What's Hegemonic about Hegemonic Masculinity? Legitimation and Beyond

Yuchen Yang[1] (iD)

Abstract

Raewyn Connell's theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity has been profoundly influential in feminist sociology. Despite the rich literature inspired by her theory, conceptual ambiguities have compromised its full potential. In this article, I critique a pessimistic tendency in the interpretation and application of hegemonic masculinity, which focuses on its regressive role in reproducing/legitimating heteronormative patriarchy while overlooking its progressive potential. I propose that revisiting Antonio Gramsci's theorization of hegemony can help us understand hegemonic masculinity by its mechanism of domination—force accompanied by consent—rather than via certain pregiven masculine qualities. This reformulation of hegemonic masculinity not only pushes us to maintain a relational understanding of masculinities in empirical research, but also brings attention to Connell's vision for social change.

Keywords

gender relations, hegemonic masculinity, multiple masculinities

If we were to summarize the innovation in theorizing gender since the 1970s in one word, "relation" is a strong candidate. The theoretical move from "gender roles" to "gender relations" overcomes a major barrier for a feminist revolution in sociology: namely, the unreflective reduction of gender from a principle of social organization to an individual property, from a basic theoretical category to a variable (Stacey and Thorne 1985). Seeing gender as relational enables sociologists to move beyond individual personalities and investigate the power dynamic between men and women and among men (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985). A major contributor to this paradigm shift is Raewyn Connell. Her theory of masculinities has become the "single theoretical framework" for studying men and masculinities (Pascoe and Bridges 2015:20–21). And in the sociology of men and masculinities, her theoretical concept of "hegemonic masculinity" has itself become "hegemonic" (Anderson 2015; Hearn 2012; Wedgwood 2009).

[1]University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Yuchen Yang, University of Chicago, 1126 East 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637-5418, USA.
Email: yucheny@uchicago.edu

Nevertheless, scholars have noted conceptual ambiguities in her theory (Beasley 2008; Donaldson 1993; Elias and Beasley 2009; Hearn 2012; Martin 1998) and various misuses that compromise its theoretical potential (Brod 1994; Ezzell 2015; Hearn and Collinson 1994; Messerschmidt 2015, 2018; Nascimento and Connell 2017; Petersen 2003). These concerns cover questions such as whether hegemonic masculinity is a fixed type, whether it equals the gender performance of the dominant group of men, whether it always legitimates patriarchy, and, most fundamentally, what makes hegemonic masculinity hegemonic. In this article, I follow Besbris and Khan's (2017) call for theoretical reformulations that clarify concepts with definitional specificities, and examine Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and its applications. I first sketch out her theory and identify conceptual ambiguities in her (re) formulations. Then, I critique a pessimistic tendency that reads hegemonic masculinity negatively as always epitomizing or legitimating patriarchy, which results from the ambiguities in Connell's (re)formulation. As Connell's theorization of hegemonic masculinity relies on the work of Antonio Gramsci, I argue that revisiting Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony can help us reconcile conceptual ambiguities and resolve this pessimistic tendency.

Drawing on sociological interpretations of Gramsci's hegemony, I reformulate hegemonic masculinity as the dominant masculinity in a consensual relation of domination: it subordinates other masculinities with a combination of force and consent. In other words, what defines hegemonic masculinity is its mechanism of domination, rather than any pre-given masculine qualities. After illustrating this reformulation with examples from school ethnographies, I highlight two of its advantages: by focusing on the relation between masculinities, it adheres to Connell's relational approach to gender and enables us to concretely operationalize hegemonic masculinity; and by looking beyond internal qualities of a single masculinity, it transcends pessimistic readings of hegemonic masculinity and helps us better engage with Connell's vision for social change.

CONNELL'S THEORY OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Connell was inspired to theorize masculinities by the 1970s feminist movement and a team project on social inequalities in schools (Nascimento and Connell 2017; Wedgwood 2009). In that project, Connell and her colleagues (Kessler et al. 1982, 1985) problematize the sex-role theory. Popularized by Talcott Parsons (1942) and dominant at the time, sex-role theory asserts that socializing agencies like families and schools initiate boys and girls to conform with, and ultimately internalize, different and complementary roles, such as a career-oriented masculine role and a domestic feminine role. Connell and her colleagues (Kessler et al. 1982, 1985) argue that this focus on internalized expectations, attitudes, and traits obscures power and structural inequality and misrepresents the gendering process. Whereas sex-role theory assumes schools impose one masculine role onto boys and one feminine role onto girls, Connell's team finds that schools actually hierarchize multiple masculinities and femininities, valorizing some and marginalizing others. This project not only contains her first usage of "hegemonic masculinity," but also motivated her to develop a more sophisticated social theory of gender (Nascimento and Connell 2017), which was later elaborated in "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity" (Carrigan et al. 1985), *Gender and Power* (Connell 1987), and *Masculinities* (Connell 2005b).

Connell (2005b) argues that masculinity is inherently relational, existing only in contrast to femininity. This relation is not "a confrontation between homogenous, undifferentiated blocs" of men and women, but between multiple masculinities and femininities (Carrigan et al. 1985:590). For Connell (2005b:76), recognizing the plurality of masculinities is "only a first step," and the more important task is to "examine the relations between them." Drawing on

Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, she theorizes the dominant masculinity as "hegemonic masculinity": the "culturally exalted form of masculinity" (Carrigan et al. 1985:592) and the "configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (Connell 2005b:77). Hegemonic masculinity is not static but responsive to changes in the conditions of patriarchy. Most men do not embody the hegemonic ideals, but they still benefit from the "patriarchal dividend" that advantages men in general through the subordination of women. Their masculinity is complicit. Hegemonic masculinity dominates certain groups of men, notably gay men, with political and cultural exclusion, legal and street violence, and so on. These subordinate masculinities often have blurry boundaries with femininity. In addition, subordinate classes' and racial minorities' masculinities are marginalized. These marginalized masculinities provide exemplary images, such as black athletes, to be appropriated by the dominant group, as well as controlling images, such as "black men as rapists," which make white, middle-class masculinity appear more legitimate. Therefore, "marginalization is always relative to the *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group" (Connell 2005b:80–81).

Connell's theory soon became profoundly influential in the sociology of gender (Brod 1994; Hearn and Collinson 1994; Segal 1990), but not without critiques. In response, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) coauthored an article to address what they viewed as misreadings. To the concern that the theory produces a static typology (Hearn and Collinson 1994; Whitehead 2002), they argue the solution is not to abandon the theory of multiple masculinities but to adhere to the relational approach it prescribes (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). To the critique that the theory overlooks subjects/discourses (Whitehead 2002), they argue the theory's psychoanalytic root deals with subjectivity, and its attention to institutional power and division of labor makes it more holistic than a single focus on discourses (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

They concede other critiques, including ambiguity in usage (Donaldson 1993), danger of reifying hegemonic masculinity into a set of negative characteristics (Martin 1998), and elitism in overlooking subordinate masculinities' influence on hegemonic masculinity (Demetriou 2001). Addressing these comments, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) call attention to the agency of subordinate/marginalized groups; variations within hegemonic masculinities across local, regional, and global levels; embodiment; and internal dynamics of hegemonic masculinity. This reformulation retains the idea that multiple masculinities exist in a hierarchy, with hegemonic masculinity dominating others by "cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:846). More explicit attention to the nested relations between local gender regimes and societal/global gender order, together with attention to the dynamism of hegemonic masculinity, clarify some ambiguities: hegemonic masculinity appears ambiguous precisely because it is not a fixed character type, as in sex-role theory. But this reformulation does not resolve all ambiguities. If hegemonic masculinity cannot be identified with a predefined list of traits, how do we know what we observe is "hegemonic masculinity"?

A REMAINING AMBIGUITY

Across her work, Connell gives multiple, sometimes contradictory, definitions of hegemonic masculinity. In her *Theory and Society* article, she describes hegemonic masculinity as the "culturally exalted form of masculinity" (Carrigan et al. 1985:592). But the most quoted definition comes from *Masculinities*: "Hegemonic masculinity can be defined 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" (Connell 2005b:77). At first glance, these two definitions are compatible. In the current social milieu, the culturally exalted form of masculinity does guarantee the domination of men over women (Abelson 2019; Bridges forthcoming).

But such compatibility falls apart when we consider social change. In the endnote to her latter definition, Connell (2005b:272n15) reminds us, "Gramsci always had in mind a social struggle for leadership in historical change." A few lines into that paragraph, Connell (2005b:77) adds, "New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony. The dominance of *any* group of men may be challenged by women." She later reiterated this vision for social change, arguing "a positive hegemony remains, nevertheless, a key strategy for contemporary efforts at reform" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:853). In an interview, she envisioned "a different form of cultural leadership" (i.e., hegemony) with Mohandas Gandhi replacing football heroes as the exemplar of masculinity (Magaraggia and Connell 2012:117).

Is hegemonic masculinity bound to legitimate patriarchy? What if, one day, feminists successfully overthrow patriarchy and establish a "new hegemony" that subordinates sexism and homophobia? Will the new masculine ideal still be hegemonic? If we follow Connell's earlier definition and recent reformulation, it will, because it becomes culturally exalted (Carrigan et al. 1985). If we follow the most quoted definition, it will not, because this masculinity *delegitimates* patriarchy, rather than legitimating it. This ambiguity has led to a pessimistic tendency that ties hegemonic masculinity to male domination.

PESSIMISTIC TENDENCY IN UNDERSTANDING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

The most elementary form of this pessimistic tendency reduces hegemonic masculinity to individuals' male-chauvinist traits, without attention to legitimation (e.g., Logan 2010; for reviews, see Messerschmidt 2015, 2018). Similarly, McCormack (2011) and Anderson (2015) critique masculinities scholars' obsession with hegemonic masculinity theory despite the rise of an inclusive masculinity that tolerates an expansion of desirable male bodies, behaviors, and interests. Such framing equates hegemonic masculinity with homophobia and sexism.

This negative reading is prevalent even in well-intentioned attempts of theory clarification. Beasley (2008:91), for example, argues that "the political legitimating meaning of hegemonic masculinity . . . quickly slides in Connell's analysis toward its meaning as the 'dominant' masculinity and how an actual group of businessmen 'embodies' this dominant positioning." This slippage is problematic because it fixes hegemonic masculinity to personality types of a group of men. Moreover, it is defeatist to assume dominant masculinity always legitimates men's power. Instead, Beasley (2008:94, 95) redefines hegemonic masculinity as "the legitimation of men's authority over women," and notes that this legitimating function "may or may not refer to men with actual power." Schippers (2007:94), on the other hand, expands hegemony to masculinity *and* femininity, defining hegemonic masculinity/femininity as the qualities that are defined as manly/womanly and "*establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship*" between masculinity and femininity and "*guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.*"

Messerschmidt (2015, 2018; Messerschmidt and Messner 2018) distinguishes hegemonic masculinity from dominant and dominating masculinities. He asserts that for a masculinity to qualify as hegemonic, it *must legitimate patriarchy*. Dominant and dominating masculinities, however, do not necessarily legitimate patriarchy: dominant masculinity is the most

widespread or celebrated in a social setting, whereas dominating masculinity is about the exercise of power and control over people and situations. Hence, in Messerschmidt's formulation, hegemonic masculinity is bounded with patriarchy in a way that dominant and dominating masculinities are not. He further theorizes positive masculinity, which in contrast to hegemonic masculinity, legitimates egalitarian gender relations. Despite Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) previous emphasis on the importance of a positive *hegemony* for feminism, Messerschmidt and Messner (2018) now exclude the possibility that a nonheterosexist masculinity can be hegemonic. Positive masculinity, they argue, is constructed outside the hierarchy of masculinities. Because it has nothing to do with gender hierarchy, it is not hegemonic.

All these reformulations allow flexibilities in the personality types of people who embody hegemonic masculinity, but they retain a static view on the object of legitimation, conflating hegemonic masculinity with the hegemony of patriarchy. This is partly because when cleaning up Connell's ambiguities, many scholars stick to the definition that hegemonic masculinity "embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (Connell 2005b:77) and overlook her other writings. Yet as Howson (2012:9) points out, this definition is based on a partial reading of Gramsci, because in Gramsci's theory, hegemony can be either regressive or progressive: "In a letter to Togliatti, Terracini and others, dated 9 February 1924, Gramsci (1978:165) makes reference to the 'hegemonic position [Russia] holds today' over a prerevolutionary Western Europe, suggesting a dominant (that is, commanding) and progressive position. In contrast, an article published during October of 1923 includes a statement where Gramsci (1978:164) refers to the 'hegemonic positions of the reformists.'" According to Howson (2012), this distinguishes Gramsci's usage from Connell's appropriation in *Masculinities*. Where Gramsci sees both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as capable of claiming hegemony to legitimate/delegitimate capitalism, Connell frames hegemony as always controlled by some groups of men to guarantee patriarchy—although this is not the case in her other works (e.g., Connell 2005a, 2012; Kessler et al. 1982; Magaraggia and Connell 2012).

Omitting the progressive potential from hegemonic masculinity and focusing only on its regressive dimension bring two risks. First, it mutes Gramsci's insight for revolution. If patriarchy is always legitimated by hegemonic masculinity, we must eradicate hegemonic masculinity to abolish patriarchy. It is unclear how that eradication will ever happen. Indeed, the starting point for theorizing multiple masculinities as existing in a hierarchy is precisely that organizations like schools cannot obliterate alternative masculinities (Kessler et al. 1982, 1985). Eliminating hegemonic masculinities and making men, as well as masculine-identifying/presenting women and nonbinary people, practice positive/inclusive masculinity is thus a de facto sex-role solution—socializing those who wish to be masculine into an egalitarian male sex role. Doing so deprives us of the Gramscian toolkit to envision a progressive ideal. If feminist revolution succeeded, what would happen to those patriarchy-legitimating masculinities? Connell (2005a; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Magaraggia and Connell 2012) has turned more attention to this issue, but it has yet to be incorporated into theoretical clarification.

The proximity between positive masculinities and egalitarian male sex roles points to another risk: this omission can distract the analytic focus from *the shifting relations between masculinities* to *the internal contents of a single masculinity*. According to the regressive interpretation of the concept, we can label a masculinity as hegemonic as soon as we find it epitomizes male chauvinism (Logan 2010) or legitimates patriarchy (Messerschmidt and Rohde 2018), without even considering the other side of the equilibrium: other masculinities that are subordinated by hegemonic masculinity, but shape hegemonic masculinity by

pushing it to hybridize (Demetriou 2001). However, in Connell's (2005b:78) formulation, heterosexual masculinity is hegemonic relative to the subordination of gay masculinity, as manifested in the "political and cultural exclusion, cultural abuse . . . legal violence . . . street violence . . . economic discrimination and personal boycotts" against gay men. In her revaluation of the concept, she concludes, "The hierarchy of masculinities is a pattern of hegemony, not a pattern of simple domination based on force" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:846). In both cases, hegemony is about the mechanism of domination—how different masculinities are socially organized into a hierarchy—rather than qualities internal to a single masculinity.

Recognizing the progressive potential of hegemony forces us to rectify this problem: if masculinities that defy patriarchy can also be hegemonic, then a masculinity's substance—whether that be sexism, homophobia, or legitimation of patriarchy—cannot be a sufficient ground for assessing if a masculinity is hegemonic. Instead of zooming into internal qualities of one masculinity, we should zoom out and interrogate its relation to other masculinities.[1] Identifying hegemonic masculinity thus requires first identifying a relation of hegemony between one masculinity and other masculinities in the same gender regime. But how do we know if a relation is characterized by hegemony, rather than something else? Because Connell's theorization of hegemonic masculinity draws on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, revisiting Gramsci's texts gives an answer.

REVISITING GRAMSCI'S THEORY OF HEGEMONY

As Rubin (Rubin and Butler 1994:63) reminds us, "There is an immense Marxist legacy within feminism, and feminist thought is greatly indebted to Marxism. In a sense, Marxism enabled people to pose a whole set of questions that Marxism could not satisfactorily answer." For Connell, Gramsci's Marxist theory of cultural domination in class relations enabled her to describe the pattern she observed in the diversity of masculinities and femininities in schools: "For lack of any snappier term, we have come to refer to the culturally dominant patterns as 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'hegemonic femininity'" (Kessler et al. 1982:10). The Gramscian concept of hegemony thus offers a springboard for theorizing the relation and hierarchy between masculinities. Whether hegemony is the snappiest term to satisfactorily describe the hierarchy of masculinities in a specific gender regime, or whether there is a pattern of hierarchy unique to the gender system, requires a case-by-case examination and a deeper understanding of the Gramscian root of Connell's theory.

This Gramscian root of Connell's theory often goes unacknowledged in masculinities studies. To the extent that Gramsci's theory of hegemony is discussed in this literature, it is often likened to Bourdieu's theory of fields and symbolic violence, which then becomes a stepping stone for developing such concepts as "masculine capital," "masculine habitus," and the "field of masculinities" (for exceptions, see Chen 1999; Demetriou 2001; Howson 2012; Matlon 2016). For example, Bridges (2009:87, 91) asserts that "both cultural capital and hegemonic masculinity rely on a Gramscian conceptualization of hegemony," and the regime-specificity of hegemonic masculinity "might be more productively framed with the help of Pierre Bourdieu." However, Connell cautions against a Bourdieusian interpretation of her theory: her theory focuses on social/historical change, whereas Bourdieu's theory focuses too much on social reproduction (Connell 1987, 2012; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Kessler et al. 1985). To avoid such conflation, I follow Burawoy's (2012, 2018, 2019) compare and contrast of Gramsci and Bourdieu as a useful guide for revisiting Gramsci's theory of hegemony.

Burawoy (2012, 2018, 2019) points out that although Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence and Gramsci's theory of hegemony are both theories of cultural domination (rather than simple, violent coercion), they differ in the extent to which the dominated are reflexive of such cultural domination. Bourdieu's symbolic violence is prereflexive: it is taken for granted, is misrecognized, and goes without saying or thinking. In contrast, Gramsci's hegemony is a conscious form of domination that involves active consent. Although some argue that Gramsci is neither clear nor systematic in specifying hegemony (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), Burawoy (2019:68) grounds his interpretation in a clear description of hegemony that Gramsci gives—in a footnote—in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971:80n49), where the editors quote pages 102 and 103 of Gramsci's "Notes on Machiavelli, on Politics and the Modern State":

> The "normal" exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary régime is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion—newspapers and associations—which, therefore, in certain situations, are artificially multiplied.

In this definition, hegemony is based on both force and consent, such that when force has to be deployed, it receives consent from civil society. To highlight the importance of consent, Burawoy quotes Gramsci's (1971:244) conception of the state as "the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities" with which the dominant class "manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules." Hegemony is thus based on "a knowing and willing participation of the dominated in their subjugation" (Burawoy 2019:68). Such reflexivity is absent in symbolic violence.

"Force plus consent" is one dimension of hegemony. Burawoy (2003) identifies a second dimension in Gramsci's (1971:181–82) three-stage theory of class formation: class consciousness expands from an economic corporate of professional group, to everyone in the same economic class, and ultimately transcends beyond an economic class to represent the interests of other subordinate groups. Gramsci (1971:182) calls this third stage "the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups." In this dimension, one group presents its interests as the interests of all and solicits consent from subordinate/allied classes with economic concessions (Burawoy 2003).

That hegemony arises from a three-stage process further suggests it is not always secured in the hands of one group. This dynamism is most evident in Gramsci's strategy of "war of position" (Burawoy 2003). According to Gramsci (1971:265), hegemony can be forged from a progressive direction when "the given party is the bearer of a new culture" or a reactionary direction when "the given party wishes to prevent another force, bearer of a new culture, from becoming itself 'totalitarian.'"[2] Capitalists must constantly renew hegemony from above *only because* proletariats are forging a hegemony from below: under the leadership of the communist party, proletariats can wage a time-consuming war of position to make their socialist agenda a "concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will" while "breaking all the threads" that bind the masses to capitalist fantasies (Burawoy 2003; Gramsci 1971:126, 265). In short, hegemony is a *relation* between different social groups, and attention to the mechanism by which one group subordinates others with force and consent is crucial for clarifying what constitutes hegemony. The reorganization of civil society under the leadership of the communist party can make socialist ideology hegemonic—and for Marxists like Gramsci, socialist hegemony

does not carry the negative connotation that masculinities scholars often attach to hegemonic masculinity.

FROM THEORY OF HEGEMONY TO HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Burawoy's concrete definition of hegemony and careful reading of its progressive potential offer us a guide to operationalize hegemonic masculinity while guarding us from the pessimistic tendency to reduce hegemonic masculinity to behavioral and discursive legitimation of patriarchy. Following his interpretation, my reformulation of hegemonic masculinity highlights the consensual relation of domination between dominant and subordinate masculinities: hegemonic masculinity is the dominant masculinity in a hegemonically hierarchized ordering of masculinities, subordinating other masculinities with a combination of force and consent. When force has to be deployed, the majority of members of the gender regime consent. People who embody subordinate masculinities are aware of their subordination, but they may still consent for the concessions they receive (e.g., the patriarchal dividend). Hence, even subordinate masculinities with subversive elements can be complicit in maintaining the existing hegemony (Hennen 2008).

Hegemonic masculinity is not a substantive kind of masculinity like toxic masculinity or the group of masculinities that legitimate patriarchy, but a structural position in the hierarchy. It is a box fixed on top of a ladder, but what goes into the box varies from gender regime to gender regime. Legitimating patriarchy or not, any masculinity can potentially achieve this hegemonic status, but the chances are unequal and contingent on structural conditions. In Connell's words, "What is hegemonic at any given time depends on how the relations among different kinds of masculinity and femininity have been worked out" (Kessler et al. 1985:44; see also 1982:10–11). Because working out these relations "is one of the key roles" of gender regimes such as schools (Kessler et al. 1982:11), masculinities that correspond with institutional power are more likely to be hegemonic (Connell 2005b).

Ambiguity in content makes hegemonic masculinity powerful in domination (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), but its mechanism of domination enables identification. Specifically, attention to the organization of force and consent, as well as correspondence with institutional power, helps us identify hegemonic masculinity in empirical research. In this regard, school ethnographies are especially illustrative, as they often situate gender performance within organizational contexts.

Consider Connell's collaborative project on social inequality in Australian schools (Kessler et al. 1982, 1985). At Milton College, one of the schools in the study, football is a major focus of school life. Students, parents, and teachers are all emotionally invested in it. At Milton, football is "above all a medium for the construction of a particular kind of masculinity," which celebrates and promotes toughness, competitiveness, violence, and confrontation (Kessler et al. 1982:5). What makes this masculinity special is not so much its "toxic" content as its correspondence with institutional power: "The honored place the game has in the school becomes a means by which one kind of masculinity, the tough and 'macho' kind, subordinates other kinds of masculinity" (Kessler et al. 1982:5–6).

This subordination involves two processes. First, other masculinities are defined as inferior to "football heroes." Boys interested in debate, study, and nonviolent games are condemned by football heroes as "the Cyrils." Second, these other masculinities "attract derision, hostility, and sometimes violence" (Kessler et al. 1982:10), as students who embody these masculinities are bullied by the football heroes. Importantly, even though Milton needs the examination success of the Cyrils to maintain the school's popularity in the education market, it still permits muted violence against them (Kessler et al. 1985). Thus, the school

consents to the *force* that football heroes, bearers of an aggressive masculinity, deploy to subordinate the Cyrils and the nonaggressive masculinity they represent. The school is complicit in the production and the subordination of the Cyrils. One may contemplate how toughness and violence legitimate patriarchy, but this is not how the authors adjudicate this masculinity as hegemonic. Their reasoning and presentation of data focus instead on the cultural ideal, permitted coercion, and institutional organization of school: "the school provides a setting in which one kind [of masculinity] or another becomes hegemonic" (Kessler et al. 1982:11).

This hegemonically hierarchized ordering of masculinities is also common in U.S. schools. In her ethnography of River High, Pascoe (2011) reveals how school serves as the context in which heterosexist masculinity achieves hegemony. She demonstrates that men's heterosexual domination over women is institutionalized in high school rituals and curriculum: heterosexual pairings in yearbooks and at dances, emphasis on girls' sexual availability in homecoming skits, and teachers' heterosexual references and homophobic jokes in class. Aligned with institutional organization, heterosexist masculinity attains hegemonic status: boys constantly police each other's masculinity through heterosexuality, and those who cannot show their ability to sexually dominate girls, or who show too much emotional attachments to girls, are derided as "fag." Problematizing the conflation of masculinities, men, and male bodies, Pascoe shows that even some girls utilize rituals of "getting girls" and claim a "penetrative phallus" to assert such masculinity.

Pascoe (2011:107) notes that "when not in groups . . . boys were much less likely to engage in gendered and sexed dominance practices," and during one-on-one interviews, boys "often spoke touchingly about their feelings about and insecurities with girls." This contrast suggests the heterosexist masculinity boys enact in public—such as posturing and bragging about their sexual adventures and deriding each other as fag—is not so much a prereflexive "masculine habitus" as a "knowing and willing participation" of boys who are potential targets of the fag discourse themselves. Furthermore, the faculty generally permit such bullying, especially if the boys doing so are white. In this case, heterosexist masculinity is hegemonic not because it reflects/legitimates two of the three "basic generalities" of the patriarchic sex-gender system Rubin (1997:42) identifies: obligatory heterosexuality that makes gender entail a sexual desire toward the other sex, and sexual double standards that grant men sexual subjectivity and women sexual passivity. Rather, heterosexist masculinity is hegemonic because of the way it subordinates other masculinities—the force of bullying through fag discourse as well as consent from boys' conscious participation and faculty's tacit permission.

Hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily bonded to competitive sports or (hetero)sexual expressions. Northside Academy, one of the black all-male academies in Blume Oeur's (2018) ethnography, provides another example. Blume Oeur shows that Northside's curriculum, administration, and school rules are all shaped by neoliberal respectability politics. Hoping to cultivate "ambitious entrepreneurs," Northside privileges scholarly masculinity over street masculinity. The school discipline reveals the hegemony of scholarly masculinity: "For students who did not consent to rules, coercion in the form of punishment . . . was always there in reserve" (Blume Oeur 2018:132). The strict school rules are accompanied by "concessions": school officials encourage students to pursue diverse masculinities as long as they do not infringe on the rules. This gives most boys an interest in the existing hierarchy of masculinities, with scholarly masculinity at the top, street masculinity at the bottom, and various other masculinities in the middle. Even though these middle-ranking masculinities may not be the ideal, they are at least respected—and such respect is relative to the punishment of street masculinity.

Because hegemonic masculinity is not a coercive personality, and coercion is crucial to it only as part of its mechanism of domination, these three cases are all examples of hegemonic masculinity despite their differences: whereas in Kessler and colleagues' (1982, 1985) and Pascoe's (2011) studies coercion is exercised by football heroes and boys who claim to be (hetero)sexually experienced, in Blume Oeur's (2018) study coercion is exercised by school officials. Coercion does not have to be exercised by those who embody hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2012:14).

OPERATIONALIZING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Defining hegemonic masculinity as a position in relation means that, to determine if a masculinity is hegemonic, we need to look beyond the substance of the masculinity of interest. Empirically, this means asking a series of questions during data collection. First, researchers need to contextualize this masculinity into a fuller ecology of multiple masculinities in the field site, asking, "What other masculinities are at play in this gender regime?" Second, researchers need to examine the relations between them, asking, "Does this masculinity dominate other masculinities? Is it subordinated by other masculinities? Or is it complicit/allied with other masculinities?" Third, if this masculinity does dominate other masculinities, researchers should probe into its mechanism of domination: Does this domination involve ideology, or brutal force alone? Is its dominance knowingly consented or taken for granted? When is force deployed, and how do those who practice/embody subordinate and complicit masculinities consent to it, if ever? What dividend do they gain by consenting to such domination? Only if its domination involves both force and consent can we conclude that this masculinity is hegemonic in the gender regime under study.

The answer to these questions may well be "no." When we identify a masculinity that is dominant but not hegemonic,[3] we reach the vantage point for further theorization: If not hegemony, what is the mechanism through which this masculinity dominates other masculinities? Is there a "snappier term" (Kessler et al. 1982:10) to describe this pattern? If Gramsci's theory of class relation offers us a springboard to dive into relational and hierarchical dimensions of masculinities and pose questions about mechanisms of domination, answering these questions during our fieldwork enables us to identify mechanisms that are unique to the gender system and to find answers that Marxism might not satisfactorily provide (see Rubin and Butler 1994:63).

The goal of masculinities studies is not just identifying different hegemonic masculinities in different gender regimes. Rather, "the question of transformation, its possibilities, sources, and strategies, should be central to the analysis of masculinity" (Carrigan et al. 1985:596). The substance of masculinities—particularly practices that may reproduce/undermine patriarchy—deserves critical attention for understanding the direction of transformation. But instead of scrutinizing a masculinity in isolation, we should examine the conditions under which one masculinity, *rather than another*, becomes hegemonic: What are the terrains on which masculinities are formed and organized? How are production, power, emotions, and symbols (Connell 2005b) structured in our field site? To what extent does the substance of masculinities under study correspond to, or problematize, these structures? How are challenges to the existing hegemony absorbed, diverted, or countered? In short, only after considering the relation between multiple masculinities and the institutional conditions can we fully appreciate the significance of each masculinity's substance; understand the possibility, sources, and strategies for transformation; and incorporate such understanding into feminist agendas for social change.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Recognizing the progressive potential of hegemonic masculinities means we should treat hegemonic masculinity not as something to abolish, but as something to take over. As Connell argues, organizations like schools "may be unable to change the types of masculinity being produced, but they can influence what is hegemonic among them" (Kessler et al. 1982:14). The goal, Connell (2012:15) claims, is to transform the hierarchical order itself and its institutional conditions "to create a hegemony for forms of masculinity that already exist in the lives of men, masculinities that are peace-making not war-making and that flourish in a context of gender equality." Feminism and gay rights activism have already affected some changes (Connell 2005a; Demetriou 2001; Segal 1990). Elements of antisexism and antihomophobia have been incorporated into worth-pursing ideals (Anderson 2005, 2008, 2015; Bridges forthcoming; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Pfaffendorf 2017). Subordinate masculinities, in other words, can affect what goes into the "box" of hegemonic masculinity, which is always already a "hybrid" (Demetriou 2001).

It is important to note that hegemony can be forged from above *and* below. Bridges and Pascoe (2014, 2018) rightly remind us that the changes so far are often superficial accommodations—by those in power—that obscure power. Although men—cisgender or transgender—pursuing hybrid masculinity appear as feminist and nonhomophobic, they can still fortify gender, sexual, class, and racial boundaries in social interaction, making underprivileged men scapegoats of masculine domination (Abelson 2019; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Pfaffendorf 2017). But this should not dissuade us from recognizing the progressive potential of hegemony. Hegemonic masculinity is constantly renewed from above, because if it does not hybridize and make concessions to people mobilized by feminism and gay rights activism, an antisexist, egalitarian, and queer masculinity may take over their hegemony.

How is such a progressive hegemony possible, if most men are invested in the old hegemony that offers them patriarchal dividend? Much is to be learned from methodologically rigorous empirical studies of the possibility, sources, and strategies for transforming the hierarchy of masculinities, but returning to Gramsci's conception of hegemony and "war of position" can help us make revolutionary sense of Connell's vision. Gramsci (1971:126, 265) argues that when a progressive group (e.g., communists) does not have immediate material benefits to offer, concessions in the form of a "concrete phantasy" (e.g., a realm of freedom) are necessary to break "all the threads" that bind people to the existing hierarchy. Connell shares this vision, albeit implicitly. Emphasizing that the diversity of masculinities itself is an important asset for social change, Connell suggests scholars can document the diverse forms of nonviolent masculinities "as ongoing functional ways of being a man," create research-based narratives and images, and circulate them widely through media and schools to provide men and boys alternative conceptions of "an honorable, respectable and valuable way to be a man" (Magaraggia and Connell 2012:117; see also Connell 2005a:1817). Despite the seemingly power-blind obsession with plurality in this claim, Connell implicitly constructs an alternative fantasy to persuade men and boys (and, I would add, masculine-presenting, gender-nonconforming women and nonbinary people) that they have much more dividend to gain in a feminist utopia: more accessible and diverse ways of being honorably and respectably masculine, and less pressure on performing sexual prowess, fighting for occupational prestige, presenting muscular body shape, and so on. An alliance, therefore, can be forged among a heterogeneous bloc of nonviolent masculinities and among a heterogeneous group of people who enact/embody these masculinities or are affected by them. Connell's first theoretical treatise on the new sociology of masculinities ends on such an optimistic note: "There are potentials for a more liberating politics . . . at least in the form of coalitions among feminists, gay men, and progressive heterosexual men" (Carrigan et al. 1985:600).

McCormack's (2011) ethnography of Standard High shows the possibility of such a coali-
tion. Observing that "boys ascribing to different masculine archetypes . . . can all maintain
high social status," McCormack (2011:84) concludes there is no hegemony in the school.
But a careful reading of his finding shows the opposite: *high*-status masculinities exist only
vis-à-vis *low*-status ones. McCormack (2011:96) describes how he "witnessed a boy harass-
ing another student (for sitting in his seat), other boys confronted the aggressor—who later
apologized for his behavior." Such collective confrontation demonstrates that students con-
sent to force against harassment, including the aggressor who reacted with an apology. This
suggests an antiharassment inclusive masculinity achieved hegemonic status: numerous
masculinities joined this hegemonic bloc and obtained a dividend (e.g., high status) from the
subordination of bullies.

This is not to deny that men may unknowingly sustain their privilege in more subtle ways
(Bridges and Pascoe 2014, 2018; Connell 2005a). But at least "support for gender equality
might become hegemonic among men" (Connell 2005a:1818; see also Anderson 2008).
Hopefully, this principle change may further the war of position to reorganize the gender
regime and the institutional conditions for the hierarchy of masculinities, from formal poli-
cies to emotion-imbued ritualistic events, such that heterosexist masculinities will ultimately
be defined as "deviant or inferior" and "attract derision, hostility, and sometimes violence"
consented by the masses (Kessler et al. 1982:10).

Because gender is relational, a reorganization of the hierarchy of femininities will likely
accompany a reorganization of the hierarchy of masculinities (Connell 2005a, 2005b): an
alternative "hegemonic femininity" (Schippers 2007) may arise; "compliance, nurturance
and empathy" (Connell 1987:188) may no longer be emphasized as "womanly virtues"; and
mass consent may endorse force against slut-shaming, rather than the force of slut shaming.
In other words, the transformation of hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic femininity, and the
gender system is an integral process. A change in one will affect the other two. This does not
mean the reorganization of femininities is a consequence only of a reorganization of mascu-
linities, or that hegemonic femininity changes only in response to hegemonic masculinity.
This line of thought assigns passivity to femininity (Hamilton et al. 2019). Rather, we should
view the hierarchy of masculinities and the hierarchy of femininities as *interdependent*, such
that the war of position must target both hierarchies and incorporate men, women, and gen-
der-nonconforming people alike. If we take seriously the dialectic of theory and practice,
then research on the social organization of femininities and its transformation is no less
important than similar work on masculinities.

This vision for social change may appear too optimistic for some, and its feasibility needs
to be tested by practice. But it is important to remember that both Gramsci and Connell are
optimists. Gramsci seeks social change in a hegemony from below—a unifying fantasy
established through a war of position that reorganizes civil society under the leadership of
the communist party. Connell seeks social change in a hegemony of nonviolent masculini-
ties—a coalition under the leadership of feminists and queer activists and facilitated by
teachers and media. Both want to overthrow the old hegemon, but neither gives up hege-
mony as a strategy for social change. It is the hegemon, not hegemony, that needs to be
replaced.

CONCLUSION

Inspired by Connell's theory, the sociology of men and masculinities has grown rapidly.
However, when using her concept of hegemonic masculinity, scholars tend to focus on its
regressive aspects and ignore its progressive potential, reducing hegemonic masculinity to

expressions of sexism and homophobia, or legitimation of patriarchy. This pessimistic tendency results partly from ambiguities in Connell's (re)formulation. In this article, I reformulated hegemonic masculinity in a way that foregrounds its Gramscian roots, maintains its progressive potential, and highlights its relational nature. Drawing on sociological interpretations of Gramsci, I argue that hegemonic masculinity should not be defined by its substance but by its position in the social organization of masculinities and the way it dominates other masculinities—a combination of force and consent. This reformulation has two advantages. Methodologically, it concretely operationalizes the concept for empirical research. Politically, it calls attention to Connell's vision for social change.

This article focused mostly on the intra-gender relations between *masculinities*, which is critical for understanding and identifying hegemonic masculinity. Unlike intra-gender relations between *men*, this focus allows us to incorporate masculine-presenting women and queer people into the analysis. But just as not all female-bodied persons are invested in femininities, not all male-bodied persons are invested in masculinities. Gender relations also include inter-gender relations between masculinities and femininities and between men and women. This raises several questions for future research and debates. For example, what exactly is the tension between the hierarchy of masculinities and the hierarchy of femininities? Could the pattern of domination differ in these two hierarchies? Is the quality content of the hegemonic masculinity in a gender regime always complementary to the quality content of the hegemonic femininity in that gender regime (Schippers 2007)? Where is the boundary between masculinity and femininity, if women can also practice hegemonic masculinity (Pascoe 2011)?

Answering these questions may require as much empirical research as theoretical conversations beyond the subfield of sociology of men and masculinities—a task that is beyond the scope of this article. But dissociating hegemonic masculinity from any pregiven substantive content enables us to appreciate the relationality of gender and envision the possibility of transformation. With the progressive potential of hegemony in mind, we can move the word "currently" in Connell's (2005b:77) most quoted definition: *currently*, hegemonic masculinity embodies the "accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy." Hopefully, it will not in the future.

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ORCID ID

Yuchen Yang https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8122-3035

NOTES

1. Some scholars have examined how people enacting certain masculinities claim themselves as superior to other men/women, in settings such as factories (Padavic 1991), sex work (Besbris 2016; Hoang 2015), and a men's group (Bridges 2014; Pfaffendorf 2017). Their insightful analyses of social interactions vividly illustrate the hierarchical relation of multiple masculinities. Yet, this literature often does not assess what Connell calls the "pattern" of hierarchy—whether the hierarchy is based on hegemonic domination, a "simple domination based on force" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:846), or other forms of domination. Hegemonic masculinity is sometimes used as a reference point, characterized by explicit homophobia/sexism, from which privileged men try to dissociate (Pfaffendorf 2017), even though this "discursive distancing" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014) may signal a new hegemony (Demetriou 2001).

2. The editors explain that "totalitarian" here is a neutral term similar to "all-embracing and unifying" (Gramsci 1971:147n33, 265n65).
3. For instance, Connell (2012:14) notes that "in parts of the global South, where cultural discontinuity and disruption is the condition of life . . . a dominant masculinity may not be 'hegemonic,' because no hegemony is possible."

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Yuchen Yang is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Chicago. His research interests include gender and sexualities, childhood studies, and social theory.