

Gay Masculinities: The Hegemonic, the Hybrid, and the Homosexual

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Introduction

While feminism and women's studies have been around for a while, the scholarly examination of men and masculinities is a comparatively recent development. Historically, maleness (particularly straight, white maleness) has been interpreted as the default, where women and sexual and ethnic minorities are dismissed as categorical "others." The study of masculinities seeks to examine, among other ideas, the sociological role of men and how power structures such as patriarchy are created and maintained. A number of explanations have been put forward, most notably R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. Connell's theory faces considerable critique (Demetriou, 2001; Beasley, 2012; Bridges, 2014; Bridges and Pascoe, 2014; etc.), but it continues to serve as the "central reference point for many, if not most, writers on men and masculinity" (Weatherell and Edley, 1998 as cited in Beasley, 2012).

The study of homosexuality is certainly incorporated into the field of masculinities. Historically categorized with other forms of "deviance," outdated discourses around homosexuality began to be challenged in the 1960s and 1970s by the gay liberation movement as doctors failed to prove a legitimate pathology associated with homosexuality (Connell, 1992). Today, gay male characters appear across popular culture, and gay men crusading for equal marriage rights serve as the face for the contemporary queer movement. Gay men negotiate an interesting intersection of gender and sexuality, and their roles of and experiences with power can and should be analyzed through the lens of masculinities.

Hegemonic Masculinity

R.W. Connell is widely recognized within the field of masculinities as the architect of the term "hegemonic masculinity" to characterize the means by which patriarchy seeks to ensure its reproduction. According to Connell, "the dominant or hegemonic form of masculinity embodies the currently successful strategy for subordinating women" (1997). In modern Western society, this hegemonic masculinity is defined primarily as homosocial, heterosexual, aggressive, and competitive (Connell, 1997). Demetriou (2001) expands on this categorization to define this theoretically global hegemonic masculinity as "white, Western, rational, calculative, individualist, violent, and heterosexual" as it stands in contrast to "black, non-Western, irrational, effeminate, or non-violent" masculinities.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) emphasize that the structural superiority of this masculinity is definitively hegemonic in its perpetuation; that is, it is maintained through culture, institutions, and persuasion rather than violence, and it retains its power because of the complicity of men and

women alike rather than the activity of any group. Such a structure resists simple dismantling and reproduces itself subtly.

The idea of a hegemonic masculinity both necessitates the existence of multiple masculinities and establishes a hierarchy among them. Connell (1997) suggests that the theory of multiple masculinities – the absence of a single biological or sociological truth about men across history and culture and the recognition of multiple expressions of masculinity across geography and time – is backed by “overwhelming” evidence. Multiple versions of masculinity also coexist in the same place and time, although the relationship between them is hierarchical. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as dominant in relation to the subordinated and marginalized masculinities of gay men and racial minorities, respectively (Connell, 1997).

Importantly, this hegemony is normative rather than normal; it is an ideal perpetuated by cultural figureheads rather than a set of characteristics within most men (Connell, 1997; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). While a majority or even many men might not embody the hegemonic ideal, they define themselves and all other men in relation to it.

Hybrid Masculinities

One of the most recent and hotly debated elements in the field of masculinities is that of “hybrid” masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). This new concept seeks to complicate Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinities by suggesting that dominant masculinities appropriate practices from subordinate masculinities in order to simultaneously reinforce and mask their power (Demetriou, 2001; Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Demetriou (2001) introduces the idea of a “hegemonic bloc” which constantly appropriates elements from subordinate masculinities in order to remain flexible in the face of a changing historical context. By reshaping and then incorporating selective elements of the “other,” this hybrid masculine bloc is able to maintain its hegemonic power even as the cultural dynamics within a society shift. Demetriou further examines the incorporation of gay cultural elements into heterosexual male normativity, such as fashion and fashion photography, and makes brief mention of the idea that such appearances of gender flexibility serve to conceal patriarchy rather than dismantle it.

Bridges and Pascoe (2014) expound upon this concept of subtle reinforcement, classifying the actions of this evolving hegemonic bloc as threefold: (1) discursive distancing – i.e., using language to distance oneself from traditional perceptions of masculinity; (2) strategic borrowing – i.e., reformulating elements of subordinate masculinities to alter the appearance but not structural position of hegemonic masculinity; and (3) fortifying boundaries – i.e., using shifts in attitude and/or practice to reify hegemonic norms even as they appear to undermine them. While men may associate in part with feminist causes or other traditionally non-masculine activities, they often make sure to certify their masculinity in other ways (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). These associations also allow the men who participate to distance themselves from problematic elements of masculinity by association alone, without requiring any substantial dismantling of their own privilege; thus, men maintain their own power while creating the illusion of its willing sacrifice (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014).

Homosexual Masculinities

The study of masculinities, particularly as they relate to Connell's concept of hegemony, naturally seeks to examine homosexuality. Connell (1997) argues that the rising visibility of gay men legitimated the creation of a hegemonic masculinity. While gay men are portrayed as feminine, they are not "definitively excluded from masculinity" (Connell, 1992, p. 737). Rather, they face conflict from within the masculine hierarchy and are seen as categorically lesser.

Gay men, like all other men, live a variety of masculinities (Connell, 1992; Nardi, 1999; Clarkson, 2006). Their masculinities, however, are frequently distilled into a universalizing aesthetic or otherwise represented as inherently feminized. Nardi (1999) examines the roots of this practice and traces it to the conflation of gender and sexuality that arose around new medical definitions of sexual deviance in the late 19th century. This conflation occurred because of a heteronormative standard that enforced male masculinity and female femininity as complementary and saw those roles as the necessary components of a natural heterosexuality; all behaviors outside of the standard were dismissed as a singular sex/gender deviance.

Despite today's language of distinction between sexuality and gender, stereotypes continue to conflate the two. "Gayness" is therefore often essentialized into a singular aesthetic. Rather than referring to actual distinct, universal concepts, so-called "gay aesthetics" hint at a universalizing characterization of sexuality (Bridges, 2014). In other words, male homosexuality is understood as unified model of behaviors, tastes, and ideologies where no such unification really exists. The straight men in Bridges' (2014) study indicate a vague range of these behaviors, tastes, and ideologies that apply to their own lives that they denote as particularly "gay." They also implicitly connect male homosexuality and gay aesthetics with effeminacy (Bridges, 2014).

This characterization of gay men as inherently feminized is replicated in Linneman's (2008) study of language in the popular television sitcom *Will and Grace*. Although the show on its surface appears to challenge stereotypical perceptions of homosexual masculinity by presenting both an effeminate gay male character and a traditionally masculine gay male character (differentiated by personality traits, profession, and clothing), references over the course of the show to both men as coded female indicate an essential distinction of homosexual masculinity as feminized and fundamentally different from heterosexual masculinity (Linneman, 2008).

Within the gay community, however, perceived effeminacy is far from celebrated. Clarkson (2006), through his examination of self-described "straight acting" gay men on a particular Internet site, addresses the way hegemonic masculinity has infiltrated masculinities within the gay community itself. He reveals the gay community's predisposition toward hypermasculinity and the subsequent marginalization of effeminate gay men and others who display evidence of gender nonconformity. Moreover, the label "straight-acting," adopted by some gay men to distance themselves from stereotypical and flamboyant effeminacy, hints at pressures to normalize homosexuality within the heterosexual, hegemonic framework (Clarkson, 2006). These masculine gay men are not content in proclaiming their masculinity on their own terms; they must legitimize it through association with the hegemonic structure.

Conclusion

The discursive concepts of hegemonic and hybrid masculinities established by the scholarship succeed in clarifying the nature of homosexual masculinities within the larger hierarchy. Gay men's masculinity is always defined, both from within the community and without, in relation to a masculine hierarchy that prizes heterosexuality and undermines effeminacy. Their subordination is enhanced (and disguised) by practices of hybrid masculinities in which the hegemon incorporates favorable traits associated with male homosexuality, such as fashion or "sensitivity," without dismantling the hierarchal power structure that oppresses deviance from a heterosexual, gender-conforming norm.

Scholars such as Linneman (2008) have taken care to critically examine claims of progress by scrutinizing texts, like *Will and Grace*, that exist as part of mainstream culture. As the gay liberation and feminist movements advance in the contemporary period, it is both interesting and necessary to continue to assess the role of media and pop culture in perpetuating or challenging these power structures.

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