

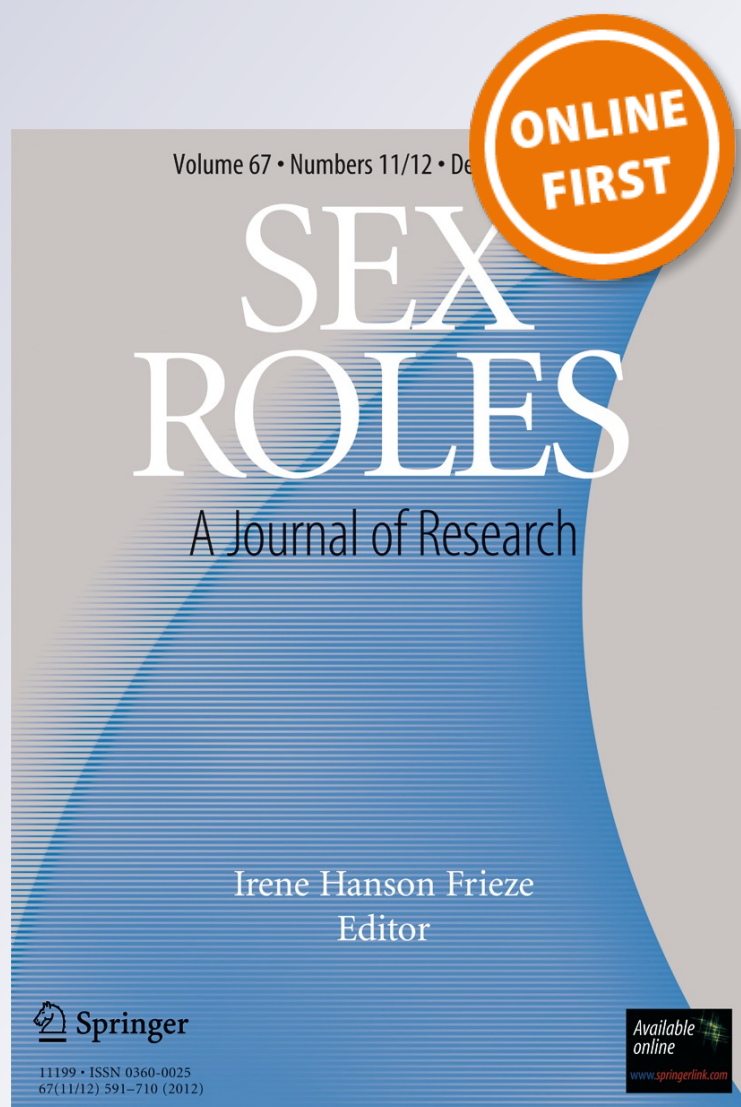
Promises Unfulfilled: The Reclining Significance of Homophobia?

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Promises Unfulfilled: The Reclining Significance of Homophobia?

The Declining Significance of Homophobia: How Teenage Boys are Redefining Masculinity and Heterosexuality. By Mark McCormack, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012. 166 pp. \$49.99 (hardcover). ISBN: 9780199778249

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After much anticipation and somewhat hushed whisper from academic circles, I received Mark McCormack's book in the mail. The anticipation of reading his book up until that point was rooted in academic banter among colleagues in various circles at conferences I recently attended in the UK and Canada. People had heard of the book, heard McCormack speak of it on broadcasts, and heard the various claims he made. The book was anticipated because it promised what might be considered a radical cultural shift in the declining significance of homophobia, at least, in Western countries where we hear of repeated incidents of harassment and homophobia (see, for example, Meyer 2009; Walton 2004).

While this review is about Mark McCormack's book, it is worth acknowledging that McCormack has been deeply influenced by the work of Eric Anderson both as a doctoral student and a co-author (see Anderson and McCormack 2010a, b; McCormack and Anderson 2010). Additionally, Anderson acknowledges that he in fact co-verified and validates McCormack's findings at Standard High (p. xiii). There is an obvious history McCormack has both as a student of Anderson's and a beginning scholar forging his own path. What one is first struck by in the early pages of this book is the homage, if you will, to Anderson's work and conceptual theorizing. Anderson also provides a deferential preface to "Dr. Mark McCormack". These points are simply observations. The book, not only has the aforementioned as its foundation, but the title, *The declining significance of homophobia: How teenage boys are redefining masculinity and heterosexuality*, starts with considerable grandeur to it

all and indeed, with much promise to be fulfilled in a short 139 pages (plus references and index!).

There is good reason for people to be talking about this book. McCormack promises to challenge what many have argued to be the case, mainly, that homophobia is not on the decline, but rather, homophobia is alive and in fact remains woven to the fabric of many elementary and secondary schools. McCormack claims otherwise; however, the data suggesting that homophobia remains a problem and social ill of society in North America (the United States and Canada!), the United Kingdom, and Australia in particular, cannot be easily dismissed (see Meyer 2009; Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003, 2005; McCreedy 2010; Pascoe 2007; Rasmussen 2006; Walton 2004). At the same time, we are seeing growing evidence in the documentation of school lives of young men and boys who have managed, in various ways, to transgress hegemonic masculinity and resist the dominant codes of masculinity that tend to dominate and oppress less privileged, non conforming masculinities (see Kehler 2007, 2009; Kehler and Martino 2007; McCleod 2002; McCreedy 2010; Renold 2004; Wyss 2004).

With the above as the necessary backdrop, I will provide a review of the structure of the book. I follow up with a look at some of the more engaging chapters and raise some questions about the promise the book has, as well as the areas that I believe McCormack might have left me wanting more. I conclude with my final word, or as final as it can be, on my read of the book from the perspective as a masculinities scholar and teacher educator (see Kehler 2012; Kehler and Atkinson 2010; Martino et al. 2009).

McCormack begins this book capturing the horrific experiences of gay students in the United States. Locating the book and the cultural acceptance of LGBTQ youth alongside the experiences of American students provides a backdrop to the

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direction of the rest of the book. Curiously, McCormack situates his findings from the UK alongside the experiences of American students. He argues, in the UK “the situation is much better for LGBT students” in three high schools “where homophobia is condemned and openly gay students have happy and productive school lives” (p. xxii). The introduction sets the stage. And while you might be rattled or unsettled, you will want to keep reading to see how he can make the leap to arguing there is evidence then, to claim a declining significance of homophobia. McCormack argues why he locates his book against the United States which is “mired in the culture wars still raging” (p. xxii) across the Atlantic divide, but he pushes maybe too far arguing that this comparison provides an “international readership” with “implications for inclusive educational practice on both sides of the Atlantic” (xxii). Needless to say, the international academic community extends beyond two sides of the Atlantic. Moving beyond this McCormack still leaves me unconvinced by contextualizing his research with the United States. Other countries, including, yes, Canada have shown ongoing movement in education and curriculum specifically to acknowledge LGBTQ students and diverse sexualized identities (see Kehler 2010; MOE 2007).

McCormack outlines the organization of his book telling the reader of his “ethnographies of three high schools in the United Kingdom to examine the contemporary dynamics of sexuality and masculinity among 16–18 year old boys” (p. xxvi). Broken into three sections, his book is well organized to allow readers to jump in where they see fit. Unfortunately for me I was looking for an ethnographic account that I might place alongside some others such as Willis (1977), Thorne (1993), and Pascoe (2007). This did not meet my expectations in that regard. Promise number one: unfulfilled.

This is an introductory book possibly for undergraduate students in Sociology, Women’s Studies/ Gender Studies courses and is intended to provide the basics for “readers who are new to this topic with accessible and detailed introductions to the issues” (p. xxvi). My disappointment is only that I had greatly anticipated the ethnographic research which actually does not come out until Part 3, 71 pages later. Part 1 locates the researcher, his theoretical frameworks, the study and the insight of “being a gay researcher”. And though we are introduced to his research sites – Religious High, Fallback High and Standard High – we do not see these schools or the students that populate them until four chapters later in the final part of the book. Part 2, Masculinities, provides a rendering of the theoretical landscape. His attention to the theoretical frameworks, shortcomings and strengths, are well done. He gives considerable detail across the landscape and perhaps that is where I, as an academic, continued to await the much anticipated ethnographies that would reflect and respond to the title of the book. McCormack uses the second part of the book, Chapter 4, to provide a critique of Connell’s concept of hegemonic

masculinity while hanging his hat on and elaborating Anderson’s concept, or arguably a theory of “inclusive masculinity”. It was not long before Chapter 6 and the reader is met with McCormack’s “driving thesis that the changes to the stratification of masculinities . . . result from the fact that British youth culture is no longer homohysterical” (p. 57). “The decline in homohysteria” (not the decline in homophobia!?), he argues, “is principally the result of improved and improving attitudes toward homosexuality” (p. 57). His survey of the literature addressing teenage boys and schooling is useful for introductory level reading. In his “Zeitgeist of decreasing homophobia” section McCormack begins addressing his claim that there is a decline in homophobia. With a brief reference to a “revolutionary policy directive in the UK,” McCormack argues that “positive attitudes toward homosexuality are increasingly prevalent in British schools” (p. 60) but he reclines somewhat when he immediately follows this saying that there is a “wider range of acceptable gendered behaviours for male students”. The argument that there is a decline in homophobia on the basis that boys have more acceptable gendered behaviours from which to draw is a stretch. Promise number two: unfulfilled.

The availability of a broader repertoire of masculinities and performances of masculinities through changing public displays of gender practices does not necessarily mean that homophobia is decreasing at the same rate. While these practices of masculinities are increasingly evident in schools, the ability to show, engage, and routinely negotiate these practices in various school spaces as well as public spaces, nonetheless has not made it mainstream and acceptable for all students. The fact remains that heterosexism prevails as the operating principle in many schools.

While school policies, curriculum and conversations at some levels in some countries may gradually be changing to reflect greater diversity of youth identities, the evidence of some boys reconfiguring gendered practices has only as much impact as the school is willing to accept and embrace. Even with anti-discrimination policies, for example, in some school curricular documents, teachers and administrators are primarily responsible for shifting and disrupting the official discourse. Students will self-monitor where and when they are safe to challenge heteronormativity. McCormack argues a “rise in gay visibility” in the media, in portrayals of sportsmen (p. 64) and in a growing number of situational comedies is contributing to the decline of homophobia. He also cites the internet as a key factor but McCormack seems to leave out issues such as cyber-bullying and the way homophobia operates in different ways than has previously been the case (see Meyer 2009). Perhaps the landscape is changing for adolescent youth, but so are the rules by which youth play the games.

McCormack argues that change is evident in the most obvious and visible ways that, unlike his school days, the

boys he observed in fact “hugged each other hello and goodbye, sat on each other’s laps, and gave their friends back rubs” (p. 80). His argument is that there is a “seismic shift that has occurred in attitudes toward homosexuality in the informal school culture” (p. 71). His argument follows that “heterosexual boys intellectualize and espouse pro-gay attitudes” (p. 71) on the basis of his research of openly gay students and the absence of homophobic language. In short, McCormack attempts to illustrate how boys redefine masculinity and heterosexuality and moreover, how this is grounds to suggest there is a declining significance of homophobia in schools.

McCormack gives the reader room to pause when he states that “forcing homophobic attitudes underground (which I would argue is no bad thing in and of itself)” (p. 76). Readers may be alarmed by such an approach that would encourage students to pent-up any beliefs and misunderstandings they may have and not address them in a thoughtful more public manner. The argument that “homophobic language has fallen out of usage and has even become stigmatized in these schools” (p. 84) may be evident for these particular schools though it might also be argued that such language was occurring in groups and spaces that he was not privy to as a researcher. There is of course much debate and question of the researcher presence that one might insert here but the reader will make his/her own judgment on the extent to which McCormack’s researcher identity influenced the kinds of data he accessed and the interactions he witnessed and was privy to in his research.

The final chapters of this book are perhaps the richest and much anticipated for me as a reader. McCormack nicely parses out his data along thematic lines including: charisma (p.101), authenticity (p. 102), and social fluidity (p.105). And while I appreciated this organization, it is telling that he also arranges his writing with sub-headings such as “conquestual recuperation” (p.91), “ironic recuperation” (p. 92), and “popularity in an inclusive setting” (p.107). What I find striking about this organization and the subheadings is the lack of student voice and narratives. Yes, they are peppered throughout these sections; but, no, they are not prominent and they appear secondary to a larger ideological argument that unfortunately overshadows the participants. The voices of the participants are in many ways strategically placed for a developing intellectual debate that clearly will not end with his “three school ethnographies”.

In many ways this book ends as it started. I began this review commenting on the detail and level to which McCormack provides a survey of the intellectual landscape and the various and relevant literature that situates the issues, his study, and himself as a researcher. The end of the book ends with an introduction to a model for understanding the spectrum of homosexuality themed language. The work of Pascoe (2007) and Anderson figure

prominently in this discussion. Again, I do not hear the compelling stories and experiences of adolescent boys but rather I am left hanging on to a debate or a rejection of the “heuristic utility of hegemony theory and hegemonic masculinity” (p. 136) all under the heading of inclusive masculinity theory (p. 135). McCormack has the final word in a closing paragraph that defends his research in the name of generalizability but then leaves it up to the views of the reader to resolve any question of generalizability: as he says, “your own views will influence how you resolve the question of generalizability” (p. 139). But why? Why, with such interesting data (though admittedly beneath the surface), why did McCormack close with questions of generalizability unless, of course, readers should question his book along those lines? I am left feeling that McCormack had such great promise to share his research, his ethnographies, but he did not meet his potential. Rather than the decline of the significance of homophobia or any significant redefinition of masculinity and heterosexuality, McCormack has drawn our attention to how academics navigate and utilize research that might in fact lead to the recline – the relaxation of our attention on the real issues, the real storied lives of adolescent boys who struggle in the heterosexist contexts of schools.

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