

Age and changing masculinities in gay-straight male workplace friendships

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Abstract

Drawing on interview data gathered from 35 gay men in the UK, this article explores how age influences the negotiation of masculinity within gay-straight male workplace friendships. Study findings show that gay-straight workplace friendships between younger men appear to be framed in terms of equality, not homophobia. Older gay men also report similar experiences, some suggesting how these friendships were not possible in their youth. Gay and straight men of a similar age are also united in friendship by their experiences of ageing and its implications for carrying out work. Interview data also reveals how gay-straight male friendships are constrained at work, thus limiting the opportunities for emotional openness and physical tactility. Overall, the study reveals how younger and older gay men, and their straight male friends, variously align themselves to inclusive masculinities within friendship. This article contributes to inclusive masculinity theory by extending the types of contexts currently studied, both relational and work-related, and adding further emphasis to the contextually contingent nature of inclusive masculinities. It also advances the limited literature on gay-straight friendships by highlighting how they might challenge and reshape the heteronormative contours of work contexts.

Keywords

Age, gay-straight male friendship, inclusive masculinity, work, workplace friendships

Introduction

Drawing on interview data gathered from 35 gay men in the UK, this article examines how the ageing process influences the negotiation of masculinities in gay-straight male workplace friendships. As Barrett (2013) notes, relations between gay and straight men have often been depicted in terms of homophobia and heterosexism, and this is evident in how gay-straight male friendships have been analysed (Fee, 2000; Nardi, 1999; Price, 1999). Notably, this research hails from a period marked by high levels of homophobia (Anderson, 2009). In contrast, more recent studies paint a more optimistic picture (Barrett, 2013, 2016; Gorman-Murray, 2013; Rumens, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2011), conveying how these friendships can cultivate emotional and physical intimacy, acceptance of gay sexualities and pro-gay attitudes and behaviours. Indeed, Gorman-Murray (2013) argues that while these friendships can be challenging to form, they can instigate ‘attitudinal and behavioural changes in some heterosexual men’ and shift the ‘contours of hetero-masculinities’, both of which are ‘central for defining equalities landscapes’ (2013, p. 214).

Acknowledging how relations between gay and straight men are changing, and the associated opportunities for reproducing inclusive masculinities, this article engages with inclusive masculinity theory for making sense of these friendships at work (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2011a; Anderson & McCormack, 2010; McCormack & Anderson, 2014). The aim of this article then is to address how age shapes the conditions of possibility for inclusive masculinities within the workplace friendships involving gay and straight men. In so doing, this article contributes to inclusive masculinity theory by exploring how age influences the experience of inclusive masculinities from the perspectives of gay men. This article hopes to shed light on how age and work settings can open up and constrain the opportunities for, experience of and the meanings attached to inclusive masculinities in gay-straight male friendships. The empirical data extends the types of work contexts currently examined within inclusive masculinity theory, largely limited to sporting and educational work settings. Additionally, this article adds to extant studies on inclusive masculinities by exploring how gay men of different ages perform and articulate inclusive masculinities within their friendships.

Furthermore, this article contributes to the scholarship on gay-straight male friendships. Against the positive appraisals of these friendships (Gorman-Murray, 2013; Price, 1999), two themes remain underdeveloped in this emergent literature: the influence of age in shaping inclusive masculinities that promote equality, acceptance, intimacy and ‘pro-gay’ attitudes and

the significance of the workplace as a context in which inclusive masculinities are enacted. By bridging these two sites of inquiry, the empirical data presented below evidences how gay and straight men of different ages are engaged in reproducing inclusive masculinities, lending support to inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2009). Equally, interview data reveals how age and work settings constrain opportunities for friendship development with straight men and the associated possibilities for inclusive masculinities. Acknowledging this, the article argues the case for a situated understanding of inclusive masculinity within workplace friendships between gay and straight men.

Theoretical framework

This article draws on two bodies of sociological theory. The first is a ‘sociology of friendship’, labelled as such within sociological circles (Holmes & Greco, 2011), that emerged around and has flourished since the late 1970s (Adams & Allan, 1998; Allan, 1979, 1989, 2008; Morgan, 2011; Nardi, 1999; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001). While acknowledging friendship as a voluntary relationship entered into freely, sociologists argued that studying friendship is as much about understanding how the individual attributes of friends help constitute friendship, as it is about examining how friendships are enmeshed within and across multiple social contexts (Adams & Allan, 1998; Allan, 1989).

Notably, sociologists have conceptualized friendships as personal and social relationships. Regarding the former, individuals respond to changes within wider social and economic milieus in how they construct intimacies, identities and selves. As such, friendship is an active process of doing and a constructed quality of human interaction. Drawing on Morgan’s (1996) notion of ‘family practices’, it is the activities in people’s everyday lives such as caregiving, conversations and doing domestic chores that generate relationships and the meanings allotted to them by those who participate in them. Following this, individuals may be understood as doing workplace friendships insomuch friendship does not materialize from an essential truth about human interaction but is an iterative, enacted practice.

Friendship is also a social relationship as the form it assumes is influenced by the ‘wider organization of social life’ (Allan, 1996, p.99). Workplace friendships are relationships shaped by and, in turn, shape modes of organising within society more broadly (Rumens, 2016; Silver, 1990). Similarly, the sociology of gay men’s friendships (Nardi, 1999) demonstrates how, in social contexts structured by heteronormativity, where heterosexuality is instituted as normal and natural, gay men have reinvented traditional family and friendship structures to develop

‘families of choice’ (Weston, 1991). Here, then, friends may be understood in familial terms and perform the caregiving and provide the intimacy normally expected of blood kin (Weeks et al., 2001). Indeed, recent scholarly observations about contemporary shifts in gender and sexual relations are germane to the empirical focus of this article.

Thus the second body of theory this article draws on is inclusive masculinity theory, currently positioned within the canon of masculinity studies literature at the site of ongoing debate about whether the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is relevant for theorising contemporary masculinities (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Beasley, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Developed in a number of seminal works (Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1985; Connell, 1987, 1995), the notion of hegemonic masculinity has profoundly influenced masculinity studies since the 1980s, not least because it examines how dominant definitions of being masculine are organized hierarchically by social institutions including work organizations. Hegemonic masculinity shows how male dominance is an exercise in gendered power relations within and outside work, manifest in an idealized set of masculine values that serves to exclude and include other men and women in ways that reproduce gendered inequalities (Carrigan et al., 1985, p. 179; Connell & Wood, 2005).

Significantly, hegemonic masculinity has come under fire for obscuring alternative ways of theorizing masculinities, especially those masculinities not considered hegemonic but may still accrue social capital within specific contexts (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). More pointedly, Moller contends that the concept of hegemonic masculinity ‘invites readers to look “out there” for particularly nefarious instances of masculinist abuses of power’ (2007, p. 265). As Anderson insists, inclusive masculinity theory was developed precisely because masculinity scholars were ‘increasingly finding little heuristic utility in the emphasis on homophobia, domination and marginalization that exists with hegemonic masculinity theory’ (2011a, p. 731).

Anderson’s (2009) argument for the current relevance of inclusive masculinity theory is that hegemonic masculinity is conceptually flawed within contemporary cultural contexts marked by a decrease in ‘homohysteria’, a term used by Anderson to refer to the fear among men of ‘being homosexualized’ or being socially perceived as gay (2009, p. 7). Homohysteria is conceptualized as different from homophobia insofar as cultural homophobia is concerned with the public representation of sexuality, while homohysteria relates to societal levels at which boys and men fear being perceived as gay (see also McCormack, 2011, p. 338). Homohysteria functions as an organizing principle in how masculinities are stratified and is integral to the production of ‘orthodox masculinity’, that fluid form of traditional, conservative

masculinity that reproduces patriarchal structures and practices. Inclusive masculinity theory suggests that in cultural landscapes coloured by low homophobia, orthodox masculinity is present but not 'culturally hegemonic', allowing more inclusive forms of masculinity to emerge.

A number of UK and US based studies within sporting-educational contexts appear to bear out inclusive masculinity theory, showing how male homosexuality has become de-stigmatised (Anderson, 2011a, 2011b), opening up opportunities for heterosexual men to engage in more feminine modes of attire (Adams, 2011), articulate pro-gay attitudes (Anderson & McGuire, 2010), join gay sports teams and clubs (Jarvis, 2015) and establish male intimacy through, for example, spooning, kissing, touching and embracing (Anderson & McCormack, 2015). These behaviours have also been documented in a range of educational contexts outside of sport, including schools in working class areas sometimes stereotyped as particularly homophobic (Blanchard, McCormack & Petersen, 2015; McCormack, 2014; Roberts, 2013).

Facets of this research reveal how within cultures of low homophobia, friendships between gay and straight men can provide relational contexts for inclusive masculinities (Anderson, 2011a; Blanchard et al., 2015). Striking in that respect is the presence of inclusive masculinities within contexts that have been habitually conceptualised as sites for the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, inclusive masculinity theory appears to be able to account for shifting masculinities within cultural contexts that exhibit greater tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality. Likewise, it may provide a better framework than hegemonic masculinity for analysing the complexities of ageing men and the masculinities they align themselves within inclusive settings. As Hearn (2011, p. 95) avers, 'the complex picture, with men being both given status through ageing and old age but at the same time marginalized, is difficult to encompass or conceptualise within the frame of hegemonic masculinity'.

Age, inclusive masculinity and gay-straight male friendships at work

Inclusive masculinity theory is adopted here as a conceptual resource for making sense of the masculinities reproduced within workplace friendships involving gay and straight men of various ages. One reason for this is the cultural stereotype that friendships across sexual orientation between men are difficult to form and sustain (Nardi, 1999). Studies show how heterosexual men are linked to hegemonic masculinity in these friendships, which can inhibit closeness and squelch opportunities to befriend gay men (Price, 1999). The fear of male friendship being read as a same-sex relationship containing sexual components is also said to

exert a negative influence on developing and sustaining these friendships (Nardi, 1992). Elsewhere, Fee (2000) notes that gay men can feel responsible for overcoming these obstacles by investing extra effort to develop and maintain these friendships, and feel obliged to suppress feelings of sexual desire, keeping physical contact in check and avoiding discussion of sexual partners. Crucially, however, inclusive masculinity theory scholarship shows how the link between hegemonic masculinity and heterosexual men is not inevitable, uniform and universal (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2009; Anderson & McCormack, 2015; McCormack, 2012).

Other studies have shed light on how friendships between gay and straight men can open up relational contexts for the development of 'pro-gay' hetero-masculine subjects (Anderson, 2011a, 2011b; Gorman-Murray, 2013; McCormack, 2012). In these studies, researchers flag the progressive changes afoot in sexual and gender equalities landscapes that have made it easier for straight and gay men to befriend. This is not to deny how men continue to be implicated in reproducing forms of gendered inequality and violence in and outside the workplace (Hearn, 2015). Rather, it is to recognise that while old gender inequalities persist that are linked to orthodox masculinity, new masculinities are emerging. As Gorman-Murray (2013) shows in his empirical data on gay-straight male friendship in inner city Sydney, Australia, these friendships play a necessary role in developing 'pro-gay' hetero-masculinities that can reshape the contours of equalities landscapes in progressive ways. In that regard, these male friendships can exhibit a generative capacity in how they can reconfigure hetero-masculinities that, in turn, contribute to the wider organisation of social relations within specific cultural contexts. While this research seems to bear out some of the propositions of inclusive masculinity theory (see also Anderson & McCormack 2016), further scopes exists for exploring how age and work can influence these friendships as sites for studying inclusive masculinity.

Notably, inclusive masculinities research has tended to focus on heterosexual and gay youth, although recent developments have focused on bisexual men (Anderson & McCormack, 2016). Similarly, the types of work contexts described in inclusive masculinities scholarship are frequently sporting and educational domains, with some scholars extending the focus into, for example, work settings in the retail sector (Roberts, 2013). Regarding age, Anderson (2011b, p. 257) notes that 'inclusive masculinity theory is grounded in the experience of 18 to 22 year-old white undergraduate men', but other studies have focused on the 16-18 age range (McCormack, 2011) and older age cohorts, as in McCormack, Anderson and Adam's (2014) study of the coming out experiences of bisexual men. White and Hobson (2015) investigate how PE teachers understand and construct masculinities within the educational environment.

They found that participants recognised many elements of softer masculinities performed by teenage boys described in the inclusive masculinities, with some of the younger PE teachers demonstrating acceptance toward boys who were emotionally open, fashion conscious and physically tactile. This research demonstrates how age is an important category of analysis that may help situate the experience of inclusive masculinity in more nuanced ways.

Relevant also is the observation that gay men in the gay liberation generation are now reaching older age. Lyons, Croy, Barrett and Whyte (2015) found some gay men of this generation observed positive changes to their lives, in particular greater public and self-acceptance of male homosexuality, experiencing more opportunities for constructing meaningful gay identities, selves and relationships. Equally, some gay men vocalised a loss of community compared to their younger selves and felt that the younger generation of gay men did not appreciate the struggles they endured. Relatedly, Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2004) argue that increasing public acceptance of homosexuality has resulted in an older generation of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people being able to live openly in older age. They point out that friendships can be important relationships for older LGB individuals, for care, support and companionship, although they do not analyse this in regard to specific dyadic formations (e.g. straight-gay male friendships), the reproduction of masculinities or in particular contexts such as the workplace. As such, these omissions warrant further investigation.

Method

The empirical material presented below is extracted from a wider project on gay men's workplace friendships, which was guided by a broad and exploratory research question: how are workplace friendships developed, experienced and attributed meaning by gay men? For this article, data is presented that was collected over a four year period, from 2010-2014. Specifically, interview data was drawn from the wider data set to illustrate the exploratory research question that structures this article: how might age influence the experience of inclusive masculinity within gay-straight male friendship in the workplace?

Participants

The study sample comprised of 35 gay men from 30 different organisations based in the UK and located in a range of sectors (e.g. higher education, health service, finance, media and communication technologies). The men were recruited using a snowball sampling procedure

which involved a mix of using personal contacts, posting details of the study on websites (e.g. of local lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender support networks) and asking human resources professionals to email flyers to staff in their organisations. The age range of study participants was from 24 to 64. In other studies, participants have been classified into age related cohorts (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; White & Hobson, 2015). However, this study avoids such an approach, as marshalling men into generational cohorts can smooth out variances in how they align with masculinities during the ageing process (Hearn, 2011). Also, as Plummer (2015) maintains, generational sexualities are ‘ideal types applicable only in some pockets of Western male gay life’ (p. 141).

Regarding other demographics, three participants preferred to identify as ‘Asian’, while the rest may be understood as ‘White’. Eleven participants described themselves as ‘working class’, the rest identified as ‘middle-class’. Eight gay men disclosed they had been previously married to a woman and were now separated and divorced. Nine participants had children from a female partner. Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents.

To participate in the study, the men were requested to have a connection with being ‘gay male’, however broadly this might be interpreted. For this article I did not include men who self-identified as bisexual or straight men who have sex with other men, although the friendship experiences of the former are documented in my research published elsewhere (Rumens, 2012). The study did not specify that participants had to be openly gay, although all of the men who participated identified as being ‘open’ about their sexuality at work, albeit in different ways in specific contexts at particular moments in time. Twenty-eight participants had experienced friendship with a straight man in a work context, and the interview material presented below is drawn from this cohort. Unless stated otherwise, the sexual identities of each friend are known to each other in the participants’ accounts that follow.

Procedure

Interviews were semi-structured and digitally or tape-recorded, lasted between one and a half and three hours and were mostly conducted in participants’ own homes. The research interview was regarded as a socially constructed and performative event (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In other words, the research interview is a localised context in which knowledge is co-constructed. For example, I did not approach the interviews with an a priori definition of friendship. To do so would potentially exclude the different meanings given to

friendship by interviewees. As such, the interview data is not treated as being ‘unblemished’, in that I did not proceed on the basis that I had unmediated access into the minds of interviewees. Discussions centred on lines of questioning that invited participants to converse on: (1) the contexts and characteristics of workplace friendships with straight men; (2) the importance of workplace friendships with straight men; (3) how cultural stereotypes relating to gay and straight men were negotiated and challenged; (4) the wider influence of straight-male friendships on social relations and equality agendas within the workplace. All interviews were digitally recorded.

Analysis

After transcribing, I coded the transcripts for themes using qualitative coding techniques. This involved re-reading the transcripts repeatedly to identify an initial set of descriptive data categories based around the four interview topic areas outlined above (Denzin, 1989). Next, I identified emergent patterns in how categories of data could be developed as themes, and established links between themes. This process of analysis allowed me to familiarise myself with the data to the point where I could construct explanatory accounts of how age influenced the reproduction of masculinities within gay-straight male workplace friendships. Each stage of the data analysis process involved comparative analysis between data categories and themes, which helped me to reshape and refine them (Denzin, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

Ageing and relations of difference

Interview data revealed how age impacted on how relations of sexual difference between gay and straight men. The younger gay men I interviewed recounted how workplace friendships with straight men were ‘no big deal’, as Ricky put it, suggesting that homophobia was not an undercurrent or source of tension in his friendships with straight men. Ricky’s description of working in a brewery, in which he developed ‘close friendships with two [straight] lads’ of a similar age (in their mid-twenties) was revealing in that regard:

It’s no big deal. The brewery is all into respecting diverse lifestyles, and there’s an understanding of that in how we all get along. Most of the straight lads I work with are

really sensitive about that, so they treat me like any other of their male friends. Me being gay isn't a big deal for them.

Similarly, Alex, in his late twenties, worked in an advertising agency with straight men of a comparable age:

The guys know I'm gay but it's a non-issue. It's a trendy work culture so no one bats an eye about it...I've never experienced anything remotely homophobic in my friendships...like I say, it's a non-issue...if anything my straight friends are gayer than I am.

In both these examples, friendships with straight men similar in age are partly conditioned by organisational cultures that are understood to be respectful of diverse identities and lifestyles. This is seen to have a positive effect on friendship opportunities with straight men, generating an equivalence in how they are treated as friends. Ricky and Alex mentioned that it was important not to feel like they would be treated differently in friendship because they are gay. This sense of equality seemed to cultivate friendships in which they could, as Ricky put it, 'be allowed to be a normal guy' or, as Alex suggested: 'my friends don't see me as gay Alex, but as Alex who just happens to be gay'. In that regard, these interview extracts support the research that documents the normalisation of gay sexualities in and outside work (Savin-Williams, 2005). Indeed, gay-straight workplace friendships can provide important relational contexts for gay men to normalise their sexuality as a small, not central, aspect of who they are at work. Equally, Alex's comment that some of his straight male work friends are 'gayer' than he is reveals how the categories 'gay' and 'straight' are less clear cut regarding the types of attitudes and behaviours these categories have traditionally denoted (Gorman-Murray, 2013), as illustrated in the following:

Since we became friends Stuart has dropped his macho masculine persona...he insists we go to gay bars after work because he doesn't like the aggro in some straight pubs. He even bought us some tickets to see Kylie...not my thing really, but I went along because he loves Kylie and I know none of his [straight] mates would go with him.

Through close workplace friendships with gay men, straight men like Stuart seem able to depart from orthodox masculinity (Anderson, 2009, 2011a), exploring how masculinity can be

experienced in terms of pleasure rather than aggression. Notably, there is no mockery or judgement from Alex about Stuart's eagerness to embrace aspects of gay male culture, such as female gay icons such as Australian pop singer Kylie Minogue as socialising in gay bars, and socialising in gay bars. Indeed, gay sexuality was used as a mechanism to engage in softer masculinities, rather than define gay people as different (c.f. Flowers & Buston, 2001).

While some of the younger gay men suggested gay-straight friendships were not out of the ordinary in the workplace, some older gay men acknowledged how the development of these friendships had been influenced by wider cultural changes in sexual and gender relations. Here, men like Rupert, an academic in his late fifties, appreciated having a friendship with Graham a straight man with whom he shares an office:

When I was growing up in the 70s I never had friendships with straight men. They were always the ones who bullied me...they were violent and aggressive...but that changed when I started to work at the university. I had to share an office with Graham which made me anxious at first but we now have a wonderfully close friendship. It's the sort of friendship I never dreamed was possible when I was younger. I really appreciate it because it's taken a lot of societal change to get to this place.

Rupert's account of his friendship with Stuart was particularly touching, not least because he repeatedly acknowledged how it provided him with a different view about straight men, less as 'homophobes' and more as 'friends'. Indeed, in this friendship, it is Rupert rather than Stuart whose conception of hetero-masculinity is subject to alteration:

He's educated me about what it's like to be heterosexual and the demands made on him to be masculine in a certain manner, being a strong type of man, not to show feelings, being the breadwinner. I'd really no idea of how tough it was to be a heterosexual man.

In Rupert's extracts a sense emerges of how hetero-masculinity is seen as something that has to be performed, rather than being understood as a naturally occurring property of straight men. As such, opportunities are opened up to discuss, as Rupert said, 'how heterosexual men can be pressurised to be men' in ways that make them 'feel uncomfortable'. Indeed, when taken together, the interview quotes above indicate how gay-straight friendships can provide relational contexts for exposing the normative injunctions to perform masculinity in orthodox ways.

Emotional intimacy

Scholars of men's friendships routinely point out how the fear of disclosing emotionally deters men from befriending each other (Fee, 2000; Nardi, 1992). In this scenario, men fear being seen to be less than a man for engaging in emotional activities that have been stereotyped and aligned with normative femininity. They may incur judgements from their male friends for seeking to disclose emotionally. Yet the flesh and blood realities of men's friendships are diverse and, in regard to my interview data, provide plenty of reasons for contesting these cultural stereotypes of male friendship.

Many of the interview conversations on gay-straight male friendships at work were peppered with accounts of everyday instances of emotional closeness. These were moments that included gay men confiding in their straight work friends about health issues, breakdowns in relationships, bereavements and growing older. In regard to the latter, Leonard (hospital occupational therapist) remarked:

The other day I was talking to Will in the office canteen, he was telling me how self-conscious he is because he is constantly peeing at work... people are noticing, and it's because he's got prostate problems, and what's worse is his GP can't do anything for him...it broke my heart to hear him struggling.

Later in the interview, Leonard mentioned how he had confided in Will:

I'm having a crisis about being gay and 40 something because as far as the gay scene is concerned you may as well be dead. I had a mini breakdown and Will picked me up and gave me a shoulder to cry on.

What is striking about the excerpts above is how both men are able to confide in each other about personal issues relating the ageing process. Affinity and emotional intimacy are conditioned by a shared experience of the tribulations of middle-age, the implications of which are, in part, work-related as Robert struggles with his need to urinate frequently at work. When I asked Leonard about what he had learnt about the ageing process from his friendship with Will, he replied:

...that straight guys go through the same thing, worrying about losing their looks, being unattractive, old and alone...I'd never thought about it in those terms, I just assumed that because Will is heterosexual he wouldn't worry about that stuff.

Similarly, Leonard flipped the question, suggesting that Will learnt about how 'gay male culture is obsessed about youth', and the pressure placed on gay men to 'look eternally young and beautiful'. These intimate moments of emotional disclosure appear to enable self-reflection amongst gay and straight men. Crucially, as inclusive masculinity research shows, the two men are able to disclose emotionally without fear of reprisal, mockery or judgement (Anderson, 2009, 2011). What is more, the emotional intimacy of their friendship helps them to cope with the patient-centred work they carry out. As Leonard maintained:

...we work in a hospital and we're surrounded by patients who are in compromising positions and states of health, it brings your own mortality home to you...sometimes you need an outlet for externalising that with someone who completely understands.

In a workplace where they are witness to the ageing process and how bodies are debilitated by disease, Leonard and Robert self-reflect on their ageing bodies, giving rise to concerns about how they are compromised (as in Will's case) or understood as moribund (as indicated by Leonard). As such, the performance of inclusive masculinity appears to have a key role to play in helping the men to allay each other's fears and anxieties about the ageing process.

Paternal concern

In addition to emotional intimacy, some gay-straight workplace friendships generated inclusive masculinities structured by paternal concern. Historically, men have been associated with paternalism in an array of settings and relationships including male friendship (Cole, 2003). However, little research shows how this is experienced in male friendships that span sexual orientations. The interview data yielded two striking examples. The first relates to a young gay man (Stafford) in his early thirties and his 'close friend' Robert, a straight man in his mid-fifties:

I went to have a tanning session after work using a sunbed. I came into work the next day looking like a boiled lobster and in pain. Robert got all fatherly with me...told me

off for being so stupid. Next thing he goes out to the pharmacy and buys some after-sun lotion. He comes back and says, 'you've got to come with me. I've got this lotion which means you're going to have to strip off'. So we went into a private office and I stripped off, got onto the desk and he smoothed the lotion into my body...he was very tender doing it and we both loved it. After he told me off for getting burnt and putting myself at risk of skin cancer. I mean he was really pissed about it.

In the extract below the dynamic is reversed, with an older gay man positioned as a father figure to a younger straight male:

I'm like a surrogate dad to Liam. His dad left him when he was young and he went off the rails in his teenage years. He's a lot better now but he needs guidance. Somehow we've found ourselves in this surrogate dad son relationship. He wants a father figure he can look up to, someone he can respect and give him affection. Like the time when he thought he'd got a girl pregnant. He was all over the place and I sorted him out, gave him that father son talk and told him what to do. There's a vulnerability about him that just brings out the father in me. (Chris, late forties; Liam, early twenties)

In these examples the expression of paternal concern is conditioned, in part, by one man acknowledging his vulnerability to the other. In Stafford's case, set in a probation office, the vulnerability is corporeal and painful, prompting a paternal response from Robert, an older straight man. The physical intimacy between the two men is experienced as titillating; notably, it is not the type of aggressive horseplay that can reinforce orthodox masculinity (Anderson, 2002). Rather, Robert and Stafford appear to enjoy the tender tactility of rubbing lotion into Stafford's burnt torso, which is framed by Stafford as a demonstration of fatherly concern.

Similarly, in Chris's interview quote, taken from his account of work life in an IT environment, the paternal dynamic is reversed. Here, the older gay man is positioned as a father figure to a younger straight man, whose emotional vulnerability and inexperience 'brings out the father' in Chris. Friendships between older and gay men can contain elements of paternal concern and affection, especially when the younger gay man is rejected by blood kin (Weeks et al., 2001). In any interesting twist on this paternal dynamic, Chris's paternal feelings toward Liam suggest that such relations can straddle sexual orientations. At no point in our conversations did I get the impression from Chris that Liam read his concern as overtly sexual. The emotional affection and episodes of care-giving (e.g. when Chris helped to care for Liam

when he caught glandular fever) within their friendship do not find reference points in orthodox masculinity; rather, they demonstrate important paternal and supportive components associated with inclusive masculinities (Anderson, 2009; Gottzen & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012).

Crucially, the expression of paternal concern in the workplace carries risks. In Stafford's case, the physical intimacy of massaging lotion into a semi-naked male body could be read by colleagues as 'unprofessional', attracting finger pointing and speculation about whether the friendship is platonic. Although these potential outcomes appear not to bother Stafford and Robert, the former saying 'we don't care who knows what we're like', their physical intimacy occurs behind closed doors. In the case of Chris, his emotional closeness to Liam can be read through a homophobic lens, as an older gay man preying on the vulnerability of a younger straight man, an interpretation Chris was acutely aware of: 'I know people gossip about our friendship, I've heard rumours that people think I'm shagging Robert'. Still, office gossip aside, the friendship also has a positive impact on wider social relations within the workplace, as Chris noted: 'I've had several guys come up to me to say I'm doing a good job with Liam...[one man] told me it made him rethink how he ought to be more sensitive with one of his male friends in the office'. Here, then, we can glimpse how gay-straight male workplace friendships hold potential for re-sculpting other men's friendships in, potentially, more inclusive ways.

Friendship constraints

While acknowledging the positive aspects to gay-straight male workplace friendships, some work contexts were not conducive to these types of friendships. Sam, a gay man in his late twenties who was employed by a charity organisation, suggested that striking up friendships with his straight male colleagues was 'out of the question'. He cited his working-class background as a marker of difference that would not provide any common ground with the type of 'white, straight, private school educated men' who dominated the organisation. In this example, the reference to and performance of orthodox masculinity is widely accepted and endorsed in Sam's workplace, evidenced in Sam's accounts of how these men routinely engaged in excessive drinking after work and expressed homophobic and sexist comments about gay men and women respectively.

On a slightly different tack, some of the older gay men I spoke to expressed reservations about befriending younger straight men at work. Richard, a gay man in his fifties, employed in a firm of solicitors, had this to say:

I've had opportunities to get to know some of the younger chaps but I am very cautious. It's so easy for it to be read incorrectly, as an older gay men grooming a young straight man...I know several senior partners who might see it that way...and the professional reputation I've worked hard to attain as I've gotten older could be tarnished.

In this excerpt, Richard vocalises how cultural stereotypes of older gay men as predatory and sexual perverts can deter gay men from befriending younger men, especially within work cultures that are gendered as conservative. Richard's case was not an isolated example, as other study participants in male dominated and very hierarchical work organisations also felt deterred from befriending younger straight men for the same reason. Conversely, some gay men I interviewed found themselves labelled as incompatible for friendship, such as Barney (late forties), who described himself as 'camp' and 'effeminate'. He found that his advances of friendship toward several young straight men in his workplace (a car manufacturing plant) were 'spurned', despite his repeated efforts to join in conversations about 'sport' and 'cars'. In one situation, he was roughly rebuked: 'no offence mate but I can't relate to you, you're a camp old queen'. Here, Barney is positioned as 'not the right kind of gay man' because of his perceived femininity and thus construed as unsuitable friendship material. In this work context, orthodox masculinity provides the co-ordinates from which masculinities are organised hierarchically, reproducing divisions between men based on gender and sexuality. This raises important questions about the limits of acceptance and how the gender dynamics of some work environments reproduce narrow expectations about the performance of masculinity.

Discussion

This article has sought to explore how age influences the negotiation of masculinity in gay-straight male workplace friendships. Traditionally, gay-straight male friendships have been conceptualised in terms of homophobia (Barrett, 2013). In line with recent research that references the significance of cultural shifts that have taken place which have de-stigmatised homosexuality in many Western contexts (Anderson, 2011a; Gorman-Murray, 2013; McCormack, 2012), this study shows how gay-straight friendships can foster pro-gay attitudes, behaviours and intimacy that can have a progressive effect on reshaping gender relations between men. In my study, I found evidence of how these friendships can enable men to educate each other about the lived experience of gay and straight sexualities. Age has a shaping

influence here. For instance, younger gay men commented that workplace friendships with straight men are 'no big deal' at a time when they perceive few or no divisions between gay and straight men.

This is suggestive of a wider cultural backdrop that is marked by low homophobia (Anderson, 2009), opening up opportunities for gay-straight friendships not just for younger men, but also older men who were unable to form such friendships in their youth when homophobia was overt and pervasive (Heaphy et al., 2004). Gay and straight men of a similar age can be united in friendship by their experiences of ageing at work, such as in the case of Leonard and Will. Again, the educative dimension to their friendship comes to the fore, this time in how the experience of ageing is mediated by different sexualities. Indeed, it is not always the straight man who must self-reflect on his relationship with orthodox masculinity and sexual prejudice. Friendship can occasion a relational context for gay men to confront their prejudices about straight men, such as older gay men like Rupert who, based on his experience of homophobia during the 1970s, stereotype straight men as inevitably linked to orthodox masculinity.

The context of work is also influential, conditioning possibilities for some gay-straight friendships, such as in work cultures populated by younger people or in the type of work men perform with their friends together. When participants spoke about their places of work positively, they sometimes used terms such as 'post-gay' and 'gay-friendly'. Typically, participants' understandings of these terms were linked to how their employers had equality and diversity policies that included sexual minorities. They mentioned also the importance of commitment from senior management towards improving sexuality diversity at work, the willingness of employers to sponsor local gay pride events, establish LGBT employee networks and support the visible presence of LGBT employees. These work contexts may be characterised as exhibiting low levels of homophobia, although this does not mean they are free from homophobic behaviours and attitudes. Moreover, these practices were not hegemonic, although aspects of the data suggest that actual cases are complicated and contingent, hinging on the interactive identity work of gay men through which people respond. Crucially, contextual accountability to organisational gender norms around masculinity is uneven, as interview data reveals. With this in mind, several implications may be drawn from the data.

First, inclusive masculinity is able to account for the complexity of the ageing process as it is experienced by different men of different ages. It provides a theoretical framework that is sensitive to how men might gain status as they grow older, as in the example of Richard, but

also how gay men are marginalised during the ageing process such as Barney, cruelly labelled a ‘camp old queen’. Equally, it allows us to draw empirical insights into how some gay men can attain status as father figures in the eyes of younger straight men, but also remains alert to how this status is precarious in work contexts in which orthodox masculinity persists. As this study shows, the types of masculinities that gay and straight men can align themselves to within workplace friendships at different ages is locationally contingent, but they are enmeshed within a wider cultural backdrop marked by low homophobia (Anderson, 2009; McCormack & Anderson, 2014).

Second, the study data implies that gay-straight workplace friendships can be sites for reshaping masculinities throughout the ageing process. The implication here is that we might seek to realise their potential in that regard by, for example, enriching the opportunities within workplaces for cross-sexuality friendships to occur. Indeed, it is plausible that workplace friendships between straight men of different ages might help promote the demise of orthodox masculinity. Conditioning the possibilities of such friendships might entail cultivating work cultures that are respectful of diverse identities, selves, lifestyles and relationships. As Gorman-Murray (2013, p. 222) avers, reconfiguring hetero-masculinity is necessary for equalities landscapes, and must be an aim of gender and sexual politics’. Similarly, I found evidence of inclusive masculinities within gay-straight male friendships at work that fostered pro-gay (and straight) attitudes and behaviours, tender moments of emotional and physical intimacy, valuing a wider range of gender behaviours beyond those confined to orthodox masculinity. Aspects of the data suggest that the types of behaviours and attitudes cultivated in these friendships can be translated into other men’s workplace friendships, as Chris’s interview extract indicates. Gay-straight male friendships may play a part in reshaping heteronormative work cultures, particularly in those friendships where heterosexual men self-reflect on myths and cultural stereotypes about gay men, from which gay-supportive attitudes and behaviours may be formed. Indeed, such friendships may encourage heterosexual men to foster ‘ally’ identities and participate in LGBT-centred initiatives to address workplace inequalities sustained by heteronormativity (Brooks & Edwards, 2009).

However, this does not mean that gay-straight friendships are inherently transformative. They can easily reinforce orthodox masculinity (Gorman-Murray, 2013) and reproduce cultural divisions between gay and straight men. Furthermore, unlike inclusive masculinity research that shows how men can openly engage in emotional bonding and physical tactility in public (Anderson, 2011), some of the examples of physical intimacy presented above are hidden from view, taking place behind closed doors (e.g. Stafford and Robert). In such cases, physical

intimacy can be read as being less for show and more for personal enjoyment and cementing the closeness of friendship ties, although the risks associated with displaying physical tactility in front of colleagues carries the risk of being labelled 'inappropriate' and 'unprofessional'. Still, in these situations, the performance of inclusive masculinities might constitute a silent and unseen revolution in gender relations that both younger and older gay can participate in. The display of once taboo gendered behaviours, without fearing the stigma of being branded homosexual, is significant in the accounts of straight male friends provided by younger and older gay men. They permit a cautious optimism about how men of all ages can play vital roles in reshaping equalities landscapes in and outside the workplace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has a number of limitations that can be pursued as avenues for further research. First, the analysis above focuses only on the perspectives of gay men, so investigating inclusive masculinities within these friendships from the perspectives of straight men remains empirically open. Such insights would enrich the data presented above, in particular about how men negotiate gender privilege and marginalisation in the ageing process (Hearn, 2011). Second, while the analysis above examines age as an important category of analysis for exploring inclusive masculinities, it does not explore intersections with class, ethnicity, race or able-bodiedness. Intersectional scholarship on gay-straight male friendship is another important avenue for nuancing how inclusive masculinities are performed and found meaningful by men. Lastly, while the study findings are not generalizable, they offer broader insights into the significance of friendships that span sexual orientations as sites of empirical investigation. As such, further research on inclusive masculinities in friendships across different sexual orientations is crucial. For example, friendships between straight women and lesbians would generate insights into how women might perform masculinities, while the friendship experiences of bisexuals and transgender people could also yield insights into changing gender relations. This article illustrates the value of extending inclusive masculinity theory in multiple directions to account for the complexity of changing contemporary masculinities in an array of social, cultural and relational contexts.

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