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The Perfect Man or the Perfect Illusion: The Cost of High Expectations

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Abstract

Throughout history hegemonic masculinity has been cultivated in societies around the world.

Historically, in America, men perpetuated the hegemony through many different means, such as moving out west, creating men's clubs, and asserting their role as the breadwinner (**Kimmel, 2006**). In more recent years, hegemonic masculinity is still finding ways to enter into our culture, and we are still ingraining it into boys at a young age. Society uses a variety of methods in order to train boys to become hegemonic, but many of the boys do not fully meet the standard.

Using a citation in the abstract

Hegemonic masculinity in America is characterized by a strong, heterosexual, White man who does not express feminine qualities. With the changes in modern culture and how men and women are socialized, a gap is forming between what men and women expect from each other in relationships. This gap leads to many adverse effects and can only be bridged rejecting hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: hegemony, hegemonic masculinity, masculine, feminine

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The Perfect Man or the Perfect Illusion: The Cost of High Expectations

In a society where there is constant pressure to act a certain way, men are finding that they have to fit the ideas of the hegemony. Hegemonic masculinity is the epitome of what it means to be a man, and it is the stereotype many men try to achieve. To be hegemonic means that a man has conformed to the idea of what a dominant male is in any society under the rule of a patriarchy (Connell, 2005). Although American society is changing, the patriarchy has not changed its ideas of what it means to be a man. Also, men and women are presented two different ideas of how a man should behave. It is through these two separate ideas that a gap is forming between the two genders and contributing to a man's inability to form lasting and meaningful relationships.

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Background Information

Historical Roots

Before understanding how hegemony affects relationships today, it is important to understand where its battle with women first developed. Hegemony has been around for a while and throughout history has shaped how men conduct their day to day lives. However, around the mid to late 1800s, the patriarchy felt that there was pressure from subordinated and marginalized groups that could jeopardize all that the patriarchy worked to uphold. **Both Connell (2005) and Kimmel (2006)** discuss how this time period affected boys and how men learned to reestablish their manhood. The women of the time were pushing for alcohol and sexual temperance (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2006). Although the men felt that by ignoring the women's need for temperance they would be upholding their masculinity, they also felt that if they proved to be too sexual, then they would be considered effeminate. In order to avoid emasculation, men tried to

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find an acceptable level of consumption. The men of the time learned that by defying women, they could regain a piece of the masculinity they believed they were losing (Kimmel, 2006).

As men continued to push against women's belief of temperance, they also developed the idea that women were domesticating men. Through this domestication, men were losing their manhood and being transformed into weaker beings (Kimmel, 2006). In order to combat these ever growing fears, the men started to find ways to separate themselves from the ideas of women even more. One way the men rejected society was to reject civilization as a whole and revert to the idea of a time before the social constructs they faced were invented (Kimmel, 2006). Men achieved this through many methods. One way was through the literature of the time. In most cases, women were not written into the novels, and if they were, they were made objects to escape. The idea of escaping women was not a new concept. In classical literature, often times the hero had to escape the clutches of a witch or siren, but, in these modern times, the woman to escape was a bossy housewife (Kimmel, 2006). These ideas were perpetuated throughout the years, and, although the settings the male was exercising his masculinity in changed, the hegemonic male always came out on top.

Modern Implications

In more modern times, there is still a call for men to be the heroes of the story and rescue the subordinated or marginalized individuals. Take for instance a recent action film. The fourth *Transformers* installment featured a few female characters, but the primary female was depicted as a damsel in distress (Bay, 2014). It also featured an athletic scientist who, upon realizing aliens are going to destroy the world, becomes a skilled fighter and understands alien weaponry (Bay, 2014). In one case a character, the female lead, has been conformed to a gender stereotype. She is afraid and needs her dad and boyfriend to protect her. In another case a character, the

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scientist, defies his stereotypes and becomes more hegemonic as the movie progresses. Both representations are teaching boys and men that even complicit masculinities can achieve hegemony and save the girl. However, the representations are also teaching boys that women are victims and need to be protected. These views are reminiscent of the past when women were housewives who had to be protected from the outside world (Kimmel, 2006). In order to uphold hegemonic masculinity, boys and men are shown dramatized versions of traditional roles.

Shaping Hegemonic Masculinity

Growing Up Male

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→ **Boyhood.** The pressure for boys to conform to traditional masculinities is not only perpetuated by the media, but it is instilled in them as young children and reinforced throughout their lifetime. One main focus is during the boys' childhoods. When children enter into school, they have already been assigned a gender and taught attributes of the particular gender. Boys often enter school imagining warrior narratives where they can be anything from a spaceman fighting aliens on Mars to a knight defending his kingdom from dragons or approaching armies. Although these are manifestations of masculinity, they are not deemed appropriate; so, many teachers push their male students to conform to the idea of what a man is in our society (**Jordan & Cowan, 1995**). One of the many ways boys are pushed to more appropriate forms of masculinity is to live vicariously through men who are viewed as hegemonic. Boys are taught to idealize police officers, soldiers, athletes, and other representations of hegemonic masculinity so that they have a model around which to base their own masculinity (**Jordan & Cowan, 1995**). **According to Kimmel (2006)**, although the number of role models has varied over the years, men are always looking for the perfect embodiment of the hegemony.

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Masculine by association. It is through these hegemonic role models that boys find their own version of masculinity. For example, many men associate themselves with sports personalities in order to show their masculinity. It is not uncommon for men to gather together at a bar to cheer on their team and bond over the wins and losses of their teammates (Pyke, 1996). Also, it is common for men to bond through the military. Gentlemen are drawn into the military through advertisements promoting strength and endurance, both of which are masculine traits (Woodward, 2000). Although both of these demonstrations of masculinity are hegemonic, the individuals operating under it have an unofficial set of guidelines they must follow in order to be considered hegemonic. In fact, these same unofficial guidelines are applied to all men, and athletes and soldiers are simply two types of manifestation of the rules.

Pressured hegemony. Men are often pushed into the Act-Like-A-Man Box so that they fit in with the ideas of hegemonic masculinity. To fit into the box, a man must not show his emotions in displays of weakness; he must be strong, violent, homophobic, and a vast variety of other traits (Kivel, 1984). The article states that “even though they have the normal human emotions...they are taught to hide their feelings and appear tough and in control” (Kivel, 1984, p. 183). Furthermore, if a man fails to hide his emotions, then he is emasculated by his peers and has to find other ways to exert his masculinity. Take for instance individuals categorized as gamer nerds. The men described by Kendall (2000) were not considered masculine by other men in everyday life, so when they entered the chat rooms they would overcompensate for their complicit masculinity and pretend to be hegemonic. In all of these cases, the average man is trying to present himself in a way that will be considered hegemonic.

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Effects of Hegemony on Men

Diversion of Emotions

The problem with all the many versions of hegemonic masculinity is that each one leaves out fundamental parts of human development. Just like Kivel (1984) stated, men are taught to hide their emotions. After being trained since childhood to hide emotions, men are experts at diverting their feelings during conversations with others. For instance, Arxer (2011) gave multiple examples of men performing these activities. The men he observed at a bar would exclude men who were emotional based on their emotionality; they would make problems less significant and change the topic; and the men would use their emotions as ways to flirt with girls. Through every scenario emotions came into question, there was always a way to minimize or discredit the emotions being shown. Even in less public locations, men hide their emotions from other men. Walker (1994) discussed how men try to distinguish their friendships as different from women's. Often times, men make these distinctions by saying they do not disclose information as much as women and only contact their friends if they have a specific reason to. The author discovered that although this was not the case of what really happens, men are under the illusion that they are still very hegemonic through their relationships with their friends.

Validation of Masculinity

The idea that men cannot show emotions and relate to their friends as women do comes stems from another underlying issue, which revolves around men's need to constantly validate their masculinity. Validation of one's masculinity starts at an early age. Kivel (1984) states that it begins for boys at a young age when they are told to act like a man. However, as they get older, the term evolves and the ways to push boys into the box become much harsher. Pascoe (2005) stated that boys will emasculate other boys in order to make themselves seem more masculine.

The process of emasculation is completed through feminization, which is accomplished through guys calling other guys gay, fags, or girls in order to make them feel like less of a man (Pascoe, 2005). A prime example would be if a boyfriend wrote a poem for his girlfriend. The girl might take it as an endearing sentiment, whereas the boyfriend's friends might see it as a sign of weakness and call him gay to make him act more hegemonic. With events like this example happening often, and with feminism and traditional female roles presenting other ideas, it is apparent that there is a disconnect forming between how men expect, and how women expect, men to act in intimate relationships.

Inability to Cope

As has already been established, men are not taught to fully express themselves to others. Emotionality is frowned upon by other men, and is thus tossed aside for less appropriate means of communication. Through hegemonic masculinity, men are taught to be strong emotionally and physically, such as the case in Pyke's (1996) article. The men described in the article did not know how to communicate to their wives that they were uncomfortable being stay-at-home dads while their wives were out working. In order to respond to the feelings, but still be tough hegemonic men, the husbands were violent towards their wives (Pyke, 1996). In contrast, feminism has instilled the idea in women that they should hold men to a higher standard and expect them to be respectful gentlemen. Although women are increasingly deciding to raise the bar, men are still expected to follow the rules of hegemonic masculinity.

Effects of Hegemony on Relationships

Cultural Expectations

Media portrayal. Women are bombarded on a daily basis by images seen online that teach them what to expect from men. When searching through social media sites, it has been

found that there are numerous images of what women should look for in men and what they should expect. A prime example is Pinterest. On this site women post about their dream guy and how he will behave. A census of images found that when searching “I Want a Man,” Pinterest shows that women are more drawn to traits that would cause a man to feel emasculated (**Bean, 2014**). For instance, one pin was an image of a dress, jewelry, and a note. The note was from a man to his significant other, in which he disclosed that he had picked the outfit for her and that he had a special evening planned for the two of them (Bean, 2014). Although many women have expressed desire in the action, other men would deem the activity as gay. Eguchi (2011) discussed how feminized gay men are assumed to be involved in the fashion industry. The association of gay men with fashion causes men to use an interest in women’s clothing to feminize other men and cause the feminized men to need to verify their masculinity. Although a woman may see the action as a romantic gesture, men see it as a failure to represent hegemonic masculinity and have to compensate for their lost masculinity.

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Status changes. Another aspect that is creating a gap between men and women is that women’s status in society is changing. As stated by Kimmel (2006), in the 1800s women were seen as objects that needed to be protected by their fathers, husbands, or boyfriends. At this time, women were still pieces of property that men traded. As time progressed, Kimmel (2006) noted that women became more independent from the men in their life and started pursuing an education. Men began to believe that through education women were losing their femininity and taking away roles that once belonged to their husbands. Men began to blame women for their problems, and antifeminism began to take root (Kimmel, 2006).

Impact on Interactions

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In today's society, men are still holding on to these ideas that women are the problem. Quinn (2002) discussed how men will objectify women in the workplace to show their dominance over them. Also, **Giordano, Longmore, and Manning (2006)** found that boys are taught this behavior early on. In their article, **Giordano et al. (2006)** discusses how boys see dating as just another area to show dominance and do not know how to behave once they enter into a relationship. The girlfriends in these scenarios often had to re-socialize their boyfriends to be less hegemonic in order for their relationship to work. There are actually many instances of boys and men struggling to cope with, or embrace, the versions of masculinity that are not considered hegemonic (**Giordano et al., 2006; Kendall, 2000; Pyke, 1996**). The men interviewed by Kendall (2000) discussed how they felt like they had to be hegemonic in order to get the girl. They felt that women wanted a hegemonic man, so, whenever they were online, they would present themselves as such. In all actuality, the women on the site were offended by the misogynistic jokes the men were making and did not like when the men behaved in hyper-masculine ways.

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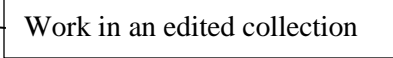
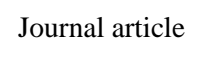
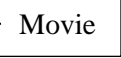

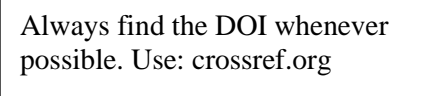
Through all the attempts men make to seem more masculine, they inevitably come to a point where they are only functioning at partial capacity. It is like Kivel (1984) stated, emotionally ignoring young boys and telling them to toughen up is emotional abuse. This emotional abuse can come back to haunt the boys later in life and contribute to their inability to form relationships. Giordano et al. (2006) explained that boys have a hard time when they enter their first romantic relationships because they do not know how to respond with their emotions. Usually, the boys start off awkward with their significant other, but still feel pressure to be initiators, confident, and masculine. If the boys falter from these ideas, then their friends will see them as weak (Giordano et al., 2006).

Eventually, boys have received so much masculine training that they struggle to see women as their equals. Unlike the men in Anderson (2008), who were able to see women as their equal, most men find it difficult to not think of women as objects. Beneke (1982) provided a prime example of this behavior. Men expressed that they had thought of rape before, and that most men often blame the victim for rape. Claiming that a woman's clothing provoked them, or that the woman herself was a prize that needed to be won, allows men to uphold their masculinity and convert the act from being a crime against a person to expressing power and dominance over a commodity (Beneke, 1982). Hegemonic masculinity perpetuates all of these ideas and more, and until it is rejected, men will continue to exercise the same negative behaviors in hopes to attract women.

Conclusion

Throughout history, men have been battling to uphold the ideas of hegemonic masculinity in a world that has slowly progressed away from those same ideas. Men are taught that in order to succeed in society they must be strong and tough, while not showing any signs of weakness or emotion. Although other men encourage displays of hegemonic masculinity, women tend to want men to be more expressive and perform actions that other men may see as feminine. Due to this discrepancy, a gap is forming between what women want and how men behave. The gap is making it difficult for men to form meaningful relationships with women, because the two want different things. There has not been much progress in remedying the situation, and there will not be until society rejects hegemonic masculinity as the norm.

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