

## Between Men and Masculinity: An Assessment of the Term "Masculinity" in Recent Scholarship on Men

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For most of the history of Western capitalist countries including Australia, the dominant categories in the social relations of gender – men and masculinity – have been unmarked, normative and privileged, while the subordinate terms – women and femininity – have been marked as deviant, pathological and Other (Hearn, "Research" 49–50; Rutherford 22–23). Masculinity has possessed the power of the normal, the universal and the generic. However, large-scale social and political changes in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly the emergence of new social movements since the 1960s, have unsettled such certainties. Feminisms, women's movements and lesbian and gay politics have named men's gendered and sexual practices as constructed, political and problematic. The configuration of men's lives has been further destabilised by disruptions to and contestations of the social organisation of gender in the realms of power, work and sexuality (Connell, *Masculinities* 84–85). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s in advanced capitalist countries, men's lives have been questioned and debated with passion. This phenomenon is not historically unique, in that there have been earlier periods of intensified struggle over the meaning and organisation of men's lives and gender relations (Kimmel, "Masculinity"). Nevertheless, in the last four decades, men have been interrogated "as a sex, in a way until recently reserved for women – as a problem" (Segal, "Changing" x).

Alongside a virtual explosion of feminist theory accompanying these social and political upheavals, a smaller literature on men has emerged since the mid-1970s which represents the academic destabilisation of dominant constructions of men and manhood (Kimmel, "After"). Over four hundred books focused on men and masculinity have been published (Flood), and this is an established field in the form either of "Men's Studies" or "the critical study of men and masculinities." I wish to critically assess the key terms which pervade this scholarship.

The word "masculinity" is often the linchpin of recent academic works on men and gender. Their titles make reference to "theorizing" or "understanding" masculinity (Brod and Kaufman; Mac an Ghail), "making" masculinity (Brod), "constructing" or "reconstructing" masculinity (Berger, Wallis and Watson; Harris; Levant), "rediscovering" masculinity (Siedler, *Rediscovering*), "performing" masculinity (Simpson), "re-producing" masculinity (Buchbinder, *Performance*), "embodying" masculinities (Seidler, *Man*), "unwrapping" or "unmasking" masculinity (Chapman and Rutherford; Jackson), "changing" masculinities (Segal, *Slow*), "rethinking" masculinity (May and Strikwerda), and "dislocating" masculinity (Cornwall and Lindisfarne). As McMahon notes, "To study men ... is to study masculinity" (675).

However, according to Clatterbaugh, the best kept secret of the literature on men and masculinities is that we have very little idea of what we are talking about when we use the term "masculinity" (27). As Berger et al note, masculinity is "a vexed

term, variously inflected, multiply defined, not limited to straightforward descriptions of maleness" (2). There are two main reasons why it is worth investigating and clarifying our use of this term. First, sound theoretical analysis requires clarity and precision. Second, to the extent that we wish to communicate to men and women our understandings of gender relations, we require terminologies and frameworks which are coherent, meaningful and clear (Clatterbaugh 25). When we slide from talking about images of men to talking about men, and when we generalise inappropriately about men's lives, we risk losing our audience and our credibility (40-41).

In the following discussion, I argue first that the term "masculinity" is used in diverse and contradictory ways. I note three problems in these applications of "masculinity": a slippage from norms concerning or discourses about men to the practices and relations of actual men, the reified representation of masculinity as a fixed character type, and the difficulties in identifying multiple masculinities. Second, I argue that the designation "masculinity" and a related one, "hegemonic masculinity," are employed to refer to cultural norms and ideals, powerful men and patriarchal authority, or both, and that such definitions are potentially at odds. Third, there are times when it is more useful to focus on men, men's practices and relations. Finally, I acknowledge that neither category "masculinity" nor "men" can be taken as given, and I question the assumed link between masculinity and men.

The term "masculinity" is the key icon of many of the recent works on men and gender, and its pervasive use in this scholarship suggests that it is seen to have considerable explanatory power. However, "masculinity" is used in a wide variety of ways and as a shorthand for a diverse range of social phenomena (Hearn, "Is Masculinity Dead" 203). This is not necessarily a problem, as many terms in academic scholarship are figured differently depending on the theoretical frameworks in which they are located. "Masculinity" may become one of those essentially contested concepts which are endlessly debated. Indeed, other terms central to feminist scholarship such as "gender" and even "woman" and "women" are the subjects of considerable disagreement (Beasley 19). On the other hand, the differing significations of "masculinity" have gone largely unremarked, and too frequently they are vague and imprecise. This is enough of a problem that several authors, including veterans of the field such as Hearn and Clatterbaugh, have expressed a growing disquiet regarding the term's deployment and utility. These concerns extend to other terminologies used in place of or interchangeably with "masculinity," such as "manhood," "the male role" and "hegemonic masculinity."

There are three clusters of phenomena to which "masculinity" or its equivalent is seen to refer: beliefs, ideals, images, representations and discourses; traits which differentiate men from women; and powerful men or a strategy for maintaining men's power. One of the most common applications of the term "masculinity" is as a reference to beliefs and ideas about, images of, or discourses about, men. Here "masculinity" refers to cultural beliefs about and representations of men, which influence the ways in which actual men live. Clatterbaugh usefully identifies seven distinct uses of the term "masculinity," and the first three in his typology refer to masculinity as a widely shared set of beliefs about the attitudes, behaviours and abilities which are masculine, or which *should* be masculine, or both (29-30).

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Thus "masculinity" in many accounts denotes common or dominant definitions, models, sets of beliefs, ideologies or discourses about men and gender, and these are seen to have normative significance. They say what men should do and what men should not do if they are to be "real" or "proper" men: At any given time in a culture, certain constructions of gender are dominant, and people and practices are regulated to conform to these constructions (Buchbinder, *Masculinities* 7). In a typical example, Gilmore's cross-cultural survey defines "masculinity" or "manhood" as "the approved way of being an adult male in any given society" (1). In accounts grounded in sex-role theory such as that by Harris, "masculinity" identifies cultural "norms" or "scripts" which set standards for and thus influence men's behaviour (10-11).

A similar approach is to focus on images of men, such that one defines "masculinity" in terms of an image or cluster of images of men (Clatterbaugh 30), while accounts influenced by cultural studies examine both visual and textual representations of masculinity. Again these are seen as normative in their effects; representations of masculinity encode both prescriptions (men shall be such and such) and proscriptions (men shall not be such and such) (Buchbinder, *Performance* 29). In more poststructuralist accounts, authors write of discourses of masculinity – of organised bodies of ideas, assumptions and values available in a culture, which are taken up by men such that they come to organise men's subjectivities and social relations. Buchbinder writes that dominant discourses of masculinity and gender determine what can be said and who can speak, provide frameworks of interpretation and understanding, and both produce and maintain local and structural power relations (*Masculinities* 29-30; *Performance* 8-15). Poststructuralist accounts of "discourses" of masculinity have been adopted particularly in work on boys' reading and writing practices (Davies; Martino). While analysis of representations of men is a vital element in accounts of gender, Hearn questions the usefulness to this project of the notion of "images of masculinity." He states that it is difficult to see what this phrase may mean, given that "imaging is a process such that masculinities do not pre-exist their imaging" ("Is Masculinity Dead" 213).

In such cases, there is the further issue that we are talking about perceptions of men and gender, rather than actual men (Clatterbaugh 30, 36). Actual men do not necessarily conform to the beliefs and discourses about or images of men which are common in a particular culture. Stereotypes about and images of men or particular groups of men are likely to exclude significant attributes of these groups and to include inaccurate attributes. One problematic tendency in the literature is a slippage from theoretical accounts of norms, representations or discourses – what men are supposed or shown or said to be like – to claims about empirically existing men's identities, practices and relations – what men actually are like. McMahon notes that "many descriptions of masculinity are really descriptions of popular ideologies about the actual or ideal characteristics of men" (691). If one argues that the term "masculinity" refers only to discourses about men and not to actual men, then this problem of the accuracy of discourses vanishes. But the corollary is that one can no longer claim that discourses "cause" masculinities: "once discourses are identified with masculinities, they can no longer be the cause of masculinities" (Clatterbaugh 36).

A second problem is the tendency to reify the terms "masculinity" and "hegemonic masculinity," such that they become fixed character types (Connell, *The Men* 23).

This is clearest in the lists of traits or attributes used by some authors when discussing the "content" of or even the "recipe" for masculinity (Doyle 146-148). One finds simplistic claims that masculinity is premised on being strong, unemotional, heterosexual, powerful, self-reliant, in control, aggressive, objective and rational, bold and unafraid. Connell writes that,

"Hegemonic masculinity" is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable. (*Masculinities* 76)

The construction of character types is related to a tendency in the literature on men towards the psychologisation of problems in gender relations, and an inattention to institutions, power relations and social inequalities (Connell, *The Men* 23). McMahon criticises the common idealisation and reification of the concept "masculinity," such that men's practices become the result of or the expression of masculinity, and there is a focus on "reconstructing" or "transforming" masculinity rather than changing men's practices and relations (690-92).

In a second cluster of definitions, "masculinity" refers to any social behaviour, trait or characteristic which has been shown to differentiate men from women (Clatterbaugh 32). If biological males are more likely to show instrumentalist traits and biological females to show expressive ones, then instrumentalism is one of the defining traits of masculinity. This strategy can be used to document gender-differentiated characteristics - masculinities and femininities - in particular historical periods or across different cultures. The strategy has often been employed to identify particular masculinities associated with axes of social categorisation and division, such as race, class and sexuality (Clatterbaugh 32-33). For example, gay masculinity includes those characteristics which differentiate gay men from non-gay men, and ruling-class masculinity includes those characteristics which differentiate ruling-class men from non-ruling-class men.

The recognition of multiple masculinities brings its own problems of definition and analysis. We cannot assume that every social division produces a particular masculinity. How do we identify which behaviours, attitudes and abilities are crucial in defining a masculinity and which characteristics are merely incidental? (Clatterbaugh 33). Connell notes that analysis of the intersections among men of gender with other axes of difference involves the risk of over-simplification, (for example, in notions of "a black masculinity" or "a working-class masculinity"), and neglecting the relations among men may result in heavy-handed typologies of character (*Masculinities* 76). An emphasis on diversities among men brings the danger of a retreat to an apolitical relativism, may lose sight of men's power as a gender (Pease 31), and may remove "attention from the interrelations of the unities of men, and the differences between men" (Hearn, "Is Masculinity" 211). Finally, given that there are innumerable ways in which one could divide individuals into groupings, do we end up concluding that each man participates in multiple masculinities or that there are as many masculinities as there are individuals? (Clatterbaugh 34).

"Hegemonic masculinity" is a term similar to "masculinity" which is increasingly dominant in the literature. Like the latter, "hegemonic masculinity" is given multiple

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and contrasting meanings by different authors and even within the one work. Connell coined the term "hegemonic masculinity" and uses it throughout his three successive works on men and gender. At times in these works, the term indicates the "culturally exalted" or "most honoured or desired" forms of masculinity in any given society (*Masculinities* 77; *The Men* 10). While in any society there are multiple masculinities and femininities, one version of masculinity is "hegemonic," as the most honoured and influential cultural representation of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity therefore refers to whatever notions or representations of masculinity are culturally dominant in a particular context. This definition is similar to those in the first cluster identified above, and it is the most common use of the term in the masculinity literature.

There are recent works on men in which the author simply substitutes "hegemonic masculinity" for "male sex role," on the assumption that both expressions denote a dominant ideal of masculinity in a particular culture and time. In fact, one can find academic works in which the term "hegemonic masculinity" is used interchangeably in the one discussion with the term "male sex role" or "sex stereotypes," such as those by Cunneen and White and Gilmore. However, understood properly, the notion of hegemonic masculinity entails a powerful critique of sex role theory. The notion embodies a series of crucial insights about the social organisation of men's lives and gender relations, including a way to theorise both agency and structure and their mutual constitution, a recognition of gender as collective and not merely individual, an incorporation of bodies as both the objects and agents of social practice, and an attention to power relations.

"Hegemonic masculinity" and less often "masculinity" are also used to signify a third cluster of phenomena, associated with men's power. Either they represent a political strategy for ensuring men's power, or they refer directly to the male bearers of that power. Connell also writes that the term "hegemonic masculinity" refers to:

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. (*Masculinities* 77)

Taking on this link to patriarchal power, other authors use "hegemonic masculinity" as a collective noun which refers literally to powerful men – those men who are dominant over women and over other men. Lorber writes of "men who are economically successful, racially superior, and visibly heterosexual" as the actual representatives of hegemonic masculinity (469). Still other authors take hegemonic masculinity to demarcate images of those men who hold power. Kimmel writes that "[t]he hegemonic definition of manhood is a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power" ("Masculinity" 125). Like Connell, Kimmel links these definitions to actual men's power, stating that they "maintain the power that some men have over other men and that men have over women" ("Masculinity" 125). Sheperd argues for an exclusively patriarchal definition of "masculinity": it should designate those practices (by either sex) which represent exercises of power perpetuating men's domination (121).

While "masculinity" and "hegemonic masculinity" are used by some authors to indicate strategies or bearers of men's power, other sloppier formulations use them

simply to refer to "those things you don't like about blokes" (Donaldson, "Growing" 1; Martin 473). Connell acknowledges that the term hegemonic masculinity has come to stand in some writings for a fixed character type that is almost always negative ("Reply" 475-76). In Clatterbaugh's account, this represents the strategy of stipulation, in which one defines masculinity as the set of behaviours, attitudes and abilities that are important from a particular political point of view. He notes that some authors establish a negative image of masculinity and simply apply it to men, sliding between images of men with little concern for whether men have the traits attributed to them (37-38).

The use of the term in Connell's *Masculinities* itself is inconsistent. It confuses whether hegemonic masculinity is a particular configuration of gender practice related to patriarchal authority, or describes whatever type of masculinity is dominant in a given social order (Martin 473). Connell acknowledges this in a more recent publication, and he re-emphasises that the term "is defined in relation to the legitimacy of patriarchy" ("Reply" 476). But Connell then states that hegemony could be a positive force;

it is quite conceivable that a certain hegemony could be constructed for masculinities that are less toxic, more cooperative and peaceable, than the current editions. ("Reply" 476)

Now, would such masculinities still be oriented towards guaranteeing men's power over women and other men, or would they be "hegemonic" only in the sense that they are culturally exalted?

Connell also emphasises the relationship between the two meanings of hegemonic masculinity as cultural ideal and as patriarchal gender practice. He cautions that the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity are not always the most powerful people, and individual holders of power do not necessarily conform to hegemonic patterns in their own lives. Nevertheless, he stresses that hegemony is only likely to be established if the cultural ideal and institutional power correspond to some degree (*Masculinities* 77). This rendition is closer to the idea expressed in Gramsci's term "hegemony," from which Connell borrows: that the ideas of a culture will be the ideas of its ruling class.

These two renditions of the term "hegemonic masculinity" can be at odds, unless we make the politically deterministic, and defeatist, assumption that in any given context the most influential cultural representations of masculinity necessarily are the same ones that guarantee men's power. Given the pervasiveness of gendered power relations this is often true, but it is not always true. Particular ideas or discourses about men may be culturally celebrated, and yet do little to legitimate men's power. In turn, particular configurations of gender practice may maintain men's power and yet be culturally marginalised. Anthropological evidence confirms these points, in that some qualities associated with constructions of masculinity in particular cultures may be construed as progressive rather than patriarchal, such as selfless generosity (Gilmore 229).

If we continue to use the phrase "hegemonic masculinity" to refer to strategies or forms of gender practice related to patriarchal authority, we will need another term for whatever definitions of manhood or patterns of men's practice are dominant in a

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particular society or local context. Even the word "dominant" may cause trouble, as "dominant masculinity" could stand for the form of masculine practice or imagery which is most common, or the form of masculine practice or imagery which ensures men's political dominance. If on the other hand we use "hegemonic masculinity" to refer to whichever images and discourses of and about men are common or exalted, we will need another word for the forms of men's gender practice which establish or maintain men's power over women and over other men, such as "patriarchal masculinity."

There are further complexities when one considers the scale for which one discusses "masculinity" or "hegemonic masculinity." These terms are used for both hegemonies at the scale of an entire society and hegemonies at the level of particular institutions such as schools and workplaces. Recognition of local orderings of gender or "gender regimes" is an important aspect of recent scholarship on men. Connell for example writes of "a contest for hegemony between rival versions of masculinity" in a particular school ("Disruptions" 197). But in such discussions of particular institutions or milieu, "hegemony" usually refers to dominant ideals or discourses, and to hierarchies among men or boys, but not to questions of the legitimacy of patriarchy.

Given these difficulties, some authors seem to opt for giving up on the term "hegemonic masculinity" altogether. Donaldson criticises the term for explaining too much, and thus too little ("Growing" 1). Inverting Connell's formulation, he calls instead for an investigation of "the masculinity of the hegemonic" (1), a sociology of ruling-class men ("What is"). While research on men with power and privilege is a vital and neglected aspect of scholarship on men, Donaldson's proposal does not address the terminological slippages which plague the field as a whole.

Two features of recent scholarship – the use of the pluralised "masculinities" and the compound subject "men and masculinities" – do not resolve the issues of nomenclature either. The shift from "masculinity" to "masculinities" represents a "pluralising moment" in which gender is seen to intersect with a host of other axes of social difference. This recognition, informed by feminist theory's exploration of difference, has moved theoretical work on men away to a degree from the homogenising and generalising tendencies of earlier research. But it has not substantially corrected the conceptual fuzziness evident in the use of the terms "masculinity" and "masculinities" themselves. The same can be said for the phrase "men and masculinities," a construction which is epidemic in the literature and which for many authors comes to cover all bets (Clatterbaugh 39).

One strategy which does address the issues of definition I have discussed is to move back from "masculinity/ties" to "men." As Hearn argues, often it is more appropriate to focus on men and what men do, think or feel – to refer to "men" – to "men's practices," "men's social relations," "men's assumptions," and "beliefs about men" ("Is Masculinity" 214). Most versions of the concept of masculinity divert attention away from men's material practices, and from a materially-based analysis of gendered power relations (208). Connell warns against emphasising gender only as performance, against privileging "the symbolic dimension of social practice over all others" ("Reply" 475):

Gender is not only a system of signs and meanings; it involves the material labor of housework and machine minding, the accumulation of wealth, the materialities of violence and power, pregnancy and child rearing, and so on. ("Reply" 475)

At the same time, I agree with Connell that we do need concepts which go beyond the categories of "men" and "women." As he states, we:

need some way of talking about men's and women's involvement in that domain of gender... of naming conduct which is oriented to or shaped by that domain. (*Men* 16)

In other words, we need to be able to name patterns of gender practice.

As well as recognising the need sometimes to move back from masculinity/ies to men, we should not assume that the term "masculinity" is applicable and meaningful in all historical, cultural and geographical contexts. "Masculinity" is not present or relevant as a concept in some societies, such as in cultures which do not show a dichotomous gender system but more complex and multiple orderings of gender (Hearn, "Is Masculinity" 208-9). Nor should we take as given the categories "men" and "women." The binaries of male and female are socially produced, and there are cultures and circumstances in which notions of "third sex," "third gender" and "transgender" are at least as useful (*Masculinities* 212). Ethnographic research on transvestism, "gender blending" and transgenderism poses further challenges to simple conceptions of sex and gender (Petersen 32-33). In general, we need to investigate the specific orderings of sex and gender in play in any particular context.

The issue I have not addressed so far is the relationship between "masculinity" and *men*. While most accounts in the literature simply take this link as given, several authors argue for driving a wedge between the two. Sedgwick disputes the common "presupposition that everything pertaining to men can be classified as masculinity, and everything that can be said about masculinity pertains in the first place to men" (12). Clearly if one defines masculinity in terms of a set of attitudes, behaviours or traits, then women displaying these can be described as masculine or as performing or possessing masculinity. Common accounts of masculinity in the literature take for granted that stereotypically or hegemonically masculine practices and narratives adopted by individuals with male bodies potentially are equally available to those with female bodies. Yet there is little discussion of female masculinity, and masculinity is seen as the domain of men. This absence is particularly important if it is true that, as Halberstam argues, the enforcement of gender conformity and binary taxonomies of gender occurs in part through the vilification and pathologisation of female masculinity, and more broadly that female masculinity has been critical in the formation of modern male masculinities (9, 46-49).

The most focused attempt to question the link between masculinity and men comes from MacInnes' *The End of Masculinity*. His provocative thesis is that in the context of a modern society showing the material and ideological legacies of patriarchy, the concepts of gender, femininity and masculinity were a way to explain men's greater power and a sexual division of labour without resorting to patriarchal claims of men's natural superiority. The concept of gender is based on a kind of Orwellian "doublethink" in which masculinity and femininity are seen as both socially



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constructed and naturally determined. Gender is understood as both tied to biological sex and distinct from it (25-32). Explanations of women's subordination in terms of masculinity rely on an assumption of natural sexual difference, in accepting that only males become masculine (12). Ultimately therefore, the concept of masculinity is conceptually bankrupt and politically regressive, "the last ideological defence of male supremacy in a world that has already conceded that men and women are equal" (59).

While MacInnes' critique is overdrawn, it does raise a key question; "what is *male* about *masculinity*?" (61). This question is not entirely new to scholars at the centre of the masculinity literature. Connell argues in his most recent work that we cannot define masculinity as equivalent to men and we have to acknowledge that masculine conduct or identity can go together with a female body (*The Men* 16, 29). Clatterbaugh (25-26, 31) and Cornwall and Lindisfarne (10) also take this as given, while Sedgwick notes that women do not merely "consume" masculinities: they also produce and perform them (13). However, the implications of separating "masculinity" and "men" are unclear. If we see the concept "masculinity" as relevant necessarily only for people with male bodies, are we contradicting social constructionist assumptions with the implicit premise that biological binaries create the categories and meanings of gender? On the other hand, if we sever the assumed link between males and masculinity, do we render meaningless the concept of masculinity?

We now have the benefit of two decades of social research on men and gender relations, affording a host of valuable ethnographic, theoretical and political insights. Given the terminological fuzziness I have outlined, there are two pressing tasks in extending this work. The first of course is to disentangle and clarify the terms "masculinity" and "masculinities," related designations such as "hegemonic masculinity," and "men" itself, to ensure that these notions are used carefully, specifically and without slippage between one category and another, or indeed to construct alternative terms with which to discuss material and discursive practices of and about men. This requires a second endeavour, a reflexive critique of discourses in scholarship on men (Hearn, "Is Masculinity" 214), with the aim of extending the work's theoretical insight, empirical reach and political utility. Authors such as MacInnes and Petersen have begun this project, with Petersen arguing that scholarly writings on men must analyse the frameworks of knowledge within which "masculinity" and male subjects have been constructed, the social and historical production through power and knowledge of these analytic categories (6-9). However, such a project is only viable if it properly engages with the scholarship it purports to assess. Both MacInnes and Petersen erect "straw" masculinity scholarships (which allegedly are essentialist, inattentive to the body's construction in discourse, focused largely on men as victims, and concerned only with gender identity rather than with social structures and processes) which they then critique. Given that "men's issues" and debates about boys and men are now firmly on the public agenda, it is all the more urgent that the scholarly discussions of men and gender which may shape them are precise and meaningful.

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***Studies in Masculinities***

***Edited by  
Sharyn Pearce and Vivienne Muller***

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