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Abstract

“Masculine capital” refers to the social power afforded by the display of traits and behaviors that are associated with orthodox, stereotypical masculinity. Men who are concerned with their masculine identity may utilize these traits and behaviors to increase their overall masculine capital, and to mitigate “failures” in other domains of masculinity. However, their success at accruing and trading masculine capital may be limited, because different traits and behaviors are not equal in the capital they convey, and their value may vary depending on the social context in which they are deployed. Research suggests that heterosexuality contributes more to masculine capital than other stereotypically masculine characteristics: The possibilities for gay men to accrue and trade masculine capital may therefore be particularly limited, especially in heteronormative contexts. Focus groups were undertaken with gay men, straight women and straight men living in a coastal city in the south of England to explore discursive constructions of gay masculinity, and to examine gay men’s possibilities for accruing and trading masculine capital. Discourse analysis identified constructions of gay masculinity in reference to hegemonic masculinity, where gay men may acquire masculine capital in similar ways to straight men. However, the meaning and value of this capital may also vary, because certain characteristics and behaviors may have different value for and between gay men than they do for straight men, and in heteronormative contexts. The analysis also identified discourses of gay masculinity where it was not constructed as a singular entity, but rather as complex, multiple and diverse.

Keywords: Gay men; Masculinity; Masculine capital; Discourse analysis

Contemporary theories of masculinity contend that there is a multiplicity of ways of “being a man” and therefore offer pluralistic interpretations of masculinity. Connell’s (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity has been particularly influential, maintaining that masculinities are hierarchically structured, with gay men occupying the lowest rung of the masculinities ladder. Recent research has examined how some men use certain behaviors that are associated with stereotypical, orthodox masculinity in order to construct and maintain a viable masculine identity (e.g., de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; de Visser & Smith, 2007; Dempster, 2011). However, such research has assumed the heterosexuality of the participants concerned, and has not examined the possibilities that gay men have for constructing a masculine identity that is valued in heteronormative, Western culture. Therefore, the aim of this qualitative study was to explore current discursive constructions of gay masculinity and to consider their implications for the masculine subjectivities of gay men.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the current and locally dominant masculine ideology, which in Western societies, defines “real men” as powerful, competitive, physically strong, invulnerable and crucially, heterosexual (Connell, 1995). Behaviors that do not contribute to the realisation of these principles are considered inherently nonmasculine at best, feminine at worst. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is not intended to describe an archetype of masculinity, nor a category of man who embodies the characteristics that render him inherently masculine. Rather, masculinity is a social process, something that is “accomplished in social action” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p.837). Connell (1995) maintains that hegemonic masculinity represents an idealized masculinity that does not necessarily correspond to the real lives of most men, but is nevertheless the object of aspiration for the majority of them. Men who do not exemplify hegemonic masculinity must inevitably embody alternative, less valued masculine identities.

Men are not expected to embody all of the principles of hegemonic masculinity in order to be considered masculine: they can even display stereotypically feminine behaviors while maintaining their masculine integrity (de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; de Visser, Smith & McDonnell, 2009). The extent to which a man is perceived as masculine depends on the combination of behaviors he enacts or traits he embodies, each weighted differently in terms of the masculine “credit” it affords (de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; de Visser et al., 2009). Borrowing from Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of “symbolic capital”, which refers to the social power afforded by an individual’s credentials, Anderson (2009) and de Visser et al. (2009) refer to the relative contribution to masculinity of different behaviors and characteristics in

terms of “masculine capital”. The value of the capital afforded by various behaviors and characteristics varies according to the “field” or social context in which they are produced and deployed (Bourdieu, 1977). In a field of heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity, competence at stereotypically masculine team sports like rugby, working out to achieve muscularity, being able to consume large volumes of alcohol, and overt, “successful” heterosexuality have been identified as important sources of masculine capital. Furthermore, such behaviors can mitigate feminine behaviors and traits, or inoculate against “failures” in a given domain of masculinity. (de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; de Visser & Smith, 2007; de Visser et al., 2009). The concept of masculine capital can explain the emergence of “new masculinities”, such as the “metrosexual man”, who combines traditional markers of hegemonic masculinity like financial dominance with a more feminine concern for appearance (Simpson, 2002).

Hegemonic Masculinity and Gay Masculinities

Heterosexuality and homophobia are at the core of hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1985). Within a hierarchical structure of masculinities, gay masculinities are subordinated because homosexuality is considered counter-hegemonic (Connell, 1995). Gay men represent a threat to patriarchy because their sexual attraction to the bodies of other men is considered inherently feminine, which explains the stereotype of the feminine gay man (Connell, 1995). Heterosexuality is closely policed by those who endorse hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and men who display feminine behaviors or who fail in a given domain of masculinity, irrespective of their sexual identity, risk being symbolically relegated down the masculinity hierarchy, by suspicions and accusations of homosexuality (Anderson, 2005; de Visser & Smith, 2007; de Visser et al., 2009; Emslie, Hunt & Lyons, 2013). Heterosexuality, therefore, can be thought of as a very important contributor to masculine capital.

However, critics of Connell’s theory argue that in contemporary Western society, masculinities need not be conceived as hierarchically arranged. Anderson’s (2009) theory of inclusive masculinity asserts that masculinities can exist in a horizontal structure, without subordinating and marginalising their alternatives. Anderson (2009) argues that the demise of “homophobia”, or culturally-entrenched homophobia, means that not all straight¹ men position themselves in opposition to gay men, and consequently have less need to prove their heterosexuality through the avoidance of feminine (or at least, nonmasculine) behaviors.

¹The terms “straight” and “gay” have been used in place of “heterosexual” and “homosexual” in order to describe sexual identity rather than sexual behavior.

From Anderson's (2009) perspective, gay men would not need to aspire to a masculinity valued in a heteronormative culture because gay masculinities would be equally viable.

Despite this optimistic view of changing masculinities, Eguchi (2009) argues that gay men negotiate their masculine identities in response to the pressure imposed on them by a heterosexist culture, where heterosexual masculinities are most valued. A physique which conveys physical strength is one way that heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity may be embodied: Muscular bodies may therefore afford gay men a masculinity that is valued within a heteronormative culture (Drummond, 2005). Consequently, an athletic or muscular physique has been identified as an important aspect of some gay men's masculine identities (e.g., Barron & Bradford, 2007; Drummond, 2005, Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005).

Research findings suggest that being gay reduces a man's perceived masculinity more than other nonmasculine traits and behaviors, like abstinence from alcohol and lack of athleticism (de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; de Visser et al., 2009). However, it is not known if or how gay men are able to use certain behaviors in order to increase their overall masculine capital and ameliorate the threat to their masculinity posed by their homosexuality. Straight men are able to accrue masculine capital via their heterosexuality (de Visser et al., 2009): It is important to consider the possibilities that gay men have for accruing masculine capital, when they are inherently unable to pursue it in the same domain.

Method

Data Collection

Data were collected from February to May 2015 via focus group interviews. Nine focus groups, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, were held with groups homogenous in terms of their sexual identity, being either gay men, straight women or straight men. The inclusion of straight men and women in the sample was deemed important for achieving a gender-relational perspective, assuming that masculinities exist in relation to each other and to femininities (Connell, 1995). Furthermore, to include straight men and women was fitting for the discourse-dynamic approach taken for studying the subjectivity of gay masculinity: how available discursive constructions of gender are implicated in how gay men experience masculinity (Willig, 2000).

Each group consisted of between three and six people. They were run in classrooms at the host university, and at a local college. Participants were asked to discuss how they would define a masculine man and a gay man. They were asked how gay and straight men might use certain behaviors in order to increase how masculine they are perceived by others. Using a technique employed previously (de Visser & Smith, 2007), images of well-known

gay and straight male celebrities were shown to participants to prompt discussion of what it means to be masculine and what it means to be a gay man. The researcher who facilitated the focus groups kept their input to a minimum and was mindful to avoid sharing their position on the topics discussed.

Discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were read multiple times for familiarisation and to acquire an initial impression of the discourses emerging.

The focus group method was deemed appropriate as it is compatible with one of the assumptions of a social constructionist approach, that “when people talk to each other, the world gets constructed” (Burr, 2003, p. 8). Social constructionism allows researchers to focus on the processes that lead to knowledge being achieved, rather than seeking out structures of knowledge that are assumed to be embedded in reality. Data that arises from studies that are positioned within social constructionism identify culturally and historically-bound constructions of knowledge that are produced in the context of relations with others (Burr, 2003). Social constructionism views language as central to how the world is constructed and how it is experienced, and assumes that identity is constructed by the deployment of discourses that are culturally and temporally available (Burr, 2003). The use of discourse analysis in this study was appropriate because it allowed for examination of how masculinity and gay masculinity were represented in different ways, via the deployment of various discourses by different speakers.

Data Analysis

Potter and Wetherell (1995) distinguished between two broad types of discourse analysis, one that focuses on discursive “practices” and the other, influenced by poststructuralism and the work of Foucault, on discursive “resources”. The former is concerned with how language is used to accomplish particular objectives in interpersonal interaction (Willig, 2013). The latter allows us to identify how people use the discursive resources available to them in order to construct objects and subjects and to define subjectivities. An important concept associated with this type of discourse analysis is subject positioning. Discourses function to make available positions for people which structure subjective experience because they demarcate the possibilities for “being”: what can be thought, felt, said and done by individuals are bound by where they are positioned (Burr, 2003; Hollway, 1989; Willig, 2000). The present study was situated within this Foucauldian discourse analytic framework.

Willig's (2013) six-stage approach was applied. The first stage was to code the data by reading the transcripts and identifying categories of references to the discursive objects: masculinity, femininity and masculine capital for gay men. One transcript was read separately by two researchers, who recorded their observations on the transcript and then discussed consistencies and differences in their remarks. Category labels and their descriptions were amended in an iterative process of finding the best description for capturing the theme of a collection of references. Once a standard approach for coding the data was agreed upon between the two researchers, the first author continued to code the remaining transcripts and proceeded to undertake stage two of the analysis. For stage two, the language used to construct the discursive objects was examined, and new categories created to record where it was used. Annotating the transcripts and making notes by hand accomplished the third stage, which was to examine the functions of the discourses, a precursor for establishing the opportunities made available by the discourses for the objects and subjects constructed. During this stage, the two researchers met to discuss the emerging discourses and their implications. Stages four, five and six involved identifying subject positions opened up by the discourses and then considering how the discourses limited and made available possibilities for lived experience (action and feelings) for those who occupied them. The first author took principal responsibility for accomplishing this, using mind maps generated with reference to the categories identified earlier. Throughout stages four, five and six, checks for quality were made between the two researchers, who met frequently to discuss the coherence of the analysis.

Participants

There were 38 participants: 12 gay men, 14 straight men, 11 straight women and one bisexual woman. They all lived in and around a coastal city in the South East of England, and most were students. Participants were recruited through various means: advertisements placed on the host university's research participant database; the researcher's contacts at a local college and a YMCA group; advertisements placed on social media sites. Some gay men were recruited via word-of-mouth. Recruitment advertisements appealed for participants to take part in a study about "Gender and Identity".

The aim was to recruit people aged 18 to 30 years, but in the opportunity samples, three participants were aged over 30. The data from these participants were retained: they were part of the discursive dynamics within their respective groups. The age range 18-30 was chosen as these years of emerging/young adulthood are when concerns about establishing identity may be particularly important (Arnett, 2000).

The ethnic breakdown (32 white participants, three Asian, two black, and one mixed-ethnicity) reflected the ethnic composition of the study location (Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, 2015).

In three focus groups, participants were not known to each other; another three groups combined some participants who were known to each other and some who were not; and in the remaining three groups, participants were classmates known to each other. Most of the groups of straight men and straight women comprised undergraduate students, or students following an “Access” programme, which provides a high school-level qualification for people aged 19 and over to enable them to progress to university study. Groups of gay men were mixed, consisting of university students and nonstudents with high school qualifications. No incentive or reward for taking part was offered to participants.

Participants gave written informed consent. They wore name badges that displayed their real names or a self-chosen pseudonym. In the transcripts, participants’ names and references to other people were replaced with pseudonyms.

Results

Three main discourses relating to masculinity and masculine capital for gay men were identified. Each is described and illustrated with verbatim quotes.

Gay Men Accruing Masculine Capital

The discourse surrounding gay men’s accrual of masculine capital was embedded in a broader discourse of orthodox, hegemonic masculinity, wherein gay men, like straight men, could accrue masculine capital in available domains when or if it was lost in others. Some participants suggested that for gay men the stakes were higher than for straight men, because, as Marcus asserted, “Gays feel they have something to prove more than straight guys”:

Marcus [gay man]: Since you’re gay, you need to give, if you want to project an image of yourself that is masculine then you feel more obliged to go to gym and look . . . particularly masculine. More than a straight guy who’s just straight and goes to the gym because he wants to pull when he goes out, whatever. I think for gay men it might be more deep than that. So they feel the need to some extent to kind of compensate.

Marcus’s use of the word “compensate” is revealing. The gay man constructed by Marcus’s discourse was obligated to develop a muscular physique because he wanted to be perceived as masculine *in spite of* his homosexuality. Richard expressed his view on why gay men enact masculine behaviors to compensate for their gay identity:

Richard [gay man]: Guys who are feminine would still engage, perhaps, in traditionally masculine activities and that, you know, redeem themselves in that way . . . I guess it comes to, like, a power dynamic in society where women are still perceived as inferior, and as long as men can somehow show that they are still masculine or male, they then are part of the dominant social group. Whereas if they're more effeminate then they lose that social power.

Richard suggested that engaging in activities that are stereotypically masculine offered redemption for the feminine gay man, who was disadvantaged by the conflation between gay femininity and being a woman. Accruing masculine capital through the enactment of masculine behaviors therefore served to promote gay men's position in the gender order. There was, however, a consensus among participants that not every gay man enacted masculine behaviors in order to accrue masculine capital: It was proposed that some gay men were not concerned their masculinity and consequently were less likely to engage in the behaviors considered to be stereotypically masculine:

Antony [gay man]: I'm not trying to live up to anybody. I'm just doing what makes me happy, and, you know, so, I, you know, I don't like exercising...

Dylan [gay man]: I guess just how comfortable you are in yourself.

Antony: Yeah, I don't feel like I've needed to prove anything to anybody.

In this exchange, Antony and Dylan implied that for some men, accruing masculine capital was performative: demonstrating masculinity to others. In a different focus group, Fiona framed the display of masculinity by some gay men in terms of insecurity regarding their sexual identity:

Fiona [straight woman]: Some other guys are very much insecure about the fact that they're gay, and they don't want to be. They try to have a girlfriend, they try to look at girls, they try to hide the fact that they're gay and that's when they will try to make it more inverted. They don't want to be seen as gay, so they can try and be as masculine as they possibly can be, and just hide that fact as much as they can. So it's just like that inner conflict within them.

Positioning gay as incommensurate with masculinity, Fiona suggested that insecure gay men pursued masculine capital in the domain of a false heterosexuality, thus establishing the intrinsic relationship between heterosexuality and perceived masculinity. As suggested by

Fiona and the men in the following extract, the motivation to enact masculine behaviors might be, for some gay men, to conceal their sexual identity:

Darren [straight man]: Justin Fashanu, he was another one [gay sportsperson]. He was gay.

...

Darren: And, and, you know, in a man's, man's world. So he, he probably tried to be more, more kind of macho the more-, 'cause he had to put on that.

Mike [straight man]: Overcompensate.

Darren: Yeah, to promote his masculinity because-, in order not to look as though he was gay.

Darren and Mike interpreted Fashanu's attempts to realize the ideals of hegemonic masculinity as a means of making up for the loss of masculine capital associated with being gay, in a social context dominated by straight men (sport). Being "macho" by enacting an exaggerated stereotypical masculinity not enacted by most straight men was conceptualized as inauthentic, a conscious performance of masculinity that served a specific purpose for gay men in certain contexts. Gay man Dylan, from a different focus group, concluded, ". . . if you saw somebody and they were more masculine, then you wouldn't think they were gay." However, Dylan also suggested that looking masculine does not necessarily afford sufficient masculine capital to avoid being perceived as gay:

Interviewer: Do you think [Tom Daley²] is a masculine guy?

Dylan: I wouldn't say he's a feminine guy, I wouldn't say obv-, like, mega masculine, but well, he's in good shape, competes for our country. I'd say he's mildly masculine. I guess when he opens his mouth then it goes a bit...

[Laughter]

Dylan: ...when he talks, but... yeah. 'Cause a lot of people would say, "Ah, Tom Daley, he's obviously gay," before he came out, just because of the way he spoke I think. Whereas any other-, if he didn't speak I don't think you'd be able to guess that much.

According to Dylan, although Daley's physique and professional athleticism lent him a degree of masculinity, it was not sufficient to belie the gay identity conveyed via his voice.

² Tom Daley is a well-known British Olympic diver. He identified himself publicly as gay in 2014

Dylan's comment about Daley's voice resonated with other participants: One of whom, straight man Tyler, suggested that a higher pitched voice with a "soft tone" was an important identifying characteristic of gay men. From Jean-Paul's perspective, this may irrevocably render gay men nonmasculine, notwithstanding the masculine capital they have accrued in other domains:

Jean-Paul [gay man]: [A man] who has a high-pitched voice . . . this will never be masculine for me, even though he's very aggressive or very confident, I would not see him as masculine.

A masculine voice can therefore be seen as an important component of masculinity for any man; and its absence one of the key threats to overall masculine capital for a gay man.

Masculine Capital and Sex Between Men

During an instance of anal intercourse between men, the insertive partner is often referred to as "the top" and the receptive partner as "the bottom". Furthermore, men who have a general preference for being the insertive partner often self-label and are referred to by others as "tops", those who are typically the receptive partner are known as "bottoms", and men who do not have a clear proclivity for one particular role are known to be "versatile" (Hart, Wolitski, Purcell, Gomez & Halkitis, 2003). In the data collected for this study, there was consensus between gay male participants that the sexual roles available in anal intercourse between men had strong gender connotations. Discourses of heterosexual masculinity and femininity delineated gay men who were anally receptive and those who were anally penetrative, such that the top was considered "always" to enact a masculine role, and the bottom was considered "always" to enact a feminine role:

Jack [gay man]: With this whole top, bottom kind of thing, you have to fall into one of those discrete roles, or versatile I guess . . . And, like, the top is always masculine, the bottom is always feminine . . . and like, if you don't fall into that you have to, like, change yourself . . .

Tim [gay man]: That's definitely true. I've . . . I think I've seen that around. I've, 'cause, like, I've, I don't think I've seen . . . a feminine, feminine person who describes himself as a top.

In this discussion, Jack established how the dominant discourse constructed tops as masculine and bottoms as feminine. His use of the word "always" indicated that the gender stereotypes associated with sexual role were deeply entrenched. Tim's assertion that he had

not seen a “feminine person who describes himself as a top” established two important things: firstly, that men self-identified as top or bottom (or versatile); and secondly, that being feminine was incongruent with identifying as a top and with being a top in a specific sexual encounter. Consequently, from Tim’s perspective, top, bottom and versatile described sexual role behaviors and secondary gay identities, that were constructed with reference to self-perceived masculinity and femininity. Self-perceived masculinity and femininity could have a direct influence on a gay man’s sexual behavior:

Tim: It’s that you’re masculine and then sometimes you just go, “Oh, I’m masculine so I should be a top, and, “Because I’m a top, therefore I’m even more masculine.”

Masculinity and being a top were therefore considered mutually reinforcing: Self-perceived masculinity influenced the sexual role adopted, and men who identified as tops interpreted this as evidence of their masculinity. These associations were so powerful that a gay man’s sexual self-label was predicted on the basis of how masculine or feminine they were perceived, as Jack described:

Jack: As in, like, I’m not masculine at all, and they’re like, “Oh, you’re clearly a bottom.”

Jack also reported that some gay men went “off the charts to not look like a bottom”, suggesting that, among gay men at least, bottoms were discernible by their appearance, that being identified as a bottom was not favourable, and that some gay men would go to great lengths to avoid being perceived as such. He described how more masculine men viewed being a bottom:

Jack: If you get, like, bisexual guys who are, like, more masculine than gay guys, they always seem to be tops, like, they’re like, “Oh no, that’s one step too far,” like, “I’m not *that* gay,” you know.

Jack’s discourse implied that while being a bottom was gay, being a top was closer to being straight. The gay men expressed the view that equating top with masculinity and bottom with femininity stemmed from a heteronormative understanding of sexual roles:

Dylan: If you’re a top, you’re penetrating the other person . . . which is more of a male role in a straight sexual relationship, I would think.

Marcus: Yeah, boys ask the question, “Who’s the man in your couple?”

Pete: Yeah, yeah.

Marcus: . . . I mean, they don't say, but the true question is, "Who's the bottom, who's the top?" . . . I think it, behind the question there is the idea that being a top is better . . .

Marcus suggested that there was an implicit understanding that being the top was preferable from the point of view of other men, as it is reminiscent of the heterosexual act of penetration of a woman by a straight man. Later in this discussion, Dylan suggested that the heteronormative discourse used for constructing sex between men made "one person the male and one person the female", which also resonated with Richard, who employed the concept of masculine capital to offer his perspective on how some gay men managed the conflation between being a bottom and being a woman:

Richard: There is a lot of pressure in this, in, in the gay culture or community or whatever... to not be perceived as womanly, and to be a bottom is to be like a woman, and so they really buff up and become really visibly masculine as a way to offset the fact that they are bottoms . . . I've found a lot of guys who are really ripped and really gym-goers and enjoy outdoor stuff, or whatever traditional masculine things, but identify as hard-core power bottoms.

As a gay man, Richard positioned himself as someone with knowledge of gay culture, and who therefore understood the inauspicious connotations of being known as anally receptive within it. As a result, within discourses surrounding gay culture, men who were known as bottoms attempted to mitigate the threat to their masculine subjectivities posed by being anally receptive by seeking masculine capital in other domains, like muscularity. Richard also used his position to identify another secondary gay identity, which he associated with exaggerated muscularity and an interest in stereotypically masculine pursuits: the "power bottom". Some gay participants constructed the power bottom as a masculine gay man who wielded power and dominance over his sexual partner, despite assuming the anally receptive role:

Jean-Paul: You're just reversing the trend and you actually, no, you're supposed to be actually, no, sort of topping the tops...

Tim: So it's...

Jean-Paul: ...so, then you're bottom, so....

Tim: ...so it's about the power that makes you masculine...

Jean-Paul: Yeah.

Tim: ...in that case, not about being penetrated.

Tim's perspective was that being penetrated did not inevitably equate to being feminine, if the power in the exchange belonged to the bottom, something that Jean-Paul described as "topping the tops". The hegemonic masculinity discourse functioned to subvert the stereotypes of the dominant, masculine top and the submissive, feminine bottom and revealed the complexity of the gender dynamics in sex between men, as shown in the extract below:

Alan [gay man]: Sometimes the bottom can be more dominant than the man-, than the top, because it's sort of, in that sort of role, it's only happening because he wants it to, if that makes sense? So he's in, he's in control

...

Often, quite often, particularly in porn, tops can be... sort of dehumanized, it's more the bottom sort of using a, a dildo as it were. But the person attached to the penis isn't important, it's just the penis itself.

The bottom's potential for masculinity was established in the discourse because he maintained control over the sexual encounter and exploited the penis for his own gains. The fact that Alan referred to "the top" initially as "the man" might reveal that the discourse he deployed was conflicting with the stereotypes he held of the masculine top and the feminine bottom.

Masculine Capital, Gay Masculinity, and Alternative Gay Identities

Some straight participants suggested that the intragroup competition and hierarchy essential to the hegemonic masculinity structure would not be found between gay men:

Joe [straight man]: I think gay people will have the most freedom in that respect. Like, they're not expected to be masculine.

James [straight man]: You kind of get taken out of that whole thing of trying to, getting lad points, I guess, if you're gay you're kind of withdrawn from that . . .

...

James: I guess it would be quite good coming out of that for a bit. [Laughs]

Bobby [straight man]: They can kind of escape, escape the sort of pressure.

...

James: Yeah, I guess 'cause they're on, all on the same level, I guess, they're all gay, so they've kind of got that in common, so they're all, like, "Well there's no need for me to

establish myself more ‘cause we're all the same,’ I guess. So I guess they almost think they've got equality. More, like, all on the same level.

Luke [straight man]: I can imagine it being, like... a group of girls, if that makes sense?

Luke's comparison between gay men and "girls" in terms of their relationship dynamics implied that gay men, like women, were not expected to be masculine because they did not function in a power hierarchy. Consequently, the pursuit of "lad points" (or masculine capital) by gay men was deemed unnecessary: They were relieved of the pressure to be masculine, something that James (who was bound by his heterosexuality to pursue masculine capital) envied. Laura also suggested that relationships between gay men were reminiscent of relationships between women:

Laura [straight woman]: With gay men, they kind of feel like they're on the same boat anyway, so they're, they're a bit more like, it's more like, if you have girls, and they don't really care, like, who's at the top . . .

Like James, Laura offered the view that gay men were not concerned with hierarchy, because they felt more equal to each other. The participants who were gay men, on the other hand, gave the perspective that dynamics of masculinity may apply between some gay men, and suggested a hierarchical arrangement of different gay-and-masculine subidentities. One such subidentity was the "gay lad".

Harry [gay man]: I know groups of laddy gay men, yeah. They go out to [Gay Nightclub³] and, together in London, or, yeah. But then it's not quite the same kind of, like, complete lack of taste as straight lad culture . . . They still, like, eat at good restaurants and don't go and have a doner kebab, but there's this kind of, like, sort of team mentality...

. . .

Harry: ...to going out and pulling and yeah.

The gay lad constructed by Harry embodied some of the stereotypically masculine aspects of "laddy" behavior—an affiliation to the "team" and overt promiscuity—while rejecting others. There was a distinct contrast between the discourse used by Harry to construct the gay lad and that used by the straight men to construct the straight lad. Whereas,

³ The nightclub referenced by Harry is a men-only gay nightclub which is intended to appeal to men who identify as bears

from straight man James' perspective, straight lads experienced a "pressure" to behave in a laddy way, Harry's position, which he gave later in the discussion, was that gay lads actively *chose* to enact the aspects of lad culture they found "fun" and "sexy". Laddy behavior by gay men might therefore be seen as distinct from the pursuit of masculine capital by straight men, who engage in the same behaviors. As well as the gay lad, several other gay subidentities were named:

Max [gay man]: There's too many gay categories now. Too many types of gay to keep up with.

[Laughter]

Interviewer: Go on, name some of them Max! [Laughs]

Max: There's, like, twink and bear, and... well those are pretty much the only two, but then there's variations of those...

Harry: No, there's more, it's like, otter....

Max: ...there's like, cub and otter-. Yeah, but that's like a type of bear.

Harry: Is it? No, an otter's different.

Max: Is it?

Harry: Bears are big and burly, otters are svelte . . .

The participants used to the terms "bear" and "twink" to refer to gay subidentities that were gendered in polar opposition, the former described in terms of their stereotypically masculine appearance (hirsuteness and a large, but not muscular, physique), the latter in terms of their youth and stereotypically feminine appearance (hairlessness and a slim frame). In hegemonic masculinity terms, bears were afforded masculine capital owing to their appearance, but they also were described as having the potential for femininity, which afforded them an alternative gay-and-masculine identity:

Richard: Although I'm not part of a bear... group, the masculinity I would associate with it is larger, hairier, but also friendlier and far more, far more generous and, and, and kind of emotional than mainstream gay ice cold masculinity . . .

Interviewer: So there's not just one type of gay masculinity?

Richard: No I think they're mul-, I mean, I think there are multiple types of masculinities in society and the same is true for gay culture, or gay community.

Richard's juxtaposition of characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity ("larger, hairier") with stereotypically feminine traits ("emotional") afforded bears an

alternative—and for Richard, favourable—masculinity to the dominant gay masculinity. His discourse opened up positions for multiple gay masculinities, and the gay bear was an embodiment of one of them. From Pete’s perspective, the bear’s stereotypically masculine appearance did not necessarily provide the masculine capital to afford an overall masculine identity:

Pete [gay man]: My friends that are bears or whatever, like... To, if you look at them and you don’t know them, you’re like, “Oh yeah, perhaps they do look a bit manly,” but I’ve found that they tend to be some of the campest people out there.

...

Pete: I don’t think they’d see themselves as particularly manly, to be honest...

Interviewer: Really?

Pete: ...it’s just that’s a, their look, and I think they’ve got the label slapped on them but I don’t think they’re really bothered about, like, what that label should technically imply.

Accessing his understanding of stereotypical masculinity, Pete’s perspective was that bear was a label bestowed on certain gay men based on their stereotypically masculine appearance, but that these men did not necessarily embody traditional masculinity in other domains. Bears were, however, still perceived by some participants as more masculine than other gay subidentities. In the context of a hegemonic masculinity discourse, Pete noted that “twink and bear obviously have different . . . masculinity ratings”, because bears were large and hairy, and therefore closer to traditionally masculine physiques.

Alan suggested that however masculine the bear’s appearance may be, no gay identity would supersede the identity at the very top of the hierarchy: “the mainstream identity of a guy”, which Harry categorized as the “jock”.

Alan [gay man]: A lot of gay guys say that to me, like, especially, I don’t know, people, they don’t necessarily feel like they fit to sort of kind of ideal, they say, “Oh I’ve always felt like I’m kind of at the bottom of . . . the ladder,” if that makes, sort of makes sense, and then they’d be, “Oh there’d be, like, a twink or a bear above me, and then....” Do you get what I mean? Yeah, then, like, there, there’d be the sort of kind of really muscular, sort of, kind of....

Harry: Jock.

...

Interviewer: What about the jock gay guy and the straight guy: where...? Are they the same in terms of their masculinity?

Max: I would say the straight guy is probably slightly more masculine, I'd say.

Harry: But then the jock has the foil of all the other gay guys below him in masculinity rating, and he's like, you know, the, the, the straight guy doesn't have that, and like you're from this "stock", you know.

In this exchange, Alan, Harry and Max unequivocally positioned the gay man who embodied the characteristics of orthodox, hegemonic masculinity—with the exception of heterosexuality—at the top of the “ladder”, or hierarchy, of gay masculinities. Alan’s hegemonic masculinity discourse provided no space for femininity, hence the bear, with his friendly demeanour and emotionality, was regulated to a lower rung of the ladder. Max’s positioning of the “straight guy” as more masculine than the gay jock demonstrates how, notwithstanding their masculine credentials, the discourses available constructed gay men as fundamentally less masculine than their straight contemporaries.

Discussion

The discourse analytic approach taken in this study provided the opportunity to examine discursive constructions of gay men and how they delineate the possibilities for gay men’s masculine subjectivities, as articulated and understood by the gay men, straight women and straight men who took part. Previous research has established that the extent to which a man is considered masculine depends on the behaviors and traits he exhibits, and that competencies in given domains of masculinity can compensate for limitations in other domains by ameliorating a man’s overall masculine capital (e.g., [de Visser & McDonnell, 2013](#); [de Visser et al., 2009](#)). This study adds to current understanding of masculinities, finding that gay men may accrue and trade masculine capital in similar ways to straight men. They may also have possibilities for acquiring capital in realms, or fields (Bourdieu, 1977), that might only have value in relations between gay men. When gay men display the characteristics and behaviors that may afford masculine capital to straight men, the value of and power afforded by these characteristics may vary depending on whether masculinity is assessed with reference to heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity or outside of this context. The study has also identified discourses that do not construct gay masculinity as a singular entity: There is diversity in the masculine possibilities for gay men, just as there is a multiplicity of masculinities available to straight men.

Summary of Findings

Positioned within a discourse of hegemonic masculinity, gay men who are concerned with being perceived as traditionally masculine may engage in at least some stereotypically masculine behaviors in order to acquire masculine capital. Both gay and straight participants suggested that gay men may accrue masculine capital in traditionally masculine domains, such as athleticism and muscularity, to overcome—or “compensate” for—being gay. It was also proposed that gay men’s success at achieving a viable masculine identity within a discourse of heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity depends on the absence of characteristics and behaviors associated with the stereotype of gay femininity—such as a feminine voice—withstanding the masculine capital they may have accrued elsewhere. This accords with previous findings that sexuality has a more profound impact on perceived masculinity than other behaviors and traits, such as physique (e.g., [de Visser & McDonnell, 2013](#); [de Visser et al., 2009](#))

The gay men in this study identified sexual role in anal intercourse as an important component of gay and gender identity, and identified sex between men as a domain where gay men have possibilities for accruing and trading masculine capital. The significance of sexual role in anal intercourse for gay men has been the subject of previous research. [Kippax and Smith \(2001\)](#), for example, found that most gay men described gay anal intercourse in terms of masculine-feminine and dominance-submission binaries, associating the insertive role with masculine dominance and the receptive role with feminine submission. However, as in the present study, some of the gay men in Kippax and Smith’s (2001) study also contested these binary descriptions, constructing bottoms as powerful, and having “strength in submission” (p. 430). In this study, the power bottom was identified as a sexual role and a secondary gay identity that has the potential to be more masculine (in hegemonic masculinity terms) than the top, despite being an anally receptive role. Consequently, gay men may achieve a masculinity that is accordant with hegemonic masculinity ideology in fields of gay culture, if they are known to be power bottoms.

In the present study, gay men suggested that it is within a heteronormative sexual discourse that the masculine top and feminine bottom are constructed: Being anally receptive was positioned in opposition to masculinity owing to its symbolic resemblance to the receptivity of a woman in heterosexual vaginal intercourse. As [Kippax and Smith \(2001\)](#) observe, for a man with a masculine subjectivity to be a bottom might threaten their masculine identity. The participants in this study suggested that some bottoms seek masculine capital in other domains—for example, by exercising to achieve muscularity—in an attempt to

overcome the feminine connotations of being a bottom, and thus to ameliorate this threat to their masculinity.

However, Bourdieu (1977) proposes that the value of capital varies in the different fields where it is produced and deployed: Credentials that afford power in one field (i.e. in a heteronormative context) may have a different meaning and afford power differently in another (i.e. between gay men). In the field of gay sexual dynamics, the value of muscularity for men who identify as a bottom or power bottom might not be related to masculine capital; rather it is suggested that muscularity may afford capital in sexual relations between men in a different way. Adams, [Braun and McCreanor \(2014\)](#), for example, found that beauty, which included having a good body, was valued in relationships between gay men, and [Lanzieri and Hildebrandt \(2011\)](#) also discussed the appeal of muscularity for some gay men in terms of their sexual attraction to other similarly built men.

The ubiquity with which gay men referred to sexual role in anal intercourse, unprompted, in discussions about masculinity, warrants further investigation. Research suggests that although sexual self-labels are predictive of actual role adopted in the majority of sexual encounters ([Moskowitz, Rieger & Roloff, 2008](#)), some gay men who identify as either top or bottom may, on occasion, adopt the contrary role ([Kippax & Smith, 2001](#); [Moskowitz & Hart, 2011](#)). Additionally, [Grulich et al. \(2014\)](#) found that only approximately one in five gay men had engaged in either receptive or insertive anal intercourse in a most recent 12 month period. Future research may therefore examine whether the capital associated with identifying, or being perceived, as a top or a bottom within a given field of gay culture is related to the role adopted in actuality, and to actual engagement in anal intercourse.

In line with [Connell's \(1995\)](#) theory, the hegemonic masculinity discourse deployed across all groups of participants constructed homosexuality as incommensurate with traditional, orthodox masculinity. The central position of heterosexuality to masculinity was affirmed by participants who suggested that although gay men can be masculine, a masculine man will not be perceived as gay. Consequently, gay men can utilize masculine behaviors—and avoid feminine behaviors—in order to conceal their gay identity; and this can depend on geographic and social context (e.g., [Pachankis, Westmaas & Dougherty, 2011](#)). Embodying a masculine identity that mirrors heterosexual masculinity may have particular value for gay men in contexts dominated by straight men, such as the domain of sport (e.g., [Messner, 1992](#)). However, the masculinity that gay men may convey in these contexts was identified by the participants in this study as inauthentic, an exaggerated masculinity that straight men

may not be equally concerned with achieving. Whether a gay man is successful at accruing masculine capital may therefore depend on how their endeavours are perceived by others: If the masculinity is perceived as performative, then it may not be perceived as convincing.

The degree to which gay men are concerned with accruing masculine capital to mitigate being gay is likely to vary across time and between social fields (Bourdieu, 1977). As one gay participant in this study observed, there are occasions when appearing more feminine (or “camp”) might help to realize a particular, favourable outcome, such as attracting a sexual partner who prefers men with those characteristics. This accords with Drummond’s (2005) finding regarding masculine fluidity: Gay men may construct and maintain a masculine identity that is acceptable within a straight culture and simultaneously manage an alternative masculinity that is valued in gay culture.

The dominant discourse produced by gay and straight participants constructed masculinities in a hierarchical arrangement, positioning gay men as subordinate because of the association between homosexuality and femininity. This discourse provided gay men with two possibilities: to attempt to ameliorate their position in the gender order by pursuing masculine capital in traditionally masculine domains; or to reject masculinity in its orthodox, hegemonic form. As previous research has found to be true of some straight men (e.g., [de Visser, 2007](#)), this study identified discourses wherein gay men are unconcerned with accomplishing a particular “version” of masculinity. These men are therefore “relieved” of the pressure to acquire masculine capital because, comfortable with their sexual identity, they have no need to “compensate” for any losses: If masculinity is of no concern, then homosexuality does not render anything lost.

Because the hegemonic masculinity discourse positioned homosexuality in opposition to masculinity, some straight men and women proposed that gay men are not expected to be masculine. Therefore, gay men are afforded the flexibility not to aspire to hegemonic masculinity—and to dominate and subordinate other men in doing so—but rather to function side-by-side with other men in a more inclusive arrangement, an observation that resonates with both Anderson’s (2009) theory of inclusive masculinity and Connell’s (1995) assumption that gay men maintain reciprocal rather than hierarchical relationships.

Some of the gay and straight participants in this study suggested a pluralistic interpretation of gay masculinity, reflecting what was also identified by Adams, [Braun and McCreanor \(2014\)](#): The diversity in gay men’s perspectives on what it means to be gay indicates that gay identity is “not a singular and uncomplicated category” (p. 465). In this study, gay men, but not straight participants, deployed discourses that constructed gay

masculinities in a hierarchical arrangement, at least when masculinity was assessed with reference to hegemonic masculinity. This discordance between the perspectives of gay and straight people demonstrates the importance of involving straight men and women in the sample: The possibilities for gay men's subjectivities differ depending on the discourses deployed, which vary depending on the identity of those who deploy them.

Among gay men, a discourse of gay masculinities operated in parallel to the hegemonic masculinity discourse and opened up positions for various subidentities, including the gay lad, the twink, the bear, and a host of other "animal" subidentities, who varied in masculinity. Masculinity was conferred chiefly on the basis of the subidentities' display of stereotypically masculine physical characteristics: Bears were described as more masculine owing to their larger physical form and hirsuteness; twinks the least masculine, owing to their slimness and hairlessness. It was suggested, however, that bears also convey a feminine or camp identity, despite their masculine appearance. Within a discourse of hegemonic masculinity, capital is afforded to bears on account of their stereotypically masculine physical characteristics which, from a "trading capital" perspective, may provide them with the flexibility to also behave in feminine ways (Anderson, 2005; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; de Visser et al., 2009). However, the value of this capital outside of a hegemonic masculinity discourse is less clear: Within a discourse of gay masculinities, the bear's masculine appearance and feminine qualities may convey social power, but the nature of that social power is unknown.

In this study, the gay lad was described as an appropriator of orthodox masculinity, but in the field of gay culture—or at least, in relations between gay men—the value attached to their behavior was not interpreted in terms of the accrual of masculine capital, but had a unique meaning. It is therefore suggested that the twink's stereotypically feminine appearance—which for straight men would not be a source of masculine capital—may have value in a particular field of gay culture and therefore afford capital in a way that it may not do elsewhere. For example, Barron and Bradford (2007) found that thinness—a characteristic of a twink—was valued in some fields of gay culture, whereas it would not be a source of capital in the context of heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, an interesting direction for future research may be to examine how capital is afforded by the traits and behaviors associated with gay subidentities in various fields of gay culture. This may be particularly important in the context of gay men's health, as Lyons and Hosking (2014) found behavioral health disparities between men who identified as twinks and those who identified

as bears, with the former more likely than the latter to smoke, drink alcohol and be the receptive partner in anal sex.

The jock was constructed as the most masculine gay subidentity of them all, a result of his “mainstream” (i.e. straight) appearance, although the gay men in this study offered the view that he was not as masculine as a straight man with the same credentials. Some gay men, then, may achieve masculine dominance that is reminiscent of hegemonic masculinity, but only within a structure of gay masculinities, only within fields of gay culture, and only when gay masculinities are assessed with reference to heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity ideology.

Limitations

Although this study makes an important contribution to the small body of literature regarding gay men and masculinity, it is not without its limitations. The sample was drawn from a city in the UK that is known for the liberal values of its inhabitants and their progressive stance on issues relating to sexuality and gender. The results may not reflect the attitudes towards gender and sexual identity held by people in the UK as a whole. There was a degree of reluctance among some participants, particularly those who identified as straight, to discuss differences between gay and straight men in terms of their masculinity.

Recruitment advertisements for this study appealed for participants to take part a focus group study about “Gender and Identity”. It is possible, even likely, that some participants held particularly strong and established views about issues surrounding gender and identity, especially given the local context. The aim of this study was to identify the discourses that are available in constructing gay men and their possibilities for masculine subjectivity, which it is acknowledged are locally and temporally bound.

Conclusion

This exploratory study identified positions for gay men in a discourse of hegemonic masculinity, where gay men who are concerned about being perceived as masculine may acquire masculine capital in certain domains, to mitigate perceived “shortcomings” in others. Gay and straight participants both identified lack of heterosexuality as the greatest threat to a gay man’s masculinity and masculine subjectivity: This study has illustrated how some gay men are able to attempt to surmount this through their display of stereotypically masculine traits and behaviors, such as athleticism and muscularity. These may enable men to achieve a masculinity that mirrors heterosexual masculinity, and therefore represents a viable masculinity to present within straight culture, so long as feminine traits and behaviors stereotypically associated with gay men are not present. However, gay men utilized

alternative discourses to frame gay masculinities in different terms: not in terms of aspirations to a masculinity that fits and necessarily has value in heteronormative culture, but rather masculinities that are valued in fields occupied by gay men. Importantly, and in line with what has been suggested previously, this study has identified discourses that convey the complexity, plurality and diversity of gay masculinity.

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