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## **“It’s just not acceptable anymore”: The Erosion of Homophobia and the Softening of Masculinity at an English Sixth Form**

This ethnographic research interrogates the relationship between sexuality, gender and homophobia among 16-18 year old boys in a co-educational sixth form in the south of England. Framing our research with inclusive masculinity theory, we find that, unlike the elevated rates of homophobia typically described in academic literature, the boys at ‘Standard High’ espouse pro-gay attitudes and eliminate homophobic language. This inclusivity simultaneously permits an expansion of heteromale boundaries, so that boys are able to express physical tactility and emotional intimacy without being homosexualised by their behaviours. However, we add to inclusive masculinity theory by showing the ways in which boys continue to privilege and regulate heterosexuality in absence of homophobia: we find that heterosexual boundary maintenance continues, heterosexual identities are further consolidated, and the presumption of heterosexuality remains. Accordingly, we argue that even in inclusive cultures, it is necessary to examine for the processes of heteronormativity.

Keywords: masculinity; heterosexuality; homophobia; schooling; gay; bullying.

## **Introduction**

In 2008, the United Kingdom's Department of Children, Schools and Families published best practice guidelines for school administrators to follow in combating homophobic bullying in schools. The directive recommends schools teach LGBT history and even introduce their pupils to gay and lesbian role models. This policy highlights a radical institutional shift in thinking about homosexuality in the British school system. Until 2002, legislation prohibited the 'promotion of homosexuality' in schools; something which even led to the banning of books with 'pro-gay' themes. Inspired by this recent directive, we explored the current levels of homophobia, and the contemporary construction of masculinity, in a standard British sixth form—one that we call 'Standard High'.

This article contributes to the scholarship about gender, sexualities and schools through empirically grounded, social-constructionist research. We are interested in how the modes of power (concerning gender and sexuality) impact upon these students' lives; the ways in which students contest or conform to orthodox sexual and gender norms; and how theories of sexuality and gender account for our findings. Both authors collected data in the field, discussing our independent interpretations of events, meaning that the validity of our analysis is strengthened through the mutual experience and coding of data.

Whereas previous research shows that boys maintain masculinity through vociferously deploying homophobic pejoratives, we show that this is not the case at Standard High. Instead, boys position themselves against homophobia, even stigmatising the use of homophobic discourse. We find that heterosexual boys at Standard High are physically tactile and emotionally intimate with other boys, and that they discuss once-feminised topics without threat to their socially-perceived

heterosexual identities. However, we find that even in this inclusive setting, heterosexual boundary policing continues, and heteronormativity exists through the presumption of heterosexuality.

### **Heteronormativity and Homophobia in State Schools**

Considerable research links the operations of homophobia, heteronormativity and sexuality in the production and maintenance of gendered identities in Western cultures (cf. Plummer 1999). For boys and men, the intersection of heterosexuality and masculinity is so intense that Pronger (1990) argues the term *heteromascularity* is required to more accurately capture its imbrications. Yet research often underplays the complex, multi-dimensional, interaction of sexuality and gender. As Jackson (2006, p. 106) writes, “Sexuality, gender and heterosexuality intersect in variable ways within and between different dimensions of the social”.

At an institutional level, schools produce their own sexual and gendered oppression (Allen 2007; Atkinson and DePalma 2009; Pascoe 2007). Curricula, policies, and officially sanctioned discussion about sexuality have been shown to privilege heterosexuality while simultaneously dismissing all other sexual identities (cf. Epstein and Johnson 1998). In Australia, for example, Ferfolja (2007) demonstrates that heterosexuality is privileged through the institutional silencing and omission of gay identities, arguing that this reproduces homophobic prejudice. In the US and UK, Pascoe (2007) and Epstein et al. (2003) show that institutionally-sanctioned cultures of homophobia severely diminish the social freedoms and learning environment of sexual minorities, so that gay students remain highly stigmatised in school systems.

However, students' sexual identities and gendered behaviours have also been shown to be strictly regulated through social interaction (Mac an Ghail 1994; Epstein et al. 2003; Frosh et al. 2002). Research has documented that only a limited range of gendered behaviours are available to boys in schools, showing that, to obtain a culturally validated form of masculinity, boys must socially distance themselves from gay students and that they are often required to intellectualise homophobic attitudes (Frosh et al 2002; Plummer 1999). Furthermore, in order to avoid homosexual suspicion, boys are found to disengage from homosocial tactility and emotional intimacy (Nayak and Kehily 1996). Traditionally, exceptions have only existed for boys with high masculine capital, who (ironically) maintain permission to break some of these gendered boundaries (Anderson 2005a; Pascoe 2003).

The stigma attached to homosexuality also means that boys are shown to use an array of heterosexual boundary maintenance techniques to publicly defend their heterosexual identities (Kehily 2002). The primary method for this has been the deployment of homophobic discourse.<sup>1</sup> This serves two purposes. First, homophobic epithets help boys distance themselves from anything perceived as feminine and/or gay (Epstein 1997; Plummer 1999). Second, the discursive policing of orthodox sexual and gender norms promotes one's own heteromasculine capital (Epstein 1993; Mac an Ghail 1994; Frosh et al. 2002). Accordingly, homophobic bullying has been described as inevitable for most boys who transgress heteromasculine boundaries, regardless of their actual or perceived sexual orientation (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003). Researchers have also shown how homophobia impacts differently upon students according to their race and class (Froyum 2007; Pascoe 2007; Taylor 2007).

## **Inclusive Masculinity Theory**

We contextualise and analyse our ethnographic research through Anderson's (2009) *inclusive masculinity theory*. This theory incorporates Connell's (1987, 1995) *hegemonic masculinity theory* by recognising that masculinities are sometimes stratified according to a hegemonic mode of dominance. However, it historically situates this, arguing that Connell's theory is only accurate in settings of high homophobia. Here, Connell and Anderson agree that boys and men are compelled to construct their masculinity in opposition to femininity and homosexuality (Mac an Ghaill 1994; Salisbury and Jackson 1996). In this zeitgeist, homophobia is the most important tool for policing masculinities (Kimmel 1994; Plummer 1999; Pronger 1990).<sup>2</sup>

However, inclusive masculinity theory expands Connell's theorising by arguing that as cultural or local homophobia declines, the mandates of hegemonic masculinity hold less cultural sway. For example, in a setting where homophobia is decreased but still evident, Anderson (2005b) describes two contrasting archetypes of masculinity that vie for dominance (one homophobic and one gay friendly), but neither maintains hegemonic control.

Finally, inclusive masculinity theory suggests that when acceptable forms of masculinity no longer consider overt homophobia to be socially acceptable, the esteemed attributes of boys and men will not rely on the marginalisation and domination of others. Thus, Anderson theorises that the gendered behaviours of boys and men will be radically different in settings where overt homophobia is absent, and that this will lead to multiple archetypes of masculinity being esteemed in an inclusive setting. Inclusive masculinity theory therefore provides a framework to understand the gendered dynamics of temporal spaces where overt homophobia has diminished—

something Connell's (1987, 1995) work fails to address. However, Anderson's theory does not discuss how heterosexual boundaries are maintained in an inclusive setting. We articulate this through our concept of *heterosexual recuperation*.

### **Re/making Heterosexual Boundaries**

The boundaries of legitimised heterosexual masculine identities have been shown to be policed through a range of (sometimes brutal) discursive and behavioural practices (Nayak and Kehily 1996; Steinberg et al. 1997). However, Anderson (2009) suggests that existing sexuality/gender theories fail to capture how heterosexual boundaries are policed in homophobia-free settings. In this article, we take this to mean *overt* homophobia. As we define it, this includes the social exclusion of gay students, homophobic discourse, and negative attitudes about sexual minorities.

We add to this theorising by conceptualising *heterosexual recuperation* as a heuristic tool for understanding the strategies boys use to establish and maintain heterosexual identities without invoking homophobia. We delineate two forms of heterosexual recuperation, recognising that these are not necessarily exhaustive of the ways boys can recoup their heterosexuality. *Conquestial recuperation* conceptualises the ways boys boast of their heterosexual desires or conquests (Kehily 2002; Mac an Ghaill 1994), while *ironic recuperation* describes the satirical proclamation of same-sex desire, or a gay identity, to maintain a heterosexual identity (Kaplan 2005).

Both forms of heterosexual recuperation are used when boys fear their heterosexuality is under question. For example, they deploy heterosexual recuperation after they perform a gender transgressive behaviour (Nayak and Kehily 1996; Pascoe 2007). Heterosexual recuperation therefore serves as a boundary making activity, consolidating heterosexual masculinities and esteeming heterosexuality in the process.

While we suggest that heterosexual recuperation techniques are mechanisms to re/make a heterosexual identity, we also highlight that the ironic form serves as a social mechanism enabling boys to expand (and even break) the tightly policed gendered boundaries described by masculinities literature. That is, ironic recuperation provides boys with a specific strategy through which they can enact otherwise transgressive behaviours without threat to their socially perceived heterosexual identities. While only boys and men with high masculine capital have previously been permitted to transgress gender norms (Anderson 2005a; Pascoe 2003), ironic recuperation is a mechanism that the majority of boys can use to transgress orthodox gender norms in this setting.

## **Methods**

### *Procedures*

A novel methodological approach was employed in this ethnography. The two authors collected data together throughout the period of study. This facilitated a broader collection of data, and subjected a significant proportion of empirical data to observation by two researchers. Independently and together, we observed the gendered dynamics of student interaction in a variety of sixth form lessons, and we capitalised on our talents to extend participant observations to other settings. For example, one author is an experienced singer, so he spent time participating in music rehearsals, while the other author is experienced with sports, so he trained with student athletes. This aspect of our ethnography enhanced our capital with students who belonged to various social cliques. The most illuminating data, however, came in the students' common room.



The common room was open all day, so both male and female students used it during their free time. The majority of students spent at least some of their day in this setting, and boys of all social groupings (and various masculine archetypes) used it. Importantly, this was an unsupervised area. We rarely saw teachers in the common room. This setting therefore provided the opportunity to observe boys of various sub-groupings away from institutional regulation.

To minimise the visibility of the research process, note taking was left to immediate recall (Spradley 1970). Although this can lead to particular parts of data being mis-remembered, misgivings about this strategy are minimised by mutual confirmation and coding of recalled events. This is an advantage of having two researchers in the field.

While five months of participant observation provided insight into the male students' behavioural patterns, interviews provided data about informants' attitudes (Brewer 2002). These interviews were conducted near the end of the study so that rapport was heightened between researchers and informants. Here, we conducted seventeen semi-structured, strategically selected, in-depth interviews with heterosexual students. We accomplished this by schematically mapping the friendship groups of the approximate one hundred boys, and strategically selecting participants from the various groups for interview. We then added five interviews with gay students (twenty-two interviews in total). We interviewed one openly gay sixth form student, one gay student in a lower grade of Standard School, and three openly gay students that recently graduated from Standard High (located through social networks of current students).

The interview schedule covered participants' attitudes toward gay men, their understandings of masculinity, their perceptions of popularity among peers, and other

subjects. Interviews averaged sixty minutes. Permission was obtained by the Head Teacher, a guardian, and each student interviewed. All names have been changed.

### *Researcher Effect and the Research Process*

To reduce researcher effect, we sought to minimise social distance between ourselves and our participants. This approach was influenced by Ferguson's (2000) ethnographic work. Here, Ferguson aligned herself with students, distancing herself from teaching and administrative staff. This approach enabled her to develop a level of trust with students, providing a richness of data usually unobtainable in school settings. We facilitated this approach by dressing similarly to the students, wearing jeans and shirts bought from River Island or Topman, and we styled our hair as they did, too. We talked about the same television shows they enjoyed (e.g. *Skins* and *Family Guy*), and we did not refrain from swearing or talking about sex.

In order to further earn student trust and respect, we participated in rule-breaking behaviours, such as spontaneously playing volleyball in the common room and overlooking students copying homework. Our acceptance was also made easier because many students asked the first author (who is white and middle class) about his recent undergraduate experiences at the local university, while the second author (also white and middle class) found participants to be particularly interested in his California heritage and residence of 'Orange County' (the subject of a popular youth television programme). His unfamiliarity with British culture also provided him the opportunity to ask questions about the assumed norms at Standard High, about which the students seemed to take particular interest in discussing.

While we appreciate the complexity and intricacy of engaging with sixth form students, recognising that there were still palpable differences between us and them,

we believe that we were regarded in good manner by a wide range of students (cf. Davies 1999). This is supported through observing that students invited us to social activities away from school (running, playing sports, musical events, and even to the local pub for drinks or to play snooker). And although we did not attend, we were invited to house parties as well.

Still, we recognise that the research process, and the relationship between researchers and students, can have complex and unexpected effects on data (Carspecken 1996; Davies 1999). Accordingly, a thorough methodological account of reflexivity and researcher effect has been produced elsewhere (cf. McCormack 2010). However, we highlight that we took several steps to examine the interactive and self-conscious identities that participants presented in the research. We reflexively examined our position (as adult researchers) when we met for data analysis sessions (Davies 1999), and we considered each other's personal influences that are implicated in any analysis of data.

Finally, we investigated the extent to which participants acted differently when researchers were present, as students can have hidden motives for their engagement with adults. Willis (1977), for example, documents the ways school-aged boys actively 'wind up' teachers, knowingly altering their self-presentation. With this in mind, we checked on the extent to which participants may have agentially misrepresented the levels of homophobic discourse and tactile intimacy that we found in this school. We verified the actions of participants in two ways. First, we spoke with two key participants about our findings (Carspecken 1996). We even strategically presented some untrue findings to check that these students were willing to contest us. Both students disagreed with the false findings, so we trusted their input in helping us develop our themes. Second, we spoke to members of staff who spent

time with students but maintained little authority over them. This comprised of three women who worked in the common room lunch area, as well as two cleaners and the caretaker. All six adults said that they noticed no difference in how the students behaved in researcher presence or absence, and the ‘lunch ladies’ independently confirmed the increased tactility (in recent years) between boys at Standard High.

### *Coding and Analysis*

It is our perception that having two researchers in the field not only facilitated a broader and deeper collection of data, but also strengthened the thematic coding and analysis of events (cf. May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000). We met for data collaboration and interpretation sessions several times daily. Here, we discussed our joint and independent observations in private, frequently interrogating each other’s interpretations. We argue that this approach provided a more thorough and valid investigation of the multiple meanings and interpretations of the social events at Standard High—compared to having just one researcher in the field.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and then coded independently by each researcher using a constant-comparative method of emerging themes (Goetz and LeCompte 1981). These codes were then compared to improve the validity of our analysis. Although we researched both boys and girls, in this article we restrict our discussion to the gendered behaviours and attitudes of boys. We also limit our analysis of race and class. This is because the analytic lenses of sexuality and gender provided the most fruitful coding of data, and this restriction also served to control the already extensive scope of this article.

### *Situating Standard High*

Standard High, situated seven miles from a major British city in the south of England, draws students primarily from the 15,000 residents of Standard town. Although there are 1,300 students, the sixth form has approximately 200 (aged 16-18) of which about half are boys. The school was strategically selected because of its demographic similarity to the population of England: the students reflect the race and class profile of the country as a whole. Ninety percent of the students are White British and the remaining ten percent are near evenly split between Polish, Black British and Asian British. The scholastic achievement rankings of the school rest at the median of England's formalised testing results. Finally, this "mixed [co-educational] community comprehensive school" represents the most common type of school in the United Kingdom. Accordingly, we call it 'Standard High' because we find no unique factors that should lead to atypical gendered behaviours; however, this does not mean our findings can be generalised to all schools.

Middle class norms prevailed at Standard High. We found two reasons for this. First, Kehily and Pattman (2006) show sixth forms are often sites where students strive to construct and maintain middle class identities, and this may be occurring at Standard High. Second, most of the students are middle class, with only some coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, class does not appear to affect friendship groups at Standard High, and a class-focused analysis did not prove to be a particularly productive coding of data. However, we recognise the *implicit* importance of class and at Standard High, pointing out that the majority of our participants' are *principally privileged*.

The great majority of male students at Standard High are white, middle class and heterosexual. This means they do not struggle with the stratification of class,

sexuality and race as others might. For example, Taylor (2007: 350) shows how working class lesbian students experience a “double deviance” because their class and sexuality stand in opposition to dominant school discourses. Accordingly, we highlight that most of our participants’ heterosexual masculinities are inextricably linked to their privileged class and race positions. It is the dominant, neutralised position of our principally privileged participants that make them an interesting and important group to study.

### **Challenging Homophobia**

The boys at Standard High stand firmly against homophobia. 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 (cf. Pascoe 2007; Plummer 1999). 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.

Supporting data comes from Jack, an openly gay student at Standard High's sixth form. Jack said that he did not feel subordinated by his peers. He said that while he was bullied "a little" with homophobic discourse in earlier years, it did not happen in the sixth form. "I like it here. The other guys are cool with it. I've got my friends, and nobody is bothered". While Jack only had two close friends, he insisted this was because he spent most of his time in the library, not because he is gay. "I'm a quiet guy. That's just who I am", he said.

Many of the boys at Standard High were keen to be inclusive of Jack. For example, Craig told us he once felt bad seeing Jack sitting alone on a coach. Knowing how shy Jack was, he summoned two friends, and together the boys sat with Jack for the rest of their journey.

This 'gay-friendly' environment even appears to be the case for younger students. Alex (14) told us that he has no problems whatsoever being openly gay in Standard's lower school. And while Alex and Jack's views do not stand as an objective measure of equality, they do speak to a lessening of homophobia when compared to interviews of gay students from this same school a few years ago.

In order to conditionally explore whether there had been a declining culture of homophobia at Standard High, we interviewed three former gay students: Luke (24) and Matt (22), who were closeted at Standard High, and Tim (20), who was openly gay when he attended the school. The informants were located through existing social networks of current students, and they make a case for decreasing homophobia at Standard High.

Luke argued that homophobia prevented him from coming out: "There was just no way I would have come out then. Are you kidding"? Matt, who was also closeted at school, was more ambivalent about levels of homophobia: "My friends

probably would have been fine, but I wouldn't exactly have been supported. Some guys were pretty homophobic". However, Tim said that homophobia impacted less on his school experience. "When I came out, it was a bit of an issue at first, but most kids were fine with it". In addition to their different feelings about coming out, Luke (the oldest) said there was frequent and vicious use of homophobic language when he was at Standard High, while Matt and Tim report hearing less. These narratives suggest there has been a withering away of homophobia in the school in recent years, and that we have not just stumbled on a unique group of students. Results from these interviews cannot be stated absolutely, but they suggest decreasing homophobia within this particular setting.

We emphasise that we are discussing overt homophobia. This includes the marginalisation of gay students, the use of homophobic discourse, and negative attitudes about gay men. And, according to these measures, it is *homophobia* that was stigmatised at Standard High. Thus, rather than homophobia being an integral part of masculinity the way Kimmel (1994) describes, Standard High's students instead argued that homophobia is a sign of immaturity.

### **Limited Heterosexual Recuperation**

Previous research on the gendered terrain of acceptable masculine behaviours has shown that when boys transgress heteromale boundaries, they are policed by homosexualising and homophobic discourse (Plummer 1999). Thus, when heterosexual boys 'inappropriately' touch or relate, they normally find it necessary to publicly defend their heterosexuality through homophobia and/or other heterosexualising behaviours (Nayak and Kehily 1996; Kehily 2002). Unique to this



study, however, boys were extremely tactile with each other, and there was limited heterosexual recuperation among Standard High's students.

An example of conquestial heterosexual recuperation came from Chris, who was known for his provocative humour. Between lessons, Chris asked if Tom Cruise is gay. Jack responded, "I don't know, but there is a really funny clip of him talking about Scientology on the Internet". Chris replied, "I'm still on the Jenna Jameson one". Here, Chris employed the common knowledge that this is a female porn star, thus framing himself as heterosexual.

However, the most prolific use of heterosexual recuperation at Standard High came through irony. Providing an example of this, Joe and Matt (two of the most popular students) walked up to a group of boys congregated in the centre of the common room. Joe stood behind Matt, hugging him around the neck. Joe then lowered his arms to Matt's waist, and rested his head on Matt's shoulders. A moment later, Joe jumped up and down, energetically shouting, "I'm horny! Let's wrestle! I'm horny"! Matt laughed and fell to the ground, squashing Joe beneath him. The boys lay motionless for a few seconds before Matt got up and then helped Joe to his feet.

We interpret this as the recuperation of heterosexuality through ironic behaviours, also suggesting that the tactility of the hug, and lack of overt homophobia, distance it from orthodox forms of heterosexual boundary management. We understand both students to be socially identified as heterosexual, because Joe had a girlfriend and Matt was known for having had casual sex with multiple girls.

Another example of ironic recuperation came when Jim, an extroverted boy, gave Baz several presents for his birthday. About twenty-five students were gathered to watch Baz open the gifts and blow out the cake's candle. Halfway through, Baz became emotionally overwhelmed by his best friend's generosity. He stood and

hugged Jim, embracing him in front of the crowd. When another boy said, “that’s sweet”, Jim performed for the crowd, exclaiming, “I’m turned on. I’m turned on”. Everyone laughed with him, but the boys did not unlock their embrace for another few seconds.

This highlights how ironic heterosexual recuperation permits an expanded (but still limited) level of emotional and physical intimacy. In shouting “I’m turned on”, Baz and Jim (who did not maintain high levels of popularity) were not regulated by others for their intimacy. However, the boys nonetheless limited their own heterosexual intimacy by employing ironic recuperation.

These examples are not the only situations in which boys were physically intimate; far from it. Instead, it seems that these students were able to relate, emote, and even act in ways once only afforded to boys with high masculine and sporting capital. Thus, as inclusive masculinity theory predicts, without the policing agent of homophobic stigma, physical closeness becomes an important, normalised, and expected element of everyday life.

### **Intimacy in the Absence of Heterosexual Recuperation**

The tactility of these 16-18 year old boys was apparent the moment one entered the common room. For example, one afternoon, Adi was sitting with his legs resting on Ryan’s lap. Ryan played with Adi’s laces, not destructively tying knots, but rather gently tying and untying his shoe. Adjacent to them, Sam sat in Liam’s lap, talking with Baz, who slowly and tenderly stroked Rhys’s leg. His hand traced up and down Rhys’ thigh. There was no apparent reason for this touching, except to serve as a sign of affection. Importantly, heterosexual recuperation did not accompany any of their behaviours, and others did not police them, either.

This analysis also extended to conversations. For example, one day Jon asked Sam (who was wearing shorts), “Have you been shaving your legs”? Sam replied, “No. I’ve got hair, it’s just blond”. In order to investigate, Jon moved closer, running his hand up and down Sam’s leg. “They look good”, he said. The discussion then attracted Ant’s attention, who confirmed, “They do look good”.

Another time, Oli stroked the back of Nick’s hair, gently rubbing the nape of his neck as he discussed Nick’s bad attempt at hair dyeing. Steve also touched Nick’s hair, saying, “Yeah, it’s really dry”. Nick responded, “I know. I had to put loads of conditioner in it”! None of this raised homosexualising or feminising sentiment among their peers.

Highlighting the normalcy of such emotional and physical intimacy, Ben and Lee, who did not maintain high levels of popularity, were standing in a corner of the common room. As they talked, they held fingertips. Ben then moved his head towards Lee’s ear, speaking to him for about a minute. His mouth was so close that it appeared his lips were touching Lee’s ear. Halfway through, Ben changed his embrace, placing an arm around Lee’s waist, and a hand on Lee’s stomach. As easily as these behaviours could have been coded as gay, there was no evidence to suggest that the students coded them as such.

With the exception of Jack and Oli (discussed later), all of our interactions with participants suggested that the boys at Standard High were considered heterosexual by their peers. Accordingly, coding their homosocial tactility as an expression or indication of sexual desire is problematic for several reasons, including that one would have to assume that almost all of the boys at Standard High maintained same-sex desire. Thus, a more reasonable explanation is that these boys were enjoying

the emotional and behavioural intimacy afforded to them in an environment free of explicit homophobia, the way inclusive masculinity theory predicts.

We also note that while many boys had sexualised discussions about girls, boys who did not present hyper-heterosexual versions of themselves were not stigmatised for their lack of overt heterosexuality. For example, Steve attended a costume party, where a girl offered him oral sex. His friends told us that he declined the offer, and one said, “he couldn’t be bothered to take his costume off”. Yet when telling us this story, none of the boys questioned Steve’s heterosexuality. Affirming this, later that afternoon, Steve walked past a group of boys and one called out to him, “Mr Lazy”. While Steve was clearly being made fun of, he was not homosexualised for rejecting heterosexual sex. Furthermore, Steve did not attempt to recuperate his heterosexuality in front of his peers.

Oli is the only student who is suspected to be gay by some of his peers. In a common room conversation, Ant asked James and Adi if they think Oli might be gay. Ant said, “I don’t think he is. I just wondered”. Adi replied, “Well he could be, I suppose. But he’d tell us if he was”. James agreed, and said, “Yeah, why wouldn’t he”? We note, however, that (to our knowledge) none of the boys ever asked Oli about his sexuality.

It is also important to note that the boys’ questioning of Oli’s sexuality did not seem to affect their interaction with him. For example, Ant was talking with Oli who, for no apparent reason, leaned across and kissed Ant on the cheek. Ant lurched away, and (through laughter and a smile) said, “Stop that”. Oli momentarily raised his eyebrows, and then returned Ant’s smile. The two boys then continued with their conversation. While Ant’s telling Oli to “stop that” was a form of heterosexual boundary maintenance (particularly when coupled with moving his head away), it is

noteworthy that Ant did not use heterosexual recuperation, nor did he stigmatise Oli for his behaviour. When we asked Ant later if he was bothered by the kiss, he said that he was not: “It just took me by surprise”.

The homosocial tactility these heterosexual boys exhibited is notably different from what scholars might expect. However, these types of interactions appeared to represent the norm for boys at Standard High. Further supporting the radically different esteemed masculine behaviours, there were no physical altercations during the entire school year. We suspect this is because in this inclusive social zeitgeist, there are few transgressions for which physical regulation is necessary.

### **Discussion**

Previous research on school cultures has argued that boys’ gendered behaviours are socially and institutionally structured into a restrictive heteromasculine ethos that is heavily policed by homophobic discourse (Nayak and Kehily 1996). As such, gay identities have been stigmatised, curricula discussions of homosexuality silenced, and gay students socially excluded within school settings (cf. Epstein and Johnson 1998). This same body of research shows that boys must act in aggressive, homophobic and misogynistic ways if they wish to maintain heteromascularity among peers (cf. Mac an Ghail 1994). However, our research offers a counterpoint to this understanding of masculine identity construction.

We find that heterosexual boys in one sixth form in the south of England are able to associate with gay students, to be physically tactile and emotionally intimate with other boys, and to discuss once-feminised topics without recourse to homophobic discourse; all without being homosexualised for their behaviours. Indeed, male-to-

male physical and emotional expressions of affection were an integral and daily part of school life at Standard High.

At first, we looked to explain these behaviours through social capital, thinking that this could buy immunity for some boys (Anderson 2005a; Pascoe 2003). However, our participant observations showed that tactility was not limited to boys of any one definable group. Instead, regardless of their popularity, and without the implication of same-sex desire, homosocial intimacy was present among and between boys of all social groups and masculine archetypes.

These findings have important implications for contemporary theorising of sexuality and masculinity. First, we find inclusive masculinity theory (and not hegemonic masculinity theory) best explains these findings. This is because inclusive masculinity theory suggests that, in a culture of decreased homophobia, physical affection and emotional intimacy between males is acceptable.

Second, even with a decrease in homophobia and its corresponding expansion of acceptable gendered behaviours, it appears that heterosexuality is *more* consolidated in this setting. Elaborating on this, scholars researching settings with high homophobia explicate the fragmented and precarious nature of heterosexual identity construction and maintenance, suggesting that just one gender transgression can homosexualise a boy (Anderson 2008; Nayak and Kehily 1996; Pascoe 2007). Yet, at Standard High, boys are socially perceived to be gay only if they publicly identify as such. Thus, in this setting, decreased homophobia strengthens the boundaries of heterosexual identity, while simultaneously permitting individuals to move outside of them. This means that decreased homophobia does not necessarily result in a dissipation of sexual identities.

The absence of overt homophobia in this setting permits new theorising about the boundary making practices of heterosexuality. Accordingly, we identify heterosexual recuperation as the chief mechanism for maintaining heterosexual boundaries without invoking homophobia. We highlight, however, that heterosexual recuperation continues to privilege heterosexuality, implicitly marginalising gay identities. Furthermore, while we demarcate our focus to *overt* homophobia in this research, we suggest that it would be a mischaracterisation to label the privileging of heterosexuality we document as covert homophobia. This is because, following Plummer (1999, p. 134), we interpret the term ‘covert homophobia’ to imply an intent on behalf of participants of which we have no evidence. Indeed, this research shows that the privileging of heterosexuality can exist even in a group of youth who are opposed to homophobia.

We believe that the consolidation of a heterosexual identity in this setting, alongside the new forms of heterosexual boundary making, warrants a shift in analysis from studying forms of homophobia to investigating heteronormativity in school settings (Ferfolja 2007). Limited scholarship exists on the examination of heteronormativity in educational settings (cf. Atkinson and DePalma 2009; Ferfolja 2007), and this tends to focus on the exclusion of gay students in schools (cf. Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). Yet it is necessary to focus on how heteronormativity affects heterosexual students as well. As Jackson (2006, p. 117) writes, “heteronormative assumptions interconnect with the institutionalisation of heterosexuality and also shape the doing of heterosexuality and being and becoming heterosexual”. We have shown in this article how heterosexual recuperation maintains boundaries of heterosexual identities, and can even permeate a setting where overt homophobia is absent. Accordingly, we argue that scholars need to examine how

heteronormativity regulates both heterosexual and gay students to fully understand its power.

We have not focused on class and race in this article because they do not explicitly impact on these participants the way sexuality and gender do. However, we highlight that this is because of the principally privileged position of our participants, and we emphasise that their lived experiences are inherently and inescapably bound to their class and race. Accordingly, these findings are situated within the privileged white, middle class discourses that prevail at Standard High.

Given debates regarding the north/south divide in English culture (cf. Nayak and Kehily 2008), it is also necessary to emphasise the contextual specificity of Standard High as existing in the south of England. Still, within these confines, we cannot think of outstanding reasons why the inclusive behaviours of these boys should be radically different from male students in similar sixth forms in this part of the country. There has been no comprehensive gay sensitivity training program, no openly gay teachers, and no other known *institutional* reason to explain the pro-gay attitudes and elevated rates of homosocial friendliness that these boys maintained (cf. McCormack 2010). While we need to be careful in making generalisations from this ethnography, these factors indicate that we have not somehow stumbled upon an exceptional case.

While we are unaware of other research documenting such extensive pro-gay attitudes in a sixth form setting, we highlight that recent research speaks to a marked improvement in attitudes toward homosexuality among other groups of British youth (Anderson 2009; McNair 2002; Weeks 2007). Nayak and Kehily (2008) suggest that global culture is producing new spaces and inciting different youthful subjectivities that give rise to new expressions of gender. We hypothesise that the rise in feminised



masculine behaviours may be partly attributable to the increasing media presence of metrosexuality (Coad 2008), and the increasingly positive attitudes toward gay men found more generally in British culture (Anderson 2009; McNair 2002; Weeks 2007). Accordingly, our research highlights that new forms of heterosexual masculinities are present at least in this school, and it beckons researchers to examine for these issue in other locations.

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### **Endnotes**

1. We understand discourse in the Foucauldian sense as a systematic set of practices that form the object under discussion.
2. While the concept of homophobia has been critiqued for its psychologising tendencies, we find its sociological use continues to maintain heuristic utility (Kimmel 1994; Plummer 1999).