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# Understanding autonomy and relationality in men's lives

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## Abstract

Masculinities scholarship tends toward describing autonomy as bound up with hegemonic masculine ideals such as independence, atomization, and self-sufficiency, without fully delving into the concept of autonomy. This article offers a more in-depth conceptual treatment of autonomy, compared to its more simplified rendering in the literature on the dominant relational conceptualizations of masculinities. In doing so, we follow recent calls to avoid categorizing men according to typologies of masculinity, drawing instead on feminist theorizations of *masculine autonomy* and *relationality* to explore how both manifest in men's lives. We draw on a study of men's drinking practices, with our data coming from focus groups with 101 men in metropolitan and regional/rural Victoria, Australia; but the issues we attend to have relevance, and can be an impetus, for further scholarly thinking about autonomy in men's lives well beyond drinking practices, and in other similar industrialized nations. We explore how masculine autonomy remains an influential and harmful discourse, often impeding possibilities for men's greater intimacy, connection and care and reproducing gendered hierarchies. However, we simultaneously highlight how men are inescapably relationally situated, exposing masculine autonomy as a discursive ideal of valorized forms

of masculinity rather than an achievable state in practice. We argue that acknowledging how men are relationally embedded and interdependent in practice offers potential avenues for further fostering men's care, intimacy and relationality, and might work toward ameliorating gendered inequalities that see care work and the work of sustaining relational networks disproportionately falling to women and marginalized men.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Academic research persistently points to "autonomy" as a central component of valued or idealized forms of masculinity in "western" societies (e.g., Dixon, 1996; Donaldson, 1993; Kaya, Iwamoto, Brady & Clinton, 2018), exploring the role of independence, atomization, and self-sufficiency in men's lives. This has helped to understand aspects of masculinity such as dominance, power and violence and to address their effects. However, space remains to further theorize autonomy in critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM). Treatments of autonomy as a *concept*—what it is and how it sits in relation to masculinity—have emerged more prominently in feminist philosophy, which considers the type of autonomy described above as "masculine autonomy". This contrasts with "relational autonomy" in feminist philosophy, which has been designated as key to the project of greater equality (Friedman, 2000; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Stemming from the feminist ethic of care, relational autonomy is premised on interdependence and on relationships as necessary for the realization of autonomy. In this article, we draw on these feminist conceptualizations as a foundation for working toward a sociological understanding of autonomy as it plays out in men's lives.

Despite the long-standing association between idealized masculinity[1] and masculine autonomy, empirical sociological research pays limited attention to how autonomy actually plays out in men's lives and, especially compared to philosophical and theoretical treatments, rarely unpacks the notion of autonomy (a notable exception is Kenny et al., 2019). This is not to suggest that past literature has defined autonomy as a complete absence of relationships with others, but rather that an in-depth exploration of the concept of autonomy and how it plays out in men's lives has not been a central focus of this work. For example, the major treatments of masculinities have instead focused productively on generating influential relational conceptualizations of masculinity, notably "hegemonic" (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Demetriou, 2001; Donaldson, 1993; Hearn, 1998), "inclusive" (Anderson & McCormack, 2018), or "hybrid" (Bridgies & Pascoe, 2014) masculinities. Using these frameworks of masculinity to make sense of empirical data is a dominant trend in masculinities literature, and as such, there might well be the temptation to read this article in the same vein. However, here we instead attempt something very different: to work toward an understanding of autonomy *as it plays out in men's lives*, drawing on our empirical data from a study of men's drinking. That is, we critically examine the concept of autonomy as an idealized *aspect* of masculinity, rather than analyzing how men fit into or practice a particular category of masculinity. While we follow the valuable logic of frameworks of masculinity in prioritizing the betterment of gender relations, in this article we heed calls from authors arguing for a different approach. For example, Beasley (2012), in this journal, called for a reconsideration of reliance on identities and typologies in research on men and masculinities.

Specifically, this article explores the complexities of autonomy in men's discussions of their alcohol consumption practices by drawing on the common threads emerging from our study of "risky drinking" with 101 men in metropolitan and regional/rural Victoria, Australia. Our aim here is not to present a study of how men "do" gender through alcohol consumption, but rather to use this empirical material to think through autonomy in both a conceptual fashion and to consider how it relates to men's actual lives. The aim of qualitative research is not to be generalizable, but rather to explore complexities and nuances in order to build and extend understandings and conceptualizations of people's lives. Accordingly, this research led to insights not only into men's drinking practices, but also the centrality of notions of autonomy to these men, enabling broader conceptual considerations into how autonomy and relationality play out in men's lives.

The men in our research valorized masculine autonomy by rejecting the idea, commonly advanced in literature on men and alcohol, that their drinking practices were influenced by friends and peer-pressure. Instead they emphasized individual responsibility for monitoring drinking and mitigating potential related harms. Against these claims to masculine autonomy, we explore how these men were actually *relationally* situated. For example, their friendships in drinking contexts were imbued with respect for their own and each other's autonomy. Their autonomy was constituted only relationally, through mutual recognition. This speaks to feminist relational accounts, which posit that autonomy only emerges through relationships and interdependencies with others. These men were further relationally enmeshed in three key ways. First, through the influence of peer-pressure, though for the most part they denied the effects of this. Second, through a desire for intimacy and connection with male friends, which in many cases was achievable primarily by drinking together. And finally, through their practices of caring, even if limited, for friends in drinking situations. This care, though, was often downplayed by participants, who instead described drinking occasions through discourses of independent, self-responsible masculine autonomy.

This article thus builds upon theoretical considerations of masculine autonomy and of relationality to explore how both manifest in men's lives in industrialized societies in the Global North. We reveal that masculine autonomy remains an influential and harmful discourse that impedes possibilities for men's greater intimacy, connection and care. Simultaneously, we highlight some ways that men are always inescapably relationally situated, revealing that masculine autonomy is more a discursive ideal of valorized forms of masculinity than a reality. This recognition of men's relational embeddedness suggests that men, not only women, can be and are already bound up with interdependence and relationality. This is not to overlook that the work of sustaining relational networks has traditionally fallen to women and marginalized men, with these inequities continuing today. It is also critical to consider the way the ideal of masculine autonomy continues to reproduce gendered hierarchies and men's dominance, particularly as part of a set of traditionally masculine-coded ideals that are defined in opposition to women and femininity. Yet, acknowledging how men are relationally embedded and interdependent in practice offers potential avenues for further fostering men's care, intimacy and relationality and for dismantling ideals such as atomistic masculine autonomy that sustain gendered power hierarchies. Thus, exploring and understanding men's relationality has implications for the project of gender equality.

## 2 | CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF AUTONOMY

### 2.1 | Autonomy and masculinity

Masculinity scholarship – both theoretical and empirical – has tended to consider autonomy in terms of independence and self-sufficiency and as something that is culturally validated and expected for men to crave, pursue, and defend. Carrigan et al. (1985) point to Sexton's (1969, p. 15) study some 16 years prior, emphasizing her point that "male norms stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy". Indeed, autonomy has widely been coded in men and masculinities scholarship as an idealized trait of masculinity and a pursuit of men, bound up with the idea of hegemonic masculinity that produces, legitimates and sustains gender inequalities

(Connell, 1987). From well noted studies of men in the 1980s, such as those by Cockburn (1986), Collinson (1988) and Hacker (1989), and right through the 1990s, autonomy is situated as not only "a traditional preserve of men" (Barrett, 1996, p. 134); indeed, it is also something more contemporary, with, for example, Dixon (1996, p. 153) describing "a prevailing cultural form of masculinity that celebrates autonomy, self-sufficiency and the performance of "control". This theme continues through the 2000s to today, especially in health research, where men are found to situate help-seeking behavior as diminishing personal autonomy (Addis & Mahalik, 2003) and retain an obdurate concern for being "robust, autonomous and self-reliant rather than concerned with self-health, illness or injury" (Creighton & Oliffe, 2010, p. 412; also; Kenny et al., 2019).

Scholarship on masculinity and work draws similar conclusions, with Aho's (2018) study emphasizing the valorizing of autonomy - by truckers and other motorists who admired them - strongly echoing findings from almost 25 years earlier by Oullett (1994). The cultural valorization of autonomy has, then, persisted and adapted to significant social and economic change. In Aho's account, for example, technological monitoring systems aimed at enabling better performance management are seen as a new imposition that curtails autonomy. Moreover, the erosion of the male breadwinner model - once so central for demonstrating autonomy - means men have been "forced" to assert claims to autonomy in different ways. Rather than allowing men to escape this compulsion toward autonomy, economic change has occurred alongside the neoliberalist emphasis on individualized self-making (Walker & Roberts, 2018).

One way men have sought to re-establish autonomy has been in the realm of consumption. For example, the consumption of heroic masculinity in film media is a means through which men compensate for the erosion described above, signaling "the autonomous man heroically defying authoritative prescriptions by watching action heroes do much the same" (Holt & Thompson, 2004, p. 433). While autonomy is not their primary concern, other literature highlights men's turn to food (Soler, 2018), style (Barber, 2016), home improvements (Moisio et al., 2013), or the use of "man caves" (Moisio & Beruchashvili, 2016) to aid the revitalization of masculine identities in precarious times. Importantly, though, this phenomenon is not new: scholars have long observed the deployment of different compensatory tactics by men in various contexts as a means of re-masculinization. Barrett (1996), for example, highlighted nearly 25 years ago that different members of navy personnel all valorized autonomy, but in its absence were able to compensate through emphasizing "discipline and endurance".

Contrastingly, research on men's alcohol consumption often emphasizes men's autonomy as problematic through its *absence*, with peer-pressure long theorized as a core driver of drinking behavior, as well as men's health-impeding behaviors more generally (Lemle & Mishkind, 1989). For instance, Iwamoto and Smiler (2013) highlight significant associations between masculine norms, peer-pressure and general conformity, and alcohol use. Similarly, Studer and colleagues' (2014, p. 706) review of research on alcohol misconduct concludes that "almost all the studies… showed that number of peers drinking alcohol, and peer-pressure to use alcohol and other substances (which is the main part of the concept of "misconduct"), were positively related to drinking outcomes" (see also de Visser & McDonnell, 2013). Indeed, Henry et al. (2011) contend that alcohol non-use is a more productive way to demonstrate personal autonomy. Where autonomy comes more overtly into the frame in sociological treatments of men's drinking, this has often been as a by-product of dominant theorizing in the field of CSMM that draws on typologies of masculinity such as hegemonic, complicit and so on to understand social phenomena, and has pertained mostly to bodily autonomy (see Campbell, 2000 *vis* New Zealand; Nayak, 2006 *vis* England; Peralta, 2007 *vis* the US). The work of Thurnell-Read (2013) surfaces bodily autonomy more thoroughly, highlighting paradoxical social expectations requiring (younger) men to maintain *and* lose bodily control during drinking events.

Another predominant strand of literature highlights how masculine norms/cultures and peer-pressure combine to underscore men's behavior. This includes behaviors such as risky drinking (de Visser and Smith, 2007; Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013); drug use (Mahalik et al., 2015); speaking about women in sexist or derogatory terms (Flood, 2008); pursuing casual sex with women as part of a heterosexual "conquest" (Nayak, 2006); or watching (Johnson & Schiappa, 2010) and playing sports (Renold, 1997). In such research, autonomy, perhaps understandably, is somewhat backgrounded. In sum, while "autonomy remains central to ideas of masculinity" (Knights, 2019, p. 24), it remains less explicit in empirical accounts of men's lives, and could be usefully conceptually expanded.

A conceptually richer account is present in Knights' (2019) theorizing of masculine identity and performativity. Here, though not attending to empirical data, Knights (2019, p, 26) draws on post-humanist thinking to argue for the importance of "the rejection of notions of the autonomous subject". This is at odds with the reinscription of the importance of autonomy to male identity found in the empirical scholarship noted above. A more productive understanding of autonomy and how it plays out in men's lives can be advanced if we turn to feminist philosophical accounts of autonomy.

## 2.2 | Feminist accounts of autonomy

The above representations of autonomy have in common an implied or explicit focus on men's pursuit of individualism, atomization and independence in service of establishing a valued masculinity. Friedman (2000) considers these values as constitutive of "masculine autonomy", which valorizes self-sufficiency and the avoidance of any form of dependence. Beyond this limiting framing, Friedman (2000) posits the importance of a feminist conception of autonomy, recognizing self-determination as a core ideal of autonomy and the denial of self-determination as a mechanism of the oppression of women.

One conceptualization of feminist autonomy is the notion of "relational autonomy", which suggests that interdependence and relationships are necessary for the realization of autonomy (Friedman, 2000; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000; Verkerk, 2001). This contention regarding the significance of socially constituted and interpersonally embedded selves is a point of emphasis for Nedelsky (1989), who suggests "there are no human beings in the absence of relations with others. We take our being in part from those relations". Friedman (2000, p. 217–218) captures this well, outlining the two claims made by feminist accounts of relational autonomy:

> First, the sort of self who could realize personal autonomy is an inherently social being who becomes a distinct self with a particular identity only through interpersonal relationships with other persons. Second, autonomy requires capacities that must either be learned from others, such as self-understanding, questioning, doubting, or imagining alternatives, or that must be exercised in interaction with others, for example, the telling of narratives about oneself. These capacities are all additionally social in requiring meaningful systems of representation for understanding self and circumstances, systems that must be embedded in social practices.

Importantly, relational autonomy is not positioned as available only to women, but instead understood as "characteristic of human existence" (Verkerk, 2001, p. 290). Indeed, while pivotal to current conceptualizations of relational feminist morals and ethics, Gilligan's (1982) suggestion of two conceptions of morality – the morality of rights, justice and autonomy, which she attributed to men; and the morality of responsibility, care and personal relationships, which she attributed to women – has been critiqued on the basis of its gendered differentiation.

Tronto's (1993, p. 3) suggestion is that we should "stop talking about women's morality and start talking instead about a care ethic that includes the values traditionally associated with women". Gerson (2002) too critiques a framework of gender-differentiated moral orientations, arguing this perpetuates gender inequality by, for example, "suggesting that women can be for themselves by being for others, while men can be for others by being for themselves". Beasley and Bacchi (2007) and Beasley (2017), while affirming many of the potentials of care for feminist imaginaries, also argue that the terminology of care is restricted as it entrenches hierarchies of care "giver" and "receiver" and offers a limited account of embodiment. They stress instead the need to acknowledge mutual reliance and embodied coexistence. We suggest, though, that a feminist ethic of care attends to this embodied mutuality through its focus on interdependence and by distinguishing between an inequality of power and the exertion of domination in a relationship of care (Elliott, 2016; Kittay, 1999). Furthermore, it is particularly important in the case of men to expand possibilities for care, interdependence and relationality - or to work toward a "caring masculinity" - given

such qualities have traditionally been considered antithetical to valued forms of masculinity, to the detriment of greater gender equality (Elliott, 2016).

Mindful of these critiques, we aim to contribute to explorations of men as relationally situated, even if gendered norms and inequalities mean this manifests in different ways to women and people of diverse genders. In our study, described below, we prioritize the significance of socially constituted and interpersonally embedded selves in men's drinking practices, troubling dominant narratives of both peer-pressure and masculine autonomy based on self-sufficiency and independence.

## 3 | METHODS AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH CONTEXT

Our discussion draws on data from focus groups with 101 men in Victoria, Australia. Most participants were born in Australia and identified as heterosexual; four identified as gay and one as bisexual, and ages ranged from 19 to 73 (median age 28 years). Participants were recruited in established friendship clusters from five "social worlds" where risky drinking is commonplace (Roberts et al., 2019). In total, we conducted 22 focus groups: six groups with rural/regional sport spectators, four with rural/regional sports players, five with metropolitan sports players, four with metropolitan corporate workers, and three with metropolitan hospitality workers.

Focus groups with established friendship clusters allowed access to natural social networks that provide cultural scripting for male-to-male, or "homosocial", drinking practices (Kitzinger, 1994; see also; Thurnell-Read, 2016). The established trust and social bonds between participants provided insight into how men collectively negotiate and articulate the norms underpinning everyday behaviors. Participants were invited to undertake a follow-up interview (40 in total), focusing on the role of social media in recording and reflecting on drinking practices (Roberts et al., 2019).

We thematically analyzed our data, allowing for themes to be developed with respect to pre-existing frameworks and for subthemes to be identified organically from the data (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). We examined how and whether the expression of these subthemes differed across subcultural and rural/urban groups, and through this iterative analytic process, drew meaningful connections between the participants' collective meaning-making processes and the theoretical frameworks under examination (Roberts et al., 2019). Here, though, we focus only on the common core theme of autonomy as it emerged *across* this sample of men, principally in relation to the topics of "banter" and "peer-pressure", "intimacy" and "care". Our intention is not to "count up" instances, or to suggest that this emerged in every account, but to reflect on and conceptualize those occasions where autonomy emerges in the data. In doing so, our focus is not necessarily on how intersectional characteristics come to bear on autonomy, though this would be a fruitful avenue for future research. The target of our analysis here is a qualitative rendering of autonomy itself. That is, rather than intending our results to be generalizable to an entire population, the accounts we draw on illuminate the mechanics and implications of the social processes being studied.

## 4 | EXPLORING AUTONOMY IN MEN'S LIVES

Here, we first explore discourses of masculine autonomy amongst the participants. These men rejected that peer-pressure influenced their drinking, instead placing value on independence and self-responsibilization. We then turn to how these men were, rather, relationally situated, despite their claims to masculine autonomy. First, we highlight how autonomy in drinking practices emerged only relationally through its recognition from others, particularly friends, speaking to the feminist conceptualization of relational autonomy. Second, we explore how social dynamics and peer-pressure as conventionally reported in alcohol research were present in our findings, again pointing to the relational embeddedness of these participants. Third, we discuss the desire for (platonic) intimacy amongst participants, which is impeded by the ideal of masculine autonomy. Finally, we consider instances of care as further examples of relationality amongst men, though again the salience of ideals of masculine autonomy in many ways limited

care in the context of drinking. Throughout, we address how ideals of masculine autonomy are practically unachievable but *nevertheless harmful* for men through, for example, impeding care-giving in drinking situations and limiting men's ability to engage in close relationships. Such ideals also reproduce the gendered structures and hierarchies that perpetuate men's power and dominance.

## 4.1 | Discourses of masculine autonomy

### 4.1.1 | The valorization of masculine autonomy

Despite the subtle influence of peer-pressure, explored below, these men expressly denied being affected by peer-pressure, except in reflecting upon their teenage years. They suggested they were not influenced by gendered expectations of what and how men should drink, and rejected the view that men use alcohol to assert a masculine identity (see also De Visser & Smith, 2007). Instead of situating the individual's performance of drinking as produced for and validated by other men, rejecting the influence of peers resonates strongly with notions of masculine autonomy and forms of self-governing bound up with culturally idealized masculinity. Indeed, the men principally positioned themselves and others as self-determined in their drinking practices and as individually responsible for monitoring their drinking, understanding their limits, and independently mitigating the harms of drinking.

Simon (FG2), for example, said in a focus group "it's just like you do you … you know who you are, why would you go beyond that because of what someone else thinks?" Here, Simon valorized a sense of masculine autonomy revolving around self-control, not giving into pressure from others, not caring what others think, and respecting one's own limits when drinking, captured in the phrase "you do you". Others also went about positioning themselves as men with the autonomy to drink how they liked or felt was appropriate, reflected in Brent's (FG13) statement that "I reckon it's your choice and your own way. You should be your own man in a way".

Participants regularly and strongly disapproved of men not displaying such masculine autonomy and self-respect, or succumbing to peer-pressure by altering behavior to impress friends. One group, for example, discussed a friend of theirs who pretended he liked drinking:

> **Tim**: If you're honest about it, come out and say, "I don't want to drink alcohol because I don't want to drink", then people will be like "yeah, that's cool, you do you". But if you've got a mate, like we do, who says he drinks but never drinks in front of us, that's when it's kind of like, you know, "why are you lying?"
> **Nathan**: Yeah, there's no reason for him to lie about it because … we do not care at all if he doesn't drink, he still hangs out with us and we still like him when he hangs out with us, so there's no reason for him to say that he does drink. (FG6)

### 4.1.2 | Respecting the autonomy of friends

In keeping with the value they placed on a sense of masculine autonomy, participants suggested they respected their friends' autonomy, and were not concerned with monitoring how or what their friends drank. This was despite the influence of peer-pressure amongst these men in drinking settings, as explored below. One group of rural sports supporters, for example, emphasized the autonomy of friends to choose not to drink:

> **Fred**: As long as they're happy, I don't think it makes any difference really, it's up to your own choice.
> **Bill**: You don't think any less or more of them, that's their choice; they don't want to drink that night, fair enough. But they still want to socialise as such, and communicate with their mates, what's the problem?

**Facilitator**: And do you feel like they are as included as if they were--?

**Fred**: Well, from my point of view, nah, there's no problem about that. You don't have any less respect or more respect for them, that's their choice that night. (FG13)

Similarly, Simon (FG2) said "I've never really supervised anyone's drinking" and suggested "[men] should feel comfortable with [their friends], you know? You don't have to prove yourself or do any of that". Meanwhile Brodie (FG9) spoke specifically of the absence of pressure within his friendship group to drink particular kinds of drinks, namely beer, saying "that pressure doesn't exist. If any of us got a different drink, I don't think anyone would bat an eyelid". Such views resonate with literature that critiques the "peer pressure model" for overlooking the significance and social benefits of conviviality in drinking events (see Thurnell-Read, 2016).

Discussing the lack of monitoring friends' drinking now that they were older, one group (in their 30s) stated:

**Wesley**: I don't really count what people drink anymore. I remember when I was younger like, there used to be a point of just conversation, I've had five beers, now I wouldn't know if the person – honestly, when I'm out drinking with my friends one would be on light, someone might be on water so that thought doesn't cross my mind anymore.

**Larry**: Yeah, you wouldn't measure what anyone's drinking, it's just –

**Wesley**: I think that word should, for me, no one really should be anything I suppose and that's so dependent on different factors I think. (FG15)

Corresponding with a primary theme across the data, here Wesley explicitly rejects the injunction of "should", prioritizing instead a sense of independence and self-responsibilization. Connected to these notions of self-control, individual responsibility, and respect for the autonomy of friends, making a serious comment about another man's drinking was seen as inappropriate. Sam (FG6), for example, asserted "if someone is obviously not a problem drinker, telling anybody how much they should or shouldn't drink is kind of like unnecessary, unwarranted, intrusive".

## 4.2 | Men as relationally embedded

While participants often asserted a sense of masculine autonomy - emphasizing independence, self-determination and self-responsibilization - we analyze here and in the following sections how they were in fact relationally enmeshed. As explored, they valued and respected masculine autonomy in themselves and others, and their friendships in drinking contexts were imbued with this respect. It was in recognizing the right of others to self-determine their drinking practices, and having this right recognized by others, that autonomy emerged. This speaks more to the feminist conceptualization of relational autonomy, whereby autonomy emerges through relationships, challenging the ideal of atomized, individualized masculine autonomy. Similarly, Kenny et al. (2019, p. 10) observed relational autonomy amongst informal cancer care-givers through "'not wanting to interfere' [and] deferring to the wishes of care recipients", with this seen as at once being "destabilizing of traditional individual (masculine) autonomy and as central to relations of care". We consider here peer-pressure, intimacy and connection, and care as further ways the men in our research were relationally embedded.

## 4.3 | The influence of peer-pressure and norms of masculinity on drinking

Attention to peer-pressure behaviors and their impact is a consistent theme of much research on men's alcohol consumption, as outlined above. The men in this research sometimes recounted occasions or ideas that emphasized the role of peer-pressure in their drinking, rendering their assertions of masculine autonomy as contradictory. At the

same time, and despite negative implications of peer-pressure on drinking behaviors, it is one key way that relationships emerge as salient in men's lives (Thurnell-Read, 2016).

One prominent way this influence of peer-pressure emerged in this research was through "banter". Following long established patterns in research on men and masculinities (e.g., Collinson, 1988; Nayak, 2006; Willis, 1977), participants considered banter a pivotal, expected and accepted element of homosocial interactions. In respect of drinking, participants often used this idea to explain that friends might "cop a bit of shit" (Alistair, FG7) if, for example, they fell behind in consumption in a round with mates (Caleb, FG17); "didn't have an answer or a reason and [just weren't] drinking for the sake of it" (Gabriel, FG7), or if they "came back [from the bar] with something flowery" (Shaun, FG7). Here, the men talked about how name calling in allegedly humorous ways is a vehicle to shame peers for not meeting masculinized standards (Thurnell-Read, 2013).

Such banter was often explained away as "boys being boys", and in most focus groups banter with friends was constructed as not intending to change behavior, as indicated here:

> **Alan**: You're not taking, well, you are taking the piss out of them [teasing them]. You don't mean it.
> **Facilitator**: ...not trying to hurt their feelings?
> **Logan**: No way because I'm drinking more Cruisers [pre-mixed vodka and fruit-based alcohol] than probably half of them. No, serious it's just like, "ooh, what are you drinking?" It's just banter, honestly. (FG19)

However, the men did not deny that banter sometimes resulted in heightened risky drinking. Indeed, at its most extreme, while rarely, participants described how peer-pressure resulted in drinking well beyond their intention. For example, in his interview Joseph (FG19) recounted drinking three pints of beer more than planned and ultimately vomiting because his friends repeatedly deployed gendered and sexist insults, calling him "a pussy", for wanting to stop drinking earlier.

## 4.4 | Intimacy and the desire for connection

This "banter" or peer-pressure subtly played a role in influencing men's drinking, despite participants often denying this was the case. However, they often spoke in ways that attempted to nullify the pernicious prospects of banter and reframed it as having a productive capacity. Here, consistent with recent sociological research, the importance of facilitating intimacy and connection with male friends featured prominently (Nayak, 2006; Roberts, 2018; Scoats & Robinson, 2020; Thurnell-Read, 2013). The pain of harsh comments was mediated in banter between friends as it occurred in a context of more equal power dynamics and trust than the kind of banter experienced among men who were acquaintances but not necessarily friends (see the above example of the cricket team; see also Roberts et al., 2019). For instance, Nigel (FG11) explained the intention of teasing by friends:

> **Nigel**: [It doesn't mean] "I want you to stop drinking". It's just like "I don't want you to go home". I feel like they love me.
> **Interviewer**: They want you to stay out?
> **Nigel**: Yeah, that's certainly what it is. When someone stops drinking it means they're going to go home, nobody wants your friends to go home.

Of significance is that the men's use of banter to achieve connection complicates the idea that peer-pressure *drives* risky drinking. Here, banter was primarily mobilized to facilitate connection rather than excessive drinking, per se. Other men in our study spoke of the desire for greater intimacy in their friend-relationships, again attesting to relationality, or at the very least their desire for it. In his interview Troy (FG11), for example, reminisced that:

I look at it [a photo from a drinking event] and smile, I'm like "what a good night". I remember like the night was excellent, hanging out with my family and kind of getting to know my cousins on a deeper level. You know, those drunken deep and meaningful conversations you have with someone you don't, that you've known your entire life, but you don't really know that well … from that night I feel closer to a few of my cousins that I hung out with, you know, I feel like we made some good bonding.

Additionally, conventions of masculinity such as independence and atomization positioned drinking alcohol as one of the few ways men could bond with one another (Emslie et al., 2013), again pointing to the harmful effects on men of the ideal of masculine autonomy. Ned (FG18), for example, stated "blokes don't really open up and they need, sometimes, an excuse to. And beer is that sort of thing that brings them together and helps them socialize a bit more". This was echoed by Andrew (FG3) who emphasized the role of alcohol as a means for men to "be on the same wavelength" and "connect more". Similarly, Louis (FG20) suggested that:

If I wasn't drinking I would confide only in a certain few, a very trusted few compared to after having a few beers [I] would be more likely to open up to someone who's just on that periphery I guess.

These men desired and sought out intimacy, in some cases achieving connection and relational embeddedness through their drinking practices.

## 4.5 | Care

Care for friends in drinking situations was another way participants revealed their interdependence and embeddedness in social relations, despite the salience of the discourse of masculine autonomy. Care in these situations, while present in some ways, was often discreet or limited. For example, even when engaging in banter to speed up their friends' drinking, Caleb (FG17) noted "there's always a limit, you know when to let people do their own thing". This statement reflects not only a subtle form of care for friends, but also again the influence of the discourse of masculine autonomy in the lives of these men, where letting people "do their own thing" took ultimate precedence. Participants commonly held that a friend's drinking should not be monitored, but that they would "keep an eye" (Brodie, FG9) on a friend if potential risks were noticed. To avoid obstructing another man's autonomy, they had developed techniques to discreetly slow down a friend's drinking if necessary.

For example, in response to the discussion prompt "when one of us vomits, we…", occasionally participants suggested "get him another drink!", but this was almost always a form of banter in the moment of the focus group. Indeed, even those who articulated this idea quickly changed their position. They usually stressed, in line with the dominant response across the data, that taking care of one's friend in such a situation is prioritized before returning to one's own drinking. Actions such as getting water for the person vomiting and making sure they could get home in a taxi were common practices that could be considered care in this situation. Participants described giving "subtle hints" (Kevin, FG9) to friends to avoid such problematic inebriation even occurring, such as bringing a bottle of water to the table (Will, FG4), taking the at-risk friend outside for a cigarette (Gabriel, FG7), or, for example, David (FG4) would tell a white lie and say "'just be careful, you know, you've knocked a few people': I usually try and use some kind of excuse like 'I think they're probably going to beat you mate, just maybe keep a lid on it', something like that".

Another participant described informing a bartender not to serve any more drinks to an intoxicated friend, while others described how as a group they would slow down their drinking when they noticed particular friends drinking too much and potentially placing themselves in dangerous situations:

*James*: That's usually when as a group we would all sort of go "[he's] hitting it pretty hard again". So we'd all slow [our drinking] down, so they'd be forced to, because otherwise they'd be … drinking by themselves and we're all sort of drinking slowly.

**Ned**: Without outwardly saying "you'd better calm down". Sort of – you're just more trying to do it subconsciously and just looking out for one another. (FG18)

Through these more discreet performances of care – limited as they may be – participants navigated their friends' sense of autonomy, their own safety, and their desire to look after their friends, revealing further ways in which they were interdependent and enmeshed in relationships with their friends. Driving while intoxicated was the circumstance in which participants felt unhindered in their ability to intervene in a friend's drinking. Most participants were confident that, if necessary, they would confiscate a friend's car keys if they were visibly over the blood-alcohol limit for driving. Importantly, however, men across all locations and subgroups prefaced these discussions by stating how difficult it is to objectively ascertain a friend's level of intoxication, and they distinguished between different levels of risk:

> **Anthony**: I'd take it as how they're presenting, are they slurring, can they stand up, hold a conversation... And yeah, okay, maybe they're a little bit over the limit, that's their decision if they want to lose their license. But are they going to run off the road, smash into something, you know?
>
> **Simon**: Yeah, are they going to harm somebody else? ... Are they putting their licence at risk or are they putting others at risk?
>
> **Eugene**: And I think you can always raise that with them, you know, "are you sure?"... And I think sometimes that's all they need to hear. (FG2)

This exchange illustrates the ease with which these participants felt they could approach a male friend about drink driving, but also highlights the perceived risks to others that allows men's intervention. When the risk was only to the individual, it was seen as their decision if they wanted to risk losing their license. Thus, this perception of risk impacted on the extent to which men were willing to impinge on another man's masculine autonomy.

However, despite care for friends in drinking situations occurring in these somewhat limited ways, ideals of masculine autonomy again emerged as harmful through acting as a barrier to participants providing health-related care for their friends. Many indicated they would not intervene in a male friend's risky drinking until he was completely incapable of taking care of himself, indeed until his autonomy was entirely impeded. For example, they stated they would give a friend water, make sure they were "not like passed out on the ground" (Sam, FG6), help them get home, or "put them to bed", but only if the friend was incapacitated. One group, for example, stated:

> **Will**: [Reading prompt] "If one of us is vomiting we – "
>
> **Michael**: Step back.
>
> **David**: Yeah, step back.
>
> **Bradley**: I guess probably it depends a bit on the context like, if they're okay and vomiting I'd probably have a laugh, but I would like to think I can tell the difference between if someone's okay and vomiting and someone that's really struggling and sort of on the verge of-losing-consciousness, vomiting. In that case I probably wouldn't, I'd probably try and help them. (FG4)

Another group relayed a scenario in which they determined it was up to their friend to decide when to seek medical attention for a serious injury sustained while drinking, facilitating the continuation of his drinking despite his inability to walk. Indeed, while these men recounted the story to exemplify male friendship and evidence close bonds, there was a clear resonance with discourses of masculine endurance and a "just walk it off" attitude to a serious injury:

> **Alan**: I probably should've waited, but we ran across the road, I slipped off the curb and smashed my knee and it blew up, this big.
>
> **Facilitator**: You didn't go to the hospital?
>
> **Logan**: He went the next day.

**Alan**: No, the boys carried me to the pub. (FG19)

Yet another group discussed how they would respond to someone trying to start a fight with their friend, explaining they would let a friend "do their thing" unless the situation got out of hand:

**Caleb**: If they're by themselves, let them do their thing unless, if anything goes too far you've got to step in or if there's more than one person you've got to step in. But if it's just one-on-one I'd leave it until it gets to a point where someone's going to get hurt because they need to sort it out. If it's going to happen it's going to happen. (FG17)

Thus, discreet and limited forms of care in some circumstances highlighted that these men were embedded in relationships and interdependencies with one another. On the other hand, the harms of the discursive ideal of masculine autonomy were again revealed in how ideals such as independence and self-responsibilization often impeded care-giving, even in extreme situations.

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our starting point for this article was to note that the use and framing of autonomy in studies of men and masculinities tends to rely on the notion of "masculine autonomy". This literature tends to point to men's commitment to associated ideals such as independence, atomization, and self-sufficiency and highlights how the ideal of masculine autonomy maintains men's power and privilege. Drawing on feminist conceptualizations of autonomy and our empirical findings, we have sought to extend this framing and to encourage an expanded consideration of autonomy.

Reconceiving the notion of autonomy, Nedelsky (1989, p. 10) suggested "[w]e need concepts that incorporate our experience of embeddedness in relations, both the inherent, underlying reality of such embeddedness and the oppressiveness of its current social forms". The findings considered throughout this article speak to both aspects of this assertion, shedding light on how men are embedded in social relations, and how contemporary configurations and expectations of masculinity continue to impede men's greater relationality and interdependence. Feminist theory and philosophy has long recognized that both men and women are interdependent and relational (e.g., Friedman, 2000), while masculinities theorizing has traditionally suggested that masculine autonomy – consisting of independence, self-responsibilization and atomization – is an aspect of idealized masculinity, but without fully unpacking its meaning. Our research extends these theoretical discussions to work toward a sociological understanding of autonomy and relationality, and how these play out in men's lives, by delving empirically into the practicalities of both sides of this equation: the reality of relationality, yet the harms of the discursive ideal of masculine autonomy for men, women and people of all genders. This focus on practice reveals that relationality and masculine autonomy – seemingly mutually exclusive concepts – are intertwined in men's lives.

Although feminist theorizing reveals the implausibility in practice of masculine autonomy, it retained a strong influence in the lives of our participants as a discursive ideal toward which they should aspire. Echoing typical assertions in the masculinities literature, men valorized masculine autonomy, adhering to principles of independence and self-responsibilization in their drinking practices and rejecting the suggestion that they were influenced by others or by societal expectations. They respected the autonomy of their friends to determine their own drinking practices, and strongly disapproved of those they perceived as influenced by peer-pressure, reflecting Verkerk's (2001 p. 291) observation that "[d]ependence on the help of others is often humiliating in a society [that] prizes independence". Our research reveals how greater care, intimacy, and emotionality were significantly impeded as ideals of independence and self-responsibilization retained purchase amongst these men. Of course, though, these "costs" of masculine autonomy are incurred at the same time as men's power is maintained.

Yet concurrently, a critical finding from our study is that a drive toward achieving masculine autonomy does not altogether negate relationality. For example, a relational form of autonomy emerged in the lives of our participants, as shown in the need for the mutual recognition of autonomy in regards to drinking amongst friends. The subtle influence of peer-pressure amongst these men, particularly in the form of banter, also contradicted assertions of masculine autonomy in drinking practices. In some cases this banter posed a danger when men were influenced to drink beyond their planned limits; yet participants simultaneously positioned this banter as a form of intimacy and connection between male friends. Men in this research desired greater platonic intimacy with their male friends, but conventions of masculine autonomy hampered this possibility. Drinking alcohol and engaging in banter thus represented some of the few ways that men could connect with one another (de Visser & Smith, 2007; Thurnell-Read, 2013). Limited care for friends in drinking situations was revealed as another form of men's interconnectedness. Participants often cared for their friends in discreet ways such as fetching them water, slowing down the group pace of drinking, or subtly hinting to friends to take care. Regardless of feminist debates around care and whether or not it holds transformative potential, the point here is that the subtle forms of care enacted by the participants for each other gesture toward these men as relationally and interdependently situated, rather than as independent and unaffected by one another. However, again the importance of respecting the autonomy of male friends by not intervening unless completely necessary and letting them "do their own thing" in drinking situations was influential, discouraging more overt, involved or sustained forms of care.

Much more than the gap between discourse and practice, these findings reveal men as inescapably relationally embedded and interdependent despite the dictates and constraints of the discourse of masculine autonomy. This speaks to feminist conceptualizations of care and autonomy that stress everyone is enmeshed in interdependent, relational networks (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Kittay, 1999; Ruddick, 1989; Tronto, 1993) and even that there exists a "necessity of having relationships in order to see oneself as autonomous" (Verkerk, 2001, p. 29). Gilligan's (1982) now classic thesis was that women's moral perspective is based on care and relationships, and men's on justice, rights, autonomy and independence. Our research highlights that men, as well as women, are relationally embedded, attesting to the possibility of realizing Tronto's (1993, p. 3) call for an ethic of care based on "the values traditionally associated with women", rather than on "women's morality". Such a goal also depends on dismantling patriarchal structures that are propped up in part by ideals such as masculine autonomy.

Recognizing that men are relationally situated opens up possibilities for challenging the harms of the discourse of masculine autonomy and for reformulations of masculinity. Relationality has been noted as a key tenet of the concept of caring masculinities (Elliott, 2016), for example, which posits that men's practices of care can lead to more nurturing and caring attitudes, thus potentially transforming ideals of masculinity that are harmful to people of all genders (see also Knights, 2019). Tackling norms of atomization and independence, and embracing instead interdependence and relational forms of autonomy, is an important feminist project in moving toward equality of access to autonomy and self-determination for men, women, and people of all genders (Friedman, 2000). Recognizing men as relationally embedded is not to overlook that care work has historically been performed by women and marginalized men. Given the assertion in feminist care theory that doing practical care work can lead to more caring and nurturing orientations and identities (Elliott, 2016), there remains much to be done in fostering greater relationality amongst men in terms of, for example, practices of care and intimacy and in dismantling patriarchal structures of power and domination. However, identifying the ways men are already relationally situated offers avenues to begin ameliorating these inequalities and for reformulating masculinity toward greater interdependence, care, and relationality.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTE

[1] This is not the same as hegemonic masculinity, which was recently "renovated" as a concept and now, according to Messerschmidt (2018), describes solely those masculinities that legitimate gender inequality.

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