


Homosociality: In Between Power and Intimacy

SAGE Open
January-March 2014: 1–11
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DOI: 10.1177/2158244013518057
sgo.sagepub.com


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Abstract

The concept of *homosociality* describes and defines social bonds between persons of the same sex. It is, for example, frequently used in studies on men and masculinities, there defined as a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. However, this common and somewhat overexploited use of the concept to refer to how men, through their relations to other men, uphold and maintain patriarchy tends to simplify and reduce homosociality to an almost descriptive term – one used to point at how men tend to bond, build closed teams, and defend their privileges and positions. The purpose of the present article is to investigate, explore, and discuss the concept of homosociality. We will introduce a distinction between *vertical/hierarchical* and *horizontal homosociality*. Hierarchical homosociality is similar to and has previously been described as a means of strengthening power and of creating close bonds between men and between women to maintain and defend hegemony. Horizontal homosociality, however, is used to point toward more inclusive relations between, for example, men that are based on emotional closeness, intimacy, and a nonprofitable form of friendship. Relating this distinction to the concept of and discussion on hegemonic masculinity, we will reconstruct and develop a more dynamic view on homosociality.

Keywords

homosociality, hegemonic masculinity, homoeroticism, homophobia, intimacy

Introduction

The concept of *homosociality* describes and defines social bonds between persons of the same sex. It is, for example, frequently used in studies on men and masculinities, there defined as a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. A popular use of the concept is found in studies on male friendship, male bonding, and fraternity orders. It is also frequently applied to explain how men, through their friendships and intimate collaborations with other men, maintain and defend the gender order and patriarchy (Bird, 1996; Lipman-Blumen, 1976). However, this common and somewhat overexploited use of the concept referring to how men, through their relations to other men, uphold patriarchy tends to simplify and reduce homosociality to an almost descriptive term that is used to show how men bond, build closed teams, and defend their privileges and positions.

A more complex, refined and dynamic view on homosociality is found in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1985) classic study *Between men*. Instead of using the concept merely as a tool to analyze social bonds and power relations between men, Sedgwick discusses the relation between different types of desire and intimate relationships between men.

unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted. (Sedgwick, 1985, pp. 1-2)

Through her analysis of the complex relationship between homosociality, homosexuality, and homophobia, Sedgwick develops an interesting and useful theory of gender and masculinity. Her main thesis is that a continuous relation is radically disrupted and gradually turned into a discontinuous relation of male homosocial and homosexual bonds, whereas there is a much more continuous relation between female homosocial and homosexual bonds.

For instance, the diacritical opposition between the “homosocial” and the “homosexual” seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men. [. . .] The apparent simplicity – the unity – of the continuum between “women loving women” and “women promoting the interests of women”, extending over the erotic, social, familial, economic, and political realms, would not be so striking if it were not in

To draw the “homosocial” back into the orbit of “desire,” of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential

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strong contrast to the arrangement among males. (Sedgwick, 1985, pp. 2-3)

The discontinuity between male homosociality and homosexuality results in male homosocial relationships being a form of “male bonding”, which is characterized by homosocial desire and intimacy, as well as homosexual panic. Homosocial desire refers to men turning their attention to other men, and homosexual panic refers to the fear of this attention gliding over into homosexual desire. In an attempt to emphasize heterosexuality, fear or hatred of homosexuals and misogynist language are developed.

In many ways, Sedgwick has set the agenda for studies on homosociality. At least three different types of readings and interpretations of the concept have evolved. *First*, as pointed out above, the concept is often used to analyze how men, through their relationships and social bonds with other men, construct power blocs and protect male territory and privilege. *Second*, there is a whole body of literature that pursues queer readings of homosociality and explores the underlying continuum of desires and relations. *Finally*, there is a growing body of literature on female homosociality that presents a somewhat different picture of the phenomenon in question. This literature connects in part to Sedgwick’s arguments, but there are also some significant developments, for example, the questioning of Sedgwick’s thesis on the asymmetry between male and female homosociality. There are, obviously, no absolute boundaries between these three different approaches to homosociality, but discussing them separately makes it easier to analyze different aspects of the concept.

The purpose of the present article is to investigate, explore, and discuss the concept of homosociality, especially male homosocial relations. Through a reading of contemporary and significant Anglo-Saxon and European literature, in particular, cultural studies, that use the concept to analyze different textual and social phenomena, our ambition is to explore and problematize the use of homosociality in studies of gender and masculinity. We will highlight different empirical examples of homosocial relations, in the research and popular culture, and will explore different aspects of homosociality, looking at how these characteristics relate to each other and what implications they might have for gender issues.

We are especially interested in developing and emphasizing the contradictory and ambivalent aspects of the concept, pointing both toward a defense of hegemonic masculinity and toward a silent and slow process that might undermine or reconstruct this power structure, as it appears today in many Western countries. In our view, the concept of homosociality is often defined as a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, situating gender relations within a reasonably stable power structure. However, by relating homosociality to the concept of hegemony deployed by poststructuralist scholars Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, our aim is to discuss and reconstruct a

structuralist and sometimes unproblematic relation between hegemonic masculinity and homosociality, thus developing a more dynamic view on homosocial relations.

Homosociality and Hegemonic Masculinity

We must recognize, then, a continuum of homoerotic experience among working-class men in a number of social settings. At the same time we must acknowledge that this experience is silenced, that the public language of the peer group and the workplace is heterosexual. Moreover, it is often seriously homophobic. “Poofers” are an object of derision, sometimes hatred. (Connell, 2000, p. 109)

There is a massive body of literature on the homosocial ordering of men’s relations, and all the different strategies men use to maintain the gender order and uphold male privileges (e.g., Bird 1996; Flood, 2008; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Messner, 2001). In this category of research, we have a number of classic studies, for example, Paul Willis’s study *Learning to Labour* (1977) about a group of working-class boys (the lads) who, in their informal group, make not behaving well, that is, not behaving according to middle-class ideology, is the honorable thing to do. The lads oppose all authorities related to the middle class, while they respect working-class authorities. As a system of socialization and reproduction, the school is dominated by middle-class values and the lads put up hard resistance to people who respect this ideology of conformity and theoretical knowledge, that is, the teachers and the pupils who like doing their homework (the ear ‘oles). This struggle also leads to the construction of a tight and close male order that excludes and oppresses young women, immigrants, and other men. Willis’ study on men and homosociality has in many ways become iconic and very influential in sociology and educational research.

Another example of an angle on these male-to-male relations can be found in Michael Flood’s (2008) article on how bonds between young men also shape their relations with women and form their sexual attitudes and behavior. In his interviews with young men at a military university, there were many examples of how friendship between men builds on and involves fantasies and experiences of having sex with women, as well as sharing memories of collective sexual harassments and sexual encounters. Women become a kind of currency men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale. According to Flood, homosociality refers first and foremost to nonsexual and same-sex bonds, involving quite high degrees of homophobia. However, it is also possible to read and understand this externalized homophobia as a sign of underlying homoerotic desires. Flood (2008) concludes,

Male-male relations organize and give meaning to the social and sexual involvements of young heterosexual men in powerful

ways. Homosocial bonds are policed against the feminizing and homosexualizing influences of excessive heterosociality, achieving sex with women is a means to status among men, sex with women is a direct medium of male bonding, and men's narratives of their sexual and gender relations are offered to male audiences in storytelling cultures generated in part by homosociality. (p. 355)

Another much discussed issue in relation to homosociality is the proposed lack of intimacy in men's friendship relations. Homosociality is often seen as being based on and formed through competition and exclusion. Recent research has put forward another and more complex image of masculinity and friendship. In an article exploring the "stag night", the premarital ritual involving a man who is soon to be married and his friends celebrating the coming wedding, there is evidence for certain changes in men's relationships. Thomas Thurnell-Read (2012) conducted participant observations with eight separate stag-tour groups. The observations confirmed a picture of male participants actively working to maintain and develop their friendship bonds. These groups of men were striving for group cohesion, togetherness, and intimacy, rather than interpersonal competition and the creation of male hierarchies. Even though this phenomenon can be seen as a part of hegemonic masculinity, there are also traces of changes and redefinitions of masculinity. In contrast to Willis' study, for example, the focus here is on the creation of a more sensitive and intimate masculinity.

Although there is a growing body of literature that brings forward more nuanced images of masculinity, thus stretching and extending the concept of homosociality to investigate potential changes in or redefinitions of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Anderson, 2008, 2009), there is also an extensive body of work that reproduces the image of homosociality as a mechanism that supports and reinforces hegemony and rather stereotypic images of masculinity (Bird, 1996; Gilmartin, 2007; Kiesling, 2005; Snyder, 2007). We are not arguing that these authors are unaware of the complexity of the concept, but their findings and conclusions clearly promote the notion that homosociality evidently is a part and extension of hegemonic masculinity.

According to Connell (1995), hegemonic masculinity refers to "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy", and which results in the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (p. 77). The concept is often used to analyze a historically changing and mobile power structure and a hierarchical relation between different groups of men and women. Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to subordinated and marginalized masculinities as well as in relation to femininities. However, hegemony does not imply total power and domination but instead is focused on a balance of forces and an ongoing struggle for power. When historical conditions and social patterns in society change, the hegemonic position can also be confronted and questioned, meaning that hegemony is never

absolute or fixed. The concept thus points to possible changes in and transformations of masculinity. Yet, Connell uses the term *complicity* to theorize how men relate to power and to the hegemonic structures of masculinity. According to Connell, most men have a complicated, dependant, and ambivalent relation to power. In Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy is changing, albeit slowly, but it is still quite a stable power structure. The organization of gender on a larger scale is centered on a single fact: "the global dominance of men over women" (Connell, 1987, p. 183).

The theory of hegemonic masculinity has had a great impact on gender studies, has become a key concept, and could be interpreted as more dynamic and flexible than, for example, the notion of patriarchy. However, a number of scholars have stressed a criticism of the concept (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Beasley, 2008a, 2008ab; Hearn, 2004; Whitehead, 2002). For example, Hearn (2004) points out some critical problems with the concept of hegemonic masculinity, especially the lack of a discussion of resistance and the problems of adapting it to analyses of specific and local masculinities. He argues for the study of multiple forms of hegemony in the gender order and for a concept that focuses on stable and changing structures and gender identities. In a similar way, Beasley (2008a, 2008b) criticizes the monolithic and unchanging use of the concept, calling for a subtler and more usable concept that allows analysis of particular forms of masculinity and men and masculinities at different levels of abstraction.

When the concept of hegemonic masculinity is challenged, redefined, and expanded, how can we then comprehend, interpret, and conceptualize homosociality in relation to the gender order? We will return to this question a number of times, especially in the section titled "Reconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity and Homosociality".

Homosociality and Homoeroticism

In November 1994, the *metrosexual* male was identified and described by the cultural critic Mark Simpson (Coad, 2008). This market segment consisted of young, urban, White, middle-class men – consumers and young narcissistic men preoccupied with looks, style, and image. In the 1990s, these men and this phenomenon indicated a crisis in masculinity, a closer relation between homo and hetero men, and a general movement toward a new masculinity. Coad (2008) writes,

Metrosexual males may look prettier and more beautiful than their nonmetrosexual brothers, but metrosexuality is the motor behind more decisive changes in the realm of sexual politics; it influences how heterosexual males interact with homosexual males and it is in the process of replacing traditional categories of sexual orientation. (p. 197)

However, the views on and interpretations of this phenomenon vary. Shugart (2008) argues that metrosexual masculinity defines and casts homosociality as a kind of universal

male solidarity. Instead of pointing toward a new masculinity, and a more sensitive and inclusive masculinity, metrosexuality reorganized homosociality to define homosexual men as different from women and heterosexual men. According to Shugart (2008), the main result of this movement is a highly commercialized masculinity and a strengthening of normative masculinity.

To understand and position the whole discussion of a new masculinity, and the potential erasure of the boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality, we have to return to Sedgwick. Her definition of homosociality is characterized by a triangular structure in which men have bonds with other men and women serve as the conduits through which these bonds are expressed. However, this triangle may portray as rivalry what is actually an attraction between men. The argument and the idea that there is an underlying continuum between different kinds of male homosocial desires open up a potential arena for research on the fragile boundaries and lines between different masculinities and hetero-/homosexuality. This is apparent, for example, in Eric Anderson's study *Inclusive Masculinity* (2009). Anderson's thesis is that we are today witnessing a considerable change in masculinity. The lessening of homophobia gradually leads to a widening of the range of masculine identities and positions that are possible to embody and perform. Anderson nurtures an optimistic view on gender and changes in gender structures. However, he is at the same time fully aware that these changes are uneven, and that in many masculine contexts and milieus, masculinity is still defined as the opposite of femininity and homosexuality. However, this said, he is obviously describing and putting forward a scenario in which masculinity is becoming gradually more inclusive and permissive (Anderson, 2008, 2009):

In a culture of diminished homophobia, boys and men will be free to express emotional intimacy and physical expressions of that relationship with one another. Accordingly, this culture permits an ever greater expansion of acceptable heteromale behaviours, which results in a further blurring of masculine and feminine behaviours and terrains. The differences between masculinity and femininity, men and women, gay and straight, will be harder to distinguish, and masculinity will no longer serve as the primary method of stratifying men. (Anderson, 2009, p. 97)

In his influential study on homosexuality and modernity, Henning Bech's (1997) ideas fit into this way of approaching homosociality. He identifies something he calls *absent homosexuality*. He writes, "The mode of being of absent homosexuality can only be comprehended in its relation to the other pole in the modern form of male-male eroticism, i.e. the homosexuals, in its simultaneous connection to and demarcation from them" (Bech, 1997, p. 84). He describes absent homosexuality as a ghost-like character, present but absent, desired and denied, known and unknown. This idea of an absent homosexuality that structures society and men's

lifestyles and desires has certain similarities with Judith Butler's idea of melancholia and identity. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler (1997) starts from Freud's theory of melancholia and uses this description of clinical depression as an inspiration for analyzing the construction of a heterosexual order. According to Butler, heterosexuality naturalizes itself by insisting on the Otherness of homosexuality. Then the heterosexual identity is based and sculptured on a melancholic incorporation of the love that it disavows. According to Butler, the man who "insists upon the coherence of his heterosexuality will claim that he never loved another man, and hence never lost another man" (Butler, 1997, p. 139).

The idea of a homoerotic continuum has inspired several cultural analyses. What is often found is a blurred boundary and distinction between homosociality and homoeroticism. There is a complex and dynamic relation between, for example, legitimate culture and underground print culture. Janes (2012) studied a leading British educational magazine for children (1962-1982) and found queer subtexts and a manifold of expressions of homoerotic desire in these magazines. Janes argues that it is not surprising to find a homoerotic space in writings produced by men for boys. The interplay between homophobia and close homosocial and homoerotic bonds between men created in fiction, but also, for example, in schools and in the military, can be seen as evidence for the thesis of a continuum of desires.

Cultural analysis shows how fragile and anxiety-ridden the indistinctness that marks homosociality is and points toward the continuous boundary work being done to uphold and defend the heterosexual order (Brady, 2012). Thus, even though we have an underlying stream of homosocial desire, there are also constant attempts to suppress and rein in these streams in the heterosexual and normative order. J. Jack Halberstam (2002) describes one such cultural mechanism in the neohomosocial triangles. In these triangles, a new constellation of one heterosexual man, one overtly gay man in the position as a rival for the woman's affections replaces the ordinary constellation of two men and a woman.

By studying films, such as *As Good as It Gets* (1997) and *Chasing Amy* (1997), Halberstam dissects and analyses how the straight homophobic man enters a learning process and learns how to accept a fully human and more gender-equal model of manhood. However, this narrative usually ends up in a reinforcement of the heterosexual order, although with some new nuances.

At the end of *As Good as It Gets*, Jack Nicholson gets the girl, the girl's son gets better, the girl gets laid, the black guy gets lost, the gay man gets his dog back, and that's as good as it gets. It can get much better. I would contend, but only when we find productive ways as feminists to theorize minority forms of masculinity. (Halberstam, 2002, p. 363)

Although the idea and theory of a continuum of homosocial desires and erotic expressions have greatly influenced thinking in the field of gender and queer analysis, it seems

that there is no easy escape from the patriarchal system and hegemonic masculinity. The subversive forces point toward breaches and leakages in the gender system, but in the end, there is a strong tendency to subordinate and neutralize resistance and utopian forms of thinking about gender and sexuality.

Female Homosociality and the Gender Conundrum

The suggested continuum between female friendship, feminist solidarity, and same-sex desire has great support in the literature. However, there is also a growing critique of this way of approaching female homosociality. Sedgwick put forward a thesis on the asymmetry between male and female homosociality. She argues that male homosociality is first and foremost fashioned through the exchange of women and the consolidation of men's power in society, whereas for women, this sharp cleavage between homosociality and homosexuality is not that distinct, clear, and stable. According to Binhammer (2006), this is a somewhat idyllic and perhaps even naive image of women's relationships. She argues that women in many ways circulate in and are permeated by the same capitalist economy and system as men are. Women's bonds are not created outside the dominant sexual economy but as a part of it. Women's relations are therefore not by definition and automatically a challenge to hegemonic masculinity.

In an interesting article, Henriette Gunkel (2009) discusses and analyzes the "mummy-baby" relationship in the South African schools. Briefly, this is a culturally specific form of female same-sex intimacy, although similar forms are found in, for example, British boarding schools. An older girl at the school helps the newcomers, the younger girls, and provides them with emotional support. Sometimes, this relation develops into sexual encounters and relationships. Although this is taking place in a highly policed and homophobic environment, this particular form of relationship seems to exist alongside the sexuality apparatus and to be accepted. The point here is that homosociality needs to be theorized and understood in different ways depending on the national and socio-cultural context.

In contrast to this study of accepted, but highly policed sexual relations between women, Christine Griffin (2000) argues that all young women in the West have to deal with the accusation of being a lesbian. This accusation also affects all women, albeit in different ways, and with different effects. Griffin calls for research that is open to aspects of female friendship that are colored and permeated by desire, fantasies, and a passion for same-sex relationships. This type of friendship is immediately drawn into the naturalized model of compulsory heterosexual relationships and the pressure of "getting a man". According to Hammarén (2008), concepts of love and intimacy have become feminized. In his study on identity constructions among young men in multicultural suburbs, female intimate relationships are understood as expressions

of friendship and heterosexuality. Young women who kiss, hold hands with, and hug each other are not considered lesbians, but rather women involved in normalized feminine heterosexual behavior. Lesbians are therefore made invisible and are ignored. According to a heteronormative order and male gaze, women's intimate relations are understood as friendship or a sexual display aimed at heterosexual men.

There is clearly a lack of research exploring female friendships as something other than desexualized relations. Therefore, sexual minority women's relations are not explored and researched (Arseneau & Fassinger, 2006). There is also a paucity of literature on friendships between Black and White women, for example (Granger, 2002), or cross-racial friendships in general. There is obviously a need to study and problematize the idea of a continuous relation between female homosocial and homosexual bonds and friendships (see, for example, Marcus, 2007). The whole idea of a sharp contrast between how this works in a male versus a female spectrum of desire and relations would seem to be the result of a polarized view on gender and identity (Johansson, 2007).

Toward a Theory of Homosociality

The three different focuses on homosociality are, of course, partly overlapping. In the literature, this concept is mainly used as a tool to understand and dissect male friendships and men's collective attempts to uphold and maintain power and hegemony. The most common use of the concept is inspired by Sedgwick's approach, and the whole discussion and idea of a homoerotic continuum. However, most authors also stress and focus on the radical disruption of this continuum and the consequences of this disruption for homophobia, and a fragile but power-seeking masculinity. In contrast, female homosociality is described as something completely different, and more in terms of a closer relation between sociality and sexuality. As we have discussed, this way of framing and analyzing homosociality is in need of reinterpretation.

We will now introduce the distinction between *vertical/hierarchical* and *horizontal homosociality*. Hierarchical homosociality is similar to and has already been described as a means of strengthening power and of creating close homosocial bonds to maintain and defend hegemony. Although this description is primarily used to talk about men's friendships and exchange of means and valuable cultural and social capital, it is also possible to frame and investigate women's relations using this concept. However, we will not argue that this concept and the idea of a vertical and hierarchical homosociality are totally gender neutral. Horizontal homosociality is similar to what was earlier described as female homosociality. This concept is used to point toward relations between, for example, men – relations that are based on emotional closeness, intimacy, and a nonprofitable form of friendship. There are, clearly, no absolute boundaries between these two approaches to homosociality. Aspects of

hierarchical homosociality in horizontal relations and vice versa might be present, but making a distinction between them and discussing them separately make it easier to analyze different aspects of the concept and highlight different implications.

Bird (1996) argues that homosociality maintains hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy, acting to institutionally and interpersonally segregate men and women, and to suppress nonhegemonic masculinities. However, this common use of the concept – which refers to how men, through their relations to other men, uphold and maintain patriarchy, in terms of emotional detachment, competitiveness, homophobia, and sexual objectification of women – tends to reduce homosociality exclusively to a heteronormative, androcentric, and hierarchical term used to show how heterosexual men bond and defend their privileges and positions. Is it not possible to discuss, for example, male homosocial relationships in terms of intimacy, gender equality, and nonhomophobia without disregarding the possible advances of maleness?

In popular culture, the concept of *bromance* (which combines the words *brother* and *romance*) and *womance* (combining *woman* and *romance*) has been introduced, discussed, and debated. Bromance and womance refer to close and intimate nonsexual and homosocial relationships between two (or more) men or women. Womance is similar to the above-mentioned concept of female homosociality; bromance, however, differs from traditional understandings of male homosocial relations and does not necessarily fit within the construct of masculinity found in some masculinity theories focusing on competition and hierarchies. Bromance emphasizes love, exclusive friendship, and intimacy that are not premised on competition and the often described “shoulder-to-shoulder” friendship, for example, watching football, playing golf, or training for a marathon together. Bromances provide a space for intimate male friendship (Chen, 2012), even though studies also show that male friendships might include utilitarian aspects, desire, rivalry, and self-interest pointing toward a less idealized picture contrary to bromance (Bray, 2003).

The concept is barely discussed by academic scholars but returns regularly in media portrayals in movies, on TV, in gossip magazines, and in more or less obscure blogs and websites. According to, for example, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* (2012), a number of celebrities have engaged in close bromances with associated celebrities, for example, Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, and George Clooney and Brad Pitt. Fictional bromances on television have also become more commonplace and shows and dramas such as *Scrubs*, *Boston Legal*, and *Boy Meets World* have had lead characters with bromantic relationships including long-lasting friendships and love. The same applies to different boy bands such as *One Direction*, or films such as *The King's Speech*. Examples of *womances* in popular culture seem to be more exceptional, although the film *Thelma and Louise* is

sometimes said to be one. The terms *bromance* and *womance* are often used to refer to two heterosexual partners, although there have been celebrity male gay–straight bromances (also called homomances or hobromances). We are not suggesting that bromances and womances are similar. The popular concept of bromance, unlike the concept of womance, is perhaps a reflection of the different values assigned to male and female friendships. In addition, while, for example, *Thelma and Louise* is about fighting misogyny and male abuse, many bromances are about how men make highly enjoyable friendships and focus on each other. Consequently, there would seem to be an underlying power relation between the concepts.

According to Chen (2012), bromances comprise three general constitutive elements: They are restricted to men, are asexual, and are locations for intimacy, love, and affection between men. They are also described as a complicated love and affection shared by *straight* males. The “bro” aspect of bromance may perhaps emphasize heteronormativity, as well as homophobia, indicating that it is not gay because it is between men. The focus on heterosexual men, however, seems to differ. Bromances or homosocial relations between gay men or between a straight man and a gay man are quite rare, but do exist (Nardi, 2001). Bromances imply intimacy that slips between the boundaries of sexual and nonsexual relationships.

Bromances notably provide a space for male intimacy, in sharp contrast to the general types of friendship that society permits men to have. They recognize intimacy without sex, in contrast with general conceptions of intimacy. (Chen, 2012, pp. 248–249)

In one Swedish daily newspaper, we can read about male intimacy and bromance (Svenska Dagbladet, 2011). The article discusses men's friendships as still being defined by homophobia and distant relationships; however, these relationships are loosening up. Today, we can witness men having close and intimate relationships with their friends, not the least as represented in media and films. The article highlights the concept of bromance and how some men's friendships are like a kind of love relation – guys who hang out all the time, talking about everything, and who like to hug each other. Bromance is described as a nonsexual love affair between men, which has been made possible through the undermining of a traditional gender order (Svenska Dagbladet, 2011). These kinds of relations are similar to what we call horizontal homosociality, also described earlier as female homosociality.

In constructions of homosocial relations, some differences between people are marked and some may be obscured. For example, the assertion of gender may overlook sexualities, age, or local differences. Often, the literature on homosociality has a quite one-dimensional focus. Theories of the intersections between sexuality, class, ethnicity, age, and gender are seldom used to elaborate critical perspectives on

these issues (Collins, 1998; McCall, 2005; Mohanty, 1998; Tayler, Hines, & Casey, 2010). These variables influence the individual at the same time and constitute flexible and often complex processes of belongings and power relations. According to this view, power relations and social positions are by necessity connected to a plurality of categories. An intersectional framework acknowledges the multidimensionality of societal factors, identities, and power (as opposed to focusing on class or gender individually). It also attempts to capture how social factors influence one another. For example, being male, heterosexual, middle class, and of the majority ethnic population can be considered occupying a hegemonic position, in contrast to being a female, working-class lesbian. However, these positions are very much contextual and situated, resulting in complex and, sometimes, ambiguous social relations. Consequently, an intersectional approach involves locating individuals within these dynamics and examining how people become subjected to a plurality of changing variables.

Homosocial relations are often described in relation to men, heterosexuality, and shared activities, such as games, playing musical instruments, watching movies, sport activities, and drinking (Messner, 2001). However, relating to the above description of intersectionality, homosociality does not necessarily imply either heterosexuality or homosexuality, and these relations might also entail emotional sharing. While the concept of homosociality (and bromance) has often been applied to relations between straight men, mixed gay-straight or gay-gay nonsexual relationships between men *or* women could just as well be defined as homosocial (Nardi, 2001). Bromances are said to maintain heteronormative hierarchies, as only heterosexuals can have a bromance (Chen, 2012). This particular boundary reflects the phenomenon of “straight panic” in which individuals experience anxiety about how others perceive their sexuality and, thus, feel a need to confirm their heterosexuality. However, because men in bromances are often identified in society as heterosexuals, they can have intimate friendships, without risking being misperceived as gay. At the same time, bromances are a source of subordination, encouraging men to stay within rigid boundaries of sexuality norms. Bromances are also described as restraining the pool of intimate friends men may have—gay men are excluded, and consequently, the culture reinforces homophobia and subordination of the gay community (Chen, 2012).

Yet, friendships between gay men and the development of networks and neighborhoods legitimize alternative forms of masculinity, thereby challenging hegemonic masculinities. In his study on the politics of friendship in the gay social movement, Nardi (2001) claims that gay friendships have the potential to produce communities, reinforce gay identity, and effect socio-political change on a larger scale. The gay community helps members to find meaning and dignity in a society that is trying to impose a hegemonic male order. The friendships of gay men serve to create a sense of belonging

and thus help sustain a sense of “gay identity”. Obviously, gay men do not automatically pose a challenge to male hegemony. They do not necessarily resist notions that, for example, men are superior to and should dominate women. However, they may undermine traditional aspects of hegemonic masculinity in that heteronormativity is questioned and homosexuality is made visible (Mills, 2001).

Even though Chen (2012) characterizes bromances as maintaining heteronormativity, she concludes her article by claiming that bromances are a starting point for deconstructing homophobia and represent a queering of heterosexual male friendship. Consequently, they open up space for men to experience intimacy outside the heterosexual pairings, which may also lead to a dismantling of compulsory heterosexuality. Furthermore, and contrary to Chen, situating bromances in mixed gay-straight or gay-gay nonsexual relationships might deconstruct homophobia and contest heterosexist norms even more (Rumens, 2011).

Reconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity and Homosociality

Although there have been some efforts to transcend and redefine the concept of homosociality, pointing toward potential changes in and redefinitions of hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, 2008, Thurnell-Read, 2012), the concept of homosociality is often, as previously mentioned, defined as a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity (Gilmartin, 2007, Snyder, 2007). There is a clear and growing body of literature that brings forward more nuanced images of masculinity, thus stretching and extending the concept of homosociality to investigate possible reconstructions of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Anderson, 2008, 2009). The overall picture from the research, however, promotes the notion that homosociality clearly is a part and extension of hegemony, thus serving to always reconstruct and safeguard male interests and power.

The growing body of poststructuralist literature on masculinity and queer theory, which has resulted in theoretical developments and a critique of structuralism, has led to a questioning of certain categories, definitions and ways of approaching gender, power, and power relations (Whitehead, 2002). These theoretical redefinitions and descriptions of gender and power are perhaps utopian, but they also point to certain changes in contemporary masculinities. In a critical investigation of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Johansson and Ottemo (2013) claim that

[T]he different positions or relations described entail either control, power and domination, or loss of control, powerlessness and subordination. The only relation/position that allows us to think beyond this polarized relational drama is complicity. However, this position does not allow for much resistance or change, because it is first and foremost described as a support act for hegemony. (p. 4)

Furthermore, Johansson and Ottemo (2013) argue that Connell stays firmly within structuralism and that it is difficult to discern any differences between theories of patriarchy and those of hegemonic masculinity. Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity implies a certain flexibility, suggesting that manifestations of hegemonic masculinity can and will change, the theory often ends up within a structuralist framework according to which, these manifestations will work to secure patriarchy (Johansson & Ottemo, 2013). From this point of view, situating homosociality within a structuralist framework of hegemonic masculinity will automatically locate homosocial relations within a stable power structure.

Whitehead (2002) criticizes the concept of hegemonic masculinity along similar lines. He argues that the concept upholds an unreservedly structuralist position, marginalizing the subject and acts of resistance that are exercised by, for example, women or men not acting in accordance with normative gender ideals. In this view, the individual is lost within, or subjected to, an ideological apparatus and innate drive for power.

Although offering a more nuanced interpretation of male dominance than patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity ultimately suffers from the same deficits, for it posits an intentionality behind heterosexual men's practices (a "will to power" if you like) while suggesting that women and gay men are somehow excluded from this otherwise innate desire to dominate and oppress. (Whitehead, 2002, p. 92)

The fact that the concept of hegemonic masculinity has had a great impact on gender studies, and has become a key concept in studies on masculinities, has obviously influenced how we comprehend issues such as resistance, agency, and subjectivity, and hence, how we understand and interpret gender relations, constructions of masculinities, certain categories, and definitions. According to Whitehead (2002), theorists using this concept are excused from having to engage in any deep analysis of the actual practices of men, taking it as a given that these practices always are representations of dominant patterns of masculinity. Consequently, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is a useful descriptor of dominant masculinities, but its overuse results in the conflation of fluid masculinities with an overarching structure. In an attempt to resolve the inconsistency between a deterministic model of (male) power and the multiplicity of masculinity that widens the range of masculine positions that can be embodied and performed (as exemplified by certain forms of homosocial relations), Whitehead calls for hegemonic masculinity to use an understanding of the social as a contested arena. Instead of leaving room for ambiguity, Whitehead claims that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is often used as a "blanket descriptor of male power" (Whitehead, 2002, p. 93).

To achieve this ambiguity, without leaving us with a theory free from power relations, we will turn to Ernesto Laclau

and Chantal Mouffe's notion of hegemony. Using their definition, we believe that it is possible to develop a dynamic understanding of the relation between hegemonic masculinity and homosociality, detaching the discussion from its structuralist legacy. According to Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau, 1990; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001), hegemonic struggles are a symptom of the always displaced nature of society, contingency, and the gaps different groups try to cover. Any ultimately fixed meaning or completely centered structures are impossible, and we are instead offered partial fixations and attempts at transcending difference and constructing a center. Hence, the subject – constructed in relation to the open character of every discourse – can never be totally fixed and stable, but is changeable and transitional. Subjectivity and agency should be understood as being rooted neither in something external to the structure nor in something completely internal to it, instead the structure itself is undecidable and nonrepetitive.

Laclau and Mouffe offer us a more open field of discourses and language games, leading to a dynamic view on hegemonic articulations and struggles. Hegemony is never fully accomplished but is in motion, and because it is ontologically conditioned by an omnipresent contingency, we will never be able to go "beyond hegemony". Yet, Laclau and Mouffe do not suggest that we will never be "free" in a dystopian sense, rather, this can be interpreted as a call to struggle against repressive structures – to redefine and rearticulate the current hegemony and construct a more desirable (temporary) hegemonic order. Consequently, hegemony is something to struggle for; the main question is in what ways we should hegemonize the social. Relating this post-Marxian concept of hegemony to hegemonic masculinity would allow us to analyze potential transitions and changes, for example, articulations of potentially radical strategies for changing the gender order. Social change is not primarily based on destroying a certain order but instead, on redefining this order.

Although the ambition of the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been to create a flexible tool for investigating a mobile power structure, discussions on hegemonic masculinity as well as on homosociality often end up in an analysis that solely fixates and upholds the contemporary and oppressive gender order. Using a poststructuralist approach to hegemony, we are not suggesting that we would replace these kinds of analyses with naive and optimistic conceptualizations of society. Instead, if we accept that the social is open for redefinitions and transitions, leading to the possibility of different subject positions, a poststructuralist approach could help us to analyze how potential hegemonic rearticulations not only lead to the reinforcement of a given gender order but also to the formation of a possibly redefined and perhaps more "desirable" order.

Changes in masculinity, for example, the construction of horizontal homosociality, in which emotional closeness, intimacy, and a nonprofitable form of friendship are developed, are not necessarily a sign of a strengthening of patriarchy as

many discussions on hegemonic masculinity suggest. The same applies to bromances, which description sometimes differ from traditional understandings of male homosocial relations and do not always fit within the construct of masculinity found in some masculinity theories focusing on competition and hierarchies. In accordance with a poststructuralist reading, our proposal is that we not predetermine the agents of change and instead, remain open to the possibility of discovering potential movements toward a redefined hegemony that contains the seeds of utopian visions of the gender order (Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005). Even Connell (1995) suggests that it is not necessary to offer a general descriptor of hegemonic masculinity but instead, posits that a hegemonic form of masculinity is the form that is the most desired in a particular *context*. Consequently, different contexts can inhabit different hegemonic ideals.

We believe that it is important for gender research to develop a theoretical model that emphasizes the dynamic qualities of Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. By exploring different masculine positions and carefully investigating contradictory aspects of hegemonic masculinity, it is possible to discern different patterns of power in everyday life – for example, feminist movements and alternative masculinities – and possibilities for subverting gender. At the same time, it is obviously important to discover new forms of nostalgic and conservative masculinities that are struggling to protect men's privileges and power positions in society. We are not suggesting that, for example, metrosexuality or bromances aren't shifts in acceptable forms of masculine performances. The idea that male friendships defined by homophobia and distance seems to loosen up, resulting in close and intimate friendship relations, can still be interpreted in an accepted but still reformulated framework of hegemonic masculinity, although perhaps a more desirable one. It does not follow from Laclau and Mouffe (Mouffe, 2005), and their suggestion that there is no “beyond hegemony”, that there is no “beyond patriarchy” and that masculinity will always be hegemonic in relation to femininity. Consequently, for a rearticulation of hegemony to be desirable, we obviously have to break with Connell's notion that hegemonic masculinity is always defined as being opposed to and privileged over femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). We also have to question the notion that all hegemonies are equally bad and try to discern whether different hegemonies are specific to different forms of masculinity. Part of such a struggle could involve articulating elements historically related to women and men as well. And this is perhaps what happens when male performances and friendships might be associated with intimacy, love, and affection (Johansson & Klinth, 2008). However, articulating intimacy and emotional closeness to men may not lead to a complete disruption of masculinity but perhaps to a potential reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity that is not *a priori* and necessarily privileged in relation to femininity.

Conclusion

Although the concept of homosociality may uphold and maintain homogeneous gender categorizations, focusing on single-sex groups and often referring to hierarchical gender relations in which men strengthen certain hegemonic gender ideals, applying a poststructuralist understanding of the concept helps us to problematize a common structuralist understanding of the relation between hegemonic masculinity and homosociality. Moreover, by making a distinction between the vertical and horizontal practice of homosociality, we can develop a more dynamic view on homosociality. Taking a vertical/horizontal view on homosociality emphasizes its relation to a structuralist hegemonic gender order, that is, to what degree homosocial relations uphold and maintain “traditional” hegemonic male and female social positions. A poststructuralist reading of hegemony makes it possible to interpret potential rearticulations of hegemony as part of the struggle for gender equality and a more just society. Perhaps the development and conceptualization of bromances and horizontal homosociality point toward variation and transition and, consequently, to a reconfiguration of hegemony, including tendencies toward an eventual transformation of intimacy, gender, and power relations. However, we acknowledge that we are only touching on potential and partial redefinitions of hegemony, also those often closely connected to the middle class, and, thus, we need to analyze the gender order more thoroughly by taking an intersectional approach to examining how these performances may affect more general gender relations in society.

In addition, there is a clear need to study and problematize the idea of a continuous relation between female homosocial and homosexual bonds and friendships. The whole idea of there being a sharp contrast between how this works in a male versus a female spectrum of desire and relations seems to be the result of a polarized view on gender and identity, not the least related to the notion that hegemonic masculinity is defined as opposed to and privileged over femininity. It is likely that the more polarized the gender order and the more heteronormative the sexual codes are the more traditional forms of homosociality one expects to find in society. As this order slowly changes and loosens up, thus rearticulating hegemony, homosociality may take other forms, and friendships may relate not only to same-sex relations but also to heterosocial forms of friendship and intimate nonsexual relations (Rumens, 2011, 2012). For example, in the absence of societal policing of gender and sexual orientation, men would be able to have friendships with other men regardless of sexual orientation (Chen, 2012). Sexual orientation would not be the basic principle for friendship. Rigid boundaries between friendships and romantic relationships would not be necessary, and the potential for fluidity in relationships would increase.

Men would not need to categorize people in terms of “friend” or “potential lover,” but would instead have a singular category of relationship in which they could both provide and receive intimacy and care. This proposition would also undermine sexual fluidity as a woman-specific construct, and permit men to experience more fluidity in both relationship forms and sexual relationship partners. (Chen, 2012, p. 262)

Adding age/generation to this analysis, some Swedish studies have shown that recent generations of men raised by feminist mothers and fathers in the 1970s and afterward are more emotionally open and more expressive (Johansson, 2007). There is also less concern among contemporary young men about the notion of being identified as gay, and, thus, they are more comfortable with exploring deeper friendships with other men (Johansson, 2007). Finally, relating to Chen and her vision presented above, situating homosociality in an intersectional framework develops, emphasizes, and makes visible the inconsistent and ambiguous aspects of homosociality, focusing not only, as in the case of Chen, on straight men but also on women and different sexual positions and generations. Using this approach further allows us to point toward a defense of a structuralist framing of hegemonic masculinity by referring to vertical/hierarchical homosociality and toward a potential and slow process of rearticulating hegemony by referring to horizontal homosociality.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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