



# Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities

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## Abstract

Hybrid masculinity refers to men's selective incorporation of performances and identity elements associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities. We use recent theorization of hybrid masculinities to critically review theory and research that seeks to make sense of contemporary transformations in masculinity. We suggest that research broadly supports three distinct consequences associated with recent changes in performances and politics of masculinity that work to obscure the tenacity of gendered inequality. Hybrid masculinities (i) symbolically distance men from hegemonic masculinity; (ii) situate the masculinities available to young, White, heterosexual men as somehow less meaningful than the masculinities associated with various marginalized and subordinated Others; and (iii) fortify existing social and symbolic boundaries in ways that often work to conceal systems of power and inequality in historically new ways.

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## Introduction

A growing body of sociological theory and research on men and masculinities addresses recent transformations in men's behaviors, appearances, opinions, and more. While historical research has shown masculinities to be in a continuous state of change (e.g., Kimmel 1996; Segal 1990), the extent of contemporary transformations as well as their impact and meaning is the source of a great deal of theory, research, and debate. While not a term universally adopted among masculinities scholars, the concept of “hybrid masculinities” is a useful way to make sense of this growing body of scholarship. It critically highlights this body of work that seeks to account for the emergence and consequences of recent transformations in masculinities.

The term “hybrid” was coined in the natural sciences during the 19th century. Initially used to refer to species produced through the mixing of two separate species, by the 20th century, it was applied to people and social groups to address popular concern with miscegenation. Today, scholars in the social sciences and humanities use “hybrid” to address cultural miscegenation – processes and practices of cultural interpenetration (Burke 2009). “Hybrid masculinities” refer to the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and – at times – femininities into privileged men's gender performances and identities (e.g., Arxer 2011; Demetriou 2001; Messerschmidt 2010; Messner 2007). Work on hybrid masculinities has primarily, though not universally, focused on young, White, heterosexual-identified men. This research is centrally concerned with the ways that men are increasingly incorporating elements of various “Others” into their identity projects. While it is true that gendered meanings change historically and geographically, research and theory addressing hybrid masculinities are beginning to ask whether recent transformations point in a new, more liberating direction.

The transformations addressed by this literature include men's assimilation of “bits and pieces” (Demetriou 2001: 350) of identity projects coded as “gay” (e.g., Bridges, forthcoming;

Heasley 2005; Hennessy 1995) “Black” (e.g., Hughey 2012; Ward 2008), or “feminine” (e.g., Arxer 2011; Messerschmidt 2010; Schippers 2000; Wilkins 2009) among others. A central research question in this literature considers the extent and meaning of these practices in terms of gender, sexual, and racial inequality. More specifically, this field of inquiry asks: are hybrid masculinities widespread and do they represent a significant change in gendered inequality?

In reviewing contemporary theorizing and empirical research on masculinity, we suggest that hybrid masculinities work in ways that not only reproduce contemporary systems of gendered, raced, and sexual inequalities but also obscure this process as it is happening. We argue that hybrid masculinities have at least three distinct consequences that shape, reflect, and mask inequalities. Hybrid masculinities may place discursive (though not meaningful) distance between certain groups of men and hegemonic masculinity, are often undertaken with an understanding of White, heterosexual masculinity as less meaningful than other (more marginalized or subordinated) forms of masculinity, and fortify social and symbolic boundaries and inequalities. As Coston and Kimmel write, “The idealized notion of masculinity operates as both an ideology and a set of normative constraints” (2012:98). We argue that the emergence of hybrid masculinities indicates that normative constraints are shifting but that these shifts have largely taken place in ways that have sustained existing ideologies and systems of power and inequality. Each of the consequences of contemporary hybrid masculinities we address here represent elaborations on the processes by which meanings and practices of hegemonic masculinity change over time in ways that nonetheless maintain the structure of institutionalized gender regimes to advantage men collectively over women and some men over other men. Indeed, hybrid masculinities may be best thought of as contemporary expressions of gender and sexual inequality.

### Theorizing changes in masculinity

The question driving the bulk of the literature on hybrid masculinities<sup>1</sup> is whether (and how) they are perpetuating and/or challenging systems of gender and sexual inequality. Scholars answer the question in three ways. (i) Some are skeptical of whether hybrid masculinities represent anything beyond local variation (e.g., Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). (ii) Others argue that hybrid masculinities are both culturally pervasive and indicate that inequality is lessening and possibly no longer structures men’s identities and relationships (e.g., Anderson 2009; McCormack 2012). (iii) The majority of the research and theory supports the notion that hybrid masculinities are widespread. But, rather than suggesting that they are signs of increasing levels of gender and sexual equality, these scholars argue that hybrid masculine forms illustrate the flexibility of systems of inequality. Thus, they argue that hybrid masculinities represent significant changes in the expression of systems of power and inequality, though fall short of challenging them (e.g., Demetriou 2001; Messerschmidt 2010; Messner 1993, 2007).

While not necessarily challenging the notion that hybrid masculinities exist, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) – in their analysis of “hegemonic masculinity” – question the extent of hybrid masculine practices, their meaning, and influence. “Clearly, specific masculine practices may be appropriated into other masculinities, creating a hybrid (such as the hip-hop style and language adopted by some working-class White teenage boys and the unique composite style of gay ‘clones’). Yet we are not convinced that the hybridization... is hegemonic, at least beyond a local sense” (2005: 845). Here, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggest that while hybrid masculine forms may exist and might promote inequality in new ways, they are unconvinced that hybrid masculinities are illustrative of a transformation in hegemonic masculinity beyond local subcultural variation. Thus, they argue that hybrid masculine forms have not significantly affected the meanings of masculinity at regional or global levels.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, while Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) are critical of the

extent and reach of hybrid masculinities, they agree that, while these new identities and practices blur social and symbolic boundaries, they are not necessarily undermining systems of dominance or hegemonic masculinity in any fundamental way.

Anderson's (2009) theory of the rise of "inclusive masculinities" challenges Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) perspective. He argues that contemporary transformations in men's behaviors and beliefs are widespread *and* are best understood as challenging systems of gender and sexual inequality. Studying a variety of young, primarily heterosexual-identified, White men, Anderson finds that masculinity among these groups is characterized by "inclusivity" rather than exclusivity (what Anderson terms "orthodoxy"). In this model masculinities are organized horizontally, rather than hierarchically. As such, men are increasingly adopting practices characterized by acceptance of diverse masculinities, opening up the contemporary meanings of "masculinity" in ways that allow a more varied selection of performances to "count" as masculine. This "inclusivity"—like hybridity—is part of a process of incorporating performances that are culturally coded as "Other." Anderson argues that these practices indicate "decreased sexism" and "the erosion of patriarchy" (2009: 9). Thus, Anderson theorizes hybrid masculinities (which he calls "inclusive masculinities") as endemic and as a fundamental challenge to existing systems of power and inequality.

To account for this transformation, Anderson (2009) argues that what he calls "homophobia" is decreasing (see also McCormack 2012). Broadly described as a "fear of being homosexualized" (2009: 7), the term considers three issues: popular awareness of gay identity, cultural disapproval of homosexuality, and the cultural association of masculinity with heterosexuality. While awareness of gay identity has increased, Anderson argues that disapproval of homosexuality is diminishing<sup>3</sup> as is the cultural association of masculinity with heterosexuality. Unyoked from compulsory heterosexuality, he argues that contemporary masculinities are characterized by increasing levels of equality and less hierarchy.

The majority of the research concerning hybrid masculinities supports Anderson's (2009) claim that hybrid masculinities are extensive but frames the meanings and consequences of hybrid masculine practices and identities differently. Rather than illustrating a decline in gender and sexual inequality, scholars suggest that hybrid masculinities work in ways that perpetuate existing systems of power and inequality in historically new ways (e.g., Demetriou 2001; Messner 1993, 2007). Thus, this body of research is at odds with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) analysis of the significance of hybrid masculinities and with Anderson's (2009) consideration of the consequences.

Messner (1993) analyzes transformations among American men toward more "emotionally expressive" performances of masculinity and critiques scholarly investigations of these transformations precisely because they tended to focus primarily on "*styles of masculinity, rather than the institutional position of power that men still enjoy*" (732). Messner examines the cultural impact of these shifts in men's behavior by analyzing the mythopoetic men's movement, men's increasing involvement as parents, and an increase in the number of high-status men crying in public.

Messner's framing of hybrid masculinities as "more style than substance" (1993: 724) represents a dominant approach in scholarship discussing the meanings and consequences of hybrid masculinities. This body of work discusses hybrid masculinities as

represent[ing] highly significant (but exaggerated) shifts in the cultural and personal styles of hegemonic masculinity, but these changes do not necessarily contribute to the undermining of conventional structures of men's power over women. Although "softer" and more "sensitive" styles of masculinity are developing among some privileged groups of men, this does not necessarily contribute to the emancipation of women; in fact, quite the contrary may be true. (Messner 1993: 725)

This shift is complex and not unidirectional. In fact, new gendered practices and identities often work in ways that either produce new forms of inequality or conceal existing inequalities in new ways.

Messner's (2007) analysis of changes in the public image of Arnold Schwarzenegger, e.g., illustrates what he calls an "ascendant hybrid masculinity" combining toughness with tenderness in ways that work to obscure – rather than challenge – systems of power and inequality (Messner 2007). Similar phenomena have been documented within various "men's movements" like the Promise Keepers and the Ex-gay Movement (e.g., Donovan 1998; Gerber 2008; Heath 2003; Wolkomir 2001), new ways of performing heterosexuality while engaging in "gay" styles, practices, and sex (e.g., Bridges forthcoming; Pascoe 2007; Schippers 2000; Ward 2008; Wilkins 2009), the masculinization of concerns with hygiene and appearance (e.g., Barber 2008), presidential discourses surrounding militarism (Messerschmidt 2010), and throughout popular culture more generally (e.g., Carroll 2011; Jeffords 1994; Pfeil 1995; Savran 1998).

Contemporary transformations in masculinity have primarily been documented among groups of young, heterosexual-identified, White men. This fact evidences the flexibility of identity afforded privileged groups. Indeed, ignoring intersectional distinctions that inequitably distribute access to specific hybrid masculine forms risks presenting contemporary changes as indicative of transformations in systems of inequality that may still exist – albeit in new forms. Messner (1993) argues that, "framing shifts in styles of hegemonic masculinity as indicative of the arrival of a New Man [often situates] marginalized men (especially poor black men, in the United States) as Other" (1993: 733). Men of color, working-class men, immigrant men, among others, are often (in)directly cast as the possessors of regressive masculinities in the context of these emergent hybrid masculinities. That said, young, straight, White men are not the only ones with hybrid masculinities. Research also illustrates the ways that groups of marginalized and subordinated Others craft hybrid gender identities – though often with very different consequences and concerns.

Demetriou (2001) coins the term "dialectical pragmatism" to theorize the consequences of the changes Messner (1993) described. Dialectical pragmatism refers to the ability of hegemonic masculinities to appropriate elements of subordinated and marginalized "Others" in ways that work to recuperate existing systems of power and inequality. Dialectical pragmatism speaks to the transformative capacities of systems of power inequality. Demetriou suggests that what makes hegemonic masculinities so powerful is precisely their ability to adapt. He suggests that hegemonic masculinity is better understood as a "hegemonic masculine bloc" capable of appropriating "what appears pragmatically useful and constructive for the project of domination at a particular historical moment" (2001: 345). Demetriou argues that Connell's initial conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity fails to account for the ways that subordinated and marginalized masculinities affect the formation, style, look, and feel of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, Demetriou's framework illustrates how the meanings and consequences of hybrid masculinities are much more complicated than they might initially appear.

Demetriou focuses primarily on one example of hybridity: the assimilation of elements of "gay male culture" into heterosexual masculinities. He illustrates how this hybrid masculinity might be better understood as a contemporary expression of – rather than challenge to – existing forms of gender and sexual inequality. Demetriou shows how heterosexual men incorporate "bits and pieces [of gay male culture,]... [producing] new, hybrid configurations of gender practice that enable them to reproduce their dominance over women [and other men] in historically novel ways" (2001: 350–351). Like Messner (1993, 2007), Demetriou shows how hybrid masculinities blur gender differences and boundaries in ways that present no real challenge to existing systems of power and inequality.

The theorizing of hybrid masculinities as illustrated by Demetriou (2001) and Messner (1993, 2007) challenges the analyses set forth by Anderson (2009) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005). Anderson's (2009) theory of "inclusive masculinity" argues that these new configurations of identity and practice are best understood as resistance to gender and sexual inequality, while Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that these challenges to hegemonic masculinity have not been significant. The research in the following section, however, broadly supports Demetriou's (2001) conceptualization of "dialectical pragmatism" and Messner's (1993, 2007) analysis of transformations in masculine *style* but not substance of contemporary masculinities. This work illustrates how contemporary performances of masculinity are part of a transformation in the practices, identities, and discourses through which contemporary inequalities are being perpetuated and expressed. In connecting with a much more diverse body of literature than existing work on "hybrid masculinities," we illustrate the depth and breadth of the meanings and consequences of gendered hybridization and comment on the origins of contemporary transformations.

### Research on hybrid masculinities

Research on hybrid masculinities highlights several consequences associated with these gender projects and performances. First, hybrid masculine practices often work in ways that create some discursive distance between young, White, straight men and hegemonic masculinity, enabling some to frame themselves as outside of existing systems of privilege and inequality. Second, hybrid masculinities are often premised on the notion that the masculinities available to young, White, straight men are somehow less meaningful than the masculinities of various marginalized and subordinated Others, whose identities were at least partially produced by collective struggles for rights and recognition. Third, hybrid masculinities work to fortify symbolic and social boundaries between (racial, gender, sexual) groups – further entrenching, and often concealing, inequality in new ways.

#### *Discursive distancing*

*The gender flexibility of postmodern patriarchy is pernicious because it casts the illusion that patriarchy has disappeared.* (Hennessy, 1995:172)

Hybrid masculine practices often work in ways that create some discursive distance between White, straight men and "hegemonic masculinity." However, as men are distanced from hegemonic masculinity, they also (often more subtly) align themselves with it. Research on men's pro-feminist, political, and grooming activities illustrates how hybrid masculinities can work in ways that discursively distance men from hegemonic masculinity.

Bridges (2010) highlights this distancing in his documentation of men's participation in Walk a Mile in Her Shoes marches – an event to raise awareness about domestic violence. In it, men wear high-heeled shoes and walk one mile. This practice of standing with women and wearing women's clothing seemingly distances them from the sexism and gendered dominance that partially constitutes hegemonic masculinity. As Bridges points out, however, the men in this march can reproduce gender inequality even as they actively work against it. The way men interact during this march reiterates forms of gender inequality that undergird domestic violence. The male participants joke about wearing women's clothing, about their ability to walk in heels, and about same-sex sexual desire. These jokes discursively align participants with hegemonic masculinity even as their practices might seem to distance them from it.

The “My Strength is Not for Hurting” campaign – one of the few anti-rape campaigns directed at men – also acts to distance men from hegemonic masculinity by framing men “as a unitary group” made to look bad by rapists (Masters 2010). Non-rapist men are simultaneously aligned with hegemonic masculinity through framing “real” and “strong” men as fundamentally different from (presumably weak and unmanly) rapists. Campaigns like this discursively separate “good” from “bad” men and fail to account for the ways that presenting strength and power as natural resources for men perpetuates gender and sexual inequality even as they are called into question (see also Murphy 2009). Both Walk a Mile in Her Shoes marches and the My Strength is Not for Hurting campaign create some distance between these (good) men and (bad) hegemonic masculinity. Yet, in challenging men’s violence against women, they simultaneously reaffirm many qualities that typify hegemonic masculine forms and dominance.

Similarly, men can embrace political stances that seem to distance them from hegemonic masculinity. Such stances allow public male figures to disguise toughness with tenderness. For instance, Arnold Schwarzenegger forged an identity that Messner (2007) refers to as the “kindergarten commando,” representing a masculinity “foregrounding muscle, toughness and the threat of violence” followed with “situationally appropriate symbolic displays of compassion” (Messner 2007: 461). Schwarzenegger’s “sexy, hybrid mix of hardness and compassion” is a “configuration of symbols that forge a masculinity that is useful for securing power among men who already have it” (Messner 2007: 473). This same shift is reflected in mediated depictions of idealized masculinities in action films of the 1980s and 90s (Jeffords 1994) and more recently as well (Carroll 2011). For instance, while action films in the 90s seem to implicitly critique or satirize the masculine “hard bodies” of the 80s, they do so in ways that Jeffords suggests “[do not reject] that body so much as [refigure] it” (1994: 191).

Messerschmidt (2010) illustrates a similar dynamic at work in international arenas. Analyzing speeches surrounding the “War on Terror” spanning the presidencies of George Bush and George W. Bush, he finds that both presidents mobilized discourses of rescue to justify military action. As Messerschmidt argues, “Bush Senior’s and Bush Junior’s inclusion of humane, sensitive, and empathic aspects in their masculine rhetoric shows how hegemonic masculinity at the regional and global levels is fluid and flexible... Such an appropriation of traditionally defined ‘feminine’ traits blurs gender difference but does not undermine gender dominance” (2010: 161). Messerschmidt illustrates the fluid properties of hegemonic masculinities and the ways in which masculinities are capable of incorporating elements of “femininity” to obscure gender boundaries, while reproducing existing systems of power and authority. These masculinized strategies allow trust to be gained “in times of fear and insecurity” and “[project] a veiled feminized stigma onto more liberal candidates” (Messner 2007: 461). Messerschmidt’s findings also imply that hybrid masculinities have attained ideological power and influence on a global stage, suggesting – contrary to Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) earlier assessment – that they are implicated in global-level processes and relations.

This kind of “feminization” has been documented in very different locations as well. For instance, Kristen Barber’s (2008) study of White, middle-class, heterosexual men in professional men’s hair salons illustrates one way that some men engage in beauty work formerly coded “feminine.” Barber finds that these men rely on a rhetoric of expectations associated with professional-class masculinities to justify their participation in the beauty industry while simultaneously naturalizing distinctions between themselves and working-class men, framing the latter as misogynistic and reproducing gender inequality. While these men are engaging in a practice that might be labeled “feminine,” Barber highlights the ways they avoid feminization and create some distance between themselves and masculinities they associate with

reproducing gender and sexual inequality. Similarly, Wilkins (2009) addresses the ways that both goth and young Christian men engage in boundary-blurring gender projects that ultimately work to recuperate existing systems of power and privilege. Navigating “masculine” norms surrounding heterosexual interest and participation in different ways, Wilkins finds that both groups reiterate existing structures of gender power and authority much more than challenge them.

As this research illustrates, contemporary hybrid masculinities create space between men and hegemonic masculinity while reiterating gendered relations of power and inequality. While this process is happening in diverse ways, this research shows it is occurring at local, regional, national, and international levels.

### *Strategic borrowing*

*If there is one aspect that separates the current crisis of masculinity from those that have come before, it is white masculinity's turn to the representational politics of identity... [W]hite masculinity places itself in other identity locations (white trash, queer, blue-collar, Irish) in order to disavow that it is normative... [O]nce it has become visible... it reworks the meaning of that visibility by locating itself elsewhere.*(Carroll 2011:6–7)

Hybrid masculinities are often premised on the notion that the masculinities available to young, White, straight men are meaningless when compared with various “Others,” whose identities were forged in struggles for rights and recognition. Indeed, cultural appropriation is a defining characteristic of hybrid identities. Research on hybrid masculinities documents the way that men who occupy privileged social categories strategically borrow from Others in ways that work to reframe themselves as symbolically part of socially subordinated groups. Through this process, White men frame themselves as victims (Messner 1993: 77) and inequality becomes less easily identified. Like Waters’ (1990) research documenting White people’s relative ignorance of the ethnic flexibility they are afforded, the hybrid identities available to young, straight, White men may be very different from those available to marginalized and subordinated groups. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, “Authentic Black people must be contained – their authentic culture can enter White controlled spaces, but they cannot” (Collins 2004: 177). By strategically borrowing elements of the performative “styles” associated with various marginalized and subordinated “Others,” research has documented the more pernicious consequences of these hybrid practices.

Demetriou (2001) charts this process by examining the incorporation of elements of gay culture by heterosexual-identified men. Rather than illustrating a fundamental challenge to systems of inequality, Demetriou theorizes the ways that culturally dominant models of masculinity assimilate elements from subordinated “Others” in ways that fundamentally alter the shape (but not structural position of power) of contemporary performances of gender and gender relations. Similarly, by theorizing the aesthetic elements of sexuality, Bridges (forthcoming) analyzes the causes and consequences of heterosexual men subjectively identifying aspects of themselves as “gay” in ways that preserve their heterosexuality and simultaneously reinforce existing boundaries between gay and straight individuals and cultures.

Steven Arxer’s (2011) study of interactions between heterosexual men at a college bar documents an analogous practice. Extremely different from the competitive, emotionally detached, sexually objectifying performances of masculinity that characterize straight men’s interactions with each other in Bird’s (1996) or Grazian’s (2007) research, Arxer (2011) examines these men’s assimilation of aspects of gay masculinity, but simultaneous maintenance of existing systems of power and dominance.

These men seem to perceive a sense of intersectional deprivation wherein heterosexual masculinity (as defined traditionally to be aggressive and emotionally detached) is *devalued* relative to gay masculinities. In response to this “crisis” in hegemonic capital, the men agree to a hybridized model of masculinity that affords them a new framework to assess *who* (“gay people”) has profited from being labeled as “sensitive” and *how* they can claim a slice of the dividend. (Arxer 2011: 408)

Yet, in the process of drawing on the emotionality presumably displayed by gay men, these men reassert gender inequality by using it to increase their chances of sexually “scoring” with women (Arxer 2011: 409). Thus, while a dramatically different collective performance of masculinity from “the girl hunt” that Grazian (2007) documents or Bird’s (1996) “men’s club,” the consequences of these performances are strikingly similar in terms of sustaining existing systems of power and inequality.

Research has also analyzed racialized strategic borrowing – a process which works in similar ways. Similar to the research on men’s appropriation of elements of gay culture, research on the cultural appropriation of and identification with hip-hop music among young White men finds that their incorporation of elements of “black culture” is often not associated with recognition of the consequences of this practice (e.g., Hess 2005; Hughey 2012; Rodriguez 2006). Rodriguez’s (2006) research on young White hip-hop music fans documents these men justifying their interest in and identification with hip-hop utilizing “color-blind” discourses (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2001) that enable them to conceal race (and racial inequality) as a significant element of this cultural form.

White appropriation of cultural forms is certainly not a new cultural phenomenon (e.g., Lott 1993; Deloria 1998) nor is the appropriation necessarily confined to boys and young men (e.g., Wilkins 2004, 2008) or the United States (Garner 2009). Yet, reasons behind and consequences of contemporary men’s “borrowings” are historically novel. As Cutler points out with respect to White appropriation of African-American linguistic patterns and style, “Its origins are complex, its consequences can be serious, and although its representativeness can’t be stated systematically, it is not an isolated instance” (1999:439).

Hughey’s (2012) research with anti-racist and White nationalist groups composed primarily of men places these practices in a larger cultural perspective. Hughey refers to this appropriation as a reliance on what he terms “color capital” by Whites. He argues that Whites engage in these practices in an effort to assuage feelings of “culturelessness” associated with White identity (see also Perry 2001 and Wilkins 2004). In very different ways, the two groups in Hughey’s study struggled to both relate to and distance themselves from color capital in ways that illustrated their cultural affiliation with racialized identities that they saw as bloated with meaning when situated alongside their own racial identities – which most understood as devoid of “culture.” Yet, while working to alleviate feelings of meaninglessness associated with White identity, Hughey finds that these practices simultaneously promote more destructive racial consequences.

Messner (1993) argues that when we frame young, straight, White men’s new performances of masculinity solely as indicators of a decline in gender and sexual inequality, already marginalized groups of men often end up situated as playing a greater role in perpetuating inequality. By framing middle-class, young, straight, White men as both the embodiment and harbinger of feminist change in masculinities, social scientists participate in further marginalizing poor men, working-class men, religious men, undereducated men, rural men, and men of color (among others) as the bearers of uneducated, backwards, toxic, patriarchal masculinities. Even as young White men borrow practices and identities from young, gay, Black, or urban men in order to boost their masculine capital, research shows that these practices often work simultaneously to reaffirm these subordinated groups as deviant, thus supporting existing systems of power and dominance.



*Fortifying boundaries*

*The outward styles of masculinity may appear to be more enlightened and egalitarian while the underlying basis of male privilege and power remains fundamentally unquestioned, reminding us that “softer” forms of masculinity are not inherently emancipatory for women and can, in fact, mask usurpation of women’s rights.* (Donovan 1998:837)

By co-opting elements of style and performance from less powerful masculinities, young straight, White men’s hybridizations often obscure the symbolic and social boundaries between groups upon which such practices rely. Through this process, systems of inequality are further entrenched and concealed in historically new ways, often along lines of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Hybrid masculinities may, for instance, complicate claims about and understandings of relationships between normative masculinity and homophobia. In recent history, homophobia has been a hallmark of adolescent masculinity (Kehler 2007; Levy et al. 2012; Pascoe 2007; Poteat et al. 2010). However, research indicates that such sentiments are on the decline among young men (McCormack 2012). While fear or dislike of actual gay people may be declining, what Pascoe (2007) calls a “fag discourse” continues to structure the socialization practices of boys and young men. Simply put, boys socialize each other into normatively masculine behaviors, practices, attitudes, and dispositions in a way that has little relationship with boys’ fear of actual gay men (Corbett 2001; Kimmel 1994). Indeed, many boys who would never insult a gay person by calling him “gay” do not hesitate to use these words to tease each other (McCormack 2012; Pascoe 2007). While McCormack argues that homophobic jokes – when not directed at gay boys – have been stripped of their discriminatory meanings, Pascoe’s work illustrates that “fag discourse” is a potent form of gender policing for contemporary young men. Thus, while seemingly non-homophobic masculinities are proliferating (Anderson 2009, McCormack 2012), a closer look at the gendered meanings of homophobia complicates these claims (Bridges forthcoming; Pascoe 2007).

Even when men engage in sexual practices that challenge the relationship between normative masculinity and homophobia, they may reify inequality. Jane Ward’s (2008) research on White straight-identifying men who have sex with men illustrates how their sexual practices may initially seem to transgress traditional notions of heterosexual masculinity but simultaneously work to reify gendered, sexual, and raced boundaries. Ward documents the ways that, in their search for sexual partners, these men objectify women, reject effeminacy among men, and hyper-eroticize men of color. They talk about hooking up with other men while watching “pussy porn,” say they do not want to have sex with men who are feminine “sissy la las,” and use exotic and stigmatizing language to describe their ideal men of color sex partners. Ward calls this particular configuration of practices “dude sex.” Though violating the “one-act rule” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009) of male homosexuality by participating in same-sex sex, these men simultaneously reinforce gendered and raced inequality. Their identity projects consist of presenting themselves as having a better “cultural fit” with heterosexuality, relying on stereotypes and gendered and racialized performances of masculinity as proof of heterosexual masculine identities.

Ward’s participants in some ways both reflect and invert Connell’s (1992) and Levine’s (1998) analysis of gay men’s assimilation of elements of straight masculinities into some gay men’s identity projects. Connell’s discussion of gay Australian men who identify with elements of “straight” masculine performances and identities finds that the practices ultimately shore up gender and sexual boundaries. Connell (1992) argues that these performances are primarily undertaken out of an interest in gender identification (as “masculine” men) and concerns with safety (due to the threat of violence against men performing effeminate gay

identities). Ward's participants take this a step further. Not only do they perform heterosexual masculinities – often relying on racialized performances associated with hip-hop and/or surfer culture – they also identify as “straight” because of their affiliation with straight culture, in spite of their participation in same-sex sexual behavior. In some ways, this research is also an example of “strategic borrowing,” illustrating how, in practice, the three consequences of hybrid masculinities we address here often work in congress and overlap.

Men's practices that initially appear to be feminist can also reify gender inequality even as they obscure it. Recent changes in the ideologies and practices of fathering may seem progressive – such as increasing levels of emotionality and time spent with children. But upon closer investigation they also entrench gender inequality. Messner (1993) makes clear that the new fathering movement was not necessarily about challenging gender inequality in the family, but about a particular *style* of male parenting, that, as Stein (2005) indicates, may draw boundaries around male heterosexuality. In her study of the Promise Keeper movement, Melanie Heath (2003) examines the ways that men embody “new fathering” by playing larger roles in their children's lives and being more emotionally available while simultaneously enforcing gender inequality by espousing a “biblical” notion of “the family” in which women are instructed to submit to their husbands. Donovan (1998) refers to this process as “masculine rescripting,” and also argues that such a process does not necessarily challenge existing systems of power and inequality. Schwalbe (1996) discusses similar ideological shifts as “loose essentialism” – a process that acknowledges and supports change in men and allows them to redefine traits formerly associated with femininity as “masculine.”<sup>4</sup>

Groups of evangelical Christian men may be the quintessential example of “loose essentialism” as research has documented their engagement in “masculine rescripting” practices when talking about sex in ways that are seemingly progressive, but simultaneously homophobic and working to reify gender inequality (Gerber 2008; Wilkins 2009). Gerber's (2008) analysis of the Ex-Gay Movement highlights some of the ways that ex-gay identities and performances of masculinity are often non-normative. In the interest of creating “a livable space” for Christian men grappling with same-sex desires, hybrid masculine options offer resources for alternative masculinities that illustrate a great transformation in *styles* of masculinity, but do little to challenge the boundaries between “gay” and “straight,” or “masculine” and “feminine.”

While all of this work illustrates the diverse ways in which contemporary performances of masculinity are playing with social and symbolic boundaries (gendered, raced, sexual, etc.), this body of scholarship also illustrates the ways that much of this play is best understood as superficial. While the young White men participating in “dude sex” (Ward 2008) are certainly blurring gender and sexual boundaries by discursively playing with the qualities that “count” when identifying sexualities, they are also reestablishing boundaries between gay and straight and gendered, racialized, and sexual systems of power and inequality. Similarly, Heath's (2003) study of Promise Keeper masculinities finds significant changes in masculine norms surrounding parenting, but – like Messner's (1993) analysis of the fathers' rights movement more generally – argues that these changes have done little to disrupt existing gendered power relations in the family. Thus, a great deal of research finds that hybrid masculine practices often work in ways that fortify symbolic and social boundaries, perpetuating social hierarchies in new (and “softer”) ways.

## Conclusion

Connell (1995:84) argued that the gender order continually tends toward crisis, but also suggests that such “crisis tendencies” have intensified recently. “They have resulted, clearly enough, in a major loss of legitimacy for patriarchy, and different groups of men are now negotiating this loss in very different ways” (1995:202). Hybrid masculinities research has primarily examined this

process of transformation among groups of men who hold concentrated constellations of power and authority in the current gender order (young, White, heterosexual, etc.).

Privilege works best when it goes unrecognized. Indeed, as Johnson notes, “Perhaps the most efficient way to keep patriarchy going is to promote the idea that it doesn’t exist... Or, if it does exist, it’s by reputation only, a shadow of its former self that no longer amounts to much in people’s lives” (2005:154). Research on hybrid masculinities suggests that recent changes – sparked by feminist critique and reform – have shed light upon masculinity and masculine privilege in historically unprecedented ways. When privilege becomes visible, however, this research illustrates how it does not necessarily cease to exist. But, the experiences of privilege by privileged groups do change, as do the “legitimizing stories” or justifications for existing systems of power and inequality. Hybrid masculinities are one illustration of what Johnson (2005) refers to as the “flexibility of patriarchy.” This is not to say that men’s awareness of privileges associated with masculinity causes their privileges to cease to exist. Rather, research on hybrid masculinities illustrates another possibility – experiences and justifications of privilege have transformed. And this transformation has led to a host of new identity projects as different groups of men negotiate this change in different ways.

Hybridization is a cultural process with incredible potential for change. Research on hybrid masculinities has primarily documented shifts in – rather than challenges to – systems of power and inequality. The question that remains concerns how we can recognize meaningful change in systems of gender inequality when we see it. Questions about how and when real – not just stylistic – change happens in the gender order remains to be answered by gender scholarship.

### Short Biographies

Tristan Bridges is an assistant professor of Sociology at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. His research and teaching interests surround politics and performances of masculinities. Having undertaken multiple ethnographic projects with body-builders, fathers’ rights activists, pro-feminist men, bar regulars, and more, Tristan’s work speaks to transformations in contemporary expressions of masculinity. He has published in *Gender & Society*, *Body & Society* in addition to other venues. He is currently engaged in a project investigating the meanings of “man caves” in American couple households.

C.J. Pascoe researches young people, gender, sexuality, masculinity, and new media. Her book *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* won the American Educational Research Association’s Book of the Year award in 2008. This book examines the relationship of masculinity, sexuality, and homophobia among high school students. Her articles have appeared in *Sexualities*, *Body & Society*, *QED: A Journal in Gay and Lesbian Worldmaking*, and *American Behavioral Scientist*. At present, she is working on a book for University of California Press entitled *Just a Teenager in Love: Gender, Romance and New Media* that examines young people’s cultures of love and romance. She currently teaches in the department of sociology at the University of Oregon.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that while we refer to what these authors are writing about as “hybrid masculinities,” the term is not used by all of these scholars. Demetriou (2001); Connell and Messerschmidt (2005); Messner (2007); Arxer (2011); Messerschmidt (2010), and Bridges (forthcoming) all explicitly use the term. But, the identity projects, practices, and

discourses to which they refer are present in a great deal of scholarship that does not explicitly use “hybrid masculinity” to make sense of ideas and findings. We use the term to bring together lines of theorizing and claims-making that have not, historically, been in dialog with one another.

<sup>2</sup> Importantly, Messerschmidt's (2010) more recent analysis of US presidential discourses mobilized during the “War on Terror” indicates that hybrid masculinities may increasingly exist on a global scale.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, public opinions in the United States concerning homosexuality have taken a marked turn in recent history – particularly those of younger men (Loftus 2001; Saad 2010). What these changes mean is more difficult to assess, as other data illustrates the continuance of harassment and bullying utilizing derogatory epithets for homosexuality and gender expression among US boys (Kosciw et al. 2012). Opinion polls are also at odds with a great deal of qualitative research among US boys and young men. So, there is some disagreement concerning how we can interpret the meanings of this change.

<sup>4</sup> Messner (2011) theorizes a similar transformation in discourse through which youth sports leagues are gendered in ways that maintain a separation between boys and girls. He refers to this discourse as “soft essentialism.” Messner argues that the notion that boys are *better than* girls (more athletic, intelligent, rational, etc.) has been successfully challenged, while the idea that boys are *different from* girls persists. Because gender inequality is institutionalized, ideologies of difference are sometimes all that is necessary to perpetuate existing inequalities.

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