



## Inclusivity, Horizontal Homosociality and Controlled Participation of “The Others”: Negotiations of Masculinity and Ageing in Two Older Men’s Communities

Ilkka Pietilä & Hanna Ojala

To cite this article: Ilkka Pietilä & Hanna Ojala (2021) Inclusivity, Horizontal Homosociality and Controlled Participation of “The Others”: Negotiations of Masculinity and Ageing in Two Older Men’s Communities, NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research, 29:4, 316-329, DOI: [10.1080/08038740.2021.1981997](https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2021.1981997)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2021.1981997>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 14 Oct 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 251





View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# Inclusivity, Horizontal Homosociality and Controlled Participation of “The Others”: Negotiations of Masculinity and Ageing in Two Older Men’s Communities

Ilkka Pietilä <sup>a</sup> and Hanna Ojala <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland; <sup>b</sup>Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

## ABSTRACT

Theories of inclusive masculinity and horizontal homosociality describe how previously marginalized forms of masculinity are becoming socially acceptable. Studies within these theoretical frameworks have largely focused on privileged groups of men and men’s changing attitudes towards homosexuality. This raises questions about the extent to which the theories apply to marginalized groups of men and other inequalities between men. In this article, we analyse ethnographic data from two Finnish older men’s communities that emphasize equality between men as an essential part of their ethos, and ask how inclusive practices and horizontal homosociality operate in these communities. Our intersectional analysis shows that older men’s communities may involve varying levels of inclusive practices that do not necessarily relate to sexuality but, instead, to other aspects of inequality. Future studies should consider the contextuality of men’s practices and the intersectional differences between men that are the subjects of these inclusive or exclusionary practices.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 August 2020  
Accepted 14 September 2021



## KEYWORDS

Older men; inclusive masculinity; horizontal homosociality; communities; ethnography

## Introduction

In research on men and masculinities, a growing body of literature has critically addressed the changing nature of masculinities, particularly in Western societies. Contrary to the theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), which underscores the importance of (symbolic) segregation between men and women and between groups of privileged and subordinated men, many contemporary men have been found to adopt certain elements of identity that are traditionally associated with various subordinated masculinities, and also femininities, as part of their gender performances. These so-called *hybrid masculinities* (e.g. Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) are often based on distancing oneself from attributes of hegemonic masculinity, such as social ranking and control of other men, avoidance of emotional intimacy with other men and homophobia. Scholars have suggested that changes in men’s attitudes and gender performances, e.g. new ways of dressing, acceptance of homosexuality and expression of emotions between men, signal that masculinities are becoming less restrictive as many men actively distance themselves from traditional forms of masculinity.

Anderson’s (2009, Anderson & McCormack, 2018) theory of *inclusive masculinity* and Hammarén and Johansson’s (2014) theory of *horizontal homosociality* are examples of recent attempts to theorize these changing masculinities. Both explore how certain forms of masculinity

**CONTACT** Ilkka Pietilä  [ilkka.pietila@helsinki.fi](mailto:ilkka.pietila@helsinki.fi)  Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

and men's behaviour that have previously been recognized as marginalized are—arguably—becoming socially acceptable and how this social acceptance of difference is practised within men's groups and communities (e.g. Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2009). Studies within these theoretical frameworks have largely focused on men from privileged groups, i.e. young, white, middle-class and heterosexual men.<sup>1</sup> This raises a question: To what extent do these theories apply to marginalized groups of men and, specifically, how do such marginalized groups position themselves with regard to hierarchies between masculinities and inclusive practices aimed at reducing inequalities between groups of men?

### Studies on inclusive masculinity and horizontal homosociality

The theory of inclusive masculinity describes social processes “concerning the emergence of an archetype of masculinity that undermines the principles of orthodox (read hegemonic) masculine values” (Anderson & McGuire, 2010, p. 250). The theory is based on a notion of social changes regarding homosexuality in Western countries, and suggests that in a culture of diminishing homophobia, boys and men have less fear of being labelled as gay. This is said to result in more permissive attitudes towards sexual minorities among men. In their study on British heterosexual undergraduate men, Anderson and McCormack (2015) found that the young men they interviewed had no problem sharing beds with other men and were engaged in a range of behaviours related to emotional and physical closeness (i.e. cuddling and spooning) without risking their socially perceived heterosexual identity.

Anderson (2009, p. 97) states that when a critical mass of inclusion of the forms of marginalized and subordinated masculinities exists, exclusionary attitudes once esteemed by hegemonic masculinity are no longer valued. Men's inclusive practices also begin to blur the line between traditional masculinity and femininity and, accordingly, question the legitimacy of existing gender ideologies and systems of inequality. Studies on inclusive masculinity (Adams, 2011; Murray & White, 2017; Robinson, Anderson, & White, 2018) suggest that especially privileged men have become more flexible and open-minded regarding their own masculinity, and as a result, groups of men nowadays have more permissive and inclusive practices, particularly when it comes to homosexuality.

The concept of homosociality refers to social bonds and nonsexual interpersonal attractions between *persons of the same sex* (Lipman-Blumen, 1976). However, the concept has mainly been used to describe heterosexual *men's* relations, social bonds, maintenance of masculinity and reproduction of power relations. In its traditional form, homosociality is seen to be based on and formed through competition and exclusion and, therefore, it is thought to be tightly linked with hegemonic masculinity. As Bird (1996) argues, homosociality reproduces men's privilege acting to institutionally and interpersonally segregate men and women, and to suppress masculine “others”, e.g. gay, racialized, old and working-class men.

Hammarén and Johansson (2014) have suggested that the traditional way of understanding homosociality is too simplistic: it is not sensitive enough to take note of the dynamics of men's relationships that strive for togetherness, cohesion and intimacy rather than interpersonal competition and production of hierarchies between men. Therefore, Hammarén and Johansson (2014) make a distinction between vertical and horizontal homosociality. Vertical homosociality refers to a traditional type of homosociality, in which homosocial bonds function to maintain masculine hegemony over women and subordinated men. In contrast, horizontal homosociality points towards more inclusive relations between men that are based on “emotional closeness, intimacy, and a nonprofitable form of friendship” (ibid., p. 1). Similarly to Anderson's theory of inclusive masculinity, Hammarén and Johansson point to horizontal homosociality as a sign of the emergence of more permissive and inclusive masculinities.

In her study on friendships of Swedish middle-class men, Goedecke (2018) noticed that men described their relationships to other men in terms of horizontal homosociality. Relationships were seen as warm and intimate, and support, conversations and confiding in others were emphasized as

important aspects of these relationships. However, Goedecke (2018, p. 238) also shows that the men positioned themselves as exceptional, progressive and non-laddish by which means they differentiated themselves from working-class men. Moreover, although being close with other men was accentuated in the men's talk, closeness was discussed in terms of politics rather than pleasure or comfort. As Goedecke (2018, p. 230) puts it, “[c]laiming to be comfortable touching (hugging) other men became proof of being less laddish and homophobic but also more secure in one's anti-homophobic masculinity and heterosexuality than other men”. Goedecke's study thus demonstrates that horizontal homosociality may not always be based on solidarity between men in general, but rather between the members of a particular group or community. Inclusivity is also used in a functional way for maintaining one's own higher masculine position.

Theories of inclusive masculinity and horizontal homosociality have emerged within a broader discussion of hybrid masculinities and their potential to transform hegemonic masculinity. In their review, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) conclude that although masculinities are described as organized horizontally rather than hierarchically in the theory of inclusive masculinity (similarly to the theory of horizontal homosociality), this does not necessarily mean that hegemonic masculinity is challenged. They also point out that empirical studies on inclusive masculinity have consistently focused on privileged groups of men. Bridges and Pascoe (2014, p. 253) raise concerns about this by suggesting that if scholars keep on celebrating new inclusive performances of masculinity among privileged men, groups of already marginalized men may easily end up being situated as the primary groups perpetuating inequality. Some researchers have also criticized the theory of inclusive masculinity for its extensive focus on heterosexual men's changing attitudes towards homophobia (e.g. O'Neill, 2015).<sup>2</sup> An example of a study in which both concerns are combined is that of Anderson and Fidler (2018) who investigated expressions of intimacy towards other men and attitudes towards homosexuality among English heterosexual men aged 65 and older. Based on their analysis, the authors concluded that when older men avoided expressions of platonic love, and tactile or emotional intimacy with other men, they performed “not-so-inclusive masculinities”. A narrow focus on sexuality in this particular unprivileged group of men both labels them as not inclusive as a group and leaves out other permissive attitudes and inclusive practices that the group may have. Considering the criticisms made of the theories of inclusive masculinity and horizontal homosociality reviewed above, it is worth considering these theories from the perspective of marginalized groups, such as older men.

### **Older men as a marginalized group of men**

In contemporary Western societies, age relations place different age groups in hierarchical order, creating a system of inequality which privileges younger adults while marginalizing older people (Calasanti, 2003). Ageism operates on the basis of stereotyped features attached to older people, such as weakness, slowness and incompetence, and therefore older people are often seen as somewhat “genderless” as, in Thompson's (2006, p. 633) words, “ageing overshadows gender”.

However, although there are general images thought to characterize the “old”, the assumed qualities of older people are to some extent different for women and men. While previous research has particularly focused on women's age-based experiences of discrimination, men are not immune to the marginalizing effects of ageism (Ojala, Pietilä, & Nikander, 2016). Research on cultural images of men's ageing has shown that ageing men often lose their power and status due to retirement and a loss of bodily performance, which results in a marginalized position in comparison with younger men, even in an experience of loss of masculinity (Meadows & Davidson, 2006). As King and Calasanti (2013, p. 699) put it, old age is “a political location that alters the lives of even the most privileged men”.

Most recent theories on men and masculinities are either based on or make reference to the theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). While acknowledging the existence of multiple masculinities and the contextual nature of hegemony, the theory views hegemonic masculinity as

the most honoured way of being a man, which only a minority of men might enact. However, due to normativity of hegemonic masculinity this requires “all other men to position themselves in relation to it” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). In the hierarchical order of masculinities, subordinate masculinities (such as gay men) not only lack many of the qualities of hegemonic masculinity but also express qualities opposite to it. Marginalized masculinities, in turn, represent men who are unable to conform to hegemonic masculinity and lack some of the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (such as working-class, disabled or non-white men) (Connell, 1995, p. 76–81). Most features attached to hegemonic masculinity are based on characteristics of young or middle-aged men, such as physical strength, virility, professional success and heterosexual prowess. Although it may be debatable whether older men represent a “marginalised” or “subordinated” group with regard to the standards of hegemonic masculinity, old men are “certainly disadvantaged in relation to younger men” (Calasanti, 2004, p. S313). As Thompson and Barnes Langendoerfer (2016, p. 120) suggest, the societal changes leading to the increasing valuation of youth have not only privileged the qualities and practices of younger men but also resulted in the promotion of “gerontophobic” masculinity ideals.

Because manhood is constructed “through and by reference to ‘age’” (Hearn, 1995, p. 97), feminist gerontology “examines how age relations shape masculinities, resulting in lower status (and even invisibility) for old men” as well as how older men become depicted as “other”, even those who may be able to approach some aspects of hegemonic masculinity (Calasanti, 2004, p. S307). As reviewed above, while a great deal of research on inclusive practices in men’s groups has been interested in privileged men’s changing attitudes towards homosexuality, future development of the theories of inclusive masculinity and horizontal homosociality would benefit from more extensive consideration of other forms of inequality and differentiation between men, such as age. Therefore, our study looks at these theories from a new angle, i.e. from the perspective of marginalized older men, while taking note of other intersecting social locations, such as class.

In this article, we analyse ethnographic data from two Finnish older men’s communities that both regard equality between men as an essential part of their ethos. As their aspiration of equality may be assumed to result in the acceptance of and respect for differences between men, we analyse our data with an interest in how inclusive practices and horizontal homosociality operate in these men’s communities. In the analysis, we pay particular attention to practices and processes through which these groups both potentially maintain and challenge hierarchies between masculinities.

## Communities studied, materials and methods

This study is based on ethnographic research into two men’s communities. Both projects approached men’s ageing and their social relationships in men-only communities, but the study designs and interview guides differed between the projects. The collective ethnography with the *Mill Village Boys* (pseudonym) was carried out jointly by four researchers in 2015–2017. The authors of this article were part of the research group. The data consist of participatory observations, personal interviews (N = 27), group discussions (N = 4), men’s written narratives (N = 21) and written documents of the community (e.g. memos from monthly gatherings).

*The Mill Village Boys* was established in Eastern Finland in 2006, when a group of retired men began to meet to recollect their adolescence in a small market town (which we will call by a pseudonym, Ekola). Since then, the group has grown substantially, and today it consists of around 100 retired men who lived in Ekola in their youth. The group gathers once a month and the core of the community’s activities is the recollection and maintenance of local history. The “old Ekola” has an important meaning for these men as it offers a localized identity and historical roots for them. The “boys”, recall a strong feeling of community among the working-class families who jointly built a better future for themselves after the Second World War. The group is not a registered association because the members want to avoid creating any hierarchies and think that registration would make their community too official.

The ethnographic study of the *Yoga for Old Guys* group represents classic ethnography conducted by a single researcher (second author) in two yoga groups for men in 2012–2013. The collected data consist of participatory observations in yoga classes and personal interviews with yogis (N = 19) and yoga teachers (N = 6). Documentary data (e.g. course descriptions, newspaper articles, DVDs) were also gathered.

The original Finnish name of the community, *Äijä-jooga*, is difficult to translate, as the word *äijä* has two different meanings. Its primary meaning is “old man”. But in contemporary Finnish everyday language it also has a connotation that refers to “tough guys” or “true men”. In choosing the translation, we decided to lean on the original meaning of the word although this translation loses the other important dimension of the word. However, as we will show below, our interviewees interpreted the word to primarily refer to older men.

*Yoga for Old Guys* is a community for men who want to practice yoga in a men-only environment. It conceptualizes yoga as physical exercise without spirituality (linked to femininity) and competition (linked to harmful masculine sports culture). Although *Yoga for Old Guys* is open to all men, it primarily appeals to middle-aged and older men. Many of their marketing texts include (implicit) age-related assumptions: “*Yoga for Old Guys* is fairly easy, fairly gentle basic yoga, where we don’t bow to gurus. . . . Even a crowbar gets younger and more flexible in *Yoga for Old Guys*”.

*Yoga for Old Guys* consists of yoga groups that have weekly yoga classes in a city in Southern Finland. A non-commercial association arranges the yoga classes and approximately 70 men are involved in the community. The majority are middle-aged or older, accompanied by just a few younger (25–40-year-old) men. Participants come from diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

Both communities consist of older men, and *Yoga for Old Guys* actively distances itself from ideals related to youthful masculinities. The members of *The Mill Village Boys* are all retired and thus older than the men in *Yoga for Old Guys*. Despite the fact that *The Mill Village Boys* do not describe their community in relation to other masculinities, it became evident in our ethnographic work that the “boys” are aware of their disadvantaged status as older working-class men. Most importantly, both communities praise their collective nature and consider equality between men to be their leading principle. This leading principle can be seen to reflect the ethos of egalitarianism, which characterizes Nordic societies and that is often, even routinely, endorsed in various mundane contexts. However, the explicit aim of equality can also be interpreted as a reaction to inequalities that relate to hierarchies between groups of men and ageist attitudes in society that the men experience in their daily lives and want to challenge when they have the opportunity to do so. Therefore, we investigated how various mechanisms of inclusive practices and horizontal homosociality worked to promote equality in these communities.

The analysis is based on observations and personal interviews from both ethnographies (N = 46) and group discussions with the *Mill Village Boys* (N = 4). Evidently, our analysis is influenced by other datasets gathered in these ethnographies (such as documentary data), but a systematic analysis focused on observations and interviews. The observations analysed were from episode descriptions written in the form of field notes and from researchers’ more interpretative field diary notes. In both communities, interviews were open-ended semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was used flexibly to allow free discussion of topics that the participants considered relevant. All interviews were digitally recorded with signed informed consent from the interviewees, transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service, and validated by the researchers to ensure accurate transcription. All names used in the data excerpts are pseudonyms.

Our analysis of data draws on ethnographic methods (e.g. Skeggs, 1994). Observations were used to both generate questions for the analysis of interviews and to validate the findings initially made based on interview data. The interviews were analysed with a focus on how the men described their communities in terms of masculinities, negotiated boundaries of group membership, and how they delineated exclusionary and inclusive practices in relation to promoting equality between men. Our reading of interview data was informed by (critical) discourse analytic approach as we were interested



in how such “macro” discourses as equality are reinterpreted and manipulated within “particular rhetorical or micro-political contexts” (Edley & Wetherell, 1997, p. 206) to create a coherent narrative of how issues like equality are interpreted for local purposes of men’s communities. The focus of analysis is thus on how men utilize, make sense of and negotiate between different cultural resources employed in the (re)production of inclusivity, homosociality and collective masculine identity.

## Equality ethos in communities

Members of both communities accentuated their aspiration to equality between men. Their descriptions of equality revealed some of the men’s experiences of inequality over their life-course. Yet, the societal divisions between groups of men that the participants referred to when talking about equality were different in the two communities.

Excerpt 1 (Einari, aged 83, the Mill Village Boys)

When we, men, go to the army, and start there as rookies, we are all equal [referring to compulsory military service in Finland]. Nobody asks who has studied, how and so on. [We are] all equal. The same applies here [in the community]. Despite the fact that there are engineers and captains and police officers and people from various occupations. But those times are gone. This is a bunch of retirees and I feel that we are equal here. You can have similar kinds of chats with anybody.

In the *Mill Village Boys*, the descriptions of inequality consistently related to socioeconomic inequalities and the resultant status hierarchies between groups of men. The interviewee refers to this by mentioning the variety of occupational backgrounds of the community members, and while acknowledging class-related inequalities that persist within society and have a substantial effect of men’s lives, he concludes that among retirees the days of inequality “are gone”. The members underlined the inclusive nature of their community: the group was open to men from different socioeconomic backgrounds and aimed to create horizontal homosociality among the community by avoiding the formation of hierarchies between the members.

*Yoga for Old Guys* had a very similar ethos. The interviewees thought that equality was one of the group’s main aims, and underlined that differences between men were accepted and respected.

Excerpt 2 (Kari, aged 65, Yoga for Old Guys)

[In the group] you see that you’re not the only one who is as stiff as a board. There are also others who are similar. Like there are guys who are more competent and those who are on the same level. So we go there hand in hand. We’re on a par.

For Kari, “being on a par” refers to accepting differences in men’s physical competence. Kari views the group as having a strongly inclusive atmosphere in which all men, independently of their competence, can go “hand in hand”, supporting and encouraging each other.

Both groups thus recognized inequalities between groups of men, both in terms of socioeconomic status and (age-based) physical competence. Their inclusive ethos was based on the idea that in these groups the differences between men were not allowed to create hierarchies among the participants. Quite the opposite, the groups were committed to fighting against such hierarchies. Despite this, it is worth noting that these inclusive practices took place in contexts of relatively homogeneous groups of men. This raises the question of whether the equality the groups put so much emphasis on was in fact based on the exclusion of men representing “others” not fitting the groups’ collective identities.

## Explicit and implicit definitions of “us” and “the other”

In the communities we studied, inclusive practices, horizontal homosociality and equality required a certain level of homogeneity amongst the members. Both groups had clearly articulated “target groups” for their activities. The *Mill Village Boys* was established to facilitate memory work for

retired men who were born or had spent their adolescence in a certain geographical area. Originally, the inclusion criteria were strict, requiring that participants had been born in the neighbourhood and were over 70 years old. However, soon after the community was established, it became evident that overly strict membership criteria would prevent too many men's participation. Therefore, the membership criteria gradually became more permissive. New members were expected to be retired and to have lived in the area at some stage of their life. These formal requirements were accompanied by a more abstract demand to have "the spirit". Kyösti (aged 77) described the qualities expected of a person fitting the group: "You have lived here and so you know the spirit of Ekola. Recognising the spirit is probably the overwhelmingly best merit [to become a member]." Members stated that this "spirit" included the following key elements: 1) Ekola had a unique history and culture, which was different from the Town, 2) Good Old Ekola was characterized by a strong feeling of community, which did not exist elsewhere, and 3) the Boys were committed to maintaining the history of Ekola. The community actively celebrated these values and individual members were expected to publicly subscribe to these ideas to express the "right attitude" in group meetings.

*Yoga for Old Guys* did not have similar clearly articulated membership criteria, except being an exercise group for men. Despite this, it became evident that the group made distinctions between groups of men based on age and physical competence. Although the group was open to all men independently of their age and competence, the men themselves perceived it as a community for older men. The men thought that even the name of the group, *Äijä-jooga* (*Yoga for Old Guys*), referred to older men. When being asked about the age structure of the group, the participants did not refer to any exclusionary practices related to participants' age. Instead, they offered nuanced accounts of why younger men themselves might not want to attend the yoga sessions of this particular group.

Excerpt 3 (Olli, aged 58, *Yoga for Old Guys*)

**Olli:** Some young men come to our group, but they don't stay here for long. Maybe they prefer going, there are different sorts of these [yoga groups], I think some of them want it to be a little bit more showy. It's because many think that yoga is also about performance, so that you take water bottles with you and generally the whole appearance, like checking that you have your leotard on the right way [the interviewer laughs]. So that there's this kind of thinking also among men, and therefore I think that some regard this more as yoga for grandpas.

**Interviewer:** Well, where does this [idea] come from? Is it because it's not that physical or demanding?

**Olli:** Well, it's not that efficient. Like here you can already be a little bit stiff. You tolerate more because we are already old farts [chuckles, and the interviewer starts to laugh]. [*Yoga for Old Guys*] is not sort of easy but I suppose the young mainly look for efficiency. Like when you go to a gym, you have to come out from there with muscles. But if I go to a gym, I go there to take care of myself. I don't go there to make myself bigger. Here people no longer have such a rush to push hard, you can take it in a little bit more relaxed manner. It's just that when you have men of a certain age, it's like more composed and controlled.

In this extract, Olli attaches various qualities to younger men, such as competitiveness, search for efficient exercise and interest in appearance, that distance them from the older participants of *Yoga for Old Guys*. The latter are described in terms of having a more relaxed stand towards exercise, not paying attention to appearance (clothes, muscles etc.) which represent younger men's vanity, and their primary motive for attending yoga of gently caring for their body. Many participants underlined the importance of stretching and noted that younger men did not consider it important. Older men were thus portrayed as having both more physical limitations but also a more controlled and wise attitude towards their body, a rhetorical move that De Visser and Smith (2006) have called "trading of masculine competence". For Olli, compensating for the lack of certain masculine qualities through other qualities creates a feeling of belonging and solidarity among the men, a feeling which is then contrasted with younger men's alleged idea of the group as "old farts" and "grandpas". Although the group did



not have articulated criteria for membership, these kinds of age-based distinctions were important for the members of the group. Young men, both as a group of men and a representation of a certain type of masculinity, were thought not to belong to the group. As 55-year-old Petri pointed out, “the group itself does not make any difference to me, but the age group does. If it was some sort of teenage yoga group, I would not go there. So age certainly matters.”

*Yoga for Old Guys* underscored inclusivity, equality and solidarity. In both communities, inclusivity was based on the relative homogeneity of the groups and applied only to group members. It was also evident that both groups had clear ideas of which kinds of men were considered to fit the groups. By making explicit or implicit characterizations of whom they represented, they also defined which groups of men were seen as “other”. However, instead of strict membership criteria, both communities underlined the importance of having the “right attitude” as a crucial quality of their members. It turned out that some men representing “others” were allowed to join the communities. Such exceptions required that these men adapted themselves to the group norms, and manifested the “right attitude”.

### Representing others: adapting to group norms and manifesting the “right attitude”

The membership criteria in the *Mill Village Boys* revolved around having lived in a particular area, having experienced the “Good Old Ekola”, and thus endorsing “the spirit”. The members who fulfilled these criteria were considered equal. A supposed inequality was linked to men’s occupational backgrounds and differing socioeconomic statuses during their work careers.

Excerpt 4 (Focus group, Mill Village Boys)

**Interviewer:** In these interviews, many have said that one of the most important things in this group is that everybody’s equal with each other.

**Otto:** Yes, it is.

**Juhani:** We have no titles.

**Teijo:** We have no chairperson, just a person leading the meeting.

**Interviewer:** But what it is about equality, why it is so important [for you]?

**Otto:** It’s maybe because we are of the same age.

**Torsti:** It’s maybe possible only at this age, when you’re retired. There may be a bank manager [at the meeting] and I’m sitting next to him. . . .

**Teijo:** Well, I don’t know them all that well but I think there is no bank manager in the group.

**Otto:** There cannot be.

**Teijo:** This is a community of so-called working people.

**Torsti:** There has been one [mentioning name and the bank].

**Juhani:** But you just haven’t noticed him [jokingly, addressing Otto]. . . .

**Otto:** He doesn’t show his wallet.

**Teijo:** We have to take a double fee from him [laughter].

At the beginning of the excerpt, the participants refer to the equality in their community by noting that they do not use titles and that they do not want to nominate a chairperson. They further claim that any inequality among men during their working lives loses its meaning when men retire,

and that former working people and bank managers may spend time together without any hierarchies between them. In so doing, the participants jointly reproduce the narrative capturing the key elements of equality in the group.

From this perspective, it is striking to see how the following lines question the shared narrative. Teijo suddenly expresses the idea that there might not be a former bank manager in the group, a suggestion supported by Otto. Teijo goes further by describing the community as “so-called working people”. With these lines, it suddenly becomes questionable whether the inclusivity and equality so celebrated in the group are based on any true need for tolerating men’s varying backgrounds. Independently of whether or not there is a bank manager in the group, Torsti’s and Otto’s last comments resolve the situation which might threaten the shared narrative. Their idea is that even if there were a man representing a higher-status group, in order to stay in the community he should be wise enough not to reveal his background. A consensus about the existence of equality in the group is reached by noting that men from different backgrounds are accepted if they do not upset the assumption of equality by expressing their higher status, and therefore subscribe to the “spirit”.

In *Yoga for Old Guys*, most participants are middle-aged or older. However, there were two considerably younger men among the interviewees. Aged 29, Konsta was the youngest. He told the interviewer that he felt “a little bit like a freak” because of his age. However, being able to join the group was not only a matter of compliance with group norms. For younger men who did not wish to be competitive, the group also offered an alternative way of exercising. Irrespective of being a “freak”, Konsta liked the group as it gave him the opportunity to exercise without external competitive pressures and just to “be himself”.

Excerpt 5 (Konsta, aged 29, *Yoga for Old Guys*)

**Interviewer:** So you originally went to *Yoga for Old Guys* when your friend (an older man) told you about it?

**Konsta:** Yeah, he mentioned that there’s such [a group]. And it was sort of easier for me to go there as there was somebody I already knew. It’s because I get far too nervous about new situations, especially if there’s a group in which people have been members for a long time. Like they are allowed to be part of it and can manage it. It’s a terrible stress to go there, but they don’t really mind me. I know that. But I’m a bit like someone who feels they should know everything right away and be on the same level as others. I don’t give myself enough time to learn. But when I went there, there was a relaxed and pretty good vibe, so it was easy to get along with them.

**Interviewer:** Did your friend mention that there’s mainly older men [in the group]?

**Konsta:** He probably said something about it. And I myself thought that if it’s called *Yoga for Old Guys* then there could be men who were easily over 30, an older crowd. And that there’s no extreme yoga gurus who can get their legs behind the neck and stuff. When you went there you noticed that the guys are certainly not made of rubber.

Konsta felt comfortable in the group as it did not represent the norms of competitiveness and embodied competence associated with youthful masculinities and prevalent in some yoga groups. Another issue Konsta wanted to avoid in yoga related to his notion of “tool sports”, which he thought characterized many commercial yoga schools. He criticized such a superficial approach to yoga and said that *Yoga for Old Guys*’ approach is “very down-to-earth”. A somewhat scornful attitude towards overly fashionable and costly clothes and tools was common in *Yoga for Old Guys*. Having a similar view of sportswear certainly made Konsta fit the group norms. However, it is worth noting that by making these distinctions Konsta also distanced himself from youthful hegemonic notions of masculinity. This highlights that while older men easily perceive youthful masculinities as a single and monolithic age-based group, Konsta brought forward more nuanced and subtle distinctions within men of his own age group.

## Negotiating membership and difference

As discussed above, Konsta was aware of his otherness in *Yoga for Old Guys*. Despite this, he appeared to have convinced the other members of his right attitude, and therefore he did not feel marginalized. Nonetheless, in our observations we realized that due to him being a considerably younger man, Konsta's behaviour was constantly under surveillance by the other participants.

Excerpt 7 (Field notes from Yoga for Old Guys class)

Konsta comes in in his outerwear and with large headphones on, walks to the hall, puts down his mat in his own space at the edge of the hall, and goes to the locker room. After a while, he comes back in and lies down on his mat with his headphones still on. Other men come in, one by one. Most of them glance at Konsta, some chuckle shaking their head, look at each other knowingly. Konsta is lying with his eyes closed and listens to music. The teacher arrives, puts down his mat and starts the class by asking everybody to sit on their mats. Konsta gets up, takes his headphones off and takes them, together with his phone, to a bench next to the wall. As Konsta walks by, Ensio (aged 71) smilingly makes a comment to him: "So you switched off your Eino Grön then?"

This episode showcases a potential violation of the code by Konsta, which the other participants recognize. In the group of men in their 50s and 60s, using large headphones is associated with youth culture, and none of the other men use them. Headphones thus underline Konsta's otherness. Konsta does not, however, violate the code by using the headphones during the class but takes them off, which is also acknowledged—and appreciated—by the other members. This becomes evident in Ensio's comment. Eino Grön is a well-known singer in Finland with a long career from the 1950s to the present. He sings mainly tango, and is particularly popular among older audiences. From this perspective, Ensio's comment is interesting; simultaneously with verbalizing the issue that all of the participants have recognized—Konsta's wearing of headphones—he ironically suggests that Konsta has been listening to music which clearly belongs to an older generation. As Ensio might also have mentioned another artist closer to Konsta's age group ("So you switched off your Metallica then?"), we interpret his comment as a friendly and benevolent teasing in which mentioning a specific artist acts more as an attempt to tie Konsta with the group rather than to distance him from it. While Konsta slightly violates the code by using headphones, this violation is considered minor by the other members, and does not threaten his position in the group.

Konsta's example underscores that having the "spirit" or the "right attitude" is profoundly a matter of representation. In everyday interaction, the "code" is about appropriate verbal and material (e.g. dress) behaviour. It illustrates that members' obedience to the "code" is monitored and possible violations are recognized. This surveillance particularly applies to those participants who are closest to representing "the other": a member who is thought of as representing "the other" is accepted as far as he shares the "spirit" with other members, and does not accentuate his difference from the rest of the community. At the same time, the example also shows how inclusive and exclusionary practices are intertwined in daily interactions. Potential violations of the "code" reveal the hidden vertical structures whose existence the members so actively try to deny in their communities.

## Discussion

Both of the groups we studied aspired to equality between men and strove for inclusivity and horizontal homosociality. Our analysis revealed that despite these aims, some men were excluded from the groups due to restrictive membership criteria and the ways in which the communities and their activities were described to their "target groups". As a result, the groups were homogeneous in their composition, particularly in terms of age and socioeconomic status. As Hammarén and Johansson (2014, p. 5–6) have pointed out, there are no absolute boundaries between the two

forms of homosociality, and “aspects of hierarchical homosociality in horizontal relations and vice versa might be present”. Vertical structures and exclusionary practices may indeed exist within groups that actively promote equality between members through various inclusive practices.

The Nordic countries are often considered “the happiest, most democratic and most equal countries in the world” (Holm, 2018) supporting gender equality “at home, at work, and in public life” (OECD, 2018) and with universalism as the “trademark” of their welfare regimes (Szebehely & Meagher, 2018). However, this obviously does not indicate the non-existence of inequalities in these societies. Our analysis highlights that despite the general aspiration of equality in Finnish society, the men in both of the groups studied were aware of their subordinated social status due to their age, weakening physical ability (*Yoga for Old Guys*) and lower socioeconomic position (*the Mill Village Boys*). Against this societal backdrop, these communities provided their members with a chance to enter a temporary enclave and safe haven, places where their locally constructed masculinities offered a brief hiatus from the more prevalent practices of vertical homosociality and exclusive masculinity they likely live with in their daily lives as older men. Although such communities do not challenge hierarchies between masculinities on a societal level, they produce place- and time-bound masculine capital, shared understanding of masculinity in old age and a sense of belonging for the participating men (Seppänen, Tiilikainen, Ojala, & Pietilä, 2021). In such social environments, older men can share similar values and life experiences that become essential building blocks of their local constructions of ageing masculinities.

Thompson (2019) has suggested that research on men’s ageing should theorize old men’s practices of ageing masculinities in ways that go beyond the hierarchies of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities and recognize the formation of multiple ageing masculinities, including time- and place-bound masculinities. From this perspective, the ethos of *Yoga for Old Guys* represents a reinterpretation of masculinity through the prism of ageing, in which competitive aspects of physical exercise, attached to younger masculinities, are replaced by more gentle approaches to ageing bodies and exercise. The group thus modifies the ideals and practices attached to men’s physical exercise that often underscore the importance of physical ability. The *Mill Village Boys*, in contrast, did not advocate any new interpretation of masculinity as such. Instead, their ideas related to restoring a youthful masculinity by basing their collectively shared identity on their youth as boys and young men in a semi-rural working-class context, which represents a time- and place-bound masculinity, and is based on guidelines for masculinity located in “pre-old age” (Spector-Mersel, 2006).

The locally prevailing interpretations of masculinity have, however, clear links to wider power structures between masculinities. The qualities attached to hegemonic forms of masculinity, and the practices of power men have over women and some other men, are context-bound and vary across regions, cultures and time. By the formation of clearly articulated collective identities, otherwise marginalized masculinities could be interpreted to represent the “locally hegemonic masculinity” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) that created expectations, norms and rules regarding group membership in these particular contexts. This local hegemony had an effect on the inclusive and exclusionary practices of the groups as group composition and collective identity determined which kinds of characteristics of members were socially regulated via exclusionary or inclusive practices.

The practices of regulation and control reveal the mechanisms of hegemony and power within the groups. While men not fitting the locally hegemonic forms of masculinity, such as younger men or men with a higher socioeconomic status, were permitted to join the groups, their participation was accepted only if they acted in accordance with group norms, concealed their dissimilarity and subscribed to the shared narratives. As King, Calasanti, Pietilä, and Ojala (2021) have recently suggested, an essential mechanism of hegemonic masculinity is that subordinated or marginalized men consent to their subordinated status. As a result, a local hegemony of

subordinated masculinities turns the dynamics of societal power relations upside down; here, parts of advantaged masculinities become assimilated into locally hegemonic but societally subordinated masculinities.

Horizontal homosociality had thus a vital function for these groups, which cannot be reduced to sympathy expressed towards men who are different. In the context of groups of older men representing marginalized masculinities, the endorsement of equality was aimed at creating an environment free of inequalities that otherwise persist in these men's lives. Ironically, however, the groups in these locally hegemonic conditions that endorse equality between men seem to operate in a very similar fashion to groups representing a hegemonic position in wider society. Future studies on inclusivity and horizontal homosociality should thus carefully consider the contextuality of men's practices (which men the group represents) and intersectional differences between men that are the subject of the inclusive or exclusionary practices. Future research could also compare the findings from this study to how other age groups construct local masculinities out of participation in distinctive groups.

## Conclusion

Our empirical analysis showed that while the groups of marginalized men adopted inclusive practices and promoted horizontal homosociality, this liberality did not question or challenge the basis of such widely recognized inequalities between groups of men as age and class. Inclusive practices in these groups did not involve any "strategic borrowing" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) from other groups nor resulted in any "hybridisation" of masculinities. Rather, these practices represented provisional tolerance of "the others", restricted by time and place, aimed at securing the internal uniformity of the groups.

Demetriou (2001, p. 337) conceptualizes hegemonic masculinity as a "hybrid bloc", which adopts diverse practices for constructing the best possible strategies for the reproduction of patriarchy: "It is its constant hybridization, its constant appropriation of diverse elements from various masculinities that makes the hegemonic bloc capable of reconfiguring itself and adapting to the specificities of new historical conjunctures" (Demetriou, 2001, p. 348). Our results resonate with Demetriou's (2001) thinking in showing that subordinated groups of men have few opportunities to challenge the "hybrid bloc" of hegemonic masculinity or create their own "hybrid" versions of masculinity even in a localized sense. The potential to challenge power relations between masculinities and groups of men thus still appears to be a privilege of the privileged.

## Notes

1. In recent years, there has been an increase of studies focusing on such marginalized groups of men as working-class men (e.g. Roberts, 2018), within the frameworks of inclusive masculinity theory. Similar empirical studies on horizontal homosociality are still scarce, and neither of the theories have seen major developments due to recent empirical research.
2. Studies on inclusive masculinity have had their empirical interest in such topics as heterosexual men's acceptance of homosexuality, prohibition of homophobic discourse and physical intimacy between straight men. According to O'Neill (2015, p. 112), the "overwhelming focus on homophobia and homophobia in inclusive masculinity theory means that little consideration is given to the relation between masculinity and heterosexuality, and the ways in which the dynamics of heterosexuality structure men's practices and male subjectivity."

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Ilkka Pietilä** (PhD) is an Assistant Professor of social gerontology at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland. His research has explored people's gendered interpretations of health and ageing, with a particular interest in ageing men and masculinities, ageing and embodiment as well as older men's communities and retirement. Pietilä has published journal articles in *International Journal of Men's Health*, *The Gerontologist*, *Ageing & Society*, *Health Psychology*, *Journal of Aging Studies*, *Men and Masculinities*, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, and *Social Science and Medicine*.

**Hanna Ojala** (PhD) is a University Lecturer in gender studies at Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Finland. Her research has focused on intersections of age, gender and class in the various contexts of men's ageing, such as health, retirement, anti-ageing, sports and communities. She has published in such journals as *Ageing & Society*, *Journal of Aging Studies*, *Men and Masculinities*, *International Journal of Men's Health*, and *Sociology of Health and Illness*.

## ORCID

Ilkka Pietilä  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3830-3619>

Hanna Ojala  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4263-9665>

## References

- Adams, A. (2011). "Josh wears pink cleats". Inclusive masculinity on the soccer field. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58(5), 579–596.
- Anderson, E. (2009). *Inclusive masculinity. The changing nature of masculinities*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Anderson, E., & Fidler, C. (2018). Elderly British men. Homophobia and orthodox masculinities. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(3), 248–259.
- Anderson, E., & McCormack, M. (2015). Cuddling and spooning. Heteromascularity and homosocial tactility among student-athletes. *Men and Masculinities*, 18(2), 214–230.
- Anderson, E., & McCormack, M. (2018). Inclusive masculinity theory. Overview, reflection and refinement. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(5), 547–561.
- Anderson, E., & McGuire, R. (2010). Inclusive masculinity theory and the gendered politics of men's rugby. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 19(3), 249–261.
- Bird, S. R. (1996). Welcome to the men's club. Homosexuality and the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. *Gender and Society*, 10(2), 120–132.
- Bridges, T., & Pascoe, C. J. (2014). Hybrid masculinities. New directions in the sociology of men and masculinities. *Sociology Compass*, 8(3), 246–258.
- Calasanti, T. (2003). Theorizing age relations. In S. Biggs, A. Lowenstein, & J. Hendricks (Eds.), *The need for theory: Critical approaches to social gerontology for the 21st century* (pp. 199–218). Amityville, NY: Baywood Press.
- Calasanti, T. (2004). Feminist gerontology and old men. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 59(6), S305–S314.
- Connell, R., & Messerschmidt, J. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity. Rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society*, 19(6), 829–859.
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- De Visser, R., & Smith, J. A. (2006). Mister in-between. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 11(5), 685–695.
- Demetriou, D. Z. (2001). Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. A critique. *Theory and Society*, 30(3), 337–361.
- Edley, N., & Wetherell, M. (1997). Jockeying for position: The construction of masculine identities. *Discourse & Society*, 8(2), 203–217.
- Goedecke, K. (2018). "Other guys don't hang out like this". *Gendered friendship politics among Swedish, middle-class men*. Uppsala: Uppsala Universitetet.
- Hammarén, N., & Johansson, T. (2014). Homosexuality: In between power and intimacy. *Sage Open*, 4(1), 1–11.
- Hearn, J. (1995). Imaging the aging of men. In M. Featherstone & A. Wernick (Eds.), *Images of aging. Cultural representations of later life* (pp. 97–115). London: Routledge.
- Holm, G. (2018). Justice through education in the Nordic countries: Critical issues and perspectives. *Education Inquiry*, 9(1), 1–3.
- King, N., & Calasanti, T. (2013). Men's aging amidst intersecting relations of inequality. *Sociology Compass*, 7(9), 699–710.
- King, N., Calasanti, T., Pietilä, I., & Ojala, H. (2021, published online). The hegemony in masculinity. *Men and Masculinities*, 24(3), 432–450.



- Lipman-Blumen, J. (1976). Toward a homosocial theory of sex roles: An explanation of the sex segregation of social institutions. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1(3, Part 2), 15–31.
- Meadows, R., & Davidson, K. (2006). Maintaining manliness in later life. Hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities. In T. M. Calasanti & K. F. Slevin (Eds.), *Age matters. Realigning feminist thinking* (pp. 295–312). New York: Routledge.
- Murray, A., & White, A. (2017). Twelve not so angry men. Inclusive masculinities in Australian contact sports. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 52(5), 536–550.
- O’Neill, R. (2015). Whither critical masculinity studies? Notes to inclusive masculinity theory, postfeminism, and sexual politics. *Men and Masculinities*, 18(1), 100–120.
- OECD. (2018). Is the last mile the longest? Economic gains from gender equality in Nordic countries. Summary brief. Retrieved from <http://oe.cd/last-mile-gender-nordic>
- Ojala, H., Pietilä, I., & Nikander, P. (2016). Immune to ageism? Men’s perceptions of age-based discrimination in everyday contexts. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 39, 44–53.
- Roberts, S. (2018). Domestic labour, masculinity and social change. Insights from working-class young men’s transitions to adulthood. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(3), 274–287.
- Robinson, S., Anderson, E., & White, A. (2018). The bromance: undergraduate male friendships and the expansion of contemporary homosocial boundaries. *Sex Roles*, 78(1–2), 94–106.
- Seppänen, M., Tiilikainen, E., Ojala, H., & Pietilä, I. (2021). Place-bound rural community of older men: Social and autobiographical insideness of the Mill Village Boys in Finland. In M. Skinner, R. Winterton, & K. Walsh (Eds.), *Rural gerontology. Towards critical perspectives on rural ageing* (pp. 188–198). London: Routledge.
- Skeggs, B. (1994). Situating the production of feminist ethnography. In M. Maynard & J. Purvis (Eds.), *Researching women’s lives*. Basingstoke: Taylor and Francis.
- Spector-Mersel, G. (2006). Never-aging stories: Western hegemonic masculinity scripts. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 15(1), 67–82.
- Szebehely, M., & Meagher, G. (2018). Nordic eldercare – Weak universalism becoming weaker? *Journal of European Social Policy*, 28(3), 294–308.
- Thompson, E. H. (2006). Images of old men’s masculinity: Still a man? *Sex Roles*, 55(9–10), 633–648.
- Thompson, E. H. (2019). *Men, masculinities, and aging. The gendered lives of older men*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Thompson, E. H., & Barnes Langendoerfer, K. (2016). Older men’s blueprint for “being a man”. *Men and Masculinities*, 19(2), 119–147.