

# THEORIZING MASCULINITIES FOR A NEW GENERATION

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## ABSTRACT

Foregrounding research among 16-21 year-old heterosexual male youth, this article provides an overview of the changing nature of masculinities in Anglo-American cultures. I suggest that cultural homophobia is rapidly decreasing among young men in these cultures, and that this has a profound impact on their gendered performances. I suggest that hegemonic masculinity theory is incapable of explaining these changes. Thus I introduce inclusive masculinity theory—and its principal heuristic concept, homohysteria—to make sense of the changing nature of young men's masculinities.

**KEY WORDS:** Masculinity, homophobia, homohysteria, inclusive masculinity, hegemonic masculinity.

## RESUMEN

Apoyándose en investigaciones realizadas entre jóvenes varones heterosexuales con edades que oscilan entre los 16 y los 21 años, este artículo ofrece una visión general de la naturaleza cambiante de las masculinidades en las culturas angloamericanas. Mi propuesta es que la homofobia cultural está disminuyendo rápidamente entre los hombres jóvenes de estas culturas, y que esto tiene un profundo impacto en sus representaciones de género. Sugiero que la teoría de la masculinidad hegemónica es incapaz de explicar estos cambios. Así pues, introduzco la teoría de la masculinidad inclusiva—y su concepto heurístico principal, la homohisteria— para explicar la naturaleza cambiante de las masculinidades de los hombres jóvenes.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** masculinidad, homofobia, homohisteria, masculinidad inclusiva, masculinidad hegemónica.

## INTRODUCTION

Words fail to capture the moments of tenderness and social inclusivity that I experience in interacting with 16-21 year-old heterosexual, male youth today. Whether it be through conducting ethnography in their high schools (McCormack and Anderson, “Just”), on their sports teams (Anderson and McGuire; Anderson,



McCormack and Lee), or just fishing 16-year-olds who have left school (Anderson, "Rise"), I find that young men today have redefined what it means to be masculine; and they embody something I call inclusive masculinities. I evidence this statement through multiple research projects, including ethnographic research, interviews and survey research (Anderson, *Inclusive*), and show a strong relationship between decreasing cultural homophobia and the softening of heterosexual masculinities in Western cultures.

In my research, I show that softer and more inclusive masculinities are proliferating among white teenage and undergraduate boys (both within and outside of formal education). Almost all of the youth that I study are distancing themselves from conservative forms of muscularity, hyperheterosexuality and masculinity. Data from my studies of heterosexual men, in both feminized and masculinized spaces, support this.

These findings have led to a new way of theorizing masculinities (Anderson, *Inclusive*). My theory argues that with decreasing stigma against homosexuality, there no longer exists a hierarchical stratification of masculinities. Instead, decreasing cultural homophobia permits various forms of masculinities to exist without hegemonic dominance of any one type.

In this article I first provide a snap-shot of what it is like to be a heterosexual 16 year-old in contemporary British culture. I then summarize my body of work among youth, showing what they do to be different, important, and positive compared to how young men constructed their masculinity two decades earlier. I provide a conceptual explanation for these events with my notion of homohysteria, placing it within theory of inclusive masculinities more broadly.

## ON BEING 16 TODAY

Jake is a sixteen-year-old, heterosexual male. He lives in a somewhat impoverished neighborhood with his mother and sister in Bristol, England. Jake, however, has a rich network of friends, both male and female, to whom he is openly affectionate. For example, Jake expresses his love for his best mate, Tom on Facebook. Accordingly, his sentiment about his friend is made public to all on his friends list. Here, he expresses as much love for his best mate as much as his girlfriend. Jake speaks of Tom in similar terms, freely identifying his friendship to me as "love." This intimacy, oftentimes described as "bromance," simulates ancient notions of Greek and Roman brotherhood; a time in which men's homosocial bonds were culturally prized.

Jake is not alone in his outright expression of love for his friends. The fluid language that Jake uses to describe Tom is not at all unusual in contemporary British youth culture. In research on English working and middle class, white, sixth-form students (McCormack and Anderson, "Just"), show that the style of men's masculinity most esteemed among these youths approximates what I call inclusive masculinities (Anderson, *Inclusive*). We show that a decrease in homophobia simultaneously permits an expansion of heteromasculine boundaries, so that boys are able



to express physical tactility and emotional intimacy without being homosexualized by their behaviors.

Illustrating this, Jake told me that he was preparing to go on a thirteen-day holiday to Spain with Tom. When I inquired as to whether he feared that they might fight being together this long, he answered, “No mate, we’re too close for that.” I responded, “Fair enough. And what does the girlfriend think of the fact that you’re taking your best mate on holiday, and not her?” Jake answered, “She knows how close we are. She’s gotta share me.”

While Jake still lives in a heterosexist culture, it at least permits him to have the same level of emotional and physical intimacy with his best male friend as it does his female partner. For example, Jake tells me that he has a busy weekend coming up. He’s spending Friday night with his girlfriend, including sex and cuddling. He will then be spending Saturday night with Tom, doing the same activities with the exception of sex. He informs me that he and Tom sleep in the same bed, where they normally cuddle—a regular practice for young men in England (Anderson, Adams, and Rivers). This is a finding confirmed by forthcoming research, where my research assistant and I find that twenty-nine of thirty undergraduate men (in one university class in England) have cuddled with another man. In fact, Jake spends as many nights in bed with Tom as he does with his girlfriend.

“Look at this message Tom sent me yesterday,” Jake tells me with pride while fishing on an unusually warm spring day. Jake hands me his mobile phone and I read the message aloud, “Love you, this week has made me realise how weak I can be without you. And I don’t like not being with you :/x.” “Oh, your girlfriend is sweet,” I tell him. “No, that’s from Tom,” he states matter-of-factly. “What did you respond?” I ask. Jake laughs, “I put “K.” But a half hour later I sent him a message saying I was just kidding and that I appreciated his text and felt the same way.”

What is interesting about Jake’s story is that he is not alone in expressing this type of homosocial intimacy. Jake does not think his friendship any different than the friendships his peers share with their best male friends. For Jake, this type of emotional intimacy is commonplace, something McCormack (*Declining*) also finds, and Way documents amongst younger children. In Britain today, boys bond not just over talk of cars, girls, and video games, but also over disclosing secrets and building intimacy. They bond over intimacy the way men once used to over a century ago. This is just one aspect of how young men are redefining what it means to be masculine. Jake’s story nicely captures many of the tenets of what it means to be a boy in contemporary British culture.

## REDEFINING MASCULINITY

In studying young men in both the United States and the United Kingdom, I show that today’s white, undergraduate men (particularly athletes) are eschewing the homophobic orthodox masculinity of the 1980s. Instead, men are establishing homosocial relationships based on (1) increased emotional intimacy (Adams, Mc-



Cormack “Hierarchy”), (2) increased physical tactility (McCormack, “Declining”), (3) eschewing violence (Anderson, “Inclusive”), and (4) and the social inclusion of gay male peers (Anderson and Adams; Bush, Anderson and Carr; McCormack, “Positive”). I assume that these practices will have some positive impact on sexism (Anderson, “Being”; “Maintenance”), although I have not systematically studied for this. I argue that these improving cultural conditions have been the result of decreasing homophobia among adolescent males, which results in further softening of masculinity—something McCormack calls a “virtuous circle of decreasing homophobia and expanded gendered behaviours” (*Declining* 63). Collectively, I call the various forms of masculinities embodied by these boys, ‘inclusive masculinities.’

#### INCREASED EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

The above section, about Jake, captures the type of emotionality common among young men in my various studies. Whether it be running with high school boys in California, fishing with 16 year-old leavers (those who chose to leave formal education) in Bristol, England, (observing) marijuana-smoking 17 year-olds in Southampton, England, or reflecting on men’s attitudes in the National Football League (Anderson and Kian) one characteristic remains constant: support. In each of these three forthcoming ethnographies, boys provide peer support. This is fundamental to their socializing. Uniquely, this support does not permit a ‘suck it up’ mentality.

For example, when Tim was arrested for drug possession, his Facebook was loaded with messages of support. He received some light-hearted banter, of course, but there was also a sentiment that his friends cared about him and were worried for him. Conversely, when Ben entered a singing competition in Bristol, he received dozens of messages of support. McCormack’s study of a British sixth form, where boys are esteemed for providing emotional support, provides detailed analysis of this (“Hierarchy”).

#### INCREASED PHYSICAL TACTILITY

The emotional support that young men show for each other extends into acts of physical tactility; a manifestation of their affection. In addition to finding a great deal of hugging, caressing and cuddling (McCormack, *Declining*; McCormack and Anderson “Just”), in our research conducted on white, heterosexual undergraduate men in the UK, my colleagues and I (Anderson, Adams, and Rivers) show that (averaging) eighty-nine per cent (of those randomly or strategically selected for interview) have, at least once, briefly kissed another heterosexual male friend on the lips.

Our results did not include kissing one’s father, kissing other men on the cheek (which also happens with great frequency today and is also culturally avowed), or kissing other men through athletic-team initiation rituals or hazing incidents.



Of course, the circumstances under which these behaviors occurred, the recipients, and the meanings associated with these kisses, were multiple and varied. However, informants' kissing narratives predominantly revolved around issues of homosocial bonding and admiration for a friend. In short, these men were not afraid to be thought gay for kissing their friends.

## ESCHEWING VIOLENCE

In ethnographic work with 22 heterosexual players from a small, Catholic, university soccer team in the American Midwest, I show (Anderson, "Inclusive") that violence among these 22 players was less than one might expect for contact-sport athletes: only three reported having fought in high school (all occurred on the soccer field), and only one player has been in a fight since coming to university (again on the soccer field). Conversely, most of the men had never been in a fight. Similarly, McCormack finds no fights in two of the three sixth forms in which he collected data during the past year (*Declining*).

When we asked Tom about his fighting history, he said, "No. I have never been in a fight. Why would I?" John said, "Fighting is just stupid, it accomplishes nothing. It's not like after [the fight] two guys fight one goes," "Oh, I see things your way now." However, I was particularly struck by Clint's attitude toward fighting. While spitting tobacco into a cup, and with his baseball cap twisted backward, he told me of his abusive upbringing. "Until I was a junior in high school, my dad beat me," he said. But "outside of my dad, no. I've never been in a fight. There's just no reason to fight." Clint then said that rather than learning to solve problems through violence, being beaten actually taught him that violence was useless in solving problems.

All but one of the men agreed with Clint's attitude. Collectively, these men suggested that fighting is a useless activity without purpose or place in their lives. Steve, the dissenting voice, thought that fighting was sometimes necessary. "If a guy's being a real dickhead," he said, "Sometimes he just needs a beating to put him in place." Still, Steve said that he has never been in a fight himself.

This philosophy extends to defending one's ground, as well. For example, I hypothetically asked a number of the players if they would get violent with a guy who had sex with their girlfriends: None did. "I might like to pound him," Derren said, "but the reality is that if my girlfriend cheated with someone, it's her I should be mad at. Not him. I'm not going to be friends with him. And I'd certainly tell him how I felt, but I'd have to have more of a talk with my girlfriend than him."

These attitudinal positions were confirmed by my observations. I saw no instances of men enacting violence, or even posturing as being capable of such. For example, a spilled drink in a bar brought two men together in apologizing, instead of confrontation. I noted that the one who bumped the other, not only offered to buy him a new drink, but that the incident started a conversation that left the men talking for fifteen minutes.



In ethnographic work at ‘Standard High’ McCormack and I found that teenage boys stood firmly against homophobia (“Just”). When we raised the issue of homophobia in interviews, all informants positioned themselves against it. Although this is not in-and-of-itself proof of a homophobia-free culture, it is nonetheless noteworthy that no male student expressed homophobia in interview. Instead, homophobia was regarded as a sign of immaturity. Matt said that if someone was homophobic, he would be policed by his peers. “He wouldn’t keep at it for long,” he said, “It’s just childish.” Justin added, “When I was in middle school, some kids would say ‘that’s gay’ around the playground, but they wouldn’t get away with it anymore. We’d tell them it’s not on.” Sam agreed, “You might find that [homophobia] before [sixth form], but not here. It’s just not acceptable anymore.”

Supporting these statements, participant observation highlighted that the word ‘gay’ is not used to describe dissatisfaction by these young men. In fact, neither researcher heard any homophobic epithet in any social setting we investigated. Terms such as ‘queer’ and ‘poof’ were not used, while ‘fag’ was only used to refer to a cigarette. ‘Gay’ was only used in sensible discussions about gay identity and sexuality.

McCormack has provided further evidence of the inclusion of sexual minority students in an ethnography of a religious sixth form (“Positive”). He showcases the stories of one lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered student, drawing out the differences in their experiences, but nonetheless showing positive changes in their school experiences compared with research from previous decades (see also Ripley et al. “Decreasing”).

## THEORIZING HOMOHYSTERIA

The type of masculinity exhibited by the youth that my colleagues and I study is starkly different than what the dominant paradigm suggests about young men. This maintains that they are homophobic, sexist, violent, emotionally repressed and afraid of physical contact with other males. And, the most important theoretical tool for understanding this social stratification of men and their masculinities since sex role theory has come through Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, which also embedded in it this ‘man as jerk’ archetype (*Gender, “Iron,” Masculinities*).

Developed from a social constructionist perspective in the mid-1980s, hegemonic masculinity theory has articulated two social processes. The first concerns how all men benefit from patriarchy, however, it is the second social process that has been heavily adopted by the masculinities literature. Here, Connell’s theoretical contribution has been particularly adopted for its conceptualization of the mechanisms by which an intra-masculine hierarchy is created and legitimized. It is only this aspect of her theory that I address here.

In conceptualizing intra-masculine domination, Connell argues that one hegemonic archetype of masculinity is esteemed above all other masculinity types, so that boys and men who most closely embody this one standard are accorded the



most social capital, relative to other boys and men. Some of the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity concern variables which are earned, like attitudinal dispositions (including the disposition of homophobia) while other variables concern static traits (i.e. whiteness, heterosexuality, and youth). Connell argued, however, that regardless of body mass, age or even sporting accomplishments, gay men are at the bottom of this hierarchy. Furthermore, Connell maintained that straight men who behaved in ways that conflict with the dominant form of masculinity are also marginalized. It was for these reasons that I have argued homophobia has traditionally been an effective weapon to stratify men in deference to a hegemonic mode of heteromale dominance (Anderson, *Game*).

Connell theorized that the power of a hegemonic form of masculinity was that those subjugated by it nonetheless believed in the right (*Gender; Masculinities*). Instead of disputing their marginalized position, they revered those at the top. Accordingly, researchers found teamsport players generally controlled youth spaces (Plummer). Hegemonic masculinity theory was precise in its ability to predict masculine configurations in the 1980s, and it likely continued to be useful throughout the 1990s. However, the level of homophobia among youth peaked in 1988 (Anderson, *Inclusive*), mainly because of decreasing hysteria of HIV's association with gay men.

The high level of homophobia and hypermasculinity of the mid 1980s—something measured through General Social Survey data in the States alongside the *British Social Attitudes* survey data, had however serious implications for not only attitudes toward gay men, but also on how straight men performed their gender (Peterson and Anderson). Thus, hegemonic masculinity theory is historically contextualized within its own temporal moment. Specifically, it existed in a culture that I call “homohysteria” (Anderson, *Inclusive*).

Homohysteria describes men's fear of being homosexualized. It incorporates three variables: 1) cultural awareness that homosexuality exists as a sexual orientation; 2) high levels of homophobia within a culture, and 3) the conflation of feminine behaviors in men with same-sex desire. Varying combinations of these three cultural traits will determine unique outcomes for men's gendered behaviors. For example, in a highly religious theocracy, homosexuals are likely thought non-existent. While this culture would be considered highly homophobic it is not homohysteria because they don't readily believe that others are gay. Accordingly, men in many Islamic countries are permitted to engage in physical and emotional intimacy (not sex) without threat to their publicly perceived heterosexual identities—if homosexuality does not exist, one cannot be thought gay for holding another's hand.

Opposite to this, a homohysteria culture (like Jamaica) comes through a high measure of cultural homophobia alongside high awareness that homosexuality exists in significant numbers. This is in a culture that both loathes homosexuals but knows they lurk among us. Because homosexuality is mostly invisible, it means that in this culture, all men (of all sexual orientations) must distance themselves from anything coded as gay, otherwise they will be homosexualized and treated accordingly. In a homohysteria culture men therefore value the most extreme representations of masculinity and they equally maintain highly homophobic at-



titudes, all in attempt to distance themselves from being thought gay. Essentially in a homohysteria culture, men are attempting to escape social stigma by avoiding being perceived as gay.

The greater the homohysteria within a culture, the more effective homophobia is in limiting the gendered components of masculinity. Operating at both the behavioral and emotional level, it means that heterosexual men have had to avoid physical tactility with other men; that they must avoid certain clothing styles, colors, sports, entertainment choices and even foods. Emotionally, they have had to deny love for their male friends, fear, or sadness. In times of homohysteria, men must adhere to extremely rigid body language and must present themselves as heterosexual even as ages as young as eight (Pollack).

Although matters were never this bad in the West, homohysteria still operated at every level of men's lives. But, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, studies began reporting a rapidly decreasing level of homophobia in Anglo-American cultures. This was even true of men in competitive teamsports (Anderson, *Trailblazing*; "Openly"; *Game*; "Orthodox"; "Updating"; "Inclusive"; "Masculinities"; Adams; Kian and Anderson; McCormack and Anderson, "Re/production"; Southall et al.). For example, I interviewed 26 openly gay high school and university athletes throughout a spectrum of sports in the United States in 2002, showing gay athletes being partially accepted onto their teams. By 2011, I found that gay male athletes were fully accepted onto their teams; and that their teammates were even eroding at heteronormativity.

## EXPLAINING THE THEORY

The collection of these findings, and the development of my heuristic concept of homohysteria, led me to the development of a new gendered theory of masculinity studies. Inclusive masculinity theory captures the social dynamics of men in non-homohysteria settings. The theory is simple: it maintains that as homohysteria decreases, men no longer need to position themselves as hypermasculine in order to be thought heterosexual. As homohysteria decreases the vertical stratification that Connell describes is no longer accurate, as it shifts to permit multiple types of masculinity without hegemony. Should cultural matters change, and homohysteria were to again rise in a culture, the ordering of men would likely return to the way Connell conceptualized.

Inclusive masculinity supersedes hegemonic masculinity theory because it is a more flexible theory that can be used to explain the social dynamics of settings with both high *and* low levels of homohysteria. When Connell devised hegemonic masculinity theory in the mid-1980s, there was no such thing as a Western culture low in homohysteria. But the significant changes that have occurred since then makes Connell's theory redundant in today's culture. Multiple other scholars are recognizing this, using my theory (i.e. Adams; Cleland and Cashmore, in press; McCormack, *Declining*; Peterson), and still more are just avoiding using Connell's framework (i.e. Kehler).

While it is not yet possible to tell whether inclusive masculinity theory will replace hegemonic masculinity theory among sociologists, its adoption by other scholars is evidence of the erosion of the dominance of hegemonic masculinity theory as scholars recognize it no longer applies.

Finally, I make inclusive masculinity theory very simplistic, intentionally. It was my desire to avoid inaccessible, and oftentimes vague, theorizing by grand theorist. To me a social theory should be simple, and have the ability to make a prediction. I shun academic-elitism. Thus, I have made an open invitation to other scholars to examine my theory and add to it (hoping they do so in accessible and practical ways).

McCormack is one scholar who has met this challenge (“Hierarchy”; “Declining”; “Mapping”; *Declining*). He recently contributed to inclusive masculinity theory by explicating how popularity is achieved in cultures where bullying and marginalization are not present. McCormack (who is also featured in this special edition) shows that what makes boys popular is not regulating others, but instead being inclusive and having charisma. Unique to a homophobia free culture, he shows that males value the ability to socialize with boys from other groups, including gay youth. Thus, hegemony is replaced by heterogeneity.

## DISCUSSION

In this overview of the research I have been conducting on gay and straight male youths over the previous decade, I have argued that inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, *Inclusive*) supersedes hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell, *Gender; Masculinities*) because it explains the loss of a stratification of men alongside in times of lower homophobia. The theory was constructed to explain settings with low homophobia; cultures in which young heterosexual men are no longer afraid to act or otherwise associate with symbols of homosexuality. Here, heterosexual boys are permitted to engage in an increasing range of behaviors that once led to homosexual suspicion, all without threat to their publicly perceived heterosexual identities.

In my various ethnographies, I have, for example, shown that fraternity members (Anderson, “Fraternal”), rugby players (Anderson and McGuire), school boys (McCormack and Anderson, “Just”), heterosexual cheerleaders (Anderson, “Being”), and even the men of a Catholic College soccer team in the Midwest (Anderson, “Inclusive”) have all been shown to maintain close physical and emotional relationships with each other.

Collectively, these studies highlight that as cultural homophobia diminishes, it frees heterosexual men to act in more feminine ways without threat to their heterosexual identity. I suggest that in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia (and likely in other Anglo-American cultures) we have dropped out of homophobia. Whereas homophobia used to be the chief policing mechanism of a hegemonic form of masculinity, there no longer remains a strident cultural force to approximate the mandates of one type of homophobic masculinity.



I do not, however, claim that inclusive masculinities are completely free of oppression and subordination. A diminished state of homophobia is not to be mistaken as a gender utopia. Men categorized as belonging to one archetype of a set of inclusive masculinities might still reproduce heteronormativity (Ripley et al. "Heteronormativity"); they might still sexually objectify women (Anderson, "Used"); they might still value excessive risk taking (Adams, Anderson, and McCormack); and they might still use homophobic discourse without intent to wound (McCormack, "Mapping"). Furthermore, I have not analyzed race, religiosity, or other demographic variables (with the exception of class) as important variables of social stratification alongside my research into these new inclusive masculinities. So generalizations are necessarily limited.

My data do, however, indicate that in the process of proliferating inclusive masculinities, gender itself, as a constructed binary of opposites, may be somewhat eroding. I argue that the efforts of the first, second, and, now, third waves of feminism—combined with the gay liberationists and gay assimilationist efforts of the past four decades—are slowly withering at the gender binary (Anderson, *Inclusive*). Increasingly, gender is the business of decreasing polarization, at least for white undergraduate men.

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