

# Hegemonic Masculinity

*Formulation, Reformulation,  
and Amplification*

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*For Raewyn, Cherished Friend, Perceptive Mentor, and  
One of the Most Important Intellectuals of Our Time*

boy or a woman or girl subordinate in contextually defined embodied terms. Such challenges may motivate social action toward specific situationally embodied practices that attempt to correct the subordinating social situation (Messerschmidt 1993, 1997, 2000, 2004, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016). Given that such interactions question, undermine, and/or threaten one's sex, gender, or sexuality, only contextually "appropriate" embodied practices can help overcome the challenge. The existence of challenges alerts us to the transitory and fleeting nature of sex and gender construction—including hegemonic masculinities—and to how particular forms of social action may arise as gendered practices when they are regularly threatened and contested.

### CONCLUSION

Social action is never simply an autonomous event but is amalgamated into larger assemblages—what is labeled here as socially structured embodied actions. The socially structured situational practices encourage specific lines of social action, and relational and discursive social structures shape the capacities from which social actions are constructed over time. Men and boys and women and girls negotiate the situations that face them in everyday life and in the process pursue, for example, a sex, gender, and sexuality project. From this perspective, then, social action is often—but not always—designed with an eye to one's sex, gender, and sexual accountability individually, bodily, situationally, and structurally. Structured action theory, then, permits us to explore how and in what respects hegemonically masculine embodied practices and thus unequal gender relations are constituted in certain settings at certain times. To understand the multifarious hegemonic masculinities discussed herein, we must appreciate how structure and action are woven inextricably into the ongoing reflexive activities of constructing embodied unequal gender relations.

This chapter then has concentrated on how hegemonic masculinities are recurrently reconstructed, re-created, supported, justified, and refashioned through structured social action. In chapter 6 I turn to how hegemonic masculinities are at times opposed, restricted, changed, contested, and dismantled.

## SIX Prospects

Throughout this book my argument has been that contemporary hegemonic masculinities are decentralized, fluid, contingent, provisional, and omnipresent locally, regionally, and globally; they are hidden in plain sight; and they collectively constitute a social structure that relationally and discursively *legitimizes* unequal gender *relations* between men and women, masculinities and femininities, and among masculinities. If my perspective is correct, this requires novel strategies to challenge and resist gender hegemony. The hegemonic masculine social structure consists of different types of power relations—that have been detailed throughout this book—and therefore is continually and pervasively renewed, re-created, defended, and modified through social action. And it is this reproduction of hegemonic masculinities within everyday life that makes gender social change so difficult. Yet it is within the multiple sites and locations whereby hegemonic masculinities are fashioned that we find the seeds necessary for that structure to be resisted, limited, altered, challenged, and dismantled.

Hegemonic masculinities are always already constructed relationally, and thus the key to gendered social change is *not* to concentrate exclusively on "changing men." This solitary strategy is what Connell (1995, 220–24) referred to as "exit politics," or "refusing to be a man"; that is, escaping from masculinity rather than conducting a dissident politics within it. Nevertheless, individual men can positively impact social change by concentrating on the relational nature of hegemonic masculinity, building new egalitarian relationships between men and women,

masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities. And this political action necessarily involves girls, women, and femininities as well.

Some masculinities scholars, however, have argued we no longer need to consider social change because recent developments in the social construction of masculinities in global North societies have resulted in hegemonic masculinities being supplanted by egalitarian “inclusive masculinities.” For inclusive masculinity scholars, young men in global North countries are now accomplishing inclusive masculinities and, thus, gender and sexual equality has been achieved by this genre of men. In this final chapter, I first consider the validity of this argument by inclusive masculinity scholars. Following this, I briefly discuss a few concrete examples of counterhegemonic practices that move beyond alleged inclusive masculinities and actually present a challenge to the *relational* nature of hegemonic masculinities. These examples then provide promising prospects for gendered social change.

#### INCLUSIVE MASCULINITY

Erik Anderson (2009), Mark McCormack (2012), and numerous followers have studied primarily adolescent, middle-class, white, sporty, heterosexual men in England and the US. From the evidence produced in these studies, they argue that the masculinity of these young men is characterized today by “inclusivity” rather than “exclusivity.” In other words, there allegedly has been a cultural shift in global North societies involving a substantial decrease in what is labeled “homophobia” or the fear by heterosexual men of being homosexualized, empowering such men to construct masculinities that are completely accepting of sexual diversity and include numerous feminine qualities—such as friendships based on emotional openness, increased peer tactility, and softened and accepting interaction—without the fear of being perceived as gay.

Anderson (2009) proposed “inclusive masculinity theory” (IMT) to explain this alleged new masculine configuration among adolescent males, arguing that global North societies have advanced through three “zeitgeists” in sequential progression from “elevated,” to “diminishing,” and finally to “diminished” homophobia. In elevated homophobia, hegemonic masculinity predominates and is culturally significant. Homophobic discourse polices masculinity and reproduces hegemonic masculinity, and young men act aggressively, maintain homophobic atti-

tudes, are emotionally distant from one another, and boast about their heterosexual exploits. In such a zeitgeist, young men who display physical and sexual intimacy with other young men “are socially homosexualized and consequently stripped of their perceived masculinity” (8).

As homophobia abates culturally over time, two dominant forms of masculinity appear: one conservative and one inclusive. According to Anderson, hegemonic masculinity is no longer applicable because it has now been replaced by a conservative dominant masculinity he labels “orthodox.” Men who practice this type of masculinity remain homophobic and are tactilely and emotionally distant. In contrast, “inclusive” masculinity emerges and is a competing dominant masculinity alongside orthodox masculinity, emphasizing emotional and physical homosocial closeness. In this “diminishing” stage of masculine development, “men who value orthodox masculinity might use homophobic discourse with specific intent to demonize homosexuals, while inclusive acting men may use homophobic discourse but without intent to degrade homosexuals” (8).

In the final “diminished” zeitgeist, homophobia has all but disappeared and therefore intentional homophobia ceases to exist. The result is social inclusion of those masculinities previously subordinated by hegemonic masculinity. In such settings, multiple masculinities—including inclusive masculinities—proliferate horizontally and young men begin to encounter a variety of acceptable nonhegemonic heterosexual practices in which homophobic discourses and behaviors are subordinated.

For Anderson, then, hegemonic masculinity is solely prevalent in times of “elevated” homophobia, becoming increasingly irrelevant during “diminishing” and “diminished” zeitgeists. Anderson maintains that global North societies currently are at the “diminishing” or “diminished” stages and thus inclusive masculinities, rather than hegemonic masculinities, have become widespread. As Anderson puts it, the “theory of hegemonic masculinity” is no longer pertinent because the documented changes in masculine constructions he and others have uncovered are “not accounted for with hegemonic masculinity theory. Times have changed, and this requires new ways of thinking about gender” (32).

I have no reason to question Anderson’s, McCormack’s, and other IMT scholars’ findings; in fact, we should support men being emotionally open, tactile, and softened in their interaction with one another. What I initially contest is Anderson’s (and most other IMT scholars’) failure to

properly consider Connell's original formulation of hegemonic masculinity (see chapter 2) as well as Anderson's (and most other IMT scholars') disregard of the reformulation of the concept (see chapter 3). To reiterate, Connell's initial conceptual formulation concentrated on how hegemonic masculinity in a given historical and society-wide setting legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities. Both the *relational* and *legitimation* features were central to her argument, involving a particular form of masculinity in unequal relation to a certain form of femininity—that is, “emphasized femininity,” which is practiced in a complementary, compliant, and accommodating subordinate relationship with hegemonic masculinity—and to certain forms of nonhegemonic masculinities. The achievement of hegemonic masculinity occurs largely through discursive legitimation (or justification), encouraging all to consent to, unite around, and embody such unequal gender relations.

As outlined in chapter 3, the reformulation of the concept involved a number of changes to Connell's original formulation, but most important for the discussion here is that instead of conceptualizing hegemonic masculinity at only the society-wide level, the reformulated concept recognized empirically existing hegemonic masculinities at three levels—local, regional, and global—and links among the three levels exist: global hegemonic masculinities pressure regional and local hegemonic masculinities, and regional hegemonic masculinities provide cultural materials adopted or reworked in global arenas and utilized in local gender dynamics.

Anderson (2009, 30–31) initially agreed with Connell's original formulation of the concept, stating: “Hegemonic masculinity is not an archetype” but instead involves “a social process of subordination and stratification.” Nevertheless, in the same breath he peculiarly conceals hegemonic masculinities by adopting in their place what he labels “orthodox masculinity” as an archetype (31): “In order to avoid confusing hegemonic masculinity as a social process from hegemonic masculinity as an archetype, I do not use ‘hegemonic masculinity’ as a categorical label; instead, I use the archetype of ‘orthodox masculinity.’” Anderson therefore substitutes orthodox masculinity for hegemonic masculinity and in the process describes orthodox and inclusive masculinities as distinct and competing categories of archetypes. Through this cunning sleight of hand, hegemonic masculinity vanishes from theoretical and empirical consideration and its replacement—orthodox masculinity—becomes a

fixed character type, as does inclusive masculinity. For Anderson, orthodox and inclusive masculinities are static character types embodied by certain men and/or groups of men. The result is that Anderson ignores the whole question of gender relations and the legitimacy of gender inequality—that is, *the* foundation of hegemonic masculinities—and through fiat concurrently conceals them from view.

Given that hegemonic masculinity is *not* operationalized and thus *not* measured by Anderson (and other IMT scholars), it is disingenuous for Anderson to claim that under “diminishing” and “diminished” homophobia, hegemonic masculinities are no longer current and therefore “hegemonic masculinity theory” is decidedly irrelevant. Inclusive masculinity scholars spuriously *assume* rather than empirically *demonstrate* the alleged declining presence of hegemonic masculinities in global North societies. Undeniably, the evidence presented throughout this book documents the persistence and omnipresence of hegemonic masculinities locally, regionally, and globally, yet needless to say they are “hidden in plain sight” from inclusive masculinity scholars. I have detailed herein that the hegemonic masculine social structure is an unbounded nexus of practices and discourses that legitimate unequal gender relations. And in view of the fact that the reformulated model of hegemonic masculinity is different from Connell's original formulation—specifically in the sense of recognizing multiple hegemonic masculinities at the local, regional, and global levels—it is additionally scandalous for Anderson (2009, 93) to declare that Connell argues there exists “only one hegemonic archetype of masculinity.” Anderson and other IMT scholars utterly erase gender relations and sexual politics from consideration. As Rachel O'Neill (2015, 109) put it, for IMT scholars “sexual political matters are not simply ignored but are instead presented as *already settled*, or *in the process of being settled*,” and thus global North societies are seen as simply predisposed to gender and sexual equality.

We cannot deny the increasing visibility and acceptance of gay masculinities and sexualities in global North societies, and Anderson, McCormack, and other IMT researchers have demonstrated that this change has made it possible for certain straight men to appropriate aspects of gay masculinities into their specific and situational configurations of masculinities. Nevertheless, and as discussed in chapter 4, work by masculinities scholars on hybrid hegemonic masculinities has likewise captured this change, demonstrating the flexibility, adaptability, and fluidity of

hegemonic masculinities, by contextually incorporating certain features of gay masculinities and in the process blurring gender difference yet not undermining unequal gender relations. As Sam de Boise (2015, 324) has pointed out, inclusive masculinities may therefore represent quite simply “another hegemonic strategy for some heterosexual, white, middle-class men to legitimately maintain economic, social, and political power in the wake of gay rights.” In fact, Nicola Ingram and Richard Waller found this to be the case. These authors studied middle-class undergraduate men in England and discovered that these young men “play” with different forms of masculinity, including hegemonic masculinity. As Ingram and Waller (2014, 48) point out, “playing” with masculinities involved these middle-class men constructing hegemonic masculinities “whilst adapting to the requirements to assume a veneer of inclusivity or present a liberal attitude on issues such as homophobia and gender inequalities.” Ingram and Waller go on to argue that IMT is unsatisfactory in accounting for their findings and that the masculinities of the young men do not represent “a genuine engagement in the erosion of inequalities. IMT therefore can be seen as a blunt tool for analyzing masculinities as it fails to excavate power relations and uncover the continuance of gender related inequalities” (48).

De Boise (2015) additionally argues that although today it may be the case that homophobia is less essential to the construction of gender hegemony within certain contexts, this actually does little to disrupt different patterns of unequal gender relations. Arguably, the vast majority of studies discussed in chapter 4 that document (only partially) the amplification of the reformulated model of hegemonic masculinity—from the differences among hegemonic masculinities, to hybrid hegemonic masculinities, to fleeing hegemonic masculinities, to hegemonic masculinities on the internet, to the role intersectionality plays in hegemonic masculinities, and to hegemonic masculinities in the global South—do not center on homophobia. The common theme among these examples of diverse hegemonic masculinities is that subordination occurs through the contradiction of hegemonic masculine qualities with feminine and toxic qualities.

Although gay men clearly constitute a subordinate masculinity within the context of gender hegemony, such subordination is associated with the historical and cultural construction of gay men as effeminate and feminine. Homophobia among straight boys and men does not necessari-

ly concern a fear about with whom one has sex, but rather involves a disdain for “the symbolic blurring with femininity and men perceptually acting ‘like women.’ The fear of homosexuality . . . is often more about distancing from the feminine due to the perceived object of desire being that ‘natural’ to women than the fear of being homosexualized” (de Boise 2015, 329).

Along with coauthors Steven Roberts and Rory Magrath, one of Anderson’s (Magrath, Anderson, and Roberts 2015; Roberts, Anderson, and Magrath 2017) most recent studies has concentrated on interviews with English football players who lived together at a football club academy and exemplifies two additional enduring problems with IMT—ignoring fluidity and women. The sample consisted of twenty-two male teenage working-class and heterosexual elite football players. The results indicated that these athletes are unanimously supportive of gay footballers coming out on their team and they are unconcerned about sharing a room with a gay player, changing with gay members in locker rooms, or relating to them on a social and emotional level. In addition, among themselves the heterosexual footballers engaged in positive emotional closeness, enhanced physical facility, and practiced bantering not as a mechanism of ridicule but as a way to strengthen closeness and togetherness.

Despite the encouraging gender qualities among the teenage footballers identified by Anderson, Roberts, and Magrath, I am troubled by the lack of empirical investigation into the fluidity of masculine construction by these *heterosexual* footballers. For example, the authors report that the adolescent footballers enjoyed discussing with each other relational dynamics “about their romantic interests, including relationship troubles,” yet we learn nothing about such discussions or their heterosexual relationships outside the academy. What is the relationship between these young men and young women in settings external to the academy? Given the emphasis in this book on the fluidity of masculine construction, to truly conceptualize the masculinity of these footballers one must investigate the possible changing masculine constructions in the different situations they interact. Do they engage in egalitarian or inequalitarian relations in their heterosexual romances? Accordingly, both the fluidity of masculine constructions and the relationship between men and women and masculinity and femininity are invisible in the vast majority of inclusive masculinity studies—indeed, women pass from sight—and this study is a typical example of this genre.

The adolescent footballers furthermore indicated in the interviews that they were more open with friends “back home” than with their teammates at the academy—what then is the difference between these contrasting settings? How do these footballers interact with their friends “back home”? Do they practice positive emotional closeness and enhanced physical tactility in this differing setting? Or do they interact in dissimilar ways?

Finally, considering Anderson’s emphasis (in so-called “diminished” homophobia) on the existence of multiple masculinities horizontally, it is surprising that these footballers seemingly are all constructing the identical masculinity within the academy; apparently, there exists exclusively one and only one style of masculinity in this setting. Can this be true? If so, it flies in the face of one of Anderson’s theoretical principles as well as thirty years of research by masculinity scholars generally.

In contrast, consider a recent study by Tim Lomas and colleagues (2016) that demonstrates how crucial it is to examine multiple sites in order to secure a full and accurate understanding of masculine constructions. Briefly, these researchers interviewed thirty men who were participants at a meditation-based center, examining the men’s masculinities both “inside” and “outside” the center. Inside the center, the men were encouraged to adopt new ideas and behaviors—that collectively constituted a new way of doing masculinity—which fell into three broad areas: (1) *physical intimacy* (e.g., being emotionally open, sharing feelings, being more caring); (2) *abstinence* (e.g., reduced alcohol and/or drug use); and (3) *spirituality* (e.g., physical-emotional experiences, adoption of Buddhist ideologies). Although the men reported the value of embracing these new masculine practices, many of the men found doing so to be challenging, both inside and outside the center.

Inside the center the men encountered hierarchical notions of masculinity that are emphasized alongside the new attention to intimacy, abstinence, and spirituality. For example, the center underscored a ranking among participants based on meditation skills, and thus moving up the hierarchy was a “coveted marker of spiritual progress” (Lomas et al. 2016, 300). Inherent in the hierarchy was competitiveness among the participants, which created a drive for achievement and status, as well as rivalry among the meditators. Subordination was consequently attached to those who “failed” to attain the meditation goals featured by the center. On that account, then, the men experienced a contradiction inside the

center whereby they were situationally encouraged to adopt both “new” and “old” masculine practices that seemingly constructed differing masculinities among a variety of “winners” and “losers.”

Outside the center, the men found it difficult to practice the new aspects of masculinity emphasized by the center. For example, socializing with friends who frequently consumed alcohol and drugs made it extremely difficult to pursue abstinence outside the center. The men also reported difficulties with physical intimacy and emotional openness with friends on the outside. One of the meditators reported to the researchers that inside the center he was “quite tactile” but in outside settings with his friends “I’m not, because I’m not sure how people will take it” (301). And the men further detailed encountering hostility by outside friends to their own developing sense of spirituality.

In short, although new ways of constructing masculinity were encouraged in the meditation center, actually practicing this new masculinity was difficult both inside and outside the center. Inside the center dominant and subordinate masculinities seemingly were orchestrated, and the “new” masculinity did not translate to the outside as the men experienced censure, ostracism, and conflict with friends. As Lomas and colleagues (2016, 303) conclude, local masculinities “that appear positive at first glance are not entirely positive on deeper examination.”

This study furthers our understanding of how masculine constructions are fluid and thus impacted by the social structures of particular settings; unfortunately, the studies by Roberts, Anderson, and Magrath do not. The Lomas and colleagues study suggests that the latter studies are noticeably abbreviated and incomplete. That is, Anderson and colleagues fail to show the construction of masculinities in “outside” arenas by the adolescent footballers—they miss this additional and essential step in researching this population. And as seems to be typical among IMT scholars, Roberts, Anderson, and Magrath steer clear of any intellectual concern about unequal gender relations and the gendered power and privilege these footballers benefit from regardless of their inclusiveness within the academy setting. To be inclusive among each other in one setting does not automatically free one from participation in unequal gender relations within other settings.

IMT scholars’ concentration is on “new” individual masculine constructions and interactions among men within particular singular social settings. In this sense, then, IMT insufficiently contributes to challenging



or dismantling of the hegemonic masculine social structure. In other words, alongside the construction of inclusive masculinities lurks the ever-present and ubiquitous hegemonic masculinities documented in this book.

In the following section, I present a few examples of scholarship that recognize and highlight counterhegemonic practices that actually oppose, challenge, question, and in some cases dismantle unequal gender relations.

#### COUNTERHEGEMONIC PRACTICES

Although I do not claim to possess a firm and concrete answer to the problem of gender hegemony—especially given its omnipresence and complex structure—we do know that hegemonic masculinities can be contested and undermined through alternative practices that do not support unequal gender relations; in particular, counterhegemonic practices that critique, challenge, or actually dismantle hegemonic masculinities. Studying the diversity of masculinities helps us to gain some grasp as to where energy should be directed to promote gendered social change; that is, those social situations where counterhegemonic practices are particularly possible or likely to materialize. One place to begin is with what I refer to as *positive masculinities and femininities*, or those gender constructions (locally, regionally, and globally) that contribute to legitimating egalitarian relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities. Such masculinities and femininities are counterhegemonic because they actually are, or they have the means to become, culturally conceptualized as legitimate and authentic alternatives to gender hegemonic relations. A number of scholars have uncovered that such “positive” masculinities and femininities usually are constructed outside the realm of gender hegemonic relations yet often in turn they contribute to legitimating egalitarian gender relations (Swain 2006; Haywood and Mac an Ghail 2012; Messerschmidt 2016; Schippers 2000, 2007). In this section, then, I discuss a variety of these counterhegemonic practices and I begin with a consideration of adolescent boys.

#### Adolescent Boys

Jon Swain’s (2006) study of ten-to-eleven-year-old boys in three schools in the United Kingdom builds on Connell’s original scheme of multiple masculinities by showing that although some boys are hegemonic, complicit, and subordinate, certain boys construct personalized masculinities that transcend the available masculinities in the sphere of hegemonic relations at school. These boys have no desire to practice in-school hegemonic or dominant masculinities, and they are not subordinated nor do they subordinate others (boys or girls). In fact, their masculinities are rather positive in the sense of being practiced in small groups of boys with similar interests (e.g., computers, theater, band), they are inclusive and egalitarian, and they are nonhierarchical without any clearly identified leader. This study then demonstrates the variety of masculinities in one particular setting, their specific relationality, and that the very presence of positive personalized masculinities suggests they have the means to become counterhegemonic.

Similarly, I (Messerschmidt 2016) found in my research such positive nonhegemonic masculinities constructed by certain teenage boys, who frequently reported, for example, hanging out with unpopular groups at school that included both boys and girls who were inclusive and nonviolent; they did not emphasize heterosexuality and accepted celibacy, the boys were not misogynist, they embraced diversity in bodies and sexuality, they were nonhierarchical, and they had no desire to be popular. Members of such groups viewed themselves as different from rather than inferior to the dominant boys and girls. Such positive masculinities were not constructed in a structural relationship of gender and sexual inequality, they did not legitimate unequal gender and sexual relations, and they were practiced in settings situated outside stable unequal gender relations. Like the boys in Swain’s study, these boys were positioned as embodying counterhegemonic practices in their particular context.

The boys in Swain’s and in my study constructed what is usually considered to be atypical masculine behavior by boys outside the social situation of the dominant popular group. For these boys, the accountable way to construct masculinity is to signify one’s embodied disassociation from unequal gender relations. Such egalitarian gendered behavior is normalized within the unpopular group—it is encouraged, permitted, and privileged by both boys and girls—and therefore within that setting it does not call into question their “maleness.” These boys are engaging in