



The quest for modern manhood: masculine stereotypes, peer culture and the social significance of homophobia

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This paper explores the use of homophobic terms by boys and young men and the meanings they invoke when using them. Highly detailed interviews were conducted with young men from diverse backgrounds about their own experiences while growing up and their observations of schools, teachers, family and peers. Homophobia was found to be more than a simple prejudice against homosexuals. Homophobic terms like “poofter” and “faggot” have a rich developmental history and play a central role in adolescent male peer-group dynamics. Homophobic terms come into currency in primary school. When this happens, words like poofter and faggot rarely have sexual connotations. Nevertheless, far from being indiscriminate terms of abuse, these terms tap a complex array of meanings that are precisely mapped in peer cultures, and boys quickly learn to avoid homophobia and to use it decisively and with great impact against others. Significantly, this early, very powerful use of homophobic terms occurs prior to puberty, prior to adult sexual identity and prior to knowing much, if anything, about homosexuality. An effect of this sequence is that early homophobic experiences may well provide a key reference point for comprehending forthcoming adult sexual identity formation (gay or not) because powerful homophobic codes are learned first.

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Introduction

Contemporary homophobia is widespread and often deeply cathected, and studies on homophobic violence show broadly similar patterns in Europe, the Americas and Australia (Comstock, 1991; Berrill, 1992; Cox 1994; GLAD, 1994; Sandroussi and Thompson, 1995). Research by Tomsen has found that at least for the last 20 years, homophobia has been a key factor in one quarter of all stranger murders in New South Wales, and it has also been involved in murders not involving strangers (Tomsen 1993, 1994, 1997). Studies elsewhere also show that homophobic harassment and assault is common and that homicides are typically very brutal and involve much more violence than is required simply to kill the victim (Comstock, 1991; Berrill, 1992; Herek and Berrill, 1992). Yet despite these global similarities, data from historical and cultural studies indicate that homophobia is highly culturally variable and by no means inevitable. In short, various social and cultural settings can be identified where homosexual practice was embraced without inciting homophobia (Halperin, 1991; Herdt, 1993). Rather than being an ancient phenomenon, it appears that homophobia is relatively modern but that traditional values are exploited to justify it.

Far from being the acts of closet homosexuals and the occasional psychopath, these findings imply that homophobia has deep social significance. But the extent of homophobia identified in the above studies seems to be out of proportion to having a principally male target (homosexual men) who are a relatively small minority and are stereotypically portrayed as weak and effeminate, and who pose no obvious immediate threat to society.

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How can we explain this apparent paradox? Is homophobia really a “simple” prejudice against homosexuals? By examining how boys and young men start to use homophobic terms, and the meanings attached to them, this study explores some of the significances associated with modern homophobia.

Methods

Between 1995 and 1997, 30 young men from diverse backgrounds were recruited to report on their boyhood, young adult experiences and their observations of their peers. Detailed interviews were conducted, focusing on how they, as young adults, arrived at their views on sexuality (homophobia was not mentioned in the recruitment). In order to capture a mosaic of uncollaborated accounts encompassing various school and developmental histories, a range of recruitment methods was used, including newspaper advertising, public notice boards, through community-based organizations, and through rural and capital city health services. Prior to each interview, respondents were screened to ensure that there was no overlap between their schooling. The data consists of detailed chronological accounts of participant’s own experiences and observations of their families, schools and peers. A chronological framework was used because it offers a suitable, non-confronting interview context for discussing sensitive issues and it permits the subsequent analysis of processes and development. The method used modified grounded theory approach and theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Layder, 1993). Interviews were transcribed and homophobic references and contextual data were identified and manually sorted into categories. The analysis involved cataloguing homophobic references such as “poofter” and “faggot” and examining their usage patterns for evidence of who and what these references target, the meanings invoked, and how they are deployed. Further details on the methods including the analytical theory can be found in Plummer (1999).

Results

Sample

The informant’s ages ranged from 18 to 33 years with an average of 26 years. Twenty-seven were born in Australia, two in New Zealand and one in Britain. Thirty-seven parents of participants were born in Australia, five in New Zealand, three in England, three in Malta, two in Scotland, two in Germany, two in Portugal and one in each of Italy, Canada, France, Ukraine, Romania and Denmark.

Fourteen subjects were from Anglican families, including two who attended Catholic secondary schools. Thirteen subjects were from Catholic families including one “charismatic” and one whose other parent was Lutheran. Six had parents from other denominations including Presbyterian, Fundamentalist, Methodist, Uniting and Eastern Orthodox Christian. There was no representation of non-Christian organized religions in the sample.

Ten subjects spent their school years in rural settings; 12 in a capital city and eight in both urban and rural settings. Twenty-one undertook at least some of their schooling in the State of New South Wales, 10 in the Australian Capital Territory, four in Victoria, three in Queensland, two in South Australia, three in New Zealand, two in Britain, one in the United States and one in Denmark. In the latter three cases and one New Zealand case, the

schooling outside Australia comprised a small minority of their school years. Ten subjects had their education in more than one state/ territory/ country. Twenty-three had at least some of their education at government schools, 10 at Catholic schools, four at Anglican schools and one at an “alternative” school.

One informant left school after Year 9, five after Year 10, nine after Year 12 and 14 completed a university degree. Three completed a trade certificate, two of whom had also completed Year 12.

Eleven of the subjects were employed in professional positions, six were in unskilled positions, six were unemployed (some with some casual work), four were working in a trade and three were full time students.

All participants rated their own sexual orientation on a scale from one to nine, where one is exclusively heterosexual, nine is exclusively homosexual and five is “symmetrically” bisexual. Eight people indicated that they are exclusively heterosexual, nine that they are exclusively gay, and three rated themselves in category five as “symmetrically bisexual”. Of the 10 remaining subjects, six rated themselves as inclined to be more homosexual and four as inclined to be more heterosexual. The sexual orientation scores of the people who have been accepted into, are currently undertaking, or who have completed a university degree are 1, 1, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 7.5, 8, 8, 8, 8.5, 9, 9, 9 and 9. The sexual orientations scores of the six participants who did not complete secondary school are 1, 1, 2, 7, 9 and 9. Four subjects were either a “school prefect” or “school captain”: their sexual orientation scores were 1, 2, 8 and 9.

Homophobic meanings¹

Homophobic meanings were found to evolve as boys grow older. For the first few years of use, terms like poofter and faggot generally did not refer to homosexuality.

... it's not a sexuality thing. If it looks a bit different, a bit tacky, pathetic or anything like that, it's “gay”! (Informant 27; age 18; sexual orientation 9; rural).

Sexual connotations became associated with homophobic words later and some participants recognized when this occurred.

There was... a transitional phase, when poofter actually became an insult meaning you're a homosexual (Informant 22; age 30; sexual orientation 9; rural).

Yet, while early homophobic words often lacked sexual connotations, they nevertheless were associated with an expansive array of meanings (summarized in Table 1).

Importantly, the data indicates that prior to having sexual meanings, words like poofter and faggot are not used indiscriminately or without meaning. For example, homophobic terms were never used to refer to girls and were never complementary. A sense of the non-sexual meanings associated with homophobia starts to emerge with the following example:

¹In order to add detail, brief biographical notes are included after quotations. The site where participants spent most of their school years is given as rural and/or urban. It is difficult to meaningfully code social class, religious background or school type because these were often mixed. Descriptions and further information can be found in Plummer (1999).

Table 1. *Homophobic meanings*

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- Being a baby
 - Being soft, weak and timid
 - Being slow to mature physically
 - Acting like a girl
 - Being academic and studious
 - Being special
 - Being artistic
 - Appearing different
 - Not integrating with peer culture, being an outcast or being a loner
 - Not conforming to peer expectations
 - Not participating in prestigious team sports
 - Conforming too closely to adult expectations at the expense of peer group loyalty
 - Sexual orientation?
-

The wimpier kids... that would cry... if you saw a kid crying, fallen over or something like that: “Poofter!” because he’d showed a softer side (Informant 20; age 22; sexual orientation 5; rural/urban).

Likewise, not being tough and being unmasculine are associated with homophobia.

It was just... lack of masculinity. It wasn’t necessarily you had sex with men. [It was] you’re not as tough as us, so you’re a “faggot” (Informant 12; age 19; sexual orientation 9; urban).

There is a clear indication that sexuality was a secondary consideration here too.

The data also contained a range of examples where homophobia was used consistently and meaningfully but in addition to there being no explicit sexual meanings, there were also no cross-gender or heterosexist connotations. For example, the informants consistently reported that being intellectual and academic could provoke homophobia.

If they were more intellectual and academic, they were always deemed [to be] fags (Informant 6; age 27; sexual orientation 1; urban).

Generally the “intellectual” reference point of homophobic terms was a counterpoint to physicality, team membership and peer group conformity.

The ones that weren’t playing sport... more interested in collecting bugs, reading... The one’s that weren’t sort of in the “in crowd”, were [called poofters]. The ones that weren’t doing what everyone else was doing (Informant 20; age 22; sexual orientation 5; rural/urban).

While in the following case, being teacher’s favourite and complying with adult expectations (as opposed to peer-group loyalty) attracted homophobic criticism:

... if you were... teacher’s favorite, you were a poofter. It was used a lot, a real lot actually (Informant 14; age 28; sexual orientation 9; urban).

So, while words like poofter and faggot could be used to refer to boys who acted like girls, they were also used to refer to boys who were different in other ways. In particular, they often were used in reference to boys who stood out from their peers because they were slow to

develop physically, soft, shy, smart and/or showed insufficient commitment to male peer group structures and values.

Homophobic intensity

While early homophobic abuse has complex and rich meanings, the intensity of homophobia in peer group settings also reflects the significance boys attribute to early homophobia. A variety of indications of homophobic intensity can be identified in the data, including the severity, duration and frequency of use of homophobic words, and the relationship between homophobia and other forms of abuse. From their earliest use, words like “poofter” were understood to be extremely powerful and were portrayed as being highly provocative.

Poofter was the only really challenging thing... if you *really, really, really* wanted to offend somebody you called them a poof (Informant 30; age 24; sexual orientation 9; rural).

All accounts described homophobic words as particularly challenging and offensive.

[Poofter] was the horriblest, meanest word that I probably knew (Informant 26; age 30; sexual orientation 1; urban).

Another indication of their power is the deep sense of how hurtful homophobic words were if they were to be used against the informant.

[Poofter] was the worst thing you could be called. I can't think of anything else that would have made me feel worse (Informant 20; age 22; sexual orientation 5; rural).

The power of homophobia is also reflected in relentless and sustained use of these labels and how they were able to dominate a boy's life. For example, in the next extract, homophobic abuse started in primary school and continued for years.

I used to be the local “poof” for some reason... they used to call me that and they used to chase me and I couldn't stand them. I hated it... in primary school and high school... it went *on, and on, and on for years*... It was a constant sort of torment... it just seems like that's all there is to your life (Informant 15; age 24; sexual orientation 9; semi-rural).

Further, in addition to the severity and duration of homophobic abuse, descriptions of the frequency with which words like poofter were used in the school ground also indicates something of the intensity of homophobic processes.

Twenty, thirty times at least. [Poofter] was *the* word... the one that stands out... That would have been about fifth class (Informant 26; age 30; sexual orientation 1; urban).

...about fifteen times in a day, at least. Thrown around in different contexts... It was a loaded, loaded term... the one that was the most cutting... I can't think of another word that would be as offensive to another boy (Informant 20; age 22; sexual orientation 5; rural/urban).

While the exact number of daily homophobic references varied considerably between individuals, ranging from several through to 50 or more, all participants reported hearing words like “poofter” at school many times each day.

Finally, ranking homophobic words against other swear words generates further evidence of the relative significance of homophobia. All accounts indicated that homophobic terms

were in a class of their own both in severity and meaning compared with other terms. In the next case, the participant was asked to rank the various swear words they were aware of.

Poofter would have to be the top... that would provoke the most out of everybody (Informant 30; age 24; sexual orientation 9; rural).

Similarly, the following quotation describes the relative impact of common slang terms.

You can handle walking around being called a loser, or a dickhead, or a wanker or something, but poofter is a bit larger, you don't want that hanging over your head! (Informant 28; age 18; sexual orientation 1; rural).

Data obtained from other subjects indicated a similar special status of homophobic terms.

Poofter was worse. Because it also carried not only are you... lacking in the courage area or the toughness area, you lack in every area. Poofter meant you're hopeless, you're right off! (Informant 29; age 27; sexual orientation 8; urban).

Prior to boys recognizing any explicit sexual connotations of homophobic terms, words like poofter and faggot had complex uses and meanings and were used with considerable impact. These characteristics distinguished homophobic words from other forms of school ground abuse.

Homophobic sequencing

All accounts indicated that homophobic terms underwent an evolution in both meaning and intensity. Informants reported that boys started using words like "poofter" and "faggot" from an early age. Most described becoming aware of homophobic terms in primary school and all started using them prior to sexual maturity. Participants consistently recounted how homophobic abuse intensified and peaked around Years 8 or 9 although this varied from late primary to late secondary school.

In high school, it just sort of accelerated... Oh, God! Probably 20 or so. Twenty, 30 [times per day] (Informant 25; age 24; sexual orientation 9; urban).

At the peak, peer-group culture was described as saturated with homophobia, which was particularly intense when peer-groups were at arms-length from adult authority, in the school ground, during breaks and before and after school. Informants recalled having heard homophobic references up to 50 times per day and that the references were highly visible as well, for example in locker-room graffiti. All accounts also provided evidence for a subsequent relative easing of homophobic references, which generally became apparent by late secondary school.

... from Year 10 onwards the "faggot" name-calling thing just seemed to disperse. Except with one or two people (Informant 12; age 19; sexual orientation 9; urban).

However, the intense impact of earlier homophobia does not appear to be entirely reversible.

Discussion

Homophobic terms enter boys' vocabulary during primary school, well before puberty and their own sexual maturity. These findings accord with those of other authors for example, Barrie Thorne reports that "by fourth and fifth grades "fag" had become a widespread and serious term of insult" (Thorne, 1993: 154; Mac an Ghaill, 1994: 165). When first adopted, words like poofter and faggot generally lack the sexual connotations that adults associate with them. But this lack of sexual meaning doesn't stop these terms from being the worst insults available to boys, and "asexual" early homophobia quickly becomes a key feature of boys' peer group politics (Thorne, 1993; Mac an Ghaill, 1994: 94, 165; O'Connor, 1995; Rofes, 1995: 82).

While participants consistently reported a lack of sexual connotations with the early use of words like poofter and faggot, they nevertheless can be shown to have rich and complex meanings from the outset (Thorne, 1993: 166; Mac an Ghaill 1994: 165; Rofes 1995: 80, 82). By mapping these meanings it was shown that homophobia has its early roots in boyhood "otherness"—specifically in being different from the collectively authorized expectations of male peers, in lacking stereotypical masculinity and/or in betraying peer group solidarity. In that sense, the developmental foundations for homophobia lie in gender—in the sense of failing to measure up to "hegemonic" boys' standards rather than necessarily being "feminine". Further, this "asexual" dimension of homophobia can still be identified in adult homophobia where homophobic abuse continues to be used to target non-sexual characteristics. The converse is also true, that homophobia is often expressed in the absence of explicit knowledge of the target's sexuality.

The relationship between homophobia and gender is complex. Scrutiny of the meanings mapped by this project reveals that words like poofter and faggot target much more than "feminine" or homosexual behaviour (Thorne, 1993; O'Connor, 1995; Rofes, 1995: 80, 82; Plummer 1999). A boy who is different, stands apart from the group, is a loner, is smarter than other boys, who adheres to adult authority in preference to peer group codes and/or who doesn't participate in team activities can provoke homophobic targeting. In his book *Masculinities*, Connell positions homosexuality as a subordinated form in a range of masculinities that constitute the "main patterns of masculinity in the current Western gender order" (Connell, 1995: 77–78). However, the evidence gathered by the present research suggests another way of viewing the relationship between homosexuality and masculinity. The every-day patterns of homophobic terms indicates that poofsters and faggots are positioned in opposition to multiple forms of masculinity, not as one subordinated member in a field of masculinities. However, rather than being constructed on an intergender boundary between masculine and feminine, homophobia marks an intragender boundary between masculine stereotypes and the male other. In Dollimore's words, "masculinity can be problematized, even feminized, so long as homosexuality remains its defining other" (Dollimore, 1991: 265). Thus, homophobia targets anything that signifies a lack of allegiance to the collective expectations of male peers—it is much more than heterosexism or a variant of misogyny or a "simple" prejudice against homosexuals.

There is extensive evidence that boyhood homophobia is in a class of its own when compared to other forms of abuse (Thorne, 1993: 166). Participants consistently reported that words like poofter were much more provocative, intense, and hurtful than other swear words, which could be shrugged off more easily. It was also clear that the early use of homophobia did not simply reflect an indiscriminate use of swear words. Meanings associated

with words like *poofter* and *faggot* were highly complex and specific even when they didn't refer to sexual practice, and the impact attributed to these words (the severity, frequency, duration and relative power when compared with other words) confirmed that they were viewed differently and much more seriously. One result of these intense processes is that boys learn to fear homophobia. This so-called homophobiaphobia has been shown elsewhere to profoundly influence male behaviour (Martin, 1982; Pronger, 1990*a,b*; Sabo and Panepinto, 1990; Messner, 1992; Troiden, 1993; Plummer, 1999).

After starting during primary school, boyhood homophobia reaches various crescendos and peaks, usually during early- to mid-secondary school (Thorne, 1993; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Around this time, most boys undergo puberty and start to consolidate their own adult sexual identity. This is also the time that explicit sexual connotations are incorporated into homophobia. The timing of homophobia, its commencement and crescendo, is significant. First, boys are generally intensely aware of the power of homophobic stigma prior to sexual maturity and early homophobic experiences may well provide a "terms of reference" for understanding adult sexual identity formation (gay or not). Second, homophobia seems to decrescendo (although probably never completely) in early adulthood, just when some young men are adopting gay identities. This is relevant because if homophobia were predominantly an individual prejudice against homosexuals then it would make sense for the intensity of homophobia to continue increasing as more young men declared their sexual orientation.

Conclusion

The meanings invoked by words like *poofter* and *faggot* evolve as boys mature. By mapping these meanings in a chronological frame, it is possible to draw some important conclusions about the nature of homophobia. Homophobic references by boys become common in early primary school, generally prior to puberty, sexual maturity, and sexual identity formation. During these formative years, words like *poofter* and *faggot* generally lack sexual connotations. Nevertheless, boys ranked these labels in a class of their own when compared to other swear words. Far from being explained as indiscriminate use of homophobic words, the early use of these words is powerful, highly meaningful and precisely targeted—even when not targeting sexuality (Thorne, 1993: 168; Mac an Ghaill, 1994: 165; O'Connor, 1995; Rofes, 1995: 80, 82; Plummer, 1999). Early homophobic references seem to be rooted in gender. In particular, homophobia targets boys who depart from the collectively authorized expectations of their male peers. Homophobia precedes and presumably provides an important context for subsequent adult sexual identity formation of all men. Ultimately, prejudice about homosexuality is founded on gender too—because homosexuality is by definition a reference not to particular sexual practices, which are often fluid, but to the gender of one's sexual partner.

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