



Straight–gay friendships: Relational masculinities and equalities landscapes in Sydney, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Equalities landscapes for sexual minorities are not achieved by formal legal and political change alone. This paper examines everyday friendships between straight- and gay-identifying men in Sydney, Australia, articulating the relational constitution of 'pro-gay' heterosexual men and equalities landscapes. Utilising interview and media data, I argue that pro-gay hetero-masculine subjects are evident in this context, and moreover, influence the creation of inner Sydney as an equalities landscape. Since hetero-masculinities are hegemonic in the social structures and systemic practices of heterosexism underpinning inequities for sexual minorities, attitudinal and behavioural changes in heterosexual men are fundamental for defining equalities landscapes. Furthermore, this analysis extends geographical research on sexualities, masculinities and friendship. I suggest that straight–gay friendships are a 'contradictory resource' for personal and social change. There are certainly possibilities for mutually reconfiguring masculine subjectivities and equalities landscapes, but simultaneously these are enacted within, and reinforce, existing systems of social difference and dominance. While constituting pro-gay hetero-masculinities, straight–gay friendships create landscapes of both new equalities and persistent inequalities. I discuss this complexity via three themes on the performance of relational masculinities, drawn from the interview data but presaged by the media data: relations of difference, networked relations, and relations of similarity and structural reinforcement. Nevertheless, I argue that reconfiguring hetero-masculinity is necessary for equalities landscapes, and must be an aim of gender and sexual politics. Consequently, I suggest that attempts to shift hetero-masculinity at the everyday level, via self-reflection and ordinary encounters, have a profound influence on equalities landscapes.

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1. Introduction

This paper is about changing relations between heterosexual men and gay men, and the way these relationships configure the spaces in which they take shape. I focus on 'everyday' relations of friendship between straight- and gay-identifying men in Sydney, Australia. My aim is to explore the relational constitution of 'pro-gay' heterosexual men and landscapes of equality for sexual minorities in this geographical context. Utilising interview and media data, I argue that 'new' pro-gay hetero-masculine subjects are evident in this city and have a significant bearing on the creation of inner Sydney as an equalities landscape. Hetero-masculinities – especially white, middle-class heterosexual men – are hegemonic in the social structures and systemic practices of heterosexism that underpin inequities for sexual minorities (Connell, 2005). Moreover, Australian studies show greater prevalence of homonegative beliefs and homophobic behaviour amongst heterosexual men than women (Tomsen, 2003; Flood

and Hamilton, 2008). I therefore suggest that attitudinal and behavioural changes in some heterosexual men – and thus shifts in the contours of hetero-masculinities – are central for defining equalities landscapes. I am particularly interested in how pro-gay hetero-masculinities are fabricated through relations with gay men, thus reworking hierarchies of masculinities; and in turn, how these relational masculinities help shape the spaces of inner Sydney. In other words, I am concerned with understanding the co-construction of 'new' hetero-masculine subjects and inner Sydney as a 'new' sexual and gender equalities landscape.

I interpret equalities landscapes as 'ordinary spaces' of daily life, rather than domains of formal politics and law. In Australia as elsewhere, equality in state-bound political and legal horizons has been the thrust of rights claims for sexual minorities, including decriminalising same-sex practices, introducing anti-discrimination legislation, and petitioning for the official recognition of same-sex couples and families. From different perspectives, such claims are seen as transformative, normative, or both. Same-sex marriage is a notable example: some argue it is an assimilative move for middle-class same-sex couples (Duggan, 2003); some contend there is potential to rework the institution of

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marriage, with flow-on advantages for more equitable gender relations in opposite-sex marriages (Smith, 2010). Others urge for moving beyond this binary, recognising the messy lived experiences of formal partnerships, and critiquing the locational advantages and privileged choices entangled in marriage claims (Browne, 2011). Similarly, moving beside disputes about political and legal rights, my interest is in ‘everyday’ relations of understanding and respect (Noble, 2009) between individuals rather than the overt political and legal goals that often propel debates about equality. This is not to say that politics and law are unimportant for sculpting equalities landscapes, but instead to stress that political and legal change is not the ‘end’ – nor the ‘beginning’ – of this process. I am concerned with how recognition, interaction and inclusion unfurl on-the-ground – in streets, homes and neighbourhoods – rather than in the abstract space of political and legal change.

This analysis of relations between straight and gay men in inner Sydney connects and advances geographical and social research on sexualities, masculinities and friendship. My intent in doing so is reparative: like other Australian geographers working within our national research priority of ‘social inclusion’, I believe that everyday recognition and equality is important for individual and collective wellbeing (Jupp et al., 2007). Pragmatically, I eschew both paranoid conservative readings of inclusion as seeding societal disintegration and paranoid queer readings of inclusion as breeding assimilation (Sedgwick, 2003). But nor is my approach rose-tinted: I am attentive to the problems, as well as possibilities, in these relational processes. Every change in people/place relations carries a danger of producing exclusions alongside inclusions. While new hetero-masculinities are important in the construction of equalities landscapes, I am also cognisant of ongoing or new exclusions practiced in relations between straight and gay men. Following Dyson (2010), I argue that friendships are ‘contradictory resources’ that entail both transgressive possibilities and conventional power relations, and therefore advance some facets of social inclusion while reinforcing other exclusions. I discuss this complexity via three themes on relational masculinities, drawn from the interview data but presaged by the media data: relations of difference, networked relations, and relations of similarity and structural reinforcement. I begin by reviewing the scholarship and conceptual frames informing my examination of relational masculinities and equalities landscapes. I then outline the empirical work for this project. Finally, I discuss my findings, describing a series of straight-gay friendships and relationships, and analysing how these relations co-construct pro-gay hetero-masculinities and equalities landscapes in inner Sydney. I argue that reconfiguring hetero-masculinity through ordinary encounters profoundly influences equalities landscapes and must be an aim of gender and sexual politics.

2. Interpretive frames: geographies of masculinities, sexualities and friendship

The compound terms ‘equalities landscape(s)’ and ‘relational masculinities’ underpin the contextual and conceptual frames of my discussion of straight-gay friendships and their bearing on everyday geographies. The language of ‘equalities landscape(s)’ emerged in response to the British Parliament’s *Equality Act 2006*, which was superseded by the *Equality Act 2010*. These Acts combined and consolidated the numerous other Acts and Regulations that informed anti-discrimination law in Great Britain, and provided comparable protection for target groups across all so-called ‘equality strands’. The equality strands explicitly stated in the Acts include gender, gender reassignment, age, disability, race, religion or belief, and sexual orientation. While there is a particular British legal geography underpinning the notion of ‘equalities land-

scape(s)’, the concept is not limited either to Britain or processes of formal anti-discrimination law. The objective of anti-discrimination law is equity and parity in the everyday social arenas of work, home, neighbourhood and public encounter; it is ultimately about recognition, understanding and inclusion in daily life. Such ‘equalities landscapes’ are arguably the intent of anti-discrimination laws elsewhere – in this case, Australia, where similar legislation and social inclusion priorities are enacted in Federal and State jurisdictions and address disadvantage across diverse equality strands, including race, ethnicity, national extraction, Indigeneity, religion, age, disability, sex/gender, gender identity and sexual orientation.¹ Consequently, I contend that the concept of ‘equalities landscape(s)’ applies to Australia. Rather than the formal legal domain of anti-discrimination, I am concerned with the everyday enactment of equity and inclusion in ordinary urban spaces, and it is in this sense and this context that I use the term ‘equalities landscape(s)’.

While ‘equalities landscape’ sets the thematic context for my discussion of straight-gay friendships in inner Sydney, the term ‘relational masculinities’ explicitly informs my theoretical framing and conceptualisation of changing relationships between men, masculine identities and everyday geographies. In this regard, there are two conceptions of ‘relational masculinities’ that I have in mind, which are interconnected. I introduce these ideas here, and expand on them in the following paragraphs. The first conception concerns inter-subjective relations between men as gendered and sexualised subjects – interactions which are, in turn, a part of broader gender power relations (Seidler, 2007). In this sense, masculine identities are diverse, not singular, and produced *through relations* with imaginaries of both femininities and masculinities, and everyday encounters with both women and men (as gendered subjects). The second conception elicits the constitutive association between masculine subjects and the spaces, places and landscapes in which their relationships occur. In this sense, masculine identities are produced *in relation to* geographical context, and inflect the meaning and experience of that landscape for other subjects. These relational processes – the inter-subjective and the spatial – are thus also intertwined, and I iterate this below.

Four bodies of scholarship – and their productive theorisations – inform my conceptualisation of ‘relational masculinities’ and their implications for ‘equalities landscapes’. Foundationally, this discussion of straight-gay friendships draws upon and extends, first, sociological literature, and second, geographical research on men and masculinities. This includes two linked bodies of literature – critical men’s studies and geographies of masculinities – which inform, respectively, the two conceptions of ‘relational masculinities’ offered above. To further develop social and spatial thinking on relational masculinities – and specifically men’s everyday relationships with each other in ordinary spaces – I draw additional insights from, third, social and behavioural research on ‘straight allies’ for LGBT² rights, and fourth, work on the geographies of friendship.

First, critical men’s studies highlight the relational nature of masculine subjectivities in pervasive social structures of gender and sexuality (Beasley, 2005). Masculinities and femininities are

¹ The following sources summarise the legislation and priorities: Australian Human Rights Commission (http://www.hreoc.gov.au/info_for_employers/law/index.html); Australian Government Social Inclusion Agenda (<http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/what-social-inclusion/social-inclusion-priorities>); and Law Council of Australia (<http://www.lawcouncil.asn.au/programs/criminal-law-human-rights/human-rights/discrimination.cfm>). In September 2011, the Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department released a discussion paper on the consolidation of Commonwealth anti-discrimination laws (arguably similar to Britain’s *Equality Act 2010*).

² LGBT refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans/transgender, and is an acronym used commonly in Western societies by organisations and allies seeking to advance legal and social rights for sexual minorities.

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