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Hegemonic Masculinity on the Sidelines of Sport

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Abstract

Nearly a quarter of a century old, the concept of hegemonic masculinity as developed by R. W. Connell remains both influential and contested among gender scholars. In this essay, we use our research on coed cheerleading in the US as a springboard to explore the bounds and limits of hegemonic masculinity as both cultural script and analytic construct. Cheerleading constitutes a public stage for "doing gender" in ways that highlight normative, taken-for-granted notions of gender difference; consequently, we use cheerleading as a vehicle for asking under what circumstances and to what degree heterosexuality remains central to the enactment of hegemonic masculinity, which reflects a larger question about the flexibility of the concept and its openness to contestation and change. Building on the work of Connell and others, we stress the need for relational analyses of gender when studying both masculinities and femininities, as well as the importance of linking individual-level data to broader structures of gendered power and inequality.

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Hegemonic masculinity: a brief overview

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, developed nearly 25 years ago by R.W. Connell (1987, 1995, 2000, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985), remains both influential and contested among scholars interested in the social construction of gender in western societies. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), the concept of hegemonic masculinity emerged partly in reaction to sex role theory, criticized for being static, inattentive to power differences among and between genders, and incapable of accounting for resistance and social change. In Connell's formulation, masculinity (as opposed to the notion of a male "sex role") is not a fixed identity, role, or set of personality traits. Rather, "masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting" (Connell

and Messerschmidt, 2005: 836). Masculinities reflect cultural values and ideologies in addition to embodied practices. They constitute an ongoing "gender project" not a "stable object of knowledge" (Connell, 1995: 72, 33). There is a fair degree of flexibility here. The "gender project" constituting hegemonic masculinity can vary across time and place, and it encompasses multiple intersecting dimensions: hegemonic masculinity is at once cultural representation, everyday practice, and institutional structure. This flexibility makes hegemonic masculinity potentially powerful analytically but also vulnerable to confusion, ambiguity, and inconsistencies in application (see Donaldson 1993; Pyke 1996; Martin 1998; Demetriou 2001; Hearn 2004; Schippers 2007; for an overview and reformulation of the concept, see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Any particular manifestation of masculinity is constituted in relation to other masculinities as well as in relation to femininities. It follows that not all masculinities are equal: there is a hierarchy that privileges hegemonic masculinity as the most legitimate, protected version. Hegemonic masculinity is less a specific type than a socio-cultural investment in an idealized masculine character in a given time and place (Connell 1987, 1995). In contemporary Western societies, this masculine character typically includes being a white, middle-class, breadwinning man as well as being strong, competent, in control, competitive, assertive (if not aggressive), rational/instrumental, and oriented toward the public rather than the private sphere. In our view, it also presumes heterosexuality, though this is a point of contention to which we'll return. Connell (1995: 77) defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." Although some femininities are culturally idealized, no femininities are hegemonic because "all forms of femininity in society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men" (Connell 1987: 186). Women's gender subordination means that when women embody masculinity -- theorized as "female masculinity" (Halberstam 1998; Blackwood 2009; Nguyen 2008, Rifkin 2002) amd/or "tomboyism" (Blackwood 2009; Carr 2007) -- it may be empowering (or, conversely, stigmatizing) but it cannot be considered hegemonic within the terms of Connell's model.

The idea that men are naturally entitled to power, authority, and sexual access to women is what Connell (1995: 79-82) calls "the patriarchal dividend." Men who realize the patriarchal dividend without being on the frontlines of patriarchy are said to embody "complicit masculinity" (Connell 1995: 79). For example, middle-class white men who "help out" at home, respect women, and eschew violence nevertheless reproduce and benefit from the broader system of gender inequality while not appearing to be its primary enforcers. "Subordinate masculinity" is most commonly associated with gay men, as heterosexuality and homophobia have been considered fundamental components of hegemonic masculinity, at least until recently (Connell 1987: 186; 1995: 78-79). In a context where women exist as sexual objects for men, and where gender is understood in binary terms, men are negated as sexual objects for men and gayness is linked to femininity. Because they too represent a symbolic slide toward femininity, men branded as sissies, wimps, fags, etc. also represent subordinated masculinity (see also Pascoe 2007; Plummer 2001; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Kimmel 1994).

Hegemony, subordination, and complicity describe relations internal to the gender order; additional masculinities are constructed through the interplay of gender with other structures of inequality such as race and class. "Marginalization" is the term Connell uses to express the relationship between masculinities in dominant versus subordinated classes or racial/ethnic groups; as she (1995: 81) notes, "marginalization is always relative to the *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group." The intersections of race, class, and gender matter for understanding both relations of marginalization and relations of dominance. Consider Chen's (1999) research on middle-class Chinese-American men, who counter negative stereotypes of themselves as men by negotiating what Chen calls a "hegemonic bargain," using advantages conferred by class, education, gender, sexuality, and/or generational status to achieve "real" manhood. "This bargain is possible because Chinese American men occupy a variety of positions in the social order, enabling them to deploy their social advantages, whatever they may be, for the purposes of bolstering their masculinity" (Chen 1999: 600). Or consider Connell's (1995: 80) example of black celebrity-athletes in the US, in which particular black athletes

appear to powerfully exemplify hegemonic masculinity, and yet the fame and wealth of individual stars does not "trickle down" to yield social authority to black men generally. This is because structural unemployment and urban poverty interact with institutional racism in shaping black masculinity (Connell 1995, drawing on Staples 1982; see also Majors and Billson 1992; hooks 2004; Orelus 2010). Similarly, working-class men across racial categories may embody hegemonic masculinity in specific local contexts, but are marginalized within a capitalist social formation that privileges wealth and the exercise of economic, legal, and political power (Willis 1977; Messner 1992; Fine at al 1998). The existence of multiple masculinities thus highlights men's control of other men, and not simply men's control of women, as a central feature of hegemonic masculinity. It also highlights the importance of considering broader structural forces such as racism and class inequality when determining just how "hegemonic" particular gender practices are.

Dellinger (2004) reminds us that the concept of hegemony foregrounds the specifically *cultural* dimensions of gender inequality. Hegemony is the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains its privilege. It is secured through broad-based consent rather than coercion because particular ideologies, practices, and social arrangements are made to seem natural and inevitable rather than the result of a concerted effort to win and hold power. In Connell's words, "the public face of hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men [and many women] are motivated to support" (1987: 185). Importantly, then, although the cultural formulation representing hegemonic masculinity benefit some men as group, it may not correspond to the lived experience of individual men.

If hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are but what sustains their power, how do we locate exemplars of it and how do we make sense of the relationship between cultural norms or scripts for hegemonic masculinity and "configurations of practice" embodied by actual men? Unsurprisingly, sport has been a fertile arena for addressing these questions. When scholars of gender and sport note that "men make sports, and sports make men" (Birrell and Richter 1994: 226), they refer to the role of sport in

constructing hegemonic masculinity. Historically in the West, sport has been one of the most masculine (and sex-segregated) of institutions, and despite recent gains by women, it is still largely organized by and for men, particularly at the "institutional core" of men's professional football, baseball, and basketball where masculinity is linked to socially sanctioned aggression and physical power (Messner 1992, 2002). According to Messner (1992), the expansion of organized sport since the 19th Century has served to bolster a faltering ideology of male dominance in the face of countervailing social developments such as rising female labor force participation (see also Theberge 1981; Bryson 1987; Hall 1988). To this day, regardless of whether they like or play sports, men and boys in the US are judged, to varying degrees, according to their perceived ability in competitive sports (Messner 1992, 2002).

In the United States, football is considered to be at the core of sport and therefore at the core of hegemonic masculinity. (Photo by John Marsh Photography, http://www.flickr.com/photos/john-marsh-photography/2253246818/).

Men's dominance in the administration and participation of sport indicates women's relative exclusion from activities that are culturally valued, publicly supported, and economically profitable (Theberge 1993, 1994). The sport-masculinity link also excludes women on a symbolic level, implying that because "real" men are strong and aggressive, "real" women cannot or ought not to be. Meanwhile, "feminine" sports such as gymnastics or figure skating -- deemed socially acceptable for women and socially unacceptable for men -- are trivialized by the sports establishment, not considered legitimate sports at all (Bryson 1987; Feder 1995). Those who embrace the "wrong" sort of sport -- male cheerleaders, for example, or female wrestlers -- are seen as gender-nonconformists and therefore presumed to be gay. Sport is such a powerful cultural force precisely because it appears rooted in nature, a "natural" expression of sexual difference and male superiority. At the same time, it highlights patterns of class and race inequality as well as heterosexual dominance: working-class men and men of color are more likely to pursue athletic careers long-term (with the attendant physical and emotional costs), while white middle-class men, having broader options, either move into management or leave sports altogether for professional employment (Messner 1992).

The construction of hegemonic masculinity via the institutional core of sport highlights the utility of the concept in a particular institutional arena. Empirical research has focused on hegemonic masculinity in many other fields and settings, including crime (Messerschmidt 1993, 2000; Newburn and Stanko 1994), the military (Barrett 1996; Woodward 2000; Higate 2003), the law (Thornton 1989; Pierce 1995), prisons (Britton 2003), schools (Willis 1977; Ferguson 2000; Pascoe 2007), fraternities (Anderson 2008), police work (Prokos and Padavic 2002), business management (Martin 2001), accounting (Dellinger 2004), body-building (Gillet and White 1992), cheerleading (Grindstaff and West 2006), alternative rock music (Schippers 2002), the media (Consalvo 2003), and gay "bear" subcultures (Hennen 2005). Indeed, a good many of these studies are discussed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) in their overview and reformulation of the concept of hegemonic masculinity published several years ago. In this essay, they explicitly reject the tendency of scholars to rely on static traits when describing configurations of masculinity, and they also reject the original assertion that masculinities, whether hegemonic, complicit,

or marginal, are invariably constituted via a single pattern of power -- the "global dominance of men over women" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 847). Overall, they argue for the continued utility of hegemonic masculinity as an analytic construct provided it is understood as 1) relational, where patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction to patterns of femininity, 2) a construct in which local, regional, and global levels of analysis interact, 3) configurations of practice that are nevertheless embodied by individuals in systematic and not idiosyncratic ways, and 4) a dynamic, internally-variegated constellation of practices that can change over time, even to the point of challenging patriarchy.

Our aim here, aside from providing an overview of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, is to draw upon our ethnographic research on cheerleading as a springboard to carry forward the exploration of the concept as it relates to a particular point of debate that Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) address only briefly and over which there is an apparent lack of consensus among gender scholars: the relationship of heterosexuality to hegemonic masculinity. Over the course of ten years, we have observed four different college cheer teams (three coed, one all-girl), attended a dozen summer training campus around the country, traveled to regional and national cheerleading competitions (15 in all), and interviewed more than 150 cheerleaders, coaches, and industry representatives -- all with an eye to understanding the role of cheerleading in shaping and reflecting the contemporary gender regime.

Cheerleading is a good barometer for understanding how young people "do" gender and sexuality in the US today because it throws into high relief the taken-for-granted cultural scripts underpinning normative notions of gender and sexual difference. Cheerleading constitutes a cultural stage for performing different femininities and masculinities in local contexts bounded by broader structures of power and inequality. Specifically, we use cheerleading as a vehicle for asking under what circumstances and to what degree heterosexuality remains central to the concept of hegemonic masculinity within contemporary US gender relations, which reflects the issue of flexibility and the concept's openness to change. Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) reformulation of hegemonic masculinity guides us in this effort: we show how a

relational analysis of gender matters when considering this question, and we stress the importance of accounting for both embodied practices and dis-embodied institutions/structures when linking masculinity to hegemony in empirical research. In our own research, we speak of individuals and institutions/ structures (rather than the local-regional-global levels employed by Connell and Messerschmidt) because, although the "cheerleading industry" is rapidly globalizing, the US is still the heartland of cheerleading and our research focuses on the construction of gender in cheerleading as domestically rather than globally variegated. We then use our research on cheerleading as a backdrop to discuss the work of other gender scholars as it relates to the interplay between gender and sexuality.

When your game face is a smile: cheerleading and the performance of masculinities

Despite its all-male origins, cheerleading in the US is predominantly female and "the cheerleader" tends to symbolize feminine attractiveness and popularity (Hanson 1995; Adams and Bettis 2003; Grindstaff and West 2006, 2010). For much of the 20th Century, "doing gender" in the context of cheerleading meant enacting an idealized feminine script centered around supportiveness, enthusiasm, and sex appeal -- what Connell (1987) would call "emphasized femininity."

Hair ribbons and ponytails are one way that cheerleading has traditionally signified emphasized femininity. (Photo by L. Grindstaff).

However, cheerleading waned in the wake of second-wave feminism, when notions of ideal girlhood expanded to accommodate the "masculine" qualities of assertiveness and physical fitness (in gender-appropriate contexts, of course); cheerleading regained its popularity by adapting to the new ideal and bringing its performance of femininity up to date, combining enthusiasm and sex appeal with hard-body athleticism. Once an auxiliary to sport, cheerleading is now sport-like itself, with a national (and increasingly international) network of competitions and summer training camps. Although most school-based cheer squads still support sports teams from the sidelines, many have embraced competitive cheerleading as well. The fastest-growing segment of the cheerleading industry is "all-star" cheerleading, which operates outside the scholastic context altogether: participants join for-profit gyms for the sole purpose of learning skills and competing. The national organization for all-star cheerleading is the USASF. Whether all-star or scholastic, cheerleading now includes high-level stunting, pyramid-building, and tumbling, in addition to dance. Not surprisingly, these changes have attracted more boys and men to cheerleading in recent decades, particularly the competitive arena.

Athleticism and physical fitness are fundamental to contemporary cheerleading. Shown left, an all-girl college squad performing a stunt (photo by crashmaster007, http://www.flickr.com/photos/crashmaster/3169343932/). On the right, cheerleaders do push-ups at a summer training camp for college teams. (Photo by L. Grindstaff).

Given the association of men with sport and the symbolic importance of sport for communicating hegemonic masculinity, the heightened visibility of male cheerleaders helps cheerleading gain legitimacy as a sport in the eyes of the public and of participants themselves. This is evident in myriad ways, large and small. Our ethnographic research shows, for example, that at colleges and universities with both coed and all-girl cheer squads, the coed squad typically supports men's sports, while the all-girl squad supports women's sports (the former being considered more prestigious because of the larger crowds and the centrality of football to scholastic cheerleading, which only men play). At national college competitions, the coed divisions tend to get the best time slots, attract more spectators, and also get maximum media exposure (Grindstaff and West 2006). Although boys and men constitute less than ten percent of cheerleaders overall (Adams and Bettis 2003), men (especially white men) appear to be well-represented as coaches and instructors, and they are clearly over-represented in leadership positions within the various for-profit cheerleading associations that constitute the contemporary cheerleading industry.

Cheerleaders themselves, both male and female, tend to consider coed cheerleading more athletic and prestigious, partly because men's presumed physical strength enables more dramatic stunts (in the words of one female college cheerleader, men can "build higher and stronger" and "do the cooler stuff that girls just sometimes can't do") and because of the symbolic association between men and sport. "People take us more seriously when guys are involved [in cheerleading]," said a female cheerleader on a west coast squad. Her male teammate agreed, noting that the presence of "big guys" in cheerleading was crucial to the successful transition to sport, but that it was being undermined by the predominance of girls. "It's understandable," he said, referring to the over-representation of young girls in cheerleading, "but as long as that's around, I think it's going to be hard to classify ourselves as a sport . . . it's got the stigma of an all-girl thing still." The "stigma" associated with all-girl cheerleading is confirmed and reinforced by the special treatment male cheerleaders frequently receive, particularly at schools where recruiting and retaining male cheerleaders is an ongoing struggle. Repeatedly we witnessed (and heard discussed in interviews) a double-standard at team tryouts, in which men but not women could be selected with

minimal skills and little or no prior experience. During team practices and even when performing on the sidelines of sports events, male cheerleaders are typically held to lower standards of emotional expressiveness (smiling, constant motion, etc.), and, at some schools, male cheerleaders are released from sideline obligations altogether, participating only in competitions, the most highly-prized aspect of cheerleading. Coaches often complained to us of the difficulty they face recruiting and retaining boys and men into cheerleading because of its feminine stigma. Some schools use the term "stunt team" instead of "cheer squad" in an effort to downplay the support function and emphasize the athleticism of cheerleading, thereby making it sound more masculine and sport-like. As a valuable but relatively rare commodity, men also had disproportionate influence on team leadership and decision-making.

A coed college team competes at "Nationals" in Daytona Beach, Florida. This popular competition is hosted by the National Cheerleaders Association. (Photo by L. Grindstaff).

At the same time that men's involvement serves to enhance cheerleading's legitimacy as a sport, the feminine valence of cheerleading as a whole casts suspicion on the "gender credentials" of its male participants. Virtually everyone we interviewed spoke of what one young man termed "the gay cheerleader syndrome" -- the assumption on the part of others that men who cheer are automatically gay, which in turn reflects the belief that gender nonconformity is an index of homosexuality. Of course, in college-level cheerleading some male cheerleaders identify as gay and some -- the majority -- do not. But sexual orientation per se is not what matters, according to the straight men we interviewed; rather, it's the performance of masculinity. Here is where the struggle for hegemony is most clearly foregrounded, as different ways of expressing -- and institutionalizing -- masculinity coexist and sometimes conflict. The same appearance- and performance-demands that successfully feminize female cheerleaders (the short skirt, make-up, hair ribbons, constant smiling, bubbly enthusiasm, etc.) simultaneously create a relatively "safe" space for feminine-identified out gay men and expose men as a group to homophobia, prompting a struggle within the world of cheerleading over what a suitably "masculine" performance entails. Indeed, Varsity Brands has [three online publications devoted to the male role in cheerleading](#).

Our research suggests that a singular, clearly ascendant role for male cheerleaders is lacking. Indeed, because the male cheerleader is not iconic in the way that the female cheerleader is, and because male cheerleaders do not automatically signify "heterosexuality" in the way that female cheerleaders do, performances of masculinity (by men) in coed cheerleading are far more variable than performances of femininity (by women). Significantly, both the variability in the performance of masculinity and the invariability in the performance of femininity are not idiosyncratic but institutionalized by the for-profit companies that make up the contemporary cheerleading industry. These companies oversee the sale of uniforms and cheer apparel, as well as the organization of regional, national, and international competitions and summer training camps. The companies have strongly influenced the evolution of cheerleading, including college cheerleading, since the activity lies outside the purview of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA); even non-competitive school teams affiliate with one or another company to obtain uniforms and attend camps.

The for-profit companies that make up the contemporary cheerleading industry oversee the organization of regional, national, and international competitions. Shown left, an array of flags inside the arena at "Worlds," the largest international all-star competition held at Disney's Wide World of Sports Complex in Orlando, Florida. On the right, the main entrance to "Cheersport" in Atlanta, GA, the largest national competition in the US. Cheersport attracts both scholastic and all-star teams. (Photos by L. Grindstaff).

The undisputed king of the US cheer industry is Varsity Brands, a multi-million dollar corporation with 5000 employees nationwide. Varsity is the parent corporation for the Universal Cheerleaders Association, the National Cheerleaders Association, the United Spirit Association, the American Cheerleaders Association, American Cheer Power, Spirit Sports, and the World Spirit Federation, among other companies. These different companies promote different performative styles for cheerleaders, communicated primarily through competition guidelines and judging criteria, for both school-based and all-star teams. Generally speaking, there is greater aesthetic consistency within all-star cheerleading compared to scholastic cheerleading. All-star cheer is unapologetically theatrical and performance-oriented, placing considerable emphasis on dance and choreography. All-star cheerleading minimizes distinctions between male and female cheerleaders: men may dance and jump right alongside the women (in rare cases, they might even "fly"), and everyone communicates enthusiasm with showmanship and flair. Glitter, heavy make-up, and big hair are taken-for-granted accessories for the girls (and even the occasional boy), as are exaggerated "facials" (smiling, pouting, winking, etc.). "Flashy," "showy" and "cartoony" are terms interviewees employed to describe this more performative aesthetic -- all understood

to be associated, if not synonymous, with "feminine." In the all-star arena, this aesthetic is more or less normative for all cheerleaders regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

School-based cheerleading is more conservative -- in part because schools have institutional traditions to uphold and must answer to alumni and administrators; not coincidentally, it appears to be a less welcoming environment for male participants uninterested in maintaining a "masculine" image. However, even within the conservative realm of college cheerleading -- the main focus of our research -- we see variability in how participants "do" masculinity, with multiple scripts clearly on display. Indeed, the three main companies serving schools -- the Universal Cheerleaders Association, the National Cheerleaders Association, and the United Spirit Association -- cultivate performances of masculinity that roughly correspond to Connell's typology of "hegemonic," "complicit," and "subordinate" respectively. Thus while women's range of performative options is narrower, there is something for everyone when it comes to male cheerleaders in the college scene, although not in equal proportion.

University of Hawaii cheerleaders wield megaphones at a football game, an appropriate way for men to express spirit according to the Universal Cheerleaders Association. (Photo courtesy of *Malamalama*, University of Hawaii).

The largest and most profitable of all the cheerleading companies, the Universal Cheerleaders Association (UCA), encourages what coaches and industry reps characterize as a "professional" or "collegiate" orientation toward scholastic cheerleading (some interviewees characterize the UCA style as "boring"). It enforces a distinct division of labor between male and female participants and a "realistic" (or "natural")

mode of communicating spirited enthusiasm. In stunts, men base while women fly (get thrown into the air), and men form the bottom layer of pyramids. Both men and women tumble, and on many UCA-affiliated teams only women dance and execute specialized jumps. (In UCA college competitions, dance has been eliminated as a category for scoring altogether). In sideline contexts, men wield flags and megaphones, women placards and poms. While women smile constantly and are in perpetual motion, men typically adopt a more stoic performance of spirit that conveys strength and confidence, sometimes shading into cockiness or bravado. The UCA style promotes a "separate but equal" approach to gender performance which is hegemonic both because it reproduces the gender politics of the larger culture and, not coincidentally, because UCA has the largest market share of teams. By contrast, the National Cheerleaders Association (NCA) could be said to institutionalize "complicit" masculinity, in that it enforces a division of labor by gender but one that is less rigid and categorical. Male cheerleaders do dance and execute jumps, but in a "masculine" way that differentiates them from their female teammates: no twirls, spins, or leaps, no bumping or grinding for men, "nothing suggestive," was the way the coach of an NCA-affiliated squad put it. Smaller and less popular among college teams than the UCA, the NCA nevertheless is larger and more popular than the United Spirit Association (USA), whose performative aesthetic is similar to that of all-star cheerleading -- that is, it promotes a more "feminine" mode of performativity as acceptable for all participants -- and thus could be said to represent "subordinate" masculinity within the realm of college cheerleading (and in society at large). And then there is the Pride Cheer Association (PCA), an international network of adult LGBT performance teams whose participating members generally adhere to conventional gender distinctions in appearance and dress but ignore such distinctions when executing stunts, cheer motions, and dance segments.

It is the extension of feminine performativity to male cheerleaders that bothers so many of the straight men we interviewed, particularly those on college teams, and it was through discussions of different styles of performativity that cheerleaders at times conflated and at times insisted on the difference between gender presentation and sexual orientation. On the one hand, straight men repeatedly told us that they didn't care who their gay teammates slept with, as long as these teammates acted masculine on the

competition mat. Coaches said much the same thing -- what male cheerleaders do in the bedroom on their own time is their own business, but what they do in public as members of a team is another story. Interviewees -- both straight and gay -- expressed concern over male peers whose "flaming" performances comprised the public image of male cheerleaders overall. "It's okay to be showy," said a gay man on a competitive West coast squad, "but there's some people who take it to another level. I mean, they're so flaming the flames are flying off the stage and hitting you on the head!" On the other hand, who are these "flaming" cheerleaders presumed to be, if not gay or otherwise non-heterosexual boys and men? That men who embrace a "feminine" gender presentation often also identify as gay is both real and stereotypical. One college coach spoke of having "conversations about image" with the gay (but not the straight) men on his team in order to "tone down" their behavior, while another said she had "the talk" every year with her gay athletes, warning them that "too obvious" displays of sexuality during performances were "a threat to the squad's respect." Although the aim here is to control the public performance of masculinity and not sexual desire or sexual orientation per se, this stance ignores the fact that performativity -- in cheerleading as in everyday life -- may be partly how sexual orientation gets expressed.

Members of Cheer New York -- an adult LGBT performance squad -- execute a basket toss. Although small men can become excellent fliers, the gender norms governing all-star and collegiate cheerleading strongly discourage this. (Photo by Tom Giebel – Atomische.com, http://www.flickr.com/photos/atomische/666250806/).
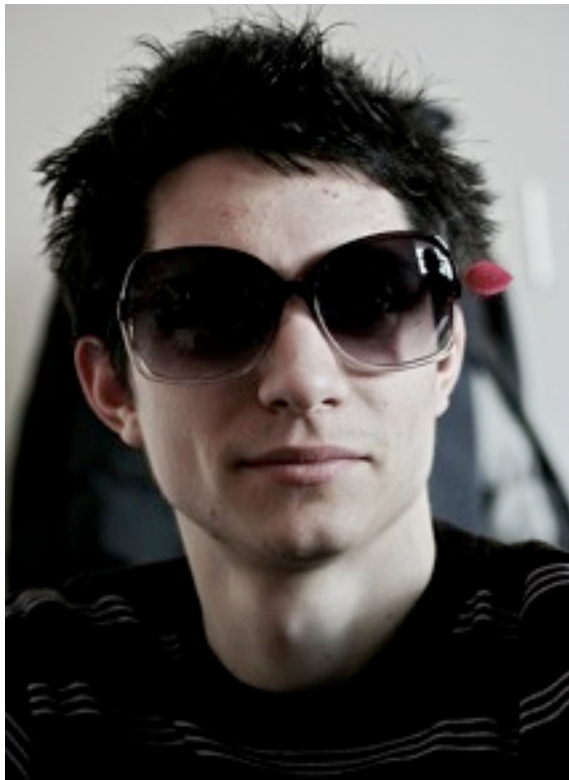
That different masculinities are at play in cheerleading, institutionalized as accepted and legitimate, and that those committed to hegemonic masculinity don't automatically exclude gay men from the club, provides us with a foundation from which to consider Connell's model of masculinity in relation to the work of other scholars also interested in the role and place of sexuality in the construction of gender hierarchies. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note, hegemonic masculinities come into existence in specific circumstances and as potential sites of struggle; as such, newer forms of hegemony may gradually displace older ones. If hegemonic masculinity was at one point predicated upon heterosexuality, perhaps it no longer is, or is less obviously so. Some gender scholars have indeed argued for the diminishing prominence of heterosexuality in the construction of hegemonic masculinity. We review their arguments below.

Hegemonic masculinity and the (declining?) importance of heterosexuality

In his well-known critique of Connell, Demetriou (2001) argues that a sharp distinction between hegemonic and non-hegemonic forms of masculinity is misleading; he suggests that the ascendant form of contemporary masculinity is a hybrid bloc that deliberately incorporates diverse and seemingly oppositional elements in order to construct the best possible strategy for reproducing patriarchy. This new hegemonic bloc is a "bricolage of masculinity" that specifically and deliberately embraces gay culture. Noting the increasing visibility of gay culture in the 1970s and the corporate mainstreaming of that culture in the 80s and 90s, Demetriou (2001) concludes that despite the tendency to view masculine power as a unified totality that admits no contradiction or otherness, the masculinity that is most culturally legitimate today is not constructed in total opposition to gay masculinity but in fact incorporates gayness into a hybrid bloc whose heterogeneity both extends (partially) the patriarchal dividend to gay men and makes hegemonic masculinity more palatable to women. In other words, the new gay-straight alliance identified by Demetriou (2001) does little to undermine, and may even solidify male dominance.

Demetriou's thesis is provocative and makes a compelling point about the centrality of processes of hybridization, appropriation, and reconfiguration to the formation of a hegemonic bloc in the US. As he

correctly notes, patriarchy doesn't disappear simply because men now sport earrings or evince an interest in skin care. But it is unclear whether the appropriation of gay culture in his discussion includes gay sexual desire/identity/orientation or is limited primarily to markers of style. The question matters, not because incorporating "true" homosexuality (that is, same-sex desire manifest as same-sex sex) into hegemonic masculinity would make patriarchy less oppressive to women necessarily, but because it would more seriously challenge certain relations of inequality between and among men. This is precisely the tension addressed by Fejes (2000) in his research on gay media masculinities. Although gay men might be increasingly visible in popular culture, their sexuality and sexual practices typically are not; gay characters are "curiously de-sexed and de-eroticized," and this leaves traditional notions of masculinity largely undisturbed (Fejes 2000: 116). Shulman (1998: 146) agrees, arguing that the advertising industry on which the media depend has constructed a "fake homosexuality" to simultaneously address the need of gay consumers to be accepted and the need of straight consumers to have their dominance obscured. Coad's (2008) critique of the concept of "metrosexuality" (originally developed by Mark Simpson) as it is currently deployed in popular media has a similar thrust. Although the original formulation by Simpson (1994, 2002) stressed metrosexuality as a *queering* of masculinity that drew on gay men as an early prototype, the concept later came to refer primarily to straight men who "embraced their feminine side" -- a reformulation that conflates gayness with femininity and re-centers the discourse around straight men (Coad 2008).

One photographer's interpretation of "Metrosexual." (Photo by aenimation, http://www.flickr.com/photos/aenimation/2386829659/).

Consequently, it seems to us that embracing a gay sensibility or a gay "aesthetic" *apart* from any consideration of homosexuality represents a particular type of gender project, one rooted in the politics of gender performance and an artificial de-coupling of gender from sexual identity and orientation. Cultivating a softer, "gayer" version of masculinity does not automatically lessen heterosexual dominance any more than admitting gay men into the club of legitimate manliness lessens gender dominance (see also Bird 1996). Recall the unspoken contract endorsed by those straight male cheerleaders who say they care not who their gay teammates sleep with as long as these teammates "act masculine" on the competition mat. Both in cheerleading and in popular commercial culture, we see a highly conditional incorporation of gayness and gay men, seemingly negotiated on the terms of those with the strongest claim to hegemonic masculinity.

Clearly the changeability and historicity of hegemonic masculinity combined with the complexity of the gender/sexuality matrix make it difficult to "pin" hegemonic masculinity down, which is one of the original critiques of the concept (see Martin 1998). When we move from studies of cultural representation to studies of lived relations, the picture is equally complex. Consider Anderson's (2005, 2008) ethnographic research on male college athletes (including male cheerleaders). He found that, for roughly half the men interviewed, a gay identity did not preclude teammates from being considered masculine, nor did limited forms of same-sex contact preclude straight men from embracing a heterosexual identity; moreover, these men evinced egalitarian attitudes toward women and accepted as valuable and legitimate softer, more "feminine" modes of masculinity. Anderson argues that no one form of masculinity is truly hegemonic among the university-attending athletes in his study. Instead, there is "orthodox" masculinity (similar in features to Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity) and "inclusive" masculinity, which is tolerant of both femininity and homosexuality. Neither form is dominant, Anderson argues, because each is embraced by roughly equal numbers of men. Unlike Connell (1987, 1995), then, Anderson sees numerical representation within the local setting as a key determinant of whether a particular construction of masculinity is dominant or hegemonic. He also sees the emergence of "inclusive" masculinity as

potentially undoing patriarchy, not as hegemony under a new guise as Demetriou (2001) would have it, although in the absence of studying women and the effects of inclusive masculinity on institutionalized gender inequality this claim is difficult to assess empirically.

Other research on different demographics is more equivocal about whether hegemonic masculinity is becoming more inclusive, indicating the continued importance of factors such as age, class, education, and race to the ways in which masculinity is crafted and deployed in the US. CJ Pascoe's (2005, 2007) study of middle- and working-class adolescent boys, for instance, demonstrates that "the feminine" remains highly stigmatizing and is simultaneously associated and disassociated with homosexuality. Her focus is the boys' constant use of the term "fag" in everyday interaction. Although certainly homophobic in origins and contemporary usage, "fag" also expresses specifically *gendered* and *racialized* homophobia; it is linked to hegemonic (white) masculinity in the context of gender-identity formation for boys but not for girls. To be a fag is not reducible to being gay; "fag" in this context has as much to do with being perceived as incompetent, weak, unmanly, and feminine (that is, failing at masculinity) as with sexual identity. Although effeminate white boys are the prime targets of fag discourse, any boy can temporarily become a fag depending on the situation or interaction, and it is precisely this fluidity that makes the fag epithet such a powerful disciplinary mechanism. As Pascoe writes, "it is fluid enough that boys police most of their behaviors out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it" (Pascoe 2005: 330). Roughly one-third of the boys interviewed said that they would never direct the epithet at a known homosexual peer simply because of his sexual orientation, because being gay is a legitimate, if marginalized, social identity that does not preclude being masculine. In other words, hegemonic masculinity is defined against male effeminacy but not homosexuality per se; this is consistent with the case of male cheerleaders, where the performance of masculinity is the main focus of disciplinary pressure from coaches and teammates.

In contrast to this last point, Froyum's (2007) research on poor African-American adolescents and their adult supervisors (both male and female) indicates a concerted rejection of homosexuality and gay-coded behaviors in the construction of heterosexual gender identities. Given that sexuality and intimate relations are among the limited avenues for poor African Americans to gain power and respect, and given their broad cultural exposure to racist ideologies and practices that stigmatize black sexuality and family formations, low-income black teens embrace heterosexuality as an *especially* important and legitimating identity (Froyum 2007). They both conflate gender nonconformity with homosexuality and construct homosexuality as morally inferior -- not unlike large swaths of the general American populace regardless of race, as Froyum points out (see Lewis [2003] on black-white attitudinal differences toward homosexuality). For the African American boys in Froyum's research, as well as for their adult caretakers, heterosexuality and male dominance remain fundamental to the construction of a masculinity that could be characterized as dominant or ascendant in local contexts but marginalized in the wider society. Other studies of low-income boys support this conclusion (Willis 1977; Connolly 1998; Ferguson 2000). That the cultural script for hegemonic masculinity appears to be less flexible among boys and men marginalized by age, class, or race suggests that the latitude to "include" gay men or a gay aesthetic in hegemonic masculinity may be a function of how securely a sense of male dominance is felt in the first place and how gender relations are configured by the interplay of micro and macro social processes.

In our own research we found that, compared to their white teammates, male cheerleaders of color, particularly African-Americans and Chicanos/Latinos, felt greater pressure from family and community to reject cheerleading because of the gay stereotype. At the same time, black men in our study, even those on teams affiliated with relatively conservative cheerleading associations, had greater latitude in performing "straight" masculinity than did white or Hispanic men. This likely reflects persistent cultural assumptions about the "natural" expressivity of African Americans, as manifest in gestures, dance moves, facial expressions, etc. At the competitions we observed, black men were disproportionately showcased in dance sequences, jumps, or cheering segments. At the Black College Nationals held annually in Atlanta, which features majority-black teams, men were well-represented as dancers and there were few gender

differences overall in the execution of routines (aside from stunting). But while some black men we interviewed embraced cheerleading as a "natural" outlet for their performative inclination and skill, others participated with considerable ambivalence, finding it difficult to reconcile the rah-rah showmanship of cheerleading with the "cool pose" (Majors and Billson 1992) stereotypically expected of them in their lives outside of cheerleading. Even among men who could be said to embody "marginalized" masculinity, then, we witnessed variability in gender performance. Given the scrutiny experienced by black male cheerleaders from others in their racial community, this variability may not reflect a lesser commitment to hegemonic masculinity but rather the dissociation of specific features of cheerleading -- particularly dancing -- from assumptions of male homosexuality. Indeed, for black men more than for white men, being good dancers and "being cool" are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Gender in/as relation

Technically, there can be as many different masculinities as there are individuals to enact them. For our purposes here, the main challenge is teasing out what constitutes *hegemonic* masculinity in light of the larger sex/gender system. From the brief overview presented above, an overarching pattern is difficult to discern: in some contexts hegemonic masculinity appears to require heterosexuality but not gender conformity, in others it appears to require gender conformity but not heterosexuality, and in still others it requires both. Certainly there is evidence to suggest that a more "inclusive" or less rigid variant of hegemonic masculinity has developed over time in the US, at least in some contexts; nevertheless we emphasize its partial and contingent nature. It remains partial both in the sense of being disproportionately represented in spheres of relative privilege, and in the sense that "inclusion" tends to be either symbolic (at the level of performance or representation) or substantive (including gay men into spheres of masculinity), but not both simultaneously. The question remains whether we are observing a transformation in hegemonic masculinity still in process, or whether hegemonic masculinity only incorporates subordinated masculinities to the extent that it secures its hegemony by expanding participation and consent to its dominance. On the one hand, this variability seems to invite a revision to

Connell's original model of hegemonic masculinity, in which heterosexuality and homophobia were unequivocally conjoined, and indeed formed the very basis for her theory of a hierarchy of masculinities.

At the same time, our research leads us to be cautious about arguing for the diminishing prominence of heterosexuality in the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the US. When our straight male cheerleaders tell us that the performance of gender matters more than sexual orientation, that they don't care who gay teammates sleep with outside of cheerleading, they say this because it's the performance of gender that audiences see, not the private lives of individual cheerleaders; more importantly, it is from the performance of gender that sexual orientation is read. Cheerleaders know that gender (non)conformity is a stand-in for sexual orientation, at least as far as spectators are concerned, and they reinforce that conflation when they insist that their gay teammates "act masculine." If, in the broader culture, gender performance and sexual orientation were in fact independently variable, then it would make little difference in terms of who performs what version of masculinity, as the performance would not signify anything in particular regarding sexuality (although it might still signify something regarding patriarchy).

What is less appreciated by cheerleaders, and even many sociologists, is the way that heterosexuality, as a construct, is already embedded in what Harold Garfinkel (1967) termed the "natural attitude" toward gender in Western culture. If gender is relational, predicated upon the co-construction of man and woman, masculinity and femininity, then what does this relationality reference if not sex/sexual difference? And what does sex difference reference if not, at least in part, heterosexuality? It is the assumption of heterosexuality embedded in the very concepts of "man" and "woman" that leads Wittig (1992) to argue lesbians are not, in fact, "women." This is certainly Judith Butler's (1990) point about "the heterosexual matrix," in which a socially constructed gender binary assumes two distinct classes (men and women) neatly bound to two distinct types of bodies, behaviors, traits, and desires. According to Butler (1990), heterosexual desire is a defining feature of gender because it is what ties the masculine and feminine in a binary, hierarchical relationship. Of course, heterosexual desire is itself relational, dependent upon the unacknowledged homosexual "other" for its meaning and legitimacy, so when gender expresses hetero-

desire it expresses homo-desire as well, but in negative form. Gender is the effect of, and alibi for, compulsory heterosexuality, and compulsory heterosexuality both needs and prohibits all alternatives (for a critique of Butler, see Hawkesworth 1997).

It seems to us that part of the continued usefulness of the concept of hegemonic masculinity lies precisely in its ability to keep the relational, binary construction of gender in full view *as a binary relation*. It calls attention to the willful disregard of the gender variance that exists in life in favor of a set of social practices through which some men and boys create and legitimate their domination over women and other men. Given the scant evidence within biology itself for discrete, male/female sex categories, critical scholars of science have increasingly argued that the gender binary is largely a *cultural* imperative imposed by scientists (and others) on a natural landscape of considerable sexual variation (Garlick 2003; see Fausto-Sterling 1993; Martin 1991). The concept of hegemonic masculinity helps to reinforce this point. It's not that hegemonic masculinity is statistically "normal," rather, it's *normative*. In the words of Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 832), it represents "the currently most honored way of being a man" and thus puts pressure on all men (and women) to position themselves in relation to it. This is not to say that the gender binary is inevitable or uncontested, but that it deeply and thoroughly informs the "natural attitude" toward gender, to which the concept of hegemonic masculinity is tied.

The other insight we wish to highlight from Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity pertains to relationality of a different sort: the relationship between individual interaction and institutional/structural forces in shaping what counts as hegemonic masculinity. Our earlier example of sports underscores the articulation between the two levels. One the one hand, girls play plenty of sports these days and not all boys do; indeed, the "nerdy" boy who prefers computer games to baseball is increasingly commonplace (setting aside that many computer games are about sports!). In addition, the institutionalization of sports in schools and local communities is more gender-inclusive than it used to be, albeit still male-dominated in organization and administration. On the other hand, the world of professional sports to which so much time, energy, money, and media are devoted provides a spectacular daily reminder of the ascendance of a

masculine bloc at the societal -- indeed, global -- level, one that bundles together competitiveness and physical skill with visibility, wealth, and power (economic, political, and cultural). In the US and elsewhere, the bloc is not homogeneous by race, class, or status: it includes players, coaches, trainers, managers, owners, announcers, advertisers, reporters and other media professionals, corporate sponsors, and an expansive network of products and services, not to mention millions of fans. But, as we've seen, homogeneity is not a prerequisite for hegemonic masculinity; the *disproportionate* exclusion of women and some men from the bloc is.
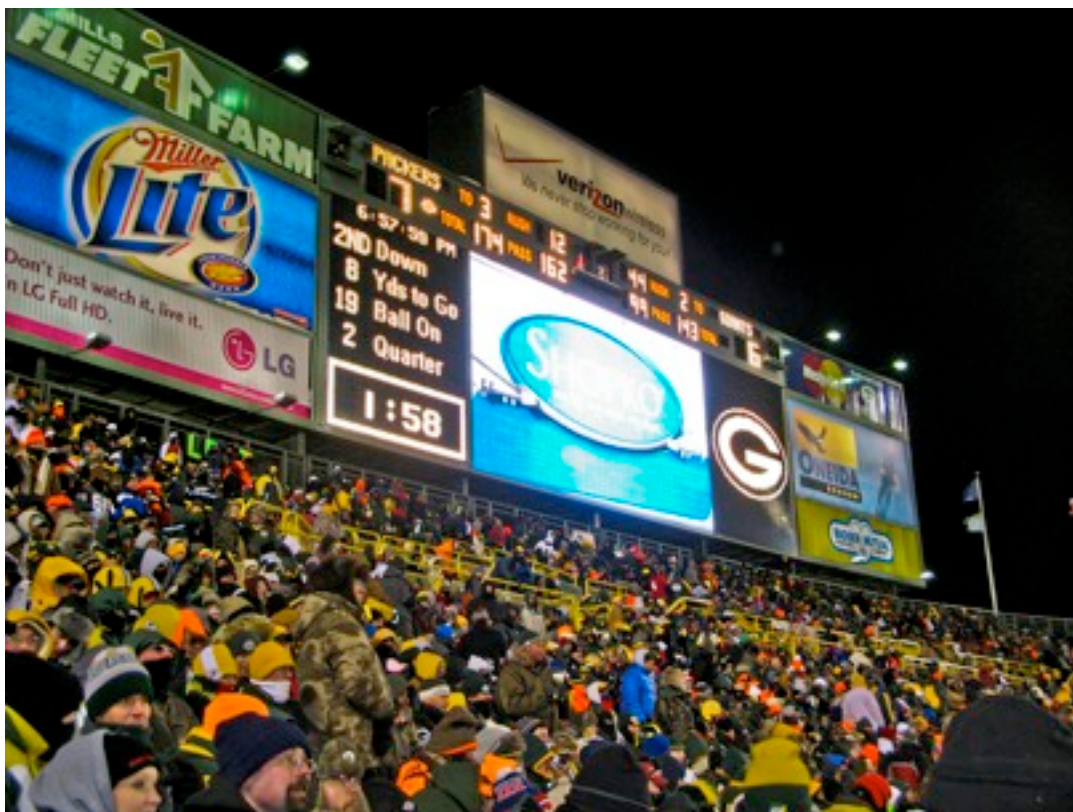
According to Wikipedia, the National Football League (NFL) is the most-attended domestic sports league in the world, with roughly 67,000 fans per game, and television rights to the NFL are the most lucrative and expensive sports broadcasting commodity in the United States. (Photo by eytonz, http://www.flickr.com/photos/eytonz/2211481566/).

The fact that the institutional core of sport helps to construct hegemonic masculinity is precisely why the "gay cheerleader syndrome" exists as a force to be embraced or denied by male cheerleaders and why

competitive cheerleading as a whole has faced an uphill battle for respect regardless of the performative style endorsed by a particular team or association (see Grindstaff and West 2006). Similar analyses could be applied to other arenas such as politics, the military, or finance, with plurality at the local level giving way to greater exclusivity as practices and ideologies get networked and institutionalized. To again quote Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 845), "whatever the empirical diversity of masculinities [and femininities], the contestation for hegemony implies that gender hierarchy does not have multiple niches at the top." Moreover, although local models of hegemonic masculinity may differ from each other, they generally overlap or have a "family resemblance" because of the interplay between local and society-wide gender dynamics (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This interplay does not preclude a reverse progression from relative singularity in local contexts to relative plurality in the wider society -- consider the narrow range of gender variance permitted in specific orthodox or fundamentalist religious communities in the US, for example, compared to society as a whole. The point is that the interplay of dynamics itself should inform any analysis. This is why, in examining local manifestations of the ways in which men and boys "do gender" and the degree to which heteronormativity informs hegemonic masculinity, larger trends and forces -- such as housing and employment discrimination against transgendered people, legal prohibitions against gay marriage, second-class citizenship in the military, or overt homophobia in religious doctrine -- will inevitably shape the scope and meaning of this hegemony.

New Directions

Gender relations are inevitably arenas of tension, and, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 853) point out, a given pattern of hegemonic masculinity is only hegemonic to the extent that it provides a solution to these tensions. Considering the shifting nature of the gender order, it is probably safe to say that hegemonic masculinity remains both a useful *and* contested concept for gender scholars.

In this paper we have focused on variability in performances of masculinity within the realm of cheerleading and sport as well as the centrality of heterosexuality in contemporary responses to hegemonic masculinity. Our own work combined with a survey of the existing literature in this area leads

us to some particular suggestions for future research. One is to explore the inclusion and experiences of gay men and a gay aesthetic in performances of masculinity. However, this endeavor must attend to variation in local contexts, and not simply focus on those instances of inclusion or incorporation that take place in spheres of relative privilege, such as college settings. More urgently, our analysis of the strengths and controversies that surround the concept of hegemonic masculinity suggests the need for developing a longitudinal analysis that can capture not just how masculinity is being negotiated at a particular place and time but how these changes unfold over the long haul. This approach would speak to the dynamics of hegemony most directly, since hegemony is conceptualized as the articulation and maintenance of power over time, including the incorporations and appropriations necessary to maintain that power in the face of challenge and resistance. A longitudinal analysis might also help scholars bring the various levels at which hegemonic masculinity functions – as an everyday practice, as an idealized cultural script, and as a set of institutionalized power arrangements – together into the same analysis. These approaches would support what we see as the key outstanding question: whether historical changes in the representations and practices of masculinity ultimately point to more progressive forms of hegemonic masculinity.

Of course, other areas of research deserve attention. Given the importance of a relational analysis for understanding hegemonic masculinities, research on femininities, both local and global, is grossly underdeveloped. "Emphasized femininity" is frankly inadequate for characterizing an "idealized" feminine orientation defined primarily by its accommodation to the interests and desires of men. To be sure, Connell is clear that no one form of femininity holds among women the position held by hegemonic masculinity among men, and that other femininities exist defined by strategies of resistance to or forms of non-compliance with subordination. But these differences are not well-elaborated nor do they adequately explain inequalities between and among women when it comes "doing gender" in everyday life (see Pyke and Johnson 2003; Schippers 2007).

Another obvious research focus is the issue of gender variance itself. Queer, genderqueer, and transgender theorists challenge the homo/hetero dualism embedded in normative notions of gender, arguing correctly

that it elides an enormous range of differences involving bodies, sexualities, identities, social relations, social norms, social practices, distributions of power, etc. (Sedgwick 1990; Bornstein 1993). What happens to hegemonic masculinity when the gender binary is neither respected or preserved -- that is, when binary relations no longer uphold the natural attitude toward gender? Related to this are efforts to understand the shaping of masculinities by female-bodied persons, and the shaping of femininities by male-bodied persons. In other words, how do women construct masculinities and men construct femininities? What is the relation between hegemonic masculinity and different female masculinities? Even if masculinity without men is not hegemonic, in what ways does it inform, shape, and challenge the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity by men?

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