Man-to-Man: A Body Talk Between Male Friends

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In this article, the author discusses friendship as a method of qualitative inquiry and how this method informed research on the social construction of masculinity in male-male friendships. First, a narrative account of a first meeting with a participant is given. Next, the discursive aspect of fieldwork is considered where the author’s ideas about friendship as method and “the reach of dialogue” are outlined. Finally, the article focuses on the role of autoethnography in conducting and representing qualitative work on masculinity.

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I’m early. To ease my excitement I take a quick stroll around the apartment complex and scout the location of “Jack’s” home, which ends up taking several minutes longer than expected because all the buildings look exactly the same—asphalt roof, red brick, white aluminum doors. There are no landmarks, and the black paint of most building numbers has faded under the pressure of heat and time. I panic. Before my insecurities can take control, I notice a multicolored jalopy—one I’ve ridden in many times—it belongs to Jack. His apartment is the one on the right. I approach the metal door and tentatively knock.

“Hey,” Jack says opening the door with a big grin on his face.
“How’s it going?” I ask.
“Fine, fine, good to see you.”

Typical of his good nature, Jack hugs me as I enter his home. He smells fresh from the shower.
“I hope I’m not too early,” I say.

I met Jack during orientation week a couple of years earlier. Since then, we had hung out many times and were good acquaintances, the kind who had shared some of the tribulations of graduate school together. I want to get to know him better and hope this conversation will bring us closer. We walk into his living room, and I plop down on a ragged sofa. I begin rummaging through my satchel, and he sits in a chair at a right angle from me. He picks up a bottle of lotion off the coffee table, squirts a glob into the palm of his hand, and begins gently working it into one of his smooth, tanned legs. He’s wearing loose fitting shorts and as he massages his muscular thigh, I produce a small digital voice recorder. I indicate my intent with a nod of my head, and Jack silently assents. I push the record button and a tiny red light blinks on.

“How do you feel about your body now?” I ask knowing he needs no further explanation because we had talked about my project earlier in the week when I asked him if he would participate.

“I’ve always been ok with my body, but not truly thrilled with it,” he says, “I often reinforce the mind/body split—it’s something I inhabit. I’m good to it. I eat well most of the time. I exercise regularly, but I’m never content with how it looks. I played football in high school, and even the serious conditioning that involved didn’t shed the bit of fat around my middle. I’ve probably tried 500 different exercises since then.” He pauses to see if I understand. Before I can reply, the doorbell rings.

“That must be Billy the maintenance guy. He’s here to fix my fridge,” Jack says as he strides across the room.

I push the pause button on the recorder and watch as the two men head into the kitchen. They chat for a few minutes before my peer returns.

“The funny thing is,” he says looking into the kitchen, “it’s the food too. I overeat sometimes. I’m hurting my body. I’ll indulge myself at the expense of the body. I can feel it happening—feel it taking over but I’ve had tremendous luck my whole life never any serious illnesses or injuries just a few scrapes. Sometimes, men think of the body as a machine. My body,” Jack pats his torso “my body is a good car. It’s never been the new car or the most expensive car but the reliable one. I wish I could have the really expensive car” he laments.

“I feel the same way, maybe a little worse,” I reply.

“How so?” he asks.

“I’ve always been self conscious about my body. When everyone was hitting puberty, I was still packing on the baby fat. For most of junior high and high school I looked like a cherub,” I say.
“You still see yourself that way?”
“Not exactly, but puberty happened fast for me. One summer I went from being the shortest person in my family to the tallest, but I didn’t believe it. I couldn’t see myself as six feet tall,” I say using my hands to demonstrate my quick change in body size.
“It took time for your body image and self identity to match?” he probes.
“Yes, but I can’t say I have positive regard for my body. I’ve just never been very athletic,” I say.
“I was always athletic, but feel I could look better. I constantly imagine that I can get rid of what’s around my waist,” he says and lifts his t-shirt to show me the slightly loose skin hanging from his gut. It reminds me of my own much bigger stomach.
“This pouch has been there since I was 15,” Jack continues, “When you’re asking me about body are you asking me about physique?”
“Yes, but I’m also interested in the contexts where physique matters—how our body image influences our relationships with ourselves and other men,” I say.

Jack sits silently and contemplates my words for several seconds. He is a handsome man in his late 30s, and it’s hard for me to believe that he feels any inadequacies about his body. Yet this bit of information comforts me. I am not alone in my struggle with appearance.

“I’ve always been just average size about 5’9” and I feel self-conscious when talking to taller men wondering if they’re looking at me going, ‘this dude’s small.’ I can feel the testosterone rising, so I make up for size difference with personality, especially vocal control. I generate presence verbally, even with those I’m closest to,” he leans forward and straightens his back, a posture that seems to add to his authority.

“The word presence is very interesting,” I say tentatively and cock my head toward the ceiling. “I don’t necessarily want to assign a negative value to our need to exert a presence around other men, but perhaps my feminist training causes me to automatically see patriarchal norms in such a performance. I see it as a way of avoiding vulnerability. I ask myself, ‘Is there a better way to story this experience; is there something else going on?’ but I get stuck with the idea that men are divorced from the emotional content of their relationships either with each other or with women. I can’t help seeing our fear of vulnerability as situated in the body, and it has to do with that need for presence you mentioned. I’m hesitant to say that there is no emotional content in our relationships or that there isn’t an emotional exchange.”

“Internally or externally?” Jack asks interrupting my musings.
“Both. It’s just that we haven’t allowed ourselves to understand that an emotional exchange is happening and I could be wrong but . . . ”
“It’s worth thinking out loud about” he finishes for me.
“My instinct is to say that men are not out of touch with their emotions; it’s just that men experience their emotions in particular ways, and we haven’t learned to talk about them with each other,” I say.

“I think that it is contextual. I can show my emotions around certain men or women. I can open up over a glass of wine or a fine meal but at other moments I feel less confident. Like when I go to the beach, my body is more on display than at other times. I’m not wearing a jacket and tie or a nice pair of shoes,” Jack slumps back in his chair, a little deflated, then says, “I don’t perceive myself as looking good, and I catch myself making comments to my partner about feeling fat and looking fat. I don’t think she sees me as fat. I don’t think anybody sees me as fat except myself, and it’s all tied to my belly. I’d like to say I’ve maintained that I’m even more muscular now than I was 20 years ago, but I can’t let go of the nagging need to improve,” Jack sighs.

I contemplate my bulky stomach and can’t help thinking mine is bigger than his—a claim that for one part of the body would be a source of pride.

“I know,” I respond.

“It’s all tied to my belly. I’ve changed directions a couple of times,” Jack says about his choice of topic.

“That’s fine,” I say.

“When I was in my 20s, bodybuilding wasn’t as big a deal as it is now. People didn’t go to the gym 5 days a week. When I was an undergrad, our school gym could have fit in this living room” he looks around and gestures at the confined space. “In my late 20s, the fitness craze hit, and I started comparing myself unfavorably to men in my age group. As I reach 40, people frequently comment on my youthful appearance and that makes me feel one up on men my age. For instance, the guy who just came in to fix the refrigerator is probably about my age but looks 10 years older. I don’t know what that’s about—am I in competition with him?” Jack relates.

I begin to imagine the stomach I’d like to have—the one I see everyday. What would it feel like to have a six-pack? Nothing on my body is hard. Everything is soft and squishy. I’m about 10 years younger than Jack, and he is in better shape. After a few seconds of silent contemplation, Jack continues

“By U.S. standards, as a man, I am well below the norm especially in other status areas. I don’t own a home or drive a nice car. I wonder if some of my anxiety about my body is from not paying attention to those other aspects. As a graduate student, I have little control over my financial situation. I want to improve to be seen as more masculine and having a good physique a six-pack . . .”

“I’m sure neither of us wants to work that hard not when we already put too much time into our brains” I add.
“But, I would never consider surgery—calf implants, pectoral implants, or liposuction and all those other cosmetic things men are doing these days. I prefer an organic approach,” Jack says.

“Right,” I agree.

“A couple of semesters ago we joked in a feminism class that when men stand naked in front of the mirror they say ‘Hey, yeah, not too bad.’ Women never do that. I guess I’m not a generic man because when I look in the mirror I often feel unattractive.”

The repair guy, Billy, waltzes into the room interrupting Jack’s thoughts.

“It’s fixed,” he beams.

Jack’s food is saved, and he escorts Billy to the door. I pause the tape recorder again and wait to continue our conversation.

“Where were we?” Jack says when he returns to his seat.

“You were saying that when men stand in front of the mirror they’re more likely to see themselves as attractive in comparison to women engaged in the same activity. That has not been my experience either; I avoid mirrors. I don’t like what I see; but, as you suggested, there are other avenues of status available to men. I can be short, fat, and have hair in funny places and still attain status through money or education. My looks are less of an issue because men haven’t faced a long history of objectification. But isn’t that changing? I’m thinking about my fantasies of the male body. I’ll flip channels on the TV and there are lots of infomercials about diet and fitness. I’ll sit and watch them and linger over the male bodies thinking ‘I want that body; wondering what it would be like . . .’”

“To be in that body,” he interrupts.

“Because the men they show are . . .”

“Oh they’re gorgeous bodies. The muscles are nice, and the skin is so smooth and even not like mine,” I describe.

“You may have noticed when you got here that I was putting lotion on my legs. I trim body hair almost weekly because that beautifies and maybe makes it more feminine. I don’t just let it grow. I keep just enough underarm hair to remain masculine, which is a joke; women grow hair there just as easily as men. I go to the beach and tan as often as possible maybe once every 3 weeks to attain that caramel look of health. I imagine I’m also emulating those bodies on television. They don’t have strange patches of hair on their stomachs like I do. I’m also constantly changing my look,” Jack relates.

“We both do that,” I say.

“Yeah, we both do,” Jack agrees. “Yesterday, I shaved my beard but I’ll eventually let it grow back. I want to remain interesting, but I won’t do anything drastic like shave my head, which is a blatant way of gaining attention.”

“I shaved my head,” I retort.
“Oh, that’s right,” he remembers.
“I enjoyed doing that. I loved the feel of my naked scalp,” I say.
“You have a good head for baldness,” he complements.
“When I grew my hair back most of the women in the department were glad. They
kept commenting that they like me better with hair.”
“I think that’s scary for women,” Jack assumes.
“I wasn’t sure how to interpret that and I will probably never shave my head again
because my partner is opposed to the idea. She doesn’t even like me growing a
beard. Her desires define, to some extent, what I can do to my body. She likes it
when I spend more time plucking my eyebrows and other cosmetic things we
do to fit the fantasy. I know it’s a way of pampering the body but when I start to
do some of those things like exfoliating my skin I feel self-conscious like
I’m . . . ”
“Deviant,” Jack states with a naughty grin on his face.
“Yes,” I draw out the word a little longer than necessary playing along with the
queer turn of the conversation.

I was going to say ashamed and am glad my friend’s word choice shifts my
perspective.

“Most of the men I was around during my formative years were blue collar, and the
idea of shaving body hair would have been queer to them.”
“For me hair trimming is very autoerotic,” Jack replies.
“It is a sensual experience,” I add.
“My partner is very intimate with my body and knows all the subtle changes as I
would with her. She asks me, ‘did you . . . ?’ I don’t shave my chest but I’ll take
my beard trimmer and set it on low and give it a quick lawn mowing,” Jack says,
and we both laugh. “Still, I also know she will be accepting and not think it
abnormal, which gives me permission in a way. If I were with a woman who
found it feminine or odd, then I wouldn’t do it. My partner tells me her prefer-
ences too. She loves my beard. It’s amazing the kind of women you attract with
a beard. When I grow my beard I get comments from African American
women all the time, which I wasn’t expecting. I get looks from lots of women
my age or older, but younger women don’t like the beard,” Jack conveys.
“It makes sense that in U.S. culture younger women hate beards, because the hair-
less man is more prevalent in the media than 10 or 20 years ago,” I say.
“Look at us,” he points at my head, “we both have long hair. Even after my hair
cut . . . ”
“Yeah, you did cut your hair. I just noticed,” I break in.
“It’s still long. You see these guys with buzz cuts—I could never do that to my hair.
Then again, I do value youthful qualities, but I’m married to my generational
norms.”
“Hair represents an age gap. When it comes to facial hair, 20-something men are
limited to goatees, soul patches, or flavor savors.”
“And the sideburn thing,” Jack adds.
“Victorian-inspired facial hair,” I suppose.
“I’ve noticed that with facial hair, when they have it, that it’s cross racial that Black
men and White men between 18 and 25 maintain similar styles, which is inter-
esting and even encouraging,” Jack replies.
“I’ve had this fantasy about using NADS one of those hair removal products you see
advertised on TV. A few months ago my partner bought some, and we started
using it on my body. It was actually very . . . ”
“Freeing,” Jack interjects.
“Annoying,” I correct.
“Oh.”
“It was taking too long, and the hair wasn’t coming off because it was growing in so
many directions. I imagined it would come right off like in the commercial, and
it would be silky smooth,” I relate.
“It doesn’t?” he asks making a mental note.
“You have to keep working at it,” I complain.
“There was a fantastic presentation at NCA last year about body hair. The men on
the panel performed 8-minute pieces about their relationship with body hair and
one guy was hairy, hairy. He had thick tufts of hair on his back, and I can’t
remember what he used. He may have shaved it or used Nair. I don’t remember,
but he developed a rash whatever he did,” Jack says.
“That happened to me too.”
“He developed a sadomasochistic relationship with his hair. He knew he was going
to get the rash but removed the hair anyway. Like I said before, I think my rela-
tionship with hair is autoerotic;” he finishes.
“I feel embarrassed about hair removal. I don’t enjoy it; I avoid it. But you embrace
it as a sensual experience,” I say.
“It is and related to that is how much I weigh. I was 172 for much of my life. There is
something about that number that I attach to youthfulness and what’s funny is
that I weighed 172 all those years but my jean size went up regularly. Now I
weigh at least 182 and sometimes 186 or 7, which I know on this body is 13
pounds over. I don’t feel heavier or sluggish or slower, but I know I’m over-
weight. I worry about whether the fat is around my middle or somewhere else
and how I’m going to get rid of it,” he says.
“I dread going to the store to shop for pants, because I know there’s a possibility that
I’ve changed size and at my best, which would have been in high school, I wore a
32. Right now, I’m wearing a 38. Over the years it has been going up and up. This
summer I reached size 40. I felt bad and joined Weight Watchers. I looked like
shit,” I say.
“I don’t diet. I dined out last night with some friends, and we had this conversation. I
don’t diet, but if I eat cheeseburgers and fries 4 days in a row, then I feel sluggish
and I switch to soup and salad. I don’t think the burgers made me go from 185 to
195, and certainly the salad doesn’t bring my weight down, but I wish I could go
somewhere and someone would say, ‘You eat all these foods that you like,’ in
other words, someone would give me a diet of food I already enjoy and told me
that eating them for 6 months would drop my weight to 172, I would do it. That number is youth to me, and it wouldn't matter if my waist size were 31 or 34. I hate that Levi’s advertises your measurements on the back of your jeans,” Jack says.

“Yeah, you can blot it out with a black magic marker or use a seam ripper to remove the patch,” I say.

“I don’t buy Levi’s. I buy Old Navy or something that doesn’t tell the world my size. I don’t get that,” Jack continues.

“I have a pair of Levi’s on right now and my preference is usually for that brand; they fit me better. But I still dread going to the store to shop for clothes because I’m never the right size. Everywhere I turn all I see is youth and beauty,” I say.

“I know when I look in a magazine I can count on being presented with young attractive men,” Jack states.

“They use older men who are rugged, which is another self-criticism. Even though I look young, I am too soft or gentle in appearance. I fantasize about being more like Clint Eastwood or the Marlboro Man,” I say.

“It’s not just the desire created by images in popular culture either. It’s also your perception of how others are looking at you,” he theorizes.

“You don’t want them to see you as soft,” I state.

“That reminds me about this performance class I visited not long ago. One of the groups asked me if I’d do a part in one of their skits—the role of a drill sergeant chanting ‘I don’t know what I been told,’” Jack imitates before going on. “I was looking over the script and one of the women said, ‘you don’t look tough enough.’ She wasn’t insulting me just pointing out that my face looked too soft to play the part. I said, ‘Just you wait. I’ll transform. I will not smile. I will not twinkle. I will be cruel and loud and scary.’ I realized that I do that sometimes—adopt a menacing persona. Sometimes a situation requires a rugged masculinity like when I go to the mechanic to have my car looked at. I don’t go in with a big smile. I’ve started doing that in airports. When I go through the checkout counter I’m not cheery anymore. I adopt a more masculine persona facially. I also change my posture. I was teaching a gender class and asked students about what is and isn’t appropriate body language for men. I stood up and put my hands on my hips,” Jack stands up and walks across the living room provocatively swaying his posterior, “and the guys are like, ‘that’s not good.’ Or I sit like this,” he falls into his chair and crosses his legs as though he were wearing a dress.

“I sit that way a lot,” I say.

“I do too. It’s more comfortable,” Jack says.

“I resent that we’re limited by the conventions of our gender.”

“Absolutely,” Jack agrees.

“We better check the time. I feel like we’re running out and I don’t want you to be late,” I say. I would surreptitiously check my wrist but don’t want to send the wrong signal. I don’t want to appear bored or impatient. I am, after all, genuinely concerned about my friend’s other obligations and I know we’ve been conversing beyond the set parameters.
“What time is it?” Jack asks.
“10:18,” I say checking my watch.
“We’re doing alright then,” Jack replies.
“I wonder about specific locations and our relationships with other men. Is there something about a place that contributes to our performance of masculinity?” I ask.
“If I said to my class that I go to the grocery store across town because I want to get checked out by gay men, they would question my heterosexuality; but places create opportunities to look and be looked at and I like leaving the grocery store feeling good about myself even though I don’t pay nearly enough attention to men’s glances as I do to women’s glances, especially from women I know. I wouldn’t notice if you got a haircut. Nor would I be able to tell you all the men I interacted with yesterday and what they were wearing. I could tell you they weren’t wearing tank tops but . . .”
“You’d only remember if it were an extreme difference from the norm,” I interject.
“Right,” Jack concurs.
“The male gaze is something influenced by place I suppose.”
“And the men you hang with,” he says.
“Those others, especially significant others, are what matter to me. When hanging out with male friends, I sometimes sense coercion about certain things,” I reply.
“Like looking at women?”
“Yes. Because of my training I feel embarrassed when I notice women for their body parts but I still find myself looking,” I say.
“I don’t apologize for noticing attractive women. I think what I find reprehensible is when you go to the gym, for instance, and an attractive woman walks through, and men will stop what they are doing turn in pairs or threesome and stare at her. That influences her power,” Jack explains.
“Most of what happens between us in that moment is completely nonverbal. We confirm a societal norm with a raised eyebrow and a smile,” I say. “It amazes me how men can carry on a conversation with one another and dissect a nearby woman at the same time. We’ll use facial expressions to say ‘hey, check her out.’ Most of the time I don’t say anything but will resist turning my head. It’s . . .”
“It’s intrusive,” Jack adds.
“It feels wrong,” I respond.
“We’re projecting our power over her through collusion,” Jack says.
“I’m more uncomfortable when that happens with a man who is my friend,” I lament.
“Absolutely,” he agrees.
“I like you maybe even adore you and staring at someone’s boobs together troubles me,” I say.
“It makes you feel terrible,” Jack sighs.
“It makes me feel bad about us as pals. I’ve had friendships break up over the act of objectifying women. If the only thing between us is our capacity to critique ‘tits and ass,’” I make the scare quote gesture to emphasize my use of vulgar language, “then I’m not going to keep spending my time with you. However, what
you were saying about not apologizing for looking reminds me of my hypocrisy. I do sometimes remember a woman I saw yesterday. The details of her flesh remind me that I’ve been trained by the media and by other males from infancy that it’s ok to gaze,” I say.

“Me too,” Jack agrees, “I can remember a woman I was sitting next to while eating dinner the other day. I could tell you what she was wearing or how her hair was styled. I could tell you that she had a pretty, oval face and c-cup breasts, but I didn’t make her feel self-conscious or take power away from her by noticing.”

“A more surreptitious look,” I comment.

“I do what women do,” he explains.

“They look at us too but in an unobtrusive way,” I ask.

“That’s right,” Jack answers, “and if I wanted to flirt, I would let her know that I saw her.”

“It’s a game of letting each other notice that you’re noticing without being overt or domineering. I’ve never been able to pull off the subtlety. Maybe I’m too familiar with the more blatant exchange that happens between men,” I say.

“I like your question about men and relationships. I try to think of the relationships I have. My brothers and I have had this conversation about body size and body style. As family, we’ve watched each other age from kids to teenagers and so on—something that’s not true with any of my adult friendships. I’ve known Brian since August ’97 and he would be delighted to know that I don’t think he’s aged at all in the last 5 years. He probably thinks he looks older. My other friend James is extremely comfortable with his body. He’s a little taller than I am—about 5’11”—and when I first met him he was lanky. Now he’s got a 40-year-old body with a beer belly. It’s enormous, but the rest of him is still thin. He looks like he’s carrying a basketball around under his shirt. When we go to watch a football game, he likes to take off his shirt. He’s pasty white and not attractive to look at, but he doesn’t care. I envy him his comfort,” Jack says.

“I wonder if there are other experiences where men look at other men that we should explore?” I ask.

“I play basketball regularly with a couple of guy friends. Afterward, we go to the locker room together, strip down, and shower together. These two guys are much hairier than I am. They have what you would call stereotypical uh…”

“Hairy, hairy, hairy,” I interrupt.


“I think most men do that,” I say.

“I don’t stare but I do a quick mental calculation to see if his is bigger than mine.”

“I find myself looking at men’s hands,” I joke.

“There’s a great moment in The World According to Garp where Helen Holmes notices how weak men look when naked and unerect. I read that book 20 years ago and have never forgotten it. Sometimes, when I get out of the shower and am in a sexual context with my partner, I feel soft and unattractive, but, in the bedroom, in the act of making love, I don’t feel that way. Enacting confidence is another area of compensation. I don’t have a magazine quality body, so I
compensate by paying attention to how well I am reading my lover’s body and making the right moves and that kind of thing,” he says.

“I think a lot of attractiveness is the way we perform our imperfections,” I muse.

“That sounds like Goffman.”

“Perhaps, but the idea of vulnerability and invulnerability keeps coming to mind. The Bow-Flex body we see on TV performs invulnerability something that we may desire; yet we may recognize that such a performance doesn’t make for very profound relationships. A more vulnerable sort of body or vulnerable presence makes for more meaningful relationships,” I say.

“Absolutely,” Jack agrees.

“In that respect our bodies put us at an advantage because we can perform vulnerability far easier than the man on the TV with the Bow-Flex body. When you see a massive, physically powerful man, the assumption is that he’s tough not a teddy bear. That body has a much harder time performing vulnerability,” I surmise.

“That’s a good point. I think that’s a major realization. It makes me feel a little bit better about myself. I can be vulnerable. It’s easier for me. I hadn’t really thought of that until now,” Jack replies. I look at my watch again and indicate that time is running short.

“Why don’t we go into my bedroom? We can keep talking while I get dressed for class,” he stands up and I follow him to the back of the apartment.

“I wonder if women can say the same thing,” Jack wonders as he strips out of his T-shirt and shorts. He has an even tan. His body is well toned except for the slight pouch of skin around his middle. It is also covered with uniform length blond hair. I snap my eyes to face level purposely refraining from gazing at his crotch.

“I don’t think so. Regardless of their body type they are rendered vulnerable by the cultural narrative of objectification,” I respond.

“They’re already vulnerable; they can’t perform vulnerable,” Jack says.

“I remember that when I was younger I incorrectly interpreted women’s experiences based on a limited understanding of my own body—probably still do. I couldn’t figure out why one girlfriend always wanted to have sex with the lights out. Or why another wanted to have breast augmentations because they sagged and were small. Not to mention the eating disorders. I couldn’t understand not until I was able to step back from my own self-conscious feelings about my body. I appreciate the cultural pressures more these day, especially because my own body is becoming more and more subject to those pressures,” I say.

“The first woman I was intimate with was considerably older. I was 17 and she was 26. She wasn’t self-conscious about her body. There was nothing I didn’t find attractive about her from her wide hips to her sagging breasts. She was sexy because she never revealed any discomfort about her body. Of course, I was feeling fortunate to just be naked with a woman,” Jack says as he pulls fresh clothes from his closet.

“I know what you mean. I had a similar experience. I was 17 and she was 21 and a junior in college,” I reply.

“Might as well have been 40,” he observes while pulling on a pair of Old Navy jeans.
“I had just graduated high school, and it was summer and we were working at the same movie theater. That’s how we met,” I say.

“I was working at a restaurant,” Jack adds.

“We spent the summer together. She had a serious boyfriend back at school,” I say.

“Mine had a husband,” Jack reveals while lacing up his shoes.

“That experience changed the way I looked at my body,” I reply.

“I don’t think I even experienced my body in that context. I just experienced orgasm,” Jack says while tucking in his shirt. “I didn’t have a body. I just had a penis. It occurs to me that over time my interactions with women have contributed to my body image. What they tell you makes a difference. Your skin is soft. You have nice hands. I like your broad shoulders that sort of thing. It sticks with you,” Jack says, and we meander back into the living room.

I pick up my satchel and follow him to the door. We’re standing at his car, reluctant to end our conversation.

“It does stick with you. After that summer, I saw myself as a stud that I was good in bed because I could get an erection just from saying sex. I had incredible staying power too. She would thank me over and over afterward. It was kind of embarrassing, but for a 17-year-old who had never had sex and had just reached puberty,” I say rapidly.


“Yes, but it made me overconfident. Even though I had a few one-night stands over the next couple of years and that image of myself was sustained, it didn’t last. I met a woman my junior year, and we got serious. We dated for 9 months before we had sex. It didn’t work. I had difficulties getting erections. When I did, I’d orgasm in about three seconds. I didn’t understand it. I was devastated,” I relate.

“I had a relationship like that too,” Jack says.

“It was very crippling, and we eventually broke up,” I reply.

“And you didn’t pursue other relationships for awhile,” Jack comments.

“I was very afraid.”

“I had a girlfriend who called me in front of a lot of people ‘quick draw’ that was during my freshman year, but oh it’s time to go,” Jack says looking at his own watch.

“I know,” I say a little disappointed that our time has run out.

“Later I met a woman who was more experienced and was patient. She taught me that lovemaking had little to do with the penis. She also said, ‘You have a nice penis.’ She thought it was attractive. What a difference that made. I have to totally go,” Jack finishes.

“I’ll e-mail you later to set up those other meetings,” I add.

“Sure thing. Take care,” Jack says.

“So long,” I reply.
We hug each other and he gets into his car. I watch him back up and pull out of the parking lot.

In the last few minutes that we are together, I experience a therapeutic turn in our talk—not so much that the stories we tell are overly painful or tragic as it is the way our ordinary lives take shape and are imbued with deeper significance. I feel excited and uplifted. It is difficult to know whether these feelings are the result of the topics we discussed or the degree to which our genuine interest in the other spurred us on. I assume the therapeutic quality stems from both, as it is uncommon that men allow themselves to talk candidly about their bodies. Had we learned anything? I don’t know. I felt connected to Jack in a way that I hadn’t felt connected to another man in a long time. We laughed and joked about the macho personas we assumed to keep others “at arm’s length.” We had shared without judgment intimate details about our bodies—our lives, and the conversation soothed me like a healing balm.

Dialogue: Talking the Talk of Friendship as Method

According to Lincoln (1995), we should recognize three important commitments associated with qualitative research. The first pertains to our relations with respondents. The second is a concern for how our inquiry is used to foster action. The third envisions research “that enables and promotes social justice, community, diversity, civic discourse, and caring” (pp. 277-278). At the heart of Lincoln’s argument about “good” qualitative research is a relatively new emphasis on the validation of relationships created as a result of doing research. Except in special circumstances, it is no longer acceptable for researchers to slink away in the night with collected data. Instead, qualitative researchers strive to foster connections between researchers, participants, and the communities in which they live—an endeavor that recognizes the proposition that all knowing is relational. It is in this relational context that I approached participants for my project.

Good qualitative work will promote reflexivity or a hyperawareness of the multirelational quality of being. Such work should also promote reciprocity or an “intense sharing that opens all lives party to the inquiry to examination” (Lincoln, 1995, pp. 283-284). Lincoln sees it as a kind of “lover-model” where a deep sense of trust, caring, and mutuality is developed.

Lincoln’s descriptions are akin to the elements of a good friendship. In fact, some researchers are beginning to identify friendship as a method for doing qualitative ethnographic work—notable among them is Tillmann-Healy (2003) who not only coined the phrase, friendship as method, but also
reminded us that ethnographers negotiate many roles while trying to gain entrée into the worlds they wish to study. Furthermore, those roles require the researcher to learn new ways of communicating. Becoming immersed in a group often means coping with the challenges, conflicts, and losses specific to groups. Goffman (1989) characterizes ethnographers in their role of participant observer as a kind of “fink” (p. 125). The notion of ethnographer as “fink” carries a very different ethos than one characterized as “friend.” Relationally speaking, an ethnographer as “friend” imagines future contact between researcher and participant. In fact, the friendly ethnographer often thinks beyond the categories of researcher and participant. On the other hand, an ethnographer as “fink” sees no future in the relationship. In this configuration, the participant is useful only as a source of data.

Friendship, according to Tillmann-Healy (2003), requires ethnographers to live in the context of participants, to move at the pace of everyday life. If ethnographers are to develop a “stance of mutuality,” and if one of our goals is social transformation, then participants must be invited into our contexts where our privileges as academics are most profoundly enacted. I can imagine a variety of ways a researcher might invite participants into the academy. For example, participants can be included in department colloquiums where they can observe and contribute to knowledge production. They can also be asked to attend dissertation defenses, especially on projects in which they were subjects (see Tillmann-Healy, 2003). Participants can even spend time in the classes we teach adding their perspective to the work we do. I have witnessed such things in my own department and feel optimistic about the bonds formed during this sharing of ideas. Granted, these are idealistic scenarios; and in some instances, where anonymity is necessary, such inclusion may be impossible. However, as qualitative researchers, we are obligated to bend our imaginations toward mutually beneficial outcomes. Consequently, what we do in the academy should not be a mystery to those who live outside our “ivory halls.” Another way we invite participants into our conversations is by actively translating our work for popular consumption and making it accessible to lay audiences.

Friendship as method, Tillmann-Healy (2003) maintains “demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying them to studying us” (p. 735). Thus, our research is often about contesting and exposing privilege and oppression. The goal that emerges from such activities is one where all involved learn to practice a more active and responsible citizenship “as a result, those who are ‘just friends’ can become just friends, interpersonal and political allies who seek personal growth, meaningful relationships, and social justice” (p. 731).

My own research strives to build a community of men where normative masculinity is not taken for granted and alternatives are considered and even
assumed within the contexts of close personal relationships. The “talk” going on among us is part of a consensus-building process where new meanings are incorporated into our tacit performance of masculinity. For example, expressing affection looks and feels different from my past experiences with other men. Being gentle with one another while hugging—for that matter even going so far as to hug one another—acquires positive rather than negative connotations and is a movement toward comfort with the homoerotic and away from the discomfort of the homophobic.

The tools of research are not necessarily antithetical to forming friendships. In fact, they may be instrumental in deepening those relationships. Tillmann-Healy (2003) believes, as I do, that entering into those contexts as friend and researcher adds emotional and relational layers to one’s study. In addition to the typical tools for gathering data, the ethnographer would utilize, according to Tillmann-Healy “conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability” (p. 734). To these I add the term dialogue, which I think of as a special type of conversation that profoundly enacts the erotic, ethical, and spiritual possibilities of a close personal relationship.

Cissna and Anderson (1994) describe many elements of dialogue including immediacy of presence, emergent unanticipated consequences, and vulnerability to name a few. In reviewing these characteristics, I see them as a list of prerequisites for beginning and sustaining dialogue, as much as a way of describing dialogue.

One aspect, immediacy of presence, identifies the need to enter a conversation without predetermined outcomes in mind. The idea is to have purpose without absolute purpose. I might enter a conversation with a goal of discovering something about masculinity, but I would let go of my urge to direct the conversation along specific lines. In talking with Jack, the conversation did not stray far from the topic of masculinity and the body but much of what we shared was spontaneous. I had no way of knowing we would discuss topics like body hair or eating habits. Questions evolved in process where both of us asked about and challenged the other’s masculinity. Dialogue favors the creative potential of talk, which anticipates another important characteristic: emergent unanticipated consequences.

I understand this quality as a kind of happy accident that often results from the creative process. The stress is on the unpredictability inherent in most forms of communication. Two unanticipated moments in my dialogue with Jack occurred when he altered my perception about pampering my body and when I helped him realize that his body could perform vulnerability more easily than others. These outcomes could not have been predicted.

To enter into dialogue requires the risk of being uncomfortable and possibly unsettled. Such a risk emphasizes the potential in personal relationships of
resisting the expectations of social performances like masculinity. A good example of this potential occurred in my dialogue with Jack when we discussed how men look at women. He reminded me that the kind of nonverbal exchanges I have with other men matter, and his relational support makes it easier to bring up this sensitive issue later in other contexts with other men.

I realized that these were the moments my research was directed toward. Too often these exchanges between men and their implications go unquestioned where they are most profoundly enacted—in real time—in close relationships. To observe and critique the media for perpetuating stereotypical masculinity is distanced, even easy. To question Self and Other requires a different sort of courage. Does the way I objectify women correspond with how I see myself in relations with other men? Is not this way of looking at Self and Other sustained by these seemingly ordinary situations between friends? If friendship makes it easier to perform orthodox masculinity, then couldn’t the same relationship help sustain resistance to such conventions?

It is important to realize that collaboration through dialogue is a joint sense-making project involving struggle. Although conversation can be passionate, it is not oriented toward winning and losing; rather it is oriented toward a deep concern for Self and Other. A collaborative orientation dispenses with the need for defending one’s position in favor of opening to the possibility of being wrong. It requires some degree of vulnerability.

In being vulnerable, another characteristic described by Cissna and Anderson (1994), people engaged in dialogue open themselves to the potential for change. The opportunity to become a different person through talking offers the therapeutic beginnings to social justice.

From working through some of the various characteristics described by Cissna and Anderson (1994), it would seem there is a qualitative difference between dialogue and any old conversation. I think the biggest difference for me is in terms of creativity and change. I see conversation as the primary way in which personal relationships uncritically maintain the status quo; in that respect there is little or no creativity or change. Even so, conversation is a necessary part of everyday life and need not be considered negative. If we sought creativity and change all of the time, we might go mad. Human beings need to be confirmed in their sense of self to develop ego stability.

It is ironic to note, creativity is, in part, a disconfirming process because it requires instability in the system. However, the instability at work in the creative process is usually, or it is hoped, oriented toward a return to momentary stability. The creative experience and change, thus, depend upon a certain amount of tension, what Goodall and Kellett (2004) call “dialectical tension” and identify as the heart of many peak human experiences including dialogue.
I see dialogue as a poetics between Self and Other dancing like free verse in a kind of unaware awareness. Ordinary conversation, though filled with potential, does not reach this way of being with another person. Most of us have had moments like the one Goodall (Goodall & Kellett, 2004) describes from his childhood “we got into things neither one of us had never spoken out loud to anyone else, and I know for fact that there were things we talked about that I had not even ever thought about before” (p. 160). Dialogue in comparison to conversation could be called extraordinary. Goodall and Kellett (2004) associate this extraordinary moment with a number of creative acts from lovemaking to playing music—all of which “reflect a definitive human urge to ‘get beyond’ the gray everydayness of relational routines, phatic rituals, and often boring, repetitive, relatively meaningless interpersonal encounters” (p. 161).

Many of the conversations I’ve had about masculinity with friends, including the one with Jack, could be described as extraordinary. Because of its social justice orientation, friendship as method requires researchers to seek the extraordinary. Besides our relationships with participants, we may sometimes experience this extraordinary quality when we write.

**Autoethnography: Representing the Talk of Friendship as Method**

My use of autoethnography in friendship as method emphasizes writing as a process of research not just the end product of research. Such writing honors the link between creativity and discovery. Autoethnography uses narrative analysis and the analysis of narrative as modes of knowledge production. I understand the analysis of narrative to be a reflexive turn in narrative analysis and can come in a variety of forms.

One interesting form of narrative analysis is in the layered approach adopted by authors like Rambo Ronai (1995). In these accounts, there is a shifting back and forth between an explicit and an implicit tone. In this way, the author talks back to the story, and the story talks back to the author; thus the aesthetic of the narrative requires these voices become inseparable and interdependent, achieving a dialogic continuity—a friendship with and in the text.

To work well, the analysis of narrative must consider how something is written as much as what is written. It takes into account the relationship between style and content. The analysis of narrative can also be achieved through literary techniques such as extended metaphor, personification, irony, and so on. These techniques require readers to refer back to the text—this self-referential quality is an opportunity for analysis often unavailable during peak
moments of dialogue. Autoethnography allows the researcher to write about these moments without ruining them, thus opening a space for radical reflexivity.

In using radical reflexivity in writing, I take my cue from scholars such as Stewart (1996) whose narrative vision is one where the space of a story “both back talks ‘America’ and becomes the site of its intensification in performance” (p. 4). It is a space that, she says

begins and ends in the eruption of the local and particular; it emerges in imagination when “things happen” to interrupt the expected and naturalized, and people find themselves surrounded by a place and caught in a haunting double epistemology of being in the midst of things and impacted by them and yet making something of things. (p. 4)

Stewart’s “space on the side of the road” is similar to the practice of “working the hyphens” employed by other scholars (see Ellis, 1995; Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Fine, 1994; Tillmann-Healy, 2001). Both are about the different contexts brought to and emerging from the relationships between Self and Other—observer and participant. Stewart calls this phenomenon “the clash of epistemologies” something I understand as the tension created by two or more ways of knowing the world coming into contact. That contact is seldom without consequence as our ways of knowing the world are sometimes incommensurable and exist in a world where power is distributed unequally.

Participating in a radical reflexivity requires approaching and using that clash to “repeatedly reopen a gap” in the thought processes informing my attitudes, those involved in the study, and those of readers on topics like masculinity for example. The “we” of the text keeps reasserting itself as a contested territory full of desire, digression, deflection, displacement, deferral, and difference. Stewart (1996) sees this phenomenon as a “model” of culture residing in “states of latency, immanence, and excess and is literally ‘hard to grasp’” (p. 5). In her view, theories of culture cannot and should not be gotten “right” because “culture” is a “constant beginning again—a search, an argument, an unfinished longing” (p. 6). Her story about people living in Appalachia is a never-ending story—one where something more is always left to be said.

Similarly, Bochner (2002) discusses Kuhn’s (1962) notion of “incommensurable viewpoints” in which people may be looking at the same world, America, for example, and seeing dissimilar or contradictory things. The urge, according to Bochner, is to convert others to our view of reality. He suggests that rather than seek to resolve those differences, those discrepancies,
in keeping with Rorty (1982) should be lived with. We begin to live with those differences in the stories we try to communicate to others. In living with a story I am profoundly aware of its unfinished quality: whereby meaning is negotiated and renegotiated. “Stories” Bochner (2002) tells us “are in a continual process of production, open to editing, revision, and transformation” (p. 81). Narratives involving radical reflexivity never claim the final word and, therefore, promote radical reciprocity and a continual reinviting of others into the text.

Barone (2000) and Richardson (1994) argue that writing differently makes our “findings” available to more diverse audiences. Part of my responsibility as a scholar is to make the world of ideas as inclusive and accessible as possible, not to exclude anyone from the conversation. One of my goals is to write something academic and popular audiences can read with enthusiasm—something I hope will tease a reader’s sensibilities about my research interest, how it might be studied, and how it might be presented. In that respect, I conceive of my research projects as pragmatic—as something people can use to do things with and to masculinity. Coles (1989) argues “the beauty of a good story is its openness—the way you or I or anyone reading it can take it in, and use it for ourselves” (p. 47). My desire is for writing that can be used in this way—relationally. Such writing serves a pragmatic function in that it explores ways we might live. This ethical turn in social science writing corresponds with Tyler’s (1986) postmodern ethnography. He writes

“a post-modern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect.” (p. 125)

Writing the narrative about my conversation with Jack was therapeutic for me, and it is hoped that readers will enter that text and discover alternative ways of understanding or performing masculinity.

If there is any goal worth having in doing autoethnography it is one where better human being is made possible. Bochner (2002) reminds us, in “The Moral of Stories” that “human life is storied life” and stories “make our experiences meaningful” (p. 73). Behar (1996) argues that ethnography is “about forming relationships,” it is a search for connections. I also believe, like Denzin (1997), that good autoethnography should push us toward cultural criticism. We should recall the larger context of individual experience along with poet May Sarton’s (1973) who declares “each person counts, counts as a creative force that can move mountains” (p. 19). Autoethnography primes our emotional pump by taking us back to the extraordinary. As an autoethnog-
rapher I cannot help revisiting these places. I am anxious to find meaning in unsettling or already unsettled events.

Many people make the turn toward writing autoethnography out of a deep need to understand human suffering. When Ellis (1993) writes about her brother’s death in a plane crash, for instance, the reader joins her on a journey through grief. It is a journey that makes a strong argument about coming to terms with loss and the importance of sharing pain communally—something she also does in her essay on 9/11 and its aftermath (Ellis, 2002). Sharing personal trauma with others helps alleviate the isolation these kinds of experiences seem to generate. Brison (2002) claims “saying something about a memory does something to it” that

the communicative act of bearing witness to traumatic events not only transforms traumatic memories into narratives that can then be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and view of the world, but it also reintegrates the survivor into a community, reestablishing bonds of trust and faith in others. (p. xi)

I believe the same can be said of ordinary events, and that not only the restoration but also the reorientation of an individual into the community is a powerful moment of social change.

As much as autoethnography is about the self, it is also always about the community the author and reader live in. Embedded in all autoethnography are the questions: How is community mixed up in an individual’s life experience? What are the canonical narratives at work in that life? By acting reflexively on the Self such methods of writing provide an opportunity for individuals to not only recognize their relationship within a community but is also a moment for disrupting and reorganizing that relationship. Thus, in writing about masculinity and my relationships with other men I am not only making sense out of that experience, but I am also opening it to critique and transformation.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I wrote about the methodology used in my research on masculinity, embodiment, and male friendships. First, I shared a narrative account of a conversation I had with one of my friends. Next, I looked at the talk aspect of fieldwork in which I explored in more detail my ideas about friendship as method and the reach of dialogue in such a mode of relating. Finally, I discussed the role of autoethnography in conducting and presenting such qualitative work.
I believe as Tillmann-Healy (2003) does that “any study involving human ‘subjects’ can incorporate some aspect of friendship as method” (p. 745). In doing research and writing research, we can all benefit from paying close attention to the emotional layers inevitably invoked between human beings whether occupying the role of researcher or participant. Crucial to observing and exploring this experience is the use of dialogue and autoethnography.

According to Bohm (1996), the spirit of dialogue can be experienced in a variety of contexts. It can occur between two people, in larger groups, or even alone. Moments of dialogue in each of these contexts: between Self and Self; between Self and Other; and between Self and group are vital connections or “peak experiences” in the performance of identity offering unique opportunities for self-awareness. As such, these are moments crucial to understanding and unsettling canonical narratives such as traditional masculinity. Other kinds of talk—the kinds of conversations we have every day and forget about every day—make up a hegemonic discourse where our assumptions tend to uphold the status quo and mostly go unnoticed. These conversations are highly political yet tend to be experienced as neutral or apolitical often resulting in a feeling that reality is natural and inevitable. Fortunately, the meanings associated with the status quo are seldom, if ever, finally settled; it is our lot in life to take for granted and contest those meanings. Dialogue in personal relationships is but one way to negotiate that experience.

Not only is talking crucial to understanding and resisting normative masculinity or other canonical narratives but so is writing. Besides dialogue, autoethnography is a key analytical tool available to researchers especially those employing friendship as method. Such writing privileges qualitative inquiry with an emphasis on knowing the world inductively and relationally. Autoethnographers endeavor to explore rather than simply explain human experience; thus, autoethnography like dialogue is a moral discourse that favors the messy contingencies of life (see Ellis, 2004).

The beauty of a good conversation and story is that they catch hold and do not want to let go. They open up a gap in our experience of reality and remind us of the stakes inherent in seemingly ordinary relationships. I have argued that canonical narratives like masculinity get their power from the everyday. My friendship with another man is a critical nexus where social norms are simultaneously imposed and deposed, determined and undetermined. Being able to talk and write about this experience creates a positive opportunity for change in my life—a change that is inevitably directed outward toward others. Engaging in this dialogic process not only makes me a more sensitive scholar but also a better human being. The end result of such research is a greater chance for social justice and, it is hoped, the building of a better community.
References


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