




Chapter 11

Masculinity, Culture and the Demise of “Man”

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Introduction

In this essay, I unpack the concept of masculinity and how it is utilised in the construction of masculine social identities. Understanding the social construction of masculinity is crucial for comprehending gender identities and their relationships with one’s personality and way of being. This paper argues that masculinity is a fluid and multifaceted concept shaped by hegemonic ideals that often restrict men’s emotional expression and behaviour. I intend to demonstrate, first, that masculinity is socially constructed and reinforced through performance. Second, I illustrate how it limits men’s potential for personal growth and authentic expression. I employ Judith Butler’s (1999) account of gender performativity to display performative aspects of masculinity and how rare genuine portrayals of masculinity can be. I highlight the ways in which gender is enacted through social interactions and behaviours. In the final section of the paper, I discuss the limitations of hegemonic masculinity and the importance of embracing diverse forms of masculinity.

Masculinity: A Social Construct

Before discussing the concept of masculinity, it is important to note the structure in which it is understood, i.e., gender. Gender is a social construct that refers to the roles, behaviours, expressions,

and identities associated with being a man, woman, or non-traditional gender. A well-versed scholar in gender identities, Judith Butler, describes gender as the repetition of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (Butler, 1999: 7). Butler describes how internal understanding of one's gender and gender roles influences their actions to behave and start portraying that gender (Ton, 2018: 3). It is influenced by cultural understandings of gender identities, societal expectations and roles, and personal factors such as a person's internal sense of being (McDermott & Hatemi, 2011: 89). The term masculinity itself stresses gender, unlike the term male, which stresses biological sex. Thus, studies of masculinities need not be confined to biological males but rather, towards persons who exhibit or are associated with being a man. Sex, on the other hand, refers to biological and physiological factors and is generally categorised as male, female, or intersex (McDermott and Hatemi, 2011:89).

While biological 'maleness' is generally recognised via explicit bodily features and XY Chromosomes, the roles, actions, body types, and identities that are considered 'masculine' differ greatly due to external conditions such as those mentioned above (Kimmel and Bridge, 2011). This variance enables common research to suggest that masculinity is a social construct. Kimmel and Bridges (2011) illustrate the multiple levels of variation in masculinity well by starting with the historical level followed by the cultural, intrapsychic and contextual levels. The historical level is where what is considered masculine evolves throughout time. To reflect on the history of masculinity, men such as Leonardo Da Vinci and William Shakespeare would dress in ruffled clothes and pantaloons. At that time, these clothes signified the structural position and class. Changing their wardrobe to expensive branded t-shirts and skinny jeans would not make them more manly but rather strange, according to their standard of how wealth and class represent themselves. These examples of how men are known to dress illustrate the context in which meaning can be made. The cultural level demonstrates that concepts of masculinity are culturally distinctive. This is

to say that not all American, Nigerian, Chinese, or Australian men are alike. The intrapsychic level describes how the concept of masculinity changes its meaning and evolves over one's life, where one's role as a man changes between, for example, the teenage hood and adulthood. Finally, masculinity differs at the contextual level, where even within the same society and generation, personal interpretations differ with respect to masculinity. 'Being a man' implies vastly different things to a white, heterosexual university student living in America and a middle-aged, homosexual, Latino man living in Mexico. Since there is not a single, unchanging definition of masculinity across various cultures, time periods, and individual men, the proper term would be masculinities in plural to emphasise the diversity of meanings, roles, and behaviours consumed in the term (Kimmel & Bridges: 2011).

Masculinity Under Hegemony

Raewyn Connell's (2005: 835) gender order theory acknowledges various masculinities that differ depending on the individual, society, culture, and time. Hegemonic masculinity (HM) is one of these masculinities. Hegemony is known as dominance over others attained by institutions, culture, and persuasion rather than violence, though force, may be used to sustain it (Connell, 2005: 832). It is a socially manufactured ideal that elevates some behaviours and characteristics of men while devaluing others. This hegemonic model frequently places greater value on characteristics such as dominance and heterosexuality.

Dominance and heteronormativity are key components responsible for upholding hegemonic masculinity because they reinforce power structures that benefit men. The common attribution of these components to men justifies traditional gender roles and reinforces patriarchal structures. By emphasising dominance, hegemonic masculinity discourages challenges to male authority while at the same time normalising heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is often presented as the "norm", reinforcing limitations and exclusions to what a man is. Like sex and gender, sexual orientation remains a distinct analytic category (McDermott

& Hatemi, 2011); however, it is used as a tool alongside HM and the ideal man. This reinforces gender binaries and excludes non-binary and queer genders individuals from the dominant masculine ideal. Normative heterosexuality serves to marginalise and exclude those who do not live up to or conform to this ideal, making it difficult to challenge or dismantle the hegemonic model. The subjugation of other marginalised identities and non-hegemonic masculine identities is a core part of HM.

HM's change over time, where newer forms of masculinity may displace older forms in a contest for hegemony. Some narratives around hegemonic masculinity highlight "positive" behaviours such as being a father, provider and protector. However, HM operates in a way that allows male dominance to continue dominating. For men to achieve social approval and authority, this frequently means conforming to the hegemonic masculine ideal. The social approval aspect is important to note, as there needs to be a society to experience HM from men and those that require it for it to be hegemonic. Some men try to ensure that they are within the structure of HM to reap the benefits, so they have to look and seem like the part. They perform and behave in a way that aligns them with hegemonic masculine ideas.

The Performative Aspect of Masculinity

The idea of gender performativity is important insofar as it helps us understand how HM is not only socialised but also reinforced, a concept introduced by Judith Butler. Butler (1999) argues that gender is not something one is but something one does. Masculinity is enacted through a series of stylised acts, such as speech patterns, body language, and clothing choices (Ton, 2018). This performative aspect underscores the social and constructed nature of masculinity. There is a pageantry to masculinity where the performative aspect and the adoption of a hegemonic masculinity itself are reliant on others and how others view one within that masculine structure.

Individuals are socialised from a young age to embody certain gender norms and expectations, which then become

internalised and reproduced through their daily actions and behaviours. Performative gender is closely related to understanding masculinity as a social construct. It emphasises that gender is not an innate quality but rather that it is something that is “performed” through the repetition of socially coded behaviours and expressions (Butler, 1999: 7).

The conformity to pre-established ways of being masculine, often reinforced through socialisation and media, provides a safety net that can offer a sense of comfort and reassurance of acceptance and privilege, making it tempting for men to conform and avoid the discomfort of challenging or redefining their own identities. This sense of comfort comes from knowing what acts and behaviours are socially acceptable within various contexts. In some sense, the convenience and familiarity of these established masculine norms can be alluring, as they offer a clear path to acceptance and belonging within a male-dominated culture.

The question of who embodies hegemonic masculinity was one of the initial criticisms directed at the concept, but in other ways, it might be crucial to acknowledge ambiguity in gender dynamics as a hegemonic mechanism that supports it. Being rash, boastful, driving while intoxicated, and getting into altercations are not behaviours that elevate one to the position of a man; rather, they serve as a means of affirmation of being a man (Connell, 2005: 838). A prime example is the Soviet Union’s celebration of the coal miner Aleksandr Stakhanov, who set a world record in 1935 by hewing 102 tonnes of coal in a single day, which led to a rush to beat the mark. This distortion included the fact that well-known “shock workers” received much unrecognised assistance from their colleagues to reach this goal. As a result, hegemonic masculinities are not relevant or realistic to men’s real lives. However, these models do represent common goals, aspirations, and wants in various contexts (Connell, 2005: 838).

Intersectionality: A Proposed Alternative to Masculinity

Masculinity studies are a dynamic, interdisciplinary field of study that is primarily concerned with the social construction of what it means to “be a man.” Masculinities researchers investigate the different ways in which males as a group are privileged, as well as the costs of such benefits and how not all men have equal access to them. Masculinity studies examine the variety of identities, behaviours, and meanings associated with masculine identity without assuming universality. Scholars of masculinity frequently refer to masculinities in plural. Because masculinity varies greatly, we must employ the term “masculinities” to describe how masculinity signifies different things to different people in different cultures and historical periods (Kimmel & Bridges, 2011).

The monolithic nature of hegemonic masculinity is challenged by the concept of intersectionality. This framework acknowledges that various social factors, such as race, class, and sexuality, intersect to shape individual experiences of gender. For example, black masculinity often involves a complex terrain where hegemonic ideals collide with racial stereotypes and discrimination. Similarly, queer men may reject traditional masculine norms in favour of more inclusive and affirming identities. These examples illustrate how hegemonic masculinity fails to encompass the full spectrum of human experience, limiting our understanding of masculinity and its impact on individuals.

Being afraid to embrace even the tiniest hint of femininity keeps one from becoming fully self-sufficient, as it is important to acknowledge and celebrate all aspects of one’s identity without fear or shame to gain proper self-awareness and self-understanding. Elements that resemble femininity or non-conformity are either disregarded or rejected to sustain the structural framework of HM. Although it is not stated explicitly, it does become ingrained in behaviour to ignore or dismiss certain behaviours and feelings right away, which discards non-hegemonic qualities.

By acknowledging and celebrating all dimensions of one's identity, including traditional "feminine" traits and behaviours, individuals are empowered to live more authentic, fulfilling lives, free from the constraints of restrictive masculinity ideals. This process of accepting oneself fully is an important step towards dismantling the harmful effects of hegemonic masculinity, which can alienate and oppress those who do not neatly fit into its narrow definition of what it means to be a "real" man. Embracing intersectionality allows for a more nuanced, inclusive understanding of identity and personal growth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, masculinity is a complex and multifaceted concept that is shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors. The notion of hegemonic masculinity, which privileges certain traits and behaviours over others, can be limiting and restrictive for men while also marginalising to persons who do not fit the masculine category. By recognising that masculinity is a social construct and embracing the diversity of masculine expressions, individuals can move towards a more authentic and fulfilling sense of self, and one way in which this can be realised is through embracing intersectionality. Embracing intersectionality and rejecting the constraints of hegemonic masculinity is crucial for personal growth and for dismantling the harmful effects of rigid gender norms. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of masculinity and its performative aspects can empower men to have more authentic, emotionally expressive, and well-rounded lives.

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