

Hidden in Plain Sight: On the Omnipresence of Hegemonic Masculinities

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The concept of *hegemonic masculinity*, formulated more than three decades ago, has now established a long history of considerable influence on the social science understanding of gender, but in particular, masculinity. The concept emerged in the mid-1980s and was coined by Raewyn Connell, who conceptualized hegemonic masculinity as a pattern of practice that reproduced unequal relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities. In this talk, I consider some of my recent work on the concept of hegemonic masculinity, with particular attention to the omnipresence of hegemonic masculinities throughout society and how they are hidden in plain sight. Following this, and in line with “authoritarianism” and “troubling times” as the themes of the symposium, I briefly discuss what I label Trump’s “presidential dominating masculinity” and how it occasionally is associated with hegemonic masculinity. I then close with a few examples of counter-hegemonic practices, concentrating on non-hegemonic masculinities, in particular, what I label *positive masculinities*.

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From *One* to *Multiple* Hegemonic Masculinities

Before I discuss some of my recent work on hegemonic masculinities, it is important to note that from the mid-1980s to 2005 the meaning of the concept of hegemonic masculinity changed from Connell's (1987, 1995) initial formulation to a detailed reformulation of the concept by Connell and myself (2005). More specifically, Connell's initial conception concentrated on how *one* hegemonic masculinity in a given historical and society-wide setting *legitimizes* 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 as well as in relation to non-hegemonic masculinities. And 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.

Connell's initial perspective found significant and enthusiastic application from the late-1980s to the early 2000s, being utilized in a variety of academic disciplines and areas. Despite this considerable favorable reception of Connell's approach, however, the concept of hegemonic masculinity nevertheless attracted criticism. And fourteen years ago, Connell and I (2005) responded to these criticisms, and we reformulated the concept of hegemonic masculinity in numerous ways. I won't go through the entire reformulation but just mention that one of the issues we emphasized is that instead of recognizing simply *one* hegemonic masculinity at only the society-wide level, scholars should analyze the plurality of empirically existing hegemonic masculinities at (at least) three levels: the local, regional, and global.

Scholars have continually applied this reformulated concept of hegemonic masculinity in a number of ways, yet despite this, problems remain. For example, Pat Martin (1998) raised the issue of inconsistent applications of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, insightfully observing that some scholars equated the concept with a fixed type of

masculinity or with whatever type of masculinity that happened to be dominant at a particular time and place. This misapplication of the concept continues to appear in the masculinities literature. Martin also noted that the emphasis on the centrality of embodied practice in the construction of hegemonic masculinity obscured the role played by discourse in reproducing notions of hegemonic masculinity. More recently, Michael Flood (2002) and Christine Beasley (2008) labeled inconsistent applications of the concept as “slippage,” arguing that “dominant” forms of masculinity—such as those that are the most culturally celebrated or the most common in particular settings—may actually do little to legitimate men’s power over women and, therefore, should not be labeled hegemonic masculinities, and that some masculinities that legitimate men’s power actually may be culturally marginalized. Indeed, there remains a fundamental tendency among some scholars to read hegemonic masculinity as a static character type and to ignore the whole question of gender relations and the legitimation of gender inequality. And some scholars continue to equate hegemonic masculinity with particular masculinities that simply are dominant—that is, the most culturally celebrated or the most common in particular settings, but do not legitimate gender inequality. Or those masculinities that are practiced by certain men—such as politicians, corporate heads, and celebrities—simply because they are in positions of power, ignoring once again questions of gender relations and the legitimation of gender inequality. Mimi Schippers (2007) therefore, has argued that it is essential to distinguish masculinities that legitimate men’s power from those that do not, and that more emphasis should be placed on the role femininities play in the construction of hegemonic masculinities.

Omnipresent Yet Hidden in Plain Sight

The good news is that recent research on hegemonic masculinities has responded to these criticisms and, in the process, revealed the *omnipresent* nature of hegemonic masculinities, from the local to the regional to the global. In other words, this research suggests that

hegemonic masculinities are much more common than previously believed—they are ubiquitous throughout society and consequently widely encountered. Despite this pervasiveness, however, hegemonic masculinities often are simultaneously *hidden in plain sight*, operating in a disguised way while concurrently securing an overwhelmingly legitimating influence; that is, hegemonic masculinities are so obvious that people do not actually “see” them—because they are everywhere, they are nowhere—and this social condition signals *bona fide* hegemony. Permit me to share with you a few examples from my own work that illustrate some recent developments on hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic and Dominant Masculinities

In response to Martin’s, Flood’s, Beasley’s, and Schipper’s concerns, since 2010, I have argued in my work that to elucidate the significance and salience of hegemonic masculinities, gender scholars must distinguish masculinities that legitimate gender inequality from those that do not. For example, I began to differentiate “hegemonic masculinities” from “dominant” forms of masculinities. I define *hegemonic masculinities* as those masculinities constructed locally, regionally, and globally that legitimate an unequal relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities. Hegemonic masculinities acquire their legitimacy by embodying materially and/or discursively culturally supported “superior” gender qualities in relation to the embodiment or symbolization of “inferior” gender qualities (Schipper, 2007). That is, certain culturally defined “superior” gendered qualities legitimate unequal gender relations when they are symbolically paired with culturally defined “inferior” characteristics attached to femininity (Schipper, 2007). In addition, hegemonic masculinities must be culturally ascendant to advance a rationale for social action through consent and compliance—hegemonic masculinities (locally, regionally, and globally) rise to a position of influence and, consequently, provide the background cultural knowledge that people use to guide their behavior.

Dominant masculinities are not always associated with and linked to gender hegemony but refer to (locally, regionally, and globally) the most celebrated, common, or current form of masculinity in a particular social setting. As an example of dominant and hegemonic masculinities, I (Messerschmidt, 2016) interviewed fifteen violent and nonviolent teenage boys who all identified certain boys in their school as notably *dominant*: they were popular, often tough and renowned “jocks,” attended parties, participated in heterosexuality, and had many friends. In other words, these dominant boys represented the most *celebrated* form of masculinity in the “clique” structure within the school, yet they did not *in and of themselves* legitimate gender inequality. In the past, scholars have mistakenly assumed that such dominant popular boys are simultaneously and exclusively representatives of in-school hegemonic masculinity (by ignoring gender relations).

However, I also found that these same dominant popular boys occasionally construct an in-school localized *hegemonic* masculinity through the practice of bullying “other” boys. The victims of such bullying are feminized through verbal and physical abuse, especially if they do not respond to the bullying in the way the masculine culture of the school dictates; that is, to physically fight back. In the brief bullying sequence of events, then, the popular dominant boys construct what I call a “localized fleeting hegemonic masculinity” because they embody aggressiveness, invulnerability, and the capacity to engage in physical violence (culturally masculine qualities) while the boys who are bullied embody passivity, vulnerability, and an inability to engage in physical violence (culturally feminine qualities). Unequal masculine and feminine relations then are constructed momentarily or briefly within the localized confines of the school. By means of verbal and physical bullying, then we have the momentary ascendancy of an in-school localized hegemonic masculinity that circulates a legitimating material and discursive justification for gendered inequality and is, for the most part, hidden in plain sight. This example likewise alerts us to the fluidity of masculinities and the movement from dominant to hegemonic and back to dominant masculinities in a short period of time.

The emphasis on a distinction between hegemonic and dominant masculinities is significant because it enables a more precise conceptualization of how hegemonic masculinities are unique—and indeed complex—among the diversity of masculinities. Making a clear distinction between hegemonic and dominant masculinities will not only bring hegemonic masculinities out from hiding but is bound to enable scholars to now recognize and research various dominant nonhegemonic yet powerful masculinities and how they differ from hegemonic masculinities as well as how they differ among themselves.

Differences Among Hegemonic Masculinities

My research also suggests that hegemonic masculinities—at the local, regional, and global levels—are constructed differently. For example, I (Messerschmidt, 2018) found that hegemonic masculinities vary in the significance and scope of their legitimating influence—the justifying of unequal gender relations by *localized* hegemonic masculinities is limited to the confines of particular institutions, such as schools, whereas *regional* and *global* hegemonic masculinities have respectively a society-wide and worldwide legitimating influence. I (Messerschmidt, 2018) also distinguish between “dominating” and “protective” forms of hegemonic masculinities and accordingly different constructions of gendered power relations. For example, the just mentioned high school popular boys who verbally abuse and feminize “other” boys consolidate localized hegemonic masculinity through *dominating* aggressive bullying. In contrast, I uncovered distinct types of hegemonic masculinities that were established through contrasting forms of benevolent *protection*.

For example, at the *regional* and *global* levels, I (Messerschmidt, 2010) found in my analysis of foreign policy speeches by US president’s George W. Bush and Barack Obama, that they each metaphorically construct themselves as embodying strength, assertiveness, knowledge, invulnerability, and the ability to protect others from global terrorists as masculine qualities, while all “other” people of the world are portrayed

as passively dependent, innocent, uninformed, vulnerable, and unable to protect themselves from global terrorists as feminine qualities. Both sets of qualities in the global North historically and culturally have been associated with men and women respectively, masculinity and femininity respectively, and when these gendered qualities are paired together in a complementary and subordinate way we have the legitimation of gender inequality through the discursive construction of a global protective hegemonic masculinity.

This identification of “protective” hegemonic masculinities challenges the notion that hegemonic masculinities are exclusively pernicious and toxic, recognizing a benevolent and compassionate way gender hegemonic relations may be practiced. Such hegemonic masculinities are hidden in plain sight because they often are simply uneventful and unexciting but also misjudged as lacking relations of power. In this example, then, gender hegemony constitutes a degree of moral legitimacy and thus, the gender unequal relationship is effectively concealed.

Finally, I (Messerschmidt, 2018) also report in recent work the different ways hegemonic masculinities are constructed: hegemonic masculinities can be fashioned through relational *material* practices—such as physical bullying by dominant popular boys in schools—that have a discursive legitimating influence, whereas hegemonic masculinities can also be constructed through *discursive* practices—such as speeches by Bush and Obama that concurrently constituted unequal gender relations linguistically, metaphorically, and thus symbolically. This discursive constitution of hegemonic masculinity is a new development in the field of masculinities studies and has also recently been examined by a number of other scholars.

What this evidence suggests then is that hegemonic masculinities often are both *materially* and *discursively* hidden in plain sight even as simultaneously they are omnipresent throughout society and indeed the world. I would like to now briefly discuss Trump’s “presidential

dominating masculinity” and how it at times simultaneously constitutes hegemonic masculinity.

Trump

As the examples discussed so far indicate, no one exclusively and consistently embodies hegemonic masculinity. Rather, masculinity—like femininity—is fluid and changing based on the social context. And no one exemplifies this better than the current US “president,” Donald Trump. As president, Trump primarily constructs different versions of what I label his “presidential dominating masculinity,” yet he occasionally merges that masculinity with a hegemonic masculinity.

Trump’s “presidential dominating masculinity” involves commanding and controlling specific interactions and exercising power and control over people and events, he “calls the shots” and “runs the show,” he demands strict obedience to his authority, and he displays a lack of concern for the opinions of others. This presidential dominating masculinity has thus far centered on seven critical features:

First, Trump cultivates a bond with, and control over, close followers based on loyalty to him as a person rather than to a political party or set of principles.

Second, Trump adapts the office of the presidency to serve his needs rather than submit to shared custom, such as refusing to release his tax returns, supporting tax “reform” that serves the economic interests of the wealthy, and ruling through a functioning kleptocracy (meaning, using the office to serve his and his family’s economic interests). For example, when he or White House staff visit other countries where there exists a Trump hotel, they stay at the hotel at taxpayers’ expense; when US Vice President Pence recently visited Ireland, he stayed at Trump’s hotel that is 180 miles from Dublin, where his meetings took place; Trump considers his Mar-A-Lago Florida resort

his summer White House and travels there several times a month at taxpayers' expense.

Third, Trump attempts to control public discourse through his constant tweets that are aimed at primarily discrediting people who disagree with his policies, such as restricting the travel of the first two Muslim women elected to Congress who planned to tour East Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank. Both support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement and have been critical of Trump's policies, and Trump urged Israel to bar entry to both women and Netanyahu agreed.

Fourth, Trump has critically curtailed environmental protections while denying that a climate crisis exists. As he stated, "I don't believe it, it's a hoax," and he completely rejects scientific opinion. Most recently, Trump has rescinded regulations on methane emissions at oil and gas plants.

Fifth, Trump's presidential dominating masculinity serves the interests of corporations by cutting regulations, lowering corporate taxes, increasing military spending, and engaging in other neoliberal practices, such as attempting to strip away health care from 24 million people, defunding public schools, and making massive cuts to social programs that serve poor and working-class people, people of color, and the elderly.

Sixth, Trump's presidential dominating masculinity is exemplified through the formulation of a dominating militaristic foreign policy (for example, US airstrikes of civilians in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria have increased dramatically under Trump; the MOAB bombing of Afghanistan; threats to North Korea and Iran; he is committed to the US nuclear arsenal, he is determined to "modernize" that arsenal, and he actually has expressed a doctrine of when nuclear weapons might be used)—as he states regarding nuclear weapons: "We will outmatch all countries at every pass and outlast them all." And most recently, Trump launched a US Space Command, intended to "protect" US interests in outer-space. He plans to establish what he labels a "US Space Force," as a 6th branch of

the US military (which currently includes the Air Force, the Army, the Coast Guard, the Marines, and the Navy).

Finally, Trump is a functioning member of a global ultraconservative “axis of evil”—whose defining characteristics are kleptocracy and dominating masculinity—with the likes of Putin (Russia), el-Sisi (Egypt), bin Salman (Saudi Arabia), Duterte (Philippines), Bolsonaro (Brazil), Kim Jong-un (North Korea), among others. These different features of his presidential dominating masculinity are, of course emphasized or de-emphasized depending upon the context.

But Trump’s presidential dominating masculinity also at times constitutes a hegemonic masculinity. As one example, Trump regionally depicts himself as *the* heroic masculine “protector” of all Americans. In his public statements as president, Trump has argued that he alone can lead the country back to safety by protecting the American people from dangers that allegedly threaten their welfare. For example, Trump has concentrated on “rooting out” illegal and legal Latino immigration (from Central and South America). According to Trump, it is primarily immigrant men who have “invaded” US communities and violated persons and property. They are unworthy of US citizenship because they are “bringing crime, bringing drugs, they’re rapists,” and only a “few are good people.” Trump discursively underscores that he will protect Americans from this alleged “invasion” by deporting “dangerous” and “illegal” Latinos and by “sealing” the US-Mexico border. Trump dehumanizes Latino immigrants as “criminals,” “rapists,” “predators,” “killers,” “aliens,” and “animals.” One study of 64 Trump rallies found that he used these words more than 500 times in reference to immigrant men, and in counties that hosted a Trump rally, they experienced a 226 percent increase in hate-motivated incidents. He also asserts that Latinx immigrants “pour into and infest” the United States. He declares illegal immigration as a “monstrosity,” contending there has been an “invasion of millions of illegals taking over America” and, therefore, “it’s critical that we stop this invasion.” According to another study, in 2019, so far, Trump’s re-election campaign has used the word “invasion” in more than

2,000 Facebook ads. To protect Americans, then, from primarily Latino immigrants allegedly “taking over America,” Trump states he must “deport” them and use “tough measures” to keep them “the hell out of our country,” such as building a wall along the US-Mexico border. In this discourse Trump constructs fleeting hegemonic masculinity in two ways.

First, Trump implies that Americans are *unable* to defend themselves from the immigrant “monstrosity,” so he will do it for them. As Trump put it, his plan of increasing deportations and “tough measures” will put the “jobs, wages, and safety of Americans first,” “the border will finally be fully and totally secured, our communities will be safe.” Here Trump discursively instructs all US citizens to entrust their lives to him; in return, he offers safety. Trump depicts himself as assertive, invulnerable, and heroically able to protect while all remaining US citizens are depicted as uniquely innocent, vulnerable, and thus passively dependent on Trump for their safety. Trump situates himself as *the* masculine “superior” president in unequal relation to *his* “inferior” feminine citizen subjects. Trump’s presidential dominating masculinity then simultaneously constitutes a protective hegemonic masculinity that is similar to the protective hegemonic masculinity constructed by Bush and Obama that I discussed earlier.

Second, Trump’s discourse constructs an unequal masculine and racialized relationship whereby Trump is depicted as just, reactive, and a good protector; Latino men are labeled unjust, aggressive, and evil invaders. This discursive pairing signifies an unequal relationship between two types of masculinities and races—one hegemonic (and white) and one subordinate (and Latino). The Latino men are symbolized as excessively toxic while Trump represents himself as virtuous yet defensively responsive. Trump’s gendered and racialized qualities are deemed superior to the gendered and racialized qualities attached to Latino immigrant men. Through this hegemonic masculine discourse, then, Trump reinforces the intersection of both unequal gender and race relations. Indeed, Trump secures and obscures white masculine hegemony through the subordination of primarily Latino men. And in this example, an overabundance of masculinity is symbolically

embodied in Latino men, and is represented relationally as a form of masculine inadequacy, deficiency, and subordination.

Finally, Trump's hegemonic masculinity intersects with a white supremacist agenda through his policy of immigration, which includes outright cruelty. For example, at the US border with Mexico, Trump separates immigrant families, locking children in cages and adults in concentration like camps, and fails to provide both the children and the adults with proper hygiene and health care. Trump has ordered military-style raids on businesses that hire illegal immigrants, arresting the Latinx immigrant workers but not the white business owners. And Trump's immigration policy blocks migrants from applying for asylum in the US if they pass through a third country.

In addition to the above, Trump's discourse (mentioned earlier) influences some angry white men, and the result is that US citizens are less safe. For example, Trump's emphasis on "taking over America" reflects the white supremacist notion of "replacement," or the idea that white people are systematically being replaced by immigrants, women, and racial, sexual, and religious minorities. White supremacist men—angry white men—experience what Kimmel (2017) labels "aggrieved entitlement" whereby the benefits they believe they are entitled are being snatched away. Trump's discourse has fanned the flames of this aggrieved entitlement and therefore inspired some to engage in domestic terrorism. For example, the El Paso shooter—who killed 22 people and injured another 24 at a Walmart store on August 3, 2019—stated in his "manifesto" that "this attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion" and "I am defending my country from ethnic replacement brought on by the invasion."

What is to Be Done?

So, my argument has been that contemporary hegemonic masculinities are decentered; they are multifarious and found in a whole variety of settings. Hegemonic masculinities do not

represent a certain type of man, but personify and symbolize an unequal gendered relationship; hegemonic masculinities do not discriminate in terms of class, race, age, sexuality, or nation. Hegemonic masculinities also are fluid, contingent, provisional, and omnipresent locally, regionally, and globally, they are hidden in plain sight, and they relationally and discursively *legitimate* unequal gender *relations* between men and women, masculinities and femininities, and among masculinities. If my argument is correct, then this requires novel strategies to challenge and resist gender hegemony. Hegemonic masculinities are continually renewed, recreated, defended, and modified through social action. And yet they are at times resisted, limited, altered, and challenged.

Although I do not claim to possess a firm and concrete answer to the problem of gender hegemony, we do know that hegemonic masculinities can be contested and undermined through alternative practices that do not support gender hegemony; in particular, counter-hegemonic social actions 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 counter-hegemonic practices are particularly possible or likely to materialize. One place to begin is with what I refer to as *positive masculinities*, or those *non-hegemonic* masculinities (locally, regionally, and globally) that contribute to legitimating egalitarian relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities. Such masculinities are counter-hegemonic because they actually are, or they have the means to become culturally conceptualized as legitimate and authentic alternatives to hegemonic masculinities. For example, in my life-history study of violent and nonviolent boys, I (Messerschmidt, 2016) found positive non-hegemonic masculinities often being constructed by some of the nonviolent boys at school. One aspect of their positive masculinity involved their response to frequently being bullied by the dominant popular boys. Some nonviolent boys responded to such bullying in a particular way—they simply employed the counter-

hegemonic strategy of “walking away” from the bullying without acknowledging the bully or the verbal abuse. In other words, this particular practice re-embodies boys who are “feminized” through bullying by constructing a self-assertive, tenacious, and secure form of masculinity that challenges the masculine culture of the school to fight back physically. “Walking away” effectively upends hegemonic masculinity because the alleged effeminate boy is instead transformed into a courageous, audacious (bold), and brave “man” with the “guts” it takes to reject gender hegemony—in the process, masculinity is constructed in a new and positive way. These boys then were practicing dissident politics within a particular personalized masculine construction.

The example of “walking away” embodies a reflexive counter-hegemonic strategy to combat subordination. However, counter-hegemonic practices can appear in the form of an unanticipated consequence to certain policy changes, without any conscious reflexive strategy devised. For example, a fascinating study by Filteau (2014) of offshore oilrig workers in the US found that hegemonic masculinity actually was accidentally replaced by a positive dominant masculinity in one notable worksite. The particular oilrig Filteau examined traditionally excluded women (only men worked there) and a hegemonic/subordinate masculine relationship endured for years, whereby hegemonic masculinity was characterized by bravado, toughness, competitiveness, and little concern for one’s own safety. Indeed, committing oneself to safety signified weakness, a quality associated with subordinate masculinity, and therefore men who deviated from hegemonic notions of masculinity were feminized and stigmatized as “sissies” for not being brave, tough, and for worrying about their safety.

However, shifting economic, environmental, and political climates forced the oilrig industry to enforce stricter safety policies to avoid lawsuits and to maximize profits. And Filteau found that because of the policy change, workers actually began to praise the new safety standards and, in turn, unintentionally changed their masculine practices at

work—they condemned so-called brave, tough, reckless, unsafe behaviors and conformed to the new safety guidelines. Filteau discovered that feminizing “other” men likewise became non-existent and workers began to value a collective performance of safety, all of which became the defining qualities of a socially dominant non-hegemonic masculinity at this particular oilrig. Workers now cooperate and work together to reinforce this new dominant masculinity. In other words, workers denounce traditionally hegemonic masculine practices as deviant and incongruent with the new dominant positive masculinity. Filteau concluded that the reorganization of the workplace unintentionally created opportunities for men to practice a new positive non-hegemonic yet dominant masculinity.

These two examples of counter-hegemonic practices—one conscious (walking away) and the other coincidental (safety policies)—destabilized gender hegemony or the superior/inferior binary qualities upon which hegemonic masculinity is based. The two examples demonstrate how the coexistence of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities can possibly lead to more humane and less oppressive ways of being a boy or a man. In both cases, practices that previously were identified as feminine behavior became recognized and established as positive masculine behavior and thus challenged gender hegemony.

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