

# Men, Sex, and Homosociality

## How Bonds between Men Shape Their Sexual Relations with Women

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Male-male social bonds have a powerful influence on the sexual relations of some young heterosexual men. Qualitative analysis among young men aged eighteen to twenty-six in Canberra, Australia, documents the homosocial organization of men's heterosexual relations. Homosociality organizes men's sociosexual relations in at least four ways. For some of these young men, male-male friendships take priority over male-female relations, and platonic friendships with women are dangerously feminizing. Sexual activity is a key path to masculine status, and other men are the audience, always imagined and sometimes real, for one's sexual activities. Heterosexual sex itself can be the medium through which male bonding is enacted. Last, men's sexual storytelling is shaped by homosocial masculine cultures. While these patterns were evident particularly among young men in the highly homosocial culture of a military academy, their presence also among other groups suggests the wider influence of homosociality on men's sexual and social relations.

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To what extent and in what ways are men's sexual relations with women organized by their social relations with other men? Drawing on interviews with young heterosexual men in Canberra, Australia, I argue that male-male peer relations have a profound influence on some men's heterosexual involvements. Homosociality shapes the sexual relations in which these men engage, the meanings given to their sexual involvements, and the development of narratives about them.

Contemporary scholarship on sexuality and HIV/AIDS has established that people's sexual relations are organized in part by their local contexts and communities and by personal and social networks (Campenhoudt et al. 1997). The social networks in which sexual actors are embedded

offer both possibilities for and limitations on formation of sexual ties, provide an audience for the formation and maintenance of these, and legitimate particular sexual activities. (Laumann and Gagnon 1995, 198)

Among men in Australia, examinations of the collective ordering of sexual relations have been conducted particularly among gay and homosexually active men

(Dowsett 1996). However, investigations of the social ordering of heterosexual men's sexual relations with women are rarer. Where heterosexual men are the subject of empirical research, often the focus is on homophobia's role in the constitution of their gendered subjectivities or in the policing of their performances of gender (Martino 2000; Plummer 1999). Such work is valuable in documenting the powerful interrelationships among hegemonic masculinities, homophobia, and heterosexual privilege but does less to advance understandings of the specific character of men's relations with women.

More widely, research on heterosexual men is a necessary element in the theorization of gender and sexuality. It is particularly important to make visible and critically interrogate dominant social categories, including those of maleness and heterosexuality, categories that have been marked as normative, natural, and privileged rather than as deviant, pathological, and other (Rutherford 1988). As Mac an Ghail (2000) notes, sexual majorities such as white heterosexual men are under-researched. While young white men dominate such fields as youth studies, only rarely have they been studied as a specifically gendered and sexualized grouping. 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 1993, 38; Campbell 1995, 207).

My research centers on a critical analysis of the sexual and social relations of young heterosexual men. This article offers an examination of one aspect of the workings of sexual and gender relations that my research has documented: the homosocial organization of men's heterosexual relations.

The data on which the following discussion is based is derived from a study of young heterosexual men's safe and unsafe sex. Semistructured interviews with seventeen men ages between eighteen and twenty-six in Canberra, Australia, were used to explore men's sexual practices and the meanings and sociosexual relations through which these are organized (Flood 2003). Because of the sometimes contradictory relationships between sexual identity and sexual practice, the research sample was defined as "heterosexually active men (aged 18-26) who do not identify as gay, homosexual, bisexual or queer" and was operationalized through a short questionnaire given to initial respondents. Interviewees were recruited from three locations: a residential hall on the Australian National University campus, the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA; a military university), and a local youth center. All participants came from English-speaking backgrounds and all grew up in Australia. Each man was interviewed for an average of three and a half hours, usually over two sessions. Interviews were coded for key meanings and understandings and their relationships to sexual practices and sociosexual relations. The names and other identifying details of the research informants have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

This article focuses on the accounts of a small number of men whose sexual relations with women were most strongly organized by their relations with other men. Some of the stories told in the interviews were deeply disturbing, as they center on

the ritualized sexual humiliation of a woman for men's collective amusement, while at other points, the interviewees expressed sentiments that were sexist or homophobic. Readers should note that some of the following interview quotes are sexually explicit and/or misogynistic. In the interviews, I adopted a similar demeanor to that of the informants and concealed my own critical analysis and rejection of patriarchal masculine and heterosexual practices. By acting in this way, effectively, I condoned their sexist practices and accounts. My ethical discomfort at doing so was mitigated only by a pragmatic concern with interview rapport and trust, and an awareness of the progressive political uses to which this research can be put.

### Bonds between Men

Homosociality refers to social bonds between persons of the same sex and, more broadly, to same-sex-focused social relations (Bird 1996, 121). Masculinity studies argues for powerful links between homosociality and masculinity: men's lives are said to be highly organized 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, 128-29). Males seek the approval of other males, both identifying with and competing against them. They 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, 129).

The assertion of male homosocial bonds is an enduring theme in literary and other texts and has been documented in a variety of cultural and historical contexts. In her influential work *Between Men* (1985), Sedgwick examines the power dynamics of the erotic triangle of two men and one woman found throughout British literature. Describing homosocial relays of desire between rival heterosexual males, she argues that patriarchal heterosexuality can be understood in terms of a "traffic in women," where women are used to cement the bonds of men with men (Sedgwick 1985, 26). Sedgwick emphasizes that by *desire*, she means an affective or social force or bond, which can be manifested in diverse ways, including as hostility. Sedgwick's analysis has been taken up in a multitude of analyses of ancient and modern texts, from Greek poetry, to the relationship between Kirk and Spock in *Star Trek* (Stein 1998), to later-twentieth-century American film, television, and fiction (Jeffords 1989; Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2002).

Historical and cross-cultural accounts of male homoeroticism and homosexuality further demonstrate the potential significance of men's homosocial bonds in the constitution of social relations. For example, there are examples of a socially established confluence between homosociality and homosexuality, in which sexual practices between older and younger men or boys establish or confirm masculinity, such as that documented by Herdt (1982). This work is now being complemented by

research also on women's homosocial and homoerotic relationships (Rabinowitz and Auanger 2002). However, the well-established feminist critique of universalizing narratives of gender should warn us off the conclusion that these examples therefore show some kind of homogenous and universal characteristic of masculinity.

Male homosociality plays a crucial role in many contexts in perpetuating gender inequalities and the dominance of particular hegemonic masculinities (Bird 1996). 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)

The institutional ordering of tight bonds among groups of men, whether in militaries, bureaucracies, or workplaces, often is accomplished through the exclusion of women and an ideological emphasis on men's difference from and superiority to them. 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." Male homosociality is implicated too in men's use of interpersonal violence, a phenomenon that both expresses and maintains inter- and intragender hierarchies of power. Solidarity between men informs men's sexual violence against women (Boswell and Spade 1996); violence against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons in public spaces (Herek, Cogan, and Gillis 2002); and military combat (Page 2002). The evidence is that it is not group membership per se but norms of gender inequality and other bonds that foster and justify abuse in particular peer cultures that promote violence against women (Rosen et al. 2003; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1997).

However, the homosocial ordering of men's heterosexual relations in particular has received relatively little attention. Homosociality organizes the male-female sociosexual relations of some young heterosexual men in at least four ways. First, male-male friendships take priority over male-female relations, and platonic friendships with women are dangerously feminizing and rare, if not impossible. Second, sexual activity is a key path to masculine status, and other men are the audience, always imagined and sometimes real, for one's sexual activities. Third, heterosexual sex itself can be the medium through which male bonding is enacted. Last, men's sexual storytelling is shaped by homosocial masculine cultures. It is to these patterns that I now turn.

## **Homosocial Heterosexuality**

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

relations. These patterns were apparent particularly at one location in my research, ADFA, a coeducational military university that trains officer cadets for all three arms of the defense forces. Both at formal, institutional levels and at the level of its unofficial culture, ADFA is deeply hierarchical, masculine, and homosocial (Burton 1996; Moore 1993; Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 1994; Smith and McAllister 1991). Relations among male cadets at ADFA traditionally have largely involved a culture of mateship built on sexism and homophobia, competitive banter, and emphasizing stereotypically masculine exploits including military training itself as well as drinking alcohol and “picking up” women. 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. Women’s recent entry into ADFA’s ranks has been greeted by many male cadets and staff with resistance and hostility. Similarly hypermasculine military cultures have been documented elsewhere (e.g., Morris 1996). However, there are signs that ADFA’s traditional culture is changing. One of my study’s interviewees, Tim, comments at several points 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 promilitary worldview than some of the newer members of ADFA.

The military university ADFA thus represents a particularly intense site of homosociality. Four of the seventeen men I interviewed were from ADFA, and the patterns of homosociality I describe were particularly evident here. It is likely, therefore, that the homosocial organization of these men’s heterosexual relations is partly a function of military culture. However, these patterns appear too in the accounts of other men in my research, and other research suggests that they can be found more widely among men.

Two men stood out for the degree to which their heterosexual involvements were organized by their homosocial relations. Tim and Curtis are “best mates” at ADFA. They are twenty-one and twenty years old, and both are naval officer cadets in their third and final year. Tim and Curtis are influential participants 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 refer to as “the boys.” The boys routinely engage in group drinking and socializing 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 organization. The men’s drinking, socializing, 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 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 [drinking sessions]. . . . Everybody’s voice gets a tone deeper by the end of the time they’ve been at the academy.”

## The Primacy of Male-Male Relations

The first pattern of interest is the primacy of men's relations with other men over those with women. Among "the boys" at the military university, male-male social relations take priority over male-female relations, both social and sexual, in three broad ways. First, homosocial social obligations are positioned as primary. This is most readily apparent in the derogatory term *WOM*. Among "the boys" at ADFA, 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 prioritize their mates over their female partners such that, as Tim says, "sometimes you feel forced to sort of *not* be with your girlfriend when you might want to, to be with the boys." Thus, "the boys do occasionally, I think, give up things and say things that they otherwise might not think, for the sake of their relationship with the boys." Tim gives examples of saying that a woman is a "tart" when, in fact, you like her or that she sleeps around when you know she does not. Tim also says that these days, after three or four years, there is more room among the men for declaring attachments to and feelings for women, but it is clear that homosocial obligations continue to take priority. A similar policing of men's homosocial commitments has been documented among American male athletes (Messner 1992), American campus fraternities (Boswell and Spade 1996; Lyman 1987), and drinking-centered male peer groups and subcultures in New Zealand (Wyllie and Casswell 1991) and in the American navy (West 2001).

At the same time, there appear to be tensions between these men's participation in collective masculine performances and other desires and attachments. Tim highly values spending time with his girlfriend:

I'll be the first one to admit that I like spending time with the girl, and I'll go out with the boys all the time, but there are so many other times where I will say, adios, I'm going home with my girlfriend tonight, and you'll cop a bagging for the ten minutes until you are gone, but they would do exactly the same if they had a woman there. . . . I'd much rather have a girl to go home and root [have sex with] than talk to the boys on the couch before I went home.

Similarly, among the male athletes in Messner's (1992) study, the male peer group's policing of its members' intimacy with women produced tensions between hidden pulls to emotional intimacy and the overt enactment of sexual aggression.

Heterosexual men's prioritizing of homosociality is also evident in codes of mate-ship. Curtis describes the well-defined principles of homosocial bonding among the boys as follows:

You never jack [tell] 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." Such narratives are expressed too in common "bucks' night" rituals for men about to be married, in which the groom-to-be celebrates his "last night of freedom" by watching a female stripper or his male peers shackle him to a ball and chain to symbolize his coming imprisonment.

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." Tim's interview presents the strongest example of this. Tim says that his relations with women are "usually purely sexual": "I don't like socializing with females very much, unless I'm out to pick them up or have sex with them." Tim believes passionately that men's relations with women are based on, and entirely mediated by, sex. Men can be good friends with a woman only if they are attracted to her. And men's friendly dealings with women are interpreted by Tim as evidence that they want to have sex with them and as a strategy for doing so.

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 nonsexual relations with women are potentially both homosexualized and feminized by this, while homosociality is heterosexual and masculine. These constructions are evident also among the slightly younger men in Martino's (2000) study. There is an irony here, of course, in that men who have too much social contact with women risk their heterosexuality. The paradoxes visible in such constructions are illustrated succinctly in the graffiti seen by this researcher on the wall of the men's toilet in a local cafe: "Q. What's the definition of an Australian poofter [gay man]? A. A bloke who likes women more than he likes beer."

## Sex and Masculine Status

A second aspect of the homosocial construction of males' heterosexual relations, one which has been acknowledged in the men and gender literature, is the association between sexual experience and masculine status. This begins for many young heterosexual men at secondary school, where achieving and claiming to have had heterosexual sexual experience is an important route to status among male peers (Holland, Ramazanoglu, and Sharpe 1994; Kimmel 1994; Messner 1992; Wight 1994).

A number of men in my study describe dynamics of male peer intragroup competition over sexual experience, surveillance of each other's sexual activities, and encouragement of their pursuit. Elliot, aged twenty-one 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 eighteen 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.

English research among white, heterosexual, working-class young men documents more violent forms of intramale competition over women. Canaan (1991) reports that young women were positioned as “pawns in a competitive game that is played by and for males.” Men fight other men, over women, in front of women, or in disputes over territory when men go out with women from other men's territory (119-20).

Status is not measured only by whether one achieves intercourse, but organized in terms of wider hierarchies of sexual practices and the social codings of sexed bodies. For example, there was schoolyard talk among boys at my own high school 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 in this study, the significance of virginity versus nonvirginity as a criterion for masculine status seems to decline as they move into their early twenties. A couple of the interviewees remarked that at university, there is less pressure from other males to have sex, that one's level of sexual experience now matters less, or that they are less sensitive to such pressure. The declining significance of virginity may simply be because most males have had sexual intercourse by their early twenties, with at least 48 percent having done so by the end of year 12 (Lindsay, Smith, and Rosenthal 1997). It is also possible, though, that the peer policing and disciplining of gendered behavior is less intense, for example, at a university that it is in secondary schools.

None of this means that among older males, sex is no longer a means to masculine status or a site of intragroup 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. Tim recounts that he boasted that as a first-year officer cadet, he had sex with a third-year female officer cadet. He 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, or with a woman seen



to be particularly attractive. Tim met his current girlfriend at the pub Mooseheads, popular with naval cadets, 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 young woman 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 fifty of them, "ohh-ohh" [*raising and lowering their arms in acknowledgement*], you know, hail-the-great-man type stuff.

In the homosocial circles I have described at ADFA, however, there is no loss of face in having casual sex with a woman who is seen to be unattractive, 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 stereotypically 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. Curtis says that men who go ugly early will be teased, but they suffer no real loss of face. However, a man may suffer stigma if he continues to see an "ugly" woman.

Jake, Chris, Adam, and Scott, all from a residential college at the Australian National University, describe other male-male dynamics through which heterosexual sex is a source of status. Jake says that he does not "stand up in front of the guys and announce what he has done," but he does use "sneaky little comments" and "throw-away lines" to give or allow the impression of sexual activity having occurred, whether it did or not. Similarly, Chris says that he leaves his accounts ambiguous to facilitate a more positive reading by his mates. Scott reports that with male friends, he "allows their minds to wander," allowing the listeners to come to their own conclusions, for example, that he had sex when he did not. Scott also says he has exaggerated about some women's breasts, saying they were "perfect," to make his friend Adam feel jealous, and Adam does this too.

These male-male dynamics are in stark contrast to those among many young women. Few young women will gain status among female peers for having many sexual partners or for "getting as far as they can" with a particular man. While heterosexual sexual experience has an almost entirely positive significance among young men, for young women, sex can be a means to the destruction of one's social standing and reputation. Women who are seen to be too sexually active, or who

transgress the boundaries of acceptable femininity, are labeled as “sluts.” A sexual double standard, centered on the policing of female sexual reputation, is pervasive among young men and women in contemporary Western cultures including Australia (Holland et al. 1996; Kitzinger 1995; Lees 1996; Stewart 1999; Tanenbaum 1999). At the same time, there are signs of a growing assertion of sexual desire and sexual agency by young women in Australia as some challenge the imperatives of heterosexual femininity by divorcing sex from love, expressing sexual desire and agency, making lusty demands for sexual pleasure, and pursuing one-night stands, casual sex, older male partners, and nonmonogamous relationships (Stewart, Mischewski, and Smith 2000).

Homosociality also mediates men’s heterosexual relations through the presence of an imaginary male audience for one’s sexual behavior. 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, “Hohhhh. 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. It is important to note that the boys are also an audience for the narrating of such sexual episodes as Tim and Curtis routinely tell sexual stories in all-male gatherings at ADFA. In some instances, the boys are witnesses to sexual activities themselves, a material and not only imaginary presence. I return to these in a later section.

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 that 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 with and among women about stereotypically feminine topics such as “bad hair days” and whether a man is attractive.

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

“the boys”: they do not 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.” Adam and Scott characterize themselves as relatively “sensitive” and as “smoother” and more successful than the “footy heads” in approaching and relating to women.<sup>1</sup> Both men 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.

The contrast that these two men emphasize between their feminized and heterosocial sexual abilities and that of “the boys” is similar to a patterning of sexual styles identified in research by Mac an Ghaill (2000) among eighteen-year-old males in a British training college. Adam and Scott are similar to Mac an Ghaill’s “Fashionable Heterosexuals,” young men who cultivated female desire through their consumption of fashionable clothes, hairstyles, and music and who displayed their competence at forming heterosexual relationships. On the other hand, Tim and Curtis are similar to the “Explicit Heterosexuals,” again displaying a sexual competence but one based on “extreme perversity, violent misogyny, and a racialized sexuality” (Mac an Ghaill 2000, 205).<sup>2</sup> In my interviews, both self-reportedly sensitive men such as Adam and Scott and self-identified members of “the boys” such as Tim and Curtis 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 that can be applied to the body of any woman to produce her sexual pleasure.

## Heterosexual Sex as Homosocial Bonding

So far, I have argued that heterosexual sex is a means to male bonding and masculine affirmation. But there is a more direct sense in which this is the case, in which heterosexual sex itself is the direct medium of homosocial bonding. The interviews documented a range of instances where men collectively participate in heterosexual sexual practice, and this collective participation is understood in terms of homosociality. In these episodes, 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.” Both Tim and Curtis are 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.

There are two aspects to the "teamwork" Tim describes. First, there is the connection between the two women, in that he says, "One made the other get goin', and then they both got each goin', and it was on fire, you know?" But the more important aspect is the teamwork between the two men, the erotic charge they create and share together as they both have sex within earshot and perhaps sight of each other. (Questions of the homoeroticism of homosociality are addressed in the following section.)

Men's definitions of *mateship* may include shared participation in heterosexual sex, even shared sex with the same woman. Asked what makes a "good mate," Tim laughs at length at the response he perceives as hilarious: "I don't know, what, the other guy on the other end of a pig on a spit!" He explains that "pig on a spit" is a type of sexual act in which a woman on her hands and knees performs oral sex on one man while having intercourse with another man from behind. She is the "pig" on their penile "spits." Thus, in this scenario, the woman's body literally is the medium through which the two men are connected to each other. In case the reader may think that this is a purely metaphoric comment, Tim had remarked earlier that "me and Curtis are always talking about putting a girl on a spit. And we're going to do it one day, for *sure*."

In another of Tim's accounts, a code of homosocial reciprocity shapes the sexual relations in which he engages. He and Curtis were in another city and had picked up two women in a nightclub. Tim says that he and Curtis have a rule that "whoever's getting the most sex, gets the ugliest girl," and Curtis had not "had a root [sex] in six weeks." Commenting that one of the women was ugly, Tim remarks, "But you see, you gotta do it for your mate; you've gotta look after your mate, you know?" Tim and Curtis go back to the women's house, and each has sex. The next morning, as Tim and Curtis drive off, Curtis says, "That was a gallant effort, and you've done well for the boys, and I appreciate that." The significance of these sexual adventures is a collective one, constituted in part through Tim's and Curtis's telling and retelling of such episodes to male audiences back at ADFA.

Men can also bond through collective involvement in coercive forms of sexual practice or sexualized interaction. Groups of men engage in the collective sexual harassment of passing women (Gardner 1995), 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. American research finds that the cultures and collective rituals of male bonding among closely knit male fraternities, male athletes, street gangs, and friendship circles foster sexual assault of women (Boswell and Spade 1996; Martin and Hummer 1989; Sanday 1990). In turn, rape can be practiced as a means to, and an

expression of, male bonding (Scully 1990). A recent study provides quantitative support for an association between patriarchal male bonding in peer cultures and violence against women. Using survey data among 713 married male soldiers at an army post in Alaska, Rosen et al. (2003, 1064-65) found an association between "group disrespect" (the presence of rude and aggressive behavior, pornography consumption, sexualized discussion, and encouragement of group drinking) and the perpetration of intimate partner violence at both individual and group levels.

All the men in my study espouse norms of consent regarding their sexual relations although with varying degrees of detail and commitment. They state that "no means no" and that they would stop sexual activity if their partner said to. At the same time, Tim's and Curtis's accounts suggest that they have pressured women into sexual activity. Two of the most disturbing stories Tim tells concern the sexual humiliation of a woman for men's collective amusement. The first is a "game" called "Rodeo," organized as follows: a group of men in a hotel room pull names out of a hat, and one man has to go out and pick up the most overweight woman he can. The remaining men hide in the room. The man brings the woman back to the room and begins to have sex with her. He ties her to the bed with her stockings, on her hands and knees. Then, he calls out to the hiding men, the lights are switched on, and he jumps on her back, trying to hold on for as long as he can while she struggles—this being the reason for the title "Rodeo." Tim says that he has participated twice in this game. Ronald, also from ADFA, gives a near-identical account of this practice and says that he knows people who have done it. Similar rituals of sexual coercion—for example, in which a group of men at a post-rugby-match party encourage or coerce a woman to show her breasts—are documented by Muir and Seitz (2004).

Tim's second story involves a less codified behavior but again one that expresses homosocial sexual abuse of women.

I remember being there for this. One of the boys brought this girl home. . . . She was, like, totally paralytic [drunk]. And he says, "Oh, come on, lie down on my bed, and I'll come and have sex with you in a minute." She goes, "Okay." So, falls asleep. And he pulls down her knickers and lifts up her dress. And goes, "Boys, boys, come here," and spreads her legs. And we got out the sand wedge . . . and some golf balls, and we tried to play hole in one [*laughs*].

In heterosexual men's sexual cultures, there are a variety of further sexual practices that can serve to express or cement bonds between men. Male friends gather to watch pornographic movies, exchange pornographic publications, videos and Web sites with each other, watch strip shows and tabletop dancing together, and go to brothels in groups to have sex with sex workers. Such practices consolidate the bonds between male friends, or workmates if conducted, for example, among male personnel on navy ships (Agostino 1997). In the case of strip shows, they also express a camaraderie between men who are strangers to each other. When men

share a social space to collectively enjoy the display of female bodies, they also bond as audience, viewers, and masturbators. When men gather to collectively become aroused, they participate in a male exchange of women or, in this case, of images and fantasies of women (Waugh 2001). This space may be virtual too, as Barron and Kimmel (2000) document in an Internet newsgroup devoted to sharing pornography. Even when a man consumes pornography alone, this use can constitute him as a member of an imaginary male community (Buchbinder 1998).

When heterosexual men watch pornography, homosocial desire may also be present in the forms of representation themselves. Common representations in pornography fetishize men's shared occupation of a woman's body or the mingling of men's bodily fluids on and in women's bodies. Mainstream heterosexual pornography routinely depicts two men performing simultaneous vaginal or anal intercourse and fellatio or simultaneous vaginal and anal intercourse with one woman, a woman performing fellatio on two or more men in turn, intercourse involving two penises in a woman's vagina or anus, and two or more men ejaculating on a woman's face or body. Particular genres of pornography extend this homosocial theme, including "gang bang" videos showing large numbers of men having sex with one woman and "Buttuku," which centers on groups of men ejaculating on a woman's body. More generally, in many pornographic films,

men share women, men get off watching men with women, men help men with women, men supplant men with women, men procure women for men, etc. (Waugh 2001, 282)

Heterosexual homosociality also may be expressed through sex-related practices that exclude women. Collective male processes in male-dominated and historically male-only workplaces such as among navy men on ships—including watching porn movies, attending male-only nude parties, penis grabbing, and boasting about sexual exploits—also function to defend male-only work spheres and resist women's intrusions (Agostino 1997).

## **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-centered environment seems to be an important factor in the development of men's storytelling cultures. Such cultures have been documented in male prisons (Thurston 1996), male college fraternities (Boswell and Spade 1996), collegiate male rugby (Muir and Seitz 2004), and the Royal Australian Navy (Agostino 1997).

Interviews with the men from the military university in Canberra suggest that a well-developed culture of storytelling 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* and *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 that 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 stories about sexual episodes, whether involving one’s good fortune, sex with prized or “shocking” women, or one’s depravity and ill fortune. Tim and Curtis from ADFA report that the boys regularly discuss the weekend’s exploits, as Tim recounts,

We *all* talk about sex, *all* the time. And, ah, I’ll tell ‘em everything. You know, I had her, on a table, with her head hangin’ over the edge, and she was suckin’ on my nuts while I was pullin’ myself off and playin’ with her. And the boys just can’t *believe* it, you know? . . . We used to actually, *every* Sunday night, meet in my room; there were about ten boys. . . . And we’d just talk about our fuckings for the weekend. And just talk and talk and talk. “You’ll *never* believe what I did. I hooked into this chick and made ‘er do *this*,” you know? Just, talk about it all the time.

American research corroborates that boasting and telling stories of one’s sexual exploits are an important part of homosocial male banter and represent competition in internal “pecking orders” among men (Bird 1996; Boswell and Spade 1996). The patterns of humor and interaction among the ADFA men are similar to those documented in an American fraternity (Lyman 1987) and among men in a brokerage house (Decapua and Boxer 1999). Joking relationships are central to fraternal bonds; humor is used to negotiate felt tensions with women, create group solidarity, and police men’s homosocial commitments; and collective “dirty talk” creates group excitement (Lyman 1987).

In my interviews, men’s telling of sexual stories itself represented a form of homosocial interaction. Speaking to a male interviewer of a similar age, they told warries that they also tell to other male audiences in other contexts. The research-based interactions were not identical to social exchanges that take place elsewhere: I did not offer sexual stories of my own, no other men were present, and we did not share membership of a wider collectivity within which such stories gain meaning. Nevertheless, the interviewees’ willingness to offer such stories probably was shaped by our shared status as male and heterosexual. In turn, in managing the interaction, I drew on my own familiarity with and embeddedness in masculinity and borrowed from the norms of culturally approved male-to-male relationships (McKegany and Bloor 1991). In this sense, in negotiating the interviews, both I and the interviewees “performed” gender or engaged in “gender identity work” (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001).

## Homoeroticism and Homosociality

Despite having stated at the beginning of this discussion that *homosociality* refers to nonsexual, same-sex bonds, it is hard not to miss the potential homoerotic element in Tim's accounts of heterosexual sex in the company of his closest male friend. In defining homosociality, some authors such as Aldrich (1992) emphasize that male homosociality in particular has involved a sexual or erotic bond. Some homosocial practices among seemingly heterosexual men indeed seem ripe with homoeroticism, such as those involving genital contact (penis-grabbing games, sexualized practices of bastardization and initiation, etc.) and genital exposure (such as male-only group nudity) documented, for example, by Agostino (1997) and by Muir and Seitz (2004). There are several ways to understand the homoeroticism of homosociality.

In one reading, Tim's account and other men's practices are expressive of a secret or repressed homosexual desire. These outwardly heterosexual male participants, in fact, nurture a secret sexual desire for other men. Certainly, we should not be surprised at this possibility given the well-established contradiction between some men's professed heterosexual identities and their same-sex sexual practices. However, the interviewee Tim would be the first to reject any imputation of homosexual desire; the military culture in which he participates is virulently homophobic, and the same is true of many contemporary male homosocial environments (male contact sports, male-dominated workplaces, etc.).

Do such men protest too much? Heterosexual men's homophobia, their fear of and hostility toward homosexuality, is sometimes understood to involve the suppression of homoerotic desire (Pease 2002). Tim's passionate homophobia, then, can read as powerful evidence of repressed homosexual desire, and such a reading certainly was typical in some early accounts offered within "gay liberation" texts (Herek 2004). However, in more recent discussions, homophobia is distinguished from true phobias centered on fear and avoidance and seen as more akin to a system of social prejudice or ideology akin to racism or anti-Semitism (Plummer 1999). While this helps us to avoid a crude psychoanalytic reading of homophobic attitudes as evidence of repressed homosexuality, it does not remove the apparent homoeroticism of some homosocial practices.

In another reading, this homoeroticism expresses (and helps to ease) the structural tension between homosocial and homosexual bonding in particular institutional contexts. Looker (1994, 214) writes of incidents of bastardization centered on simulated male-male intercourse, which took place among cadets in the same military university context in which the interviewees Tim and Curtis live. He argues that it is

where the repression of homosexuality is under the most severe pressure (that is, at the exact point where a whole institution such as the military is founded upon homosocial co-operation and the valuation of the masculine ideal) it finds symbolic expression in an act of humiliation.



More intimately, clearly, there is an erotic charge or arousal for some heterosexual men in having sex with a woman, or engaging in another kind of sexualized interaction with her, in the company of other men. This is the case in Tim's account and true of at least some men's homosocial consumption of pornography, use of sex workers, and participation in group sex involving two or more men and one woman. The felt eroticism of such encounters is generated through men's shared interaction with women and women's bodies, but for some, it also may be generated by their sexualized proximity to other men. At the same time, powerful homophobic norms police men's interaction in such episodes, such that touching other men or expressing desire for them is forbidden.

## Conclusion

The extent to which males' lives are organized homosocially varies across the life course. Other Australian research by Plummer (2001) finds that during primary school, peers expect boys to socialize only with other boys, and those who associate too closely with girls risk both contamination ("girls' germs") and homophobic abuse. Yet, by the middle of secondary school, boys who do not associate closely enough with girls are considered suspect (Plummer 2001). Over this period, boys, therefore, move from exclusive homosociality to both homo- and heterosociality. (Such patterns are shaped, of course, by other factors as well such as being in a single-sex versus a mixed-sex school.) Many begin to give greater social time and emotional investment to male-female sexual relationships, and this shift consolidates as young men enter mixed-sex workplaces or university environments.

However, as my research has suggested, some young men continue to have highly male-focused peer relations throughout adolescence and into early adulthood; some participate in highly homosocial young male collectivities such as sporting groups, gangs, and subcultures; and some will spend most of their adult lives in these or other homosocial contexts such as male-dominated workplaces and institutions. Tim and Curtis, for example, will continue to lead largely homosocial working lives if their aspirations to be officers in the Royal Australian Navy are realized.

Male-male relations organize and give meaning to the social and sexual involvements of young heterosexual men in powerful ways. Homosocial bonds are policed against the feminizing and homosexualizing influences of excessive heterosociality, achieving sex with women is a means to status among men, sex with women is a direct medium of male bonding, and men's narratives of their sexual and gender relations are offered to male audiences in storytelling cultures generated in part by homosociality.

Examining the homosocial ordering of heterosexual men's sexual relations is one aspect of the wider project of understanding men's involvement in and negotiation of sexual and gender relations. This is critical in part for feminist reasons. As

Stoltenberg (1993, 45) states, "The way to improve relations between men and women is to expose the codes that control relations among men." *Male bonding* may refer at times to innocuous practices of companionship in leisure or at work. Yet this study has documented that homosociality also is constitutive of troubling practices of sexual coercion of women and the surveillance and policing of men's social and sexual relations. While male homosociality may be particularly intense in the military culture in which some men in this study dwell, this research and other scholarship suggest that homosociality has an organizing force in the sociosexual relations of young heterosexual men in a variety of other contexts.

## Notes

1. Their colloquial terms *boys* and *footy heads* are common ones for distinct formations of masculine practice, similar to Connell's account of "cool guys," "swots," and "wimps" and Martino's account of "cool boys," "party animals," "squids," and "poofers" (Connell 1989; Martino 1999).

2. A third group in Mac an Ghaill's research, "Sexual Outsiders," showed forms of public presentation of self not centered on heterosexuality and had limited sexual experience.

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