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'We Don't Really Give a Fiddlers About Anything": The Ambiguity, Contradiction and Fluidity of Irish Masculinities.

Clay J. Darcy
Independent Researcher, claydarcy@gmail.com

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Abstract

Irish men have received little critical attention as gendered subjects. Historically, masculinities were invisible in Irish society. Thus, this article will contribute to the visibility of Irish masculinities and the critical study of men, by sociologically examining Irish men's conceptualisation of masculinity and their understanding of what it means to be a man in contemporary Irish society. Using masculinities as the primary theoretical and analytical lens, this article draws from 9 focus groups conducted with 44 Irish men, which explored their views about masculinities and about being a man in contemporary Ireland. The men in this study presented a complex conceptualisation of masculinity shaped by a traditional past and a fast changing present. This paper reveals complexities at play between men's conceptualisation of how to be a man in contemporary Ireland and their lived experiences as men. The findings of this study suggest some Irish men are moving away from a rigid and stereotypical notion of masculinity to a more fluid and progressive construct. This paper argues the ambiguity, contradiction and fluidity of Irish masculinities gives some men greater flexibility in how they express their gender identity.

Key words: Irish masculinities, gender, men, Ireland.

Introduction

Only in recent decades have Irish men received critical attention as gendered subjects (Ferguson, 2001; Cleary, 2005; Johnson and Morrison, 2007). Irish men's historical gender invisibility can be explained by their position as the dominant and unspoken gender in Irish society. Based on empirical research, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the visibility of Irish masculinities, by sociologically exploring Irish men's conceptualisation of masculinity and their understanding of what it means to be a man in contemporary Irish society. The importance of this work stems from recognition that "studies of masculinities can help confront patriarchy" and that revealing diversity in men's lives can help break down the "oppositions between male and female on which patriarchy relies" (Lohan, 2000, p. 167). Lohan (2000) contends that Ireland has been slower than other countries to "re-cast gender studies" to include men and masculinities. This article builds on work that recognises masculinities as social constructs, constituted through interaction, multiplicitous and fluid (Connell, 1995; Pascoe and Bridges, 2016). Masculinities are relational, geographically specific and contextually dependant (Connell, 1995). In order to situate this study, the following sections explore the Irish gender landscape, how Irish masculinities have historically been constructed and hackneyed notions of Irish masculinities within the popular discourse.

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The Irish Gender Landscape

Irish gender constructs "reflect dominant norms about men and women" and have been influenced by recent shifts in Irish religiosity and economic climate, a more heterogeneous society and the growth of media influence (O'Sullivan, 2007, p. 268). Ging (2009) argues that the gender landscape in Ireland is saturated with paradoxes and contradictions, and that notions of genetic determinism dominate contemporary discourses about Irish men and masculinities. Tager and Good (2005) contend that what boys and men are taught as acceptable masculine behaviour in one cultural context can be emasculating in another. To support this contention, they argue that "a kiss between men or an emotional display may be perceived as appropriate or inappropriate, "manly" or not, depending on the cultural context" (Tager and Good, 2005, p.264). Bairner (1999, p. 128) argues that within an Irish context "the culture of the "hard man" was central to the construction" of Irish masculinities, particularly in "working class communities". Thus, social class positions also play a significant influence in the ways men demonstrate masculinities in specific geographic contexts. This paper works to explore some Irish men's conceptualisation of masculinities and uncover what being a man means to them. However, Irish masculinities cannot be understood without giving consideration to structural and social factors at play within the Irish context. In this regard, it must also be remembered that Ireland does not exist in a vacuum. Keohan and Kuhling (2004, p. 5-6) observe that contemporary Irish society has been influenced in "ambiguous and paradoxical" ways through the "globalisation of the local and the re-localisation of the global". Ging (2009, p. 60) argues that a "language of genetic determinism has shaped contemporary discourses about Irish masculinities". Ging (ibid) contends that some media sources are contributing to the perception that Irish men "are becoming increasingly feminised and disempowered". Ging (ibid) believes this view "is central to a politics of gender that is underpinned by strict sex-role stereotyping based on biological difference". Ging (ibid) further argues that public debates about Irish boys and men, centred on "flash point issues" such as male suicide and the "masculinity crisis" have been significantly shaped by "the gender-essentialist rhetoric of the American men's movement and of self-help literature". This paper adds to other empirical work that have studied Irish masculinities, in particular, focusing on Irish men's conceptualisation of masculinities and the meanings they ascribe to being a man in contemporary Ireland. The following section examines some of the historical and recent influences on Irish masculinities.

Constructing Irish Masculinities

Irish masculinities have been constructed upon indigenous social structures and historical narratives of nationalism. Historically, gender was interwoven within Irish national identity, expressed through colonial and post-colonial discourses that described Ireland as "feminine" (Maclaran and Stevens, 2009, p. 77). Baker (2013) suggests that the characterisation of Ireland as feminine and their British colonisers as masculine was used to justify the need for colonial rule. It was also used to argue that Ireland was incapable of ruling itself because it's "feminine qualities […] would lead it to ruin" (Baker, 2013, p. 4). Barker (2013, p. 32) argues that the colonisation of Ireland resulted in the emasculation of Irish culture and resulted in some Irish men later becoming locked into a cyclical pattern of reinforcing old stereotypes and overcompensating masculinity. Over time, Irish masculinities have been complexly constructed through constitutional legislation (Ferguson, 2001b), idealised notions

of familism (Ferguson, 2000; Ní Laoire, 2005), sporting institutions (Bairner, 1999; Lloyd, 2000), societal and institutional homophobia (O'Donoghue, 2005; Ryan, 2010), and media and film (Ging, 2004, 2009). The Roman Catholic Church dominated Irish society during the twentieth century and was significant in shaping Irish masculinities. Celibacy was a central feature of traditional Irish hegemonic masculinities, as was the notion of "the private family and heterosexual marriage" (Ferguson, 2001a, p. 120). Religious influences on Irish masculinities are exemplified in historical practices within Irish schools. The majority of Irish schools were governed by the Roman Catholic Church, and, as a result, Irish masculinities have been (re)produced by school structures and practices that were typified by a strong culture of gender segregation and moral instruction (Mac an Ghaill et al., 2004). Ferguson (2001a) draws attention to the rural aspect of traditional Irish masculinities, what Campbell and Bell (2000, p. 540) would describe as the "rural in the masculine". Historically Ireland's economic landscape was agricultural. Driven by manual labour, this heavily impacted on Irish gender patterns. The body plays a significant role in the construction of gender (Connell, 2002) and as Irish men's bodies shaped the land, they were in turn shaped by it. Through manual work, men learned practical skills, which they passed on to younger generations, in turn, perpetuating a traditional construction of masculinity tempered by physicality and the demonstration of practical skill. Work is recognised as significantly gendered (Connell, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2007) and plays a dominant role in the shaping of both femininities and masculinities. The breadwinner role features prominently in Irish men's notions of what it means to be a man (Goodwin, 2002; Hanlon, 2012). Hanlon's (2012) examination of caring masculinities identifies complexities in men's formation of masculine identities, noting the influence of personal experiences, conventional notions of masculinity, family dynamics and the parenting style experienced, along with the wider social, cultural, and economic climate.

Ging (2005) and Johnson and Morrison (2007) contend that many Irish men maintain an ambiguous understanding of masculinity. Johnson and Morrison (2007) believe this ambiguity stems from a transition occurring in Irish society from traditional to contemporary masculinities. This following section explores hackneyed notions of Irish masculinities within the popular discourse.

Hackneyed Notions of Irish Masculinities

New and contradictory discourses about masculinity are evident in the Irish media (Ging, 2005). There is a hackneyed notion of the 'The Irish Male' within the popular discourse (O'Connor, 1994; 2009). These stereotypical notions about Irish men can be used to understand how Irish masculinities are perceived as being unique. O'Connor (1994) paints a picture of Irish men as jovial storytellers, lyrical and witty, with a deeply nationalist and Celtic spirit.   His stereotypical 'Irish Male' has a complex relationship with his parents and religion, and an even more complex relationship with alcohol (ibid). This clichéd notion of Irish men is exemplified in the following passage from him:

> A man was sitting alone at the bar, deep in mystical contemplation of his pint, when the door opened and another fellow, bedecked from head to toe in black, entered the premises unobserved by the former. The new arrival crept up to My Nabs at the bar and quickly tapped him trice on the shoulder. The philosopher turned, a smile of surprise and delight playing about his lips. 'Would ye FOOK OFF, yeh fat fooker-yeh' he happily cried. 'I haven't seen yeh in BLAYDIN' AGES!' Only in Ireland do men

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> *greet each other thus. Although even making allowances for local cultural idiosyncrasies, I thought it was a bit much to talk to an Archbishop like that* (O'Connor, 2009, p. 233).

Whilst O'Connor's portrait of Irish men is intentionally facetious, it does provide a vignette into masculinity ideologies at play within Irish society. O'Connor's caricature accurately captures the quintessential Irish man: a pub going beer drinker, naturally witty and clever, who demonstrates playfulness and irreverence with other men. This characterisation of Irish men and the popular notion of the "cute hure/hoor" who is politically devious and without scruples (Share, 1997, p. 139) echoes Buckley's (1983) classic ethnographic study of the people of Listymore. Buckley (1983, p. 388) observed how Irish men engaged in "playful rebellion" during their interactions with others and who delighted in "wrongfooting" (present day slagging or making fun of) other men. Identities are a "continual process of construction, appearing in various social contexts which manifest identity while simultaneously altering it" (Watson, 2007, p. 352). Irish masculinities are distinct in so far as they are entwined with notions of national identity. Irish masculinities do not exist without some accepted degree of Irishness and they speak of the socially accepted ways for Irish men to display and (re)produce masculinities. Thus, Irish masculinities are an identity expression, specific in context, but arguably ambiguous in form. Although the factors that have shaped Irish masculinities are varied and complex, there is one cultural practice that deserves highlighting. Men's use of alcohol and the practices surrounding its consumption are deeply rooted within Irish masculinities. The relationship between alcohol and Irish masculinities has been widely noted (Blaney, 1974; Greenslade et al., 1995; Inglis, 1998; Barich, 2001; Share, 2003; Tilki, 2006; Share et al., 2007). Drinking alcohol holds major symbolic significance in Ireland and the relationship between the Irish and alcohol is complex (Buckley, 1983). Lloyd (2000) suggests that in the past, Irish men drank in opposition to a sense of paralysis, alienation and anomie experienced under British colonial rule. For many Irish men, the consumption of alcohol has become intertwined with doing masculinity (Lloyd, 2000). Drinking practices can play a central role in Irish men's gender performances (Lloyd, 2000; Darcy, 2013). Within Irish culture, the heavy drinker is glorified and public drunkenness is socially tolerated (Greenslade et al., 1995). Tilki (2006, p. 2) states that "Irish masculinity was constructed around a combination of hard physical labour and heavy drinking". According to Inglis (1998, p. 245), alcohol is a culturally normative coping strategy for many Irish men; used as an emotional analgesic, to momentarily escape adversity and eliminate "the self". Irish men are not alone in their use of alcohol in this way; men in other locations use alcohol for similar reasons (Dolan, 2011). The pub has played a significant social role for many Irish men (Tilki, 2006) and in other cultural contexts has become a prime site "where hegemonic forms of masculinity are constructed, reproduced and successfully defended" (Campbell, 2000, p. 563).

This paper examines how some men navigate the dominant notions and expectations at play within the Irish gender landscape, to form their conceptualisation of masculinities. This study works to provide a snapshot of understanding into the meanings Irish men ascribe to being a man in contemporary Ireland. The following section details the research methodology employed to carry out this work.

Methodology

This article draws on data obtained from a broader study (Darcy, 2017) about masculinities and Irish men's recreational use of illicit drugs. As part of this study, nine focus groups were conducted with a broad sample of Irish men living in the East and South East regions of Ireland, to explore their views on Irish masculinities and men's illicit drug use. This article is based on the focus group discussions about Irish masculinities. In total, 44 men participated in this aspect of the study. A feasibility exercise was conducted at an early stage in the research and it was determined that individually men were reluctant to participate in focus groups with strangers, thus pre-existing men's groups were targeted to assist with participant recruitment. Formal contact was made (through email and letters) with independent autonomous groups of men, such as men's development groups, sports groups, spiritual/hobbyist groups within the East/South East region of Ireland, to seek help in recruiting research participants. Five of the focus groups were composed of pre-existing groups of men, such as, youth groups (*n*=3) and men's development groups (*n*=2) (Table 1). The other four groups were recruited by informal means, by requests made through the researcher's social network. These groups consisted of men who were either related to one another (*n*=1), part of the same social network (*n*=2), or who knew each other through their employment (*n*=1). All of the focus groups were comprised of white heterosexual Irish men. Across the focus groups there was a mix of men from rural and suburban locations and from working and middle class backgrounds. One focus group consisted of two men from the Traveller community.

Table 1: Focus group details

Group	Composition	Description
Pilot	Men aged 19-22yrs (*n* = 5)	Young men from suburban area, pre-existing youth group, with moderate levels of education and employment.
FG1	Men aged 18-19yrs (*n* = 4)	Young men from small rural village, pre-existing youth group, with moderate levels of education and some employment
FG2	Men aged 18yrs (*n* = 2)	Young men from small rural village, part of a pre-existing youth group, with moderate levels of education and high unemployment.
FG3	Men aged 43-66yrs (*n* = 7)	Mixed age group of men from large rural town, members of a men's group, with mixed levels of education, employment and relationship status.
FG4	Men aged 45-85yrs (*n* = 10)	Mixed age group of men from large rural town, members of a men's group, with mixed levels of education, employment and relationship status.

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Table 1: Focus group details (contd.)

Group	Composition	Description
FG5	Men aged 44-76yrs (*n* = 4)	Mixed age group of men from suburban area, family group, with high levels of education, professional employment, mixed relationship status.
FG6	Men aged 35-52yrs (*n* = 5)	Middle age group of men from suburban area, known to each other through work, with mixed levels of education, employment and relationship status.
FG7	Men aged 32-37yrs (*n* = 5)	Men from suburban areas, part of a social network, with high levels of education, professional employment and mixed relationship status.
FG8	Men aged 18-19yrs (*n* = 2)	Young men from rural Traveller community who are known to each other, with low levels of education and employment, mixed relationship status.

Drawing upon the guidelines of Morgan (1988, 1993), Carey (1994), Mack et al. (2005) and Flick (2009), the focus groups were semi-structured, homogeneously composed, held in informal settings and moderated by the researcher. A focus group protocol guided the running of the sessions, whilst a topic schedule guided the discussion. The aim of these focus groups was to obtain a breadth of opinion with a small sample, drawing upon a range of masculine experiences in terms of age, occupation, class and family/relationship status (Table 1). Ethical approval for this research project was sought from University College Dublin Office of Research Ethics in August of 2014. Focus groups were conducted between October 2014 and June 2015. Focus groups participants were asked to agree confidentiality of the group and were reminded the researcher did not have control over what group members said outside of the group context. For that reason, focus group participants were informed confidentiality could not be completely guaranteed. Focus group participants were informed they would be assigned pseudonyms and that all data would be de-identified during the transcription process. Some extracts contained in this article have been shortened in places by omitting unnecessary text, however, such extracts remain an accurate reflection of what was said by participants. Omitted text is indicated by an ellipsis […]. Pauses are indicated by …

Findings

Irish Men's Understanding of Masculinities

For many of the focus groups participants, articulating their ideas about masculinity and being a man in contemporary Ireland was difficult. To them, masculinity was ambiguous, hard to define and in some cases invisible. Some focus group participants provided a

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description of masculinity that was drawn from a "language of genetic determinism" (Ging, 2009, p. 60), strongly linked to men's bodies and defined in biological terms:

Researcher: *[…] what does being a man mean to you?*
Walter:(whistles loudly) *Jesus!* (laughs)
Duke: *Being able to pee standing up!*
Walter: *You're going deep there now* [Researcher Name]*! Being a man?*
               (silent pause)
Rowe: *Curve ball!*
Tom: *That's a hard one.*
Walter: *You must, just …*
Tom: *Ease us in!*
Walter: *Soften it a little bit* [Researcher Name] *there you know!*
Tom: *On the recording that must sound f**king dodgy!*
               (group laughs)
Walter: *It does!* (laughs)

(Focus Group 7)

Whilst the participants in the above excerpt, initially had difficulty formulating a response to the question, they quickly begin to both collectively and discursively construct a notion of masculinity, through reciprocal humour, that was linked to men's bodies, heterosexuality and dominance. For these young middle-class men, openly talking about masculinity challenged the status quo and the participants quickly began to police each other and the boundaries of discussion. Tom's concern about how the discussion might sound on the recording, suggests that the conversation, tone and the language being used was perceived (at least by him) as being homosexual and by extension not masculine. Drawing from dominant stereotypes in their cultural and structural surrounds, these focus group participants continued to collectively construct a definition of masculinity that re-asserted traditional masculine values of stoicism, strength, and personal and social restraint:

Tom: *[…] if one of the guys in work was crying in front of me because…*
Rowe: *Oh, you'd feel uncomfortable, yeah!*
Tom: *Someone chewed him out of it and gave out to him or something like that […] I hate to say I feel, I would think any less of him and you know I would really try not to but my instant…*
Collin: *You'd try not to.*
Rowe: *I don't want to go to battle with this chap!*
Tom: *Reaction would be like 'what's, what's going on there?'*
Rowe: *Or, even if you came […] and somebody was crying. Jesus! I'm going to walk out of the room, I don't even want to…*
Tom: *Don't want to deal with it! Yeah.*
Rowe: *Could be he's just lost his wife in a car accident, but you don't know, you just walked into the …for f**k's sake!'*
Tom: *But […] if I came in and there was a girl crying, I'd probably go over and comfort her and if there was a guy crying, I'd be like … you know how* (pretends to be whistling looking elsewhere).
               (group laughs)

(Focus Group 7)

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The above excerpt highlights how, for these participants, men's public displays of emotion confront their own understanding of normative gender expectations. This example also illustrates how men's emotional displays can create emotional tensions for other men. Not knowing how to deal with the emotional complexities of such a situation, the men in this focus group opt for avoidance as a response. For other men, masculinity was articulated by stating what it was not, rather than what it was. This oppositional construction of masculinity is similar to how some men in other locations construct masculinity (see Campbell, 2000). The following passage illustrates this:

Nick:	*The suggestion is that masculinity means you're not supposed to express your feelings, now, whether that's true or not ...*
Robert:	*Yeah.*
Nick:	*But that's the suggestion you can't express your feelings, can't cry.*
Researcher:	*Ok.*
Nick:	*That's kinda what society...*
Matt:	*Supposed to be tougher and ...*
Researcher:	*Supposed to be tougher?*
Matt:	*Yeah* (quietly) […]
Graham:	*F**k off with someone else's wife.*
Harry:	(laughs) *Easy do that!*
	(group laughs)
Researcher:	*That's what you're not supposed to do?*
Graham:	*I know.*
Researcher:	*Or, you're supposed to do?*
Graham:	(laughing) *You're not supposed to do, but we do it, if we get the chance!* (laughing)
	(*group laughs*)
Nick:	*Supposed to work hard, that would be another one, yeah* […]
Harry:	*Well, they're not supposed to burst your b*****ks out though, neither!*
Graham:	*Ah, you're supposed to enjoy yourself, too!*
	(group laughs)

(Focus Group 3)

The views of the men in focus group 3 provide an interesting contrast to the earlier comments expressed by the men in focus group 7. There is an age difference between the men in both groups, with the men in focus group 7 being older. The older men appear to demonstrate a greater degree of emotional reflection (perhaps a result of their participation in a men's development group) and a more complex understanding of the differences between men's emotional lives and the stereotypical gender expectations at play within society.

Across the focus groups, some commonalities surfaced in the men's understanding of what constituted masculinity. Emerging strongly from the data were the notions that men should be providers, hard-working, philandering, tough and stoic. Relationships and family life were acknowledged by participants as significant influences in men shaping masculine identities. The following discussion illustrates this:

Researcher:	*Ok, so are relationships a big thing, in terms of what makes you a man?*
Eamonn:	*Oh, I think so, yeah.*

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David: *I think so, yeah, 'cause the, the, I think you get more involved in what your partner or wife's interests, then as well.*

Eamonn: *I can go through my first marriage where I was totally disempowered, em ... didn't know who I was, eventually, there were other circumstances as well, my first wife nearly died of Hodgkin's ... and eh, had one child who was ten weeks old and one who was two, so we put everything into that, so there were. Can't blame her totally.*

Terry: *Mm.*

Eamonn: *But, I then totally put everything into her, I lost that who I was.*

(Focus Group 4)

Eamonn's comments highlight the importance of relationship and family status in men constructing masculinities, however, it also demonstrates how masculinities are relational and co-constructed (Connell, 1995). Reflecting Ging's (2005) observations on discourses about masculinities in the media, within some focus group discussions, there was evidence of men renegotiating and redefining masculinities:

Researcher: *[...] what does being a man mean to you? You were saying? [directed at Terry]*

Terry: *It's just about being an individual and who you are, and what you want to be, and [...] how you assert yourself as a man, as such [...] how you help people in life.*

Researcher: *Are there certain ways you should assert yourself as a man?*

Terry: *Not necessarily, I think you know.*

Morris: *There's more room to be, to have self-expression, I think ... and I think there's, it's getting less defined, you know in that way, you can just be, kind of explore it a bit.*

Morris: *Well, I find over the last few years, have becoming a lot open-minded [...] things that I would probably not even think about a few years ago have just, "so what" like?*

Researcher: *Yeah?*

Morris: *No big deal like, you know. But then again, you're brought up by other people beliefs and guidance, so it's kind of when you move on as a man and you've experienced these things in life. You'll form your own opinions and then that's what makes you the man that you are [...]*

(Focus Group 4)

In the above excerpt, Morris and Terry suggest masculinity is becoming more ambiguous and less defined. There is a strong sense of fluidity to the men's understanding of how to express masculinities, a fluidity that for them, appears quite positive. For Morris, he believes he has moved away from the masculinity ideology that surrounded him in his youth. In his opinion, his age and life experiences have had a significant bearing on how he has constructed his masculine identity. For Terry and Morris, masculinity is self-determined, however, it must be remembered these men are middle-aged with considerable life experience. Their understanding of masculinity is shaped by their age, their location and structural

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surroundings. Younger men or men from other cultural or ethnic groups will have different experiences of enacting masculinities.

The following section explores the focus groups' conceptualisation of Irish masculinities and unpacks how Irish masculinities are perceived by these men, to be different to masculinities elsewhere.

Are Irish Masculinities Unique?

Intrinsic to all of the focus group participants' conceptualisation of Irish masculinities was the centrality of alcohol and engaging in heavy drinking. Much like the work of Greenslade et al. (1995), Lloyd (2000), Tilki (2006) and Darcy (2013), the men in this study subscribed to the notion Irish masculinities were demonstrated through hard/heavy drinking and, in drinking contexts, irreverence toward others:

> Researcher: *[…] is there anything unique then about Irish men? Compared to men from other countries?*
> Liam: *Yeah.*
> Alex: *Irish men, yeah, they like want to drink!*
> Noel: *They don't give a s**t like.*
> Des: *If you turned round to somebody in another country and said "Ah, will you ever f**k off!" […]*
> Des: *You'd get a box* (punch), *but like, if Joe said something to me and I said that to him, the two of us would just start laughing.*
> Liam: *We've a different sense of humour.*
> Des: *Yeah, like, that's it!*
> Liam: *The best sense of humour, I think!*
> Des: *We've a completely different sense of humour.*

> (Pilot Focus Group)

The above excerpt is reminiscent of the "wrong footing" and "playful rebellion" that Buckley (1983, p. 383-388) observed men engaging in the small Irish town 'Listymore'. In the above example, humour and joking are important interactional tools between men in homosocial contexts. Research participants had a sense that Irish men are different to men elsewhere and they could identify some clichéd character traits unique to Irish men; however, they were unable to provide a unanimous definition of Irish masculinities suggesting a strong degree of fluidity at play within contemporary gender constructs. However, some men drew heavily from historical stereotypes that legitimated a hackneyed conceptualisation of Irish masculinities. The following discussion illustrates this:

> Researcher: *How would you describe Irish men […]*
> Aidan: *Drink!*
> Stuart: *We've always had a history for drinking, haven't we like?*
> Researcher: *Yeah?*
> Stuart: *That explains one thing. It does! […] Like the fighting Irish like, why do all the Irish fight when they're drinking like, you know what I mean?*

> (Focus Group 1)

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For the young men above, drinking and fighting were closely related activities. However, drinking and fighting are not unique to Irish men as Canaan's (1996) study on drinking, fighting and working-class masculinities illustrates elsewhere. Whilst Aidan and Stuart believe Irish men to be drinkers and fighters, others did not share this view. For other focus group participants, Irish men were demarcated by their sense of humour and lyrical skill rather than drinking and fighting. According to the following participants, Irish men are distinguished by their sociality and ability to entertain:

Researcher:	*[…] how would you describe Irish men?*
Ross:	*Sexy!*
Mitch:	Yep!
Researcher:	*Oh!*
	(group silence)
Jim:	*Story tellers.*
Researcher:	*Story tellers?*
Jim:	*Convivial … em … social […]*
Researcher:	*Are there any characteristics that are…*
Mitch:	*Needy!*
Researcher:	*Needy?*
Jim:	*Yeah.*
Researcher:	*In what way, needy?*
Mitch:	*[…] whenever I was abroad and I looked at us compared to others, and immature, it always seems the Europeans seem to be much more in control, boring!*

<div align="right">(Focus Group 5)</div>

There were some areas of common agreement about what constitutes Irish masculinities or what distinguishes Irish men from men elsewhere. Many participants believed that Irish men are distinguished by their drinking habits, playfulness, humour and sociability. However, some of the men in this study demonstrated contradictory and paradoxical understandings of Irish masculinities, suggesting fluidity in these men's conceptualisation of what it is to be an Irish man. Emerging from these men's discussions is the different, yet interrelated, dimensions of being a man and of being Irish. Whilst the men acknowledged ways in which men can demonstrate masculinity within Irish society, there were differences between this understanding and their experiences of, and meanings ascribed to, being a man in contemporary Ireland. Demarcating Irish masculinities was an arbitrary exercise in constructing something that was both same and other. The men in this study identified as Irish men (same), yet their conceptualisation of Irish masculinity differed greatly from their own understanding of what it was to be a man in contemporary Ireland (other). Some participants described Irish men as social and indifferent, yet, simultaneously reserved and unconfident in comparison to men elsewhere:

Researcher:	*[…] how would you describe Irish men?*
Ken:	*Devilishly handsome!*
Pat:	*Rugged! Handsome! Tall!*
	(group laughs)
Researcher:	*Is there characteristics unique to Irish men, do you think?*
Ken:	*We don't really give a fiddlers* (care) *about anything, just live and let live. The majority do anyway.*

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Researcher:	*Right.*
Ken:	*We like to enjoy ourselves, we like to socialise, we like our families* […]
Anthony:	*Compared to the English or the Americans, we are a lot more reserved about putting ourselves out there, confidence wise.*

(Focus Group 6)

Whilst the above conceptualisation of Irish masculinities is fragmentary and contradictory, implicit within the men's discussions is an understanding that some Irish men benefit from structures that maintain the "patriarchal dividend" (Connell, 1995, p. 79). A key location where men enjoy both pleasurable and privileged social positions is the pub. To further this discussion, the following section explores the relationship between Irish masculinities, alcohol and the pub.

Irish Men, Alcohol and The Pub

The pub is acknowledged as a site where "hegemonic forms of masculinity are constructed, reproduced and successfully defended" (Campbell, 2000, p. 563). Participants in this study articulated notions about how Irish men display and (re)produce masculinity through their drinking practices and interactions in pub spaces. For the following young men, masculinity was, in part, demonstrated by heavy drinking:

Des:	*I think it's not, yeah, well, with us anyway, it's not who, well sometimes it is, but it's not who drank the most, it's who gets sick first!*
Noel:	*Yeah*
	(group laughs)
Des:	*A good example of that* […] *Is the twelve pubs last year!* […]
James:	*It was two years in a row.*
Alex:	*We all went over to Mercy. Remember that? Everyone was like "Who got sick last night?" "Who got sick last night?"*
Noel:	*Nine times!* (laughs)
Liam:	*Me and Ben were the only ones that didn't!*
Noel:	*Yeah.*
Des:	*I only got sick once* […]
Alex:	*Think I only got sick once as well!*
Liam:	*Yeah, basically it was a competition* […]
Alex:	*No, it wasn't!*
Des:	*No it was, but it was like an unofficial competition.*
Liam:	*It was a competition, but nobody was trying to win anything like.*
James:	*It was next morning everyone was talking about it!*

(Pilot Focus Group)

As the above passage illustrates, participating in heavy drinking on its own did not ensure masculinity was demonstrated, it had to be accompanied by other activities. A common hegemonic ideal about men's bodies involves them being capable of enduring hardship and demonstrating power and strength, which is often achieved by men engaging in heavy

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drinking and maintaining control over intoxicated bodies (Campbell, 2000; Peralta, 2007; Thurnell-Read, 2011; Kimmel, 2008). The men above appear to draw from this hegemonic construction and place emphasis on their ability to hold down alcohol. Whilst Liam states 'nobody was trying to win anything' it appears these young men were trying to win an elevated position within their homosocial group through competitive drinking. For these men, heavy drinking had to be accompanied by being able to hold one's drink, it was this combination that was demonstrative of masculinity, as was the collective participation in making fun of those who failed in this effort. Whilst young men often drink more than they can handle because they don't want to appear weak and/or immature (Kimmel, 2008), older men appear bound by similar beliefs, sharing comparable ideas to their younger counterparts about the significance of men's alcohol consumption:

<div style="margin-left:2em">

Mitch: *Yes, and to be, the way you'd talk about it, think how you'd talk about it the next day "oh yeah, do you know, ah, he's a great fella, yeah, Jesus he'd, you know, he sank fifteen pints or you know he took fifteen Es".*

Ross: *Yeah, but Jimmy can't hold his drink "he's b******d!"* (laughs)

Mitch: *Yes, exactly!*

Ross: *He had three!*

Mitch: *And, he's less of a man [...] but it is that kind of perception, it is, yeah.*

Ross: *Definitely, yeah […]*

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<div style="text-align:right">(Focus Group 5)</div>

Emerging strongly from the focus groups was the notion that men who were unable to engage in heavy drinking, or who were unable to maintain bodily control whilst intoxicated, are viewed disapprovingly. Or, as Mitch put it, they were 'less of a man'. For these participants, men who fail to display control over intoxicated bodies, in turn, fail to demonstrate masculinity. Thus, their gender performance becomes contestable when control is lost. Incapacitation, as a result of intoxication, appears to be viewed as weakness by some men, as Duke explains:

<div style="margin-left:2em">

Duke: *I find em, in work* [Duke works as a paramedic], *if I pick up a bloke, I don't have, my patience is very finite and I use statements like "if you're going to drink like a man, start acting like a man! Get the f**k up off the ground!" Em, "You're lying on the street in somebody else's p**s, who do you think you are?" But, if a girl was lying there and of all my colleagues, everybody is a little bit more, em sympathetic.*

Researcher: *Ok.*

Duke: *"Oh, my God, this girl is vulnerable", she is lying on the street, her mini-skirt is up over her ears, em, you know this sort of stuff, and everybody is like "Oh, my God, she is so vulnerable' - but a bloke - 'Dope! Get up, will you!"*

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<div style="text-align:right">(Focus Group 7)</div>

Duke's example of dealing with highly intoxicated and incapacitated men through his work as a paramedic, demonstrates his expectations of how men ought to be and act. In Duke's view, men should not become incapacitated, regardless of the degree of intoxication they are experiencing. In Duke's view, when men become incapacitated, they are not acting as men

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should. It seems for Duke, men must maintain an outer semblance of control, especially when in the presence of other men. Duke perceives a difference in how women are viewed. In similar circumstances, their intoxication and incapacitation appears excusable because of a perceived vulnerability and/or weakness associated with femininity. Women are not told they are not acting like women when they lose control, rather they are afforded sympathy according to Duke. This suggests there is an expectation that women are unable to hold their drink the way men should. This difference is made clear by Duke who does not sympathise with men when they become incapacitated, rather they are chided for their loss of control and their failure to 'act like men'. Other men articulated the relationship between men's drinking and their (re)production of masculinities in different terms. For Pat, heavy drinking and a controlled outer presentation of self when intoxicated, was considered a masculine badge of honour:

> Pat: *And it's nearly a nearly a* […] *badge of honour that you can drink, stay in the pub all day and go home and be ok, it's nearly ok to do that* […]
>
> (Focus Group 6)

Emerging strongly across the focus groups were the participants' ideas about what was considered normative masculine behaviour. Spending time in pubs and engaging in heavy drinking were accepted masculine activities, legitimated by collective practice and approval. The pursuit of self-gratification through heavy drinking as a means of demonstrating masculinity, suggests for some participants, complicity with a structure of gender relations where men maintain pleasurable and privileged social positions, at least within homosocial groups.

Conclusion

This article sought to contribute to the visibility of Irish masculinities, by exploring Irish men's conceptualisation of masculinities and their understanding of what it means to be a man in contemporary Irish society. This article provides a snapshot into some Irish men's views about masculinities and about being a man in a fast changing Irish context. While some men present the notion that Irish men "don't give a fiddlers about anything" (in other words don't care about anything), it appears this statement hides significant complexities at play between men's conceptualisation of how to be a man in Irish society and their lived experiences as men. Whilst the men in this study painted a conceptualisation of masculinities as ambiguous, contradictory and fluid, there are differences between this understanding and their experiences of, and meanings ascribed to, being a man in contemporary Ireland. The views expressed by the men in this study, suggest for them, that Irish masculinities are typologies that maintain a position to them as both same (similar to them) and other. The men in this study identified as Irish men, yet their conceptualisation of Irish masculinity differed greatly from their experience of being a man who identifies as masculine in contemporary Ireland. The centrality of alcohol and self-gratification to the men's conceptualisation of Irish masculinity appears to be due to the distinct historical and cultural relationship between alcohol and being Irish (Buckley, 1983; Kearns, 1997; Barich, 2001), and this can help explain the meanings men attribute to its consumption. However, masculinities for the Irish men in this study were complex and fluid constructs, influenced by the men's age, sexuality, relationship and family status, location and structural surroundings. This research supports other Irish masculinities studies that have identified ambiguities at the heart of Irish men's

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understanding of masculinities (such as Ging, 2005 and Johnson and Morrison, 2007), but this study suggests change has occurred for some Irish men. There has been progression in the past decade to a more fluid understanding of masculinities for some men. Some of the participants in this study acknowledged that there is a greater degree of self-determination in how to express masculinity in contemporary Ireland. This suggests that some men are moving away from a rigid/stereotypical notion of masculinity to a more fluid and progressive construct. Whilst Irish masculinities may maintain a strong degree of ambiguity, this provides some Irish men with a greater degree of flexibility in how they express their gender identity.

This study is a snapshot and therefore a number of limitations must be noted. This research was limited in its sample size, geographic confines, and the focus of the analytic lens employed. Whilst the sample included a range of masculine experiences, the need remains to explore the experiences of other groups men who may maintain a subordinated or marginalised position within Irish society. The findings of this research are specific to a small sample of white heterosexual Irish men. It would be useful to conduct research comparing the experiences of different cultural and ethnic groups of men in Ireland. It would also be interesting to establish similarities or differences between Irish men and men from other countries. Building on the work contained here, a comparative study, including the views and experiences of men from multiple locations and across the social spectrum would enrich what has been established here. Secondly, by only including men's voices in this research, this study does not take into consideration women's views about and women's understanding of masculinities. Not including women in this research was purposeful, as the study sought to only explore men's views and experiences. However, masculinities and femininities are co-constructed; they are relational (Connell, 1995). Masculinities are not limited to male bodies; women too are actively involved in the construction of masculinities, and can also "do" masculinity (Pascoe and Bridges, 2016, p. 4). In this regard, a valuable avenue of exploration for future research would be to include women's views in relation to masculinities. This article may be relevant to researchers, practitioners and scholars across the spectrum of applied social studies, particularly those who have an interest in gender, Irish men and masculinities.

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