

# **The Declining Significance of Homophobia for Male Students in Three Sixth Forms in the South of England**

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## **Introduction**

Previous research has established that high levels of homophobia are commonplace throughout educational institutions in the UK (Ellis and High 2004; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Thurlow 2001). Ethnographic investigations also demonstrate that homophobia is a central mechanism in the maintenance of male students' heteromale identities (Mac an Ghail 1994; Nayak and Kehily 1996). This means that although homophobic abuse has been rife in school settings for many reasons, a primary factor is that being homophobic is the most effective way for a boy to demonstrate his heterosexuality among his peers. Deploying homophobia against others shows that one is meeting an important mandate of heteromale identity, while simultaneously raising one's social status at the expense of others. Thus, rather than being reproduced through personal prejudice, homophobia often serves as a form of heterosexual and male social currency (cf. Plummer 1999).

Drawing on 12 months of participant observation and 44 in-depth interviews, this research examines the contemporary levels of cultural homophobia in three sixth forms in the south of England. Using Anderson's (2009) concept of *homophobia* to situate levels of homophobia temporally and spatially, I show that homophobia maintains little cultural influence with the boys studied. This influence does, however, vary between sites.

The decreasing significance of homophobia is evidenced by several factors. First, the majority of students intellectualise pro-gay attitudes and proclaim support of

gay rights. Furthermore, there are openly gay students in two of the three sixth forms. These students report being neither bullied nor harassed, and homophobic discourse is entirely absent at these sites; homophobic discourse is used only rarely in the other setting. However, homosexually-themed discourse is present at all three sixth forms. This discourse maintains socio-negative effect, but it is not as pernicious as the homophobia documented in previous studies (cf. Thurlow 2001). Finally, I document an increase in homosocial tactility between heterosexual male students. Accordingly, by examining the gendered behaviours of male students in relation to their attitudes toward homosexuality, I show that homophobia maintains less significance than documented in previous studies (cf. Epstein 1997; Mac an Ghail 1994; Nayak and Kehily 1996).

### **Theorising Masculinities**

The most prolific tool for understanding the social stratification of masculinities has been Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity. From a social constructionist perspective, hegemonic masculinity theory articulates the social processes by which a masculine hierarchy is created and legitimised. Here, discursive and physical regulation of other boys' behaviours results in one archetype of masculinity being esteemed above all others. Boys who most closely embody this standard are accorded the most social capital, while those who behave in ways that conflict with this valorised form of masculinity are marginalised.

Considerable research establishes that the most fundamental characteristic of this dominant masculinity is heterosexuality (Mac an Ghail 1994; Nayak and Kehily 1996; Skelton 2001). The importance of heterosexuality to masculinity is so significant that the two are culturally conflated—something Pronger (1990) calls

‘heteromascularity’; and it means that feminine behaviours in boys are interpreted as signs of homosexuality (Pollack 1998). Homosexual suspicion is effective in relegating boys in the masculine hierarchy because anyone’s heterosexuality can be questioned in a homophobic culture (Anderson 2008).

Anderson (2009) develops the concept of homophobia to understand the power of cultural homophobia in regulating masculinities. Homophobia is defined as the cultural fear of being homosexualised. High levels of homophobia often cause boys to avoid any association with homosexuality, because being thought gay can relegate them in masculine hierarchies. Anderson suggests that two key factors affect a culture’s level of homophobia: The awareness that anyone can be gay, and the level of cultural homophobia.

Homophobia is a particularly useful concept here because it historically contextualises levels of homophobia, and theorises how changing levels of homophobia will impact upon the construction of masculinities in any given culture. For example, in periods of high homophobia, hegemonic masculinity theory captures the social dynamics of male peer group cultures. However, Anderson (2009) argues that this is not the case when levels of homophobia decrease. He theorises the impact this has on men’s gendered behaviours with *inclusive masculinity theory*.

Inclusive masculinity theory employs Connell’s theorising for periods of high homophobia. However, Anderson argues that as the level of homophobia declines, the mandates of the hegemonic form of masculinity hold less cultural sway. For example, in a setting where homophobia is decreased but still present, Anderson finds two archetypes of masculinity that vie for dominance; inclusive and orthodox. In this cultural moment, orthodox masculinity remains homophobic, but does not maintain cultural control over men ascribing to the more inclusive form of

masculinity. Accordingly, neither form of masculinity maintains a hegemonic position.

Inclusive masculinity theory next argues that when a culture is no longer homohysteria, there will be a marked expansion in the range of permissible behaviours for boys and men. The regulative mechanisms of hegemonic masculinity – physical domination and discursive marginalisation (cf. Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) – are no longer present or lose utility in such a setting. This is because boys no longer fear being homosexualised, meaning that they can act in ways once considered transgressive without the threat of homophobic policing. This means that although some boys will continue to maintain personal homophobia, the expression of this will be stigmatised in their peer group (Anderson 2009).

In settings where overt homophobia is absent, Anderson theorises that many archetypes of masculinity can be socially esteemed. This greatly diverges from Connell's model, and is supported by a growing body of work documenting multiple masculinities being esteemed in male youth cultures (Anderson 2008; Anderson and McGuire forthcoming; McCormack and Anderson forthcoming). Furthermore, recent research in school settings documents that decreased homophobia results in the expansion of gendered behaviours for male students (Kehler 2007; Swain 2006).

### **Masculinities in Schools with High Homohysteria**

The social stigma traditionally associated with homosexuality has meant that boys must maintain a heterosexual identity if they wish to avoid being bullied and harassed in school cultures (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003; Plummer 1999). Accordingly, studies document that the majority of gay students hide their sexual identity from their peers: They fear harassment, and assume that their teachers will fail to act against this

(Flowers and Buston 2001; Vicars 2006). Accordingly, a homohysterical zeitgeist severely impacts on the learning environment and social freedoms of sexual minorities (Rivers 2001).

However, a thorough body of research also documents the regulation of heterosexual male students' gendered behaviours in schools with high levels of homophobia (cf. Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford 2003; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002). Here, heterosexual boys are culturally compelled to conform to a rigid code of masculinity in order to avoid being thought gay. This requires them to be aggressive, homophobic and homophobic (Epstein 1997; Mac an Ghail 1994).

Although there are many reasons why boys may have troubled educational experiences (cf. Froyum 2007), high levels of homophobia have a profound effect on students' experiences of school. This is because homophobia and anti-femininity have been fundamental components of the masculinities that have traditionally dominated school cultures (cf. Nayak and Kehily 1996; Stoudt 2006). Accordingly, decreasing levels of homophobia in a local and broader culture can have a socio-positive impact on the experiences of boys in school settings.

After surveying the educational and masculinities literature, I describe three main ways in which the influence of homophobia on boys' gendered behaviours is evident. One consistent finding is that boys *employ homophobic discourse* to distance themselves from homosexuality (cf. Plummer 1999). I define homophobic discourse as the use of anti-gay language with the intent to wound another person (cf. Anderson and McCormack forthcoming). Homophobic discourse has the effect of policing boys who stray from the permissible range of heteromale behaviours. For example, Nayak and Kehily (2006: 468) write: "Young men...admonish one another through homophobic insults for sitting too closely together, speaking in high-pitched 'squeaky

voices,' ... being of slight build, or displaying an earnest, academic prowess". In a homohysterical setting, homophobic discourse is the quickest and most effective method to question another boy's heteromale standing (Anderson 2008).

Another key finding concerning male students in homohysterical schools is that boys must *maintain social and intellectual distance from homosexuality* to avoid being homosexualised. Accordingly, some boys intellectualise their 'disgust' of homosexuality, calling it unnatural, immoral, or suggesting that it goes against religious doctrine (Hillier and Harrison 2004). Furthermore, boys who support gay students and/or gay rights have traditionally been homosexualised and ostracised within the school community for their association with homosexuality (Anderson 2000). This means that any challenge to the homophobic, heteromale norm carries with it a substantial risk to one's peer status. Accordingly, many students distance themselves from any individual, behavior, or statement that is socially coded as gay (Plummer 1999).

Finally, boys must also *disengage from homosocial tactility* because this is also homosexualising in homohysterical settings (Kehler 2007). Accordingly, high levels of homophobia mean that boys are "prohibited from holding hands, softly hugging, caressing, or kissing" (Anderson 2009: 8). With the exception of certain team sports, physical touch is normally limited to fighting and acts of aggression (Ferguson 2000). This means that when heterosexual boys 'inappropriately' touch one another, they normally find it necessary to publicly defend their heterosexuality through homophobia and/or other heterosexualising behaviours (Kehily 2002; Plummer 1999). Accordingly, homophobia impacts negatively on both the attitudes and behaviours of heterosexual boys, meaning that it is important to examine the continued significance of homophobia in school settings.

## **Methods**

### *Participants and Setting*

Data for this research comes from the ethnographic study of two secondary school sixth forms (one called 'Standard College' and the other 'Fallback College'), and one sixth form college (called 'Religious College') in the south of England. The sixth forms are located approximately 2 miles from each other in Standard town, which is situated seven miles from a major English city. There are no other institutions nearby, so there is no selection bias with these research sites. Data collection occurred between March 2008 and July 2009.

The participants are the 16-18 year old boys in each sixth form. Most of these boys self-identify as heterosexual, although there are also some openly gay and bisexual students, and one openly (female-to-male) transsexual student. Data was collected with as diverse a set of students as possible. This was facilitated by undertaking initial observations of a broad range of lessons (including but not limited to Art, Music, PE, Maths and English), enabling me to socialise with a broad range of students. I also came into contact with students in their social areas, as well as attending various clubs and group meetings. Although I undertook measures to ensure that a diverse sample of students are accounted for, it is possible that a selection bias occurred as homophobic students may have distanced themselves from me.

Standard College maintains demographic similarity to the population of the UK; its students reflect the race and class profile of the country as a whole. Students come from working to upper-middle class families. Ninety percent of the students are White British, and the remaining ten percent comprise a variety of other racial and

ethnic groups. There are approximately 200 students aged 16-18 in the sixth form, almost all of whom attended Standard School before reaching its sixth form.

Fallback College is situated 1.5 miles from Standard College. Although affiliated with Fallback School, few students stay on to the sixth form. This is attributable to the fact that Fallback College functions primarily to provide educational opportunities to troubled students who have previously struggled academically and/or behaviourally. With just 18 male students in total, its focus is on giving students the opportunity to achieve a range of key skills that will equip them with entry-level qualifications required for the workplace. All students are white and working class. However, because of their troubled social and educational lives, these students are not representative of working class youth more generally.

Religious College is the largest of the sixth forms with approximately 1,000 students, aged 16-18. Students come from Standard town, the nearby major city and the surrounding area. Accordingly, there is a broad range of students, with a spectrum of class and racial groups. Religious College is not affiliated with any school and students are granted more social freedoms than students at the other sites. For example, there is a smoking area for students, no uniform policy is prescribed, and students are allowed off-campus when not in lessons. However, Religious College is a religious sixth form, and it is therefore mandated to uphold socially conservative views concerning gender and sexuality.

### *Procedures*

Participant observation and in-depth interviews provide two perspectives of the students' attitudes and behaviours (Brewer 2002). Multiple classes were observed in each location, and I socialised with the students across the school sites. However, the



most illuminating data was collected away from teacher supervision; in the common rooms, on college playing fields, and off-site during break times and lunch.

My ethnographic approach is influenced by Ferguson's (2000) research method. In her research on school settings, Ferguson actively situated herself in her participants' world, maintaining allegiance with the students and keeping distance from teachers and administrative staff. This minimised social distance with her participants, decreased researcher power and enabled Ferguson to collect data otherwise unobtainable in school settings. It is because of the richness and quality of her data that I employ this methodological approach.

Proponents of this style of ethnography maintain that decreased social distance between researcher and participants leads to richer data and increased validity (Anderson 2009; Kong, Mahoney and Plummer 2002). To facilitate this, I sought to minimise social markers of difference between myself and the participants, styling my hair and dressing as was fashionable in each setting. This was made easier by my age (24/25). I also adopted the male students' colloquialisms, and talked about the same music and television shows they enjoyed (eg. *Skins*). In order to gain students' trust, I participated in minor rule-breaking behaviours, such as playing sporting games in the common room.

I also deemed it necessary to be open about being gay. I discuss the effects of this later, but it is important to note that because I came out in the third week of data collection, I initially examined levels of homophobia when students did not know of my sexual orientation. Finally, to reduce the visibility of the research process, the taking of notes was left to immediate recall (Spradley 1970).

In-depth interviews complement participant observations by providing rich data about participants' attitudes (Brewer 2002). I conducted 12 semi-structured, in-

depth interviews at Standard College, 10 at Fallback College and 22 at Religious College, strategically selecting boys from a representative sample of sub-cultures within these settings. Each interview covered issues of friendship; bullying; attitudes toward homosexuality; perceptions of masculinity and popularity among peers; and understandings of homophobia and homosexually-themed discourse.

### *Researcher Effect and Reflexivity*

A body of methodological literature highlights the impact that a researcher can have on the research process (cf. Carspecken 1996; Gitlin 1994). Indeed, the inherently subjective nature of qualitative inquiry means that it is necessary to recognise the partial, provisional and situated aspects of this form of research. Much qualitative, feminist scholarship also highlights the inevitable impact of a researcher's sexuality (alongside other aspects of their identity) on the research process (cf. Anderson 2009; Weston 2004). It is impossible to negate this effect. This is because both discussion and silence concerning sexuality impact on the interactions between researcher and participants (Fine 1994). Accordingly, it is necessary to discuss the benefits and the disadvantages of the knowledge of ones sexuality. I begin with the benefits.

Kong, Mahoney and Plummer (2002) suggest that openness with sexuality elicits further disclosure from many participants. Anderson (2009) suggests that because there are so few openly gay teachers, being openly helps distance the researcher from authority. I believe this is the case with my research. Discussing my sexuality seemed to strengthen my rapport with key members of each sixth form—something Mac an Ghail (1994) suggests is methodologically significant.

However, it is also possible that knowledge of my sexuality influenced some students to avoid contact with me. It is also possible that it caused other students to

exaggerate their support of gay rights, or to temper their use of homophobic discourse. While it is impossible to know the extent of this, it must be pointed out that this is unique data in-and-of itself, as it indicates that homophobia is driven underground. This is notably different from a time when students were homosexualised for associating with gay people (Mac an Ghail 1994).

The impossibility of knowing the precise impact of these issues necessitates reflexive examination of my position as researcher (Davies 1999). Even with my attempts to minimise social distance from participants, the power differential will still have influenced the data collected (Carspecken 1996; Doucet and Mauthner 2008). Accordingly, following Mauthner and Doucet (2003), I explicitly examined my personal, emotional and theoretical influences that are implicated in any analysis of data. By allocating specific times and places to reflect on my data collection; maintaining a reflexive and critical position throughout the data analysis; and having other scholars cross-code parts of my data, the analysis presented here recognises and accounts for (as far as this is possible) the perspectives through which I view the social world. While the results are inevitably partial and incomplete, it is my hope that I am critically self-aware of this limitation.

### *Measures*

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded, using a constant-comparative method of emerging themes (Brewer 2002). As part of inter-rater validity, sections of interview transcripts were coded by another researcher. This researcher also visited each research site with the author to interrogate interpretations of participant observations (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995). Permission for interview was obtained from the Head Teacher, the student, and a guardian of each student interviewed at

each location. No student or guardian refused, and all names and institutional identities have been protected. Unless otherwise stated, the participant observations and excerpts of interviews presented here are representative of the data more generally.

## **Results: Declining Homophobia**

### *Intellectual Distance from Homosexuality*

Colin is a popular and sporty student at Standard College. When talking about gay rights, Colin states, “I believe in equality for gays. I mean you wouldn’t treat them any differently, would you?” Similarly, Jack’s support of gay rights is unequivocal: “Gay people should be equal in society. Anything else is wrong”. In fact, all the boys interviewed at Standard College openly support gay rights. Evidencing how normal these views are, Nick is unable to provide a reason for his pro-gay attitude. Confused, he asks, “Well, why wouldn’t you support gay rights?” Further evidencing the intellectual acceptance of homosexuality, I did not encounter any student arguing against the legitimacy of homosexuality at Standard College. This is true of both participant observations and interviews.

Pro-gay attitudes are also held by students at Religious College. Many of the boys relate this to their contact with openly gay students at the college. For example, Alex says, “Since coming here, I’ve met gay guys. They’re cool, and so is them being gay”. Similarly, Zak says, “One of my mates is gay, of course there’s nothing wrong with it”. However, there is less explicit mention of gay rights at Religious College, and more of a focus on acceptance of homosexuality. For example, Dean says, “I don’t see what’s wrong with homosexuality. I wouldn’t want to do anything gay, but then I’m straight”. What is notable for a religious college, however, is that the

argument that homosexuality is against religious doctrine maintains no support with the boys I talked to (cf. Hillier and Harrison 2004).

Highlighting the intellectual acceptance of homosexuality, students at both Standard College and Religious College argue that it is homophobia that is unacceptable; not homosexuality. At Standard College, Matt suggests that if someone was to express homophobia, he would be policed by his peers. “He wouldn’t keep at it for long”, he says. “It’s just childish”. Justin adds, “They wouldn’t get away with it. We’d tell them it’s not on”. Furthermore, when discussing my own homophobic school experience at participants request (cf. Nayak and Kehily 1996), Nick says, “...that’s just excessive. It’s like racism used to be”. Rhys agrees, saying, “That’s out of order, you wouldn’t find that here. It’s just not acceptable anymore”.

This notion that homophobia is stigmatised is also raised by participants at Religious College. For example, Dominic says, “I think it’s actually homophobia that’s bad now. If you were homophobic, you would be too embarrassed to say anything”. Craig, a charismatic and sporty student, says, “I heard homophobia back in school. But you come here, and meet gay guys, and you grow up”. Anthony agrees, “You just realise it’s stupid.”

The least progressive attitudes to homosexuality are found at Fallback College. However, even here, none of the students intellectualise homophobia. Tim says, “You’re born gay or straight. So we shouldn’t try and change people. I don’t have a problem with it”. When asked about gay people, Phil merely replies, “I’m not bothered, mate”. However, some students express only tolerance for homosexuality. For example, Chris comments, “It’s their choice. I don’t care what other people do if it doesn’t affect me.” Jamie shows slightly more ambivalence, saying, “I don’t want to know about it, but they can do what they want”. Nonetheless, these responses are

noteworthy because it has been suggested that boys with social and economic problems maintain high levels of homophobia (Froyum 2007).

It should also be noted that there are no openly gay students at Fallback College. This means that these students have not socialised with gay boys their own age, a factor that research suggests is beneficial to acquiring pro-gay attitudes (Smith, Axelton and Saucier 2009). This is also supported by data from Religious College. While it is quite possible that gay students opted to leave Religious School at 16, the small population size (of just 18 male students) means it is not statistically significant that there are no openly gay students in this cohort.

This intellectual acceptance of homosexuality is significant for two reasons. First, even though students may be overstating their advocacy of gay rights, this is still markedly different from a time when students were homosexualised unless they proclaimed explicitly homophobic attitudes (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002; Mac an Ghail 1994). Secondly, it appears that at both Religious and Standard College, homophobia rather than homosexuality is stigmatised. Although this may result in homophobic attitudes being forced underground (and while it is also inevitable that the statements of some participants will be deeply influenced by their perceptions of me as an openly gay researcher), this still serves as evidence that homophobia maintains less cultural sway with the majority of students at these institutions, compared to the existing literature (Ellis and High 2004).

#### *Social distance from gay students*

The veracity of male students' intellectual acceptance of homosexuality is supported by the social acceptance of openly gay students. Religious College has the most openly gay students. Here, an openly gay 16 year old, John, was recently elected

student president. Rather than his sexuality being a hindrance, John made his homosexuality a part of his campaign. His posters were framed with rainbow borders, and in his campaign speech, John includes an argument that his homosexuality helps him better understand issues of equality. John is applauded at the end of his speech. As he leaves the hall after the event, several sporty boys gather round, congratulating him. One comments, “Mate, you’re such a homo”, while another says, “You’re so gay. You’ve got my vote”. John laughs, saying “I’m gay for all of you”.

John’s election is particularly noteworthy because, whereas the literature suggests that openly gay students can only be popular if they embody orthodox notions of masculinity (Epstein 1997; Pascoe 2007), John exhibits flamboyant mannerisms, self-identifying as a queen. Other openly gay students report being happy at Religious College, too. Greg says, “I was a bit worried about the religious thing at first, but it’s good here”. Keith says, “Being gay just isn’t that much of an issue”.

The inclusivity at Religious College is also evidenced by the reception that Ross received when he came out as transsexual (female-to-male). First identifying as a lesbian, Ross later told friends that he was going to change his name and start using the male pronoun. He says, “I lost some friends when I said that. They just gradually started seeing me less and less. But I’ve made new friends too.” Ross maintains that he has not been bullied or harassed since coming out, a claim supported by my participant observations—I often saw Ross in the canteen and other social areas, and never observed him being bullied or marginalised. While those students who distanced themselves from Ross clearly maintained transphobia, the level of social inclusion of Ross is remarkable when compared to other literature on the topic (cf. Grossman and D’Augelli 2006).

At Standard College, there is only one openly gay student. Tom is quiet and hard working, and does not maintain high masculine or social capital. However, he is not marginalised in the school. Tom says, “I’ve got my friends, I like it here. The other guys are cool with it, too”. Sam, a sporty heterosexual student, says he is friendly with Tom. “Whenever I see him around, I say ‘hi’. He’s a nice guy”. When I ask Sam if Tom’s homosexuality makes him less popular, he says, “No. That’s irrelevant. He’s just a quiet guy. I think he’s here to work more than have fun”.

Even though there is little opportunity to socialise with gay students at Standard College, many boys embrace things that are socially coded as gay. For example, the camp song ‘Barbie Girl’ is regularly played in the common room. The song imagines life as a Barbie doll (“I’m a Barbie girl, in a Barbie world. Life in plastic, it’s fantastic”). One time, Rhys starts dancing to the song, one hand in the air, the other pulling his t-shirt up his torso. I ask him why the song is played so often, and he laughs, saying, “You could say it’s our school anthem”. Indeed, students are often seen dancing to the song, and it is played with almost monotonous frequency.

The students are aware that the song has gay associations. Sam says, “It’s brilliant. It’s pretty gay, too!” Jack says, “I guess we grew up with it, so it’s always been a song everyone likes”. When I comment that many boys think the song is gay, Jack smiles, saying, “Yeah, so what? Who cares if it’s gay?” While irony may be involved in claiming the song as a school anthem, it demonstrates that these boys do not fear being homosexualised by association with things that are socially coded gay.

### *Homophobic Discourse*

The frequent use of homophobic discourse in school settings is a well-established academic finding (cf. Pascoe 2007). Here, it serves as a mechanism for boys to



consolidate their own heterosexual identity (Nayak and Kehily 1996). However, there is no homophobic discourse at Standard College or Religious College, and it is only very occasionally used by just three students at Fallback College. Throughout my time at Religious College and Standard College, I never heard homophobic pejoratives used by students. The word 'gay' is never used in an aggressive manner to subordinate another person in these sixth forms, either. To see if participants were altering their behaviour in response to my presence, I spoke to canteen workers and other staff who spend time in student social areas but who maintain little authority over students. They all said that the absence of homophobia was the norm.

Supporting these observations, Tom, the openly gay student at Standard College, says that he does not hear any homophobic discourse. "People don't care that I'm gay. It's fine." Similarly at Religious College, Eddie and Greg, who are both openly gay, say they do not hear homophobic discourse. Eddie says, "It's fine, there really isn't any anti-gay stuff. Being gay isn't even an issue any more". Greg agrees, "It's just cool here". The openly gay student president, John, says, "There's so little homophobia here, and everyone's so open. I love it".

These views are further supported by how heterosexual boys discuss the openly gay students at Religious College. For example, while popular, Greg is disliked by some of his classmates. "You either love him or hate him", Lewis says, "And I don't love him". Craig describes Greg as, "really arrogant". What is notable, however, is that these students do not use Greg's homosexuality as a way of attacking him. In fact, homosexuality is never used as an insult or even mentioned negatively about gay students, even by people who dislike them.

The situation at Fallback College is more complicated. Although most students refrain from using homophobic discourse, Aiden, Jamie and Charlie (who

embody a traditional archetype of masculinity) occasionally use homophobic pejoratives. For example, when discussing whether he should get his hair cut, Aiden says, “But then I might look like a fucking poof”. This language is deeply troubling. It shows that homophobia maintains legitimacy with some students. Furthermore, while the other boys do not engage with such discourse, they are implicated in the reproduction of a framework of homosexual stigma because they do not contest it.

Most students maintain in interviews that they disapprove of homophobic discourse. Phil says, “It’s dumb when Aiden says things like that, but what can you do?” Similarly, Tim says, “I don’t like it, but I can hardly change his views”. This is one instance where knowledge of my sexuality may have altered the stated views of some participants (cf. Weston 2004). Nonetheless, the rarity of homophobic discourse (and its use by a minority of students) indicates a decrease in the power of homophobic discourse in this setting; at least compared to previous research (Rivers 2001; Thurlow 2001).

Supporting this assertion, there are times when students at Fallback College might be expected to engage in homophobic discourse, but do not. Students frequently discuss boys they dislike, some of whom transgress heteromale norms, but they do not use homophobic discourse. For example, Aiden, Jamie, and Dan are talking about Matt, a former student at Fallback College. Dan says, “Do you remember when we caught him dancing in that room?” Jeff laughs, adding, “Yeah, he had his hair gelled up, and was dancing to some musical—Grease, or something”. Aidan asks, “Wasn’t he wearing leather trousers too?” Even though I probed their reaction to this, no homophobic epithets were deployed. The infrequency with which homophobic discourse is publicly used at Fallback College supports the notion that homophobia maintains less significance in this setting.

### *Replacing Homophobic Discourse*

As homophobia diminishes in these sixth forms, the frequency of homophobic discourse is markedly decreased. However, homosexually-themed language is still often used across these settings. I call this use of language *gay discourse* (cf. Anderson and McCormack forthcoming), and it is distinct from homophobic discourse because there is no intent to subordinate an individual when used. However, this does not absolve this type of language from promoting a framework of homosexual stigma, and gay discourse can still be damaging when used to regulate behaviours (Anderson 2005).

The socio-negative form of this discourse occasionally occurs at Religious College. For example, a large number of students sit on the playing fields on a hot and sunny day. James and Gavin are lying next to each other, when James sprawls across Gavin. As the two remain in close physical contact, Sarah, who is sat with the group, comments, “You guys look so gay doing that”. As they continue to lie together, she asks more forcefully, “Don’t you even care?” At this, the boys move slightly apart, but none of the other students in the group pay any attention to her comments. Without having interviewed these boys, it is difficult to determine why they changed their behaviours. It may be that they did not want to be perceived as gay, or it might reflect the easiest way to silence Sarah. However, because they did not immediately police their behaviours, it is unlikely to reflect a homophobic culture.

Nonetheless, this use of gay discourse remains troubling because heterosexuality is privileged at the expense of homosexuality. Sarah clearly thinks the boys should care that they ‘look gay’. It is because this form of gay discourse

contributes to a framework of homosexual stigma that it needs to be challenged.

However, it is noteworthy that I only ever observed *girls* using gay discourse in this manner; never boys. Examining this sex divide is beyond the scope of this paper, but the important factor for this article is that boys do not use gay discourse to regulate other students' behaviours.

The most frequent use of gay discourse is when the word 'gay' is used as part of an expression of displeasure. This often takes the form of the phrase 'that's so gay' (cf. Rasmussen 2004), and it only occurs at Religious College. For example, when given a large piece of science homework to complete over the weekend, Jonathan exclaims, "That's so gay! When am I supposed to go out?" Similarly, when Chris realises he left his book at home, he mutters, "so gay". However, boys maintain that this phrase is not homophobic. Chris says, "I say it all the time. But I don't mean anything by it. I've got gay friends". Alex says, "It isn't meant homophobically. When I say 'that's so gay', I don't mean homosexual".

While some scholars label this usage homophobic, I support the argument that it does not necessarily reflect homophobic attitudes (cf. Anderson and McCormack forthcoming; Lalor and Rendle-Short 2007). As Rasmussen (2004: 304) comments, "It does not always have to be read as homophobic. It can also be ironic, self-referential, habitual, or even deployed without a "knowing" relation to gayness as a sexual signifier". However, even when such language is claimed not to be homophobic, the nature of power and its re/production means that the issue of whether there is an element of homophobia in the 'text' remains important. For example, in a culture that stigmatises homophobia, distancing oneself from homophobic language can be interpreted as a rhetorical move that defends oneself

from censure; homophobia is denied and made deniable, while heterosexuality is continued to be esteemed above other sexual orientations.

While there is clearly some truth to this, the diversity of gay discourse is testament to its contested and complex manifestations and meanings. For example, gay discourse takes a different form at Standard College. Here, heterosexual students sometimes ironically proclaim same-sex desire, consolidating their heterosexual identity in the process. This is something I call *ironic heterosexual recuperation* (McCormack and Anderson). For example, as Sam and Jack prepare to go to different lessons, they hug each other goodbye. Although both identify as heterosexual, Sam says, “Bye, lover, see you at break”. Jack responds, “See ya boyfriend”. Ironic pronouncements like this also occur in the common room. One day, Adi is giving Ryan a back massage. Ryan says, “That’s so good”. Adi smiles, saying, “I know how to please a man”. Ryan laughs, and says, “Go harder. Harder”. Even though these joking performances are made in public, they are not accompanied by any form of homophobic discourse. However, because this is a method of proclaiming heterosexuality, use of this language must be critiqued for the ways in which it privileges heterosexuality (cf. Anderson and McCormack forthcoming).

There is very little gay discourse of any form at Fallback College. It is only ever employed by Tim and Phil, who occasionally use ironic heterosexual recuperation. For example, they often call each other “babes” and “my lover”, particularly when planning social activities. These two maintain the closest friendship at Fallback College, and socialise together in their free time. The lack of gay discourse may be somewhat attributable to the limited presence of homophobic discourse in this setting. This would suggest that gay discourse is normally used by students who maintain positive attitudes about homosexuality.

Finally, gay discourse is used at Religious College in a way not previously documented. Here, gay and straight students use homosexually-themed language as a way of socially bonding. For example, John, the openly gay student president, is sitting with Antony and Justin in lesson. While Antony is doodling in his book, he looks up, and asks, “Is this really gay what I’m doing?” John and Justin start laughing, and John says, “Yeah, it’s pretty gay”.

Another time, Greg is playing catch with Tim, and some other heterosexual friends. As Tim throws the ball, it slips out of his hand, travelling only a few metres. Greg shouts, “Tim! You’re gayer than me!” While bonding these students, this example demonstrates that they are also cognizant of the heteromasculine norms that dominate homohysterical settings; it could be argued that it re-enforces these norms. However, the playful use of this discourse has removed the stigma that used to accompany such language. Of course matters are complicated, so although I remain critical of the use of gay discourse more generally (cf. Anderson and McCormack forthcoming), it appears that this use of language maintains some socio-positive effect in this instance. This is because it consolidates friendships between gay and straight students. However, not being gay is still an attribute that raises one’s capital.

### *Homosocial Tactility*

Research has traditionally shown that physical tactility between boys is limited, because its homosexualising potential relegates boys in masculine hierarchies (Nayak and Kehily 1996). However, many of the participants in this study are tactile with each other. For example, at Standard College, where students profess pro-gay attitudes and denounce homophobia, there is a great deal of physical closeness between boys. Demonstrating this, one afternoon, Adi is sitting with his legs resting

on Ryan's lap, while Ryan gently plays with Adi's shoes. Sam sits in Liam's lap nearby, talking with Baz. No reason is apparent for this touching, except to serve as a sign of affection. This occurs in a busy common room, and is not commented on by any student.

In another example, Jack is seated on the windowsill of the common room, his feet placed on the seat of a chair that is rested against the wall. Nick starts talking to Jack about their plans for the weekend, and he rests his hands on Jack's knees. Jack, who is wearing shorts, seems oblivious to this. As Nick leans forward to emphasise his point, he runs his hands up Jack's thighs and back down again. His actions are seen by many, but challenged by none. This is because this form of tactility is a normal part of male interaction at Standard College.

Physical tactility is also exhibited at Religious College. Here, boys tend to hug each other on special occasions, embracing for several seconds. This physical closeness is not accompanied by homophobic or gay discourse, either. For example, Zak and Anthony sit together in the sun, listening to music. Their arms occasionally touch as they talk. However, they do not engage in the prolonged tactility that is evident at Standard College. This is most likely because the majority of students at Standard College have known each other since they were 12 years old. At Religious College, however, students join aged 16. Friendship groups have not therefore had the chance to develop in the same way.

There is very little physical tactility at Fallback College. There are two reasons for this. The first is that, similar to Religious College, the students have only known each other for one year, and so most of the friendships are relatively new. Second, Fallback College is comprised of a small group of troubled male students, who ascribe to different archetypes of masculinity. For example, Aiden, Jamie and Charlie

embody a traditional archetype of masculinity, and are in the same classes as those students who proclaim pro-gay attitudes. These students, who occasionally pat each other on the back and sit closely together, are likely inhibited by the more orthodox views of their classmates. While the culture at Fallback College is not homohysterical, and these students do not harass their more inclusive classmates, the presence of orthodox students likely prevents more tactile behaviours from being expressed.

Further supporting a softening of boys' behaviours, there has been no physical fight at Religious College or Standard College for the whole of the academic year. At Fallback College, although fights are rare, Jamie and Charlie have been in a fistfight earlier in the year. Even so, these are the exceptions, and the aggression and dominance often associated with teenage boys is not present at any school (cf. Stoudt 2006).

## **Discussion**

Research on school cultures shows that boys' gendered behaviours are structured by a restrictive heteromale ethos that is heavily policed by homophobic discourse (Nayak and Kehily 1996; Plummer 1999). This research suggests that because homosexuality is stigmatised, boys distance themselves from anything coded as feminine or gay (Pollack 1998). Anderson (2009) describes such a cultural zeitgeist as 'homohysterical'. Homophobia is particularly salient for this research because it recognises levels of homophobia to be historically and spatially situated, making it possible to theorise the impact of different levels of homophobia on boys' gendered behaviours.

The significance of homophobia is decreased in all three settings. The social and intellectual inclusion of homosexuality by the participants shows that most of



these boys no longer fear being homosexualised. Perhaps the best evidence for the lack of homophobia is the near-total absence of homophobic discourse. At Standard College and Religious College, there is no anti-gay abuse whatsoever, while the rare use of homophobic pejoratives at Fallback College is met with disapproval by the other students. While the open discussion of my sexuality may have influenced some students to hide their own homophobia, it is notable that the frequency and style of homophobic discourse did not change with the disclosure of my sexuality (in the third week) at any of the three research sites.

It is difficult to locate the generative mechanisms for this inclusivity. There is, for example, no openly gay teacher in any of these sixth forms. No institutional pro-gay initiatives exist, either. Indeed, particular *differences* between research sites point to a cultural influence. For example, the anti-bullying and equal opportunities policies at Standard College and Religious College do not reference homosexuality, while those at Fallback College do. Similarly, despite its religious ethos, Religious College is the only site that has resources on homosexuality in its library and medical centre. These differences do not, however, correlate to the varying levels of homophobia at each research site. This suggests that cultural factors play some role in the decreased levels of homophobia found in this research. Of course, the nature of qualitative research means that these suggestions cannot be generalised to the wider culture.

Another explanation for these findings is that in addition to decreasing levels of cultural homophobia among youth in the UK (Anderson 2009; McNair 2002), Kehily and Pattman (2006) argue that sixth form students often present themselves as autonomous and mature young adults. This may mean that the pro-gay attitudes displayed here are a way of distancing themselves from a more homophobic, 'immature' past. Kehily and Pattman also argue that it is a way for students to

appropriate middle class norms. This would help explain why homophobia maintains least significance at Standard College. However, while these factors are likely to have some impact, much scholarship has also documented high levels of homophobia in sixth form settings (cf. Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford 2003). This requires us to be cautious about generalising findings of inclusivity from any one site.

This article uses Anderson's inclusive masculinity theory because it best describes the gendered behaviours of the boys in these settings. In this research, hegemonic masculinity theory does not accurately describe the variety of esteemed masculinities across the three sixth forms. Furthermore, the near-total absence of discursive marginalization and physical domination means that the social mechanisms that produce a hegemonic form of masculinity are not present (cf. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Documenting low levels of homophobia, this research extends the application of inclusive masculinity theory to three sixth forms in the south of England. My findings demonstrate that we need to recognise that levels of homophobia in school settings are temporally and spatially situated, and that male students are not uniformly homophobic.

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