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"I don't want to be seen as a screaming queen": An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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gay men's masculine identities

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Abstract

It has been argued that gay men who live in Western societies must negotiate masculine identities against a cultural backdrop where the most desirable and locally hegemonic masculinity is heterosexual. However, contemporary masculinity theories conceptualize masculinities as increasingly inclusive of gay men. The purpose of this study was to use a discourse-dynamic approach to studying masculine subjectivity to identify how gay men in England and Wales negotiated masculinity discourses to construct their masculine identities. One-to-one, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with six younger gay men aged 20 to 24, and 11 older gay men aged 30 to 42. Participants were asked to describe their subjective experiences of masculinity. The results of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis indicated that discourses of hegemonic and alternative masculinities had implications for lived experiences of masculinity. Older participants in particular emphasized their attributes they associated with masculine dominance, including anti-effeminacy attitudes. The majority of younger participants did not feel masculine. Irrespective of age, many participants resisted hegemonic masculinity by highlighting the value of "gayness" at times. The findings suggested that hegemonic masculinity was the most readily available discourse for conceptualizing masculinity, but that lived experiences of masculinity were not necessarily located within this discourse.

Hegemonic masculinity theory has influenced research into gender relations since it was first proposed in the mid-1980s (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). At the core of hegemonic masculinity is compulsory heterosexuality, and the denigration of gay men (Connell, 2005). It has therefore been argued that gay men must negotiate an identity in a cultural context where being gay represents a failure to meet culturally-defined expectations of what makes a "real man" (e.g., Eguchi, 2009). However, it has also been suggested that in recent years, compulsory heterosexuality for men has become less important, owing to cultural shifts that have promoted the status of gay people in society (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Ghaziani, 2011; Morris, 2017). The theory of "inclusive masculinity" accounts for the emergence of newer discourses of masculinity, characterized by the absence of homonegativity (negative attitudes towards gay people), and the inclusion of non-traditionally masculine and even stereotypically feminine attributes and behaviors (Anderson, 2009).

Research evidence suggests that there may be generational differences in experiences of gay and masculine identity between younger and older gay men. For example, younger gay men report having "come out" to themselves and to others at a significantly earlier age than older gay men (Dunlap, 2016; Grov, Bimbi, Nanín & Parsons, 2006). This may be reflective of the cultural changes that in some social fields have made being gay a source of social prestige – something Morris (2017) refers to as "gay capital". The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how a sample of gay men based in England and Wales, who varied in age from 20 to 42 years, defined masculinity and constructed their masculine identities against competing discourses of masculinity.

Theories of masculinities

Whether men identify and are perceived as masculine may be contingent on the extent to which they embody a masculinity that is sanctioned as the ideal way of being a man. In Western culture, the dominant masculinity discourse promotes a form of masculinity that contends that men should be powerful and independent, discrete from women and all that is feminine, and crucially, heterosexual (Connell, 2005). This masculinity discourse is hegemonic because it perpetuates power inequalities between men and women (external hegemony) and between men and other men (internal hegemony: Connell, 2005 ; Demetriou, 2001). Heterosexuality is the lynchpin of hegemonic masculinity because it reproduces patriarchy: Women are sexual objects for which men compete (Donaldson, 1993).

Connell (2005) argued that although not many men are able to embody hegemonic masculinity, all are positioned in relation to it, occupying less valued, culturally-subordinated masculinities. Gay masculinities are subordinated because same-sex sexual relations between men negate the hegemonic ideal of male domination over women, and because to derive sexual pleasure from another man is elided with femininity, the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity. As a result, homophobia and anti-femininity are core components of hegemonic masculinity, which might explain why, compared with heterosexual women, heterosexual men are particularly hostile towards gay men, and especially towards those who are effeminate (Monto & Supinski, 2014).

Although hegemonic masculinity theory has been influential, some have questioned its relevance in contemporary Western societies. Anderson (2009) and McCormack (2014) have argued that since cultural homophobia has become less prevalent in the United States and the United Kingdom, young heterosexual men have increasingly incorporated alternative gender expressions into their repertoires of masculinity. These emerging form of heteromasculinities are referred to as "inclusive" because the young men who subscribe to them reject homophobia, form closer homosocial relationships and welcome gay men into

their friendship networks (Anderson & McCormack, 2016). According to Anderson (2009), inclusivity is a consequence of declining "homohysteria", culturally-embedded homophobia that restricts men in terms of what they may do, what they may say, even how they may look, particularly in male-dominated contexts. Hegemonic masculinity polices the behavior of men in cultures where homosexuality is overtly derided; where men are less concerned with the possibility of being perceived as gay, less restrictive, more diverse masculinities can flourish (Anderson, 2009). If masculinities are becoming inclusive – i.e., are structured horizontally rather than hierarchically – then this has implications for how all men, including gay men, define and experience their masculinity.

The formation of gay identities

Boys and young men have agency to actively construct their masculine identities, and therefore the power to resist dominant discourses of masculinity (Courtney, 2000). Masculinity is therefore a potential site of social change (Connell, 2012; Demetriou, 2001). However, some research that has taken place over the past 15 – 20 years has indicated that boys and young men who do not embody the locally hegemonic masculinity may be derided, labelled "gay" or "wimps" by other boys (Swain, 2006). Consequently, young gay men experience social pressure to engage with a hegemonic masculinity discourse by attempting to "act straight" at school, and/or feign interest in masculine pursuits, like football (Barron & Bradford, 2007).

Young gay male identities may be suppressed in schools and colleges, where boys' behavior is policed by hegemonic masculinity, but the gay scene may be a space where fledgling gay identities have more freedom to develop (Valentine & Skelton, 2003). Gay social spaces, such as gay bars and clubs, may provide young gay men with a "refuge from heterosexism" (Adams, Braun & McCreanor, 2014, p.424). Through patronage of these spaces, gay men learn normative expectations of how gay men should look and act, what

interests they should have, and what body is desirable (Barron & Bradford, 2007). These normative expectations may prescribe femininity – particularly a feminized appearance (i.e., a slim body; tightly-fitted, brightly coloured clothes; and well-styled hair) – as the vehicle through which young gay men can secure and maintain an identity accepted within the gay scene (Barron & Bradford, 2007; Clarke & Smith, 2014).

Some evidence suggests that there are generational differences between older and younger gay men in terms of experiences relating to gay identity formation. For example, millennial gay men (i.e., those born in the 1980s and later) make fewer references to socio-political circumstances when describing the formation of their gay identities than gay men whose identities were formed during the 1960s, 70s and 80s (Weststrate & McClean, 2010). Further, younger gay men (i.e., those age under 25 years) report (retrospectively) having reached several gay identity formation milestones at significantly younger ages than older gay men (Dunlap, 2016; Grov et al., 2006).

Some evidence suggests that school/college environments are no longer hostile towards young gay men, and that young people (particularly boys) increasingly recognize homophobia as unacceptable (McCormack & Anderson, 2010). This may mean that compared with older gay men, who were socialized before these apparent cultural shifts occurred, younger gay men may feel more comfortable with overtly eschewing traditional expectations of masculinity and embracing more modern, alternative masculinities, that incorporate non-masculine and feminine behaviors.

Gay men and hegemonic masculinity: Existing literature

It has been suggested that gay men experience social pressure to negotiate their identities against culturally-embedded discourses of hegemonic masculinity and stereotypic gay effeminacy, and are under greater pressure than heterosexual men to "prove" their manliness (Drummond, 2005; Eguchi, 2009; Hunt, Fasoli, Carnaghi & Cadinu, 2015;

Sánchez, Greenberg, Liu & Vilain, 2009). Much of the extant literature regarding gay men's response to hegemonic masculine is focused on the gay male body. Some gay men value muscular bodies (to a greater extent than heterosexual men) because muscularity offers an escape from the stereotype of effeminacy and the opportunity to embody a masculinity valued in a heteronormative culture (Calzo, Corliss, Blood, Field & Austin, 2013; Filiault & Drummond, 2008; Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2011). However, in some gay social contexts, it is thinness rather than muscularity that is valued (Barron & Bradford, 2007). This suggests that other discourses, apart from hegemonic masculinity, influence gay men's engagement in certain behaviors.

The reproduction of hegemonic masculinity has been identified in many fields of gay culture, including the gay adult film industry (Burke, 2016); online gay communities (Dowsett, Williams, Ventuneac & Carballo-Diéguez, 2008); in scripts of anal intercourse (Johns, Pingel, Eisenberg, Santana & Bauermeister, 2012; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2016); in gay online dating (Clarkson, 2006); in sports (Filiault & Drummond, 2008); and within certain gay subcultures (Borgeson & Valerie, 2015; Manley, Levitt & Mosher, 2007). Hegemonic masculinity can explain the antagonism some gay men show towards gay men who subvert normative masculinity: Anti-effeminacy is pervasive in some fields within the gay community (Brennan, 2016; Eguchi, 2009; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Taywaditep, 2001). In his interviews with gay men, Taulke-Johnson's (2008) identified a discourse of the "good gay", a man characterised by his lack of visibility as someone who is gay, achieved largely via avoidance of stereotypically gay (i.e., effeminate) behaviors. This is reminiscent of Brekhus' (2003) typology, the "gay centaur", a gay man whose gay identity is a small and non-defining aspect of his overall sense of self. Some gay men identify as "straight-acting", a discursive strategy intended to distance themselves from effeminacy (Clarkson, 2006; Eguchi, 2009). The deployment of such discourses by gay men suggests that they may have

internalized a cultural value of toleration of gay men, as long as their gayness is not performed too ostentatiously, and is therefore not too visible (Eguchi, 2009).

Some gay men consciously eliminate femininity from their gender repertoire and adopt only behaviors that they understand to be masculine, as a response to pressure to conform to currently accepted hegemonic standards of manliness (Wilson et al., 2010). Therefore, the performance of masculinity by gay men may be framed as self-conscious, and indicative of their awareness that masculinities that look heterosexual are more socially desirable than alternative gender expressions (Duncan, 2007). However, other work has identified examples of gay men who view their masculinity as an authentic representation of their true selves (Adams et al., 2014; Duncan, 2007; Eguchi, 2009).

Further, some gay men may value femininity over masculinity, which may be associated with their conflation of femininity with being gay, and a desire to make their sexual orientation known publicly (Wilson et al., 2010): "Gayness" can contribute to gay men's social and cultural capital (Morris, 2017). Brekhus (2003) would refer to these men as "gay peacocks", because their gayness is central to their identities. Other gay men are comfortable with combining behaviors that they interpret as stereotypically feminine and masculine as part of a more balanced repertoire of gender expression (Wilson et al., 2010), and value the same in their romantic partners (Johns et al., 2012).

The present study

Given that gay men are subordinated by hegemonic masculinity, they might be expected to find strategies to resist it, and enact non-hegemonic forms of masculinity. However, much of the extant literature in gay masculinities has shown how gay men continue to engage in a hegemonic masculinity discourse to locate their identities, and this is likely to influence how they experience their masculine identities. Non-hegemonic masculinities are potential sites for social change, because they challenge male dominance over women and

other men (Connell, 2012). The aim of this study was to identify social discourses of masculinity and to explore how they were related to gay men's masculine subjectivities – their lived experiences of masculine identity. There were two research questions: How did gay men conceptualize masculinity? How were gay men's conceptualisations of masculinity related to lived experiences of masculinity identity? Including younger (<25 years) and older (>30 years) gay men in the sample also allowed for the examination of possible age-related differences in how masculinity was defined and experienced.

Method

Data collection

Individual interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes each were conducted with 21 gay men between July and December 2016. The interviewer was a 34-year-old, white, British gay man. Participants were able to choose between a face-to-face and Skype interview. Geographic distances between the interviewer and the participants made Skype more convenient for most participants. Eighteen participants chose to be interviewed via Skype. Video was enabled during some Skype interviews, at the request of the interviewees. The three participants who elected for face-to-face interviews all lived in the vicinity of the university where the interviews were held.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the lead author. Video recording was not used. Transcripts were checked for accuracy against the original interview recordings before the analysis took place. The key interview questions were: (1)*"How masculine do you see yourself?*; (2) *How important is it for you to be masculine?"*. These two questions were used to initiate more in-depth discussions about the participants' masculine subjectivities – many follow-up questions were asked, based around the participants' responses to these key questions (Flowers, Smith, Sheeran & Beail, 1997). The data presented here was part of a study that had a broader remit to examine gay men's

experiences of masculinity and of anal intercourse. For this paper, only the analysis relating to gay men's beliefs about and experiences of masculinity is included.

Analytic approach

The data were analysed using a discourse-dynamic approach (Willig, 2000) based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an idiographic approach that examines subjective experiences of individuals in specific situations (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). However, IPA's focus on individual experience does not preclude the opportunity to identify social discourses and to examine subject positioning within them. IPA and a discourse dynamic approach to exploring subjectivity share an interest in how contexts influence experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). In this study, it was possible to identify how reflexive positioning in discourses of masculinity was associated with how the participants made meaning of the experiences that were bound by these discourses.

The lynchpins of IPA are phenomenology – the description of subjective experience – and symbolic interactionalism, the perspective that people make sense of their experiences by a process of interpretation, via interaction with the social world (Smith, 1996). Although focused on the experiences of individual people, IPA researchers are able to identify communalities between participants' verbal accounts, which reflect shared understandings of the phenomenon under examination (Flowers, Hart & Marriott, 1999; Smith et al., 2009).

A key concept associated with IPA is the "double hermeneutic" – the understanding that as the researcher is charged with making sense of participants' own sense-making, both participant and researcher are engaged in the process of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). IPA researchers must "give voice" to the participants by describing how they experience the phenomenon under examination, and must also consider *what it means* for that individual to experience the phenomenon in the way it is reported (Larkin et al., 2006).

Data analysis procedure

There is no one way in which to perform IPA; for this study, the procedure described by Flowers et al. (1999) was employed, with reference to that offered by Smith et al. (2009). The first step was to become familiarized with the interview transcripts, which involved repeated reading of each transcript. Both authors were engaged in this stage, annotating the transcripts with their initial observations. For the second step, one transcript was examined by the authors in more detail. Examining the participant's descriptions of his experiences accomplished the phenomenological element of the analysis, and the interpretative aspect was fulfilled by paying close attention to and making extensive interpretative notes regarding how the experiences had been described, and why they had been described in that way. In particular, the authors noted where participants' accounts were contradictory, and where they had used explanation, rationalisation, repetition, changes in pronouns, rhetorical questions, laughter and unusual phrasing. In the third step, each observation was given a label that captured its content, and was thenceforth treated as an emergent theme.

Once the authors had discussed their analyses of this exemplar transcript and negotiated how to manage divergence in coding, the first author continued the analysis process to identify emergent themes in the remaining transcripts. Once all transcripts had been coded, a detailed profile of each participant was produced (see Supplementary Materials). Participant profiles comprised descriptions of the participants' experiences as they had been reported, and the author's interpretative observations. They were used alongside spreadsheets of emergent themes to identify commonly recurring themes that captured the participants' shared experiences. These recurring themes were grouped together into overarching themes, and the overarching themes were given labels to describe the collection of emergent themes they represented.

It is acknowledged that IPA is inevitably interpretative, and therefore analyses are necessarily influenced by the perspective of the person interpreting. However, throughout the

analysis, the authors attempted to honour the world-view adopted by the participants by doing case-by-case analysis of each transcript and bracketing preconceptions and insights emerging from the analysis of other transcripts. Therefore, the authors strived to suspend their own preconceptions, expectations and experiences of the phenomenon in question and represent the phenomena as the participants experienced it (Flowers et al., 2009; Willig, 2013).

Participants

The data from interviews with four men was disregarded. In two cases, this was because the participants did not provide sufficient detail for IPA to be utilized. In one case, the participant did not answer the questions posed. In one case, the Skype connection was too poor to allow for accurate transcription. Smith et al. (2009) recommend a sample size ranging from four to 10 for an IPA study. There were 17 self-identified gay men in the final sample, aged 20 – 42 years (median = 32). Participants aged under 30 years were deemed "younger" gay men: Arnett (2000) suggests that adult identity formation takes place up to this age. There were six men aged under 30 (range = 20 – 24; median = 22.5) and 11 men aged over 30 (range = 30 – 42; median = 35). Further demographic information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

Some participants were recruited purposively from the sample of an earlier study (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017). These men had given their permission to be contacted regarding their participation in future studies. A number volunteered to be interviewed in response to recruitment advertisements placed on gay interest pages on social media. The majority of participants were recruited via word of mouth, where men who had been interviewed already contacted their acquaintances and suggested that they take part. Potential participants were advised that the study was about "Experiences as a gay man". None of the recruitment materials or pre-interview correspondence with potential participants mentioned that the interview would involve questions about experiences of masculinity.

Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' employing university. A £10 gift voucher was given to participants. Informed consent was acquired. At the start of each interview, the participants were advised that they were not obliged to answer any given question, that they were free to stop the interview at any time, and could request that their data be excluded from the analysis. To maintain the participants' anonymity, their names were changed to pseudonyms at the point of transcription, and any potentially identifying references to other people or places were deleted.

In the extracts from interview transcripts provided in the analysis, three spaced full stops indicate that some words or sentences have been omitted for brevity and clarity. Bracketed content has been added by the authors.

>Table 1 here<

Results

The majority of participants drew on a hegemonic masculinity discourse as they attempted define their masculinity. However, there was variation in how participants positioned themselves in relation to this discourse – the extent to which this discourse was engaged in and contested – which had implications for lived experiences of masculinity. Whether participants had binary or pluralistic interpretations of masculinity was unrelated to the age of the participant. However, there were age-related differences in participants' masculine subjectivities: Older participants were more likely to describe feeling masculine than younger participants. That said, one of the youngest participants identified very strongly as masculine in hegemonic masculinity terms. This example illustrates the substantial diversity identified in participants' conceptualisations and experiences of masculinity. As a consequence of this diversity within the samples of younger and older men, the analysis presented is collapsed – findings from younger and older participants of men are presented together.

The analysis is divided into two sections to answer two research questions: How did gay men conceptualize masculinity? How were gay men's conceptualisations of masculinity related to lived experiences of masculinity identity? In addressing the first research question, the analysis identified two themes: (1) Masculinity in opposition to "gayness"; and (2) Alternative interpretations of masculinity. Two themes were identified to address the second research question: (1) The value of appearing masculine and avoiding effeminacy; and (2) Masculinity and femininity in different social contexts. There was no obvious hierarchy to the themes, but the themes between the two sections were connected, because conceptualisations of masculinity had implications for how participants experienced their masculine identities. In what follows the themes are described alongside illustrative, verbatim quotations from participants.

Conceptualisations of masculinity

Masculinity in opposition to "gayness"

The majority of participants, irrespective of age, deployed discourses of hegemonic masculinity and stereotypic gay effeminacy to conflate gender and sexual orientation, and position them in opposition to their alternatives. Therefore, heterosexuality was constructed as masculine by these participants, gay as feminine; heterosexual/gay and masculine/feminine were constructed as dichotomous; and gay could not be masculine. Engaging in these discourses had implications for some participants' self-perceived masculinity, as Reza (23) described:

> *I: How, how masculine would you say that you are?*
>
> Not very.
>
> *I: How come?*
>
> In terms of personality I'd say, "No", like absolutely, I, like, hate football and all that shit obviously. I quite like quite camp music [Laughs].

By declaring his disdain for football, Reza positioned himself implicitly in relation to a heterosexual man – football is the sport "indexical of [male] heterosexuality" (Barron & Bradford, 2007, p. 150). Reza believed that he was not masculine because he did not have the interests that he perceived as masculine – and as a gay man, nor should he be expected to, "obvious[ly]". Reza's account suggested his definition of masculinity was centred on the masculinity he would expect a heterosexual man to embody. In this discourse, men who did not have interests that epitomized heterosexual men could not be masculine. However, when Reza compared himself to other gay men, his perceptions were different:

> 'Cause to me, the more masculine you are, the less gay you are, and the more feminine you are, the more gay you are sort of thing . . . So, and because, because obviously you're not wearing the makeup and stuff, when you're in places like [gay nightclub], you think, "Well actually, I'm a little bit more masculine because I'm being less feminine, I'm being less gay."

Because he framed masculinity and femininity as poles of the same dimension, Reza's self-perceived masculinity was influenced by his belief that he was less feminine than the other men present in a gay nightclub: To Reza, what was less feminine must be more masculine. Reza's account suggested that self-perceived masculinity was relational and context-dependent, associated with perceptions of the masculinity of other men. According to Reza, gay men could embody degrees of "gayness" that were determined by how masculine and feminine they were: Reza was "less gay" than others because he was comparatively more masculine than them. Rather than referring to sexual orientation, the word "gay" in this context described a gendered social identity positioned in a particular social context. To Reza, and to other participants, there was a distinction between being gay and *doing* gay: Gay

men who did not *do* gay (i.e., enact certain feminine behaviors such as wearing makeup) to the same extent as others had the potential to identify as and be perceived by others as at least "a little bit" masculine.

Self-perceived masculinity was for many participants influenced by beliefs about the sexual orientation judgements made about them by others. When asked to report on their self-perceived masculinity, some participants responded by referencing whether they believed they were visibly gay. Andy (23) provided an example:

> I'd put myself quite high on the masculinity scale, you know, proper masculine, people like my dad who is, you know, shaven hair and smokes forty a day, to feminine being, you know, majority of gay, you know, camp gay [city] men . . . I feel like I would be able to walk into a straight bar, normal bar, and no one would be able to tell the difference.

Andy's belief that patrons of a "straight bar" would not be able to differentiate between himself and a heterosexual man was contingent on several beliefs: First, that true ("proper") masculinity was embodied by heterosexual men like his father; second; that gay men were (usually) identifiable because they were feminine; thirdly, that he was different to the "majority" of gay men; and lastly, that because his sexual orientation was not visible, he must embody a masculinity that looked sufficiently heterosexual. Although he believed that there was a "difference" between heterosexual men and himself, Andy's view that this difference was undiscernible in non-gay contexts allowed him to distance himself from other gay men: the "difference" was limited to sexual attraction, and was not related to masculinity. Being gay did not affect Andy's masculine subjectivity because he embraced the mandates of hegemonic masculinity and, despite being gay, was aligned closely to them: Andy *was* gay, but he did not *do* gay like most gay men did.

Andy's description of his dad as the personification of masculinity hints at how masculinity may intersect with class. Working class masculinities may align with certain hegemonic masculinity standards – particularly physical strength and emotional stoicism (Coston & Kimmel, 2012). Andy described growing up in a "masculine household, very working class area". His beliefs about masculinity were rooted in a hegemonic masculinity discourse that he had been engaged with since he was a young child – there was little room for the consideration of any alternatives.

The positioning of masculinity and being gay in opposition was not only evident in men who experienced themselves as masculine, as self-identified "camp" gay man Sahib (20) illustrated:

> Camp is what I am, so if a guy doesn't think I'm camp I'm like, "Are you dumb?" . . . I've had so many guys go, "Are you straight?" I'm like, "Really?!" . . . And it's one of those things, like, I'm just, like if a guy ever goes, "Are you straight?" I would always think they're stupid. I will automatically assume that other people think I am, because just the way I, like, just everything about me, I'm like, "There is no way you can assume I'm straight."

With a strong feminine subjectivity ("I see myself very feminine, like as a woman") and a strong belief that only gay men could embody such femininity, Sahib was incredulous that anyone could doubt his sexual orientation. Sahib was not just gay, he was the personification of the gay effeminacy stereotype, and in that discourse, his sexual orientation should have been overtly obvious to others. That "so many" men had asked if he were heterosexual might have suggested to Sahib that others were not guided so unwaveringly by the same stereotype – or at least, did not want to be seen to be endorsing it – but for Sahib it was unequivocal: only gay men could embody femininity to the extent that he did. This belief

was sufficiently strong that others' apparent doubt over his sexual orientation did not influence Sahib's masculine identity: he repeated "I don't feel masculine at all" three times during the interview.

Other participants' attributes were more ambiguous, and this influenced their beliefs about how their sexual orientation was perceived by others, and their self-perceived masculinity. Voice was the most commonly-referenced give-away of sexual orientation. Some participants suggested that gay men might not be discernible on the basis of their appearances, but their effeminate, or stereotypically gay-sounding, voices could reveal their true sexual orientation, as Jack (22) illustrated:

On Saturday night, I went out into, like, a club . . . and the doorman wasn't going to let me in because he thought I was straight and [my friend] was like, "Oh no, wait until you hear him talk," and then I was talking to one of my friends, he was like, "Oh yeah, it's fine." Like, after he'd heard me speak [Laughs].

. . .

I: *How do you feel about people assuming that you're straight?*

It doesn't happen very often until I, well it does actually, until I start talking. And then as soon as I open my mouth people are like, "Oh my God, are you gay?" and it's like, "Yes, I get the voice gave it away, it's cool."

According to gym-goer Jack, he had the appearance of a heterosexual man – Jack equated muscularity with masculinity, and masculinity with heterosexuality – but appearances were deceptive because his voice distinguished him as gay, and as far he was concerned, everyone knew it. Jack explained, "I just feel like inside I'm a lot more feminine than I appear to look". Femininity was not a gender performance for Jack, it was who he was, and a masculine appearance alone did not change how he experienced his gender.

Accustomed to hearing the "Are you gay?" question, there was in Jack's mind no doubt over how he was perceived by other people: The stereotype of gay effeminacy was activated as soon as he spoke. From Jack's experience, a voice that sounded gay could not be the voice of a heterosexual man, and in the discourse of hegemonic masculinity, a man with such a voice could not be masculine.

Alternative interpretations of masculinity

Although many of participants framed masculinity and gayness in polar opposition, as hegemonic masculinity prescribes, others had alternative interpretations. From Ben's (24) experience, masculinity and gay were not mutually exclusive because expressing gayness had masculinising implications:

> I'll still strut around in a straight bar, pole dance in a straight bar, it's happened once but I was very drunk! [Laughs] . . . As soon as I got off that pole, people were cheering and giving me high fives, you know. Then I felt butch! [Laughs] And gay at the same time.

Ben conceptualized masculinity as something done by men ("the butchest thing I do is shave") and he did not believe that normative behavior for men included pole dancing – if he had then his story would not have been notable. However, Ben experienced the honour bestowed on him by heterosexual people for his pole dance as a source of social power – and therefore as masculine (or, in Ben's terms, "butch"). For Ben, masculinity and gayness were not on a binary dimension because gay men like he could feel masculine at times, despite not identifying as masculine in more general terms ("I'm not butch in the slightest").

For Arman (36), locating his own masculinity was difficult because he had observed such diversity within and between the gay men he had encountered:

> I: Generally, how masculine do you see yourself?

I don't think I really see myself as either or, I just kind of like see myself as me . . .

I've learned to accept that there's loads of different people. And, yeah, there are some

guys who are very feminine in their appearance, in their actions and stuff, and then

equally as much as you've got guys who can be masculine. But I've been to loads of

parties where you've got the most masculine guy, and a Britney [Spears] song comes

on and they're mincing everywhere. . . . So, it's, for me, I suppose again it comes

down to environment and who you're with. But in my day-to-day life, I'm kind of like,

I'm just me.

Although Arman's account implied that he conceptualized masculinity and femininity

as oppositional ("either or"), it also suggested that both were unpredictable and context-

dependent and could be embodied in the same person. As a consequence, gender was not a

preoccupation: Arman did not identify as masculine because he knew that whether he might

be perceived as masculine depended on what he was doing and where he was doing it. As

other participants also reported, in "day-to-day" (i.e., non-gay) contexts, Arman did not have

a particular gender performance, just his authentic self, which he did not identify as gendered.

Some participants reported pluralistic interpretations of masculinity, referring to their

understanding that some heterosexual men enacted non-masculine and/or feminine behaviors,

which had implications for how gay men could define and experience their own masculinity:

Dale (31): People could easily say I'm much more straighter than the straight guy, or

much more masculine than the straight guy, you know, because he's sort of like

beautiful and gets his teeth bleached . . . It's just like, "Here's Dale, he's not shaved,

again. He smells like rugby, and like car oil." But, but yeah, I don't, I never think

about it. 'Cause I've got quite a few straight friends who I go to their house, and I'm

just like, "This is the gayest house I've ever been in.". . . I use derogatory words all

the time, so like, the, the F-word, faggot, I use that . . . But it's all in good fun, and it's only with people who I can feel comfortable using that with of course . . . And it's just like hand soaps made from, like, essential oils with like real flowers in them, I'm just like, "What sort of gay ass shit is this?!" . . . But it's just like, that doesn't define how masculine or feminine they are.

Dale's account suggested that he understood there was a discourse of masculinity wherein heterosexual men were expected to avoid femininity, and could expect legitimate denigration via homophobic taunts if they did not, (Anderson, 2005; de Visser & Smith, 2007; de Visser et al., 2009; Emslie, Hunt & Lyons, 2013). However, Dale attempted to position himself and his heterosexual friends outside of this discourse. He asserted that it was other people (not he) who conflated heterosexuality with masculinity and who defined a man's masculinity (and in this discourse, their sexual orientation) by their interests and behaviors. However, this did not prevent Dale from engaging in the homophobic teasing of his heterosexual male friends for violating hegemonic masculinity ideals. The interviewer was not to assume that these homophobic jibes were made in seriousness: "of course" they were made in a light-hearted, ironic spirit, and aimed at particular individuals who would receive them as such.

For gay men to taunt heterosexual men with homophobic abuse plays with hegemonic masculinity, both reinforcing it and contesting it simultaneously. Dale indicated that masculinity was positioned in opposition to all things "gay", and that men who engaged in "gay" things were suitable targets for (albeit irreverent) homophobic taunting. However, knowing that some heterosexual men could present as more stereotypically feminine than gay men like himself meant that it was erroneous to define masculinity by what heterosexual men did. Some heterosexual men did not "do straight" just as some gay men (including Dale) did

not "do gay", so the masculine-heterosexual dichotomy was not valid. As a result, Dale could have a masculine subjectivity that was unthreatened by his sexual orientation.

Experiences of masculinity

The value of appearing masculine and avoiding effeminacy

Many participants showed reverence for attributes that constituted the locally hegemonic masculinity, on the understanding that the masculinity they embodied was socially desirable and for gay men, counter-stereotypic. The older participants (>30 years) in particular held in high esteem the attributes they possessed that they considered to be masculine. These included face and body hair, large and/or muscular bodies, lack of attention to grooming, beer drinking, gym patronage, dominant and controlling personalities, dominance and power in sexual relations and competence in and/or fandom towards masculine sports (e.g., rugby). For rugby player Andy, being masculine meant opposing a stereotype that did not represent who he was:

> *I: But how important, generally, is masculinity to your identity?*
>
> I would say it is fairly important because I don't want to be a stereotype I guess. If you ask my mother what a stereotypical gay man would be, it would be, you know, drag queens and, you know, crop tops and things like that, whilst I am very far removed from that, so it is quite important to me to, to, to be masculine and come across as masculine . . . It's not something I have to put on, it's just kind of who I am.

Andy's fear of being stereotyped as feminine meant that his masculinity – which he framed as authentic ("it's not something I have to put on") – had particularly high value. His concern was not to "be" (and not merely "be seen as") stereotypically gay, because his masculinity was genuine, not just an appearance. Using his mother as an example of someone who held stereotypic beliefs about gay male effeminacy reinforced Andy's claim to a

counter-stereotypic identity. She was of a different sex, a different sexual orientation and a different generation to Andy, and therefore her stereotypic beliefs could not capture who he was. Earlier in the interview, Andy had described himself as "straight-acting", and had then said: "But I don't really like that term – I'm just me" – a discursive tactic intended to avoid any suspicion that his masculinity was a self-conscious attempt to emulate heterosexuality.

Like Andy, self-proclaimed "alpha-male" Rob (35) desired to be perceived as masculine, and his proficiency in and enjoyment of rugby contributed to his strong masculine identity:

> When I'm in the middle of [gay bar] singing at the top of my voice the words to "This Boy is a Bottom" and pointing at all my friends, I'd say that that's quite feminine, but, like, when, like, I'm playing rugby and smashing into people and not really giving a damn, then it's kind of like, "Actually, no, not that feminine." It's like, "It's quite butch." . . . I just, I flip from one, both ends of the scale.
>
> *I: What would you prefer to feel like?*
>
> . . . [The] majority of the time I'd like people to think I was quite manly . . . I don't want to be seen as a screaming queen.
>
> *I: Can you elaborate on that? Why, why wouldn't you want people to think that you were a screaming queen?*
>
> 'Cause that's not me. And it's not the sort of person that I find attractive in a man. So, I kind of like, you, you know, sames attract, and I don't find screaming, you know, I'm not, I'm not saying I'm prejudiced against them, it's just what you find attractive, and I just don't find anybody that's kind of screaming at the top of their voice, running through, you know . . . Yeah it's, it's that kind of, it's just that kind of cliché, kind of over the top, I'll say "twinky" kind of screamer.

Rob's account indicated how hegemonic masculinity might be embraced in some contexts and played with in others. He emphasized his hegemonic masculine credentials ("playing rugby, smashing into people, not giving a damn"), and contrasted them with what he described as the femininity of singing a song in a gay bar about a man who is receptive in anal intercourse (a "bottom"). His description of his singing performance suggested how Rob engaged with and queered hegemonic masculinity – he maintained his masculinity by being positioned as the centre of attention in the gay bar, performing to an audience who he was indicating were anally-receptive (and therefore, in a hegemonic masculinity discourse, less masculine) bottoms.

Rugby enabled Rob to embody a masculinity reminiscent of hegemonic masculinity: it was aggressive and unconcerned about his wellbeing. Even Rob's ability to "flip" from what he understood was femininity in a gay context to what he saw as masculinity on the rugby pitch was framed as a source of masculine pride. Rob positioned himself apart from effeminate gay men ("them"), and his hyperbolic description of "screaming" and "running" exaggerated their effeminacy and augmented the distance between them and himself. Rob's masculine identity was particularly valuable to him because he believed it was also favoured by other gay men: as he opined later in the interview, "It is the age of the hairy man, gay guys have now become a lot less preened and tweezered and waxed . . . It's the age of the rugby player." On the understanding that being masculine would attract masculine partners, it was vital that Rob was distanced from effeminate gay men because effeminacy was not sexually appealing, and from Rob's perspective, nor was it valued in his particular gay community. According to Rob, gay men found a form of masculinity typically associated with hegemonic masculinity (hirsuteness, lack of care for grooming, sporting prowess) most desirable, and his anti-effeminacy helped him align with this attractive male archetype.

Participants like Rob created categories for themselves and other gay men, which enabled them to distance themselves from those in an unfavourable category (i.e., "screaming queens"). However, this "othering" of effeminate gay men was not always associated with the value the participants attached to masculinity. For example, Reza distanced himself from "camp" and "flamboyant" gay men despite not identifying as particularly masculine, nor being "really that bothered" with being perceived as such:

> I don't really go around screaming that I'm gay sort of thing, like, I just keep to myself like, in that sort of sense, if I don't know someone. Like, I don't feel the need to say it. Whereas obviously some people are very, like, in your face and, like, that sort of thing.
>
> *I: Oh, some people it's kind of more, it's more in your face?*
>
> Yeah, like they're very like flamboyant and, like, camp and stuff. I don't think I'm that like, like, obvious sort of thing.

With one exception, the younger participants did not experience themselves as masculine, and some described feeling feminine. However, this did not preclude expressions of anti-effeminacy. Although "not very masculine" Reza did not actively avoid effeminacy, there were undertones of anti-effeminacy in his account. He disparaged some gay men's flamboyance and campness, framing it as an inauthentic reflection of an attention-seeking "need" to communicate their sexual orientation to others. Reza was distinguished from other gay men because his gayness was less ostentatiously and less aggressively performed. Consequently, Reza's sexual orientation was less visible, which was favourable, either because it was not important to Reza for this information to be publicly available, or because it was important that it was concealed.

Bartender Ryan (22) valued his campness because he believed that it honoured his gay identity, by communicating his sexual orientation to others ("I want people to know I'm gay"). However, as illustrated in the following account of his experiences of working in a gay nightclub, not all gay men were equal when it came to such expressions of campness:

I'd found people weren't being themselves. Like, I'd talk to people there when I was sober, 'cause I was working, and they'd be so, like, out there, confident, putting on like this façade, and then I'd see them sober in the street the following day and they were just completely different people . . . I'm not saying there's anything wrong with being camp 'cause I'm camp as Christmas myself, but it's when [audio fault] in a different side, and they're not that person, and that's what it was a bit frustrating for me to see.

Ryan's anti-effeminacy was not motivated by a desire to be distanced from effeminate gay men. Rather, like many of the other participants, Ryan identified other gay men's effeminacy as fluid and dependent on social context, whereas his was consistent and an authentic performance of his gay identity. From Ryan's perspective, campness was integral to his gay identity, which, unlike other men, he honoured in all spaces, not just on the gay scene.

Masculinity and femininity in different social contexts

Many of the participants, both younger and older, described the importance of being perceived as masculine in certain social contexts. The workplace was identified by many as a location where being perceived as masculine was important, and some participants described the strategies they had in place to accomplish what they believed was a valued masculinity in that space, as illustrated by Ross (32):

I think I would certainly deepen my voice, stand up straight and be far less flamboyant when I was presenting.

. . .

I: How important is it for you to be, to be perceived as masculine then?

I think, I think part of it is that my own stigma of, "If I'm not masculine and I'm not professional and I'm not conforming to what people think men should be, I won't be taken seriously." . . . And particularly with the people who I was managing were straight, and they obviously knew I was gay, but I think, I think there was a certain amount of holding back on elements of my personality in order not to be, sort of, looked down on in their eyes.

Ross' concern was that if he *did* gay in a context where people knew he was gay, his attempts to influence people's perceptions of his masculinity would be futile and his professional credibility lost. At work, Ross' gayness had to be reined in and his masculinity performed consciously, a response to his belief that there was stigma attached to "flamboyance". This was the reverse of the situation described by Ryan in gay environments. The stakes were high for Ross because his sexual orientation was known: His heterosexual colleagues might have expected effeminacy, and in response, Ross was vigilant over his behavior and mannerisms in an attempt to maintain a respected counter-stereotypic, masculine identity. However, Ross explained that in other contexts, it was by utilising his gayness that he could acquire social power:

Playing the fool and being a little bit camp is entertaining, and straight people who might not necessarily have a vast number of gay friends–or *any* gay friends–I think probably appreciated my company, because I'd slightly play the fool with the girls, you know, making jokes with them about the blokes they're going out with, or the blokes in the club. They would always really enjoy that, having a little, kind of, being a fag hag for an evening and having a gay man come along and, you know, toddle

along next to them and make jokes about the blokes. But that again probably wasn't really my personality, I would much rather be standing at the bar with the blokes.

Ross had explained earlier in the interview that he often felt like a "Plain Jane" on the gay scene, and "disadvantaged" and "awkward" in the company of heterosexual men, because their conversations were often masculinized ("not part of my world"). "Playing" with gayness when in the company of heterosexual women afforded him attention that he did not receive elsewhere, and also facilitated bonding him with his female friends. Ross was clear about his position in this context: He was a novelty, the joker ("the fool") and an outsider ("toddle along"), charged with the responsibility to entertain. Ross' understanding was that those who embodied a masculinity he believed was typically expected of men ("deeper voice; less flamboyant") were to be taken seriously, whereas those who enacted gayness were frivolous, and also marginalized. Although he had a preference for socialising with heterosexual men, the masculine performance this demanded eluded Ross. However, as a gay man with a firm understanding of people's stereotyped expectations of him, Ross was able to utilize his gayness to his advantage when he was in female company.

Many participants described the importance of inhibiting gayness in non-gay contexts, in response to perceived threat. Threat was particularly likely in contexts populated by heterosexual men. For example, Adam (33) described the "discretion" he exercised by refraining from stereotypically gay behavior when in a "pub with a group of lads". For self-identified "flamboyant" and "very, very gay" Ben, some threatening contexts required hypervigilance over his mannerisms:

> *I: When you said sometimes you kind of either act or have acted a bit more butch,*
> *what do you actually do to, to do that, to accomplish that?*

I try and walk differently, I try and talk differently, you know, this with my hand [gesticulates wildly] didn't exactly help when I'm gesturing so I tried to stop doing that as much as I could . . . I do go and club down this place called [street name] in [Welsh city], and, you know if there's a situation there where it gets a little bit dicey, you know, I will try and butch up.

Ben used the phrase "butch up" to describe his attempts to conceal his sexual orientation when he was in some potentially threatening contexts dominated by heterosexual people, by avoiding certain behaviors. Aware that people were able to discern men's sexual orientation by observing subtle behaviors (Johnson, Gill, Reichman & Tassinary, 2007), Ben felt obliged to attempt to walk and talk in a way that he believed would make his sexual orientation less conspicuous. "Butching up" meant emulating a masculinity that he believed would not be expected from a gay man, which for "flamboyant" Ben demanded close and conscious attention to the subtle behaviors that might reveal his true sexual orientation.

Appearing masculine was crucial in some social contexts, but many participants – including those who described identifying strongly as masculine and valuing their masculine identities – also discussed the importance of opportunities for expressing gayness. The gay scene was cited frequently as a space where gayness could be enacted, as Andy explained:

I: If [your friend] was, like, dancing around on the dance floor, doing the splits and stuff, how would that affect you? How would you feel about him doing that if you were next to him?

It's funny isn't it? 'Cause if he did that in the public during the day I'd be like, "Get the fuck up you idiot. What are you doing?" and I'll probably walk away, but in [gay club] I'd be like, "Yes, that's brilliant," you know, and then probably try and do it next to him [Laughs] . . . I guess I can feel like I can really, sort of, let go if I was in a,

a gay bar or a gay club.

For Andy, maintaining a masculine identity and avoiding gayness were paramount until he entered the gay scene, which provided relief from his everyday gender performance ("I can really let go"). The gay scene was not "public" space because from Andy's perspective, public spaces demanded a masculinity that looked heterosexual from those (like he) who were concerned about their masculine identities. As Andy explained elsewhere, there was "a time and a place" for gayness, and the gay scene was that place. Like other participants' accounts – including "alpha-male" Rob's – Andy suggested that in at least some gay spaces, it was gayness rather than masculinity that was socially desirable.

Discussion

Combining discourse-dynamic and IPA approaches in this study allowed for the detailed examination of how a sample of gay men living in England and Wales defined masculinity in relation to their own sense of masculine identity. The study identified how gay men negotiated discourses of masculinity, including a hegemonic masculinity discourse that privileges heterosexuality. By including a sample that comprised men of diverse ages, it was possible to explore age-related differences in how masculinity was conceptualized and experienced.

The majority of participants, irrespective of age, conceptualized masculinity in terms of hegemonic masculinity, positioning it in opposition to what was gay. "Gay" referred to a particular social identity that was characterized by a constellation of attributes (campness, flamboyance, a lack of interest in stereotypically masculine pursuits), that participants believed were particular to gay men. As suggested by other work (e.g., Clarke & Smith, 2014), "gayness" – the *doing* of gay – was on a continuum. Again irrespective of age, many of the participants in the present study discussed their masculinity in relation to their visibility

as gay men – for some, it was the first point of reference. With beliefs about masculinity anchored in a hegemonic masculinity discourse, gay men who "did" gay, and were identifiable by others as gay, could not be simultaneously masculine.

Conceptualisations of masculinity rooted in a hegemonic masculinity discourse had implications for how masculine identity was experienced by many of the older participants, and one of the younger participants. These gay men maintained that they were authentically masculine: a discourse of "masculine normalcy" that is reminiscent of "ordinary" (Wetherell & Edley, 1999) and "authentic" (de Visser & Smith, 2006) self-positioning by heterosexual men. In Wetherell and Edley's (1999) study, ordinariness was associated with a critique of hegemonic masculinity as macho and extreme; in the present study, ordinariness was a critique of *gayness* as extreme and hyperbolically camp. Some of the men in this study were "ordinary" men because they embodied an authentic masculinity and did not enact gayness. In Brekhus' (2003) terms, these men were "gay centaurs", or "integrators", because their gayness did not define who they were, and they could "pass" as heterosexual. The very fact that some participants rationalized their masculine identities in this way suggests that they felt obliged to "prove" the authenticity of their masculinity. It was important to some of the participants that others should not view their masculinity as self-conscious and performative, an attempt at appearing heterosexual (Duncan, 2007).

A number of participants had less essentialist interpretations of masculinity, and this did not appear to be related to their age. These participants suggested that if both gay and heterosexual men could incorporate non-masculine and/or stereotypically feminine behaviors into their gender repertoire, then defining masculinity in relation to sexual orientation was erroneous. This alternative discourse of masculinity may reflect what Anderson (2009) refers to as the "inclusivity" of contemporary masculinities. Heteromasculinities and gay

masculinities are not necessarily discernible from one another if they are both characterized by gender-diverse attributes.

All but one of the younger participants reported feeling generally non-masculine or feminine, and used adjectives such as "camp", "flamboyant" and "feminine" to describe themselves. This was in contrast to the older participants: Only one of the older participants felt feminine; one felt both masculine and feminine, and three felt neither feminine nor masculine. There are several possible explanations for this discrepancy in masculine subjectivity between the younger and older participants. It has been identified in previous work that the commercial gay scene prescribes for young gay men a feminized "twink" identity as a vehicle through which social acceptance as a gay man (by other gay men) can be achieved (Barron & Bradford, 2007). Young gay men who identify, or are perceived by others, as feminine may possess greater capital (and acquire higher status) on the gay scene than their contemporaries who do not possess feminine attributes (Clarke & Smith, 2014).

It has also been suggested that being gay is increasingly celebrated by young heterosexual people rather than denigrated, and that young gay men can enjoy promoted positions in their peer groups, because gay identities carry social prestige (Morris, 2017). As a result, some young gay men may be more comfortable with overtly resisting the hegemonic masculinity discourse, notwithstanding their acknowledgement of its dominance (Morris, 2017; Wilson et al., 2010). Further, and as one participant in this study stated explicitly, embodying a feminized identity may facilitate expressions of defiance against normative cultural expectations of men – an opportunity to "own" and show pride in gayness.

It has been argued that heterosexual men increasingly deploy "gay aesthetics" as part of their gender expression (Bridges, 2014, p. 59), meaning that more fluid expressions of masculinity may be becoming "the new normal". In this study, a number of participants engaged with hegemonic masculinity at times and rejected it at others. They played with

hegemonic masculinity by emphasising their hegemonic masculine attributes, and also utilising opportunities to enact non-masculine (and/or effeminate) gayness. This may reflect the general trend, observed in other masculinities research, for men to challenge hegemonic masculinity, and produce "hybridized" configurations of gender practice (Anderson, 2005; Demetriou, 2001). Although the older participants were more likely to feel masculine and value their hegemonically masculine identities than the younger participants, this did not preclude their occasional resistance to the hegemonic masculinity discourse.

Irrespective of whether the hegemonic masculinity discourse was overtly resisted or embraced, and whether masculinity was a salient aspect of identity, many of the gay men in this study reported strategies for negotiating hegemonic masculinity in different contexts. The most commonly described strategy was the avoidance of feminine behaviors; and some participants' accounts were saturated with anti-effeminacy. Avoiding effeminacy was often deemed particularly important in non-gay contexts where there was perceived threat, either to professional integrity in the workplace or to physical safety in contexts populated by heterosexual people who might be hostile towards gay men. Therefore, for some gay men, avoiding effeminacy was associated with the belief that effeminacy is indexical of being gay, and that being perceived as gay presents a risk of subjugation, including via the threat of violence (Connell, 2005).

A number of participants rationalized their anti-effeminacy by referring to their belief that masculinity is attractive to other gay men: Anti-effeminacy may therefore be normative (and desirable) in some gay communities (Taywaditep, 2001). This contributes to an explanation as to why many of the participants valued their attributes that they identified as masculine, such as their facial and body hair, their large/muscular bodies and their competence at masculine sports. It was generally the older participants who held such attributes in such high esteem. This could be explained with reference to the literature on the

"bear" gay subculture. Bears are generally older gay men, who have large / overweight (but not muscular) physiques, hirsute bodies, and facial hair (Moskowitz, Turrubiates, Lozano & Hajek, 2013). Within the bear community, feminized, narcissistic masculinities are derided and more "natural", heterosexual-looking masculinities are celebrated: According to Hennen (2005, p.34), the bear discourse "seeks to minimize the difference between bear and heterosexual masculinity". Future research might examine more closely how lived experiences of masculinity are associated with membership of different gay subcultures, especially where membership may be contingent on age.

Limitations

It might be argued that combining an experiential approach such as IPA with a discourse-dynamic approach to studying subjectivity gives rise to epistemological and ontological conflict. However, as Hood (2016, p. 172) argued, the benefit of taking a pluralist approach by combining experiential and discursive approaches is that such an approach provides the opportunity to "link ideographic detail more clearly to broader contextual issues". For the purposes of this study, it is maintained that gay men's experiences of masculinity were influenced by their positioning in relation to masculinity discourses. Therefore, it was possible to explore individual experiences in the wider context of the masculinity discourses that were available. From the critical realist perspective that was adopted for this study, it is argued that although discourses of masculinity do not say anything about masculinity as a "real" entity, men's positioning in relation to these discourses can have "real" implications for lived experience.

A second limitation was that this study did not examine how other variables may intersect with masculinity. Future research might investigate how variables such as class, ethnicity, education history and physical ability status may modify gay men's perceptions and experiences of masculinity.

Conclusion

The majority of the men who participated in this study conceptualized masculinity in a hegemonic masculinity discourse. For some, particularly the older participants, this influenced their lived experiences of masculinity: Those who had a desire to feel and be perceived as masculine in hegemonic masculinity terms were more inclined to emphasize their masculine attributes, deride effeminacy, and avoid effeminacy in non-gay spaces. Younger participants were generally less concerned with masculine identity, even though their conceptions of masculinity were largely rooted in a hegemonic masculinity discourse. Irrespective of age, many of the participants played with hegemonic masculinity by embracing it at times (emphasising their heterosexual appearances, their competence in aggressive sports, and their disdain for effeminate men) and queering it at others (directing homophobia to heterosexual men; deploying gayness selectively). The study's findings therefore indicated that even though the hegemonic masculinity discourse remained the most readily available for conceptualizing masculinity, some gay men experienced their masculine identities outside of this discourse, producing novel configurations of masculinity.

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