

On the construction of an artificial paradox: A critical commentary on Diefendorf and Bridges' 'On the enduring relationship between masculinity and homophobia'

Mark McCormack

University of Roehampton

Abstract

The social trend of decreasing homophobia and liberalising attitudes toward homosexuality is a contentious sociological issue. In a recent article in this journal, Diefendorf and Bridges contend that differences in findings of quantitative and qualitative research related to masculinities and homophobia demand new theories and methods to chart the enduring relationship between homophobia and masculinity. In this critical commentary, I demonstrate the flaws of the methodological framing and refute the characterization of qualitative literature provided. I argue that the theoretical errors in the original article are a result of inattention to social and historical context. Drawing attention to problematic citation practices, I call for critical approaches that recognize both positive social change and contexts where problematic dynamics persist.

Introduction

In their article *On the Enduring Relationship Between Masculinity and Homophobia*, Diefendorf and Bridges posit a methodological paradox that they find in empirical research on heterosexual men, masculinities and homophobia: that while quantitative data documents a sustained trend of decreasing homophobia among men, qualitative research finds no such trend and instead reports an enduring relationship between heterosexual masculinities and homophobia. Their answer is a theoretical overview of the masculinities literature from the 20th century, a critique of some of the qualitative research that examines decreased homophobia among heterosexual men, and a call to masculinities scholars to diversify approaches to studying men and masculinities.

In this critical commentary, I reject the notion that a methodological paradox exists and document the flaws in the argument that stems from this manufactured observation. Rather than a methodological paradox, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of social science methodology coupled to a straw-man argument that mischaracterizes both the diversity of the literature and what that literature states. I argue this is the result of a contextual myopia before drawing attention to selective and thus problematic citation practices. A “critical” perspective has been privileged over a systematic analysis of the literature, meaning that Diefendorf and Bridges’ article provides only a descriptive review of the sub-set of qualitative literature that documents an enduring relationship between heterosexual masculinities and homophobia.

There is no methodological paradox

Diefendorf and Bridges’ primary argument, which they foreground in their introduction, is as follows:

Since the turn of the century...quantitative evidence suggests a marked decline in sexual prejudice along most measures. And, on some measures, men have started expressing lower levels of sexual prejudice than women... Qualitative scholarship, however, with few exceptions, continues to find that enactments of sexual prejudice remain integral components of masculinity for heterosexual men.

They call this a 'methodological paradox' and an 'inconsistency'. When they repeat this framing, they emphasize this disparity, stating 'Qualitative research – with very few exceptions – continues to document enactments of homophobia among boys and men'. Using the terms 'sexual prejudice' and 'homophobia' interchangeably, their arguments for new ways to theorize masculinities and continued homophobia rest on this premise.

The most obvious problem in the animating paradox presented is that it is based on a fundamental methodological misconception. Assuming for now that the difference in findings between qualitative and quantitative research exists, this is not a paradox but an expression of the systematic differences in sampling between quantitative and qualitative methods: in general, quantitative research involves random sampling to chart social trends while qualitative studies adopt non-probability approaches to understand lived experience and theorize social problems. Rather than a paradox, this difference is within the range of expected outcomes given the different sampling approaches.

If one wanted to test why such a methodological divide existed, a careful study would systematically evaluate competing explanations. Potential reasons could include:

1. Effects of non-random sampling; that men who reject homophobia are not being studied in qualitative research;
2. Bias or error in the quantitative research; desirability bias might be present among respondents or the survey questions about sexuality are not nuanced enough;

3. Researcher bias; qualitative scholars might focus on harm or mis-characterize the social dynamics of their population sample;
4. Publishing bias; it might be easier to publish qualitative research that reports harms than positive trends (similar to the difficulty quantitative researchers have in publishing studies which do not find significant effects (Mervis, 2014));
5. Enduring nuanced relationships; it could be, as Diefendorf and Bridges posit, that homophobia has changed and shifted rather than decreased, and only qualitative research can chart this.

Sadly, the article by Diefendorf and Bridges does not systematically analyze competing reasons, instead advancing a partial theoretical argument related to the fifth option. More problematically, the methodological divide that animates their argument does not exist.

Diefendorf and Bridges cite just three studies that document a decrease in homophobia among young men (Anderson, 2009; Anderson and McCormack, 2015; McCormack, 2012)—presumably being the sum total of the ‘very few exceptions’. Yet there is a large and diverse body of qualitative research that investigates the dynamics and experiences of straight men whose embodied masculinities and social practices are not enmeshed with homophobia. The contention that qualitative research does not document and critically analyze decreasing homophobia among straight men is incorrect. I have provided critical reviews of this precise topic (see Anderson and McCormack, 2018; McCormack and Anderson 2014).

Many qualitative studies find straight men embodying masculinities where enactments of homophobia are not integral components of their gender. For example, Adams (2011) documents soccer players espousing pro-gay attitudes and condemning homophobia among students at a college in the American mid-west; Blanchard, McCormack and Peterson (2017) report on teenagers being inclusive of gay peers at sixth form in the North East of

England; Channon and Matthews (2015) use qualitative textual analysis to demonstrate that even as straight men in mixed martial arts engage in practices of heterosexual recuperation, they simultaneously envision and support a more inclusive form of masculinity; Dashper (2012) examines how gay sexuality is accepted by heterosexual riders in dressage in the UK; Elliot (2016) theorizes ‘caring masculinities’ to understand men who reject domination and offer the potential of sustained social change for men and gender relations; Frank (2008) documents the variegated ways couples who swing negotiate heterosexuality, arguing that labelling their practices as homophobic erases complexity and inclusiveness of gay people; Gottzen and Kremer-Sadlik (2012) show that fathers of children who participate in youth sport demonstrated inclusive masculinities and reprimand those that did not; Hall (2014) demonstrates the growth of metrosexual masculinities and their celebration of behaviours and styles that were once stigmatized for their perceived associations with homosexuality.

Without providing a full alphabet of scholars who document masculinities that are not enduringly associated with homophobia, there are far more than a ‘very few exceptions’—I know of more than 50 such publications. These studies have taken place in both countries Diefendorf and Bridges focus on: the US (e.g. Adams, 2011; Barrett, 2013; Michael, 2015; Worthen, 2014) and the UK (e.g. Cleland, 2015, 2018; Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2012; Magrath, 2017; Morris and Anderson, 2015; Ripley, 2018; Roberts, 2013, 2018). As such, the characterization of the literature by Diefendorf and Bridges is incomplete and selective. This misrepresentation continues with the discussion of theory.

The discussion of theory is wrong

This body of research mentioned above has mostly, though by no means entirely (e.g. Beasley, 2015; Elliot, 2016; Frank, 2008), adopted Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT) to understand how masculinities can exist without being tied to homophobia. First explicated in

Anderson's (2009) monograph *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*, the theory has evolved to incorporate both empirical trends and theoretical challenges. With Anderson, I published a reformulation of the theory (Anderson and McCormack 2018), where we engage with serious and important critiques of the theory and refine key concepts and clarify several issues. The inductive nature of the theory means this has included taking account of social class (e.g. McCormack, 2014; Roberts, 2013, 2018), generation (Anderson and McCormack, 2016; Rumens, 2018), and sexual fluidity (Scoats, Joseph and Anderson, 2018; Robards, 2018; Wignall et al., 2019) among other issues. In our reformulation, we drew not just on our own research, but that of numerous other scholars who have used the theory to varying extents—refining and augmenting it and extending academic debate.

I write this because Diefendorf and Bridges give the briefest of descriptions of IMT. Providing just three citations, they state that the evidence is based on “physical, quasi-sexual, and emotional closeness among heterosexual men”. This account does not accurately represent the three publications cited, yet alone the numerous studies and the reformulation published since (see Anderson and McCormack, 2018; and McCormack and Anderson, 2014). Given this, I now provide an overview of IMT to clarify one theory by which qualitative research accounts for decreased homophobia among boys and men.

IMT was inductively theorized from qualitative studies that found more inclusive behaviours of heterosexual men in male peer group cultures in the UK and the US. In addition to physical tactility and emotional closeness, this research also found that many young men rejected homophobia, were close friends with their gay peers, recognized bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation, embraced activities and artefacts once coded feminine, and eschewed violence and bullying (see Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2009, 2014; Anderson and Adams, 2011; McCormack, 2012, 2014). Closely associated with these inclusive attitudes and behaviours toward same-sex desire and gay people is a concomitant

physical and emotional closeness (see Anderson and McCormack, 2015) also known as bromance (Robinson, Anderson and White, 2018).

Diefendorf and Bridges claim that IMT presents these shifts as ‘historically novel’ (p. x). This is incorrect: IMT explicitly accounts for the fact that physical and emotional closeness (i.e. homosocial intimacy) has occurred historically and does occur cross-culturally. Indeed, what makes shifts in men’s intimacy so interesting is that it is closely related to homophobia and cultural awareness of sexual minority identities. As Anderson (2009) argued in his first exposition of IMT, men used to be emotionally and physically close at the turn of the 19th and 20th century in Britain and America (see Brady, 2005; Deitcher, 2001; Ibson, 2002), yet these behaviours were increasingly censored across the 20th century (Kimmel, 1994; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Thorne and Luria, 1986). It is only in the past 20-30 years that they have become acceptable again. Given that the early 20th century was not particularly inclusive, although the context is complex (Brady, 2005; Chauncey, 1995), why does homophobia police gender in only some contexts?

Anderson’s answer to this question includes the concept ‘homohysteria’. Defined as the fear of being socially perceived as gay, a culture is homohysterical if it meets three conditions: i) the culture maintains antipathy toward gay men; ii) there is mass awareness that gay people exist in significant numbers in that culture; and iii) the belief that gender and sexuality are conflated. When these conditions are met, homophobia is used as a tool to police gender, as people fear the stigma of being socially perceived as gay. Thus, the tactile and emotional behaviours of British and American men today are different to those tactile behaviours of the Victorian era, just as they are different from tactile behaviours in Iran and other homophobic countries today.

We have proposed a stage model to understand this (Anderson and McCormack 2016): homoerasure, where gay identities were erased through homophobia, yet homophobia

did not regulate gender (as per the Victorian period); homohysteria, where homophobia policed sexual and gender identities (as per the 1980s and 1990s); and inclusivity, where decreased homophobia means that homophobia is *less* effective in policing gender (as per some *but not all* contexts today).

The primary contribution of IMT is that it connects men's gendered behaviors (including but not limited to physical tactility) with the social trend of decreasing homophobia, explaining variance between cultures and generations. The theory contends that a profound change in masculinities will occur when homohysteria decreases. The driver for decreasing homohysteria is improving attitudes toward homosexuality in broader society. However, while the new dynamics and behaviors are founded upon the condemnation and rejection of overt forms of homophobia, this is not solely attributable to changing attitudes: Structural changes that include shifts in the law and greater access and prominence for sexual minorities in a range of social institutions are important (Weeks, 2007), as well as social shifts in the organization of society from away from industrial economies (Roberts, 2018), the growth of the internet, and processes of individualization where social institutions have less influence on moral values (Giddens, 1992). These broader changes appear to support decreasing homophobia, as same-sex desire and sex are framed as forms of love that individuals have a right to engage in (Twenge, 2014). IMT does not just consider 'the relationship between masculinity and homophobia largely attitudinally and interpersonally' as Diefendorf and Bridges assert, but how attitudes and interactions and social practice are connected with social and generational change, geographic context and the shifting legal sphere.

The incomplete and simplistic discussion of IMT is not because the authors are unaware of the influence of the theory on the field of masculinities studies. Diefendorf and Bridges cite nine articles that critique 'work within the "inclusive masculinity" framework'.

This is three times as many citations as provided for the publications that document decreased homophobia among men, and the debate these critiques have produced is also ignored (e.g. Anderson and McCormack, 2018; Borkowska, 2016; Roberts, 2018). Similarly excluded from discussion are other theoretical frameworks for understanding men beyond a relationship where masculinity must be continually entwined with homophobia (e.g. Beasley, 2015; Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2012; Plummer, 2014). This selective exclusion of qualitative research that does not fit the ‘methodological paradox’ makes it increasingly difficult to see Diefendorf and Bridges’ argument as a good faith attempt to accurately review the qualitative literature on masculinities and decreasing homophobia.

Whither social and historical context?

Given that the methodological paradox constructed by Diefendorf and Bridges falls away when one fully engages with the extant literature, the next question is how this framing can have occurred. I suggest two forms of intellectual myopia explain it: related to social and historical context.

One of the key flaws of Diefendorf and Bridges’ argument is the inattention to social context. While they state that they focus on the US and the UK, only quantitative survey data from the US is discussed in any detail. This focus matters because attitudes toward homosexuality have been significantly better in the UK. Smith, Son and Kim (2014) document this using several quantitative data sets and statistical techniques, and in some measures the UK is approximately 15 percentage points more inclusive than the US. Anderson (2009) reports on data that shows a more significant gap of approximately 30 percentage points. Nuanced quantitative research from the UK provides further detail on the liberalization of attitudes toward homosexuality that supports the contention that the UK is notably more inclusive than the US (e.g. Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Clements and Field,

2014). This difference has profound implications for variance in the relationship between homophobia and masculinity in the UK and the US, elided by Diefendorf and Bridges.

Historical context is the other major omission, particularly related to cultural change over time. Sociological research recognizes distinct eras related to sexuality since the 1950s, oriented around the shifting importance of the 'closet' (as per Seidman 2002). For example, Ghaziani (2014: p. 9) discusses the 'closet, coming out, and post-gay eras' to understand different zeitgeists of sexuality. He argues that the closet era was defined by concealment, isolation and shame, and lasted until the mid-1940s; the coming out era was the period between 1945 and 1997, when people increasingly lived as openly gay though not necessarily without stigma. The third era began in 1997 and is known as 'post-gay', characterized by a 'dramatic acceptance of homosexuality and a corresponding assimilation of gays and lesbians into the mainstream' (p. 9). Similarly, in his book *Straights*, Dean (2014) argues that the US is now a 'post-closet culture', where the societal presumption of heterosexuality has withered. Dean then uses this framing to theorize how straight people, including heterosexual men, interact with and form social relationships with sexual minorities—from aversive relationships to close friendships (see also mine and Anderson's stage model of homophobia, discussed above).

Indeed, the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual people have transformed in recent decades (Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Morris, 2018; Plummer, 2010; Savin-Williams, 2005, 2017; Seidman, 2002; Weeks, 2007), not least because of interactions and friendships between sexual minorities and straight men (see Anderson, 2014; Barrett, 2013; McCormack, 2012; Rumens, 2018). Not all this research considers the intersection of masculinities and homophobia, which is perhaps why Diefendorf and Bridges do not cite it, yet generational differences in sexualities at both the individual and cultural levels demands recognition and intellectual engagement.

The flaws in disregarding social and historical context are evident in the section on homophobic language. Discussing Pascoe's (2007) influential ethnographic study of two high schools in Southern California, Diefendorf and Bridges contend that her findings can be generalized across countries, as her book supposedly proves the 'ubiquity of [fag discourse] during an era in which tolerance for gay people and rights were ostensibly on the rise'. That Pascoe's *ethnographic* work on 'fag discourse' occurred in a specific country and decade is not deemed relevant—even though 'fag' has never been significantly used in the UK as a homophobic epithet, but rather is slang for a cigarette.

Diefendorf and Bridges' discussion of homophobic language ignores the research that documents a shift in meaning and usage among young men. I have argued that the intent, meaning and interpretation of language is dependent on the social context (McCormack 2011). Thus, while 'that's so gay' was homophobic for many decades, qualitative research using a range of methods has found a more nuanced and diverse set of associations with the language more recently (see also Magrath, 2018; Rasmussen, 2004; Sexton, 2017)—including generational differences in how such language is understood (see Lalor and Rendle-Short, 2007). Responding to the critique that heterosexual men denying homophobia in their use of language might be a form of strategic self-presentation, I found very similar language practices among young *gay* men who mostly rejected the idea that the language was homophobic (McCormack, Wignall and Morris, 2016). I conceptualized an intent-context-effect matrix to understand the complexity of language and how once-homophobic phrases can mean something different in pro-gay contexts.

Comparing mine and colleagues' arguments with those of Diefendorf and Bridges (and see also Pascoe and Bridges 2014), the important difference is that our perspective recognizes that phrases like 'that's so gay' and 'dude, you're a fag' can *still be* pernicious and homophobic, particularly if they are said in homophobic social and historical contexts. That

is, I accept that Pascoe's theorizing is accurate for her study. This contrasts with the other perspective that insists that theorizing around language, men and decreasing homophobia is uncritical—that a mere 'closer look...would complicate these claims' (Pascoe and Bridges 2014, p.256). For these scholars, phrases like 'that's so gay' and words like 'fag' are inherently homophobic, even if said by young gay men jokingly in pro-gay contexts (see Pascoe and Bridges, 2014, pg. 256). This is analytically and methodologically flawed precisely because social and historical context are erased.

The citation practices are biased

The article by Diefendorf and Bridges fails to adequately describe the extant literature by ignoring qualitative research on men and masculinities that documents decreased homophobia as a central component of the structures and dynamics of these men, as well as research that uses decreased homophobia as one of the social trends by which to explore other sexual and gender phenomena. It is notable that despite using the terms 'sexual prejudice' and 'homophobia' interchangeably, they ignore qualitative research on sexual minorities that reports a transformation in experiences since the peak of homophobia in the 1980s (see above). Quite why they shift between 'sexual prejudice' and 'homophobia' is never explained.

Diefendorf and Bridges never grapple with the consideration of how sexual minorities might embody, reify and challenge dominant forms of masculinities. I appreciate that constantly referring to 'heterosexual masculinity' can be clumsy but one is left with the impression, in reading their article, that gay, bisexual, trans, queer and female masculinities are irrelevant to contemporary theorizing of masculinities and homophobia. It is also unclear, methodologically and theoretically, why heterosexual masculinities are independent of LGBT masculinities or why profound shifts in the experiences of sexual minorities, as documented

by qualitative research, are to be ignored. A brief footnote that states ‘we are primarily referring to the gendered practices associated with individuals who identify as men’ does not address these concerns.

Diefendorf and Bridges also use problematic language in their description of academics discussing qualitative research. Scholars who argue that the decline in homophobia found in quantitative research maps onto heterosexual men’s lives in diverse and complex ways are said to ‘privilege and parade these results’ (p. x) of decreasing homophobia; Diefendorf and Bridges also assert that ‘some scholars suggest we interpret these shifts in sexual inequality at face value’. Given the only scholars they cite in this area are myself and Eric Anderson, it is reasonable to assume they are referring to our work in this context. Diefendorf and Bridges also assert that we are ‘complicit’ in arguing that *gender* inequalities are already settled, despite our argument clearly being that we see hierarchies between men as mostly independent of the reproduction of gender inequality (Anderson and McCormack, 2018). Diefendorf and Bridges (p. x) then assert that we claim ‘uncritically’ that homophobia is in decline, despite them accepting at the start of their article the quantitative research demonstrating this to be the case.

Anderson and I are gay men who have discussed both the benefits and complexities related to disclosing one’s sexuality when collecting qualitative data (see Anderson, 2009, 2014 and McCormack, 2012 for discussions of this). Being gay offers no exemption from academic scrutiny, of course, and it is important that people of all sexualities study and write about masculinities and homophobia. Yet sexuality is also relevant, particularly in the ethnographic research that we have collected (our research also includes interview-based studies, surveys and digital methods). Diefendorf and Bridges’ assertion that gay scholars are uncritical of homophobia, that we ‘privilege and parade’ data showing decreased homophobia, and treat claims at ‘face value’ suggests a certain inability to reflect on

(hetero)sexual privilege (for Bridges) even as we share with him the privilege of being white, cis-gendered middle-class men.

The citation practices in the article become more problematic when one considers who is excluded from being cited. Many women and people of colour have written about the intersections of decreasing homophobia, sexuality and gender (e.g. Brodyn and Ghaziani, 2018; Caruso and Roberts, 2018; Dashper, 2012; Elliot, 2016; Frank, 2008; Ghaziani, 2014; Haltom and Worthen, 2014; Morales, 2018; Ralph and Roberts, 2018; Roberts, 2013, 2018; Worthen, 2014), yet not one of them is cited. Given Bridges (2019) laudable aim for masculinities studies to become more diverse not least through citation practices, it is inexplicable that the only citations they offer related to what they call ‘work within the “inclusive masculinity” framework’ are from two established, white, cis-gendered gay male academics. I would have welcomed a critical engagement with the excellent work of women and people of colour, and other sexual minorities, that I have cited above and who have made significant and original contributions to knowledge on this issue.

This omission makes Diefendorf and Bridges’ subsequent call for intersectionality and diversity ring hollow. One does not truly decolonise sociology or masculinities studies by excluding work from sexual minorities, women and people of colour that provides a different perspective from one’s own. Such practice is reminiscent of Brodyn and Ghaziani’s (2018) concept of ‘performative progressiveness’—a concept they introduced to understand how heterosexual privilege is retained even as homophobia decreases. In this instance, Diefendorf and Bridges’ use of rhetorical devices to support academic inclusion but only to do this when it fits a theoretical paradigm is more performative than it is progressive.

Theory versus method

Sociology stands as a discipline by its approach to understanding data—through its set of systematic methods of data collection and analysis and its rigorous approach to theory. Qualitative and quantitative methods have different approaches to these issues, and the development of theory differs with each methodology, but theory and method should not be in conflict and sociology needs both to function effectively. This must also include recognition of the implications of sampling strategies, particularly how non-random sampling limits claims to generalizability.

In their article, Diefendorf and Bridges have privileged theory to the extent that method is disregarded. The systematic approach that is central to any review of academic literature – the methodology of a literature review – is rejected: how Diefendorf and Bridges engage with the findings of other research is entirely dependent on whether it fits their theoretical approach. Thus, work that critiques IMT is cited and discussed in detail, while studies that consider non-homophobic masculinities are excluded despite being central to the animating paradox of their article. By ignoring all the studies that show something different, they attempt to universalize the particular.

My argument is that the relationship between masculinity and homophobia endures only *in some contexts*. It is vital that research continues to study the presence of homophobia in men's lives where this occurs and critically examine why and how it continues. But one can do this while still also recognizing positive social change. There is no methodological paradox, but rather a diverse social world where the dynamics of men and their masculinities are complex, multi-faceted and varied. Quantitative research documents a broad social trend related to decreasing homophobia, and qualitative research finds a diverse range of expressions of masculinities. One does not need to deny this reality to argue for a critical approach to the study of sexualities or campaign for social justice related to sexuality.

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