One small step for man

Change and continuity in perceptions and enactments of homosocial intimacy among young Australian men

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Abstract

While recent scholarship has documented a growth of same-sex, non-sexual kissing among young men in western societies, this may reflect a weakening, rather than complete transformation, of hegemonic gender structures. Critically engaging with current theorising of 'inclusive masculinities', this paper reports the findings from a study of young Australian men's views on what constitutes acceptable forms of homosocial intimacy and how they attach meaning to these behaviours. Using qualitative data from focus groups with 22 men from five different subcultural peer groups and eight follow-up individual interviews, we illustrate that exaggerated intimate behaviours are not considered authentic displays of affection, and therefore do not meaningfully challenge gendered power structures. Rather, they have been adopted into the repertoire of ways men can perform masculinity. However, this hybridity is neither a means of reconfiguring male power, nor evidence of entirely inclusive masculinities, but instead constitutes an initial step *toward* inclusivity.

Introduction

Social commentator Clementine Ford (2017) recently called the lack of platonic touch between Australian men 'a tragedy of modern manhood'. Indeed, the social expectation that men must maintain physical and emotional distance from one another is well documented in academic research (see Kimmel 1994; Connell 1995; Ibson 2002; Pascoe 2007), as are the consequences this isolation can have for mental, physical and emotional wellbeing (Greene 2013). However, researchers have recently observed a significant transformation in men's engagement in non-sexual same-sex touch – formally referred to as 'homosocial intimacy' (Anderson, Adams & Rivers 2012; McCormack 2011; Drummond et al. 2015; Scoats 2015; Robinson, Anderson & White 2017). This phenomenon sits at odds with dominant theories in the field of men and

masculinities that emphasise the centrality of homophobia to previously established constructions of western masculinity (Kimmel 1994; Connell 1995).

While some scholars view men's increased engagement in homosocial intimacy as a re-appropriation of homosexualised behaviours as a means of maintaining patriarchy and/or hegemonic dominance (Demetriou 2001; Bridges & Pascoe 2014), Anderson (2009), theorises a disintegration of the masculine hierarchy and a proliferation of more inclusive forms of masculinity. Contributing to debates in this field, here we report findings from a study of young Australian men's views on what constitutes acceptable forms of affection between male friends and how they attach meaning to these behaviours. While quantitative evidence suggests numerical growth of same-sex kissing among heterosexual Australian men (Drummond et al. 2015), these figures remain lower than documented elsewhere and, importantly, until now an in-depth, qualitative understanding of this phenomenon in the Australian context remains absent.

Drawing from focus groups and follow up individual interviews with 22 young men from five different peer groups, we illustrate that current theoretical frameworks do not capture the complex and nuanced ways young Australian men understand and engage in physical intimacy. Our participants openly engage in the same-sex behaviours documented by IMT theorists, though not as means of reproducing patriarchy, or as authentic attempts to communicate platonic love. Rather, it appears these behaviours – though underpinned by genuine affection - have been integrated into, and are only acceptable if determined to be a part of, the repertoire of ways men can enact masculine banter, risk-taking and heterosexual achievement.

We first provide a critical summary of the theories of Inclusive Masculinity (IMT) (Anderson 2009), Hegemonic Masculinity (HMT) (Connell 1995) and the concept of 'hybrid masculinities' (Demetriou 2001; Bridges & Pascoe 2014), and then outline the study methods. The findings sections follow, before a closing discussion that teases out the complexity in the data. Drawing on the work of Duncanson (2015), we conclude that our participants' attitudes to and enactment of homosociality evidences a necessary, though not sufficient, step towards more inclusive and emotive masculinities.

Hegemony, hybridity and change – reconfiguring male power

Connell's (1987; 1995) HMT has been pivotal in ensuring that masculinities are conceptualised as multiple, relational and hierarchical, and has supported the view that homosociality and homophobia are central to constructing masculinities (see also Kimmel 1994). Broadly, HMT posits that, in a particular culture, a multiplicity of masculinities can exist, with one representing 'the currently most honoured way of being a man', and generating hegemonic dominance externally over women, and internally over other forms of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, p.832). Donaldson (1993) suggests this idealised form of masculinity is competitive, aggressive, stoic, courageous, rational and tough. In her seminal papers, however, Connell (1987, p.185) does not identify a fixed set of characteristics to define the hegemonic archetype, instead focussing on 'not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support'. Connell (1995) conceptualises those who do not enact the hegemonic archetype, but benefit from patriarchal dominance, as embodying 'complicit' masculinities; and men who are unable to conform to it as embodying 'marginalised' (e.g. non-white or disabled) and 'subordinated' (e.g. gay) masculinities.

After these findings gained traction in the 1990s, men's enactment of masculinity began to shift considerably amid broader social, political and technological changes in the West (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman 2004). In her original theorisation, Connell (1995) accounts for change by arguing that 'protest masculinities' can challenge and replace the hegemonic form, or that civil society will promote a new form of masculinity in order to reproduce patriarchy amid these changing conditions (Demetriou 2001). Although a 'more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic', Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p.833) view the hegemony of any given archetype as an attempt to 'stabilise patriarchal power or reconstitute it in new conditions'. Accordingly, change is always a strategic attempt to reproduce male power. While sharing this view, proponents of *hybrid masculinities* critique Connell's dualistic approach, arguing instead that masculinities adopt and appropriate new traits to maintain power amid shifting conditions.

Within Connell's framework, non-hegemonic masculinities are subordinated in their entirety and the 'dialectical pragmatism' of internal hegemony, whereby hegemonic masculinities appropriate elements of subordinated masculinities in order to sustain their patriarchal dominance, is overlooked (Demetriou 2001). Alternatively,

Demetriou (2001) conceptualises hegemonic masculinity as a unified hybrid bloc that incorporates, rather than negates, diverse and oppositional elements to reconfigure itself and adapt to contemporary conditions. Similarly, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) theorise hybrid masculinities as ‘gender projects that incorporate bits and pieces of marginalised and subordinated masculinities and, at times, femininities’ (Bridges 2014, p.60). A central issue within this literature is the extent to which hybridisation challenges or perpetuates systems of inequality. On the latter, Bridges and Pascoe (2014, p.247) argue that hybrid masculinities:

> …reproduce contemporary systems of gendered, raced, and sexual inequalities, but also obscure this process as it is happening… to the advantage of men collectively over women, and some men over other men.

Privileged groups adopt hybrid identities to ‘reframe themselves as symbolically part of the socially subordinated groups’, in ways that not only conceal but further entrench their privileged position (Bridges & Pascoe 2014, p.252). This results in stylistic, but not substantive shifts in masculinity (Messner 1993). For example, the rise of more present and emotional fathering styles has been found to support notions of gender inequality, as men may appear progressive and be recognised for changing their parenting *style*, without explicitly challenging or reducing the disproportionate child-rearing responsibilities placed on women (Messner 1993; Stein 2005; cf Roberts 2017 whose data challenges this specific point). However, Anderson (2009) views the shift in men’s actions, opinions and appearances as evidence of inclusive masculinities.

Inclusive masculinity and a disintegrating masculine hierarchy

Anderson (2009) entered the field of critical men’s studies as a proponent of HMT, and acknowledges its relevance in periods of high cultural homophobia. However, in his studies of university-attending men in a fraternity (2008a), a rugby team (2008b) and soccer teams (2005), Anderson observed the emergence of more inclusive forms of masculinity alongside a distinct lack of hierarchical power struggles and a significant reduction in cultural homophobia. The link between these three phenomena forms the basis of Anderson’s IMT. To properly articulate this theory, Anderson advances the concept ‘homohysteria’, referring to men’s fear of being *perceived* as gay, rather than a fear of homosexuality per se. A society may become homohysteric when it transitions

from viewing homosexuality as deviant or a mental disorder, to acknowledging it as a legitimate sexuality that exists in great numbers, does not carry any distinguishable physical traits, and cannot be negated by religious affiliation (Anderson 2009). In such conditions any man could plausibly be gay, while it is simultaneously impossible for men to permanently prove otherwise (Anderson 2009). This triggers a 'witch-hunt' to expose homosexuals (Anderson 2009), with men forced to 'prove and reprove their heteromasculinity through acquiescence to orthodox expectations and behaviours that are coded as heterosexual', including an avoidance of same-sex touch (McCormack 2012). However, IMT posits that, as cultural homohysteria decreases, 'a hegemonic form of conservative masculinity will lose its dominance, and softer masculinities will exist without the use of social stigma to police them' (Anderson 2009, p.96).

In this formulation, the masculine hierarchy disintegrates and multiple masculinities can exist without a power struggle, meaning that gay men will experience less stigmatisation, and men's social attitudes towards women will improve (Anderson 2009). Importantly, as homohysteria decreases, so too does the distance between heterosexual men, as they become more comfortable expressing platonic intimacy with one another (Anderson 2009). IMT, though, has been critiqued for romanticising the transformation of masculinity. Some researchers, such as de Boise (2015), argue that IMT oversimplifies and promotes unwarranted optimism about the transformation of masculinity. Meanwhile, O'Neill (2015) suggests that by supporting the postfeminist logic that gender equality is largely achieved, IMT scholars simultaneously account for and undo the work of feminism. In addition, Anderson is said to be selective in his use of examples when illustrating inclusive masculinities (de Boise 2015), largely theorising from studies of high school- and university-attending men in the UK and USA. However, while the literature on homosocial tactility outside of UK and the US is currently very limited, homosocial intimacy has become more common and more intense in a range of social contexts, and researchers have begun to examine how this behaviour fits with contemporary notions of western masculinity (Robinson et al. 2017).

Of particular note, a British study of heterosexual male students aged 16 to 25 by Anderson et al. (2012), and an Australian study of male undergraduate students by Drummond et al. (2015), found significant proportions of participants had engaged in various types of same-sex kissing. Similarly, McCormack's (2012, 2014) ethnographic study of homophobia in British high schools; Robinson et al.'s (2017) study of

bromance**;** Roberts and colleagues' (2017) study of elite football players; and Scoats' (2015) analysis of Facebook images, also reported increasing physical intimacy between young men from a variety of social backgrounds and in heterogeneous contexts. Each study identifies men's increasing acceptance of homosexuality and a resulting shift in the physical and emotional boundaries of heteromasculinity (Anderson 2009). However, while IMT theorists have conducted research with individuals from various age groups, social backgrounds and sexual minorities (Roberts 2017), the aforementioned data around homosocial tactility*, specifically,* between heterosexual men derives almost entirely from studies of British university- or high school-attending students. Indeed, there is to date no qualitative studies examining Australian men's understanding of and engagement in homosocial tactility.

Drummond et al.'s (2015) survey data shows that far fewer, though not insignificant numbers of, young men in Australia engage same-sex kissing than in the UK; however in-depth qualitative understandings remain absent. This absence is important, because finding that young Australian men are engaging in same-sex kissing does not necessarily indicate that they accept or would engage in deeper forms of physical or emotional intimacy, nor does it shed light on the meanings men attach to these behaviours. Hybrid masculinity scholars might, in this instance, argue that young Australian men are appropriating behaviours coded as 'gay' to appear progressive without having to challenge or sacrifice their gendered privilege (Bridges & Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001). Furthermore, attending university has been shown to increase the likelihood that individuals exhibit progressive attitudes, with several studies highlighting that as an individual's education increases, their propensity for homophobia decreases (Robinson 2008). It is somewhat unsurprising then, that Drummond and colleagues' study portrays a shift away from rigid, homophobic gender norms. What is currently unclear, is how Australian men make sense of their increasingly tactile homosocial behaviours and whether these behaviours reflect a broader transformation similar to that which has been documented by IMT theorists in the UK.

The middle ground

Scholars currently occupy seemingly polarised positions when theorising the transformation of masculinity. Proponents of HMT and hybrid masculinity view

changes to the hegemonic form as strategic attempts to reconfigure male power and maintain patriarchy. On the other hand, IMT scholars often argue that changes in men's behaviour evidence the disintegration of gendered hierarchies and proliferation of more inclusive forms of masculinity. However, de Boise and Hearn (2017, p.791) caution against the assumption that displays of emotion or intimacy are de facto antithetical to or progressive for men's behaviour. Indeed, there exist traces of some middle ground theoretical positioning.

McCormack (2014) extended IMT by arguing that a group of working-class British boys exhibited multiple phases of inclusivity. Inclusive attitudes were 'numerically dominant' among the group, however two of the boys lacked the social and cultural capital necessary to engage in homosocial tactility and emotional expression. Despite the fact that they did not actively police their friends' increased intimacy, the presence of the less-inclusive boys led the rest of the group to regulate their own intimate behaviours. In this way, McCormack highlights the complex ways class can impact men's ability to engage with shifting masculinities.

Outside of IMT, Duncanson's (2015, p.241) research on military peace-keepers contends that the 'softening of hegemonic masculinities… is not always inevitably a superficial change, masking the retention of power'. Rather, transitioning away from hegemonic structures requires an initial phase where the previously disparaged traits these men possess are newly valued and incorporated into 'softer' masculinities (Duncanson 2015, p.241; cf McCormack 2014). Conceiving genuine equality within hegemonic structures, says Duncanson (2015), necessitates this initial phase of changed behaviour, even if it does not at first entirely eliminate feminisation and other forms of subordination. In this way, Duncanson's work speaks to Howson's (2006) proposition that the journey towards more socio-positive hegemony is far from a single step process. Applying any of these positions to contemporary homosocial intimacy in Australia is, however, an empirical matter. Therefore, our research seeks a deeper, more foundational understanding of what constitutes 'appropriate' forms of homosocial intimacy to young Australian men from various backgrounds, and meaning is attached to these behaviours.

Method

Procedures

Data was gathered from five focus groups with 22 young Australian men from a range of social backgrounds (*n* = 3, 4, 4, 6, 5), and eight follow-up one-to-one interviews. Averaging around two hours in length, each focus group was conducted with an established friendship group, which permitted access to the social networks that provide scripting for homosocial behaviours (Kitzinger 1994), and allowed participants to feel more relaxed when articulating their views (Bloor et al. 2001). Furthermore, the all-male setting provided 'an opportunity to study masculinities in the making' (Allen 2005, p.37), as young men are said to carefully manage the opinions they reveal, to maintain ascendancy over subordinated masculinities (Holland, et al. 1993). The young female researcher facilitating the group discussions limited her input to introducing activities, prompting discussion and elaboration, reiterating sentiment and monitoring equal air-time, to mitigate the effect her presence may have on the masculine posturing of participants (Allen 2005).

Discussions were driven by two visual elicitation activities. First, participants observed footage of a male rugby team's drunken night out ('Sandbach Rugby Team Part 2' 2007) and were asked to individually write down words occurring to them and collectively categorise these as they saw fit. Second, participants sorted 18 images of men engaging in intimate behaviours into piles of 'okay', 'it depends' and 'not okay'. Participants were encouraged to discuss these categorisations from both a subjective and objective perspective; whether it was a behaviour they would engage in, or if they considered it an 'okay' behaviour for other heterosexual men. These techniques produced multilayered data around acceptable forms of intimacy, as well as the 'taken-for-granted' processes through which each group ascribe meaning to these behaviours to arrive at a consensus (Bryman 2016).

Eight individual follow-up phone interviews were conducted with participants from each focus group. Interviews were treated as post-focus-group debriefs, broadly addressing their reflections on the group discussion, what they agreed or disagreed with and the extent to which they felt comfortable expressing their opinions in the group. While not seeking generalizability, this follow up was intended to provide a deeper appreciation of the participants' individual perspectives (as both a comparison to and elaboration of the focus group data), and uncover how they interpret and relate to the group perspective, and to better enhance data validity.

Participants

A recruitment call was posted on Facebook, augmented with 'snowballing' techniques, with the researchers using Facebook Messenger group conversations to share the explanatory statement and consent form, and organise the logistics of the focus group. Participants were aged between 18 and 25, and self-identified as heterosexual. These young men came from a variety of geographies across Australia and had starkly different interests. Although some participants are or have been university students, we did not sample through this channel, and only one group met through tertiary studies. Participants in FG1 met at high school in the West Gippsland region of Victoria, and have maintained a close friendship since graduating. This is similar for the men in FG2, who went to a Catholic all-boys school together. Most men in FG3 and FG4 met through mutual friends after high school. FG3 live in suburban outer-Melbourne and spend much of their time together playing video games and smoking marijuana, while FG4 live in Brisbane and volunteer together for a Christian youth organisation. Lastly, FG5 met through their Biomedical Science Degree at a university in Melbourne (though three have longer term friendships) and spend most of their time together studying or 'getting drunk'. We use pseudonym identifiers – the first letter of participants' first names and the number of the focus group they were in – to aid illumination of differences and similarities within and across groups.

Analysis

We employed open and axial data coding techniques. During initial coding, data was split into broad categories, and then more specific analytic codes according to any theoretically significant implicit or explicit similarities, differences, patterns or structures (Seale et al. 2004). We then examined how these codes combined and intersected to form over-arching themes, and whether the expression of these themes differed across groups (Guest et al. 2012). Through this iterative analytic process, we drew meaningful connections between participants' perspectives, their collective meaning-making processes, and the theoretical frameworks under examination.

HMT, IMT and hybrid masculinities were used as lenses through which we made sense of the data, taking a best-fit approach. Supplementing this, we drew on Ravn's (2017, p.4) work on men's understandings of legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence, because 'investigating symbolic boundary work means looking at the categorizations that are negotiated and the symbolic meanings and values attached to

these categories as part of this'. This definition fits squarely with our intention to understand which homosocial acts are positioned as legitimate and illegitimate, and how efforts to construct these symbolic boundaries speak to the various theories of masculinity outlined above.

Findings

Attitudes to intimacy

Congruent with other research, our data suggests that young Australian men engage openly in physical intimacy. Across all groups, participants viewed handshaking, hugging and placing an arm around a friend's shoulder to be acceptable in almost all contexts. When presented with images of men conventionally enacting such behaviours, participants categorised them as 'okay' without discussion. One participant described them as normalised aspects of greeting his male friends: "whenever I say hi to [best friend] he'll give me a hug and say g'day, and if he's dropping me home he'll shake my hand" (G4). Similarly, when FG3 met up for the focus group, "it was hugs for everyone" (D3). Given homosocial touch is traditionally considered off-limits in homohysteric societies (Anderson 2009), this represents a significant shift towards more physically intimate friendships. However, hugs are not exempt from homohysteric scrutiny.

Participants were critical of hugs that appeared too tender and established symbolic boundaries against the men who engaged in them, largely through homosexualisation. An image of one man draped over another's back was referred to as "chin sex" (Z2) and, when held too long, was deemed as "a bit weird" (S5) and approaching "the feelings stage" (J2). Though light-hearted and not overtly homophobic, this boundary work establishes that there are *acceptable*, and by extension unacceptable, forms of platonic hugging. Interestingly, minutes earlier participants had viewed footage of men stripping, kissing and grabbing each other's genitalia and, despite conceding the behaviour was extreme, said "they're obviously not gay" (TH2). Indeed, most participants had either engaged in or witnessed some form of non-sexual same-sex kissing, nudity or genital horseplay.[1] This suggests the acceptability of intimate behaviours does not depend on its extremity, nor did the participants refer to a

[1] A term coined by the first author to encapsulate all non-sexual homosocial genital touch, e.g. putting one's testicles on another man's face, genital flicking, stroking or grabbing or "sack-whacking".

widely accepted, unsurpassable *line*. Instead, to articulate the boundaries of acceptable intimacy, the participants referred to intent, context, body language and closeness.

Contrary to the view that homosocial kissing, cuddling and caressing are employed as a means of communicating genuine platonic love (e.g. Anderson, Adams & Rivers 2012; Anderson & McCormack 2015), our participants described gestures beyond hugging as acceptable only if the intent is *anything but* authentic affection. While these behaviours require a certain level of trust and closeness, and may be underpinned by "genuine and sincere" affection (B3), the participants did not consider them "standard" (D5) ways to physically express closeness. Highlighting this, one participant said:

> H4: …as soon as it's kissing on lips it would be a joke with the boys, it couldn't be a display of affection… it wouldn't be like 'dude I love you, I'm gonna kiss you on the lips'.

When discussing one stimulus image, another participant said, "they're kissing on the lips, you would question that they're gay" (S5), and his friend added, "[it] probably comes down to whether you're celebrating or what state you're in" (C5). Even the group describing themselves as "pretty open with kissing" (S3) attributed this to methylenedioxy-methamphetamine (MDMA) use, along with the desire to attract women's attention or get a reaction. One participant said, "me and D3 have been hooking up since we realised that hooking up would get us girls", and later added, "it's a show of comfortableness with your boys and the reactions you get are great, they're so good!" (S3). Indeed, images of men kissing or holding hands were only placed in the 'okay' or 'it depends' pile if participants identified sufficient evidence that the act was a joke, dare, celebratory gesture, gesture of support, result of intoxication or attempt to attract women's attention.

Without prompt, participants examined context and body language to ascertain the intent of men in the elicitation materials. For example, the sport context signified exaggerated camaraderie and overpowering euphoria:

> J2: …you know that this kiss isn't gonna be like a long lasting, sort of, tongue-in-mouth kiss, it's a two second peck on the mouth because he just scored a goal!

Similarly, the party context signified alcohol- or drug-fuelled shenanigans. In both cases, intent surrounding homosocial intimacy was explained as something other than authentic. It is this crucial point that distinguishes our data from that of, for example, Anderson et al. (2012, p.444), who found that intoxication facilitates 'same-sex kissing as a sign of bonding', as alcohol- and drug-related discourses were largely employed to disassociate kissing from authentic connection. Similarly, though the use of same-sex intimacy as banter coexists with our participants pro-gay attitudes, it was not, as McCormack (2012) found, an attempt at ironic heterosexual recuperation, used to foster bonding between gay and straight peers. Rather homosexuality is still deployed as a crux for humour predicated on sexual othering, a point that should not be overlooked. Furthermore, though friendship closeness was an important element of the men's ability to engage in these behaviours, this too was complex, and does not quite align with the findings of IMT scholars.

In line with IMT, behaviours like hugging were described as emotional connection that "translates into a physical thing" (G4). However, for gestures beyond hugging, participants framed closeness as being comfortable with, and open about, each other's sexualities. Interestingly, the men's sexuality may not matter, as long as there exists a mutual understanding that an intimate gesture is not a sexual or romantic pass:

> H4: If I was gay… would you feel differently about putting your balls in my face?
>
> J4: …if it's actually you, I know that you're not going to make a move for me so I probably would.
>
> H4: So in order for you to do that it has to be your close friends.
>
> G4: Which is kind of on the topic of that, we're all comfortable with each other's sexualities so it's okay.

This suggests that homohysteric anxieties can be mediated through friendship closeness, insofar as this closeness signifies a mutual understanding that exaggerated intimacy is not motivated by, and will not be reciprocated with, sexual or romantic desire. This again highlights the centrality of intent to men's boundary work around homosocial intimacy, and distinguishes it from the authentic gestures of intimacy documented by IMT theorists in the UK.

Regardless of the variable in question – context, body language or closeness – what mattered was that the intent behind an intimate gesture was not solely to express platonic affection. This is likely because intimate gestures beyond hugging, when carried out authentically, were seen as reserved for the people "who you are attracted to and you love" (S5) – irrespective of whether one is straight or gay. Consequently, participants actively established and policed the boundaries of homosocial intimacy according to what is okay, and 'what is gay' (Lamont & Molnár 2002; Anderson 2009). This is not to say they were explicitly anti-gay but that, as heterosexual men, they felt romantic gestures were deemed not permissible.

Persistent homohysteria and complicity

Despite engaging more openly in physical intimacy, our participants diverge from dominant understandings of this phenomenon, as their attitudes toward intimacy were both implicitly and explicitly governed by homohysteric sentiment, however diminished that might be in the broader Australian context. Every group outwardly rejected homophobia and the fear of being perceived as gay, but they policed intimate behaviours according to a boundary between platonic and romantic, or, more specifically, between heterosexual and homosexual – a strategy central to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity (Duncanson 2015). Some behaviours were overtly homosexualised. For example, S5 said, "I wouldn't let a male friend [hold my finger as we walk], because people would think we're gay", and J2 said, "even if they were hetero I'd be like, 'are you sure?'" However, this dynamic was equally present on a subconscious level. Explaining why he doesn't enjoy kissing other men, one participant referred to himself as a "zero on the Kinsey scale" (R3), while another said, "I'm not sure I'll ever kiss a guy again, that did negative stuff for me" (B3). In both cases, the participants implied that kissing is undertaken for romantic or sexual reasons, and does not hold inherent value as a platonic gesture. Similarly, when H4 described a European family member kissing him on the cheek, he inadvertently aligned the behaviour with a romantic pass:

> H4: I'm like 'okay that's just his culture so it's fine', but it still makes me feel like 'ooh'. I know he's not interested in me…but it still brings about the same feelings, internally.

This sentiment was pervasive across interviews and focus groups. In some cases, the boundary was not gendered:

B3: Handholding suggests more emotional intimacy than purely just physical intimacy.

R3: That's why it feels weird for me to hold a guy's hand, or even a girl that I barely knew, if I didn't have any feelings for her. I don't have feelings like that, sexual feelings for men, so…

This suggests that social boundaries – rather than gendered boundaries, per se – govern men's engagement in certain behaviours (Lamont & Molnár 2002). However, beyond handholding, participants acknowledged the gendered nature of their intimate behaviour:

T1: …you could hug or kiss on the cheek or whatever with female friends and it's not seen as weird until you get to a point where people might assume you're in a relationship. But at the same time, that point is set a lot further than the one for male intimacy.

Similarly, participants in FG5 resented that "it's weird if two guys kiss as mates but it's not if two girls kiss as mates" (D5). However, they too homosexualised men whose behaviour went "too far" (S5), which illustrates that increasing homosocial intimacy can exist alongside homohysteria.

The fact that young men are more physically intimate may not, in itself, evidence a decline in homohysteria and spread of inclusive masculinities. Even participants who described enacting more inclusive and emotive masculinities avoid intimate behaviours that would call into question their heterosexuality (Kimmel 1994), and police the behaviours of other men according to what is "okay", and what is "gay" (Anderson 2009). Young men still engage in heterosexual recuperation (McCormack 2012) as a form of symbolic boundary work, as evidenced by one participant who said:

T1: Whenever you have any kind of intimacy or affection between male friends, a lot of groups of people feel the need to specify that this is just a platonic thing… there's no feelings of homosexual relation here.

In a more extreme example, R3 pointed out that blatant homophobia can coexist with homoerotic banter among some "hyper-masculine" men who are like "footy, yep, no

gay stuff" but "kiss when they get drunk". Similarly, J2 observed that the intimate behaviour in the stimulus video is highly contextual:

> J2: There's this sort of false sense of security in their sexuality that's evolved in that context, which is kind of transient, and when they're with other people – you know, not getting pissed in a pub – that kind of behaviour is so completely unacceptable and gay.

This *false sense of security in their sexuality* likely reflects a broader, yet equally transient, respite from homohysteria that occurs in these contexts. That is, men do not become more secure in their sexuality, there is simply less risk that it will be called into question because tactility has been integrated into the repertoire of ways men can enact masculine banter, risk-taking or heterosexual achievement. So, although homosocial intimacy appears to increase as homohysteria decreases (Anderson 2009), in this case it reflects a highly situational decline in homohysteric anxieties, rather than declining cultural homohysteria. Alongside the persistence of homohysteria, discursive remnants of complicit masculinity in the men's talk around intimacy emerged.

Throughout the research, participants distanced themselves from "lad culture" – arguably the hegemonic archetype in this social context – without necessarily challenging or questioning the persistence of gendered power structures from which they benefit (Connell 1995). In an inversion of a process Pascoe (2007, p.14) calls 'repudiating the abject', these men established the orthodox masculine identity as a 'constitutive outsider' (cf. Pascoe on the spectre of the 'fag'), and continually 'iterated and repudiated' it in order to 'affirm their identities as normal and as culturally intelligible' (see also Butler 1993). Part of this repudiation was the establishment of symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár 2002; Ravn 2017), through which the participants explicated and emphasised differences between themselves and the "lads", or "macho" men, to establish their collective identity. They did so explicitly through statements like "we wouldn't identify as a particularly hyper-masculine group, so we're not footy boys and all that stuff" (B3) and by associating hyper-masculinity with being "a fucking dickhead" (S5). This process also entailed more implicit distancing strategies like the rejection of "surface level" (H4) male friendships and the inauthentic physical intimacy that characterise them. In doing so, participants established and substantiated their own, more inclusive form of masculinity that neither breaks down

nor directly challenges the masculine hierarchy, but exists laterally in relation to the hegemonic archetype.

Despite distancing themselves from orthodox masculinity, participants did not directly challenge the power structures underpinning the hegemony of "lad culture" (Connell 1995) – and may therefore be viewed as complicit in perpetuating unequal gender relations. This was evident in their general attitude towards "lad culture", as well as in the specific use of certain discursive devices. For example, participants framed their position in relation to the hegemonic archetype as not being "cool enough", "macho" or "into sports", but did not question the cultural exaltation of these characteristics (Connell 1995). In addition, the phrase "lads" was framed as both a positive and negative label. For example, when describing a stimulus image of three men roughly embracing for a photograph, Z2 noted it was just "normal lads having a good time". This indicates that the symbolic boundaries that participants constructed are discursively permeable.

Furthermore, FG4 drew on and highly essentialist notion that "boys will be boys" on several occasions, to make sense of the rugby players' extreme behaviour. Through an HMT lens, the lateral relationship between their collective masculine identity and the hegemonic form could be defined as complicity (Connell 1995), as these discursive devices could indicate that the men do not reject or even fully acknowledge prevalent gendered power structures. However, at no point did they express admiration of the qualities of the hegemonic masculine archetype (Connell 1995). Indeed, the subject matter did not specifically require them to engage in such critical reflections. The participants were simply working with the cultural discourses available to them, to make sense of and articulate their masculine identity (Coupland & Jaworski 2009). Certainly, a holistic perspective of the data suggests the participants' attitudes toward, and enactment of, homosocial intimacy *are not efforts to reproduce patriarchy*. Rather, the extent to which the participants embraced open communication and emotional intimacy signals a positive, but not yet sufficient, step toward inclusivity.

Signs of change

Contrary to Allen's (2005, p.42) view that serious group discussions are 'at odds with the usual expression of masculinity', the participants were willing and often eager to engage with one another in the focus groups. J2 attributed this to the stimuli-focussed

format; by allowing them to speak objectively at first, and then ease into more personal story-telling, discussions were less "awkward" than he anticipated. More broadly, it might reflect a shift occurring in this generation of young Australian men because, when given the opportunity, the participants did not hesitate to communicate openly.

Although unaccustomed to such discussions, FG1, FG2 and FG5 engaged with one another openly, and expressed positive feedback in the follow up interviews. T1 said, "the group discussion opened different avenues of conversation that I definitely wouldn't have had with my friends, had we not been involved in the study", and later added, "I knew both participants well, and so I was comfortable sharing my thoughts and opinions with them". Similarly, T2 said it was a "pretty good chat, pretty open, pretty constructive as well because being guys, we don't tend to chat about that stuff regularly". Both positioned such discussions as non-standard for young men, and for this precise reason T2 believes they are "constructive". Not only were these groups willing to engage in the discussions, they reflected on the benefits of this open communication (Anderson 2009) and critically considered the gendered norms that might impede it (Kimmel 1994).

Furthermore, FG3 and FG4 described open communication and emotional intimacy as the norm. Contrary to traditional expectations that men maintain emotional distance from each other (Kimmel 1994; Connell 1995; Anderson 2009), FG3 emphasised the ease with which they discuss their emotions, mental health, sexualities and sex lives, and articulate their love for one another: "R3 will message me occasionally saying 'I love you man'…out of the blue" (B3). In their adolescent years, this group caveated such declarations with the phrase "no-homo", which "although it is homophobic, means like 'oh I love you, as a friend'" (R3), but that homohysteric distinction is no longer necessary (McCormack 2011; Anderson 2009). To FG3, the focus group was simply a more formal opportunity to engage in open communication:

> S3: We love talking about our feelings, it's one of our favourite pastimes. And M3 was always saying he wanted to talk about our feelings without the drugs!
>
> M3: Yes! We sat in a circle and we talked about our feelings!

As implied, these participants attribute their openness, in part, to the use of ecstasy, which brings about "incredibly euphoric vibes" and is where "the culture of [physical

intimacy] kind of started" (M3). Though sharing similar attitudes toward emotional intimacy, and outwardly contesting the notion that men should be stoic, FG4 attributed their views to their faith (Kimmel 1994; Anderson, Adams & Rivers 2012):

H4: …we don't hide our emotions and our entire faith is based around love… I have so much love, I have no issue sharing it with my friends.

G4: And I have no reason to not share that with my friends.

J4: And for me, my weaknesses are my greatest strength, because they're where I'm going to experience the most growth, so why would I hide that?

Indeed, when faced with sensitive conversations, these groups didn't exhibit signs of discomfort, or shame one another into silence as noted in previous research (Kimmel 1994). When R4 opened up about his mental health, it was met with a casual joke:

R4: I suffered a lot of social anxiety through my younger years from being so overweight… so I've always been someone who's kept to myself. It's actually these three who have broken that barrier for pretty much the first time. It's something I struggled with for the best part of eighteen years, just not having any need to touch anyone else.

J4: I'll touch you whenever you want [group laughs].

Traditionally, such disclosures and vulnerability would be considered a sign of weakness for men, resulting in some form of emasculation (Kimmel 1994; Connell 1995). However, not only had this group supported R4 through his struggle, they comfortably engaged in meaningful reflection, and could make light of the situation without undermining his emotions. Indeed, while every group challenged, questioned and made gentle fun of one another (Allen 2005), not one participant was berated or mocked for their opinions. Rather, participants accepted their differences, which suggests the imperative for them to actively police the boundaries of masculinity may be lessening (Anderson 2009). Given the value many participants placed on emotional intimacy, and the overall rejection of toxic masculine characteristics, it would be reductionist to conclude that their understanding of physical intimacy, albeit governed by homohysteria, is not a sign of progressive change.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through this study, we addressed the lack of qualitative research into homosocial intimacy among young Australian men. To date, most theorising in the field rests on data from male students in the US and UK. While our findings confirm the prevalence of homosocial kissing among young Australian men, such behaviour was not described as an authentic display of platonic affection, and was still subjected to homohysteric policing. Rather than signifying the spread of entirely inclusive masculinities, exaggerated intimate gestures appear to have been adopted into the repertoire of ways men can perform masculinity within homohysteric conditions.

Within our data, a complex interplay of factors determines the acceptability of an intimate act, but what matters is that intent fits with a traditionally acceptable masculine endeavour. Our participants felt comfortable hugging their friends, and had all either engaged in or witnessed homosocial kissing, cuddling and genital horseplay. While the latter may be underpinned by genuine affection, our participants do not believe that young men engage in these behaviours to communicate their platonic love (cf Anderson, Adams & Rivers 2012). Behaviours beyond hugging were described as socially acceptable only if thought a joke, a dare, a celebratory gesture, a gesture of support, or for attracting women's attention – that is, *anything but* genuine displays of affection. This is likely because, when enacted authentically, behaviours beyond hugging are reserved for the romantic realm. As such, our participants still homosexualised men who transgress the boundaries of acceptable homosocial intimacy.

IMT theorists draw connections between declining homohysteria and increasing physical intimacy, but our findings document the deployment of a diluted but still present homohysteric discourse as means of policing this intimacy. In an objective sense, our participants identified the co-existence of the blatant homophobia and homoerotic bonding practices of others in hyper-masculine spaces like sports teams. Despite framing such intimacy as inauthentic, and establishing symbolic boundaries against the homophobia that characterises hyper-masculinity, our participants' understanding of homosocial intimacy remains governed by homohysteric sentiment. As illustrated, they defined the boundaries of acceptable intimacy according to what is "okay" and what is "gay", thereby reproducing the understanding that masculinity equates to a rejection of the homosexual, and by extension, the feminine (Anderson 2009). Therefore increased physical intimacy may not necessarily evidence declining homohysteria. In certain situations, men experience a *transient* sense of security in their

sexuality, suggesting that some contexts offer less risk of being homosexualised for engaging in intimacy. Indeed, our data indicates homohysteric suspicions can be mediated by friendship closeness and context if these variables indicate intent is something other than authentic affection. In fact, it appears the forms of intimacy Drummond et al. (2015) view as evidence of inclusive masculinities, could more plausibly align with Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) concept of hybrid masculinities.

Given the centrality of humour and assertive heterosexuality to western masculinities (Kimmel 1994), the use of exaggerated intimacy as banter or to attract women could be viewed as a strategic reappropriation of subordinated traits. Indeed, de Boise and Hearn (2017) encourage scholars to be critical of the end to which men's emotions are put, when making claims about their function as antithetical to or progressive for men's behaviour. By adopting previously feminised behaviours in ways that still afford them masculine capital, these young men are able to appear progressive while further entrenching their privileged position (Bridges & Pascoe 2014). However, although participants described these reconfigured homosocial practices as instrumental in some respects, *they were not attempts to conceal or reconfigure male power* (Bridges & Pascoe 2014), nor efforts to create new hierarchies (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) or challenge gendered power structures (Anderson 2009). Rather, it appears these men engage in more intimate behaviours simply *because they want to* and because, today, it is part of *the cultural zeitgeist*.

Within the HMT and hybrid masculinities frameworks, there is little room for conceptualising our participants behaviour as progressive change – indeed, 'it is as if every shift in gender relations is inevitably hegemony at work' (Duncanson 2015, p.240). Similarly, though the IMT framework, and in particular the concept of homohysteria, are useful in understanding our participants' behaviours, situating our participants' progress as definite evidence of inclusivity would hinder our ability to critically engage with contradictions and shortcomings, and push for more genuinely equal gender relations (de Boise 2015). As such, we situate our results between existing theorisations – one step away from the strategic reproduction of patriarchy, and *toward* the disintegration of hierarchy through inclusivity. While Healy (2017) has warned that a tendency towards more and more finely-grained nuance damages the capacity for good theory, understanding our data demands a theoretical middle ground.

As Duncanson's (2015, p.241) study of British military masculinities illustrates, there exists a transitory stage between these two points, where the softening of hegemonic masculinities through hybridity is not 'a superficial change, masking the retention of power'. Given hegemonic masculinity achieves its status through the subordination – and often feminisation – of other men, it follows that transitioning away from hegemonic structures requires the previously disparaged traits these men possess to be newly valued and incorporated into 'softer' masculinities (Duncanson 2015, p.241). Therefore, the adoption of feminised behaviours, even somewhat jokingly or as forms of heterosexual achievement, may be a sign of progress.

Just as saying 'I love you, no-homo' was the first step toward more genuine expressions of platonic love for some participants, engaging in exaggerated intimate gestures as a joke or to attract women's attention appears be the currently most achievable step toward genuine physical intimacy. However it was not, as McCormack (2014) observed, a classed issue, where men do not have the cultural or social capital to enact intimacy, and tend to regulate their behaviours in the presence of less progressive peers – indeed, as discussed, most participants had engaged in the full range of behaviours documented by IMT theorists and felt comfortable doing so. Rather, the behaviours do not, or are perhaps *yet to*, represent and be deployed as authentic displays of affection in the first place. Through hybridity, however, young men can engage in intimacy despite the persistence of cultural homohysteria, in ways that validate intimate gestures as part of the masculine schema. Within these conditions, behaviours like hugging – which have significantly positive impacts on men's well-being (Keltner 2010) – are normalised and less strictly policed. However, the use of homoerotic gestures as a crux for humour or instrument for heterosexual conquest cannot be separated from the oppression and objectification of homosexuals in a heterosexist society. It is problematic then, to determine exaggerated behaviours like same-sex non-sexual kissing, which are considered *acceptable* but not *authentic*, solely as practices of inclusivity. Furthermore, while distancing oneself from orthodox masculinities is a positive shift, dismantling hegemony requires moving beyond identity strategies based simply on Othering, and toward the construction of masculinities premised on equality and respect (Duncanson 2015).

Our research aimed to provide a deeper understanding of how young Australian men engage with what constitutes acceptable forms of homosocial intimacy. Although

it is clear these young men are engaging in more physically and, in some cases, emotionally intimate friendships, the meanings attached to these behaviours do not squarely correspond with inclusive masculinity theory; nor did their enactment of masculinity fit neatly with any of the field's primary theoretical frameworks. Instead, our participants' homosocial practices form part of a transitional step away from orthodox masculinity and toward genuinely changed gender relations (Duncanson 2015). While insufficient progress, this transitory phase should not be dismissed. Instead, we must continue to interrogate it to expose its contradictions and push toward inclusive masculinities and more equal gender relations (Duncanson 2015).

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