

Homosocial and heterosocial academics in masculinity contest cultures

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to examine how masculinities are reproduced in academic workplace cultures through homosocial and heterosocial relations in the context of neoliberal university reforms.

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior lecturers across two departments of a major social science subject at two Swedish universities. We employ the analytical dimensions of Masculine Contest Cultures (MCC) to analyse gender dynamics within academic settings undergoing managerialist transformation.

Findings – The study identifies patterns of harmonic versus competitive homosociality and homogenous versus fragmented heterosociality. Competitive homosociality emerges when neoliberal performance management systems disrupt traditional academic hierarchies, while harmonic homosociality persists where organisational narratives celebrate men's achievements. Women's responses vary correspondingly through fragmented heterosociality (withdrawal from traditional supportive roles) or homogenous heterosociality (maintaining collective support for men's privileges and advancement).

Research limitations/implications – The study is limited to Swedish universities and senior lecturers. Future research should examine intersectional factors and conduct comparative studies across national contexts and career stages.

Practical implications – Findings suggest that performance management systems can reinforce gender hierarchies when implemented without attention to homosocial and heterosocial dynamics. Universities need to provide better institutional support for middle managers, particularly women, who face contradictory expectations from multiple directions.

Social implications – Understanding academic institutions as sites of masculinity contests offers insights for creating more equitable academic environments and addressing persistent gender inequalities in higher education by recognising the complex dynamics between men's competitive relations and women's varied responses to masculine workplace cultures.

Originality/value – This study contributes to understanding gender dynamics in higher education by developing a nuanced conceptual framework for understanding masculinity contests in academic settings and demonstrating how seemingly similar neoliberal transformations produce different gendered outcomes across institutions through the interplay of homosocial and heterosocial relations.

Keywords Masculinity, Homosociality, Heterosociality, Organisational culture, Gender equality, Higher education, Neoliberalism

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

In this article, we examine homosocial cultures in academic settings and the role of heterosocial relations within them. A substantial body of research suggests that academic workplace cultures have become increasingly dominated by new forms of managerialist, individualist, performance-based hegemonic masculinities following the implementation of neoliberal reforms and New Public Management principles (Tsouroufli *et al.*, 2025).

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Within these evolving university cultures, women and other minorities continue to face discrimination, albeit sometimes in more subtle forms than the traditional patriarchal nepotism and favouritism (van den Brink and Benschop, 2012). Despite decades of gender equality initiatives in higher education, sexism and harassment remain persistent features of academic environments (Yarrow and Davies, 2024).

We interrogate this through the lens of homosociality – i.e. nonsexual interpersonal attractions between men – which scholars have identified as central to the construction and reproduction of hegemonic masculinities in organisational power structures (Holgersson, 2013). As Bird (1996) noted, heterosociality – i.e. women’s orientation toward and support of men – often plays a critical role in sustaining such cultures. Taking homosociality and heterosociality as central to understanding academic workplace dynamics, we pose the research question: How are masculinities reproduced in academic workplace cultures through homosocial and heterosocial relations?

We employ the theoretical notion of Masculine Contest Cultures (MCC) (Berdahl *et al.*, 2018) to link constructions of masculinity to their consequences for workplace cultures. While homosocial relations are often framed in somewhat harmonious terms (men orienting themselves toward other men through mutual respect, admiration and recognition), MCC suggests that masculinity also emerges through contest and competition between men in never-ending negotiations of power and status, where manhood is elusive, tenuous and must be publicly proven repeatedly (Berdahl *et al.*, 2018; Vandello and Bosson, 2013). We also examine heterosocial relations (Lipman-Blumen, 1976) in homosocial cultures – the extent to which women are expected to orient themselves toward men, recognise men’s ongoing status negotiations and the consequences for women’s well-being and career advancement in academic settings.

The article is structured as follows: first, we review the literature on homosociality and heterosociality, linking these concepts to MCC. Following a brief review of our research methods, we discuss our findings from in-depth interviews with senior lecturers in two departments of a major social science subject at two Swedish universities. We contribute by (1) extending our understanding of how masculinity contests shape academic work environments in the context of neoliberal reforms, (2) offering a nuanced analysis of the interrelation between homosocial and heterosocial dynamics in university settings and (3) developing a conceptual framework of harmonic versus competitive homosociality, and homogenous versus fragmented heterosociality, which helps understand the reproduction of masculinities in contemporary academia.

2. Masculinities and homosocial cultures in academia

Our study is set in an era where traditional academic inequality regimes are being reconfigured through managerialist reforms that foster new forms of individualist, performance-based hegemonic masculinities (De Coster and Zanoni, 2019; Tsouroufli *et al.*, 2025). Traditional and emerging forms of masculinity coexist and merge, with consequences such as men reinforcing norms that prioritise work and careers while simultaneously arguing that women should be similarly encouraged to make such priorities (Snickare and Wahl, 2024). Masculinities in academic organisations must thus be analysed as assemblages of various masculinities situated in temporal, spatial and cultural contexts (Buschmeyer and Lengersdorf, 2016). At the same time, women continue to be positioned as deviants who need to be “fixed” while existing traditions and values remain preserved (Fagan and Teasdale, 2021; Bleijenbergh, 2022; Muñoz-García *et al.*, 2024; Snickare and Wahl, 2024). The production and reproduction of masculinities and femininities are linked not only to academia as such, but also to surrounding societal cultures and to traditions within specific institutions.

Masculinities in the workplace are produced and reproduced through homosocial and heterosocial cultural processes whereby employees relate to each other and co-construct notions of what is desirable and legitimate (Holgersson, 2013). Homosociality fundamentally involves “the seeking, enjoyment and/or preference for the company of the same sex”

(Lipman-Blumen, 1976, p. 16), with men orienting themselves toward other men across multiple life domains. In organisational contexts, this orientation allows men to exert influence over institutional directions and resources while perpetuating emotional detachment, competitiveness and sexual objectification of women (Bird, 1996). Homosocial workplace cultures are inherently laden with notions of status and power (Holgersson, 2013) and are reproduced as men respond to expectations regarding certain appearances and behaviours. This typically occurs through adaptation – acquiring ways of talking, behaving, referencing and performing that are positively coded as masculine in the local milieu, refraining from challenging existing hierarchies and power structures (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009), and building and sustaining close relationships with other men. Such adaptation entails understanding what is expected in terms of competitiveness, aggression and conflict orientation – conformity to these expectations is essential for inclusion.

In homosocial male-dominated cultures, women frequently respond to heterosocial expectations, orienting themselves toward men to gain inclusion (Lipman-Blumen, 1976). Heterosociality can be displayed through women distancing themselves from other women and from stereotypically feminine attributes and perspectives, while refraining from articulating women's experiences. This behaviour demonstrates loyalty to men and signals that they do not pose a threat—consequently, men receive recognition from women while women's specific experiences are further invisibilised and marginalised. Heterosocial relations are less theorised than homosocial ones (Bird, 1996), but it can be expected that they contribute to the reproduction of homosocial cultures by reinforcing women's subordinate position within these structures.

Building on this existing research on masculinities in the workplace, Berdahl *et al.* (2018) developed the concept of Masculine Contest Cultures (MCC) to emphasise how men in homosocial cultures continuously prove masculinity through competitive performance along several interrelated dimensions (Glick *et al.*, 2018). Central to MCC is the expectation that employees project invulnerability and strength, never showing weakness or acknowledging limitations. This involves suppressing emotions (particularly those coded as feminine), avoiding requests for help and concealing personal problems. Such performances reflect the precarious nature of masculinity – the constant need to demonstrate capability and control in the face of potential challenges to one's status. Endurance and stamina are valorised, manifested through long working hours, the ability to handle high-pressure situations without visible stress and demonstrating one's capacity to outwork and outlast competitors. Complete dedication to work becomes the measure of commitment and ambition, positioning family responsibilities, personal time and work-life balance as signs of insufficient seriousness or capability. Underpinning these expectations is a fundamentally competitive framing of workplace relationships, where colleagues are positioned as rivals rather than collaborators, and winning becomes paramount even at the expense of others' success or organisational collegiality. Work and careers become constructed as zero-sum games where one person's advancement necessarily comes at another's expense (Matos *et al.*, 2018).

Within these cultures, there is a clear risk that men perform manhood acts that transcend ethical boundaries and endanger others through incivility, bullying, harassment, and abuse. Berdahl *et al.* (2018) observe that “less masculine” men also participate in reproducing these cultures, either through aspirations to be included in homosocial interactions or through positioning as passive bystanders. These dysfunctional organisational climates are associated with poor individual outcomes for both men and women, including burnout, lower well-being and reduced organisational commitment.

Masculine contest cultures in academia differ somewhat from those described by Berdahl *et al.* (2018) in corporate contexts. While the general MCC dimensions – not showing weakness, proving stamina, putting work first and winning at all costs – apply, they manifest distinctively in academic settings. Academics navigate complex, sometimes contradictory performance expectations across different areas of work, and demonstrating one's superiority through excessive work hours alone may be insufficient. Moreover, contemporary academic

masculinity includes managing relations with women through seemingly progressive approaches to gender equality while maintaining structural advantages (Armato, 2013). This reflects what Yarrow and Davies (2024) identify as sophisticated forms of cultural sexism that operate through apparently benevolent mechanisms.

Rather than employing the quantitative metrics identified in the MCC model (Glick *et al.*, 2018), we utilise its analytical dimensions – culture and leadership characteristics, enacted dominative behaviours, patterns of relations to work and general sense of well-being – to examine homosocial and heterosocial dynamics in academic settings. This qualitative adaptation allows us to explore how MCC manifests in specific institutional contexts while remaining attentive to variations, contradictions and forms of resistance that might be obscured by standardised measurement approaches. Crucially, we extend the MCC framework by explicitly theorising heterosociality – women’s varied responses to masculine workplace cultures. By analysing both homosocial relations among men and heterosocial dynamics between men and women, we offer a more holistic account of how gender operates in academic workplace cultures undergoing neoliberal transformation. This approach also recognises the importance of specific structural factors in academic settings, such as tenure systems, grant allocation, publication metrics and administrative structures in shaping how masculinity contests unfold.

3. Methodology

We conducted 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews with male and female senior lecturers in a major social science subject at two Swedish universities, “Alpha” and “Beta” (see Table 1). Both are comprehensive state-owned universities representing the dominant institutional model in the national higher education system. They are well-established research and teaching institutions comprising multiple faculties, and were selected as typical examples of universities in this context currently undergoing neoliberal transformation.

At both universities, senior lecturers face an increasing set of formal expectations: delivering a significant and exact number of teaching hours, producing bibliometrically recognisable scientific publications, and adhering to managerial rules and regulations. However, the two departments differ significantly in their managerial practices and how neoliberal reforms have been translated into workplace cultures, providing contrasting cases for examining homosocial and heterosocial dynamics.

We deliberately focused on senior lecturers because they hold tenured positions resulting from past achievements, meaning they no longer face the precarity experienced by early-career academics. This allowed us to examine their lived experiences as established academics without foregrounding anxieties related to job insecurity (Lindgren *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, some participants held administrative roles, providing insights into leadership cultures within their departments.

Table 1. List of participants, with approximate age

Alpha university (n = 10)	Beta university (n = 9)
AA, woman, senior lecturer, reader, 45 yr	BA, man, senior lecturer, 35 yr
AB, man, senior lecturer, unit head, 60 yr	BB, man, senior lecturer, reader, 40 yr
AC, woman, senior lecturer, 35 yr	BC, man, senior lecturer, 35 yr
AD, woman, senior lecturer, unit head, 45 yr	BD, woman, senior lecturer, 40 yr
AE, woman, senior lecturer, reader, 50 yr	BE, woman, senior lecturer, reader, unit head, 50 yr
AF, man, senior lecturer, 50 yr	BF, woman, senior lecturer, 55 yr
AG, woman, senior lecturer, unit head, 55 yr	BG, man, senior lecturer, reader, 65 yr
AH, man, senior lecturer, 45 yr	BH, man, senior lecturer, 60 yr
AI, woman, senior lecturer, 40 yr	BI, woman, senior lecturer, reader, 60 yr
AJ, man, senior lecturer, 40 yr	
Source(s): Authors’ own work	

We identified all active senior lecturers through departmental websites, then contacted a sample ensuring variation in gender and age. This sampling strategy aimed to capture diverse experiences of homosocial and heterosocial workplace interactions, as well as varied perspectives on how workplace cultures and managerial practices have evolved over time. All contacted lecturers initially agreed to participate, though one interview at Beta was subsequently cancelled.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face at participants' workplaces, audio-recorded with informed consent and lasted between one and two hours. Participants were assured of confidentiality through anonymisation of names, specific universities and department details. Given the potentially sensitive nature of discussions about workplace dynamics and gender relations, we remained attentive to participants' comfort during interviews and respected boundaries regarding what they wished to share. The project received approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

Our interview guide was informed by theoretical perspectives on academic careers, identity construction, work-life balance and gender dynamics in higher education. In line with our research question, we sought to elicit stories and examples related to the MCC dimensions conceptualised by [Glick et al. \(2018\)](#): culture and leadership characteristics, enacted dominative behaviours, patterns of relations to work and general sense of well-being. Interview questions explored homophily and workplace cultures (cf. [Holgersson, 2013](#)), patterns of collaboration and competition, and experiences of organisational change. While guided by these theoretical themes, we encouraged participants to raise and explore aspects of their experiences that they found particularly salient.

We approached data analysis after completing and transcribing all interviews, following an iterative process moving between theory and data ([Yarrow and Davies, 2024](#)). Our analytical approach combined thematic analysis with narrative elements to capture both patterns across interviews and the richness of individual experiences.

Analysis proceeded in two main steps. First, we created detailed descriptions of each department as a workplace, drawing on participants' accounts of organisational history, development, key characteristics, significant actors and everyday modes of interaction. This provided contextual understanding of the institutional settings in which gender dynamics unfold.

Second, we focused specifically on understanding the departments as gendered spaces, examining how expectations, merit, status, influence and recognition are continuously negotiated in relation to gender. We systematically identified descriptions of "manhood acts" ([Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009](#)) and examples of homosocial and heterosocial practices, paying particular attention to their consequences for individuals.

Throughout the analysis, we worked collaboratively, comparing interpretations and challenging each other's readings of the data to ensure analytical rigour (cf. [Yarrow and Davies, 2024](#)). We also employed reflexivity regarding our own positions as researchers studying gender dynamics in academia, acknowledging that our own experiences and perspectives as academics shape how we interpret participants' accounts.

4. Findings

This section presents our analysis of the two departments through the lens of Masculine Contest Culture (MCC) dimensions ([Berdahl et al., 2018](#); [Glick et al., 2018](#)). Table 2 summarises the two departments using the MCC dimensions.

4.1 Alpha University

As part of transforming Alpha from a teaching-focused regional college into a full-fledged university, a new management team implemented a hierarchical organisational structure with extensive performance measurement and managerial control systems. The Faculty of Social

Table 2. Characteristics of alpha and beta social science departments across MCC dimensions

MCC dimensions (Glick et al., 2018)	Alpha university social science dept	Beta university social science dept
Culture and leadership characteristics (psychological safety, heterosexist culture, toxic leadership, support for work-life balance)	Former regional teaching institution under transition to national research university New and heavily disputed hierarchical, managerialist leadership culture. Increasing individualism, performance-orientation and competition Shift of power from senior male professors to younger (mostly female) formal managers	Well-established national teaching and research university Organisation lacking confidence – promoting international publications, cooperations and internal “star scholars” Collegial and rather gender-equal management based in seniority, entitlement and academic status
Enacted dominative behaviour (bullying, sexual harassment, ethnic harassment)	Bullying of (mostly female) middle managers. Open conflict between male professors Invisibilisation and marginalisation of women in public spaces Ethnic subordination of women	Recognition of male “star scholars” in public spaces. Congratulatory culture “Star scholars” detaching themselves from their organisation Women compliant and expected to offer heterosocial support and sacrifice
Patterns of relations to work (burnout, organisational dedication, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, work performance)	Conflicts and frequent burnouts Significant – yet often un-realised – turnover intentions. Strong reluctance among men to accept leadership assignments Satisfaction with teaching performance, dissatisfaction with research output demands and management practices	Gentle and positive interactions at work Low turnover—a culture of remaining and not rocking the boat Satisfaction with general performance, albeit under financial hardships that call for solidarity and sacrifices
General sense of well-being (psychological health, general health)	Somewhat stressful and conflict-ridden work environment	Positive and considerate work environment
Source(s): Authors’ own work		

Sciences was among the first to adopt this regime, creating what faculty members describe as fragmented academic collegiality and a culture of internal competition:

I don’t know how much trust we actually have in [the Dean of Faculty]. People are quite unsure about how these systems will be used. My experience is that they are used as a way of . . . well, not bullying people, but they are used to put pressure on people. To compare people. It creates situations, where people start to compete in a way that . . . they become intimidated of this, that they are so clearly to be compared with others and so on. (AI, woman)

Alpha had a tradition of practice-oriented research and teaching groups with close connections to civil society and public sector organisations. In contrast, the new leadership emphasised publishing in international journals and securing external research grants. Power and status at the department had traditionally been concentrated in a small group of male full professors, who led the groups and consistently dominated departmental meetings and discussions. At the same time, a new generation of young senior lecturers with strong international publication merits was recruited from other institutions, many of whom commuted weekly rather than residing locally. A female unit head described the problems of bringing these groups together:

It is a bunch of elderly men, very strong and outspoken men who claim their place all the time . . . they just take over the discussions, just by being there. It is an enormous challenge to dampen them and encourage others to . . . In addition, we have a surplus of young female lecturers, it is unusual, but we have a lot of young women. Who tend to sit silent. Many of them with an international background, they bring their cultural . . . already from start they submit to figures of authority, I've noticed that. (AG, woman)

Most senior male academics at Alpha were recruited from more prestigious universities and understand their role as bringing in and safeguarding high academic standards. Reluctant to assume formal managerial positions, they express open frustration when colleagues they perceive as less qualified are appointed to unit head and director positions. The previously collegial relationships among these senior men have increasingly fractured as performance-oriented systems have made them competitors rather than collaborators:

So they created this system with publishing rankings. There are some cases where people got mad and filed complaints against each other . . . one example was [a full professor] who was reported by a colleague for having registered some publications twice and got a higher score, stuff like that. Undeniably, people now set out to publish large quantities of articles in order to look good. I could probably have been promoted to Reader a long time ago myself, but I must honestly say that I had not been able to cope with the humiliation, in front of my colleagues, if I had been turned down. So it was better to wait and publish until I was on the safe side. (AH, man)

Younger academics have adapted to the performance management system, adjusting their priorities accordingly. When teaching responsibilities consume available time without corresponding recognition or rewards, faculty increasingly prioritise individual research projects – partly because research productivity affects career advancement, but also because it provides autonomy and reduces dependence on the institution:

There is a pressure on us senior lecturers to do research, or really, to publish research. There are almost no internal resources, but you have to do it, so you invest your own free time. If you do not do that, you are actually digging your own grave. Then you'll be *persona non grata*, you become unemployable everywhere else. If I don't publish, I will never be able to leave . . . you kill even that distant dream of getting a job somewhere else. It also sends the signal that you are inadequate and not up to your job, and nobody wants to hear that, so it becomes a strong drive to perform. (AB, man)

The managerialist governance structure at Alpha is widely criticised. Faculty unite in their critique, directing frustration toward the Social Science Faculty dean. Most managers at the department are women senior lecturers – caught between colleagues' expectations to fight their battles upwards and superiors' demands that they implement policies downwards. They report significant distress from these conflicts, with some taking extended leaves of absence. One female lecturer/manager recalled confronting a senior male professor about teaching responsibilities, an interaction that illustrates masculine status assertion and incivility:

I was anxious beforehand and it became a strange meeting. Not that we have ever been great friends or so, but it was just . . . very chilly. And he left the room abruptly after stating that he intended to refuse to take over the course. Later I heard that some people in the unit had looked forward to a real altercation, and joked about bringing popcorn and sit and listen outside my door. (AD, woman)

Several women senior lecturers have reluctantly accepted the managerialist approach, although they find the detailed workload allocation and control systems to be degrading expressions of distrust in their professionalism. They have learned to limit the time and emotional energy spent caring for students and colleagues outside their immediate groups, though they continue to feel pressure to perform caring femininity while conforming to heterosocial expectations:

If you are a man here, there are really only positive things associated with promotions, but for women that is not at all self-evident. You are dragged into numerous committees and all sorts of formal roles, where you are to be The Woman. You are supposed to be nice and empathetic, and your colleagues get

increasingly envious. Personally, I have my eyes set on becoming a Reader in a few years, and I will apply despite all the drawbacks. But it is not obvious that it will be good for my research, to become that person. (AA, woman)

Alpha has a relatively high proportion of women senior lecturers, many of whom are internationally recruited. Several describe experiencing multi-layered exclusion – as women, as non-Swedes, as commuters rather than local residents and as scholars in non-traditional research areas. Many women academics, both Swedish and non-Swedish, have formed small informal groups outside the professor-led structures, which male colleagues view with suspicion or indifference:

In our little group our academic backlogs are too thin to be competitive enough. We do apply for the big grants, but it is merely to practice doing it. We have neither much time nor much money, so it ends up in research that is cheap and quick to do. For the moment we focus on getting out some publications, and then to get grants based on those. We have been reluctant to work in the [full] professors' projects, we have some bad experiences from that. We have been kind of outsiders. (AI, woman)

4.2 Beta University

Beta University was founded several decades ago in a region lacking academic traditions. This history features prominently in departmental narratives – older respondents recall an “academic settler culture” focused on developing education and reaching out to society. In contrast, participants characterise the current position as a well-established and respected academic environment with numerous full professors and readers. While they acknowledge disturbing incidents from a more patriarchal past, including accounts of young women rebelling against these violations, they describe current everyday interactions as characterised by long-standing personal relationships, subtle humour and emphasis on high academic quality.

Despite the advantageous position, Beta lacks institutional confidence. Narratives from the “settler years” persist, including concerns about geographical disadvantages, difficulties attracting top faculty and students, and chronic financial insecurity. The taken-for-granted solution has been to promote internal “star scholars” and actively pursue international collaborations and reputation-building. Senior male professors and readers who champion these approaches enjoy high departmental status and expect colleagues to recognise their contributions. One example of such recognition involves resource allocation, as illustrated by a female lecturer who pre-emptively limited her own professional development without being explicitly asked to do so:

There is almost no budget for conference participation anymore. I am in the board for a national research network based in [another university], and I cannot afford to go there physically. We took this to our unit meeting, what should we do? It can be a lot of conflict in such a discussion, resources are limited and some of the male professors have always travelled whenever they wanted to. But we agreed that it is better to look at aspects such as who can represent us, who can build contacts, who can get research grants. Our professors indeed have these important contacts. People like myself may also need to travel, but we felt that it is better that we stand back in the current situation. I don't put up a fight, I try not to be difficult, I look at the total situation. I teach the full semester anyway so I don't need the money. (BF, woman)

A congratulatory culture has developed around high-performing senior men. Academic achievements such as publications, research grants, and media appearances are publicly celebrated, while teaching accomplishments – the primary responsibility for most faculty – receive comparatively little recognition:

We have these TV screens. They tell you when someone published something, when a book has been written, when a research grant has been approved. Prizes come up. Every single journal article must be

congratulated. I don't receive congratulations after having examined lots of students at the introduction semester, despite it is just as much money and effort involved. My colleagues may ask, and that feels good. I was on the TV screen once. I received a teachers' award some years ago, and it came up. I was very proud. (BI, woman)

Most professors and senior readers at Beta are men who collaborate in various configurations. They often display strong awareness of their status and importance, maintain high visibility on social media, and express both concern for and contempt toward the department. Many prefer working from home rather than on campus and characterise academic life as an ongoing competition to publish in high-ranking journals, thus distinguishing their personal status from the university's more modest reputation. A young reader's comments about his former PhD supervisor and his institutional affiliation illustrate this dynamic:

I was lucky to have a really nice supervisor here, he's knowledgeable. He publishes in crappy journals, but he's knowledgeable. Me and my colleague [Carl], we know that our university is not good enough in the eye of others. We have seen big people from good universities during conferences and so on, people with thousands of citations, and we know they are not better than us. One way of showing that we are equals is if we publish in the same journals as they do. So we're only aiming for the A+ journals (BA, man)

These men appear unbothered by internal bibliometric performance assessments and workload planning systems, as they focus instead on their international reputations. Whilst expressing many opinions on potential improvements in the department, they invest little actual time in organisational service. Their primary focus remains scientific publishing, which they frame as an individual competitive enterprise that builds respect and self-confidence:

I'd say that the pressure I experience is the one I put on myself. I know that [the head of department] wish me to publish, but since the faculty here is quite uneven when it comes to research skills, I would be quite fine not to live up to whatever they would wish from me. But I have intrinsic demands on myself, that tells me that I must have much higher ambitions. I must write more, network more. I need to feel that I am always heading for the next step. So never be too satisfied, I'd say. Just go on playing the game. (BB, man)

Women lecturers with career ambitions operate under different conditions. They typically take organisational regulations and performance requirements more seriously, recalling how their managers emphasise both the need to improve their performance and to demonstrate loyalty to the university. One senior lecturer described adjusting to these expectations by working part-time, hoping this would make her performance appear more valuable:

I try to compete with those who go all in for research, but they are slightly ahead of me. I can't really be on their level, but I would like to. The main reason why I work 75% is that then I feel I don't have to publish as many articles as those working 100% have to. So I feel that I still might be considered to do my job properly (BD, woman)

Beyond the high-status male researchers, Beta also includes male senior lecturers who focus almost exclusively on teaching and administration. While they participate in departmental meetings and social events, including the congratulatory rituals, many maintain primary interests outside academia. These men view their positions primarily as teaching jobs, operate their courses with considerable autonomy and prioritise work-life balance:

When I took my PhD, that was sort of a big thing around here. I liked to teach in a field where we lacked teachers, and was offered a permanent position on the spot. I write a paper now and then when I'm up to it, but I don't try to bring in grants. I can be quite upset sometimes about all that focus on research, but I try to keep some distance. I'm over 60 and these years shall be the best ones, I think. Time for my family and my little side-business, that is more important. (BH, man)

5. Discussion: variances in homosociality and heterosociality

In this section, we analyse how homosocial and heterosocial relations manifest differently in the two cases, examining how these differences relate to the (re)construction of academic masculinities under neoliberal conditions. Our analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we examine manhood acts – the specific behavioural performances through which men establish and maintain masculine status in workplace settings, showing how these operate similarly and differently across Alpha and Beta. Second, we analyse patterns of homosociality, developing the distinction between harmonic homosociality (characterised by internal cohesion and mutual recognition among men) and competitive homosociality (characterised by overt rivalry and status contestation). Third, we explore patterns of heterosociality, contrasting homogenous forms (where women collectively orient themselves toward supporting men’s status and privileges) with fragmented forms (where women withdraw such support and prioritise personal well-being or alternative relational accountabilities).

5.1 Manhood acts in masculine contest cultures

Both institutions reveal numerous examples of manhood acts (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009; Berdahl *et al.*, 2018) – behavioural performances through which men establish and maintain masculine status in workplace settings. Some instances explicitly involve conflict and bullying, such as male colleagues reporting each other to management for publication scoring discrepancies, or senior male academics berating female managers for asking them to fulfil teaching responsibilities. Other manhood acts manifest through speech and attitude: disparaging colleagues, managers or the institution; positioning oneself as a successful careerist destined for higher positions; and emphasising one’s international networks and reputation.

These behaviours align with what Benschop *et al.* (2013) describe as “ambition as a resource” – the strategic value of presenting oneself as possessing the confidence and competence necessary for more advanced positions. A common thread across these manhood acts is demonstrating autonomy and independence, asserting one’s entitlement to operate above organisational regulations, and claiming professional exceptionalism. This reflects broader patterns where masculinity must be continuously accomplished and proven through specific contextual performances (Berdahl *et al.*, 2018).

Masculine contest cultures in academia differ somewhat from those described by Berdahl *et al.* (2018) in corporate contexts. While the general MCC dimensions – not showing weakness, proving stamina, putting work first and winning at all costs – apply, they manifest distinctively in academic settings. Academics navigate complex, sometimes contradictory performance expectations across teaching, research and service, and derive status not only from managerial evaluations but also from epistemic communities beyond their institutions. This aligns with research showing how masculinities are context-specific accomplishments that must be continuously performed and validated (Detjen *et al.*, 2024).

In academic contexts, demonstrating masculinity through excessive work hours alone may be insufficient – what matters is a calculated performance combining research productivity with an appearance of work-life balance, suggesting effortless superiority (Lindgren *et al.*, 2025). Age also influences these dynamics, as career goals are often achieved well before retirement, shifting status considerations from past achievements to perceived “future potential” (Lund and Tienari, 2019). This temporal dimension reflects the precarious nature of masculine status that must be repeatedly proven and validated (Vandello and Bosson, 2013).

Consequently, masculine competition in academia differs from that in corporate environments driven by bottom-line mentality. While academics must avoid displaying weaknesses and demonstrate success in performance evaluations, they must simultaneously cultivate an image as internationally networked, inherently capable, institutionally independent and strategically savvy. Moreover, contemporary academic masculinity includes managing relations with women through seemingly progressive approaches to

gender equality while maintaining structural advantages (Armato, 2013). This reflects what Yarrow and Davies (2024) identify as sophisticated forms of cultural sexism operating through apparently benevolent mechanisms.

5.2 Harmonic and competitive homosocialities

Our analysis reveals two distinct patterns of homosocial relations: harmonic and competitive homosociality. These patterns reflect different ways masculinity contests unfold within academic workplace cultures, shaped by institutional contexts and organisational narratives.

At Alpha University, we find a transition from harmonic to competitive homosociality. Historically, a group of male professors dominated the department through seniority, academic achievement and patriarchal behaviour patterns – a form of harmonic homosociality characterised by internal cohesion and external dominance. This pattern reflects what Holgersson (2013) describes as traditional homosocial workplace cultures where men orient themselves toward other men through mutual respect and recognition, maintaining hierarchies through collective agreement rather than overt competition.

The implementation of managerial control systems and strengthened formal leadership structures has disrupted this arrangement, diminishing these professors' relative influence and fragmenting their formerly collegial relationships. The emerging culture privileges research output and future potential over research experience (Lund and Tienari, 2019), making professorial status increasingly contingent and vulnerable. This transformation illustrates how neoliberal reforms can intensify masculinity contests by introducing market-based competition mechanisms into previously collegial environments (De Coster and Zanoni, 2019).

In this transformed environment, men who benefit are those capable of producing high-status work (publishing in prestigious journals and securing external grants) while framing these achievements as individual rather than collaborative – demonstrating their capacity to succeed in an increasingly competitive academic marketplace (Fagan and Teasdale, 2021). For these academics, homosocial culture still positions them as competent and superior (Muñoz-García *et al.*, 2024), but the resulting status is precarious and transitory. Each “win” is followed by new competitions in which they must again prove their worth, creating vulnerability extending beyond surface-level performance to personal identity (Lindgren *et al.*, 2025).

The vulnerability inherent in maintaining one's position within this competitive homosocial culture sometimes manifests in problematic behaviours: boasting, aggressive confrontations, shaming, derogatory comments, bullying and harassment. At Alpha, these behaviours target not only other men – disrupting earlier patterns of horizontal homosocial relations – but also women who have assumed formal managerial positions and are tasked with exercising authority over male professors. This represents what Berdahl *et al.* (2018) describe as dysfunctional outcomes of masculine contest cultures, where toxic behaviours emerge as men struggle to maintain status in competitive environments.

At Beta University, homosociality appears more harmonic than at Alpha, though it still operates as a masculinity contest culture. The men who dominate through research performance and international networks engage in a delicate balance between homosocial community and competition. Younger male academics simultaneously praise and subtly critique their senior colleagues, maintaining this balance within a workplace culture that discourages extreme manifestations of masculine competitiveness. This moderated approach is supported by strong traditions of heterosociality and organisational narratives framing individual “star scholars” as organisational success factors.

Male academics at Beta consistently reinforce established organisational narratives about institutional challenges while simultaneously distancing their personal status from the university's reputation. This represents a masculine contest culture, but one with less overt contestation in daily interactions. The congratulatory culture around high-performing men creates implicit hierarchies while maintaining surface collegiality, reflecting what

5.3 Homogenous and fragmented heterosocialities

There are also significant variations in how women faculty respond to masculine contest cultures, patterns we conceptualise as homogenous versus fragmented heterosociality. At both institutions, women faculty have recognised the managerialist shift toward careerism, individualised assessment and intensified workload monitoring. However, their responses differ significantly between the two settings, illustrating distinct patterns of heterosociality that interact with different forms of homosocial culture.

At Alpha, most women faculty interpret the new managerial conditions as legitimate justification to abandon traditional heterosocial orientations. They prioritise personal well-being, form peripheral collegial spaces and focus on individual achievements rather than supporting senior men. Many explicitly voice reluctance to participate in the heterosocial recognition of high-status men, exhibiting what we term “fragmented heterosociality”. This pattern aligns with research showing how women may resist traditional gender expectations when organisational conditions make such compliance particularly costly (De Coster and Zanoni, 2019).

This approach carries significant costs: further distancing from centres of power and influence, reduced recognition of their “potential” and “impact”, and experiences of shame and inadequacy for not fulfilling relational responsibilities. It also reflects a broader disengagement from Alpha’s institutional development, exacerbated by widespread scepticism toward managerialist reforms. As De Coster and Zanoni (2019) observe, these women have reconfigured their sense of relational accountability within the academic setting, prioritising personal integrity over institutional expectations.

Fragmented heterosociality at Alpha also emerges when relatively junior women lecturers assume formal managerial responsibilities. Expected by senior leadership to apply rules uniformly without regard for informal status hierarchies, these women are perceived by senior men as violating heterosocial expectations not only by challenging professorial autonomy but through the very act of enacting managerial authority within the homosocial culture. This creates what Yarrow (2021) describes as “knowledge hustlers” – women who must find ways to navigate complex organisational politics while being positioned as threatening to traditional masculine hierarchies.

In contrast, women faculty at Beta maintain a tradition of not directly competing with senior men, displaying what we term homogenous heterosociality. They position themselves as morally responsible for the organisation despite ongoing managerialist reforms, assuming responsibility for “academic housework” and administrative tasks (Macfarlane and Burg, 2019), limiting their resource claims, and adhering to formal organisational regulations. This homogenous heterosocial supportiveness aligns with longstanding organisational narratives framing Beta as a vulnerable academic environment dependent on its successful (male) scholars for survival. Institutional loyalty is implicitly equated with loyalty to these men.

Women engaged in heterosocial support at Beta face a paradoxical vulnerability: the men they support rather than compete with are simultaneously those against whom they are measured if desiring recognition and advancement. This reflects broader patterns in research on academic gender relations, where women’s supportive labour is essential for institutional functioning but remains largely invisible and unrewarded (Bleijenbergh, 2022; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012).

Nevertheless, female faculty at Beta are not entirely marginalised – they exercise significant influence over teaching and administrative functions and generally experience respectful treatment in daily workplace interactions. This suggests that homogenous heterosociality, while limiting women’s access to high-status positions, may provide some protection from the more extreme manifestations of masculinity contest cultures observed at Alpha.

6. Conclusions

Our study makes several contributions to understand how masculinities are reproduced in academic workplace cultures. First, by identifying patterns of harmonic versus competitive homosociality, and homogenous versus fragmented heterosociality, we provide a nuanced conceptualisation for analysing masculinity contests in higher education. This conceptualisation extends the MCC concept (Berdahl *et al.*, 2018) by demonstrating how masculine contest cultures manifest distinctively in academic contexts and by theorising women's varied responses through the concept of heterosociality.

Second, our findings illustrate how managerial reforms reconfigure rather than simply replace traditional academic hierarchies, sometimes intensifying competition among men while disrupting established patterns of women's supportive labour. The transition from harmonic to competitive homosociality at Alpha University, contrasted with the maintenance of more harmonic patterns at Beta, reveals the mediating role of organisational narratives and institutional histories in shaping how neoliberal reforms translate into gendered workplace cultures.

Third, we demonstrate that heterosociality – women's participation in sustaining homosocial cultures – is neither monolithic nor inevitable, highlighting women's agency even within constraining structural conditions. The distinction between homogenous and fragmented heterosociality illuminates different strategic responses to masculine workplace cultures, from collective withdrawal of support to maintenance of traditional patterns, each with distinct implications for women's careers and well-being.

We do not suggest that managerialist reforms necessarily produce competitive homosociality, nor does competitive homosociality inevitably lead to fragmented heterosociality. The ongoing celebration of historic organisational narratives at Beta University, contrasted with their erosion at Alpha, significantly affects such relationships. Nevertheless, neoliberalisation and managerialism in higher education tend to disrupt cultural contexts where traditional hegemonic masculinities have been sustained through harmonic homosociality and homogenous heterosociality.

Competitive homosociality in academic settings increasingly fosters masculinities based on calculated approaches to power and status, disidentification with the immediate workplace and selective reliance on quantitative performance assessments. Traditional structures of gender inequality persist in reconfigured forms, with women conditionally invited to participate in contest cultures as postfeminist subjects who view gender discrimination as an outdated phenomenon.

Creating more inclusive academic environments requires attention to organisational narratives and developing alternatives that emphasise collective achievement rather than individual competition. Performance management systems, while ostensibly gender-neutral, can reinforce gender hierarchies when implemented without attention to homosocial and heterosocial dynamics. Universities should critically examine how performance metrics privilege competitive individualism and whether alternative approaches might better support collaborative scholarship and inclusive workplace cultures. This includes creating spaces for collaborative scholarship, recognising diverse forms of academic contribution beyond high-impact publications and developing organisational narratives that celebrate collective rather than individual success.

Middle managers – particularly women – require better institutional support, as they face contradictory expectations and criticism from multiple directions. Caught between senior leadership demands for policy implementation and colleagues' expectations for advocacy, these managers experience significant stress and burnout. Universities must recognise these contradictory pressures and provide adequate resources, training and organisational backing for managers navigating masculinity contest cultures.

Our study has several limitations that suggest important directions for future research. First, our analysis focuses on senior lecturers – academics with permanent positions who have already achieved a significant level of career security. Future research should examine

how homosocial and heterosocial dynamics operate across different career stages and how precarity intersects with gender to shape workplace experiences. Second, while we deliberately selected participants to ensure gender diversity, our analysis does not fully address intersectional dimensions of inequality beyond gender. Future research should examine how masculinity contests and heterosocial expectations operate differently for women and men positioned differently within systems of racial, ethnic and other forms of stratification.

Ultimately, creating more inclusive academic environments demands ongoing critical attention to the complex dynamics between men's competitive relations and women's varied responses to masculine workplace cultures. It requires recognising that gender equality cannot be achieved simply through adding more women to existing structures or encouraging women to compete more effectively in masculinity contests. Instead, transformation requires fundamental rethinking of how academic work is organised, valued and rewarded – moving toward collaborative, collegial models that recognise diverse contributions and support all academics in achieving meaningful, sustainable careers.

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