

## **A critique of hegemonic masculinity and developing an alternative approach using ethnographic evidence**

### **The theory of hegemonic masculinity**

Hegemonic masculinity was the theory originally developed to explain the everyday processes and practices which enabled men to maintain dominant social roles over women. Perhaps conveniently the theory has also been used extensively to explain many of the disadvantages and problems which men suffer from. If we want to know why men are more likely to commit suicide, why they are reluctant to go to the doctors, why they don't seek help for depression, engage in a range of unhealthy behaviours, and so on this can broadly be explained by hegemonic masculinity – the practices and behaviours of men.

So broadly according to this theory there are various processes at work to establish male dominance which have become embedded at an unconscious level in the way we do things. From the outset boys are taught not to cry or express their emotions because this could reveal their vulnerability. Traditional gender roles required that young men were socialised into becoming strong independent providers, stoical, able to find solutions, always in control.

These tropes of masculinity are held to impact on men's wellbeing in various ways. For example changes to social and economic systems mean that men are not as in control as they expect to be, this can have negative outcomes for self-esteem and lead to depression; in extremis suicide becomes a way of re-establishing control. Ditto the experience of dependence, another cause of suicide, it results in intense distress clashing with their perception of what it means to be a man. Unemployment is a problem because it disrupts the possibility of performing masculinity through the provider role. Even loss of the paternal role has been incorporated into the hegemonic concept:

The theory has some basic flaws, there is no real discussion about causality – the argument is circular in effect. It is highly culturally determinist, actual differences between men and women are regarded as so superficial – it is what culture does with them which is at issue here. Also it doesn't explain why male suicide rates are lower in some Muslim and other ethnic minority cultures which we would regard as having far more male hegemony than our own.

### **Other ways of understanding masculinity**

It is not the description of masculinity which I would like to question, rather it is the underlying causes of the behaviours which I want to interrogate here.

It is a fact that men are less likely to go to the doctor, that they are more likely to engage in unhealthy practices and less likely to engage in activities just to help them keep fit. According to Will Courtney

*“A discussion of power and social inequality is necessary to understand the broader context of men’s adoption of unhealthy behaviour ... Gender is negotiated through relationships of power.... These power relationships are located in and constituted in, among other practices, the practice of health behaviour”.*

Put simply, if men weren’t seeking domination they wouldn’t be so unwell.

However the same set of unhealthy practices could be equally well explained using an alternative approach. The reason men don’t go to the doctor’s or look after themselves could at least partly be because they feel that they are not that important and that the wellbeing of others is of greater consequence; the world will still go round even if they don’t look after themselves.

This would tally with the evidence. We know that 99% of the majority of people who die in war are male, 96% of those who die in the workplace, and 71% of those who die from murder (thanks Glen). Men are very much more likely to be sent to prison and they are also more likely to sleep rough. Their bosses expect them to work longer hours. We also find that numerous health care initiatives are directed at women rather than men.

This is the wider context which men exist in - the disposable male – so surely the lack of attention which they give to their own health care needs is a perfectly rational response? Men can see that their needs are not a social priority, they internalise this and therefore see little reason to look after themselves.

Stoical behaviour can be understood in a similar vein. Alston spent many years living in rural Australia which has been subject to a significant drought for over a decade. This has led to unprecedented hardship which has impacted on everyone particularly men who are committing suicide at four to five times the rate of women. Alston tells us that *“to address the crisis of rural male suicide it is important that the dominant form of rural masculinity be exposed and interrogated and its shortcomings revealed”.*

However I would suggest that there is a rather more straightforward explanation. Firstly it should be pointed out that despite Alston’s lengthy discussion about the stoicism of men it emerges time and again that men are not particularly stoical:

*“My wife and I are fortunate in being tough as old leather boots we’ve got each others shoulder to cry on ...”*

or *“ I need help with my husband. I don’t know what to do ...he’s crying all the time”*

Yet these examples are mentioned in passing without further comment or explanation.

But we also learn that when the men do break down the women come to the healthcare worker to talk discuss how they don’t know how to deal with their men’s distress. Surely these husbands rather than pretending to be strong in order to maintain a position of

dominance, are simply trying to avoid causing their wives further distress. It seems to me that this is a far more commonsensical explanation than anything theories of masculine hegemony can provide.

What about the idea that mothers socialise their sons to suppress their emotions, bury their feelings in that assertion 'Boys don't cry'. Mothers may be socialising their boys in how to be male but the mechanisms through which this happen are very difficult to ascertain. Rather than subscribing to assumptions of masculine hegemony there could be something different going on. What if boys were actually a tad more emotional than girls, – as a busy mother coping with the strains of raising a family – a fragile boy would add to the stresses of everyday life. If boys were actually more emotional than girls it would produce the same sort of outcome. We would want them to sit on their over-developed emotions, stop bugging our pressured lives with their heightened sensitivity and we would be very easily resort to telling them that "Boys don't cry". Alternatively we know that empathy is reduced when dealing with difference – and boys being of a slightly different species perhaps don't elicit exactly the same response. Which is why the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus could be a very useful corrective here.

All this is sheer speculation without a shred of evidence – but it should be explored and considered before capitulating to masculine hegemony as a cause.

Finally what about the bread and butter of hegemonic masculinity - that men avoid dependence, rather seeking to maintain power and control. Michael Shiner and colleagues conducted an analyses of coroner's reports on suicides and did indeed find that over dependence on a woman was identified a causal category and that suicide was also used as a way of re-establishing control. However if one feels that one has to take one's own life in order to exercise any kind of influence this appears to be a pretty extreme loss of control.

Hegemonic masculinists can always find a way to turn things round:

*"We could speculate that for men there are perhaps tensions between the ideal of autonomy that hegemonic masculinity sets up and the reality of dependence on women. ...Distress may also be caused by a tension between certain misogynist aspects of heterosexual male culture and the personal experience of depending on a real embodied woman"* (Shiner p.745)

What I would like to suggest is that far from lacking control according to some normative framework men *objectively* lack control and this leaves them in a very vulnerable situation where they may be unable to fulfil basic needs. Far from being dominant men are far more vicariously positioned - this happens in two different ways.

Firstly women tend to gravitate towards the domestic arena, local community and social networks where they can exercise a considerable degree of control. Men by contrast are peripheral here and have an almost unmediated relationship with the impersonal forces of

the labour market, the state of the market or the weather – over which they have much less control.

The other arena in which men are vulnerable is in relation to the family, in particular their partner and children for it is their role here, which lends meaning to the other dimensions of life. The provider role is not only important because it helps establish status and indicate success. Rather it increases men's access to a mate or partner and perhaps even more importantly gives them a chance to have a role in their children's life. However if their relationship breaks down key roles and relationships are lost in a way which does not happen in other cultures

### **Why anthropology**

So what I am suggesting is that hegemonic masculinity does not provide an accurate way of understanding either the position of men, or the relationship between the sexes and therefore solutions to male problems which are rooted in this theory are unlikely to have a helpful approach. Alternative insights can be provided by turning to the sorts of societies traditionally studied by anthropologists. There are a number of reasons why these provide a useful resource

Firstly there is such rich diversity in the way that people choose to organise their social relations that any universals are thrown into relief. Secondly while in our own society power tends to be understood largely in terms of what happens in the public realm of employment and politics anthropologists have given a great deal of attention to kinship and the organisation of family and households which provides a useful corrective to the focus here. Further there seems to be more freedom to explore relations of power because they do not appear to have a direct bearing on our own society. However a look at these other societies can be very informative if we want to understand our own.

### **The consistency of maternal responsibility**

One of the most consistent features across a scan of a wide range of societies is the primary responsibility which a mother has caring for her child. This caring may often be shared out amongst a wide range of people, the father may for example in a foraging society such as the Aka take an almost equal role, but the primary maternal responsibility remains. As Geoff Dench explains all societies have found that building on the biological fact of motherhood is the most effective way to ensure that children are cared for.

What is perhaps most significant is that this does not confer any loss of status – to the contrary – it is a highly esteemed social role. The awe in which motherhood is held starts early as Margaret Mead points out

*“And having a baby is on the whole, on of the most exciting and conspicuous achievements that be presented to the eyes of small children in these simple worlds in some of which the largest buildings are only fifteen feet high and the largest boat some twenty feet long”.*

In peasant communities the mother child relationship is the most important tie in life. If we look at family life in a Bolivian mining community where the men die young both men and women agree that the mother child relationship is the most enduring relationship. The self-sacrifice by the mothers, many of whom worked two shifts of six hours to keep their children fed and clothed, gave children a rare understanding of the human potential for love and devotion. Long after their mothers had died, adults especially men, could hardly speak of their passing without crying. “My mother left me an orphan”, said one miner whose mother died when he was 45 years old.

### **The place of the provider role**

However imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and the esteem in which the maternal role is held is reflected in the way men try to recreate this role. Various forms of this can be found across a whole range of societies however perhaps the clearest example is demonstrated by Ian Hogbin’s ethnography of the Melanesian Wogeo – the book is called the Island of Menstruating Men. The entire construction of ritual and symbolism, the gendered division of labour, the cultural context is structured so that the processes of reproduction are shared by men.

Firstly there are a whole series of initiations carried out by the older men, beginning in babyhood when the boys ears are pierced and ending in late puberty. The purpose of these various rites is to grow the boys into men. In this way while women can reproduce children, only men are capable of making men. A crucial part of the whole ritual is the playing of flutes and teaching the initiates to play flutes – these would appear to have some mystical powers through which the whole process can occur. It is also fundamental to the division of labour as one male respondent summed it up “Men play flutes, women bear infants”. Also crucial is that the flutes are allegedly kept secret from the women – when they hear them they are supposed to believe that it is some strange monster which will eat their sons. This theme of having secrets from women is a reoccurring one perhaps providing a balance which helps men to deal with the mysteries of female reproductive success.

There are various ways in which the men help the boys to reach manhood. Crucial is sleeping in the clubhouse. In many different societies, including this one, the club house is at the heart of the ritual – boys go in uninitiated, and come out as men. In some societies it is even called a womb.

Many rituals are involved in magically growing the boy. They are given lots of unpleasant things to eat and drink which will ensure lofty stature and freedom for skin disease. It is said that by the end of all the initiations they will have consumed some portion of every useful

tree, creeper or plant found on the Island – in this way the milk provided by women is somehow outdone by the nature harnessed by men. The symbolism of this is strengthened by the mythology where the tribal hero Nat Egare survived underground in his dead mother's body by eating the roots of the plants and trees.

But most crucial of all the rituals is bringing about menstruation in men. This happens initially when the boys are about 13 through the scarification of the tongue. This serves the dual purpose of not only bleeding the boys but by doing it through the tongue it cleanses them of the feminine pollution which they would have imbibed in their mother's milk. In later puberty they are taught how to menstruate properly. They go into the sea, find a small crab and incise the penis using the crabs claw. This ritual is repeated at frequent intervals throughout the man's life. I can't help thinking that while this may maximise cultural reproduction it might discourage reproductive success!

While all the processes are accompanied by severe restrictions and discomforts for the boys –those who do the initiating endure privations which are even worse. The result is that the men refer constantly to enduring such pain, hunger and thirst that they expect in the years to come the boys will make a fitting repayment with offers of daily assistance. In this way we can see how the rituals mimic the child's obligation to his or her mother.

In many societies, for example the Aka, the training of young boys in the men's secret society is combined not only with witchcraft and herbal healing but with learning to hunt. In this way the provider role is subsumed into and becomes part of the rituals which facilitate social reproduction and here we get to the crux of what the provider role is all about. Far from being a way of gaining status, power and domination, by becoming a provider a man is finding himself a place in processes of reproduction so that he too can share in woman's reproductive role. This link between male providing and male reproduction is found among the Wogeo – the scarification of the tongue takes place once the boys are becoming economically useful.

Through giving birth women become responsible for a dependent other and through this play a key role in building up the social networks which facilitate the exchange of services which make up the heart of society. Thus the providing role too gives men a key place in processes of reproduction, and gives them (a little bit anyway) the experience of having others dependent on them and the sense of responsibility and experience of being useful which flows from that.

In fact if we turn back to the Bolivian mining community where the key relationship was between mothers and their children, we find that men also have a very important role to play. For most miners the family provides the object and motivation for living and working. Men feel no need to disguise the fact that their ability to earn money and hand it over to their wife forms the basis for their maintaining a position in the family:

*“The miner knows how to work for his children, knows how to support his children but life is bought at a high price. Eight people died in Colorado. Why? To support their children. We expose our life and our soul to buy the daily bread for our children. A miner works with his love not with his bad intentions”.*

The miner’s devotion to his family is underwritten by priests:

*“there is no difference between the sacrifice that you workers make and what the priest makes. You workers who bring food home to feed your children are in your sacrifice acting as a minister of the Lord”*

So as Geoff Dench observes, providing is in fact a way in which men can become more like women; it is not about accumulating status and power among men.

### **The economic social and political importance of the private realm**

We assume that women’s greater connection with children means that they are excluded from arenas of power however in simple societies this is far from the case. In peasant societies the domestic unit is of primary economic, political and social importance so that women’s power in this sphere extends to the village at large. So if we look at such as Riegelhaupt’s studies of Greek and Portuguese peasant societies or Roger’s ethnography of a village in North East France we find that women will be responsible for the marketing the family farm’s produce plus extra money earned by the husband is managed by her. Women will make all the marketing and household economic decisions and are always consulted in ‘male’ agricultural decisions. As one farmer said “My wife is my minister of finance”.

Women are virtually in control of information dissemination because men work individually in the fields while women come into contact with each other through their household work in the village. They develop excellent inter-household communication networks through which they are able to influence public opinion and influence the outcome of local elections. They are more likely to be involved in rituals surrounding birth and death which helps to maintain distant kin networks. They use men’s fear of female sexuality and pollution to obtain the things they want.

While men have the positions of authority for example in the local chapter of the farmers union or in the municipal council the members will say privately that the local chapter is powerless and that the capitalist farmers are really in control. Where organisations are actually useful for example in the machine co-operative it emerges that this was set up on the insistence of women, and while men find running it a nuisance and would like to give it up it is the women who insist that they make it work.

Women do defer to men in what anthropologists refer to as ‘the myth of male dominance’. However letting men believe that they are powerful enables women to stay in control. While men know that they are not, they do believe that women think they are and so go on

doing what is expected of them. This works out very well for both. It is good for men in relation to the outside world, to appear to be in charge of their family, meanwhile women have someone to blame for foolish or unpopular decisions, and being able to call on the authority figure of the father helps the woman to stay in charge of her children.

### **Fathers and care**

Although all primate males can nurture infants as well as women when necessary there is huge variation in the amount of care men do. This would appear to be largely a case of path dependency; women breast feed, they are more responsive to certain cries of babies and what with one thing leading to another they end up doing most of the care. Fathers seem to be most likely to do caring when they spend a lot of time with the mothers so for example among the Aka there is very little gendered division of labour so husbands and wives share in a great many of the tasks. This is perhaps carried to its extreme in the Titi monkey where the mothers breastfeed the baby, it is then handed over to the father who in fact does most of the care. In the case of the Titi monkey the parents are monogamous and spend their whole time together. This sort of partnership appears to be necessary in order to keep the male so involved.

While it appears to be essential to reproductive success for a mother to take responsibility for her child, and certainly no society appears to have survived without it, for men, caring for children appears to be one of a number of strategies pursued to achieve reproductive success. So for example while it used to be assumed that males would be most likely to care when they could be sure of the paternity of their offspring this has turned out not to be the case. In foraging cultures fathers and men in general may enhance their reproductive fitness by providing food, care, defence and other forms of investment to children who are not biologically related to them. Men may invest in children in these contexts to attract new mates or keep an existing one. Hunter gatherer fathers will favour genetically related children over step children, but this level of care decreases when the number of reproductive women in the camp goes up.

But the main point to take away is that caring for children tends to be bound up with providing and mating – it requires a more extreme situation, for example when the mother has died or abandoned the child for a father to take over the care.

### **So what would I take away from these other societies when thinking about ways in which we can improve the wellbeing of men?**

These societies are incredibly different from our own but they draw our gaze to the private, the household, the domestic the community realm. It is true that men dominate in politics and generally earn more than women and are more likely to have jobs which confer power and prestige.

But in our everyday life how important are these symbols of power? Perhaps they are like the capitalist farmers in the little French village whose presence means that in everyday life men exercise little control. After all it is our social interactions, our friends and our family, our homes, our leisure pursuits or the daily grind of work which makes up our everyday life. If we look at who makes decisions about housework, or spending, or children or what we do with our leisure time – it would be difficult to arrive at a portrait of male control. If we understood that male dominance is as mythical as it is in peasant societies this could help ease off the underlying distrust which afflicts relations between women and men.

We have seen that men's contribution to reproduction is culturally constructed rather than rooted in the directly biological processes of birth and nurturing. This means that the male role is far more vulnerable when it comes to social change. And it explains why economic upheavals provoke tremendous fluctuations in suicide mortality. In such a context I would suggest that it is much more likely that men will adopt a negative culture of masculinity during times when their roles and positions in society are insecure. The theory of hegemonic masculinity by corroding and delegitimising the few roles that men have is much more likely to contribute towards the development of a negative culture of masculinity than do anything very positive for men.

As we saw the provider role was important as it gave men a part in the reproductive cycle of life. In our own society men are still significant providers and research suggests that, within reason, both men and women value them having this role. However providing gets its meaning from the role it plays in partnering and parenting. In contemporary culture it is frequently separated from partnering and parenting and this makes it meaningless in itself. This happens through relationship breakdown where either the mother may make it difficult for a father to have contact with his children or the state makes unreasonable demands on the father in terms of providing child support.

It is because of the way in which relationship breakdown separates providing from partnering and parenting that it emerges so consistently as a trigger for suicide in the research. We need to think about ways in which when relationship breakdown happens the links between providing and parenting and possibly also partnering can be maintained.

There is also a very consistent link found between unemployment and suicide and I would suggest that this is because of the way in which unemployment can disrupt the providing and therefore opportunities for parenting and partnering. Unemployment does not have this same effect in relation to women; as the risks are greater for males we should be more concerned by unemployment in men.