

Men, Sex and Mateship: How homosociality shapes men's heterosexual relations

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20 minute version

Abstract

Cutting-edge scholarship in Women's Studies and Sexuality Studies recognises that gender and sexual relations are organised in part by local contexts and communities, personal and social networks, and other axes of social differentiation. Yet these insights only rarely have been applied to or tested among heterosexual men. This paper extends contemporary theorisations of gender, sexuality, and social life by examining the homosocial organisation of men's heterosexual relations. Qualitative research among young straight men finds that their sexual relations with women are structured and given meaning by their social relations with other men. Homosociality organises the male-female sociosexual relations of some young heterosexual men in at least five ways. First, male-male relations take priority over male-female non-sexual relations, and platonic friendships with women are dangerously feminising and rare if not impossible. Second, sexual activity is a key path to masculine status. Third, other men are the audience, always imagined and sometimes real, for one's sexual activities. Fourth, heterosexual sex itself can be the medium through which male bonding is enacted. Lastly, men's sexual storytelling is shaped by homosocial masculine cultures. Assessing the workings of male homosociality is significant in theorisations of both heterosexuality and masculinity.

Bionote

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Citation

Flood, Michael (2003) Men, Sex and Mateship: How homosociality shapes men's heterosexual relations. Paper to *(Other) Feminisms: An International Women's and Gender Studies Conference*, University of Queensland, 12-16 July.

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Introduction

My research has centred on a critical analysis of the sexual and social relations of young heterosexual men. In this paper, I offer an examination of one aspect of the workings of sexual and gender relations which my research has documented, the structuring of men's heterosexual sexual relations by their relations with other men.

Why do research on heterosexual men

My focus on heterosexual men has been shaped by two concerns, one specific and the other broader. First, research on heterosexual men is a necessary component of efforts to understand and prevent the sexual transmission of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

More widely, research on heterosexual men is a necessary element in the theorisation of gender and sexuality. It is particularly important to make visible and critically interrogate dominant social categories, including those of maleness and heterosexuality, categories which have been marked as normative, natural, and privileged (Rutherford, 1988: 22-23).

My research thus answers the call of feminist authors for 'critical analysis of the sexual cultures of heterosexual men' (Robinson 1992: 444, Waldby, Kippax and Crawford 1993a: 38, Campbell 1995: 207).

Contemporary scholarship on sexuality and HIV/AIDS has established that people's sexual relations are organised in part by their local contexts and communities and by personal and social networks. However, investigations of the social ordering of young heterosexual men's sexual relations with women are rare.

The data on which the following discussion is based derive from a study of young heterosexual men's safe and unsafe sex. Semi-structured interviews with seventeen men aged between 18 and 26 in Canberra were used to explore men's sexual practices and the meanings and sociosexual relations through which these are organised (Flood, 2000). Interviewees were recruited from three locations: a residential hall on the Australian National University campus, the Australian Defence Force Academy, a military university, and a local Youth Centre. Each man was interviewed for an average of three and a half hours, usually over two sessions.

The remainder of this paper focuses on one dimension of men's heterosexual relations documented in this research.

(b) Bonds between men

Men's practice of gender is a homosocial enactment.

Homosociality refers to social bonds between persons of the same sex. Men's lives are highly organised by relations *between men*. Men's practice of gender has been theorized as a homosocial enactment, in which the performance of manhood is in front of, and granted by, other men (Kimmel, 1994: 128-129). Men attempt to improve their position in masculine social hierarchies, using such 'markers of manhood' as occupational achievement, wealth, power and status, physical prowess, and sexual achievement (Kimmel 1994, p. 129; Turner 2001).

Male bonding, and homosocial desire, are marked in literary traditions and contemporary texts.

The assertion of male homosocial bonds is an enduring theme in literature and other texts. Sedgwick interrogates the power dynamics of the erotic triangle of two men and one woman found throughout British literature, in which there are affective or social bonds between two male rivals for a female. Sedgwick's analysis has been taken up in a multitude of analyses of ancient and modern texts.

Men's homosocial relations are constituted as homoerotic in a variety of historical and cultural contexts.

Historical and cross-cultural accounts of male homoeroticism and homosexuality further demonstrate the potential significance of homosocial bonds in the constitution of social relations. For example, there are cultural contexts in which sex between older and younger men or boys establishes or confirms masculinity.

Homosociality is linked to gendered power.

Feminist scholarship describes male homosociality as playing a crucial role in perpetuating gender inequalities. The relationship between 'male bonding' and gendered power is exemplified in early feminist definitions of patriarchy in terms of

relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women. (Hartmann, 1981: 14)

Men's dominance of political and economic hierarchies is sustained in part through informal male bonds, homosocial networks sometimes colloquially and yet accurately described as 'old boys' clubs'.

'Mateship' is celebrated in Australia's colonial and sexist historiographies.

Finally, male homosociality has a distinct cultural and historical resonance in Australia, in narratives of "mateship". In Australian historiographies, "mateship" is invoked as a fundamental part of an Australian cultural 'heritage' or national 'spirit', imagined to be forged among male soldiers on the shores of Gallipoli or among white male convict settlers.

But there is little research on the homosocial ordering of men's heterosexual sexual relations.

However, the homosocial ordering of *heterosexual sexual* relations in particular has received relatively little attention. It is to this that I now turn.

(c) Homosocial heterosexuality

Interviews with young heterosexual men document that at least for some, it is their male/male peer relations which structure and give meaning to their heterosexual relations.

Overview of ADFA, and Tim and Curtis

These five aspects of social organisation were apparent particularly at one research location, the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA), a co-educational military university which trains officer-cadets for all three arms of the Defence forces. ADFA is deeply hierarchical, masculine and homosocial. Relations among male cadets largely involve a culture of mateship built on

sexism and homophobia, competitive banter, and an emphasis on stereotypically masculine exploits. Close relations of male bonding are deliberately forged through ADFA training processes and quickly develop in the 'hothouse' conditions of residential accommodation and group training.

The military university ADFA thus represents a particularly intense site of homosociality. Four of the 17 men I interviewed were from ADFA, and the patterns of homosociality I describe were particularly evident here. However, these patterns also appear in the accounts of other men in my research.

Two men stood out for the degree to which their heterosexual involvements were organised by their homosocial relations. Tim and Curtis are "best mates" at ADFA. They are 21 and 20 years old, and both are Naval Officer Cadets in their third and final year. Tim and Curtis are important 'players' in the social and recreational life of the male members of the Academy. Both men give a very strong sense of a male homosocial collectivity at ADFA, which they very frequently refers to as "the boys". "The boys" routinely engage in group drinking and socialising at nightclubs near the ADFA campus and in the two bars at ADFA itself.

Tim's and Curtis's social lives are deeply homosocial in their organisation. The men's drinking, socialising, fighting and picking-up are all conducted with and among men, and their intimate sexual lives are the routine material for stories shared with their mates. Tim also comments that he is a member of the "old school" at ADFA, by which he means an older generation of ADFA officer-cadets and staff with allegiances to a more masculine, patriarchal and pro-military worldview than some of the newer members of ADFA exhibit. Tim himself identifies the "male bonding thing" at ADFA, saying that there is "a lot of it" here and "we're always talking over war, sex, piss ups... Everybody's voice gets a tone deeper by the end of the time they've been at the Academy".

1. Homosocial relations are primary.

Primacy of male-male relations

Among "the boys" at the military university, male-male social relations take priority over over male-female relations, both social and sexual, in three broad ways.

First, homosocial social obligations are positioned as primary. Among "the boys", a man who passes up on homosocial bonding to be with his girlfriend is called a "WOM", or "Woman Over Mates". As Tim recounts, "you bloody *WOM*, we've got a big piss up ahead and you're going out with your *girly*". Men in the homosocial circles of ADFA exert pressure on each other to prioritise their mates over their female partners. Tim says, "the boys do occasionally .. say things that they otherwise might not think, for the sake of their relationship with the boys." He gives examples of saying a woman is a 'tart' when in fact you like her, or that she sleeps around when you know she doesn't.

A similar policing of men's homosocial commitments has been documented among male athletes (Messner 1992, p. 97) and in male campus fraternities (Boswell & Spade 1996, pp. 140-141; Lyman 1987, p. 156).

At the same time, there appear to be tensions between the ADFA men's participation in collective masculine performances and their more personal desires and attachments.

Heterosexual men's prioritising of homosociality is also evident in codes of mateship. Curtis describes the well-defined principles of this homosocial bonding as follows;

you never jack on your mates, you will always be there for your mates, you'll always look after your mates and as far as a mate is concerned, they always come first.

The primacy of homosocial bonds may be consolidated in cultural narratives of heterosexual men's reluctance to be (and other men's teasing of them for being) 'under the thumb' of their wives or girlfriends, 'wrapped around her little finger,' encumbered by a 'ball and chain,' or 'pussy whipped.'

Heterosexual logic to friendships with women

The primacy of homosocial relations is expressed also in a compulsively heterosexual logic governing intimate relations with women. The four ADFA interviewees agree that, as one man said, "guys can't be friends with girls without thinking of them sexually". Again, Tim says that his relations with women are "usually purely sexual". His relations with women are very focused on sex, and women are only of interest for this reason.

Female friendships as feminising and homosexualising

Finally, excessive heterosociality is seen to threaten men's heterosexual and masculine credentials. When Tim describes male friends who appreciate women's company, he is quick to add, "oh but they're not *gay*". Men who have close but non-sexual relations with women are potentially both homosexualised and feminised by this, while homosociality is heterosexual and masculine. The paradoxes visible in such constructions are illustrated succinctly in the graffiti seen on the wall of the men's toilet in a local cafe: "Q. What's the definition of an Australian poofter? A. A bloke who likes women more than he likes beer."

2. Sex is linked to masculine status

There is an association between male sexual experience and masculine status. This begins for many young heterosexual men in adolescence and at secondary school, where achieving and claiming to have had heterosexual sexual experience is an important route to status among male peers.

A number of men in my study describe dynamics of male peer intra-group competition over sexual experience, surveillance of each other's sexual activities and encouragement of their pursuit. Elliot, aged 21 and in his fourth year of university, says that in late secondary school "we were always going, oh you know did you get with her? did you screw her?". Jake gives a similar account;

all your mates when you're 18 are *pushing* it, like they're going, oh, have you slept with her yet? [in an urgent whisper] You know, have you boofed her? come on man. (...) it was almost a competition in our group it's like, who was doing what with their girlfriend.

Status is not measured only by whether one achieves intercourse or not, but organized in terms of wider hierarchies of sexual practices and the social codings of sexed bodies. For example, there is schoolyard talk among boys of "getting to first base" (kissing a girl), "second base" (touching her breasts), "third base" (touching her genitals) and a "home run" (intercourse). This formulation orders both sexual practices and parts of a woman's body into sequences, and associates acts and body parts further along the sequence with greater sexual status.

Among males, the significance of virginity versus non-virginity as criteria for masculine status generally declines as they move into their early twenties.

But among older males sex is still a means to masculine status or a site of intra-group competition. Men in my study describe receiving kudos and accolades from male peers for other kinds of sexual achievements. One means to status is through having sexual relations with a woman who is superior in local hierarchies of status and power: in one ADFA case, as a first year officer-cadet having sex with a third year female officer-cadet. Tim says, “for a male to fuck a third year female is a *feat*. It is a *trophy*. It is oh how the *fuck* did you do that? you know. I got one.”

Another means to status is sex with a woman whose occupational position makes her a likely object of male sexual attention, such as a barmaid. Tim met his current girlfriend at the pub Mooseheads, and she was a barmaid;

a barmaid was a, a *conquer* of the century you know and it was my next task. Gotta get myself a Moose barmaid ‘cause they were all so petite and little and serve you lots of drinks.

Masculine status in Tim’s social circles may also be gained simply through the achievement of sex with a passing woman. Tim went away with ‘the boys’ on “a footy trip”, picked up a girl at the Sydney Cricket Ground and had sex with her in the army bus, and this too earned him accolades;

That was the *biggest* score. Came back and the boys were goin’, there was 50 of them, ohh-ohh [raising and lowering their arms in acknowledgement], you know, hail the great man type stuff.

Sex with ugly women

In the homosocial circles I’ve described at ADFA however, there is no loss of face in having casual sex with a stereotypically unattractive woman, and this practice is even codified in particular sayings such as “go ugly early” and “fat chicks need lovin’ too”. The practice of ‘going ugly early’ involves the attempt to initiate sexual relations with unattractive women in the belief that sex is more likely and one can go home earlier with such women. This choice is seen to circumvent the “work” involved in wooing more attractive women who are more difficult to persuade because of their stronger position in the sexual marketplace.

These male-male dynamics contrast with those among young women, for whom the sexual double standard and such constructions of sexual reputation as “slut” exert a powerful control on their sexual and social lives.

Homosociality as a barrier to heterosexual sex, and heterosociality as a heterosexual strategy

So far I have discussed a range of ways in which male homosociality informs men’s pursuit of, and gives meaning to, sexual interactions with women. However, for two of the men interviewed, masculine homosociality is a *barrier* to heterosexual sexual relations.

Adam and Scott, good friends in a residential college on campus, both make claim to a heterosexual sexual skill which is grounded in their heterosociality and their stereotypically feminine traits. Adam and Scott participate in a mixed-sex friendship circle. Both say that they get on better with women than with men, that they have “feminine sides” and are “sensitive”, and that they are able to converse among women about stereotypically feminine topics such as “bad hair days”.

Both men perceive stereotypical masculine traits as ineffective in initiating and maintaining sexual relations with women. Scott criticises the sexual strategies of men he refers to as “the

boys”: they don’t try to charm, dance, dress nicely or stimulate women’s minds, they are blunt, and they “just think sex should be theirs to have whenever they want it”. Both Adam and Scott say that they are good at “doing the work”: at interacting with women in such a way that they increase the likelihood of having casual sex or a relationship. This practice can include talking, dancing, flirting, compliments and other expressions of interest and attraction.

Self-reportedly ‘sensitive’ men such as Adam and Scott and self-identified members of “the boys” such as Tim and Curtis both offer narratives of heterosexual sexual skill. But while the former frame this in terms of heterosocial prowess, the latter claim to possess a physical and technical skill which can be applied to the body of any woman to produce her sexual pleasure.

3. Audience

Homosociality also mediates men’s heterosexual relations through the presence of an imaginary male *audience* for one’s sexual behaviour. In talking of his sexual activities, Tim often mentions how ‘the boys’ react to hearing of this. I had asked Tim, “Of all the things that two people can do sexually with each other, what do you enjoy the most?” He identifies fellatio, and in the following account, he lives a kind of stereotypical masculine fantasy in which he enjoys football, beer, and oral sex all at the same time;

there’s something *really* appealing to me about sittin’ there with a beer, just watching the footy and, Lucinda finishes cleaning up after lunch she sits down, and gets toey and just starts suckin’ me off. And I’m sittin’ there with my beer. And I’m watchin’ the footy. And I’ve got a girl suckin’ me off (little laugh). And I just go, hohhh. If the *boys* could see me now.

Thus “the boys” are the imagined audience for this man’s sexual achievements, their collective male gaze informing the meaning of his sexual relations.

4. Heterosexual sex as homosocial bonding

So far I have argued that heterosexual sex is a means to male bonding and masculine affirmation. But heterosexual sex itself can be the direct medium of homosocial bonding. Here, women’s bodies serve materially as sites for male homosociality.

The most powerful example of bonding with men through sex with women comes in one of Tim’s stories. As Tim says, this sexual episode represented “teamwork” in which “we’re thinking of each other as we’re giving it to ‘em”. Tim and Curtis are both at a local hotel with their girlfriends, having gone there for an ADFA function, and both end up in the restrooms having sex with their girlfriends within earshot of each other. Tim says,

I could see Curtis, like, in the other room goin’ yeah yeah, and I’m goin’ yeah yeah, and we’re thinking of each other you know as we’re giving it to ‘em (...) the girls were loving it ‘cause they were both howling you could hear them go, oh!, fuck!, uh oh oh (...) it was *fantastic*. It was great, ‘cause it was like, it was *teamwork*, you know? (...) yeah so we just do everything together.

Men’s definitions of mateship may include shared participation in heterosexual sex, even shared sex with the same woman.

Men can also bond through collective involvement in coercive forms of sexual practice or sexualised interaction. Groups of men engage in the collective sexual harassment of passing women (Gardner, 1995: 100-107), from cars, on the street, or at sporting events. Tim for example reports that when with his ‘mates’ at a cricket match, he “was goin’ like [...] hey show us your

tits! from the top stand". Male bonding feeds sexual violence against women, and sexual violence against women feeds male bonding.

In heterosexual men's sexual cultures, there are a variety of further heterosexual sexual practices which can serve to express or cement bonds between men. Male friends gather to watch pornographic videos, exchange pornographic materials, watch stripshows together, and go to brothels in groups. When men share a social space to collectively enjoy the display of female bodies, they also bond as audience, viewers, and masturbators.

Homosocial desire may also be present in forms of representation themselves. Common representations in pornography fetishise men's shared occupation of a woman's body or the mingling of men's bodily fluids on and in women's bodies.

5. Homosociality and sexual storytelling

There is one final way in which homosociality structures heterosexual men's sexual relations, and that is in shaping the development of men's *narratives*, their sexual *stories*, with which they make sense of their sexual and gendered lives.

The presence of a homosocial and male-centred environment seems to be an important factor in the development of men's story-telling cultures. Such cultures have been documented in male prisons (Thurston, 1996), male college fraternities (Boswell & Spade 1996, p. 138), and the Royal Australian Navy (Agostino, 1997a). Interviews with the men from the military university in Canberra suggest that a well-developed culture of story-telling exists here too, and that sexual narratives are an important element in such performances. All four of the men from ADFA refer to "warries": stories about military training, war, funny situations or incidents, drinking and sex, where "warry" is a portmanteau word created out of "war" plus "story". These stories are told to each other typically in the officers' mess (where alcohol is consumed) or in the recreation rooms of on-campus accommodation. Curtis and Tim have a stock of "warries" that they find particularly hilarious or interesting and they have told on repeated occasions, and others can identify them by their particular warries. In my interviews both men tell several "sex warries": detailed sexual stories about sexual episodes, whether involving one's good fortune, sex with prized or "shocking" women, or one's depravity and ill fortune.

Overseas research corroborates that boasting and telling stories of one's sexual exploits is an important part of homosocial male banter, and represents competition in internal 'pecking orders' among men.

(Caveats re. generalisation)

Given the small number of men on which the analysis is based, it cannot be claimed that the patterns established can be generalised to all young heterosexual men in Australia, let alone to men in other countries and cultures. But the possibility that these configurations of meaning and practice are present in similar forms in the lives of other men deserves further investigation.

(d) Homoeroticism and homosociality

Despite having stated at the beginning of this paper that homosociality refers to *non-sexual* same-sex bonds, it is hard not to miss the potential homoerotic element in Tim's accounts. Other authors have given greater emphasis to the sexual element particularly of male homosociality.

Some homosocial practices among seemingly heterosexual men seem ripe with homoeroticism, such as those involving genital contact (penis-grabbing games, the 'elephant walk', practices of bastardization and initiation, etc.) and genital exposure (male-only group nudity). Some argue that

such practices express a homoerotic desire which is taboo in dominant masculine narratives of sexuality. Does this mean then that the outwardly heterosexual male participants are secretly gay? Certainly we shouldn't be surprised at the possibility, given the well-established contradiction between some men's professed heterosexual identities and their same-sex sexual practices.

At the same time, contemporary male homosocial environments often are virulently homophobic. This is true of the military culture in which Tim and Curtis participate, and equally so for example in cultures of male contact sport and elsewhere. Tim and Curtis would be the first to reject any imputation of homosexual desire.

Do such men protest too much? Male homophobia is sometimes understood to involve the suppression of homoerotic desire (Pease, 2002: 122). Does this mean then that heterosexual men who express the most hostility towards homosexuality are the ones who most harbour repressed homosexual desire, while those heterosexual men accepting of homosexuality are the least interested? Clearly this is too simple. Such a crude psychoanalytic account neglects the sense in which homophobia is a social ideology, akin to racism, as much as it is a personal 'phobia'.

At the same time, clearly there *are* important homoerotic elements in some heterosexual men's homosocial practices, and psychoanalytically informed accounts may give more purchase on this. For example, Redman (1997) traces the psychic policing of heterosexual male identities against the threat of homoerotic desires.

The potential relationship between masculine homosociality and homoeroticism is so far still under-theorised, and its potential expression in heterosexual relations is under-examined.

Conclusion

Coming to grips with the homosocial ordering of heterosexual men's sexual relations is one aspect of the wider project of understanding the sexual cultures of heterosexual men. And doing this is critical in part for *feminist* reasons. For as Stoltenberg (1993: 45) states, "The way to improve relations between men and women is to expose the codes that control relations among men." I have discussed a series of ways in which male-male relations organize and give meaning to men's sexual relations with women. And I am conscious that there is much more work to be done, both empirical and theoretical, in investigating the intertwining of homosociality and heterosexuality.