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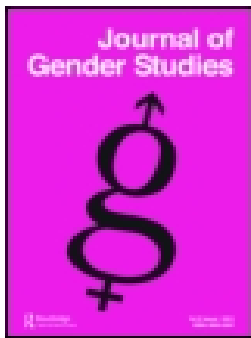
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Young men's friendships: inclusive masculinities in a post-university setting

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ABSTRACT

When Eric Anderson published inclusive masculinity theory (IMT), it was largely situated in relationships he observed with first-year undergraduate students. Here, he noticed a striking difference in behaviours and attitudes between the adolescent heterosexual men in the United States, compared to those in the UK. Since IMT's inception, there has been a great deal of further enquiry into the social lives of young heterosexual men in both of these nations. What is undertheorized, however, is whether the intense emotional and physical tactility of homosocial relationships described in this literature will occur with current and future generations. Nor do we know if men described as exhibiting inclusive masculinities at university continue to do so – and to what degree – as they enter the workplace and develop family ties. This research utilizes 10 semi-structured interviews with the same participants from Anderson's initial studies, showing that they continue to strive for the same emotional intimacy with male friends that they achieved during their time at university. Half also carried this behaviour into the friendships developed with other men since graduating from university. Thus, this research contributes to IMT as it offers preliminary analysis into the friendships of inclusive men, after their time at university.

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Introduction

When Eric Anderson published inclusive masculinity theory¹, it had been largely based on research and observations of a number of first-year undergraduate sports students (see Anderson, 2009). Contrasting with older literature on boys and men's friendship (e.g. Komarovsky, 1974; Plummer, 1999; Williams, 1985), his participants exhibited same-sex physical tactility (cuddling and kissing); same-sex emotional intimacy and support; and an greater range of mass entertainment (music, film and sport) traditionally coded feminine. These behaviours were underpinned by positive attitudes towards sexual minorities. This was significant, as it later proved to be an overwhelmingly consistent finding among middle-class, university-attending, white men (see, for example, Anderson, 2014²). Indeed, since Anderson's initial, pioneering studies on contemporary masculinities, inclusive masculinity theory has seen significant uptake among masculinities scholars in a variety of settings.

Drawing on interviews with 10 of the same men that Anderson (2009) based his initial theorizing, we examine the theoretical lens that underpins their university friendships and reflect upon its importance to these men – 10 years after graduation. The university context has previously been acknowledged

as an environment in which men develop interdependent and intimate friendships (Anderson, 2014; Anderson & McCormack, 2015; Robinson, Anderson, & White, 2017). Accordingly, this article examines the ways in which these men view their university friendships retrospectively, and whether their tactile and intimate nature is something that has continued with new friends, or whether it is restricted to the university setting.

Analysis shows that these men fondly recollect their university friendships, and continue to enjoy emotionally intimate relationships with these men. Despite this closeness, however, these friendships have been hampered by a lack of geographical proximity and subsequent lack of regular contact. These men also enjoy similar friendships with post-university friends, though many of these are more reserved in nature – particularly with work colleagues – as this was seen to create a potential conflict of interest between professional and personal lives. Thus, this research contributes to and progresses inclusive masculinity theory, outlining its longevity in theorizing long-term male friendships.

Constructing male friendships

An overwhelming body of sociological research has shown that men's friendships have previously been constrained and policed by personal and societal homophobia (Epstein, 1997; Jourard, 1971; Plummer, 1999). Indeed, young men have been highly homophobic – in accord with orthodox notions of masculinity – in order to distance themselves from homosexual suspicion (Plummer, 1999). Thus, male heterosexuality has been largely demonstrated through violence, aggression, hyper-heterosexuality, emotional stoicism and the stigmatizing of anything vaguely related to femininity (Kimmel, 1996).

It is for this reason that previous research on male friendships has shown that close male friends greatly avoided emotional intimacy with one another (Pleck, 1981). As Lewis (1978, p. 108) wrote, 'Cultural prohibitions in America, as well as many other Western nations, frown strongly upon the demonstration of intimacy between men'. Research as far back as the 1970s showed that male friendships were severely restricted: Jourard (1971) showed that self-disclosure – a significant component of emotional intimacy – was lacking between men. Further, Pleck (1975) showed that 58% of men had not told their closest male friend that they even *liked* him. Problematically, men who *did* enjoy close same-sex friendships became subject to significant levels of peer ridicule (Komarovskiy, 1974). Even though men reported greater numbers of same-sex friendships than women at this time, they were not comparable in terms of closeness or intimacy (Olstad, 1975).

The restricted nature of male friendships intensified throughout the 1980s, as growing levels of homophobia in the Western world (Loftus, 2001) – primarily facilitated by the spread of HIV/AIDS, which became intimately associated with the gay community – resulted in narrower definitions and displays of masculinity (McCormack & Anderson, 2014). During this time, men erased the word 'like' from their lexicon, as it became too frequently interpreted as a euphemism for the word 'love' (Williams, 1985). Curry (1991, p. 124) argued that athletes at this time 'learned to avoid public expressions of emotional caring or concern for one another as they bond because such remarks are defined as weak or feminine'. Even as recently as 1996, Nayak and Kehily show that discussing personal and emotional issues can be problematic as it 'fractures the hard face of conventional masculinity' (1996, p. 224). Accordingly, men at this time were forced to maintain a 'safe' social distance from one another to avoid fear of reprisal.

But since the turn of the millennium, attitudinal homophobia has significantly decreased in Britain and the US (Clements & Field, 2014; Twenge, Sherman, & Wells, 2016). As a result, men are afforded a more diverse range of behaviours – including greater same-sex emotional intimacy – which would have previously coded them as gay (Anderson & McCormack, 2015). Indeed, there is mounting evidence to suggest the erosion of the previously tightly-policed bonds between men. For example, Anderson and McCormack (2015) document the prevalence of hugging and gentle forms of tactility among British university students, while Scoats (2015) showed similar levels of homosocial tactility in his analysis of British undergraduate men's Facebook photographs. Other recent research has shown boys and men willing to engage in emotional support (Baker & Hotek, 2011), cuddling (Anderson & McCormack, 2015) and kissing (Anderson, Adams, & Rivers, 2012; see also McCormack, 2011).

Currently, the most visible demonstrations of these behaviors come from young men in a life-stage termed emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). This developmental stage can be understood as period of development between late adolescence and young adulthood that reflects a sense of diminished obligations and a prolonged delay in the responsibilities and associated with adulthood (Arnett, 2004). During this period, emerging adults may attempt to escape the familial constraints put on them (Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001), explore their identity (Arnett, 2004) and slowly work towards the adoption of what they perceive as wider societal norms (Nelson & Barry, 2005) – this being considered a marker of adulthood.

Previous research has suggested that men's friendships have, in the last several generations of Western male culture, been based on shared activities. Drinking, gambling and playing sport were all common (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Seiden and Bart, 1975), and interactions would following particular patterns – such as joking or teasing – in order to generate intimacy (Kaplan, 2006). While this may still hold true at younger ages, when adolescents enter into emerging adulthood (approximately 18 years old), shared activities become less important (Radmacher & Azmitia, 2006). Other research on emerging adults has furthermore suggested that contemporary male friendships do not appear to be based upon competitiveness and a perpetual jockeying for a position within a hierarchy, but instead allow men to develop their bonds of friendships within more vulnerable contexts (Scoats, Joseph, & Anderson, 2017).

Inclusive masculinity theory

Inclusive masculinity theory emerged from research that examined more inclusive attitudes towards sexual minorities among young, ostensibly heterosexual sporting men (Anderson, 2009). In contrast to previous research with sporting men (Curry, 1991), men in these studies espoused positive attitudes towards homosexuality, embracing gay athletes onto their team as equals (Anderson, 2011; Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016; Magrath, 2016, 2017). A central component of this theory is Anderson's (2009) concept of homophobia, which aims to explain the power dynamics of heterosexual masculinities within a historical frame. It is best defined as a 'homosexually-panicked culture in which suspicion [of homosexuality] permeates' (Anderson, 2011, p. 83).

Inclusive masculinity theory postulates that, when a culture becomes less homophobic, there will be a positive impact on young men's gendered expression (Anderson & McCormack, 2015). In addition to the research previously outlined, McCormack's (2012) ethnographic research on British sixth forms shows that young men engage in physically tactile and emotionally intimate ways, without the threat of homophobic policing. Magrath (2016) also documented this behaviour in a university soccer team, where undergraduate students would frequently bond in similar ways. Anderson (2014) extends this theorizing to discuss how this has developed into what is termed a 'bromance' – essentially defined as a 'love affair' between two friends, but omitting sexual attraction and desire.

As homophobia has continued to decrease in British culture, inclusive masculinity theory has burgeoned into a social theory which offers the most useful tool for conceptualizing contemporary masculinities in the Western world. Indeed, since its publication towards the end of the last decade, it has been used to frame attitudes towards homosexuality among male athletes (Anderson et al., 2016; Magrath, 2016; Magrath et al., 2015), sports fans (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Cleland et al., 2016), and in British education (McCormack, 2012). It has been employed to theorize patterns of masculinities in over 100 separate academic studies. Accordingly, there is sufficient evidence to argue that a new generation of masculinities scholars are finding inclusive masculinity theory the most effective means of capturing the complex masculine dynamics between men (Anderson & McCormack, 2016).

Nevertheless, what is currently lacking in academic literature is the sustainability of inclusive masculinity theory: Does it still maintain the same cultural sway over time? Can it still accurately theorize men's friendships upon their exit from university, given that a large number of studies evidencing inclusive masculinities are undertaken with emerging adults at university (Anderson, 2009; Ellison et al., 2007)? Considering the formation of friendships with university peers helps emerging adults more easily transition/adjust to university life (Buote et al., 2007), the norms that these friendships are built

upon may no longer make sense outside of the university context. Inclusive masculinity may, therefore, simply be a feature of university life, although other research suggests that this is not the case (Magrath, 2016; Roberts, 2013). Instead, it may be as Scoats (2015, p. 17) postulates, that:

Inclusive masculinity, and the broadening of behaviors it affords, may be representative to these early emerging adults as a marker of adulthood ... [and] align more with what they perceive as contemporary cultural values of both wider society and their peer group.

Method

This study draws on semi-structured interviews with 10 men from various locations who graduated from a highly ranked English university (2006–2009) with a sport-related degree. These men – some of whom were nicknamed the ‘fem boys’ throughout the length of their degree, due to their overwhelmingly inclusive presentation of masculinities – were significant in the development of inclusive masculinity, having previously been involved in the research for the development of the theory (see, Anderson, 2009). Reflecting the subject of their degrees, a large number of these men were also athletes who represented their university in a range of sports.

Having graduated in approximately 2009, aged between 21 and 24, these participants were aged between 28 and 31 at the time of data collection. All are white, every participant self-identified as heterosexual – either ‘exclusively’ or ‘mostly’ – and there was an equal mix of those who were single or in short or long-term romantic relationships. Seven are currently employed in the sports industry in various capacities, such as coaching and marketing, while the remainder worked in other professional occupations. Because of their occupation, as well as their educational attainment, all participants self-identified as middle-class, and reside in a variety of locations. Following their graduation, half of these men had returned to their city of birth, while the remainder had moved to various cities across the world for employment reasons. Researcher flexibility was therefore required to ensure that interviews could be conducted at appropriate times.

Participants were identified via previously established personal networks of the second author, who was a student at the same university Anderson (2009) formulated inclusive masculinity theory. The use of personal acquaintances has the benefit of gaining access to those who would not answer advertisements for research, but would perhaps respond to a personal request (Browne, 2005). Participants were, however, given the option of interviewing with the first author to minimize the effects of the relationship with the second author: seven participants chose this option. Although 14 participants were identified through these networks, four were unavailable at the time of data collection; thus, only 10 participated in this research. This sampling strategy has therefore resulted in a convenience sample, and thus it is not necessarily generalizable to the wider populous from which the theory was based upon. It does, however, lay the foundations for future research to take place.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were employed to develop a rich understanding of how participants constructed friendships. Participants were provided with a detailed outline of the research prior to interview. After initial demographic information was confirmed, questions centred on four main themes: (1) Friendships at university; (2) The maintenance of these friendships since exiting university; (3) The creation and maintenance of friendships with new people; (4) The influence of romantic involvement on friendships. Seven interviews were conducted by the first author, and three were conducted by the second author.

This research involved the process of internet-mediated interviewing, with all interviews conducted through Skype. The ability to utilize this synchronous interview technique has, according to Deakin and Wakefield (2014, p. 605), ‘been heralded as a new “methodological frontier” holding great potential for collecting data in an innovative manner’. For this research, it also proved useful in engaging with otherwise inaccessible participants (Janghorban et al., 2014). Indeed, as already acknowledged, half of these men now live and work abroad, rendering internet technologies as the most ubiquitous and logical approach to data collection.

Data collection occurred intermittently over a four-month period between March and July 2016. Interviews ranged between 50 and 90 min, averaging 75 min in length. All participants were provided with detailed information about the research, and all digitally signed a consent form. The ethical procedures of the British Sociological Association (BSA) were followed, and ethical approval was gained from both authors' universities. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, and pseudonyms have been employed throughout the results section. Interviews were transcribed immediately after taking place, and narratives were coded for themes relating to participants' friendships and relationships. Both authors familiarized themselves with the data, and rigour was maintained by an independent process of coding. Our coding was also strengthened through themes recorded in research notes after each interview, thus enhancing the overall reliability of this research.

Fondly recalling university friendship

Previous research on men and masculinities has documented that men's friendships have traditionally been policed by high levels of homophobia (Curry, 1991). In times of high homophobia, men have traditionally been forced to place restrictions on emotional disclosure (Williams, 1985), as well as restraints on physical relationships (Pleck, 1981). However, corroborating Anderson's original research, men in the current research comfortably and openly discussed how strong levels of emotional intimacy and physical tactility characterized the friendships they enjoyed at university. These details were not viewed as embarrassing moments of their youth, but encompassed a lot of nostalgia for the participants.

Bonding occurred through various socializing activities – described by Callum as 'typical university stuff' – but which often centred around two significant elements: recreational sport (playing and/or watching) and alcohol. Jason, for example, said that, 'We did a lot of drinking together and also spent a lot of time outside playing a bit of football'. Similarly, Josh said that, 'We watched a lot of football together, and some of us were involved in the inter-mural football team ... We also played video games, went out and got drunk, had nights out at the casino'.

The various activities these men participated in were underpinned by enjoying close and personal conversations about a range of issues. Perhaps unsurprisingly, each of the men involved in this research acknowledged the closeness between university friends. Evidencing this, Lewis said that, 'We were very close ... You could rely on them at any time'. Jason nostalgically referred to his university friendships as 'amazing'. He continued: 'I'd be hard-pushed to find a stronger connection than with the guys at university'. Josh used almost identical terminology to illustrate the nature of his university friendships: 'We had a fairly strong love and connection. It was a caring friendship group'. This was a common and consistent finding among all men involved in this research.

Indeed, eight of these men provided examples when a strong level of emotional support was required during university. For example, Josh said that:

One of our friends got cancer when we were at university, so there was a lot of support for him. Making him feel that he was still valued as part of the group, and checking to see if he was coping.

Similarly, Nathan discussed how support was also offered with friends in difficult situations: 'Me and another guy ... came to university in long-term relationships, but they didn't last long ... So he and I spent a lot of time supporting one another for that'. Jason also said, 'I broke up with my girlfriend – my first serious relationship – and was upset and crying. It might've been awkward ... but they were always there. They were the most reliable people'.

Seven of the participants described their close male friendships as 'bromances'. Callum, for example, said that, 'Yes, definitely bromances. We enjoyed ourselves a lot and had a nickname for our group – something we still use'. Similarly, Josh said that, 'The friendship we had would be best described as a bromance, for sure ... We all clicked and got on really well'. Jason concurred with these sentiments: 'There were bromances at university and since ... There are people I've got older with and our bromance is even stronger'. Only three men failed to use this term when describing their friendships. However, this was simply related to a rejection of the concept of a bromance, and not indicative of a conservative

friendship. This was best illustrated by Lewis, who commented that, 'Unless it's a joke, I'm not a fan of the word "bromance" – I find it too much of an Americanism.'

However, these friendships were not simply characterized by their emotionally candid nature, also extending to physical friendships – something they felt underpinned the closeness between them. This included, but was not restricted to, hugging, cuddling and, in some cases, kissing. Lewis, for example, described his friends as 'a tactile group', adding: 'We were also hugging each other ... There was other stuff, but I can't really remember because we did it so often; it happened a lot'. Josh mirrored this overview: 'We used to hug each other a lot. A lot of the guys used to cuddle up on the sofa ... it became a comfortable thing we did'. Eddie discussed how his group of friends were comfortable with this behaviour, commenting that, 'Everyone was fine with hugging and sitting on each other's laps ... It was a marker of our friendship: people didn't feel uncomfortable with it'. Only one participant, Ewan, felt any discomfort with physical friendships, though admitted that this was solely attributable to the fact that he is not a tactile person. Even so, though, he still said that, 'It depends on who it is ... I don't actively try to avoid touching them, I just don't feel the need to'.

Given that alcohol has been shown to have a profound effect on the expression of contemporary masculinities (Anderson et al., 2012; Roberts, Anderson and Magrath, 2017), it is unsurprising that this also emerged as a significant factor for men in this study – and their elevation of physical affection. Evidencing this, Lewis said that, 'On nights out there was a lot of hugging and cuddling. We kissed too'. Likewise, Jason commented that, 'Kissing happened a lot on nights out. There was a lot of kissing on cheeks – especially when pictures were being taken'. Marc also commented: 'We might get drunk on nights out and end up snogging each other, which might not have happened at home'.

Interestingly, however, while alcohol consumption was proven to be a factor in exaggerated displays of physicality, it was not the primary influence. Nathan described such behaviour as 'drunken bravado', before commenting: 'It wasn't always facilitated by alcohol, though. It often didn't really change, whether alcohol was involved or not'. This was a view shared by Charlie, who said that, 'It became more frequent as a result of alcohol, but I don't think that it was exclusively alcohol-related'. These assertions are further supported by the fact that, when recollecting these incidents, these men showed no remorse, nor regret, for these behaviours.

University friendships today

Every participant had fond recollection of their university friendship networks – despite graduating almost a decade ago. The completion of a university degree is, naturally, a time during which most undergraduate students seek employment and/or return to their community of origin. Perhaps predictably, then, although participants refer to these friendships as strong, they have become restricted by geography. This is made increasingly problematic by those who now reside outside of the UK. Indeed, four of the participants involved in this research have moved to major cities Europe or the US. Explicitly referring to the significance of geographical proximity, Callum outlined the challenge of maintaining friendships as a result:

The difficulty is ... because of logistics. [After university], one guy moved back to the Isle of Man, two guys live at completely the opposite ends of London, and I'm in the middle. Another guy moved down to Bournemouth and has now moved to Scotland, and another has been travelling the world.

Participants stated that this impacted upon how frequently they are able to arrange social events with these friends. Josh commented on the difficulty of arranging social events around friends who live abroad: 'It's not always the full group [who meet]. It's harder because there is a guy who lived in Germany and now Canada – but whenever he's back, we always try and organize stuff around him being here'. Along a similar theme, Nathan said that, 'We always try and organize regular things. Not everyone can make it because of the distance ... Some of the guys live abroad, which makes it more difficult'. Despite the intricacies of organizing events based on others' travel arrangements – and their returning back to the UK – this shows that these men still desire to see each other on a regular basis, whenever possible.

Related to this, and contrary to previous research, which shows that men with a romantic partner were less likely to prolong friendships (Demir, 2009), the arrangement of contemporary social events were also met with an assimilation of participants' wives and girlfriends (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). Here, the incorporation of the romantic partners of these men fostered the continuation and development of the group friendship dynamic, rather than replacing it. Ewan, for example, said that, 'Girlfriends don't impact on my friendships at all. My partner often joins us when we see each other'. Similarly, Callum commented that, 'The girls being there with us didn't change much ... They are now part of our lives in a very serious way, whereas before girlfriends weren't as central'. Josh also acknowledged that, although romantic partners affected the overall ambience of a social event, this did not negatively impact the overall group friendship. He did say, however, that relationship statuses could have a bearing on how often they see each other: 'Maybe it's a slightly different mentality with partners. But I wouldn't really say it's affected us whatsoever. If we were single then we would probably meet up more often: that's the only difference with relationships'. Interestingly, these views were shared by all the men in this research, regardless of their current relationship status.

There was, however, an equal split among participants about whether the new elements to the friendships, such as location and the influence of romantic partners, had any impact on the overall closeness among the group. Charlie, for example, said that, 'I think, with close friends, there's still a great level of support', and Jason added: 'It's nice that, when we meet up again, it's still very much the same as it used to be. Our personalities are still the same, and we still have the same connection'. And Nathan said that, 'Emotionally, we are still very close. They offer a shoulder cry on if needed ... It hasn't really changed since university'.

Conversely, the remaining participants believed that the distance and time between their university friendships had an impact on the overall closeness in their friendships. Exemplifying this, Callum said that, 'I really miss it; it's not the same anymore ... I still consider my university friends as my closest group ... We still have a strong bond, but it's not as close as when we lived together'. Similarly, Marc commented that, 'I miss the support and friendship, especially when I'm away working or travelling'. Lewis also believed that his group of friends had become more distant, and longed for the closeness they previously shared: 'Living and doing everything together is something I miss massively. We were so close, and I really miss them ... Even though I still see them regularly, it's not the same'. Importantly, the closeness of these friendships is often impacted – and even replaced – by post-university friendships, a theme we discuss later in this paper.

Participants also collectively discussed the importance of various forms of social media³, as well as instant messaging (IM) channels, to stay connected with one another. This was particularly important given the distance between many of these men. This was best evidenced by Callum, who said that, 'Social media is less frequent, but more important nowadays. We use it to catch up more'. Marc spoke of his reliance on each of the major social media channels to stay in contact: 'I have to remember which of my friend uses what – but I rely on them all to stay in contact, particularly [with friends] in the UK'. Others spoke of the importance of IM functions, allowing multiple participants to become members of synchronous online conversation. 'That's the main way of communicating everything ... It's the best and easiest way for us', said Josh, summarizing almost all of the participants in this research. Indeed, seven of the 10 participants employed social media or IM group conversations – in various capacities – to ensure they remain in contact with university friends.

Participants also spoke of the importance of social media and IM in continued levels of emotional support between friends. Marc outlined how he had recently separated from a romantic partner, leading to his close friends – wherever they were in the world – to contact him regularly to check his wellbeing. Others spoke of support afforded to them after family bereavement. Josh, for example, spoke of a friend who had recently lost a parent: 'He was inundated with support ... There were a lot of calls, constant messages, telling him to let us know if there's anything we could've done ... Someone was also reporting back to the group with how he was'. Discussing a similar situation, Shaun commented that, 'One of our friends is having a tough time at the moment, so we're having lots of time on our group chat to

support him'. Thus, men in this research placed strong emphasis on social media in order to simulate the close university friendships that they enjoyed.

Post-university friendships

Aside from continuing to enjoy close friendships with numerous university peers, all but one of the men in this research had also formed other friendships since graduating. However, developing a comparable level of intimacy to university friendships was challenging. Callum suggested that the strength of the bonds he made at university have been difficult to replicate: 'I've got a lot of friendships which have started since uni which aren't as close. The closeness I had is something I've not found again'. Eddie provided similar sentiment: 'I've made friends since leaving university, but it's definitely harder. And they're definitely a lot shallower'. Similarly, Charlie found that it was still possible to develop intimate friendships after university, but it was more difficult: 'I think the intimacy you are thrown into at university, and the intensity of the friendships, is definitely something you don't get as much of after university'. Nathan added, 'I've made other friends, but nobody I'm as close with'. This was something he attributed to having to line-manage them, creating a boundary which hindered their friendships developing any closer. Accordingly, he spends most of his time maintaining his university friendships, despite the fact he sees them less frequently. Thus, his pre-existing intimate friendships meant that he did not see the need to develop support networks with new people, as this was something he already had with others.

Despite these difficulties, some participants were able to find post-university friends, with whom they were able to share emotional closeness with. For Callum, although he had never again found the same level of closeness with his post-university friends, he felt that he was actually more emotionally open with his current group of his friends: 'They tend to chat more about feelings, so maybe it's about the nature of the people. More open, but that might be about getting older, rather than the social dynamics of the people'. For Jason, living in the US (and now a country in Eastern Europe) allowed him to bond closely with other expatriates whom were in a similar situation.

I'm very open with my [non-university] friends now – probably more so [than at university]. I think when you get older, you're more comfortable and not worried about people judging you. We have a lot of fun but we have serious talks too. And I think with my friends from university, they probably have the similar kind of situation with their new friends since leaving university.

Eddie echoed a very similar situation: 'The majority of my closest friends made after university, were made whilst I was living abroad'.

Physical tactility with post-university friends, however, seemed to be less prevalent than emotional intimacy. Nathan suggested that while there was still tactility with his new friends, this was mainly limited to hugging when greeting, and was more restrained than with his university friends. Similarly, Josh said that, 'These friendships are less physical. We wouldn't be as tactile, even if we do still hug when we see each other; that would be it'. Moreover, Eddie felt that he was quite a tactile person, and would be so from the outset of a new friendship in order to establish that as a norm, as well as to see how others responded. Despite this, he still felt that comfort with tactility that took time to develop: 'I'm a tactile person, but I think it takes some time to build up a relationship where you can do that with people'. Even Jason, who appeared to have developed the deepest friendships since university, did not suggest that he was as tactile with his new friends, despite the continued comfort: 'We don't care what people think. But we're always happy to hug each other. We might not cuddle but we're still quite open [to physicality]'.

Overall, there is unquestionable evidence that intimate friendships had developed in a post-university context. However, participants remained cognizant of the fact that the university environment provided a more solid platform for this to occur more easily and more frequently. This is also related to the collective development into young adulthood, particularly as the sharing of personal information was seen as a concern, blurring professional and private boundaries (Roberts et al., 2017).

Discussion

In 2009, Eric Anderson published inclusive masculinity theory in his seminal monograph *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*. This was largely based upon the positive attitudes towards homosexuality, and physically tactile and emotional intimate nature of first-year undergraduate sports students. Since its initial publication, inclusive masculinity theory has developed into the most prolific paradigm of theorizing the increasingly liberal nature of contemporary masculinities. In this article, we draw on 10 in-depth interviews with many of the original men, with the intention of measuring the longevity of the theory, and whether it continues to accurately frame the attitudes and behaviour of these men – a decade after graduation.

We find that these men fondly recall their university friendships, and discussed multiple ways through which they bonded with peers. Consistent with the work of Seiden and Bart (1975), this time was primarily facilitated through watching and participating in sport and (often excessive) alcohol consumption. However, unlike older sociological research on men's friendships (e.g. Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Curry, 1991), these were also underpinned by proud and unequivocal emotional support for one another. Indeed, this is best described by Robinson et al. (2017), who write that university provides 'an increased opportunity and desire among young men to form peer attachment bonds ... premised on self-disclosure and intimacy' (p. 6). Thus, men in this research frequently engaged in emotional support regarding significant events – such as serious illness, and the end of a long-term relationship – even crying in each other's presence without fear of judgement. As such, the majority of these men comfortably described these friendships as representing a 'bromance' (Robinson et al., 2017).

Further underpinning these close friendships, these men also regularly engaged in various forms of physical tactility. This occurred in multiple forms, including – but not limited to – hugging, cuddling and kissing. The men discussed the comfort they had with one another to cuddle on the sofa in one's house, or to sit on each other's laps. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these behaviours also frequently occurred on nights out, when excessive alcohol consumption took place – particularly in the case of kissing. This is something which has been documented in existing literature on men's expression of physical friendships: Anderson et al. (2012, p. 428), for example wrote that, 'Kissing seems to have been generated in and mostly restricted to pubs and nightclubs. Sustained kissing does not occur ... in other aspects of students' private lives'.

Since graduating from university, however, it has naturally become more difficult for these men to maintain their friendships in the same way. They are now more restricted in their social events, with a large proportion having returned to their hometowns, and many others having settled in another country. As a result, one might expect the closeness of the friendships to wane, and perhaps eventually dissipate, but matters were more complex among men in this research. Indeed, there was an equal split among participants over whether the challenging logistics had impacted the overall emotional closeness. Attempts were often made to arrange an annual – or more frequently – congregation of university friends. Whether this was achieved or not, the more striking finding here is that *all* the participants expressed their desire and longing for the same emotional intimacy enjoyed at university.

These are significant findings, as previous research has suggested that the goals of emerging adults typically become more oriented around work and family, and less around friends, the older they get (Salmela-Aro et al., 2007). Given that the participants in this research are towards the upper end of emerging adulthood – if not already having transitioned into full adulthood – we would therefore expect to see their romantic partners and careers taking priority. Whilst there is some, albeit limited, evidence of this – one participant, for example, suggested that friends were a lower priority now that he was thinking of starting a family – these men still sought to maintain their intimate friendships, even if it had to be done electronically via social media.

Indeed, the logistical difficulty in arranging regular social events has resulted in strong emphasis being placed on social media channels for regular group contact, continued emotional support, sharing nostalgic and reminiscent messages, and attempting to organize times to see one another. The use of social media in facilitating this group closeness is unsurprising, and has been documented in the

previous research in the sociology of friendship. A decade ago – during Facebook’s embryonic stages, before developing into the world’s most active social platform – Ellison et al. (2007, p. 1162) show that undergraduate students relied on the website to ‘keep in touch with old friends and to maintain or intensify relationships characterized by some form of offline connection ... Facebook [also] provided a way to keep in touch with high school friends’. The current research highlights how these men social media to facilitate their friendships in a similar manner – oftentimes as a means of replacing the closeness they previously enjoyed.

Also important here is the nature of post-university friendships – those made with other men since graduating, leaving university, and entering into employment. Among the men in this study, there was a divide among those who had developed friendships with comparable closeness and those who had not. Interestingly, those who had not formed new close relationships simply preferred to maintain university friendships that they had enjoyed previously, while, for others, one common barrier in developing friendships concerned the perceived fear that developing close relationships with colleagues would be damaging to their working relationships. Comparable to Roberts et al. (2017), intimate relationships and professionalism were largely seen as incompatible. For others, however, this work-friendship divide did not present a problem.

While this research is noteworthy in that it investigates and advances current literature on the sociology of friendship, it demonstrates the effectiveness of Anderson’s (2009) inclusive masculinity theory to explain how men’s friendships over a relatively long period of time – something not previously addressed. There is little doubt that masculinities have witnessed a generational shift away from the highly stoic 1980s, to one that embraces the behaviours of caring, tactility and emotional expressionism (Anderson & McCormack, 2015, 2016). But existing research which employs this framework is restricted to explaining what we call the ‘immediacy of masculinities’ – overlooking how friendships develop over time.

Nevertheless, inclusive masculinity theory captures the patterns of friendship among men in this research. We show the continuation of emotionally intimate and, to a lesser extent, physically tactile nature, of these friendships since graduation a decade ago. Men either enjoy – or long to enjoy – the emotionality previously enjoyed in the university context. There was no regret or embarrassment of their previous behaviours, and some of these men even carry them into many of their post-university friendships. This lack of embarrassment suggests that these men do not regard many of their previous (and current) behaviours as ‘childish’, but view them as compatible with the formation of an adult (or near adult) identity (Scoats, 2015). Accordingly, there is evidence in this article documenting the longevity of friendships. Considering that we rely on interviews with men on whom the initial theorizing was based, we urge scholars to move away from the immediacy of masculinities, and call for longitudinal research to deepen our understanding of the contemporary nature of masculinities among the next generation of Western men.

Notes

1. Inclusive masculinity theory was formally published in Anderson’s (2009) monograph *Inclusive Masculinities: The Changing Nature of Masculinity*, but antecedents of this theory had previously been developed in his earlier work (e.g. Anderson, 2005).
2. This resource (Anderson, 2014) draws together studies from over 15 separate articles, covering a multitude of different sports.
3. Social media is best defined as websites which enables users to share various content and/or maintain contact with ‘friends’ whom you become connected to. The most prolific contemporary social media include Facebook, Instagram and Twitter – all of which have public and private messaging/chat functions built into the website.

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