

# **A Gay Man in A Hypermasculine Kitchen: An Autoethnographic Account**

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## **Abstract:**

This brief auto-ethnographic account explores the way hegemonic masculinity is confronted when a queer male inhabits a hyper-masculine space. Themes from the literature review such as gay aesthetics, masculinity insurance, and working class masculinity are intermingled with a symbolic interactionist perspective rooted in Goffman to describe key moments from a year spent in the back of a kitchen as a gay male. Where sociological work on kitchens leaves out a conversation of masculinity this research confronts this gap head on by approaching it with current research on masculinity especially as it mingles with a classed and queer identity. As an auto-ethnographic account this study is able to bring the subjects internal experiences into the academic field speaking with and back to the discourse on hegemonic masculinity directly as a research subject.

**Keywords:** Hegemonic masculinity, working-class masculinity, auto-ethnography, Goffman, stigma, gay, queer

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## Hiper-Maskülen Bir Mutfakta Bir Gey: Oto-Etnografik Bir Anlatı

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### Özet:

Bu kısa oto-etnografik anlatı, kuir bir erkek hiper-maskülen bir mekanda bulunduğu, hegemonik erkekliğin üstüne nasıl gidildiğini, onunla nasıl yüzleşildiğini ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Gey bir erkeğin bir restoran mutfağında çalıştığı bir yılın en önemli anlarını betimleyebilmek için, makalenin literatür taramasında ele alınan gey estetik, erkeklik sigortası ve işçi sınıfı erkekliği gibi temalar, Goffman'ın teorisine dayanan bir sembolik etkileşimci perspektif ile bir arada kullanılmıştır. Bu araştırma, mutfak üzerine yürütülen sosyolojik çalışmaların eksik bıraktığı erkeklik boyutunu ele almakta; bunu da konusuna erkeklik üzerine yapılan, sınıfsal ve kuir kimlik perspektifini içeren güncel çalışmalar üzerinden yaklaşılarak yapmaktadır. Oto-etnografik bir anlatı olan bu çalışma, araştırma öznelerinin içsel deneyimlerini, hegemonik erkeklikle yürüttüğü diyalogu doğrudan bir araştırma konusu olarak ele alarak, akademik alana taşımaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:**Hegemonik erkeklik, işçi sınıfı erkekliği, oto-etnoloji, Goffman, dama, gey, kuir

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## Theoretical Frameworks

Auto-ethnography according to Norman Denzin takes into account an often differentiated other (Denzin, 2014) making Erving Goffman's *Stigma* a great theoretical departing point for complicating hegemonic masculinity as it is, "...specifically concerned with the issue of "mixed contacts"-- the moments when stigmatized and normal are in the same "social situation," that is, in one another's immediate physical presence..." (Goffman, 1963, p. 12). The "subordinate" gay man and the "dominant" straight male collide under a hegemonic masculine ideal. Unlike studies which serve to identify the themes operating in a particular hegemonic structure this study aims to show at which points the hegemonic masculinity operating in contentious ways and how that hegemonic masculinity is challenged or ignored.

Goffman's *Stigma* as well as Thomas Scheff's extensions of Goffman in *Goffman Unbound* are the theoretical underpinnings used to make sense of the auto-ethnographic account where a gay man finds himself in a hyper-masculine kitchen both contesting and conforming to the fluid concept of hegemonic masculinities. As R. W. Connel and James Messerschmidt point out, "The idea of a hierarchy of masculinities grew directly out of homosexual men's experiences with violence and prejudice with straight men." (Connel and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846) While no violence occurred leftover prejudices and assumptions were apparent. The experiences derived by living with stigma as well as working to de-stigmatize a contested masculine self serve to speak in relation with research on hegemonic masculinity as well as to breathe life directly into the academic concept through lived experience. Thus the traditional literature review is best integrated into the narrative itself.

## Methodology

A quick survey of the literature on masculinity studies reveals ethnography, participant observation, and qualitative interviews, often mixed, are the most frequently used. (Anderson, 2002; Bird, 1996; Bridges, 2014; McCormack, 2011; Morris, 2008; Nayak, 2006; Roberts, 2013; Satterlund, 2012) A personal auto-ethnography would provide a less frequently used methodology with its strengths and weaknesses. While an autoethnography is a personal account which by its nature limits the data set to one, autoethnographies have two advantages. Steven Roberts notes that interviews “...do not capture reality as it happens; they are an *account* of an event, even a representation.” (Roberts, 2013, p. 674) An auto-ethnography is qualitative data as it is experienced by the subject. It is the researcher's stance that the content generated in this study is closer to the reality of the subject than what can be derived from interviews. This view departs from Denzin (2014) when dealing with the question of myself as a real person in the text. While I do understand the argument that “these languages [autobiographic account or autoethnography] are only devices, tools, or *bricolages* for creating texts” (Denzin, 2014 p. 12). I did my best at holding up the integrity of the lived experience.

Secondly, an auto-ethnography is powerful in its ability to define, react, critique, and otherwise complicate the concept of hegemonic masculinity as a broad theoretical tool. From this angle the subject, me, gets to speak directly to hegemonic masculinity as an academic field. The subject impacts the shift in culture on a microcosmic plane and interacts with the language used in academia. Researchers using interviews use the content of the subjects to speak to the field in ways which the subjects may or may not agree. The subjects interviewed do not engage in the academic discourse surrounding their identities. A view where subjects speak directly to the theories which describe them is imperative for social research.

Autoethnographies have nine basic assumptions as described by Denzin (2014). Those properties are “(1) the existence of others; (2) the influence and importance of race, gender, and class; [in this case sexual orientation is emphasized]; (3) family beginnings; (4) turning points; (5) known and knowing authors and observers; (6) objective life markers; (7) real persons with real lives; (8) turning point experiences; and (9) truthful statements distinguished from fictions.” (Denzin, 2014, p. 7) The other emphasized here is the straight male in opposition to the gay male in a working-class context. Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe found that men, “...to do their part in maintaining men as the dominate gender group and if they wish to enjoy the privileges that come from membership in that group – must signify possession of a masculine self.” (Schrok and Schwalbe, 2009, 279 -280) The relationship between sexual orientation and class are highlighted while race is briefly mentioned where relevant. Because I am speaking from a position of white privilege even as a dishwasher a brief discussion of race focuses where this privilege played a role in my own masculine performance. Family beginnings are not elaborated upon other than how they feed into a classed masculine identity. I am a real person with a real life and this short auto-ethnography highlights a turning point for me because I quit my job and started a new one as a result of the continued homophobic discourse in the kitchen. Overall I do my best to formulate a truth as opposed to a fiction by integrating other studies on masculinity into my own story.

### **Short Auto-Ethnography: A Gay Man in a Hyper-Masculine Kitchen**

Scheff (2007) quotes “Goffman's favorite target was the idea of an individual self, standing alone, as if there were no social context.” (Scheff, 2007, p. 5) A college graduate ends up yelling at his co-workers, stomping through the kitchen, slamming his clean dishes down, and taking walking breaks to cry. He yells at the sous chef for not telling co-workers to recycle and compost correctly. He asks, “Why the fuck does nobody care?” They carelessly throw their trash in the recycling. He

is a dishwasher at a new restaurant in downtown St. Paul. To his co-workers, his erratic and emotional behavior makes no sense. The sous chef, tired of his obnoxious bickering, chucks the trash back and says, "I'm tired of your attitude."

He is gay male with a degree in Sociology. What does that mean? The cooks and sous chefs in the kitchen know we live in a consumer society and realize we are facilitating the consumption of the hockey fans, theater goers, and concert attendees. We are the minions who prepare their food and have to deal with the carnage. My co-workers have the ability to appreciate the importance of dealing with what is left behind responsibly. They react to my suggestions of recycling as if I was asking them to do something taboo. Why do I feel the need to object? Is it because I am a rural to urban migrant, a gay Iron Ranger with a private university degree? I am likely perceived by my coworkers as a nut job who is soft-spoken and polite but loses his temper under pressure. It is almost certain they do not understand the sources of that pressure, which go well beyond the stress generated by the job.

This led to the following questions. What happens when overarching conflicting values come into contact? What happens when a once stigmatized identity begins to gain legitimacy in political, religious, and educational institutions? What does the effect of these changes look like in a working class environment? A gay man finds himself in the midst of a hyper-masculine world which respects his work ethic, states its open mindedness, and enjoys his charismatic personality while simultaneously dismissing his master identity through microaggressions. In one moment a line cook uses a high pitched gay voice to mock the ridiculousness of a late night order while politely holding the door for me, a gay man. I relate to those who have a high pitched "gay" voice. So politeness and respect, holding the door open, crosses paths with a tone of voice that signifies rejection. I often focus on the fact that it is not personal and that I am respected, so I let it slide but when the word faggot leaps from the executive chef's mouth I have to say something. He excessively apologizes, offers me a raise, gives me a steak, and tells me how much he appreciates me.

## Unacknowledged Shame

When I started working at the restaurant I was mostly unaware that I was overcompensating masculinity. I simply did not know I was ashamed of being gay even though I was openly gay and out. In Goffman's terms, "Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing." (Goffman, 1963, p. 7) I was out of touch with my emotions and only wanted to prove that I could perform masculinity while simultaneously being skeptical having studied sex, sexuality, and gender during my undergrad. My relation to my own sexual orientation over time has been deeply ambiguous changing from the "closeted Jesus save me from my sins" phase to an unfiltered "condom in your face" activist days. This aligns with Goffman's theory on stigma where "the stigmatized person sometimes vacillates between cowering and bravado racing from one to the other," (Goffman, 1963, p. 7) My gay identity shifts allowing itself to regress into various forms of concealment to unabashedly open and this can happen on a whim in face to face contexts.

I have selected just a few examples of unacknowledged shame present as I prepared myself mentally for my position as a steward. The selected journal entries document the internal preparation for "the primal scenes of sociology" (Goffman, 1963, 13) "When normals and stigmatized do in fact enter one another's immediate presence..."

In August, just a few weeks before my first shift I write, "No mom my boyfriend does not have to know anything about you damn it, he does not have to know you or anyone in the family." This reveals a lot of anticipated pain due to anticipated rejection. While I am out to my family, I know that it would be difficult to bring a boyfriend to my family reunion on my mother's side. While they accept that I had come out, there had been a discussion about during which my aunt used the phrase, "loving the hater and hating the sin." My uncle disagreed with

her by making the point that the sin could not be separated from the sinner. Hating the sin is hating the sinner. Needless to say this is emotionally painful not to know the stance of my family. So I am concealing open expressions of love from all family. I go on to say, “my uncle has my views and my views are nothing like your views” which is the start of recognizing that I am dealing with a social illness concerning love, respect, and affirmation in my relationship with my family. This is the site of my own insecurity where shame can fester.

Again in the park on August 11<sup>th</sup> I write “How cute, two men holding hands in the park. I can hardly stop staring at it, bobbing my head up and down. They probably think I am homophobic but I'm just actively depriving myself of this possibility.” In a sense I was inwardly homophobic and sometimes still catch myself with self-hatred. Why was I denying myself this possibility? Because it is difficult, there is homophobia to contend with and sometimes it feels easier to live without it by not acting upon it, keeping a distance. It is the shame that has seeped itself into me and there is a constant battle of renouncing shame and keeping it away while defending my difference.

Continuing to brace myself for my entrance into a male dominated space, I deny anything I perceive as feminine and therefore gay, including my own acts of creation. “I brought up a coffee table I made, [my mother] framed it as “interior design by Jacob Woods” which is not the type of representation I desired.” It was painted abstractly with blue and white smears. It was made out of the window section of an old door that sat in our basement unused. I go on to write, “The construction of the piece is entirely masculine to me and this is the portion I would rather have recognized. I did receive praise from my brother which surprised me when I was proud of that having been struck with a feeling of admiration from someone I am envious of.” This construction of masculinity is consistent with the finding of Edward Morris (2008) where “...boy's perceived nonacademic, blue-collar work such as woodworking or construction as more active and enjoyable.” (Morris, 2008, p. 740) This desire to have my masculinity affirmed continued into my work experience as a dishwasher in downtown St. Paul. I rejected my



mother's input because the term "interior design" struck me as a gay male's profession or a woman's domain so I resented it due to repressed shame.

On September 1<sup>st</sup> there was some direct awareness of what my ego's needs were in pursuing this route while detesting it, "I think it is driven by this desire to torture myself. To stand in as a gay man doing the most masculine thing I could possibly imagine showing straight men that gay men can do some hard disgusting shit. It's an over-compensatory strategy." I followed this remark with "I used to intimidate insecure masculine men. I'm already getting off on it." I go onto describe how I physically objectified them sexually as a way to assert my orientation via aggressive masculine dominance. I also dismiss my brother's masculinity by leveraging my ability to withstand obscene hours of solitude considering him weak for letting a woman into his life. I used this as ammunition for making fun of his need for alcohol to express emotional phrases such as "I love you." This is weaved across an ongoing narrative of being cold to a male roommate I had a crush on. My absurdity, driven by taking on and acting out masculine narratives takes on an existential tone of mockery, "I am nothing but a dishwasher that sustains a bad faith, never truly being a dishwasher but instead imagining myself as Sisyphus happy with the repetition of the tasks." I go on to say that "I pose a threat and will need to overcompensate my masculinity in order to conceal my true value systems at work. My task will not require many human interactions I suspect." Which was absurdly naive and ultimately destructive of my own wellbeing.

My psychological makeup is not without context. When watching Game of Thrones I see the very things that I feel when I write, "How emotionally charged we all are, straight men using their bodies to negate my existence, my brother and strangers alike. White men are slowly losing their symbolic power and we enter the phase of the feminist revenge where men will be belittled by women and their tiny penises will be seized up by a thumb and pointer finger and in some cases a tweezers will be needed. I am the result of the world, born against my own will and placed in something which was never my own nor will ever

be my own and if I attempt to alter it in a way which takes away the symbolic control of white men we cannot be seen together in paradise, earth, or hell. We are all negating in our current arrangement a constant threat to each other's animalistic wills. We will pull and tug, finger and lick, spank and spit until we become united in full sexual bonds, enjoying our presence as twins in the womb of a manic God. This is why I must exercise to allow my physical strength and virgin youth appearance to deplore and confuse the men of the restaurant."

### **Denial: Laughing Off Microaggressions**

**T**hese were the thoughts I used to brace myself for an already stressful workplace filled with penis jokes and homo jokes galore. In the kitchen with a gay man anything could be turned into a penis reference. Through a litany of penis references and high pitched voices I laughed instead of asking for the behavior to stop. I recognized that teasing was common in the workplace. Gary Alan Fine notes that, "Teasing is one measure that a workplace – or any social system – is harmonious. Teasing is a marker of community; its existence recognizes there is enough looseness or "give" in relationships that one person can make a joke at another's expense without the belief that those sentiments are real." (Fine, 1996, p. 120) While Fine leaves out the role masculinity has to play in interactions such as the server who drew a ketchup penis on my work space, Ava Baron confronts behaviors such as bananas used as penis references, in a historical look of working class masculinity. "Learning to "take a joke like a man" in certain contexts becomes a means of initiation into a male workplace fraternity. Only "real men" can laugh at themselves while being insulted." (Baron, 2006, p.153) I had to define for myself what was acceptable teasing and what was not. I found that behaviors and language that targeted my identity were a problem partly because I was insecure about my sexual orientation. I could take a joke, just not ones that were about that. This can be explored by looking at my own utterance "Do I really sound like that?" to someone using the high pitched gay voice with the clear intent

to mock my angry attitude. This response is rife with underlying driving forces and assumptions.

One of those driving forces supports Scheff's (2007) interpretation of Goffman,

“When anger has its source in feelings of rejection or inadequacy, and when the latter feelings are not acknowledged, a continuous spiral of shame/anger may result, which can be experienced as hatred and rage. Rather than expressing and discharging one's shame, it is masked by rage and aggression. One can be angry one is ashamed, and ashamed that one is angry, and so on, working up to a loop of unlimited duration and intensity. This loop may be the emotional basis of lengthy episodes or even lifelong hatred.” (Scheff, 2007, p. 129)

This cycle of mine needed to be both acknowledged and stopped. This was intimidating because it meant I needed to confront the people that were higher up on the corporate hierarchy. It turned out that after gaining respect and identifying shame as a source of some problems most of my neurotic fears were not true for my location in St. Paul. At least in a state where men were starting to accept other gay men as equally significant I could tell others when they were bugging me and ask for specific behaviors to stop. It took me several months before I realized I was acting neurotic and could simply ask for certain problems to stop because my assessment of homophobia was morphed by a larger politically charged atmosphere. With an impending vice president that had allegedly stated, “If you like it in the crapper you get the zapper,” I was justified in my fears given the national conversation. I had been harassed in for walking in Hutchinson, a town an hour away. Someone hollered from their car, “God hates fags.” and again in the same town a week earlier, “Why do you walk that way?” Not to mention I had Charlottesville on my mind which while it targeted a Jewish identity more directly, the phrase, “fuck you faggots” was taunted. And what

about the Orlando night club? Why was I silent for so long? Why did I not push back?

While I shared the same frustrations as gay athletes I challenge two phrases used in Eric Anderson's study. The first is "failed to recognize their identities were being denied" and secondly "took part in their own oppression" (Anderson, 2002, p. 870). I reiterate the constant fear of violence that haunts every queers mind (Anderson, 2002). While gay athletes may have concealed statements that asserted their gay identity for other reasons, for me it was out of fear that if I pushed back something physical would happen. Like athletes who tolerated sex talk and sometimes participated, (Anderson, 2002) I listened to cooks talk about their sex life without asking me about mine. For me, these conversations highlighted my difference and oppression. This was just the opposite of a failed recognition. It strikes me as odd to partake in my own oppression, but rather I likely react to oppression in ways which I believe to best benefit my wellbeing. That includes safety. I most certainly did not fail to recognize what could and could not be discussed without awkwardness or consequence. While I cannot speak for those athletes interviewed, it's not without significance that the primary patrons of the restaurant were hockey fans with workers who all enjoy hockey.

With this tension between progress and stagnation, signs of empowerment and oppression, over time I took the view that this setting was on the side of progress and that there was room to work. This shift in perceptions of gay men as well as a shift in masculinity is noted in recent literature. In *Boys will Be Boys* by Steven Roberts points out how men in retail do not conform to the static character of masculinity presented in academia on working class men (Roberts, 2013). And in one of the more progressive manifestations of masculinity, which may not be progressive, Tristan Bridges found that men adopt a gay aesthetics to appeal more progressive than they actually are (Bridges, 2014). While Joshua Gamson argues cultural representation of queers has increased in problematic and economically motivated ways, (Gamson, 2005), this

increased visibility likely played into the ability to make positive change to homophobic discourse when it was present.

### **Challenging Homophobic Discourse by Redirecting Shame**

I did not start challenging the social problems in my environment until April 2017 when I had a breakdown during an eight hour shift. All of my troubles in my personal life and my life at work seemed to mold into one problem, that of composting and recycling. I ended up overstepping the hierarchical boundaries and hollered at the sous chef for not supporting my recycling and composting efforts, and proceeded to take a walking break to cry outside. But what became increasingly obvious after this meltdown was a desire to affirm my masculine identity to the point of dismissing my own conflicting convictions about masculinity. Scheff (2007) writes “Members of a group who feel not accepted both by foreigners and in their own group are in a position to surrender their individual identity in order to be accepted, giving rise in the German case to the principle of blind loyalty and obedience.” (Scheff, 2007, p. 129) This is not a process that goes unacknowledged internally, but is expressed overtly for its effects of appearing like one belongs.

During a stressful night the executive chef let the word faggot out of his mouth. At first I could not believe it and wondered if I should confront him. He did mumble, “that is politically incorrect” but it was not about PC culture. It was about respect. I understood what Fine had found when studying kitchens. “By expressing anger, one closes a frustrating event and reestablishes rhythm.” (Fine, 1996, p. 69) Furthermore, “Anger is seen as a means of achieving temporal stability and coping with the behavioral reality of the kitchen.” (Fine, 1996, p. 69) While the anger was justified there are a whole litany of curse words less damaging to me than this one.

The kitchen was just as full of mixed messages as society at large. Gay marriage is approved and then is followed by a hostile administration. In one moment I am loved and accepted at the same time I receive negative feedback on markers of gay identity. In May 2017 a

line cook held the door open for me while using a high pitched gay voice. Someone ordered a salad past ten pm when material for salads had already been put away. This voice mocked the customer yet I was there. While I understood that the voice was not directed at me I was still upset that I had to listen to a representation of a gay person. Of course it had to be a gay person that ordered that salad. Shortly after I asked the closing line cook if I could get some ice cream and he said, "Jacob, of course, you do not have to ask." he chuckled. This mixed message about my identity was again apparent with the chef's denouncement of an order when he said faggot.

The word was not directed at me. It was directed at a customer who could not hear it, and was said in a tone that conveyed annoyance. It was likely a response to the inconvenience of their order. The day before I had practiced sticking up for myself after a server made fun of my compliment on a woman's dress. Now I needed to have another conversation with my supervisor. While I heard him say "Dinner is on me" because I did the work of two, I was so upset by the word faggot that I did not want the food. I wanted a sincere apology.

Prior to this day I was overcompensating my perceived lack of masculinity in a space where "stigmatized and normal are in the same "social situation" (Goffman, 1963, p. 12). Anti-gay cues provoked my insecurities and I took those to be fuel for my raging fire. I wanted to prove my competence without having to address the issue head on. Thus the rage shame cycle or silence to violence cycle took over. I also had been interpreting these remarks as intentional for the purpose of getting me to quit but as I found out when discussing the word with chef this was simply language leftover from his upbringing. If this was true for other individuals I had confronted they were completely unaware of the emotional damage they were causing. When some said they did not mean anything personal by it they were probably being sincere. But it had to stop.

When I was offered food by chef a server said "now that is true love" but true love is about mutual understanding and Chef was not

understanding the full effect of his speech and the server may not have been present or may not have noticed the statement, attributing the same amount of importance to the word faggot as the words fuck or damn. When the rush was over and Chef's temper had subsided I asked if he had a moment to chat. He was continuing to thank me and offer moral support in light of the chaos that is doing the work of two. I asked that we go into the hallway to chat in private and said, "I overheard you apologize for using a politically incorrect word. I'm not sure which one it was. If you do not mind telling me, what was it?" He confidently but shamefully said, "Faggot". He admitted it which meant that I had room to work.

I explained to him the word had nothing to do with being politically correct and it was about respect. I had chosen the word respect because respect for co-workers/employees was emphasized in the kitchen. I avoided the term microaggression strategically as that was academic jargon. He interrupted, agreeing the word was derogatory. I went into talking about my early college days to reiterate my gay identity in the context of extreme masculine environments. I mentioned everyone up north had guns in the back of their trucks because they were hunters and when I did HIV and AIDS training for the gay alliance during my radical activist days I threw condoms at these men. When I said this out loud I was trying to convey fearlessness, bravery, and pride. I was trying to relate to his masculinity, him being a big buff man, while also showing that I have a life story driven by this one issue. While I did not say it, the word faggot invokes the negative impacts of living with this identity, an identity that has threatened my relationships to belonging to social institutions and communities my whole life. I did convey the pain when I acted out my feeling, "When I hear a word like that it really gets to me." I illustrated my point by letting my arms and backbone go limp and leaning forward, with my head down in a sad subordinate position.

He said that while it is no excuse, he was a redneck and had grown up using those words. I had grown up in this environment as well, hence the self-hatred and shame in the first place, "We all have a story to tell, I

get it.” I mentioned that I respected his job, said it is a lot of pressure to work under and suggested that he replace the word faggot with something equally intense like the word fuck. He said, “I have kids and I should not be swearing at all.” Before he left for home he apologized four times, said he would never use the word again and if he did I should take it to the general manager. He also said his wife was involved with an LGBTQIA friendly church and goes off on him when he tells racist jokes. He mentioned in another conversation he was once president of a rosary garden and plants hybrid tea flowers which is from an interview, “not a fact he often shares with the guys.” This shows that under the logic of the gender binary he both somewhat guarded and comfortable with his feminine side or that he was trying to deploy a gay aesthetics where “men try to distance themselves from stereotypical masculinity” (Bridges, 2014, p. 70) to get off the hook.

This moment is academically rigorous in that it is what hegemonic masculinity should do. It should “...recognize social struggles in which subordinated masculinities influence dominant forms.” (Connel and Messerschmidt, 879). This moment is where “subordinate” masculinity attempts to reform “dominant” masculinity. This moment challenges a discourse used to justify violence and hate speech. Here subordinate and dominant are put in quotes because my masculine reality regardless of its place on the hierarchy served to push back and effectively change the frequency of homophobic behaviors and discourse in the kitchen. This incident puts into question the idea of subordinate and dominant masculinity if only subtly. In short, was I really “subordinate” when I used my voice to speak to the “dominant” executive chef about his use of the word faggot when in context I was pulling twice the weight? Was not my execution of white working class masculinity, a Goffmanian bravado, as a gay male precisely why I was able question the presence of problematic language? To watch him babble in apologies when I called him out on it gave me the upper hand and resulted in a very expensive steak which I devoured with masculine delight. Was he still dominant then? In this moment I deflected and transformed a language's effects that could manifest as silence and shame into a moment of exercising



agency to confront the unquestioned homophobic discourse of the kitchen. This word “faggot” tries to shame the subjects to whom it is directed but because I have nothing to be ashamed of harming nobody, I have to redirect shame onto the actors by confronting them.

### **Working-Class Ethic and Values as Masculinity Insurance**

**A**cting out a superb work ethic allowed me to challenge hegemonic masculinity which sustained my social and economic benefits in the restaurant. I found that my working-class work ethic, a working-class masculinity, served as a type of “masculinity insurance” (Anderson, 2002, p. 875) where exceptionally talented gay athletes get a pass in homophobic environments as winning is valued more than one's sexual orientation. In this case my ability to keep pace in the kitchen without complaint served as a masculinity insurance which could be used to curve homophobic discourse because my working class values and ethic overrode the gay aspect. Melvin Kohn's research as cited by Dennis Gilbert (2008) shows the relationship between parental values and occupational experience. “Kohn studied class differences in the values parents impart to their children.” (Gilbert 2008, pg. 96) Working class parents value obedience, manners, “good student”, neatness, cleanliness in their children. Their own values reflect strong punishment for deviance, stuck to old ways, people not trustworthy, and believe in strict leadership. Job characteristics have close supervision, repetitive work, and work with physical things. (Gilbert, 2008)

In another vein, this working class upbringing instilled in me a working class masculinity where I valued the muscular features I obtained from the labor itself. This is congruent with Baron (2006) where “...toughness, physical strength, aggressiveness, and risk-taking.” are emphasized (Baron, 2006, p. 146). Physical toughness is again emphasized in Morris (Morris, 2008). While kitchen work did not pose significant risks to the body, cuts, burns, and physical pain were all common and tolerated without interfering with workplace output. In contrast to findings on masculinity in subjects in low status jobs

(Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009) I did not often reject commands and rules from the executive chef. I was mostly complacent with workplace tasks and found my masculinity aligned more with Roberts finding where men in retail obtained a sense of masculinity in that they had a job at all (Roberts, 2013) versus the amount of money made by it or whether or not it was manual labor. This was in part due to being labeled “lead steward” as the turnover for dishwashers was high. Due to the responsibility I had over “subordinates” where I had to “...make things happen and resist being dominated by others...” (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009, p. 280) I had the tiniest sense of superiority which rested on class and raced relations. I do have a degree and am white and worked with the urban working-class mostly coming from east St. Paul. My coworkers were diverse and from interactions I derived more poor than I had been by the time I reached high school when my mother started working full time as a special education teacher.

Many of these insights are relevant to my upbringing. Having been raised using wood stoves we would spend many hours tossing wood into the back of trucks and hauling it to be stacked and piled. We worked with things and my uncle was the close supervisor valuing neatness. The wood had to be stacked flush with each other and each end piece carefully selected for the fortification of the sides so the piles would not fall over. It was very repetitive and there was no room for negotiation when conflicts came up. This reflects working class child rearing where Gilbert cites Kohn (2008) “parents [do] not focus on developing their children’s language skills. They did not draw out their opinions or expect to be challenged by them.” (Gilbert, 2008, p. 101) If I or any other child acted out or tried to disagree we were punished. Kohn as cited by Gilbert also found, “They disciplined their children with short, clear directives – sometimes coupled with physical punishment – which children generally accepted without complaint.” (Gilbert, 2008, p. 101)

In the work place I would sometimes run out of my regular things to do and see that other things could still be done such as washing out the bottoms of the garbage cans. The fellow that brings us our linens, rags, and various cloths noticed that it was a slow day and that I was

working instead of “dicking around”. He said to me that he told my supervisor about this and that not many people do that these days. I speculate that this perception of the lack of self-motivated action is a result of the millennial middle class ending up in unskilled labor after college. At any rate this action was something that was respected and among other things resulted in a successful request for a raise a few weeks later. The “linen man” said he put a good word in for me so I used that successfully to get a pay bump.

In short my work ethic and comfort with repetitive meaningless labor made it so my actions in the workplace were recognized as a valuable addition to the team. My conformity, manners, and attitude were all presented in an effective way. My effective conformity to the needs of the restaurant, such as not complaining, finding work to do when it was slow, keeping my work area clean, and doing what I was asked to do contributed to an overall value I could leverage in protecting the needs concerning my sexual orientation. I was a phenomenal worker and thus when I stated my needs or what should not happen to me or in my presence they were respected not simply because I had asked for these things to change but because the values instilled in me as a child and young adult were still playing out in a workplace that also valued them more than they unintentionally undervalued or rejected the deviation of my sexual orientation through language and action.

## Conclusion

In conclusion it is necessary to point out interactions which were left out and could be explored in more detail. While there were many incidents that dealt with race, class, gender, and educational attainment, these were left out with the intent to focus on sexual orientation and working-class identity. My white privilege, my male body, and my bachelor’s degree in Sociology both open up and close off certain areas of insight. I avoided commenting on moments where hegemonic masculinity in action focused on other people in the kitchen across gender, class, and race. While these moments are plentiful they

did not pertain to me and my experience and left them out accordingly. Furthermore a whole set of interactions between me and women could be elaborated on to show how working-class women reflect popular media such as *Queer Eye For a Straight Guy* and many others when presented with a queer male. This was also left out as I wanted to focus on my interactions with men.

Overall this auto-ethnographic account documents how shame can be either concealed or redistributed in a context where a queer male inhabits a hypermasculine space which provokes his identity. By acknowledging a progressive Twin Cities culture and leveraging a working-class masculinity, a type of masculinity insurance, homophobic discourse and behavior under the guise of joking can be successfully curved. The concept of masculinity insurance can be further developed and applied across other contexts outside the domain of sports when dealing with queer men. However this incident of masculinity insurance does not find that oppression goes unacknowledged but rather concealing markers of a gay identity serves to protect the best interest of the subject.

On a theoretical plane we find that because Goffman focuses on stigmatized identities across multiple identities ranging from amputation to stutters, blindness to queerness his breadth omits specifications that may be limited to particular identities. More specifically his ideas are limited and outdated on his insight to the ways in which a person with stigma responds to environments which exacerbate insecurities about one's identity. This auto-ethnographic account is an update to the question "How does the stigmatized person respond to his situation?" (Goffman, 1963, p. 9) A person can go through an intense mental bracing process when anticipating encounters with the very people who can most provoke a specific "shameful" identity. It also appears that the stigmatized's attempt to "correct his condition" is not only a "private effort" to master areas that are closed off to one's shortcomings. (Goffman, 10) This attempt to overcompensate one's perceived or actual deficiencies is a sustained effort that can occur not only "in isolation from current contact between normals and

stigmatized” (Goffman, 1963, p. 12) but in this case a year-long effort performed in front of those perceived to have the very ideal of what I perceived myself to lack.

Another useful concept is that of gay aesthetics. While gay aesthetics often serves to reinforce problematic elements of hegemonic masculinity, in the context of a sincere apology the posturing of a gay aesthetics performed in front of the offended gay male served to curve the damage of a derogatory term. The posturing of a gay aesthetics, planting tea flowers and having an LGBTQ progressive wife, was effective in calming the damage caused by the word faggot. While the word was a terrible slip the culprit had to remind himself of his own stance on progressive issues despite having a language which reflected his own rural redneck upbringing. Judging from Facebook interactions the executive chef who used this word is actually quite progressive often liking my own queer positive posts such as a rainbow colored dildo.

Lastly this account highlights the ways in which a version of hegemonic masculinity as it operates in the kitchen is confronted and challenged blurring the lines between dominant and subordinate masculinity. It shows that queer men and straight men are agents who are slightly more flexible in their ability and willingness to both challenge and curve homophobic discourse and behavior in the workplace even if those behaviors and statements led to a job change. Overall I found a willingness of straight men to hug, engage in vulnerable moments that acknowledged feelings, and to respect the boundaries of their co-worker where those boundaries were reasonable for the specific operation of hegemonic masculinity at that site. Perhaps the fact that their most efficient dishwasher left them because they insisted on singing Lady Gaga obnoxiously just to get under my nerves taught them a lesson. I know they spent more nights in the back washing dishes because the new dishwashers could not keep pace which meant the line cooks had to wash the dishes at the end of the night.

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