelated) established ideas, leading to conflation. Those who already accept these established ideas may be more likely to accept the new, proximate ideas, as one idea is presumed (often erroneously) to be related to another. Examples of the 'list of ideas' mixed up together in single contributions characterise EM as containing 'vulgar language'; representing the traditional family as 'only a cereal pack norm'; teaching boys about 'exploring alternative sexual lifestyles'; suggesting males are especially prone to violence, crime and failure; containing indoctrination and feminist propaganda; and using inappropriate methodologies.

Using the 'list approach' as a rhetorical device supporting conflation meant that many contributions encoded EM as undesirable *a priori* by embedding it within lists of pre-existing social, educational or cultural issues widely considered to be controversial, undesirable or both (e.g. feminism, 'junk science', 'social engineering', 'vulgar language'). We observe that conflation is typical of cultural flashpoint debates.

Flashpoint as broadly cultural, extending beyond its sector of origin

A sixth characteristic feature of a flashpoint is that it is concerned with larger societal concerns; it extends beyond its sector of origin, making the domain-specific matter a broader cultural matter. As exemplars, we note here some of the range of issues and concerns that were raised. We do this in order to separate EM-specific concerns from concerns expressed in the context of EM, but which might just as easily have been expressed in other contexts. These other contexts could include all SPHE programmes, RSE programmes, gender equality programmes, and many policy and legislative contexts, especially Family Law contexts.

The media contributions about EM included concerns about the gendered representation of violence and, specifically, the gendered representation of domestic violence; concerns about young male suicide and male vulnerability; concerns about state policy and legislation on equality-related matters; concerns about the treatment of men and fathers by society and by the courts in particular; concerns about the erosion of traditional Judeo-Christian religious values, specifically in respect of sexual identity/orientation as well as diversity of family forms; and beliefs about a singular feminism responsible for many social ills. EM, an educational matter, came to be seen as being enmeshed with broader issues which were being contested in a society undergoing a critical moment of

social, cultural and educational change, including issues of gender and sexuality. In this, it showed the capacity of discourse within social movements to not only 'recirculate historical sexual anxieties', but also to 'creatively and often unpredictably refashion meanings', even encoding danger in them (Irvine, 2000, p. 71).

Discussion

The time period during which EM became a cultural flashpoint was characterised by unprecedented economic, social, cultural and educational change in Ireland, particularly in relation to gender. EM (and RSE/SPHE) was developed and implemented against the backdrop of the economic recession of the mid-1980s in Ireland. The late 1980s and early 1990s was a time of high emigration, high unemployment, income deprivation, consistent poverty and social marginalisation. The community and anti-poverty social movements of the preceding decades slowly brought change to the dominant social paradigm (O'Sullivan, 2005), leading to a national politics of participatory democracy, evidenced in the seven national partnership agreements, and broad policy support for equality measures, including on gender (Connolly & Hourigan, 2006).

Educational participation increased during these decades, leading to extensive educational change, with dominant paradigms shifting from theocentric through mercantile to liberal equality paradigms (O'Sullivan, 2005). Church control of schools lessened somewhat, and the number of single-sex schools decreased. Gender equality became a focus of research, policy and educational reform and, within the Ministry for Education, the Gender Equality Unit promoted many gender equality initiatives. Most of these interventions were aimed at girls and young women and, with EM, attention turned for the first time to boys and, specifically, to boys in single-sex schools (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2004).

The dominance of the Roman Catholic Church on society and on education was diminishing (Inglis, 1998). The second wave of feminism problematised at many levels women's roles in the family and in society, and, consequently – eventually – those of men (e.g. Connolly & Hourigan, 2006). Ireland's EC accession ultimately led to EU-directive-led legislation in Ireland (Hanmer et al., 1994) that both reflected and allowed for, among other things, changing relationship and sexual mores and increased labour force participation by women. This changed context produced legislation (Smyth, 1988) that disrupted existing gender norms, including women's legal status as chattels (1981), legislation to allow contraception (1980–1985), to decriminalise homosexuality (1993), and to permit divorce (1996) (Urquhart, 2012). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ireland had enacted radical equality legislation that prevented discrimination both in employment and in the provision of goods and services on nine separate grounds, including gender (Barry et al., 2004). In recent years, Ireland has seen ever more radical constitutional and legislative change, including, in 2015, the first marriage equality legislation in the world, providing for marriage to be recognised irrespective of the sex of the partners and, in 2020, electing the largest proportion of left-wing parliamentarians in the history of the State.

EM was developed and implemented within twin contexts of changing social and educational paradigms, as well as within the context of an already controversial RSE programme. In hindsight, it may be seen not only as a flashpoint waiting to happen but

an inevitability, given its capacity to absorb social and cultural angst experienced by those for whom such change was unwelcome.

Definition and value

We have identified and described six characteristic features of a cultural flashpoint based on our analysis of the EM case. Although others have identified instances of the cultural flashpoint, the characteristics of these identified flashpoints have remained, as far as we can tell, largely implicit.

We now offer this working definition: *'a cultural flashpoint is a domain-specific cultural matter (point) which causes controversy (flash), such that the domain-specific matter becomes part of a broader societal discourse, capturing current cultural anxieties, discontents and unease, particularly at critical moments of social change'*. The flashpoint exists as both content/event and controversy.

Specific domains that we identified earlier in this paper include politics, religion and medicine, but could also potentially include any other domain. To our knowledge, the concept of cultural flashpoints in education has been rarely used. However, we can readily identify many other instances of what could be termed cultural flashpoints in education, even if they have not been named as such. These include IQ (Jensen, 1969), Bell Curve (Murray & Herrnstein, 1994) and Ebonics (Wolfram, 1998). More recently, we point to an analysis of a health education module in Croatia as a possible instance of a cultural flashpoint in education (Igor et al., 2015). Described as a 'culture war' that erupted, the module included some of EM's topics, among them gender roles, gender equality, sexuality and violence. Further analyses within education and indeed other fields may refine our proposed phases, definition and characteristics in areas such as bioethics (Caplan, 2008), among others.

In the context of our case, the controversy that erupted around the EM programme (an educational domain-specific matter) can be thought of as the 'flash', and the programme itself the 'point', a cultural object that captured broader cultural anxieties, discontents and unease. In the first place, cultural flashpoints are of interest because of their capacity to illuminate the values of, and the tensions in, the culture or society in which they appear. By observing and analysing the 'flash' surrounding these cultural flashpoints, a deeper understanding of their home cultures can be achieved.

Second, we consider cultural flashpoints to be illuminating moments in wider cultural movements. Following Eder's (1982) theory of 'new movements', we can frame EM as part of a wider movement (cultural, political or otherwise), that was seen by its critics to 'oppose present social life' (p. 5). In the EM case, it was precisely the perception that EM was 'oppose[d] to present social life' that led to unprecedented negative focus immediately following its introduction. The opposition to 'present social life' was, in this case, the changing discourses on boys, men and masculinities in Irish schooling and society, discourses that were only beginning to be described in Ireland at that time but have since continued (Katz et al., 2021; O'Beaglaoich et al., 2020; Barnes, 2012; Darcy, 2019; Ferguson, 2001; Ging, 2013; O'Keeffe, 2022; Popoviciu et al., 2006). Further, the 'failure' of this minor educational reform to become embedded may be attributed to its lack of alignment with the 'contemporaneous grammar' of schooling and a social ideology in change but not yet changed (Courtney & Mann, 2021; Tyack & Tobin, 1994). This is

consistent with the overriding influence of Anglo-Saxon/American curriculum cultural influences observed by Gleeson (2021) in his analysis of the evolution of Irish curriculum culture, specifically in relation to reform and change. Nonetheless, since the end of its flashpoint, EM has garnered ongoing attention among academics, who attest to its cultural significance as a notable marker of contestation as well as gradual longer-term change, both vis-à-vis schooling and men in Irish society (e.g. Haywood et al., 2005, Ó'Beaglaoich et al., 2015; Barnes, 2012; Ging, 2013; Inglis, 2015; McCormack & Gleeson, 2012; Neary et al., 2017; O'Sullivan, 2009).

Third, importantly, it is the *perception* of high stakes associated with the focal object, event or issue that underpins and forms the basis for the conflict and lends both an immediacy and ongoing cultural resonance. One could argue that if EM really were culturally significant, then at this point, more than 20 years later, it ought to have left some trace and be referred to in public debates about boys, men and masculinities in Irish society rather than being simply a subject of primarily academic interest. This fizzling out of the cultural flashpoint is particularly salient because, at the time of the EM case, among all other curriculum interventions/programmes large and small, not one received anywhere near the same attention that EM received, including the introduction in 1999 of the Revised Primary School Curriculum, which could be regarded as the most significant curriculum initiative at primary school level in Ireland in over 30 years.

Conclusion

This paper has used an illustrative case (EM) to test the concept 'cultural flashpoint', in order to describe its characteristic features and to define it. As such, we offer the cultural flashpoint as a conceptual tool for understanding and analysing the cultural politics of education or, indeed, other sectors such as health, social care or the environment. Our chronological analysis of the dataset of media articles demonstrated the phasic nature of a cultural flashpoint.

Finally, the six-part multi-dimensional framework of cultural flashpoints that we present in this paper is, we claim, a potentially valuable conceptual device for identifying, analysing and understanding contestation about educational change in the context of wider and more long-standing cultural, social, educational and political movements. Though cultural movements are of more significance and impact in the long term, cultural flashpoints, when clearly perceived and understood, illuminate and set in relief relationships between significant but undeclared aspects of educational change and the social, political and cultural contexts in which they occur.

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ORCID

Joan Hanafin http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8016-2266
Paul F. Conway http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6513-7310
Cormac Ó Beaglaoich http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9620-3280
Jack Hanafin http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7466-9220
Máirtín Mac an Ghaill http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5713-3109

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