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**The Intersection of Youth Masculinities, Decreasing Homophobia and Class:  
An Ethnography**

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This article examines the emergence of progressive attitudes toward homosexuality among working-class boys in a sixth form in the south of England to develop an intersectional analysis of class, youth masculinities and decreasing homophobia. Drawing on three months of ethnographic data collection, I find that working-class male youth intellectualize pro-gay attitudes and that homophobic language is almost entirely absent from the setting. I document the presence of homosocial tactility, as well as the valuing of friendship and emotional closeness. However, these behaviours are less pronounced than documented among middle-class boys, and I use these findings to advance understanding of how class influences the development of inclusive attitudes and behaviours. Inclusive masculinity theory is used to understand these findings, refining the theory and extending it to a new demographic.

Key words: class, heterosexuality, homophobia, intersectionality, masculinity, youth

Research has traditionally shown that the dominant form of masculinity among British school boys was one that esteemed homophobia, promoted aggression and required the suppression of emotion (Mac an Ghail 1994; Phoenix, Frosh and Pattman 2003). While this view of masculinity has been predominant since the 1980s, a new body of research demonstrates that positive attitudes toward homosexuality have gained considerable traction among heterosexual male youth (Adams 2011; Anderson 2009; McCormack 2012a). This scholarship suggests that a decrease in homophobia results in boys being physically tactile with one another, emotionally open with their male friends, and more inclusive of difference among their peers (Anderson 2008a; McCormack 2011a; McCormack and Anderson 2010).

While including samples of adolescent males from both working and middle-class groups, this research has primarily focused on undergraduate men (Anderson 2009; Anderson, Adams, and Rivers 2012; Peterson 2011). Accordingly, less attention has been paid to the extent to which homophobia is decreasing among working-class youth and the ways in which class and gender intersect to structure the lives of working-class boys in this context. These are significant issues, particularly as some research has suggested this social group maintains elevated rates of homophobia compared to their middle-class peers (Froyum 2007; O'Donnell and Sharpe 2000).

To address this absence, I use a class lens to analyse data from a three-month ethnography at a British sixth form populated by working-class students. I find that no student espoused or intellectualized homophobic attitudes and that this has led to an expansion of gendered behaviours for these boys (cf. Jackson 2006; Way 2011). I theorize these changes using Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory, augmenting it by providing analysis of how class operates as a dampening but not prohibitive factor on the development of more inclusive attitudes and behaviours.

## **Understanding homophobia and school boys**

Schools have traditionally been recognised as socially conservative institutions that reproduce orthodox notions of sexuality (Allen 2007). Dominant discourses about ‘childhood innocence’, the ostensibly adult nature of sexuality, and the supposed radicalism of the ‘gay agenda’ has meant that discussion of sexuality in schools has, until recent years, been mostly silenced in the UK (Nixon 2010). This is one reason why homophobic attitudes have prevailed, with the consequence that lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB)<sup>1</sup> students have faced harassment and social marginalization (Plummer 1999; Rivers 2011). Research documented that the great majority of LGB youth opted to stay in the closet throughout the 1980s and 1990s to avoid this pervasive homophobia (Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas 2001).

In addition to having a negative impact on LGB youth, the cultural conflation of gender and sexuality means that homophobia also affects heterosexual students (Epstein 1997). This is because feminine behaviours in boys are seen as evidence of homosexuality, so male students avoid activities that are socially coded feminine and therefore gay (Mac an Ghail 1994). Thus, homophobia is deployed against any boy who fails to conform to a narrow set of behaviours deemed ‘heteromasculine’ (Anderson 2008b). Francis (1999) described these as including “‘having a laugh”, alcohol consumption, disruptive behavior, objectifying women, and an interest in pastimes and subjects constructed as masculine’ (1999: 357). Notably absent is any form of academic engagement, as this was seen as a feminine activity and consequently relegated in the masculine hierarchy (Jackson 2006; Reay 2002). Instead, boys enacted competitive displays of aggression and misogyny to avoid marginalization. Yet homophobia proved to be the most effective way of policing masculine behaviours (Anderson 2008b).

Anderson (2009) conceptualized the potency of homophobia as a regulatory tool of masculinity through ‘homohysteria’. Defined as the fear of being socially perceived as gay,

three factors determine the levels of homophobia within a culture: the conflation of feminine behaviours with male homosexuality; the awareness that homosexuality exists as a sexual identity in that culture; and the level of cultural homophobia. High levels of homophobia in the 1980s and early 1990s contributed to a homophobic culture, where men went to great lengths to avoid being socially perceived as gay. Anderson (2009) attributes this to the rise of moralistic right wing politics, the politicisation of evangelical religion, and the AIDS crisis. These social occurrences created a perfect storm for a moral panic against homosexuality, with dominant media and political discourses reactionary in their attempts to promote 'traditional family values' (Page and Shapiro 1992).

Homophobia is an important concept because it distinguishes between cultures where homophobia regulates gendered behaviours and those where it does not. Anderson (2009) highlights this by contrasting homophobic but non-homophobic countries like Iran with homophobic cultures like Britain and the USA in the 1980s. In Iran, homosocial tactility occurs without social regulation because such behaviours do not connote homosexuality. Yet in the UK and USA, particularly in the 1980s, same-sex touch had to be accompanied by acts that prevented the person from being socially coded as gay. Accordingly, when tactile behaviours occurred in male peer groups in homophobic periods, they were frequently accompanied by homophobic abuse (Anderson 2005; Pronger 1990).

### **The declining significance of homophobia**

A key attitudinal trend over the past thirty years is the increasingly positive attitudes toward homosexuality (Anderson 2009; Curtice and Ormston 2012; Keleher and Smith 2012). After the homophobic 1980s, a liberalisation of attitudes regarding homosexuality began in the early 1990s (Anderson 2009; Loftus 2001); improvements that continued and accelerated in the new millennium (Weeks 2007). Supporting this, the most recent data from the *British*

*Social Attitudes* survey show that only 29 per cent of adults think same-sex relationships are wrong, down from 46 per cent in 2000 (Curtice and Ormston 2012). Similarly, Cowan (2007) reports that 86 per cent of British citizens would be comfortable if a close friend was gay. Furthermore, Cashmore and Cleland (2012) find that 93 per cent of football fans would accept an openly gay player on their team. These findings are significant because attitudes are closely correlated to behaviours and lived experience (Loftus 2001).

Evidence for decreasing homophobia can also be found in qualitative research that shows the positive effect changing attitudes have had on the lives of sexual minorities (Cohler and Hammack 2007). This includes better representation of LGB people in the media (Netzley 2010); an improving environment for LGB students in schools and universities (Jones and Clarke 2007; Taulke-Johnson 2008); and more positive experiences for sexual minorities within sport compared to a decade ago (Anderson 2011). The Internet has also provided a political and social space for LGB youth, enabling them to cross geographical and cultural boundaries in the development of their sexual identities (Gray 2009).

There have also been substantive changes to the legal system in the UK. Section 28 was repealed in 2003, which, combined with an equal age of consent for same-sex sex, the introduction of civil partnerships and now gay marriage, has had the effect that homophobic perspectives are no longer enshrined in English law (Cretney 2006).

Still, it is important to stress that decreasing homophobia is an uneven social process, influenced by a range of factors. The visibility of LGB people is, for example, still restricted in professional sport and among senior politicians; and heterosexual privilege remains present in educational (and other) settings (Ripley et al. 2012). Homophobia is also rife in other parts of the world. Even so, and notwithstanding variance according to local culture, considerable evidence documents a markedly improved environment for LGB people in the UK (Cretney 2006; Curtice and Ormston 2012; McCormack 2012b; Weeks 2007). Furthermore, while the

declining significance of homophobia has many benefits for LGB youth, academics have also demonstrated the positive effect it has on heterosexual boys (Anderson 2009; McCormack 2012a).

These changes have been theorized through Anderson's (2009) *inclusive masculinity theory* which argues that as homophobia decreases, homophobia ceases to be an effective mechanism through which to regulate boys' gendered behaviours. Accordingly, as boys become less concerned with whether they are socially perceived as gay, an expanded set of gendered behaviours becomes available to them. These include hugging and other forms of tactility (Adams and Anderson 2012), kissing friends on the lips as an expression of emotional closeness (Anderson, Adams and Rivers 2012), respect for difference (Harris 2010), and the ability to form deep emotional bonds with peers (McCormack 2012a). However, much of this research has focused on middle-class youth, leaving little examination of how the influence of decreasing homophobia on boyhood masculinities is structured by class.

### **The intersection with class**

While feminist research on men and masculinities foregrounds the importance of gender in social life, scholars have also highlighted the ways in which masculinities intersect with class and sexuality in the reproduction of inequalities (McDowell 2003; Richardson 2000, 2010). Building on Bourdieu's (1984) theorizing, this body of research extends understandings of class beyond narrow definitions of familial income and employment classifications to that of a symbolic economy which permeates social relationships.

This symbolic economy consists of four forms of 'capital' which result in an uneven distribution of power and a hierarchical stratification of society (Sayer 2005). In addition to a traditional type of economic capital, Bourdieu (1984, 1993) conceptualized cultural, social

and symbolic forms. Cultural capital consists of non-financial assets that can promote social mobility, and can exist as an embodied state through people's behaviours and attitudes (Skeggs 1997). Social capital refers to the cultural resources a person has based on their networks and group membership. Symbolic capital refers to one's prestige in a social group and is the form the other capitals take once they are recognized as legitimate (Skeggs 2004).

Academics have sought to understand the ways in which the symbolic economy of capitals legitimates particular forms of gender and sexual identities (Jackson and Scott 2010; Skeggs 2004; Taylor 2012), and a sophisticated analysis of the intersection of class, heterosexuality and masculinities has developed in recent years (Barber 2008; Nayak 2003). Here, the role of homophobia in male peer group cultures has been a significant focus. For example, in a qualitative study of working-class male youth in the North East of England with data from 2002, Richardson (2010) established that heterosexuality was 'compelling' for these youth, arguing that it was the classed nature of work, leisure and education within the specific locality that meant her participants found that heterosexuality and some homophobia elevated their social standing amongst their peers.

However, given the focus on the centrality of homophobia and heterosexual privilege to working-class youth's masculinities (Nayak and Kehily 1996; Richardson 2010), there has been little discussion of how class, masculinity and sexuality intersect in cultures of *decreasing* homophobia. For example, while I recognized the 'principally privileged' (McCormack 2011a: 87) position of the middle-class, pro-gay participants in my earlier work (see also McCormack and Anderson 2010), I did not examine the processes by which class operated in the construction of these more inclusive forms of masculinity. Similarly, while Roberts (2013) documents a softening of masculinity among working-class men employed in the service sector, his analysis does not explore the relation between this important finding and decreasing homophobia.



Following Anderson's (2009) call for research to investigate the complexity of changing formations of masculinity, I employ neo-Bourdieuian conceptions of the symbolic economy to examine the intersection of masculinities, class and decreasing homophobia. Given the importance of male peer group culture (Gunter and Watt 2009; O'Donnell and Sharpe 2000), I draw on ethnographic data of working-class boys in a small sixth form college in order to document the improved attitudes toward homophobia, the effect this has on the participants' masculinities, and examine the role of class in this process.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

Data comes from a three month ethnography of a British sixth form, which I call 'Fallback College'. Rated 'good' by the school inspectorate, Fallback College functions primarily to provide educational opportunities to students who have struggled previously at school for academic and behavioural reasons. With only 18 male students (out of 30 students in total), the college's focus is on providing students the opportunity to achieve a range of key skills that will equip them with entry-level qualifications for the workplace.

The great majority of the 30 students in the sixth form come from areas of socio-economic deprivation. This was highlighted by the school administration who stressed that the catchment area included the poorest postcodes in the town, and that all but two of the participants had been entitled to free school meals when in secondary school. Importantly, all the male participants lived in the local working-class area, and their social, cultural and symbolic capitals coalesced around working-class identities (see Skeggs 2004; Taylor 2012). Participants were aged between 16 and 19 at the time of data collection, and all identified their ethnicity as White British.

## *Procedures*

An ethnographic approach was adopted, with observation, participant observation, and in-depth interviews providing three perspectives of the students' attitudes and behaviours (Bogdan and Biklen 2003). This research involved collecting data with male and female students in the school. While participant observations occurred in classes, free periods and break times, the majority of participation occurred with students during their free time. Collecting data in student peer group settings proved to be the most fertile area for understanding their attitudes and behaviours (O'Donnell and Sharpe 2000). Much of this occurred outside the school gates, as students walked into the nearby town centre at lunch and during free periods. Students did not engage in higher rates of homophobic language when they were outside Fallback College grounds, suggesting little institutional influence on their attitudes toward homosexuality.

The research was framed as an investigation into 'what it means to be a guy in school today'. I told participants I wanted to understand how school life for male students had changed since I had left school. After three weeks of data collection at Fallback College, I came out as gay. This was approved by the college administration, and it enabled me to observe any differences in student behaviour before and after I came out. There were none (see below for discussion of this). After coming out, several participants expressed interest in my sexuality and talked about it further with me. My interactions with students and discussions with members of staff provided no evidence to indicate that any participants had assumed I was gay before I came out.

I conducted 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a strategically selected sample of male students in the final month of the study. Topics discussed in interview included attitudes toward homosexuality, friendship, popularity, socializing, television programmes, as well as other issues that arose within the interview. Participants were asked

their sexual orientation, and all identified as heterosexual. They also all perceived the other male students in the school to be heterosexual. Interviews averaged 55 minutes and were recorded using a digital recorder. All participants interviewed signed consent forms, and the research was conducted in line with British Educational Research Association guidelines.

### ***Reflexivity***

While I worked to decrease social distance, it is necessary to recognise the impact of the researcher on the research process (Davies 1999). Given that the relationship between the researcher and participants can have unexpected effects, it is necessary, as Willis (1978: 197) argues, for the researcher to ‘analyze the intersection of his own social paradigms with those of the people he wishes to understand’. Accordingly, and as Mauthner and Doucet (2003) suggest, I allocated specific times and places each day to reflect on the collection of data. Here, I examined the ways in which my personal influences impacted on my analysis of data, my emotional experiences in the field, and the extent to which participants acted differently when I was present (Davies 1999).

I investigated whether participants acted differently in my presence in two ways. First, I spoke to two key participants about my findings, strategically presenting some false findings (for example, that I perceived there to be ‘quite a bit’ of homophobic language) to see if the students were willing to challenge my interpretation. Both disagreed with these findings, supporting my belief that other students did not act markedly differently around me. Secondly, I spoke to the caretaker and cleaner who spend time around the participants but have little authority over them (Mac an Ghail 1994): These adults commented that they noticed no difference in how students acted in my presence or absence.

I employed a critical reflexive approach to the recording of data and its analysis to ensure that bias was kept to a minimum (Davies 1999). To ensure the rigour of analysis, a

second academic expert in qualitative research on masculinities coded four of these interview transcripts, and we discussed differing interpretations when they arose until agreement was reached. All names have been changed and the identity of the school has been protected.

### **Decreased homophobia**

Whereas research has traditionally shown that homophobia is a central part of working-class boys' lives (Phoenix, Frosh and Pattman 2003), there was very little homophobia at Fallback College. While there are a number of ways to evidence low levels of homophobia, I primarily demonstrate this by documenting the near-total erasure of homophobic language and the near-universal espousal of support for equal rights for LGB people; a position I call 'pro-gay'.

Highlighting the near-total erasure of homophobic language, 15 of the 18 boys *never* used anti-gay words or phrases.<sup>2</sup> This is based on participant observations and discussions with teachers and other members of staff, as well as through interviews with participants about their own and others' language use. Many of these boys said that this was because they viewed such language to be wrong. For example, Dan said, 'I don't use homophobic words...It's so stupid. What's the point?' Alec said that homophobic language was 'not on, really. I dunno, it just doesn't seem right'. Interestingly, these boys' condemnation of homophobic language was not as emphatic as that documented in my study of middle-class sixth form boys who said it was totally unacceptable (McCormack and Anderson 2010): While participants from that sixth form likened homophobia to racism, this link was not made at Fallback College.

In addition to a near-total erasure of homophobic language, it is important to note that when homophobic language was used at Fallback College, it occurred in a markedly different social context to what the literature traditionally describes (Jackson 2006; McCormack

2011b). Aiden, Charlie and Jamie were the only three students that used homophobic language, and they did so rarely. In my time at the school, I only heard them use the word ‘poof’ once each; and it always pertained to their appearance. For example, when discussing whether he should get his hair cut and styled, Aiden said, ‘but then I might look like a poof’. Likewise, Charlie said, after being given a t-shirt by his sister for his birthday, ‘I didn’t like it. It had glittery shit on it. I thought I’d like look a poof if I wore it’. I interpret this use of language as a way for these boys to simultaneously consolidate their own heterosexual identities and distance themselves from the softening of masculinity in both Fallback College and the broader culture (Anderson 2011; McCormack 2012a).

Contrary to previous research (Nayak and Kehily 1996; Plummer 1999), when Charlie, Jamie and Aiden used homophobic language it did not improve their social standing in any measurable way. When Aiden worried that a haircut might make him look like ‘a poof’, Dan said afterwards ‘It really annoys me when those guys use that language. It’s so stupid’. There was no evidence to suggest that this language raised their social standing, even between these three students (see McCormack 2011b).<sup>3</sup> Rather, given that their use of homophobic epithets was stigmatised by the rest of the peer group, the ways in which Charlie, Jamie and Aiden’s limited social and symbolic capital intersected with their heteromasculine identities (their embodied cultural capital) served to marginalize them further.

In addition to this absence of homophobic language, there were a significant number of opportunities where one might expect homophobic language to be deployed but it was not. For example, one day several of the students were discussing the popular UK television show *The Friday Night Project*. Hosted by openly gay comedian, Alan Carr, the show often used the host’s camp mannerisms and sexuality as a source of humour. When Owen said he found the show ‘hilarious’, adding ‘the stuff they get up to is ridiculous’, Charlie replied, ‘that

show's shit. What's funny about it?' Owen said, 'Alan Carr's always funny, the way he mocks the guests'. Jamie added, 'Yeah it's not the best show, but I like how he takes the piss out of himself and the celebrities'. They never mentioned the sexuality of the host or the frequent homosexual innuendo, nor did they use homophobic language to argue their position or consolidate their masculinity.

While there is a history of gay innuendo in British comedy, gay comedians have either found themselves marginalized if they are open about their sexuality (such as Julian Clary) or have elected to remain closeted (like Kenneth Williams). Carr is both camp and open about his sexuality and his overt presentation of his sexuality was received positively by participants; even those who disliked the show. After discussion of a different episode of *The Friday Night Project*, I asked about Carr's sexuality. 'It doesn't matter mate', Owen said. Perry added, 'I don't think people care whether he's gay or straight. He's funny, he's gay, I can't think of anyone who would present it better'. The participants liked Carr's comedy and were knowledgeable about his sexuality; neither fact had any discernible impact on their social standing. Whereas research has traditionally shown that boys have had to distance themselves from homosexuality (Mac an Ghail 1994), this was not the case here.

The significant decrease in homophobia is further supported by the boys' views on homosexuality and gay people. Significantly, none of the boys espoused homophobic views and the large majority supported equal rights for gay people (cf. Froyum 2007). Phil said, 'You're born gay or straight. So we shouldn't try and change people. I don't have a problem with it'. When asked about gay people, Perry replied, 'I'm not bothered, mate'. Even Aiden, Charlie and Jamie, who had used the word 'poof', did not espouse homophobic philosophies. When asked in interview about his use of the word 'poof', Aiden said 'I don't have anything against gays, you know...But my dad says nasty stuff about gays all the time, and so those words for me just slip out'. Charlie commented, 'It's their choice. I don't care what other

people do if it doesn't affect me. But it's not wrong'. Jamie showed slightly more ambivalence, saying, 'I don't want to know about it, but they can do what they want'. Interestingly, these proclamations of support for gay rights were not as emphatic as those made by the boys at the nearby middle-class college (McCormack and Anderson 2010).

While there are no openly gay students at Fallback College, several students had previous contact with gay men. For example, Stuart discussed his older brother's gay friend, saying, 'my brother's best mate came out a few years ago. He's round the house all the time...He's a cool guy, though he always beats me at *Street Fighter*'. Similarly, Phil said, 'I've had a gay friend. His parents moved, though, so we don't see each other much now'. Significantly, no participant indicated that they had distanced themselves from anyone because they knew them to be gay.

It is possible that some participants altered their views in knowledge of my sexual identity. However, there are several reasons to suggest that this was not the case. First, there were no differences between how students interacted with me before and after coming out; I continued to socialize with Charlie, Jamie and Aiden after they knew that I am gay. Furthermore, both key participants and members of staff commented that they noticed no difference in the behaviour of participants when I was present. Accordingly, the absence of homophobia and the intellectualizing of pro-gay views demonstrate that homophobia is of little significance in the lives of these heterosexual, working-class boys.

### **Limited but expanded same-sex touch**

Research has shown that homophobia has been a key mechanism for keeping boys physically distant from each other (Floyd 2000; Mac an Ghail 1994), and that as homophobia decreases, men become more tactile with each other (Anderson 2009). This research supports these findings, demonstrating in addition the effect that social class has on such behaviours.

Boys at Fallback College were regularly in close physical proximity to each other. Primarily working on computers during lessons, boys would frequently share a seat or sit on each other's lap to gain proper access to the screen. 'Squeeze up, mate – room for a little one', Alec said to his friend Dan in one lesson. Dan responded, 'There's plenty of room man, make yourself comfy'. And if boys each had their own chair, these were often close enough to enable them to share the mouse or keyboard, their arms resting on each other as they completed work or, almost as frequently, played Internet games to avoid work.

This form of male touch also occurred when boys shared a textbook, or worked on a project together. Huddled over a desk working on a portfolio, Owen and Perry's arms would frequently cross to reach paper, pen or scissors. Furthermore, they would often use gentle physical touch to get each other's attention. For example, when Owen was concentrating on drawing, Perry got his attention by resting his hand on Owen's forearm, gently moving it until Owen looked up. These examples of tactility were not active statements of inclusion or pro-gay beliefs; instead, they were the normalized actions for male friends at this college.

Whereas other research has demonstrated hugging, cuddling and kissing between middle-class students with little identity management (Anderson, Adams and Rivers 2012), including at the nearby local middle-class college (McCormack and Anderson 2010), these unabashed behaviours were not present at Fallback College. Even so, these male youth still engaged in gentler touching than research used to find (Jackson 2006). One key way was through drawing on each other's arms. For example, Phil and Joe were sat next to each other, playing a computer game instead of working. Joe leant across during Phil's turn and held Phil's bicep gently with his left hand. With his right hand, he started drawing a skull on Phil's arm. Once finished, Joe looked down and said, 'Getting better man, I like it'. Another time, while listening to the teacher explain some class work, Alec took Dan's hand and started drawing squares on his forearm, before colouring them in. Dan did not react to this,



seemingly content with this interaction. In total, seven of the male students regularly drew on each other in this manner.

Describing why they draw on each other, Joe said, 'It's just when you're bored, it's something to do, innit?' When I asked why he did not use his book, he replied 'Well it's just different you know. Like a tattoo but different stuff each time'. Similarly, Alec said, 'It doesn't mean anything. It's just that some of those lessons are pretty fucking boring'. However, Phil recognized that such drawing was indicative of friendship, commenting, 'Now you mention it, I only draw on my best mates. So Joe and Dan I'll draw on, but no-one else'. This homosocial tactility therefore has similar meanings to the same-sex kissing among heterosexual university students in Anderson, Adams and Rivers' (2012) study; although it was not as prevalent as among the boys at the nearby middle-class sixth form (McCormack and Anderson 2010).

The only two students who did not engage in any form of homosocial tactility were Aiden and Charlie. While these boys would work together, they would always ensure there was space between their seats, and the only time I saw them touch was when playing football at break. Unlike the other students, I never saw their arms overlap; instead, they got each other's attention vocally. They did not draw on their arms. In this manner, they cemented their difference from the rest of the male peer group, providing visual cues of their more traditional style of masculinity. And of significance, although they did not engage in these behaviours themselves, there was no evidence that Aiden and Charlie ever sought to regulate those boys who did.

### **Openly valuing friendship**

The closest friendship at Fallback College appeared to be between Phil and Dan. These boys would socialize with each other most evenings, sometimes on their own, and other times with

other female and male students from the college. Recognizing the closeness of their friendship, Phil and Dan would regularly address each other as 'lover' or 'boyfriend'. They called each other 'babes' and 'my lover' daily, particularly when planning social activities. For example, Dan said, 'Hey my lover, are you coming round mine after school today?' Phil replied, 'Sure babes, you know I wouldn't miss it'.

Proclaiming close friends as boyfriends is understood by students 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'. Evidencing decreased levels of homophobia, it is also important to recognize that these boys did not view these comments to be socially coded as gay. For example, Dan said, 'I think it's pretty obvious. It doesn't mean I fancy Phil, it means he's my best mate. No-one's got confused so far, anyway'.

While most boys did not use the terms 'babes' and 'lover' like Phil and Dan, they were happy to discuss the importance of their friends. For example, 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!

Providing a similar perspective, Jamie said, 'my best mates work now [instead of attending sixth form], and I miss just being around them. Your friends are important'.

It was also possible for boys to talk about their friendships with girls. For example, Perry spoke about how he was 'good friends' with his girlfriend, Sarah, saying, 'I've got my mates I hang out with, my guys, but actually I'm friends with Sarah'. Jamie, who often socialized with Charlie and Aiden, said, 'I'm friends with quite a few girls. I've got my mates, but I like talking to the girls as well. It's a bit easier to talk to them'.

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: They would work on projects and walk to the local chip shop together every lunch. Yet I never heard them openly discuss their friendship or refer to each other as friends. In interview, when I asked Aiden about his friends he said, 'Well Charlie I guess. I hang out a lot with him'. When I asked whether he valued this friendship, he looked uncomfortable, saying 'He's a mate. You know, we hang out'. Similarly, when I asked Charlie about friends, he said 'Not really'. When I prompted him by saying that I thought he was friends with Aiden, he replied 'I hang out with him, 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. While there were varying levels of the use of phrases such as 'babes' and 'my lover', it was only Aiden and Charlie who did not esteem talking about friends in a positive way.

### **Exploring the divide in the group**

It is evident that there was a divide in the masculine peer group at Fallback College, as Charlie and Aiden, and to a lesser extent Jamie, adopted more traditional forms of gendered behaviours and attitudes, including not discussing emotions, an absence of homosocial tactility and ambivalence to homosexuality. These boys also sometimes physically distanced themselves from the rest of the group. While Jamie maintained some level of social fluidity with other boys (see McCormack 2011a), Aiden and Charlie would rarely interact with other students, preferring to walk to the chip shop each day on their own. However, this isolation was symptomatic of a broader disengagement from the broader culture.

The central difference between Aiden and Charlie and the rest of the boys at Fallback College, all of whom were working-class, was the extent to which they engaged in the

dominant discourses of the wider British culture (Savage 2003). Evidencing the divide, while most of the students watched television shows such as *Skins*, *The Inbetweeners* and *Family Guy*, Aiden and Charlie did not. When asked what television they watched, Aiden said, 'Just football'. Charlie added, 'Yeah, the rest is shit. Maybe a bit of [motorbike] racing, but other than that, what's the point?' When I mentioned that other students watched *The Inbetweeners*, Aiden replied 'Yeah, but it's shit. I watched it once, and I thought it was rubbish'. Similarly, Aiden and Charlie only socialized at their local pub, rather than those in the nearby city, and they would often go with their older siblings or parents rather than other friends.

While Charlie and Aiden distanced themselves almost entirely from this broader youth culture, it was also clear that this was because they felt disenfranchised (see Reay 2006; Skeggs 2009). When I asked them about what they liked least in their lives, they both commented that it was the lack of 'space'. Charlie said:

We've got nowhere that is our own, you know. The common room [at Fallback College] is crap, there's nowhere to hang out in town. I'm even sharing my bedroom with my younger brother at the moment. We've just got no space.

Aiden supported this saying, 'Dan and Phil and that lot go off and do stuff, but we're not into that stuff and there's fuck all to do round here'.

It is important to note, however, that while most of the male students engaged in the broader youth culture to a much greater extent than Aiden and Charlie, their appropriation of and participation in this culture was limited to varying degrees. For example, it was only Dan and Phil who had Facebook profiles, or other similar social networking accounts, and they were the only students who would regularly visit the nearby major city, while the other participants would rarely venture there. Furthermore there was a clear stratification with regards to the amount of tactility, with Dan and Phil being most tactile, Perry and Dave

substantially less, and Aiden and Charlie very little. Significantly, the extent to which a student moved beyond their local peer group and engaged in the broader youth culture dominated by middle-class discourses correlated closely to the social and cultural capital they maintained and the form of masculinity they embodied. It seems that the lack of engagement with the broader culture is a dialogical effect of these students' disadvantaged classed and gendered positions.

## **Discussion**

While a growing body of research documents increasingly positive attitudes toward homosexuality among heterosexual male youth (Adams 2011; Anderson 2009; McCormack 2012a), a critique of this literature is that it has tended to focus on groups of middle-class white men. This article develops our understanding of masculinities in contemporary culture by examining how social class intersects with masculinity and decreasing homophobia to structure the experiences of young men who are working-class.

A significant finding is that this group of working-class boys maintain markedly more progressive attitudes toward homosexuality than documented in earlier research (Epstein 1997; Mac an Ghail 1994). The great majority of boys in this study espoused pro-gay attitudes, with the least progressive minority still expressing tolerance for homosexuality. Importantly, no boy intellectualized homophobia and the rare use of homophobic language was argued not to signify homophobic attitudes (see McCormack 2011b). Alongside this improvement in attitudes toward homosexuality, I also document an expansion of gendered behaviours – with homosocial tactility and the expression of emotion permitted in restricted ways.

However, while these results are encouraging, these boys do not display the same level of tactility or emotional openness as documented among middle-class youth at a nearby

sixth form (c.f. McCormack 2012a; McCormack and Anderson 2010). Here, hugging and soft touch were ordinary occurrences and students regularly proclaimed deep emotional bonds between friends (McCormack 2012a); they also explicitly condemned homophobia as no longer acceptable (McCormack and Anderson 2010); behaviours and attitudes that were present at Fallback College but not as emphatic. Highlighting the class difference, it is noteworthy that when discussing their tactile behaviours with me in Fallback College, Joe referred to tattoos and Alec added ‘fucking’ to his explanation. In so doing, both boys situated their tactile behaviours within a more traditional style of masculinity and in accordance with the capital they maintain (see Francis 1999).

The differences between these groups can be explained from a class perspective. Savage (2003: 536) conceptualizes the ‘particular universal’ to describe the ways in which a range of middle-class practices have become ‘regarded as universally “normal”, “good” and “appropriate”’ in the UK. This has the effect of working-class norms and capitals being marginalized in social institutions (Skeggs 2009). Having interests that contrasted with these middle-class norms, these boys lacked the social and cultural capital to engage in these wider cultural discourses that esteem softer masculinities and more positive attitudes toward homosexuality (Anderson 2009; McNair 2002; Weeks 2007). Accordingly, I find that 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 when compared to middle-class boys in other settings including a nearby college (McCormack 2012a; McCormack and Anderson 2010).

Supporting this contention, many factors identified as drivers of progressive change are situated within middle-class norms. For example, Anderson (2011) highlights how the use of social media such as Facebook has helped break the taboo concerning homosexuality, while I discuss the positive influence of new cultural icons, like *One Direction*, who

exemplify this expansion of gendered behaviours (McCormack 2012a); yet many of the boys at Fallback High did not use any social networking sites, and restricted their media and cultural engagement to classed pursuits such as motorbike racing and football. Furthermore, with more inclusive attitudes flourishing in metropolitan areas, socializing solely within this small town serves to insulate against the narratives of diversity that exist in metropolitan areas (see Swank, Fahs and Frost 2013).

Rather than working-class discourses or cultures inhibiting the development of progressive attitudes and behaviours, my research suggests that it is instead the extent to which boys in these cultures can engage with the ‘particular universal’ of the broader youth culture that matters (Savage 2003; Skeggs 2009). Nayak (2003) writes that, ‘young people...are cultural innovators and consumers involved in a complex negotiation with social transformations’. My research indicates that working-class youth perhaps do not have the social and cultural capital that enables them to mediate this broader youth culture. This also explains the divide within the peer group at Fallback College, which correlated to the social capital the boys maintained. This argument is not to critique these working-class youth but to highlight the complex ways the symbolic economy intersects with gender and decreasing cultural homophobia to impact negatively upon them (see Skeggs and Loveday 2012).

In order to explore this further, it is worth considering Taylor’s (2012) concept of ‘parameters of privilege’. While Taylor refers to geographical and economic structures that marginalize working-class youth, it is quite possible that participants in this study experience cultural exclusion when they attempt to negotiate these middle-class discourses: That the social and cultural capital esteemed by this broader youth culture operate as *symbolic* parameters of privilege that limit the ability of these working-class youth to engage with changes in contemporary society.

While conceptualization of forms of capital maintains significant heuristic utility in understanding how class and gender operate in social interactions, Bourdieu's (1993) notion of 'habitus' is particularly important in understanding the broader *change* in the social stratification of society. Sallaz (2010: 296) describes habitus as a highly durable disposition that depicts 'social practice as the outcome of a dialectic of incorporation and objectification', where people internalize social norms during their formative years within a specific social context. Crucially, Sallaz (2010) highlights that because habitus influences how we interpret the world, it accounts for the ways in which people of different generations will generate practices that form new paradigms of, for example, gender, race and class. The boys at Fallback College have grown up in a social zeitgeist of decreasing homophobia, and habitus explains how the forms of masculinity markedly differ from prior generations, yet the unequal symbolic economy acts as a buffer on how these boys engage with these practices.

These findings are best explained by inclusive masculinity theory, supporting Anderson's (2009) argument that as homophobia decreases, boys become more emotionally expressive and physically tactile. It demonstrates that positive attitudes toward homosexuality are not just a middle-class phenomenon, extending Anderson's theory to a new demographic. In doing so, these findings also provide new evidence for understanding the mechanisms through which inclusive attitudes are supported or hindered.

This research also advances our understandings of inclusive masculinity theory by further documenting the transition from homohysteria to inclusive cultures. Anderson (2009) argues that there are three key stages in this transition, which are dependent on the level of homophobia within the setting. In a highly homophobic culture, boys are stratified in a vertical stratification (Connell 1995). Here, boys align themselves to one dominant archetype of masculinity and punish those who stray from its mandates. Anderson then argues that as homophobia declines, two archetypes of masculinity vie for dominance. Anderson (2005)



documented this in a study of men's cheerleading teams, showing that there were two groups of men – one that espoused macho, homophobic values and another that was inclusive of homosexuality and other forms of difference. Finally, Anderson (2009) argues that in a setting with little or no homophobia, boys are stratified horizontally and archetypes of masculinity are independent of popularity (McCormack 2011a). I suggest that Fallback College is between this second and third stage: the more inclusive boys are numerically dominant with those ascribing to a more traditional archetype of masculinity marginalized, yet the inclusive boys also seem to regulate their own behaviours somewhat when in the presence of these other boys.

While this article provides the first examination of how class intersects with the development of pro-gay attitudes among heterosexual male youth, there are limitations. Primarily, given that this is a single ethnography, the findings cannot be generalized to all working-class youth, limited by demographic factors such as ethnicity. However, the power of this article is in the development of an intersectional analysis that helps understand the impact of class and gender on the development of inclusive attitudes, so the representativeness of the sample is not a key concern. Indeed, this article extends the literature on the intersection of class and masculinity, demonstrating that decreasing homophobia among male youth is not purely a middle-class phenomenon.

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## NOTES

1. This article does not focus on the experiences of transgender people here as their experiences of gender, sexuality and schooling are distinct from those of LGB youth (Greytak, Kosciw and Diaz 2009), and research has often focused on LGB experiences.
2. 'Anti-gay' was defined in interviews as language that implied negative attitudes or feelings about same-sex sex or LGB people and participants demonstrated understanding of the phrase.
3. I also never heard the phrase 'that's so gay' used at this school and so did not collect data on what participants would understand by the phrase. 'Gay' was used solely to refer to gay identity, and never in an aggressive manner.