"I Don't Want to Make Them Uncomfortable":

A Micro-Scale Examination of Emotional and Physical Boundaries Within Male Friendship

Mara Rosenberg and Jack Thornton
Class of 2017, Sociology

In recent years, masculinity scholars have theoretically linked heightened levels of emotional and physical intimacy within friendships among young straight men to a perceived decline in cultural homophobia. However, other researchers have questioned the degree to which an increase in transgressions of physical boundaries that were once more strictly coded as homosexual—such as cuddling, holding hands, and kissing—constitutes a tangible decline in homophobia. In response to some of these theoretical and empirical concerns, we elected to investigate the impact of these "changing" dynamics among straight men on the lived experiences of gay men. Using a qualitative approach, we conducted, transcribed, and analyzed semi-structured interviews with five gay male and five straight male undergraduate students. The interviews focused on participants' friendships with other men and how their friendships with straight men and gay men differed. Upon completing our analyses of the interviews, we found that most of the gay men in our study sensed a prevailing degree of apprehension about their sexuality from their straight male friends, a barrier that the straight men we interviewed did not claim to detect.

Introduction

Recent research in the field of masculinity studies highlights the changing dynamics of male friendship, particularly with regard to the physical and emotional boundaries between men. Anderson (2009) and McCormack (2012) have received considerable attention from scholars and the media for their work on the subject, which connects a decline in explicit homophobia to a growth in the range of the possibilities for emotional bonding among men. These two sociologists have emphasized the prevalence of pro-gay attitudes and heightened levels of emotional and physical intimacy between young heterosexual men, who ostensibly no longer fear being called "gay" in a disparaging manner for expressing affection towards their male friends. However, other scholars have critiqued the notion that homophobia has declined simply because young men now maintain more intimate relationships with one another and in some contexts engage in behaviors, such as cuddling, holding hands, and kissing, that were once socially coded as homosexual. The work of McCormack (2012) in particular prompted the present study. We question the degree to which McCormack critically analyzed the data he provides. In a study that purports to focus on the decline of homophobia, we take issue with the primacy he gives the experiences of straight men. The developments he documents seem largely to constitute an expansion of straight male privilege; he gives little consideration to the impact of "declining homohysteria" and changing dynamics between straight men on the lives of gay men themselves. Seeking to understand the ramifications of these developments in terms of physical and emotional intimacy for friendships between gay men and straight men, we conducted a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with five gay-identified and five straight-identified undergraduate men on their experiences with male friendship. While the straight men in our study did not view a homosexual orientation as a barrier to friendship, most of the gay men sensed a prevailing degree of apprehensiveness about their homosexuality from many of their straight male friends. Upon further questioning, we uncovered the presence of conversational and physical barriers related to the sexual difference between the men in our study, suggesting that homophobia may have simply changed in nature rather than vanished wholesale as McCormack (2012) suggests.

Methods

In order to best capture the intricacies of male friendship, we elected to develop an interview guide and conduct semi-structured interviews with five straight men and five gay men. Semi-structured interviews allowed us to develop a consistent basis for questioning through-

out all of our interviews while enabling us to freely probe participants for elaboration on their varied experiences with male friendship. This tactic yielded richer answers than a survey or a structured interview would have yielded, but also ensured a greater degree of regularity between different interviews than an unstructured interview might have permitted. We based our interview guide on an interview guide published in the appendix of an article by Anderson, Adams, and Rivers (2012) but also added our own questions intended to allude to important concepts from the literature, such as ironic and conquestial recuperation (McCormack 2012). We designed the interview guide to include three thematic sets of questions. We began with an overview of male friendship in a broad sense before focusing on the emotional and physical boundaries within participants' male friendships, and then concluded the guide with more direct questions about sexuality and its impact on male friendships. In the first set of questions, we asked participants to define a close friend, to describe their closest group of friends, to explain what they liked to do and talk about with their close friends, to characterize their male friendships, and to tell us more about a particular friendship of theirs with a gay man and a particular friendship with a straight man. To transition into the second set of questions, we asked participants if they believed that their straight male friends were as comfortable with gay men as they were with straight men, and then followed by asking them to describe the emotional intimacy and physical contact they engaged in with their male friends. We then asked if these dynamics differed between their friendships with gay men and their friendships with straight men. The final set of questions focused most explicitly on the subject of sexuality. We asked participants if sexual identity came up as a conversation topic among their friends, if they discussed their sexual encounters with their gay and straight male friends, if they encountered any sexual tension in their male friendships, and if they had known their straight male friends to engage in sexual experimentation with other men and, if so, how this behavior was received. We concluded the interview by asking participants if they had anything to add about the nature of friendship among gay and straight men. To recruit our participants, we developed a short and confidential eligibility survey that we posted on the Facebook groups for the Grinnell College classes of 2016-2019 as well as a Facebook group intended for queer-identified Grinnell students. The survey asked respondents to list their gender identity; sexual orientation; and approximate number of straight male, gay male, straight female, and gay female friends. At the end of the survey, we asked respondents if they would be willing to participate in a confidential in-person follow-up interview about their experiences with friendship and if they preferred a male or female interviewer. We concluded by asking respondents for their email addresses so that we could contact them. We received forty-nine survey responses, and twenty of those respondents met the eligibility criteria for our study. We selected five straight men and five gay men to interview. Jack interviewed three of the gay men, while Mara interviewed two gay men and all five straight men. We confirmed that they consented to being audio recorded and then recorded and conducted the interviews using the guide we developed. Interviews lasted twenty to fifty minutes. After completing all the interviews, we transcribed each one and then analyzed each transcript, paying particular attention to recurring themes as well as the similarities and differences in how gay and straight men responded to our interview questions.

Literature Review

Scholars from various academic fields, such as anthropology, history, philosophy, sociology, and social psychology, have extensively studied the nature of friendship, a type of personal relationship between that involves platonic mutual affection. Relationship researchers define intimate or "close" friendship as a "voluntary, non-sexual relationship that consists of sharing personal information and concerns, expressing affection both verbally and physically, providing understanding and support, and openly expressing feelings" (McRoy 1990:36). As Nardi (1999) states, "Friendship appears, as forcefully as any human behavior, at the intersection of self and society where the individual and the community reside" (13). Sociologists tend to emphasize the importance of social and economic structures over personal characteristics in their studies of friendship and to conceptualize friendships as interactional. Allan (1998) states, "While friendships are rightly seen as being constructed through the actions of individuals, these actions are not in some sense 'free-floating,' but are inevitably bound to the social and economic environment in which they are being created" (687). Elements of individuals' social locations, such as gender and class, therefore affect how they define and experience friendship.

Within twenty-first century patriarchal American society, male and female individuals enact and navigate friendships differently due to the socially constructed

nature of their respective sex categories. Because male socialization compels men to equate emotional self-expression with weakness, their friendships with one another tend to stem from shared interests and focus less on "intimate self-disclosure and mutual help and support," which women often emphasize (Nardi 1999:39). As a result, men "rate the meaningfulness of and satisfaction with their same-sex friendships lower than women do" (Nardi 1999:40). When men spend time together, they primarily "exhibit … activity-centeredness and task orientation" in lieu of discussing the details of their personal and emotional lives (Reid and Fine 1992:134; Fee 2000). Cultural conceptions of masculinity prescribe self-sufficiency and independence for American men, two values that conflict with the personal self-disclosure and reciprocal support involved in more "intimate" friendships (Seidler 1992:20). While men tend to consider their mixed-sex friendships more intimate than their same-sex friendships, women find their same-sex friendships to be closer (Nardi 1999). In homosocial contexts, men find that "sharing seems to prove [their] inadequacy as men [because] it can show a failure to be able to deal with [their] lives on [their] own" (Seidler 1992:24). Many men refrain from "opening up" to other men out of fear that their friends will not welcome or reciprocate their vulnerability (Reid and Fine 1992). Instead, men prefer female friends for these more intimate conversations, if they have them at all (Reid and Fine 1992). For many men, their inability to forge honest and communicative friendships with other men constitutes a source of tremendous pain, though the open discussion of such pain would be antithetical to established norms of masculinity.

From a sociological standpoint, the reluctance and difficulty men experience with regard to intimacy in their friendships can be further linked to contemporary theoretical perspectives on masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity theory "articulates the social processes by which a masculine hierarchy is created and legitimized" and asserts that while multiple forms of masculinity exist, "one form is culturally esteemed above all the others" (McCormack 2012:37). Critical sociologists, such as Schwalbe (2014), also understand the institution of gender as an inherently oppressive system of power relations and conceptualize masculinity as a collection of dominative practices. McRoy (1990) states that masculinity as well as friendship rituals among men find their roots in anti-femininity, the "devaluation of stereotypically feminine values, attitudes, and behaviors" (36). To uphold the hegemonic form of masculinity and maintain the power and privilege associat-

ed with manhood in a patriarchal society, men (and women) must engage in a collective form of misogyny that ties women to intimacy and therefore weakness, meaning "real men" must distance themselves from intimate expression.

Given the primacy of heterosexuality and the sexual domination of women as components of contemporary Western masculinities, homophobia constitutes an additional outgrowth of the devaluation of the feminine through the linkage of physical and emotional intimacy between men to the "weakness" that men must disavow. In this sense, the gendered expectations that encourage women to develop emotionally intimate friendships with one another simultaneously preclude men from engaging in affectionate behavior or using affectionate language with one another, as it conflicts with the heterosexual mandate of the current hegemonic form of masculinity. In any given culture, the prevalence of anti-femininity tends to correlate with homohysteria, the fear of being labeled homosexual (McRoy 1990; Anderson 2009:7). Boys and men may enact a form of hypermasculinity that involves homophobic language and (potentially violent) behaviors due to a fear of being labeled homosexual and thus feminine, weak, and somehow "not a man" (Allen 2014). While prominent institutions of homosociality in American society, such as athletics and college fraternities, represent an opportunity for men to socialize and engage in a form of camaraderie, these institutions must temper that intimacy to eschew the possibility of homosexualization, which, through an association with femininity, would undermine the collective power of men (Hartmann 2003). These spaces tend to breed anti-femininity by diminishing traits associated with femininity and thereby reifying (heterosexual) male supremacy (Messner 1990). Seidler (1992) also suggests that these institutions, especially sports, can cause men to view each other as competitors, further limiting their ability to express vulnerability to one another. Therefore, the reification of patriarchy comes at the substantial expense of emotional intimacy among men.

Unlike straight men, who more adequately meet the standards of contemporary Western hegemonic masculinity by virtue of their heterosexuality, gay men tend to draw on their friendships with each other for strength in the face of homophobia on both societal and individual levels. For gay men, their friends may replace family members who have rejected them due to their sexual orientation (Nardi 1999). Many gay men use familial language, such as "brother" or "father," with one another and describe their larger friend group as their "chosen family" (Nardi 1999). Because gay men cannot fulfill the hetero-

sexual mandate that accompanies contemporary hegemonic, Western masculinity, they face a weaker imperative to uphold the negative conflation of intimacy with femininity and enjoy the freedom to indulge their capacities for stereotypically "feminine" emotions and behaviors (McRoy 1990). Gay men threaten hegemonic masculinity because they "expose the falsity of the notion that femininity is weak" (Anderson 2009:106). However, while some gay men may undermine patriarchy by rejecting the devaluation of feminine traits, many gay men also uphold oppressive institutions through the means by which they enact friendship (Nardi 1999). Rather than critiquing heteronormative constructions, such as "marriage" and "family," many gay men actively seek out and reproduce these institutions, as evidenced by their reinterpretation of friendship grounded in familial language (Lannutti 2005). While gay male friendship may subvert some cultural norms, the mainstream gay community often espouses an assimilationist view towards LGBT rights, further illuminating the complex interplay of large-scale social structures on the experiences of (particularly gay) men.

As homosexuality becomes increasingly acceptable in American society, friendships between straight men and openly gay men will likely become increasingly common. Anderson (2009) has documented a decline in cultural homohysteria; his body of work will be more extensively engaged below. However, the existence of friendship between gay and straight men does not necessarily indicate the absence of homophobia or some form of sexual inequality. Fee (2003) shows that straight men value their close friendships with gay men and often consider these friendships one of their greatest sources of intimacy. Despite the importance of these friendships, heterosexual men do not always know much about their friends' experiences as gay men, such as "what contradictions they encounter, how they undergo marginalization, [and] what struggles around identity they might experience" (Fee 2003:48). Gay and straight men may still enjoy meaningful friendships with one another, and both groups often describe these relationships as intimate and fulfilling (Fee 2003:51). Nevertheless, while straight men may attain a degree of intimacy with their gay friends that they might not share with straight friends, gay men are often unable to be as "open" with their straight friends as they are with their other gay male friends.

In a more detailed examination of friendship between straight and gay men, Price (1999) details three distinct levels of friendship between gay and straight men. In the shallowest level of her framework, "struggling with differences," the gay and straight men in the friendship have little respect for each other's sexualities (114). This level mostly applies to work friends or casual acquaintances; the lack of mutual trust precludes any emotional intimacy. She terms the next and most common level "ignoring differences" (74). Men in this stage consider each other close friends but rarely discuss their sexualities or sex lives, particularly the sex life of the gay man. At this level, the straight men tend to be oblivious to the tensions in the relationship, whereas the gay men sense their straight friends' discomfort with their sexuality. Gay men in this stage do not feel included in their straight friends' larger group of friends, usually comprising other straight men. Straight men in this stage are often more open with their gay friends than with their straight friends, but gay men tend to be less open with their straight friends than with other gay men. Price titles the final and most intimate level of friendship "embracing differences." In these relationships, "Their sexual identities are no more or less a part of their friendship than they are in each man's life" (Price 1999:27). Both parties feel comfortable expressing their sexuality in front of each other. These kinds of friendships mirror the dynamic more commonly shared between two gay men and include the freedom to discuss any topic, physical and verbal affection, and a significant involvement in each other's lives. Rather than experiencing their sexual difference as a barrier or source of conflict, these men "allow sexual differences to enrich friendship" (Price 1999:49). Given the significant advances of the gay rights movement in the sixteen years since Price published her book, the state of friendship between straight and gay men warrants reexamination.

The field of masculinity studies has also progressed in the last two decades since the debut of hegemonic masculinity theory. Anderson (2009) has received considerable attention from scholars and journalists for his research on the changing nature of contemporary masculinity. His theory of inclusive masculinity builds on the concept of hegemonic masculinity by suggesting, "As the level of homohysteria [within a culture] declines, the mandates of the hegemonic form of masculinity hold less cultural sway" (McCormack 2012:45). Rather than constructing one form of masculinity as dominant above all other forms, Anderson describes "inclusive and orthodox" masculinities, neither of which maintain cultural control in an era of decreased homohysteria (McCormack 2012:45). Orthodox masculinity "is framed in terms of a macho and 'traditional' response to homosexuality whereby homophobic narratives are openly voiced

and males assert dominance over each oth-er through the fear of homosexual stigma" (De Boise 2015:320). In contrast, inclusive masculinity "not only tolerates homosexual identities but also openly affirms and, in some cases, incorporates practices and performances associated with subordinated subject positions into its construction" (De Boise 2015:320). Citing Anderson (2009), McCormack (2012) concludes, "When a culture is no longer homohysteric, there will be a marked expansion in the range of permissible behaviors for boys and men" (45). Anderson has extensively documented these expanded behaviors in his other work. Anderson (2009) argues that men "are distancing themselves from the corporeal pissing contest of muscularity, hyper-heterosexuality, and masculinity that [he] grew up with during the mid-1980s" (153). Drawing primarily on the experiences of white, middle-class undergraduate athletes, Anderson documents heightened levels of homosocial tactility, including cuddling (Anderson and McCormack 2014), kissing (Anderson, Adam, and Rivers 2012), and increasing "pro-gay" attitudes and language (Anderson 2011). McCormack (2012), who received his Ph.D. at the University of Bath under the mentorship of Anderson, echoes these findings in his ethnographic study of three British high schools and documents the near-complete absence of explicit homohysteria at "Standard High," attributing this phenomenon to a perceived decline in cultural homophobia. Despite the optimism of this research, major theoretical concerns surround the application of McCormack's framework to the study of masculinity.

Scholars have extensively critiqued inclusive masculinity theory, and the validity of McCormack's (2012) research in particular invites a more rigorous appraisal. De Boise (2015) thoroughly disputes how Anderson and McCormack understand hegemonic masculinity theory by "frequently [referring] to hegemonic masculinity as a type of person or an archetype rather than a web of gendered configurations" (323). In contrast, "hegemonic practices, in order to be legitimated, must correspond to institutional privilege and power, which have no basis in nature and are subject to change" (324). Hegemonic masculinity theory conceives of masculinity as a "historically mobile relation," leading De Boise to question why Anderson and McCormack argue for the inadequacy of the theory during periods of low homohysteria (324). Most vitally, "it may be the case that what Anderson calls 'inclusive' is just another hegemonic strategy for some heterosexual, white, middle-class men to legitimately maintain economic, social, and political power in the wake of gay rights" (324). De Boise also contends with the "[conflation of] certain same-sex practices with homosexuality–something queer theorists have gone to great lengths to disavow," which problematically implies that "because straight-identifying men are able to kiss or touch each other in a 'nonsexual' way in some contexts … there is an overall decline in the social stigma attached to individuals who identify as homosexual" (330).

On this note, we endeavor to understand the degree to which social stigma towards gay-identified men still exists in the context of an elite American liberal arts college through a qualitative look at the friendships of gay and straight undergraduate men. The work of Anderson and McCormack privileges the experiences of straight men over gay or bisexual men, despite their claim to focus on the "declining nature" of homophobia. Moreover, neither scholar employs a particularly critical lens when analyzing the phenomena they document, readily accepting the pro-gay attitudes that their participants espouse at face value. For example, McCormack (2012) develops the concept of heterosexual recuperation, whereby straight boys reaffirm their sexual identity after engaging in behaviors that may potentially be read as homosexual. "Conquestial recuperation" involves bragging about heterosexual encounters, while "ironic recuperation" involves the ironic or satirical expression of same-sex desire or identity (McCormack 2012:91-92). McCormack fails to interpret this second form of recuperation as potentially homophobic due to the pro-gay attitudes the boys claim to hold. While Anderson and McCormack interpret a documented increase in homosocial tactility and emotional intimacy among straight men as an indicator of declining homophobia, they fail to read these developments as a mere expansion of the range of acceptable behaviors among straight men rather than an advance towards equality for all men.

Results

Based on their responses to our broad questions about the nature of their friendships, the gay and straight men in our study often conceptualized and enacted their friendships in a fairly similar manner. Both groups of men held similar definitions for "close friendship," though the gay men tended to emphasize that their relationships with their close friends must be unconditional and committed. The straight men considered a close friend someone they could "rely on" and "feel at ease with." In contrast, most of the gay men considered a close friend someone they "wouldn't get tired of" and "could text at two in the

morning and they'll come help you." This minor difference speaks to the higher level of intimacy that the gay men we interviewed tended to expect from their close friends in comparison to the straight men we interviewed.

When we asked the men in our study what they liked to do and talk about with their friends, both groups listed similar activities and exhibited comparable variations in their approach to more "sensitive" conversation topics. Straight and gay men alike preferred to "just hang out and talk," party, play video games, and engage in more physical activities, including sports, with their close friends. No consistent trend emerged from either group regarding what they talked about with their friends. Some gay and straight men felt that they could talk about "everything and anything" with their close friends while others felt less inclined to "pry" or "probe" about more sensitive or "personal" matters. While these responses suggest that the men in our study, both gay and straight, tend to enact their friendships with a degree of uniformity, differences began to emerge once we asked them to examine their friendships through the lenses of gender and sexuality.

As we transitioned from questions about friendship in a broad sense to questions intended to probe the dynamics of friendship between gay and straight men, the straight men we interviewed usually downplayed the salience of sexuality in their interactions with gay men, while the gay men acknowledged a level of apprehensiveness from the straight men in their lives. When asked whether their straight friends were as comfortable with gay men as they were with one another, one straight man explained, "I'm not friends with any homophobes. We treat everyone equally." Another added, "I don't think it makes much difference to them, or if it did, I don't think they really notice," which suggests a lack of awareness on the part of many straight men about their conduct and demeanor towards their gay friends. In contrast, all but one of the gay men stated that while most straight men they knew were pretty "open," they still sensed a "residual degree of discomfort." A few of the gay men in our study described a tendency to present themselves "towards the middle" of a spectrum between gay and straight, suggesting a need to downplay their more "feminine" traits during their interactions with straight men. As one gay man elaborated, "I'm a more toned-down version of myself around my [straight] male friends." When asked about the gender distribution of their close friends, the straight men all said they had more male friends. In contrast, most of the gay men stated that they had more female friends in high school though

they had made more close male friends since coming to Grinnell. Most straight men in our study had little to say when asked how they would characterize their male friendships, while the question seemed to resonate more with the gay men we interviewed. The gay men tended to discuss the presence of conversational and physical boundaries when asked about their male friendships, preemptively answering the specific questions we designed to address these topics later in the interview guide.

Given the primacy of emotional and physical intimacy in research on the relationship between the "changing" nature of contemporary masculinity and the "decline" of homophobia by McCormack (2012) and Anderson (2009), we gave these two elements particular consideration in our interview guide and subsequent analysis. The gay men in our study expressed a greater level of comfort discussing their romantic relationships with their female or gay male friends than their straight male friends. As one gay man stated," [My straight male friends] try to see where I'm coming from and they're fine with [my sexual orientation], but they don't have the same experiences. Their [relationship] advice is only valid to a point." The gay men in our study also felt less comfortable talking about "taboo" subjects like sex and sexuality with their straight male friends. When asked if this difficulty prevented him from feeling close to some of his straight male friends, one gay man explained, "It totally does … there's almost a lack of genuineness with some of those friendships." In contrast, several of the straight men in our study reported feeling more comfortable when talking to their gay friends about "sensitive" subjects. As one straight man explained, when talking about his sexual encounters, "I think I get to be a little bit more honest with my gay friends. I get a lack of judgment from them." Another straight man elaborated, "[My gay friend from high school] was a person I could go to because he didn't hold the same hyper-masculine expectations [held by other guys]." On the subject of sexual encounters, the gay and straight men in our study acknowledged inequality regarding how they discussed their hookups with male friends. One straight man explained, "My close gay friend wouldn't talk about hooking up with guys with me … but I would be totally okay with that. I would welcome that because I don't like that he feels reserved about that." For many of the gay men, however, there may be valid reasons for not discussing their hookups with their straight male friends. As one gay man explained:

I can talk about the details of my sexual life with my female friends, but not my male friends, especially my

straight male friends because I feel like they're grossed out by it. They're not homophobic, but they don't really want to hear it. But it's kind of a double standard because I'll hear about things with them and girls.

The same man continued, stating that:

I wouldn't feel comfortable talking to [my straight male friends] about [certain things only gay men can understand]. It's something about my identity that I wouldn't want to share with them because I worry that they wouldn't understand or they would have a s t i g m a against it … They might talk to me about Tinder [a hookup app for people of any gender and sexuality], but I don't think I would bring up Grindr [a hookup app exclusively for gay men].

The other gay men echoed these sentiments. One gay man stated that he uses gender-neutral pronouns when discussing his hookups because he worried that his straight friends might be "judgmental," while another gay man stated, "[Straight friends] might not understand, even if they want to. Subconsciously, gay sex is [gross or] like a joke for a lot of people." Given that most of these boundaries stem from the sexual difference between gay and straight male friends and do not exist between friends of the same sexual orientation, we interpret these experiences as evidence of a reformulation of homophobia, not a decline as Anderson (2009) and McCormack (2012) might.

Although scholars of masculinity and friendship have documented heightened levels of homosocial tactility among heterosexual men, we find a striking discrepancy between the social meanings of same-sex physical contact among straight men and same-sex physical contact between gay and straight men. Most of the straight men said that they felt comfortable hugging, cuddling, or even sleeping in the same bed as their straight friends. However, men in both groups expressed concerns about the nature and potential misinterpretation of expressed affection among male friends of different sexual orientations. Straight men worried about misleading their gay friends into thinking that they had a romantic or sexual interest in them. As one straight man explained, "I've had some reservations about engaging in physical contact with them. [I worry] just generally that I could give the wrong impression." Another straight man "[wouldn't engage in] anything that could be misconstrued as something of a sexual nature" with his gay friends. In general, however, the gay men in our study seemed to have greater reservations about physical contact, suggesting that they might

not feel fully comfortable around their straight friends. As one gay man explained:

Straight men assume that gay men are interested in them, so I don't hug my straight male friends because I don't want them to think that a have a crush or any longing for them even though it's strictly friendly … I don't want to appear like I'm in love with them, and it bothers me that I can't express that affection towards them.

Another gay men stated, "There's a fear that straight friends might misinterpret my actions. The threat of having to have a conversation about that, like clarifying that you're not into them sexually, is enough to make me [not express physical affection]." Regarding the aforementioned subject of ironic recuperation, most straight men in our study did not view such behavior as problematic. One straight man explained that such jokes were acceptable when coming from a straight friend but not a gay friend, indicating an explicit inequity related to the sexual orientation of the man making the joke:

On my way back from Thanksgiving, [to my roommate] I was like, 'Can't wait to see you tomorrow. We're snuggling, right?' And it was a joke. What if I was like 'We're banging tomorrow night?' … So I'm joking that I'm gay, but I don't have a problem with it. … [When a gay teammate of mine made a joke by complimenting my dick in the locker room,] it was crossing the line because I didn't know if he was serious and it made me uncomfortable … I was like, 'Are you serious? Do I need to be wary around you?'"

Other straight men acknowledged seeing or participating in this form of recuperation but felt "neutral" about it and did not view ironic recuperation as "mocking of romantic relationships." In contrast, three of the five gay men took issue with ironic recuperation. As one gay man stated, "It bothers me because it parodies homosexuality and swipes at the legitimacy of my feelings and my relationships." Another gay man added, "It's a terrible joke. It offends me [because] it diminishes or tears down a group that has been stigmatized and oppressed." As with the conversational barriers described above, these disparate interpretations of physical contact between men, whether intended as recuperation or a genuine display of affection, cast doubt on the notion that increased homosocial tactility signals a decline in homophobia.

Conclusion

This study has sought to provide a qualitative look into the present state of male friendship, particularly between gay men and straight men, and to critique and respond to the extant literature, particularly the work of Anderson (2009) and McCormack (2012). In light of our findings about the persistence of physical and conversational boundaries between gay men and straight men, even within the context of close friendship, we take challenge the notion that difference in sexual orientation poses no threat to intimate friendship among men. Instead, we posit that homophobia has merely reformulated rather than disappeared, as some scholars suggest, in an era of increasing social tolerance of homosexuality. As this study demonstrates, tolerance does not necessarily result in the full acceptance of gay men, even within their "close" friendships, by straight men. Based on our interviews, gay and straight men still experience discomfort and tension regarding the social meanings of platonic physical affection between two men, which both groups of men feared might be "misinterpreted" by their male friends of differing sexual orientations. While many gay and straight men might consider one another close friends, gay men frequently regard their struggles related to sexuality as chief among their most fundamental life experiences. In order to overcome this barrier and maximize the potential of their intimate friendships, gay and straight men alike must embrace their differences and challenge the gendered notions of friendship that prevent many men from achieving intimacy with one another.

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