

Amalgamated Masculinities: The Masculine Identity of Contemporary Marginalised Working-Class Young Men

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Abstract

Recent, UK-based studies have focused on the construction of working-class masculine identity and documented changes and softer displays among young men. This article contributes to this literature and is based on ethnographic research conducted in Wales, UK, and a sample consisting of the most marginalised working-class young men often associated with protest masculinity, homophobia and misogyny. The findings illustrate that although the participants disclose behaviours linked to protest masculinity, they also demonstrate softer masculine displays, including physical tactility, sensitivity, gender-egalitarian views and rejection of homophobia. Although the elements of protest masculinity discount the embodiment of pure inclusive masculinity, the changes in views and behaviours among the subgroup of working-class young men are significant and congruent with other research in this field. The combination of gender practices is conceptualised as ‘amalgamated masculinities’, a fusion of locally constructed protest masculine characteristics and softer masculine attributes adopted through external cultural influence.

Keywords

amalgamated masculinities, marginalised young men, protest masculinity, South Wales, working class

Introduction

Within the context of social relations in the South Wales valleys, UK, this article explores the masculine identity of a group of young men. The findings derive from an ethnographic study conducted in collaboration with a youth centre organisation. The study focused on the school-to-work transition and masculine identity of a group of marginalised working-class young men aged 12–21, alongside interviews with youth workers and a schoolteacher.

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The young men openly spoke of a disaffected relationship with education, physical and verbal confrontations with teachers, frequent school truancy and some manual employment career aspirations, all of which have become synonymous with working-class and/or protest masculinity (Connell, 1995). This form of masculinity has historically (though not exclusively, as addressed below) been associated with homophobia, sexism, suppression of emotion and avoidance of physical tactility (Connell, 2005; Frosh et al., 2002; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Ward, 2015; Willis, 1977). However, current understandings of the most marginalised working-class young men derives from research that may be considered dated considering the notion that masculinities, social class distinctions, and working-class identity are subject to change (Ainsley, 2018; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Savage et al., 2013), and coupled with increased media and societal interest in masculinity, particularly the media notion of toxic masculinity (Whitehead, 2021) and its detrimental effect on men's health (McQueen, 2017).

Increased societal interest in masculinity has coincided with research documenting the changing nature of masculinity, including hybrid and inclusive masculinities (Anderson, 2009; Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Within the scope of inclusive masculinity, research has challenged the historical understanding of working-class young men and masculinity. Based in the south and north of England, UK, Blanchard et al.'s (2017), McCormack's (2014) and Roberts' (2013, 2018) research documents working-class young men's engagement in behaviour and expression of views historically understood to be antithetical to normative protest and/or working-class masculinity, including physical tactility, pro-gay attitudes and emotional intimacy, emotional openness and the admission of vulnerability. However, the behavioural changes identified are somewhat regionally specific and, importantly, the study samples consisted of working-class young men who were engaged in education or had attained academic credentials, which is claimed to facilitate softer displays of masculinity (Nixon, 2018). This raises questions about wider applicability (de Boise, 2015) and whether these changes in behaviour and masculinity translate to the lowest qualified and most marginalised contemporary working-class young men.

This article empirically addresses this query through three sections, described in the Findings. The first section shows the participants' engagement in physical tactility, which contradicts the historical masculine notion of a 'rejection of all aspects that are deemed feminine' (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003: 97). The second section illustrates expressions of sensitivity, compassion and empathy, features that oppose hegemonic masculine ideals of being unemotional and dispassionate (Collier, 1998; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The final section indicates some evidence of gender-egalitarian views and distancing from homophobia. These findings contribute to a contemporary understanding of marginalised working-class young men's masculine identity and collectively illustrate what is referred to as amalgamated masculinities, a fusion of both locally developed working-class/protest masculine characteristics and softer masculine attributes adopted through external cultural influence. It is argued that such a conceptualisation is a way to understand both continuity and changes in masculinity and supports and strengthens the argument around transformations in working-class masculinity (Blanchard et al., 2017; McCormack, 2014; Roberts, 2013).

Complex Behaviours in Protest Masculinities

Protest masculinity is defined as a ‘marginalised masculinity, which picks up themes of hegemonic masculinity in the society at large but reworks them in a context of poverty’ (Connell, 2005: 114). This reworking includes trying to obtain power with limited means. This power retrieval is exercised through various gender practices, including resistance to school, manual labour and drugs and alcohol use (Connell, 2005). Furthermore, protest masculinity is a form of masculinity produced in working-class places (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and has thus become commonly associated with working-class men (Elliott, 2020).

Connell (2005) initially associates protest masculinity with violence, crime and drug/alcohol use. Conversely, in the latter parts of the discussion relating to protest masculinity, Connell (2005: 112) argues that protest masculinity:

is not simply observance of a stereotyped male role. It is compatible with respect and attention to women . . . egalitarian views about the sexes, affection for children, and a sense of display which in conventional role terms is decidedly feminine.

Similarly, Howson (2006: 65) states that protest masculinities can be understood as ‘behaviours such as deep affection for children, egalitarian attitudes towards the sexes and a sense of personal hygiene and fashion that, traditionally, was attached to subordinate masculinities and femininities’. These aspects of protest masculinity – particularly affection for children – contradict the former characteristics of protest masculinity and align themselves with caring masculinities defined as types of masculinities that ‘reject domination and its associated traits and embraces values of care such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality’ (Elliott, 2016: 240). Subsequently, these conflicting characteristics of protest masculinity potentially create confusion (Walker, 2006) and make this form of masculinity challenging to define and identify, especially considering the contextual societal epoch of Connell’s (1995) original definitions, coupled with recent changes that have challenged original notions of class identity (Savage et al., 2013) and working-class status (Ainsley, 2018). Furthermore, the association between protest masculinity, poverty and the notion of ‘a pattern of masculinity constructed in local working-class settings’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 847) depicts an economically and place-based deterministic masculinity formation that negates external societal and cultural influences. The following section discusses studies often understood through working-class and/or protest masculinity.

Macho Identities among Working-Class Young Men

The notion of marginalised working-class young men with macho, laddish identities (Ward, 2015), often understood through working-class and/or protest masculinity (Connell, 1995), has continually populated working-class young men’s studies. For example, Willis’ (1977) school-to-work transition study identified a group of young men, referred to as ‘the lads’, that rejected school, had manual employment aspirations and used various tropes that identified them as sexist and homophobic (McRobbie, 1991;

Skeggs, 1992) and viewed women as inferior and ‘both [as] sexual objects and domestic comforters’ (Willis, 1977: 43).

Similarly, Mac an Ghaill’s (1994) ethnographic study at a secondary school found different groups of working-class young men, with one being the Macho Lads, who, similarly to Willis’ (1977) lads, rejected ‘formal school knowledge and the potential exchange value it has in the labour market’ (Mac an Ghaill, 1994: 65). Instead, the Macho Lads’ school experience centred around a ‘valorisation of “masculine” manual labour’ (Mac an Ghaill, 1994: 71) while also projecting strong homophobic attitudes, ‘overtly sexist to young women and female staff’ (Mac an Ghaill, 1994: 87) and emotionally illiterate. Frosh et al.’s (2002) study of 11–14-year-old boys in London schools identified working-class young men that understood popular masculinity as ‘requiring attributes such as “hardness” and antagonism to school-based learning’ (Frosh et al., 2002: 77) and evidence of sexism. Furthermore, homophobia and avoidance of behaviours traditionally coded as feminine were central parts of the young men’s lives, to the extent that expression of emotion between male friends and physical tactility/hugging were avoided due to the association with femininity. Moving to other parts of the UK, Ward’s (2015) study in the South Wales valleys identified a group of working-class young men referred to as the Valley Boiz, who resembled Willis’ (1977) lads and had a similar attitude towards education and employment. Although these young men engaged in dual displays of masculinity by ‘perform[ing] a “softer” side through intimate stories with close friends’ (Ward, 2015: 152), these young men equally expressed homophobic and misogynistic views, including ‘bros before hoes’, meaning male friendship should come before females and sex (Ward, 2015: 55).

These studies demonstrate the continued identification of a subgroup of working-class young men with a negative or complex relationship with education, attraction to manual employment and homophobic and sexist attitudes, all of which have become features synonymous with protest masculinity (Connell, 2005). However, these studies may be regarded as somewhat dated, considering that the findings are nearly a decade (Ward, 2013) or more old and concerning economic and social changes that have ‘ushered in a broad cultural examination of masculinity’ (Brown, 2022: 13), often focused on toxic masculinity (Whitehead, 2021) and the detrimental effect on men’s mental health, with men being encouraged to become emotionally expressive (McQueen, 2017).

Complicating Understanding of Working-Class Young Men in Contemporary Masculinities Research

Recent contributions to masculinities studies have included hybrid masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) and inclusive masculinity theory (IMT) (Anderson, 2009). Bridges and Pascoe (2014: 246) refer to hybrid masculinity as the ‘selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalised and subordinated masculinities and – at times – femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities’. Essentially, hybrid masculinities suggest that some men (particularly those that occupy privileged social categories) display softer masculine characteristics in an

attempt to distance themselves from a hegemonic masculine position, while simultaneously, reinforcing dominance and obscuring inequality and gender differences.

IMT (Anderson, 2009) is underpinned by the notion that contemporary western cultures have experienced a decrease in overt homophobia and suggests that some heterosexual young men exhibit a 'softer' version of masculinity consisting of increased acceptance of sexual minorities (particularly gay men), a rejection of homophobic attitudes and behaviours and 'increased peer tactility, emotional openness and close friendship based on emotional disclosure' (Anderson and McCormack, 2018: 547). The notion of close male friendship has extended to additional studies that have documented new forms of friendship between men, often referred to as a 'bromance', which is based on trust, involves physical and emotional intimacy and has been linked to inclusive masculinity (Robinson et al., 2018). However, claims around inclusive masculinity have been critiqued due to studies that have often included a predominantly white, middle-class study sample and, therefore, a perceived privileged position that potentially enables this subgroup of men to 'engage in traditionally feminised practices without having their masculinity diminished' (Gough, 2018: 10). Debates around inclusive masculinity sit within a fuller argument around whether societal change is occurring (Christofidou, 2021; Roberts et al., 2021) and homophobia is decreasing (Diefendorf and Bridges, 2020; McCormack, 2020).

Despite IMT's association with middle-class men, several studies on working-class young men have also incorporated this concept. For example, pro-gay attitudes, emotional closeness, homosocial tactility and inclusive forms of behaviour were identified among participants in McCormack's (2014) ethnographic study in a school sixth form in the south of England. However, when comparing these findings with a similar study on middle-class sixth form young men in the same region of England (McCormack and Anderson, 2010), the analysis revealed less pronounced inclusive forms of behaviour in the working-class participants. McCormack (2014: 132) explains this differentiation by arguing that class acts as 'a dampening but not prohibitive factor on the development of more inclusive attitudes and behaviours', resulting from an unequal symbolic economy that reduces levels of tactility among working-class young men. Similarly, working-class young footballers demonstrated softer displays of masculinity, including emotional closeness and physical tactility among male teammates in Roberts et al.'s (2017) study. However, these behaviours were somewhat more conservative than those found in other recent research due to institutional norms and their constraining effect.

'[P]ositive attitudes toward homosexuality . . . physical tactility and emotional intimacy' were identified in Blanchard et al.'s (2017: 310) ethnographic study of sixth form college working-class boys in the north-east of England. Despite these behaviours, a small minority of the study sample demonstrated orthodox masculinity, which is often associated with working-class youths (Blanchard et al., 2017), and includes behaviours that have become synonymous with protest masculinity including 'explicitly homophobic, avowedly anti-feminist and misogynistic, alongside a strong predilection for anti-feminine acting' (Roberts, 2018: 211).

Roberts' (2013, 2018) study, situated in the south-east of England, focused on working-class young men who had not disengaged from school/employment, yet neither achieved degree-level education nor professional occupation. The research identified

softer demonstrations of masculinity that facilitated young men's engagement in job roles requiring traditionally associated 'feminine' attributes and skills, including service sector work. The young men also demonstrated increased inclusivity towards gay men, emotional openness and the admission of vulnerability, and gender egalitarian views towards domestic labour and unpaid care work, though alongside the continuation of some use of contradictory sexist and homophobic language.

These studies demonstrate a shift from the idea that boys and men in the margin are regressive (Roberts and Elliott, 2020) and synonymous with protest masculinity, homophobia, sexism and toughness, suppression of emotion and physical tactility (Connell, 2005; Frosh et al., 2002; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Ward, 2015; Willis, 1977). However, the studies are regionally specific and relate to young men that are or were academically engaged – which is claimed to facilitate softer displays of masculinity (Nixon, 2018) – as opposed to marginalised working-class young men with a disaffected relationship with education (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Ward, 2015; Willis, 1977). Therefore, questions remain about the extent, type or meaning of changes in working-class young men's behaviour in other places, especially among the most marginalised. This article addresses this and demonstrates significant changes and softer displays of masculinity among this subgroup of working-class young men. However, these changes sit alongside protest masculinities, a coexistence conceptually termed 'amalgamated masculinities'.

Contextual Information and Methodology

The data presented below derive from a study that explored the school-to-work transition and masculine identity of a group of marginalised working-class young men and was conducted collaboratively with a youth centre organisation. Cardiff University ethics committee approved the study on the basis that all participants' names would be changed, and any identifying characteristic would be removed to provide anonymity. The participants were provided with verbal information about the study and consent forms that provided the signee with details about the research, the questions that would be asked, how the data would be used and their right to refuse to answer questions and withdraw from the study. Before undertaking data collection, all participants gave verbal and written consent to their involvement in the research, with those under 16 also supplying parental or guardian consent.

The youth centre attached to the study was situated in an ex-coal mining community in South Wales valleys, UK, which previously supported two coal mines that offered a significant source of employment. Owing to the area's geographic and economic isolation, it has failed to replace this earlier source of work. Consequently, the area now suffers from high levels of deprivation.

The research consisted of ethnography, including 120 hours of participant observations, assessing the participants' patterns of behaviour, actions and the culture within which they were created and existed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The ethnographic approach and subsequent interaction enabled me to build a good rapport and trusting relationship with several of the young men. Based on trust and rapport, I adopted a purposeful sampling technique (Patton, 2002) and recruited participants that

would ‘yield the most relevant and plentiful data, given [the] topic of study’ (Yin, 2015: 93). As such, and owing to the impact and curtailing effect of COVID-19, the research predominantly became a case study (Yin, 2012) of a group of nine young men, which I came to refer to as ‘the Ladz’: Stan (age 13), Tommy (age 14), Dan (age 16), Craig (age 12), Lewis (age 18), Billy (age 15), Ian (age 17), Cole (age 20) and Wesley (age 17). This group of young men were relatively representative of young men who frequented the youth centre at the time of the research and demonstrated various levels of association with protest masculinity, ranging from a somewhat disaffected relationship with education and manual employment aspirations, through to criminal behaviour, violence, school exclusion and drug/alcohol use (Connell, 1995). Furthermore, the relationship and rapport I established with the Ladz heightened my sense of researcher reflexivity (Attia and Edge, 2017) while also causing me to reflect on the data collection process and positionality.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted to complement the observation data. The interviews generally lasted around an hour. One interview was conducted with each participant, all were audio-recorded, and the interviews were mainly conducted with each participant individually. However, on request from the participants, a couple of interviews involved two young men being interviewed together. Furthermore, because young men in their early teenage years have a reputation for not being good compliant talkers (Frosh et al., 2002), the interviews also incorporated visual methods as a possible means of stimulating conversation and exploring various forms of employment. The young men were shown pictures of various forms of employment and asked to identify the work presented in the image and express their thoughts and feelings about the job. Three youth workers were also interviewed to provide their opinions about the young men and their behaviour. Alongside this, the headteacher of a pupil referral unit attended by some of the Ladz was contacted and interviewed to explore the educational provision offered to the young men.

All data were thematically analysed and coded, which involved ‘searching across [the] data set . . . to find repeated patterns of meaning’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 86). Once collated, the codes were placed into themes and cross-checked to ensure they worked with the coded data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The following findings section presents themes that captured something important about the data while demonstrating patterned response or meaning in the data set (Charmaz, 2010). The theme names are derived from data quotations.

Findings

‘We Don’t Do It the Old-Fashioned Way’: Physical Tactility and Emotional Intimacy

Although the Ladz openly expressed views and demonstrated behaviours that have become synonymous with a laddish identity and protest masculinity (Connell, 1995; Jackson, 2006; Ward, 2015), they equally engage in practices and discourse historically considered contradictory. These contradictory behaviours included acts of physical tactility, often sitting on each other’s laps, and placing arms around each other, and

engaging in behaviours that conflict with the traditional masculine ‘man code’ (King et al., 2021) of emotional inexpressiveness (Courtenay, 2011). One act of physical tactility particularly prominent among the Ladz involved their greeting practice whereby the young men hugged each other. Providing an example of this, one evening, while I was sitting in the youth centre’s cafe area and surrounded by a relatively large mixed group of teenage boys and girls, Wesley was leaning against a wall adjacent to me, engaged with his phone. However, this relatively withdrawn practice significantly altered when Ian appeared at the youth centre. Ian had been working overtime and arrived at the centre late that night. Upon arrival at the youth centre and his entrance into the cafe area, Ian spotted Wesley and said: ‘Hey, bro.’ The two young men smiled at each other, clasped hands in a tight embrace, and then placed their arms around each other and hugged. This physical tactility between Ian and Wesley was a form of patterned behaviour among the Ladz.

Owing to the prominence of the young men’s hugging greeting practice that contradicts the historical masculine notion of a ‘rejection of all aspects that are deemed feminine’ (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003: 97), associated with affection (Frosh et al., 2002) and perceived as evidence of homosexuality (Mac an Ghaill, 1994), I questioned some of the young men about their conduct:

RG: I’ve noticed that everyone hugs each other – what’s that about?

Tommy: Best friends.

RG: You hug each other because you are best friends?

Tommy: Yeah, besties for life! Nah, ’cos we’re all gay together!

RG: You’re all gay?

Stan: I’m a homosexual, you dull cunt!

Tommy: Na, joking. To say hello, init. We don’t do it the old-fashioned way, do we, Stan.

RG: What’s the old-fashioned way?

At this point, Tommy and Stan engaged in a theatrical display. Almost simultaneously, they both raised their hands to form a handshaking gesture, while jointly leaning backwards and then meekly shaking each other’s hands, while Tommy said: ‘Good day, good day, boy.’ In response to this demonstration, I asked the following question: ‘So what’s the new way?’ Subsequently, Stan and Tommy fist pumped and embraced each other with a hug, with Tommy saying ‘Broskies’ and Stan replying: ‘Long-time no see.’

Although paired interviewing with young men can alter their natural behaviour (Allen, 2005), this hugging practice was not an isolated incident between Tommy and Stan. In fact, on a number of occasions, Tommy and Stan’s embraces were far more intimate and exemplified bromance associated behaviour (Robinson et al., 2018). For

example, one evening while observing these two young men, I witnessed them engage in a visually intimate embrace that included a tight clasp of each other with Tommy saying to Stan: 'I love you, bro.' Therefore, the dramatisation and acts of physical and emotional intimacy lend significant support to the notion of softening masculinity. Firstly, there is no attempt to defend their hugging practice; there is an outright acknowledgement of this behaviour suggesting it is a normalised practice. Secondly, this behaviour is contextualised within the notion of close friendship or, more importantly, 'best friends', which corresponds with heterosexual recuperation, a term McCormack and Anderson (2010: 847) use to make sense of 'the strategies boys use to establish and maintain heterosexual identities without invoking homophobia'. Thirdly, both young men recognise that male hugging and same-sex touch may be perceived as gay behaviour (Blanchard et al., 2017; Ralph and Roberts, 2020), but this does not seem to matter to them. And lastly, we have the theatrical display where the young men identify generational change, suggesting that 'old-fashioned' greeting methods include shaking hands and distance – the attempt to lean back. Whereas contemporary greeting methods include a fist pump, tactility and words such as 'Broskies'. This terminology potentially offers valuable evidential information.

Gough (2018: 54) suggests that 'men are hugging each other more so than previous generations, at least in some Western nations like the UK'. This behavioural shift includes the 'man hug' or 'bro hug', which combines both a handshake and a hug and expresses affection, but in a way still coded as masculine. Consideration of the Ladz' behaviour and accompanying terminology – 'Bro', 'Broskie' – does seem to suggest that 'bro hug' is a reasonable explanation.

The other member of the Ladz that I questioned about hugging was Billy. The following excerpt is our discussion regarding this behaviour:

RG: Billy, I've noticed that you and the boys in here hug each other. What's that about? What does that mean to you?

Billy: It is a mess about at the end of the day. It's like when you score a try in rugby, you go over to your teammate and hug them. It's all well done. You see footballers kiss each other on the head. It's just a thing of trust you have. It's like they're my best mukkas [friends]. And like, it's just weird, it's just. It's not like, like, anything weird, it's just, oh, you're one of my best mukkas like.

In this excerpt, Billy suggests that the young men have built up a close, trusting relationship and friendship that enables or facilitates their tactility. However, there is evidence of tension in Billy's admittance of physical tactility, whereby he states: 'It's not like, like, anything weird', or what may potentially be understood as an attempt to distance himself from an association with 'gayness' (Blanchard et al., 2017; Ralph and Roberts, 2020). However, positionality and researcher effect may also be relevant. Put simply, perhaps Billy's framing is not about distancing from sexual norms in general but instead influenced by what he perceives to be my views on this issue as a much older adult researcher. Furthermore, mentioning sports and footballers kissing indicates that the media and sports influence behavioural practices. However, conversely to the Ladz' displays of

male tactility, media and sport are often perceived to circulate stereotyped gendered images and promote hegemonic masculine ideals (Connell, 2000; Messner et al., 2000), which include a rejection of behaviour coded as feminine and gay (Epstein, 1997; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003) and the subsequent avoidance of homosocial tactility (Floyd, 2000). Although these notions of sport and media hold some relevance, movements like ‘#MeToo . . . [have] ushered in a broad cultural examination of masculinity’ (Brown, 2022: 13). This contemporary cultural examination of masculinity has also emphasised the emotional suppressive nature of toxic masculinity (Whitehead, 2021) and the detrimental effect on men’s mental health (Courtenay, 2011). Subsequently, men have been encouraged to become more emotionally expressive and intimate (McQueen, 2017), while movies and magazines have portrayed softer and more sensitive versions of manhood with men pushing buggies and publicly hugging children (Lavigne, 2013).

‘Soooo Much Underpaid’: Sensitivity, Compassion and Empathy

As stated, visual methods were used to explore various forms of employment and as a discussion stimulation technique. Among the selection of photos used was a picture of a nurse. The following excerpts are the young men’s replies:

I’ve heard about the, um, the conditions in nursing. It’s like I, they’re on like 20 thousand a year. That’s awful init if you’re saving someone’s life every day. It shocks me. Things I hear make my jaw drop. (Billy)

Nurse. Underpaid! Soooo much underpaid. They’re saving your life, and football players get paid a quarter of a million just for playing football on a football pitch. They’re saving your life, and they get paid pennies. It’s just horrible! If I had the brains, I would love to do the job. It is something . . . just helping people. (Ian)

I would. I wouldn’t mind that – helping people every day of the week. Obviously, I wouldn’t want the abuse side of it like when drunks come in, and you’re trying to see to them because, obviously, it would agitate me. But I wouldn’t mind helping someone every day like. (Cole)

Working in the NHS, nursing or doctor. I’d smash that job. I was looking after my stepfather’s Nan, because she had dementia, and I was looking after this other old lady with cancer. I was down their houses after school every day, seeing them, like if they were ok. (Lewis)

In these replies, initially, through Billy and Ian’s responses, we see resentment towards the perceived mistreatment of nurses and the wage allocation that is considered insufficient in respect of the job requirements and responsibility. These responses resonate with the favoured musicians among the youths, including Stormzy and Dave. Dave’s music was frequently played in the youth centre media room, and one of the preferred songs was ‘Question Time’ (Dave, 2017), which includes the following lyrics:

All my life I know my mum’s been working. In and out of nursing, struggling, hurting. I just find it fucked that the government is struggling to care for a person that cares for a person. So where’s the discussion on wages and budgets? . . . A question for the new Prime Minister.

Although the young men never associated their views with this song, there is an obvious association that again potentially reflects the Ladz' adoption of popular culture, as was evident in the young men's hugging greeting practice. Furthermore, identity is formed in cultural relations (Willis, 1977), and media and popular culture are often considered to influence and shape the 'common sense of the people, including their taken-for-granted notions of masculinity and femininity' (Hanke, 1998: 184). Although the young men's replies superficially offer a limited link to masculinity, the central features of hegemonic masculinity include being unemotional and dispassionate (Collier, 1998; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Conversely, Ian's and Billy's responses and consideration of individuals other than themselves possibly indicate open masculinities (Elliott, 2020) or 'new' masculinities characterised by sensitivity, compassion and empathy (Roberts, 2018). Moreover, evidence of these traits – sensitivity, compassion and empathy – is also identifiable in Lewis' caring responsibilities and his 'looking after' people.

Dan's nursing response, not shown above, did not correlate with these excerpts. However, an additional reply did demonstrate elements of empathy and compassion:

You learn different pipe sizes and how to fit them in. It's just learning a new skill in general. So even if you've got a family member who needs something, you can just help them out. I don't mind helping people out like.

'A Boy Can Be a Ballerina': Gender-Egalitarian Views and Distancing from Homophobia

The Ladz were asked about their thoughts and opinions about working with women and gay men. On reflection, this was a blunt approach as I somewhat failed to consider that some of the young men might be gay themselves. Nevertheless, this exploration was intended to assess the young men's views of women, gay men and their masculinity, potentially allowing us to think of an alternative imagined employment future other than male-dominated work:

I wouldn't mind – different, but I wouldn't mind it. I'm not sexist; it's just that you don't really see women plumbing, do you? I don't know why. If girls do plumbing, it shows an example and makes others feel more comfortable doing it. There's nothing bad if you're a girl or a boy. A boy can be a ballerina or a dancer – there's nothing wrong with it. It's what you're into init. I don't care or think anything of it. It's them init – as long as it's not bothering anyone – let them do what they want. No difference between a man and a woman is there. If anyone thinks there is, it's just sexist init. (Dan)

It wouldn't bother me at all working with women or gays. There are gays in my family. My uncle is gay – happily gay and has been married for 15/16 years. They're no different. Your sexual preference or gender or anything like that doesn't make odds on your personality. (Cole)

Conversely to working-class young men's common association with sexism (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Ward, 2015; Willis, 1977), Dan and Cole's excerpts – particularly in Dan's – we see gender-egalitarian views. Dan states that there is 'No difference between a man

and a woman' and thus disputes the idea that women are 'inferior and incapable of doing certain things' (Willis, 1977: 149). Furthermore, Dan's comment demonstrates a sense of naivety, but mild disdain, towards the notion of patriarchy. Additionally, Cole's statement deviates from the homophobic position that is often associated with protest and/or working-class masculinities (Connell, 1995; Epstein, 1997; Willis, 1977). Billy, Ian and Wesley's responses included:

Yeah, as long as I get my job done and enjoy what I do, I don't care who I do it with. You have to think dun you, oh, they got the same mindset as me, they wanna do the best, they chose that career for a reason, you let them get on with it. Don't judge anyone for who they want to be. (Billy)

I don't really care who I work with as long as we get along. If you don't get along with someone, then you can't really work with them, can you? (Ian)

Yeah, I wouldn't mind. I just want a happy relationship with my like . . . teammates. As long as I get along, then I can be happy. (Wesley)

Although a gender-egalitarian view is less prominent in Billy, Ian and Wesley's responses, and these young men seem more concerned about being proficient at their job, the exclusion of homophobic and sexist discourse is notable:

Really dun bother me tha don't. Even if I was working with fucking, any sexuality, it doesn't bother me. They're themselves, shouldn't be judged for who they are. As long as they feel comfortable, it doesn't make me uncomfortable. As long as they don't try shit with me, I'm sound. (Lewis)

I wouldn't mind working with anyone. I wouldn't mind working with gays, it's just like they can't be talking about different weird stuff – 'cos I can't just like keep listening to it, and it's going in my head, and I'm thinking, am I gay? Like, I'd go to bed, and I'm like, 'Am I gay?' They might try and make me gay, so that's why I wouldn't like it. I wouldn't mind working with a girl; they just can't be bitchy. (Craig)

Lewis and Craig's data demonstrate a further departure from the original overt gender-egalitarian views expressed by Dan and Cole. Similarly to some of the participants from McCormack's (2014) study, Dan and Craig demonstrate ambivalence, particularly towards working with gay men. Initially, both young men offer a positive response. However, the expulsion and fear of homosexuality, particularly in Craig's response, whereby he seems anxious and concerned about working with gay men, and states that it may lead him to question his sexual orientation and 'make [him] gay', which he 'wouldn't like', coupled with coarse comments about women and 'bitchiness' curtail this reply and demonstrate the traditional hegemonic masculine expectation of maintaining distance from homosexuality (Mac an Ghaill, 1994).

As stated previously, some of the young men's interviews were conducted together due to their request, including Tommy's and Stan's. The following excerpt is our three-way discussion about working with women and gay men:

RG: Would you work with women, boys? [They both respond with 'Yeah' and laugh.] What about working with gay men? [Both laugh and say 'ew' (an expression of disgust).] Stan: Fuck that! I'm a homosexual! RG: You're what, Stan? Stan: I'm a homosexual. Tommy: Homophobic? Stan: Homosexual! RG: So, would you work with gay men then? Tommy: No! 'Cos, what if they tried getting on you? Touching your leg and that, trying to touch your cock. Stan: I'd be like, 'Fuck you, you fucking.' I'd blow his fucking head off! RG: What about working with women? Tommy: Fair enough, we can shag them. RG: Would you rather work in a place with all guys, or women and guys? Tommy: Guys. Stan: Women. Tommy: Oh yeah – it depends how fit [attractive] they are. Stan: 'Cos guys try and get on women, don't they. Tommy: Ooooo yeah (excited tone). Stan: I'm the fucking leader of the pack, and I'll fucking shag them all!

Unlike the previous Ladz' responses that have shown a full or partial distancing from the overtly sexist and homophobic position associated with working-class young men (Connell, 1995; Epstein, 1997; Willis, 1977), Tommy's and Stan's show a distinct and apparent reconnection to homophobia and degrading discourse (McRobbie, 1991) that sexually objectifies women, verges on predatory perspective and signals hegemonic masculinity in its purest form by legitimating inequality (Messerschmidt, 2018). There is also a seemingly confused understanding between Stan's anti-gay sentiment and his terminological use. For example, concerning gay men, Stan demonstrates violent disdain and states: 'I'd blow his fucking head off!' yet Stan refers to himself as 'homosexual', thus revealing a contradiction between his views and his linguistic use, which Tommy equally identifies and corrects. The inconsistencies in Tommy's and Stan's views are representative of their ways of being throughout the research, whereby protest masculine associated homophobic and sexist discourse was combined with acts related to a softer version of masculinity, including physical tactility and emotional openness (Anderson and McCormack, 2018).

Discussion and Conclusion

Although behavioural changes in working-class young men have been documented, including positive attitudes towards homosexuality, physical tactility and gender egalitarian views (Blanchard et al., 2017; McCormack, 2014; Roberts, 2013, 2018), little is known about whether these behavioural changes correspond to the most marginalised working-class young men that have, hitherto, become synonymous with laddish identities and protest masculinity (Connell, 1995; Jackson, 2006; Ward, 2015). Contributing to this knowledge gap, sustained ethnographic attention to a group of marginalised working-class young men in the Welsh valleys demonstrates that although research participants openly expressed and demonstrated gender practices associated with protest masculinity, they equally exhibited views and behaviours that might be historically considered contradictory and evidence significant changes in social practices. For example, a hugging greeting practice and physical tactility may be perceived as a feminine practice and thus challenge the hyper-masculine notion of a 'rejection of all aspects that are deemed feminine' (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003: 97), while also demonstrating same-sex touch, which historically may be perceived as homosexual behaviour (Blanchard et al., 2017; Ralph and Roberts, 2020). The visual methods data and nursing

picture revealed sensitivity, compassion and empathy, aspects that oppose protest and/or hegemonic masculinity's central features, including being unemotional and dispassionate (Collier, 1998; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Contrary to the sexist association (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Ward, 2015; Willis, 1977), some of the young men expressed gender-egalitarian views, disputing the presumed pervasiveness of the idea that women are inferior (Willis, 1977), while also deviating from the homophobic position that is often associated with working-class masculinities (Connell, 1995; Mac an Ghaill, 1994).

Although there is some variation in the young men's responses, and it would be disingenuous to claim that these practices that contradict protest masculinity (Connell, 1995) are entirely representative of the Ladz, there are unmistakable masculinity-related behavioural and attitude changes among these young men that challenge recognised understandings of laddish culture and protest masculinity (Connell, 1995; Jackson, 2006; Willis, 1977). Therefore, change in itself is not questionable; instead, it is a question of how we explain and understand this change.

The Ladz' deprived locality and marginalised status 'lock[s] [them] out of the power and privilege of hegemonic or complicit masculinities' (Roberts and Elliott, 2020: 88) and therefore negates the possibility and explanation that the young men are adopting 'hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable, but . . . distanc[ing] themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 841). Furthermore, the notions of a masculinities performance or hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014; Ward, 2015) may explain the Ladz' views and opinions. For example, the young men's attraction to manual work and school resistance demonstrates an affiliation with protest masculinity (Connell, 1995) and values including toughness and stoicism (McDowell, 2003). Whereas expressions of physical tactility, sensitivity, compassion and empathy and gender-egalitarian views may be understood as incorporating 'elements associated with . . . subordinated masculinities and femininities' (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014: 246). However, these ideas suppose that the Ladz are purposely adopting a sophisticated practice whereby softer masculine characteristics are demonstrated in an attempt to somewhat distance themselves from a protest masculine position (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Given the social location of these men, it seems implausible to argue that they are borrowing 'from below', as per hybrid masculinity.

Furthermore, inclusive masculinity (Anderson, 2009) in its complete form can be discounted as an explanatory frame for these data because some of the Ladz reject or display ambiguity around one of the key components of this theory, including pro-gay attitudes (McCormack, 2014), which leads us to the idea that class acts as 'a dampening but not prohibitive factor on the development of more inclusive attitudes and behaviours' (McCormack, 2014: 132). However, I propose a further possibility, including the fusion of both protest masculine (Connell, 1995) characteristics and softer masculine attributes (Anderson and McCormack, 2018), or what we might refer to as 'amalgamated masculinities'.

My explanation for amalgamated masculinities initially derives from the notion that protest masculinity is 'a pattern of masculinity constructed in local working-class settings' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 847) and produces gender practices including a disaffected relationship with education, manual employment aspirations, criminal behaviour and drug/alcohol use (Connell, 1995), all of which the Ladz either displayed

or openly admitted to. However, equally, the young men are assimilating some ideas of manhood and masculinity beyond their immediate community and internalising softer masculine ideals through popular culture and media, which has included scrutiny of men and masculinity (Wolfman et al., 2021).

Overall, this article builds on and strengthens the argument around changes and softer displays of masculinity among working-class young men. The Ladz' demonstrations of softer, more inclusive behaviours and views establish that changes in masculinity are not restricted to middle-class men (Roberts and Elliott, 2020) or working-class young men that have attained academic credentials (Nixon, 2018). Instead, inclusive, softer displays of masculinity and the trend evidenced by Roberts (2013), McCormack (2014) and Blanchard et al. (2017) are consistent in a group of the most marginalised contemporary working-class young men. Although the Ladz still embody elements of protest masculinity (Connell, 1995) that discount the embodiment of pure inclusive masculinity (Anderson, 2009), the young men's softer displays of masculinity are noteworthy and genuinely held. Subsequently, amalgamated masculinities is a way to conceptually understand this development of continuity and changes in masculine practices.

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