

# FRIENDSHIP DYNAMICS AND POPULARITY HIERARCHIES AMONG INCLUSIVE MEN

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has demonstrated that aggression and marginalization are key components of maintaining popularity within male peer groups. However, more recent ethnographic studies have documented a significant shift in young men's attitudes and behaviours, with more inclusive masculinities flourishing. My previous research has examined friendship dynamics and popularity hierarchies among boys, showing that contemporary popularity is stratified by a boy's charisma, authenticity, emotional support, and social fluidity. In this article, I draw upon ethnographic research to provide an intersectional analysis of how adolescent masculinities are influenced by class, age and sexuality.

KEY WORDS: Friendship, homophobia, masculinity, heterosexuality, youth.

## RESUMEN

Anteriores investigaciones han demostrado que la agresión y la marginación son componentes claves para mantener la popularidad dentro de los grupos de pares masculinos. Sin embargo, estudios etnográficos más recientes han documentado un cambio significativo en las actitudes y comportamientos de los hombres jóvenes, con un aumento de las masculinidades inclusivas. Mi investigación previa ha examinado las dinámicas de amistad y las jerarquías de popularidad entre chicos jóvenes, demostrando que la popularidad contemporánea se estratifica según el carisma, la autenticidad, el apoyo emocional y la fluidez social de cada chico. En este artículo recurro a la investigación etnográfica para proporcionar un análisis interseccional sobre la manera en que las masculinidades adolescentes se ven influenciadas por la clase, la edad y la sexualidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: amistad, homofobia, masculinidad, heterosexuality, juventud.

Research into the peer dynamics of young heterosexual men has documented negative social characteristics such as aggression, homophobia and an absence of emotional openness (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman; Stoudt). This has been attributed to cultural homophobia and the cultural conflation of gender and sexuality in Western societies (Anderson, *Inclusive*). This means that in order for boys to avoid the stigma of being socially perceived as gay, they have to behave in ways that are op-



positional to things culturally coded as feminine. Hence, boys espouse homophobia and get into fights to avoid any suspicion of maintaining same-sex desire (Derlega et al.). Anderson conceptualised this as “homohysteria”—the fear of being socially perceived as gay (*Inclusive*).

The centrality of homophobia to young men’s friendship dynamics is significant not least because it means that as attitudes toward homosexuality change, so will the ways in which boys interact. And as homophobia decreases in Western cultures (McCormack, *Declining*; Savin-Williams; Weeks), a growing body of research is documenting this change (Anderson and McGuire; McCormack, “Hierarchy”; Roberts). For example, boys are more open about their emotions (Anderson, “Rise”), more tactile (McCormack and Anderson, “Just”), and more inclusive of LGBT students (Adams; McCormack, “Positive”). In this article, I will build on prior research (Anderson, McCormack and Lee; McCormack, “Hierarchy”) to provide an intersectional analysis of how the changing dynamics of male friendships are influenced by class, age and sporting participation.

## CONTEXTUALISING BOYS’ FRIENDSHIPS

Male friendship groups play a central role in the organization of masculinity among teenage boys (O’Donnell and Sharpe), where boys seek to gain control of their lives and distribute privilege between their peer group (Corsaro and Eder). This complex negotiation of social stratification is manifest as popularity (Adler and Adler), and is achieved through a range of factors, traditionally including attractiveness and extrovert behaviours (Francis, Skelton and Read), the marginalization and bullying of weaker or less popular boys (Cillessen and Rose) and skill at sports and other activities coded as masculine (Jackson).

Scholars have highlighted that the most effective way masculinities are regulated is through the use of homophobia (Derlega et al.; Mac an Ghaill; Plummer), but there are a range of other social mechanisms that do this as well. Boys police each other so that individuals who behave in ways that are not socially condoned are brought back in line with the norms of that setting (Steinberg, Epstein and Johnson).

This ordering of friendships among men has been understood through hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell). Adapting hegemony theory to understand the vertical hierarchies of boys and men, it recognizes that in addition to the policing of masculinities, boys associate themselves with students who are more popular than they are in order to consolidate their masculine standing. Anderson argues that this is most evident in non-sporty boys who admire more athletic boys and support sports teams in order to gain social standing even when they do not have the physical capabilities to participate in the sport (*Game*).

This set of powerful regulatory tools means that boys’ friendships have been characterized by a limited range of behaviours and a damaging social dynamic. Mac an Ghaill describes boys’ legitimate interests as being restricted to “football, fighting and fucking” (56), and Francis highlights that male peer groups appear



preoccupied with damaging behaviours including alcohol consumption, disruptive behaviour and the objectification of women.

These damaging behaviours have tended to emerge in late adolescence. Way documents how working class, ethnic minority young boys have deep, meaningful friendships, where they speak about “circles of love,” “spilling your heart out to somebody,”...and “feeling lost” without their male best friends (91). Yet Way documents that as these boys get older, these friendships dissipate and older teenage boys feel socially isolated and long for the friendships of their youth.

However, it may be that Way’s findings are limited to working class youth, or that her findings are historically situated, as she collected data for her book over the past twenty years. This is because recent research has documented the kind of friendships Way finds with young boys occurring among middle class teenagers, in both Britain and the United States (Anderson, *Inclusive*; McCormack, “Positive”).

## THEORIZING SOCIAL CHANGE

Attitudes toward homosexuality are rapidly changing in American and British cultures, with decreasing homophobia being a progressive and growing trend (Anderson, *Inclusive*; Loftus; Weeks). Recent research by Keleher and Smith documents growing support for gay and lesbian equality, attributing this to a cohort effect of older, less accepting Americans dying and being replaced by more inclusive youth, but also to changing attitudes throughout American society. Similarly, Curtice and Ormston find significantly more inclusive attitudes in the U.K.

These quantitative studies support a large body of qualitative research documenting a decrease in homophobia. Anderson finds openly gay athletes in U.S. college teams being socially included by their peers, suffering little or no harassment (“Updating”)—a marked improvement from his earlier research (Anderson, “Openly”). Netzley finds increasing positive representation of gay men in the media, while over 5,000 gay-straight alliances offer safe spaces for LGBT students in American schools (Miceli).

Research documents an even greater transformation in the U.K., where homophobic attitudes were never as entrenched as in the United States (Anderson, *Inclusive*). My research has documented that LGBT students are included in even conservative school cultures (McCormack, “Positive”), and that heterosexual men espouse support of gay rights (McCormack, *Declining*; McCormack and Anderson, “Re-production”). Furthermore, Cashmore and Cleland find that 93 per cent of football fans would accept an openly gay player on their team.

Anderson theorizes how these changes in cultural attitudes toward homosexuality influence the social hierarchy of masculinities, devising “inclusive masculinity theory” to argue that the gendered behaviours of boys and men is radically different in cultural contexts where homophobia has diminished (*Inclusive*). In order to explicate his theory, Anderson developed the concept “homohysteria” to understand when homophobia regulates gendered behaviours. Defined as the cultural



fear of being socially perceived as gay, two key factors affect how homophobic a culture is: The awareness that anyone can be gay in that culture, and the level of homophobia. Anderson argues that it is these factors that determine whether there is a “need for men to publicly align their social identities with heterosexuality in order to avoid homosexual suspicion” (*Inclusive* 8). Inclusive masculinity theory posits that as homophobia decreases, homophobia ceases to be a policing mechanism of boys and men’s gendered behaviours and that this will have a profound effect on the social dynamics of their interactions.

A growing body of work supports this theorizing (e.g. Adams; Cavalier; Cashmore and Cleland; Dashper; Flood; Gottzén and Kremer-Sadlik; Kehler; Roberts), yet the social dynamics of friendship has received less attention in this literature (Anderson, Adams, and Rivers; McCormack, “Hierarchy”)—and it focuses primarily on white, middle class men. In this article, I will draw on my research studies to explore various components of male friendship in cultures of decreased homophobia; adding an intersectional analysis to inclusive masculinity theory.

Intersectionality developed as a concept from the critique of gender -and race- based research that failed to recognize that there are many modes of oppression that structure an individual’s identity, and that these ordering principles are mutually reinforcing (Anderson and McCormack, “Intersectionality”; Crenshaw). While perhaps most developed by black feminist scholars (e.g. Collins), there is a broader recognition that it is vital to understand the multiple factors that influence the social dynamics of any culture—and in this article I will address how class, age and sport influence the social dynamics of male friendship groups.

#### METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

In this article, I draw on three studies that examined the dynamics of male peer groups in the United Kingdom. The first study (McCormack, “Positive”) involved ethnographic data collection in three sixth forms in the south of England, where I spent over a year interacting with male students to understand “what it means to be a guy in school”; the schools were purposively selected to find three distinct types of school (one a middle class school I call “Standard High”; one a Christian college I call “Religious High”; and one for disaffected youth I call “Fallback High”). The participant observations were supplemented by 44 in-depth interviews, as well as conversations with members of staff in the schools.

The second study was ethnographic research undertaken with a university rugby team at an elite university in the south of England (McCormack and Anderson, “Just”). Undertaken with men aged 18-23, it offers an insight into the friendship practices of an older group of men in a very specific social (sporting) context. I also draw on research on the hazing activities of two different sport teams from the same university to support this (Anderson, McCormack and Lee). Detailed discussion of the methods used are found in the articles cited.



## RESULTS: THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF MASCULINITY IN INCLUSIVE SETTINGS

In my research on the masculinities of sixth form students in the U.K., the boys in these schools espoused pro-gay attitudes and condemned homophobia (McCormack, *Declining*). In addition to this, they had openly gay friends, and some even critiqued their school for a lack of openly gay role models. This inclusive culture has led to teenage boys redefining masculinity, and what made a boy popular was markedly different from what one might expect (McCormack, “Hierarchy”).

The first thing to note about these students’ conceptions of friendship, is that they have not abandoned all the components related to friendship previously. Just like with more traditional forms of masculinity, “fun-loving” acts of extroversion are important when friends enter. For example, one week in the common room entertainment was provided by boys using a skateboard. They performed tricks, trying to outperform their friends. The success of the trick, however, was less important than the exuberance with which it was performed. The most popular performances were the funniest and the most physical, and boys who could do this best received the most praise.

This idea of charisma raising popularity was also supported by interviews with students. For example, Alex, a quiet student who plays in a rock band, commented, “The bigger the character you are, the higher up you are.” But contrary to the charisma of aggressive and macho boys, students argued that charisma raised the spirits of all students. As Ian said, “Say it’s a wet and rainy day and everyone’s down, you can always rely on someone doing something, just to make everyone laugh again, and feel a bit better.”

It used to be the case that those boys who did not engage in extroverted behaviors were socially marginalized as nerdy or gay (Mac an Ghaill). However, at Standard High more introverted students can be popular if their behaviors are deemed to be part of “who you really are.” One of the popular students, Ian, said, “Take Sam, he’s a bit different. But I got to know him, and he’s really cool. I like his individuality.” As Jack said, “It’s ultimately about comfortability with yourself.” This was demonstrated through the clothes that the boys wore. That is, a wide variety of clothing styles were on display at Standard High, and while clothing was important, what mattered was not the style of clothes you wore, but that it “fit” with your personality.

One of the heartening and perhaps surprising aspects of what constituted popularity at Standard High was that the giving of emotional support was an ordinary and valued way of life for boys at this school. Indeed, boys spoke of their close friendship openly; as Matt said, “I love my friends, and I could rely on them if I needed to.” I frequently observed this kind of support between male friends. However, boys also provided reassurance during public events as well. One example of this came during the election of “student officers.” Here, students had to give a speech as to why they should be elected to one of the various available positions. Each candidate had to give a three-minute speech in assembly, and each was ap-



plauded before and after they did so. However, Simon was rather awkward during his speech, and spoke rather hesitantly. Despite not being particularly popular, he was equally applauded by his peers. Furthermore, later walking past a group of the most popular students, Matt called out, "Well done, Simon," and Ian added, "Yeah, it's not easy to do." There was no heckling, and the boys praised Simon's willingness to take part.

The final element of popularity at Standard High complements both inclusivity and support. Here, social fluidity recognizes how boys befriend a broad range of peers. Contrary to what earlier research has shown, boys are not part of antagonistic cliques and value the ability to move between social groups at Standard High. Indeed, there are no real cliques at Standard High—just groups of friends. Alex described this well by saying, "When you enter the common room and your friends aren't there, you can just talk to other people."

The boys value this sociability, and this was most powerfully demonstrated by how they decided to celebrate the end of the school year. In the last week of the summer term, approximately two-thirds of the students organized a five-day holiday together to the same seaside resort. One of the key components of this trip was that everyone stayed together. As Matt said, "It's important we go as a group, so we can all celebrate the end of the year together." At Standard High, popularity is achieved by including peers, not excluding them.

## MIDDLE CLASS BOYS' CONCEPTIONS OF FRIENDSHIP

While boys' friendship groups were less insular than the cliques documented in earlier research (Jackson), they still placed a great deal of importance on close friendships, and were open about this. For example, Jack had been overseas for the weekend and on return was catching up with his peers. He saw his best friend, Tim, enter the common room, and shouted out, "Timmo!" Running across the room, and flinging his satchel onto one of the nearby chairs, Tim embraced Jack. Grasping him around the waist, Tim lifted Jack off the ground. Jack shouted, "Timmo, where were you all weekend, I missed ya!" as he exuberantly kissed Tim on the top of his head. As the boys calmed down after their initial greeting, they talked excitedly about their experiences over the weekend.

More frequent than this kind of boisterous demonstration of friendship, though, were the touching behaviors that occurred during quiet conversations. Here, boys used physical touch as a sign of friendship. Ben and Eli, for example, were stood in a corner of the common room, casually holding hands as they spoke—their fingers gently touching the other's palm. Halfway through the exchange, Ben changed his embrace, placing an arm around Eli's waist and a hand on his stomach. This kind of tactility was commonplace among the majority of boys at these schools. Indeed, hugging was a routine form of greeting in these schools.

Boys also openly recognized the closeness of their friendships. For example, Phil and Dan would regularly address each other as "lover" or "boyfriend,"



particularly when planning social activities. Proclaiming close friends as boyfriends was understood as a way of demonstrating emotional intimacy. Phil said, “Yeah, I call him boyfriend and stuff, but that’s just a way of saying he’s my best mate.” Similarly, Dave commented, “I’ll sometimes call my best mates “lover” or something similar. It’s just a way of saying, “I love you,” really.” It is evident that the dynamics of masculinity has changed in these settings, but so has the way these boys value their friends.

## THE INTERSECTION WITH CLASS

In my earlier research, I focussed on the friendship dynamics of the boys in the middle class school. However, my ethnography at Fallback High—a school primarily consisting of working class youth—enables me to examine some differences in how working class youth behaved.

The boys at Fallback High also openly valued friendship. For example, Jamie said, “my best mates work now [instead of attending sixth form], and I miss just being around them. Your friends are important.” Providing a similar perspective, Joe said:

My best mates here are Dave and Dan. I enjoy hanging out with them, going down the pub and sometimes when we get drunk, we talk about emotional stuff, you know? But then other times we just chat shit. Both are good!

There were just two boys who did not openly value or express their friendship in any significant form. Charlie and Aiden were seemingly good friends who spent a lot of time together, yet I never heard them refer to each other as friends. When I asked Aiden about his friendship with Charlie, he looked uncomfortable, saying “He’s a mate. You know, we hang out.” Similarly, when I asked Charlie about friends, he said “I hang out with [Aiden], we’re mates.” The defensive tone adopted by Aiden and Charlie was in opposition to that of the other male students who all spoke in open terms about their friendships.

I have argued elsewhere the working class discourses that prevail in Fallback College act as a buffer on the development of inclusive attitudes and behaviours; restricting but not prohibiting them (McCormack under review). Clearly, this has also impacted on their friendships; as just two of the boys at Fallback High exhibited anything similar to the deep emotional bonds that were normalised at Standard High. While this may partly be attributable to the length of time the friendships have lasted, the middle class boys were much more at ease in discussing their friendships and happy for them to be openly celebrated. This class divide is also supported by Way’s work, which finds working class male teenagers unable to relate to each other.



## THE INTERSECTION WITH SPORT

Intersectionality theory often focuses on key demographic factors, such as age, class, race and sexuality. Yet other contextual conditions also influence the way friendships, and masculinities more broadly, are organized. Traditionally, sport has been a socially conservative institution that promotes a macho and stoic form of masculinity (Anderson, *Inclusive*)—yet research I have conducted finds changes here to, albeit with friendships contoured differently from my research in schools. Some of this may also be attributable to the men being slightly older, but being part of a sport team influences friendship dynamics.

On ethnographic research with a rugby team (McCormack and Anderson, “Re-production”), we found that friendship involved lots of “flirting with gayness”—jokingly pretending to be gay as a way of entertaining each other. For example, when Graham is greeted accordingly, he smiles and points suggestively to his butt, playing-up to the suggestion that he is gay. Similarly, Mike, aged 20, greets Colin, aged 22, with, “hey homo,” and Colin replies, “Yeah, sister. Good weekend?” that this type of gay banter is understood as indicative of close friendship. When asked if he would banter with someone on the team he disliked, he responds, “No. Of course not! You only banter with those you like.” Accordingly, participants’ assert that gay banter is used only among friends, a finding supported through multiple interviews and observations.

In this setting, “don’t be gay” is also used (although less frequently). This phrase, heard once a week, is normally expressed between friends as a way of debating the merits of a standpoint. For example, Mike tries to persuade Colin about the quality of a television show. Colin responds, “Don’t be gay, man. That programme’s shit.” But when interviewed, Colin insists he does not mean this to insult about sexuality, but about Mike’s standpoint instead. He does not desire to stigmatise gay men in the process. “I was just expressing my dislike of the programme. It has nothing to do with sexuality at all.”

In research on university teams’ hazing activities (Anderson, McCormack and Lee), we also found that the heterosexual male athletes (aged between 18 and 23) were proud of their friendships and would often demonstrate this through drunk-only kissing each other. Even so, they also provided “support” as they encouraged their friends to drink dangerous levels of alcohol on nights out. While more open about expressing emotion, these sporting men tended to display these behaviours in situations that were more stereotypically masculine.

## CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the changing nature of male friendships in cultures of decreased homophobia—settings which are becoming increasingly prevalent in British and American cultures. Finding that middle class white teenagers espouse social inclusivity and giving emotional support when needed, I show that these male adolescents are proud of their deep and meaningful friendships. However, I add to





these findings by exploring how these dynamics intersect with class, age and the social context of sport; showing that the effects of decreasing homophobia on the social dynamics of male peer groups is not homogenous and will differ according to various intersecting factors. This highlights the need for further research into how the changing nature of masculinities intersects with a range of other social factors, including race, geography, religiosity and level of education.

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