

Masculinity and Masculinities in Gender Theory

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Introduction: Why the Plural Matters

Masculinity refers to meanings, practices, identities, and expectations socially associated with men or with traits coded as masculine. The plural *masculinities* is often more useful because no single model describes all men, all cultures, or all historical periods. Masculine expectations vary by class, race, sexuality, age, religion, nationality, disability, occupation, and institutional setting. They also change over a person's life. A young athlete, a father, a gay man, a corporate executive, a transgender man, and a woman who adopts masculine styles may relate to masculinity differently.

The original essay correctly recognizes masculinity as socially constructed, discusses Connell's gender model, female masculinity, and camp, and argues that masculinity is not reducible to a male body. A fuller analysis must avoid saying that gender is "no more than" social construction, as though embodiment and material conditions are irrelevant. It should also explain that plural masculinities do not exist as equal lifestyle choices. They are organized through power: some forms are celebrated, others tolerated, subordinated, marginalized, or punished. (Connell, 2005)

From Sex Roles to Gender Relations

Early social-scientific discussions often described masculinity as a male sex role. Boys were socialized to become independent, assertive, competitive, heterosexual, emotionally controlled, and economically responsible. This approach helped show that behavior was learned rather than automatically produced by anatomy. However, the role model implied a stable script shared by all men and treated socialization as a one-way process.

Later gender theory shifted attention from fixed roles to relationships and institutions. Masculinity is produced in families, schools, workplaces, religious organizations, militaries, sports, media, and law. Men do not merely learn a role; they negotiate expectations, receive rewards or sanctions, and position themselves in relation to women and other men. The same person may perform authority at work, vulnerability with a partner, and deference toward a more powerful man.

Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity

R. W. Connell developed the concept of hegemonic masculinity to explain how a culturally honored

form of manhood helps legitimize men's dominance over women and the hierarchy among men. Hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily the most common behavior. It is an ideal associated with authority, heterosexuality, competence, strength, and control that institutions and culture present as admirable.

Few men fully embody the ideal, yet many can benefit from a gender order that privileges men collectively. The concept is relational: hegemonic masculinity exists in contrast with femininity and with subordinated or marginalized masculinities. It is also historically changeable. A form of manhood that gains authority in one era can lose it when economic conditions, political movements, or cultural values shift.

Complicit, Subordinated, and Marginalized Masculinities

Connell distinguishes additional positions. Complicit masculinities do not perfectly perform the hegemonic ideal but receive advantages from the wider system. A man may reject aggression and still benefit from assumptions that men are more authoritative or suitable for leadership. (Kimmel et al., 2005)

Subordinated masculinities are actively devalued. In many Western contexts, gay men and men perceived as feminine have been treated as inferior to heterosexual masculine ideals. Homophobic policing among boys and men often works by associating emotional expression, weakness, or nonconformity with homosexuality, regardless of actual sexual orientation.

Marginalized masculinities describe the interaction of gender with structures such as race and class. A racialized man may display strength or authority but still be excluded from institutional power. Working-class masculinity can be celebrated in images of physical toughness while working-class men lack economic security and political influence. The category therefore prevents masculinity theory from treating all men as equally privileged.

The Three-Fold Structure of Gender

Connell's earlier model analyzes gender through power relations, production relations, and cathexis. Power relations concern authority, violence, institutional leadership, and control over decisions. Production relations concern the [gendered division of paid and unpaid labor](#), ownership, wages, and economic dependence. Cathexis concerns emotional and sexual relationships, desire, attachment, and the cultural organization of intimacy.

These dimensions interact. A workplace may assign leadership to men, pay women less, and reward a managerial style coded as aggressive. A household may depend on a woman's unpaid caregiving

while presenting the man as the primary decision-maker. Sexual norms may define heterosexual conquest as masculine and care as feminine. Gender order is therefore reproduced through everyday arrangements, not only through explicit beliefs.

Masculinity as Practice, Not a Possession

It is misleading to describe masculinity as a set of traits stored inside a person. Masculinity is also something people do. Clothing, speech, posture, occupation, emotional display, humor, sport, risk-taking, parenting, and sexual conduct can all be interpreted as masculine in a particular context.

These practices are not freely chosen from a menu. People act within institutions and face consequences. A boy may hide fear to avoid ridicule. A male nurse may emphasize technical expertise to counter stereotypes. A woman in leadership may be called masculine for behavior praised as decisive in a man. The label reveals the observer's gender assumptions as much as the individual's personality.

Female Masculinity

Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity challenges the belief that masculinity naturally belongs to men. Masculine presentation and identity among women, lesbians, butch people, and other gender-nonconforming individuals have long histories. These forms should not be treated as imitations of "real" male masculinity. (Halberstam, 1998)

Female masculinity also exposes how culture separates valued traits from the people permitted to claim them. Independence, physical strength, ambition, or emotional reserve may be admired in men but judged unfeminine in women. Calling every assertive woman masculine can reinforce the idea that authority is inherently male. At the same time, some individuals deliberately identify with masculinity and should not have that identification explained away as mere sexism.

Camp, Performance, and Exaggeration

Camp is a sensibility that values stylization, theatricality, exaggeration, irony, and artifice. It has important connections with queer culture, though it cannot be reduced to one identity. Camp reveals that gender conventions can be performed so intensely that their constructed quality becomes visible.

A camp performance may exaggerate feminine glamour or masculine bravado. The audience recognizes the signs—voice, costume, gesture, pose—as cultural codes rather than natural essence. This playfulness can destabilize gender authority by showing that supposedly authentic masculinity also relies on repeated performance.

Camp is not automatically politically liberating. It can reproduce stereotypes, exclude people without cultural knowledge, or become detached from queer histories when adopted as a marketable style. Its theoretical importance lies in demonstrating the pleasure and instability of gender performance.

Intersectionality

Masculinity cannot be studied separately from race, class, sexuality, nationality, disability, and age. Intersectionality examines how structures combine rather than adding one identity after another. For example, Black men may face racist stereotypes of aggression while being expected to prove masculine strength. Asian men in Western media have often been feminized or desexualized. Indigenous masculinities have been reshaped through colonial violence and resistance. Disabled men may be denied adulthood, sexuality, or independence because dominant masculinity idealizes bodily control.

Class also changes masculine possibilities. A breadwinner ideal requires access to stable employment. When industries decline, men may experience loss of status, but the problem is not simply psychological failure; it is connected to economic restructuring. Some respond by developing caring or community-oriented identities, while others invest more strongly in dominance or resentment.

Masculinity, Violence, and Care

Masculinity should not be equated with violence. Most men are not violent, and women can use violence. Nevertheless, cultures that reward dominance, entitlement, humiliation of weakness, and control over women can create conditions in which violence becomes a recognized masculine resource. Military, gang, sport, and peer settings may differ in how they discipline aggression.

Alternative masculinities emphasize care, cooperation, emotional literacy, and nonviolence. Fatherhood can become a site of change when men participate in daily caregiving rather than treating income as their only contribution. Men's ability to seek help, express fear, and build supportive friendships can improve mental health. The objective is not to label care as masculine and capture it for men, but to remove the rule that care diminishes manhood.

Queer and Trans Masculinities

Queer theory questions the assumption that masculinity must align with male sex, heterosexual desire, and conventional family roles. Gay, bisexual, lesbian, nonbinary, and transgender people create masculinities that borrow from, revise, or reject dominant codes. A transgender man's masculinity is not less authentic because it developed through a different embodied and social history.

Trans and queer experiences also show that recognition is relational. Identity is shaped not only by self-understanding but by how institutions classify bodies, names, clothing, and relationships. Access to health care, legal documents, employment, and safety affects the ability to live a gendered identity.

Changing Masculinities in Institutions

Workplaces increasingly value collaboration and emotional intelligence, but leadership may still be coded as masculine. Schools discourage some forms of aggression while sports culture may continue to reward endurance through injury. Militaries have opened roles to women and LGBTQ+ personnel while retaining traditions associated with masculine toughness. Media can celebrate involved fathers and vulnerable male characters while simultaneously promoting influencers who build audiences through misogyny and dominance.

Institutional change matters more than individual attitude alone. Parental leave for men can normalize caregiving. Anti-harassment policy can limit entitlement. Mental-health services can challenge stigma. Flexible work can reduce the conflict between earning and family care. When structures change, a broader range of masculinities becomes possible.

Critiques of Masculinity Studies

Masculinity studies can become too focused on men's identity struggles and lose sight of women's inequality. Describing harmful behavior as a "crisis of masculinity" may invite sympathy for men without addressing people harmed by that behavior. Scholars must distinguish explanation from excuse.

The category "hegemonic masculinity" can also become vague when used for every dominant male behavior. Researchers should identify the institution, historical setting, and mechanism through which a particular ideal gains authority. Masculinity is not a universal cause that explains everything men do.

My Position: Masculinities in the Plural

I prefer the plural because it captures variation and power. There is no timeless package of traits possessed by all men. Masculinities are constructed through relations, embodied experiences, institutions, and histories. They can be performed by people of different genders and can change within one life.

The plural should not imply that every form is equally harmless. A masculinity organized around domination has different social consequences from one organized around care and mutual respect.

The task of theory is therefore both descriptive and critical: it should identify diverse practices while asking which practices sustain inequality and which expand human freedom.

Conclusion

Masculinity is best understood as masculinities: multiple, relational, embodied, and historically changing forms of gender practice. Connell's theory explains hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, and marginalized positions within a gender order. Halberstam's female masculinity and camp demonstrate that masculine signs do not naturally belong to male bodies. Intersectional, queer, and trans perspectives reveal how race, class, sexuality, disability, and institutions shape recognition and power. The plural allows diversity to be seen, while a critical analysis ensures that diversity does not hide hierarchy. Masculinity becomes less restrictive when strength can include care, authority is separated from domination, and people are free to express emotion without losing social respect.

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