

“Man Up!”

Young Men, Risky Drinking, Public Violence and Hegemonic Masculinity

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Abstract

Young men’s engagement in risky drinking and public violence is now widely recognised as significant issue facing many contemporary societies. This paper presents an analysis of the relationship between young men, hegemonic masculinity, risky drinking, and public violence. This paper will argue that hegemonic masculinity, a legitimate and ideal form of masculinity that is positioned as dominant over women and all other forms of subaltern masculinities, plays a significant role in young men’s engagement in risky drinking and public violence, and that there exists an important relationship between young men, hegemonic masculinity, and risky practices that must be considered when attempting to understand young men’s widespread engagement in such practices. Drawing on a series of focus groups and interviews conducted with young Australian men, this paper documents two key ways in which young men’s engagement in risky drinking and public violence is related to hegemonic masculinity. First, young men use risky drinking and public violence to construct and perform configurations of masculine practice that are considered culturally legitimate and in alignment with a dominant hegemonic ideal. Second, young men’s engagement in risky

drinking and public violence acts to reinforce a patriarchal gender system which guarantees the overall subordination of women and the domination of one form of masculinity over all other masculinities. This analysis provides important insights into the ways in which young men's engagement in risky drinking and public violence is shaped and informed by their understandings of masculinity. Furthermore, it begins to articulate some of the ways in which hegemonic masculinity manifests in the everyday lives of young men, and the impacts of this across the wider gender order.

Introduction

The widespread engagement of young men in risky drinkingⁱ and public violenceⁱⁱ has become a prominent concern for many within the contemporary social order. Young men's engagement in excessive alcohol use and acts of public violence has been identified as having substantial negative impacts not only upon young men, but also on other individuals and across broader society (ABS 2007; 2009; AIHW 2011). Here in Australia, extensive education strategies have been devised by the Government to target such behaviours, aiming to educate young men about the negative consequences of risky practice in order to effect behaviour change. However, the effectiveness of these risk-reduction strategies has come under question with recent research indicating they are having only a modest impact with some minor improvements but also some deteriorations (Ipsos-Eureka 2009, 9). This, coupled with the fact that risky drinking and public violence continue to permeate night-time economies, indicates that these strategies need to be further strengthened by a critical theoretical approach that aims to understand *why* young men engage in these practices. Little is known about young men's understandings of risky drinking and public violence, nor about how young men's notions of masculinity inform their engagement in such practices. This paper will argue that hegemonic masculinity plays a significant role in young men's engagement in risky drinking and public violence, and that there exists an important

relationship between young men, hegemonic masculinity, and risky practices that must be considered when attempting to understand young men's widespread engagement in these practices.

Hegemonic Masculinity: Cultural, Political, and Social Practice.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity suggests that there exists a legitimate and ideal form of masculinity within a given gender order that is positioned as dominant over all women, and all other forms of subaltern masculinities. The concept emerged largely from the work of Connell (1987; 1995) and has become the theoretical cornerstone upon which the discursive framework now known as the critical study of menⁱⁱⁱ has been built. However, over the past thirty years as the research on hegemonic masculinity has expanded the concept has attracted serious criticism for being used in ways which are often confused and contradictory, slipping between various meanings and interpretations (Beasley 2008; Demetriou 2001; Flood 2002; Hearn 2004; 2012; Jefferson 2002). These criticisms have pointed to the problems of essentialism, reification, and ambiguity within the literature, and have argued that the concept itself has had too limited a focus. In an important re-thinking of the concept, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) acknowledge these problems yet maintain that a sophisticated and clear grasp of the central aspects of the original theory was still crucial in conducting critical analyses of gendered power relations.

In light of this re-thinking, it has become apparent that a clearer definition of what hegemonic masculinity actually refers to is needed. As Hearn (2012, 590) asks, 'does it refer to cultural aspirations, representations, everyday practices, or institutional structures'? – In other words, is it a process, an action, an ideal, a value, or all of the above? The time has come to be more precise and specific when it comes to defining what hegemonic masculinity refers to, and how it should be used within subsequent theorisation. With this in mind, this paper has

defined hegemonic masculinity as having two distinct yet theoretically interconnected components; a cultural component; and a political component. Together, these two mechanisms operate simultaneously to ensure the continued legitimisation and authorisation of inequalities within the gender order that see the overall dominance of men over women in society, and some men positioned as dominant over other men.

As a cultural mechanism, hegemonic masculinity acts as a cultural ideal, a model of masculinity that is ideologically acknowledged and approved as being the most legitimate and authentic form of masculinity within a given society. As Connell (1987, 110) indicates, at any given time one form of masculinity is culturally exalted and positioned as dominant over all others. This form of masculinity sits over and above subordinate, complicit, marginalised and protest masculinities, and also all women, as the most acceptable and desirable form of manhood within a particular society. Central to the workings of hegemonic masculinity as a cultural mechanism is the idea of *legitimacy* (Hearn 2012, 594). In order for a specific form or ideal of masculinity to become widely acknowledged as the most acceptable and desirable it must first be culturally endorsed as being the most legitimate form of masculine practice within that culture. Within hegemonic gender systems, men who desire to be seen as enacting authentic masculinity must express a particular form of masculine practice which aligns with the culturally accepted hegemonic masculine ideal. In turn, the legitimacy of the hegemonic masculinity is achieved through generating aspiration and desire within men to align themselves with this ideal, with any deviations or departures from the desired hegemonic characteristics perceived as a failure and a lack of authentic masculinity.

Whilst it is certainly cultural, hegemonic masculinity is ultimately and most importantly political; a way of obtaining and maintaining control of systems of gender and exercising power and domination over subordinate factions (Donaldson 1993; Howson 2006). As

Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985, 592) observe, hegemonic masculinity is centrally concerned with the institutionalisation of male dominance and female subordination, and involves a specific strategy for the subordination of women. According to Connell's (1995, 77) original definition, hegemonic masculinity can be understood as the 'configuration of gender practice' that ensures the legitimacy of patriarchy and the continued domination of men and the subordination of women in society. Hegemonic masculinity therefore describes a gender system in which a particular configuration of masculine practice is politically positioned as dominant, and therefore exercises power and authority over women and all other forms of masculinity in society. It is a form of masculinity that gains its legitimacy and authority through the ideological persuasion of the greater part of the population, through social institutions, social practices, cultural values and norms, convincing the wider society that hegemonic masculinity represents the authentic and legitimate masculine ideal. This hegemonic pattern of masculinity asserts a gender order in which men are dominant over women, and through which patriarchal principles are made to appear normal and natural, and are reinforced and maintained.

One further point that must be acknowledged is that whilst hegemonic masculinity certainly involves cultural legitimacy and political authority, it also always refers back to the social - the actual configurations of practice embodied and enacted by men. As Hearn (2004, 59) rightly argues, a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of hegemonic masculinity requires a shift from a focus on masculinity to a focus on the practices and understandings of men themselves. As has been noted, the defining characteristics of hegemonic masculinity are not always the most common or the most comfortable for men to identify with at the everyday level (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). In fact, hegemonic masculinity may not actually exist in any pure form found empirically in the here and now but rather sit above men as some form of aspiration goal or 'empty signifier that only a small number of men, if

any, actually fulfil (Hearn 2012, 594; Howson 2009, 18). So whilst it is undoubtedly important to examine the broader macro nature of hegemonic masculinity as it plays out within existing gender systems, it is imperative to do so in ways that acknowledge the actual configurations of social practice as expressed in the lives of actual men. With these things in mind, the ultimate aim of this research is to draw on these notions of hegemonic masculinity to examine the ways in which young men's engagement in two social practices - risky drinking and public violence – is shaped and informed by hegemonic masculinity. That is, the ways in which risky drinking and public violence are used by young men to express culturally legitimate masculine identities, and to reinforce and maintain a gender system that ensures the overall subordination of women and the domination of one form of masculinity over all other masculinities.

Studying Risky Masculinity

This paper is part of a larger qualitative study of the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and risky practices among young men. The data presented here is drawn from a series of twenty individual interviews and two focus groups conducted with a sample of twenty-eight young men in the city of Wollongong, Australia. The study employed a 'strategic' or 'theoretical' approach to sampling (Mason 2002, 123-125), in that participants were chosen based on their relevance to the research question and the theoretical argument being developed (see Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990). The research sample was defined as young men aged 18 to 24 years who regularly engage in risky drinking and/or who have experienced public violence. The young men were recruited from two key sampling locations; the University Of Wollongong (UOW); and the Wollongong College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). These settings were chosen for a number of reasons. First, these two settings provided access to populations of young men who fit the desired age demographic. Second, recruiting from these settings would increase

the likelihood of obtaining a sample that was diverse in educational, socioeconomic, and social class status. In order to negate any issues of power imbalance between the researcher and participants, the interviews and focus groups were conducted by a person of similar age, gender, race, and class (Tagg 1985), and were designed to investigate young men's understandings of risky drinking and public violence, documenting the particular ways in which young men manage and negotiate hegemonic masculine expectations in regards to these practices. Interview and focus group transcripts were then coded for key themes and subjected to a thematic and comparative analysis, with all participants allocated pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Young Men, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Risky Practices.

An analysis of the qualitative data collected in this study indicates that young men's engagement in risky drinking and public violence is highly related to their understandings of masculinity. According to their accounts, young men use risky drinking and public violence to express forms of masculinity that are in alignment with a dominant hegemonic ideal. Furthermore, these practices are also used by young men to subordinate and marginalise forms of masculinity that do not meet the desired hegemonic standard and to reinforce patriarchal ideologies which see men positioned as dominant over women. Drawing on the accounts of the young men, this paper will now examine the ways in which young men's engagement in risky drinking and public violence corresponds with the two aforementioned central components of hegemonic masculinity – the cultural component and the political component.

As has been established, the concept of hegemonic masculinity recognises that at any given time, one form of masculinity is culturally exalted and positioned as dominant over all others. This form of masculinity is considered to be the most culturally legitimate and authentic form

of masculine practice, a form of masculinity that sits over and above all other forms of masculinity, and is positioned as dominant over all women. Any aspirational practice that aligns itself towards this hegemonic ideal can therefore be considered to be aspiring towards masculine legitimacy. In examining young men's engagement in risky drinking and public violence, it becomes apparent that these practices are organised in ways that legitimate some forms of masculine practice whilst marginalising and subordinating others. The young men indicate that there are very clear cultural ideals regarding risky drinking and public violence that dictate what *is* and what is *not* considered legitimate masculine practice.

In terms of risky drinking, there are particular expectations placed on young men in terms of how they engage in this practice. Young men are expected to drink large quantities of alcohol, to drink frequently and to excess, to drink certain 'manly' drinks such as beer or hard spirits and to reject 'girly' drinks like cocktails and cruisers, to be able to 'keep up' with their male peers, to 'hold their piss', to not pass out drunk and to keep drinking when others cannot;

So there's manly drinks and girls drinks, for sure. We give each other banter if you get like a little pussy drink, everyone knows that, it's like a manly culture sort of thing; you're just like a little bitch, a little pussy, why are you drinking that? Have a beer. Man up! It's everywhere; it's just the way it is.

Stefan, 18, TAFE

The young men talk of having to 'prove yourself' through alcohol consumption, to demonstrate that you are better at drinking than other men and can 'out-drink the bloke sitting next to you'. To do so is to demonstrate legitimate masculine practice and results in gaining status amongst your male peers.

In a similar fashion, there are particular expectations placed on young men in terms of how they engage with public violence. Young men are expected to respond adequately to threats and challenges from other individuals, especially other men; to protect their male honour and 'not take any shit'; to never back down from a fight; and to always 'have your mates back' by supporting them in their altercations;

As a man, I think you're expected to get involved in violence. I think there is that expectance, people expect to see you arc up and throw a punch.

Jimmy, 23, UOW

Young men must never be seen as 'weak' or 'soft' when it comes to public violence, and to lose a fight, refuse to fight, retreat from an altercation, or to be badly beaten results in a loss of masculine status and respect;

If someone challenges you to a fight, you don't want to be seen as backing down or whatever, you have to respond. If you don't you're just seen as soft I guess.

Tim, 20, UOW

The idea the young men consistently reiterate is that there is a culturally accepted and acknowledged masculine ideal in relation to risky drinking and public violence. According to the young men's understandings of these two practices, authentic masculinity is a quality that is proven or demonstrated through social practice. Young men's successful claim to an acceptable and culturally legitimate form of masculine identity is therefore contingent upon the ways in which they engage in both risky drinking and public violence.

In talking to young men about their engagement in risky drinking and public violence, it becomes apparent that these practices are also organised in ways that contribute to the subordination of women and the fostering of gendered inequalities between men within masculine hierarchies. The hegemonic pattern of masculinity asserts a gender order in which some men are positioned as dominant over other men, and where women are considered subordinate to men and subject to patriarchal rule. Its basic principles allow for those who have a successful claim to power to operate in ways that ensure the continued maintenance and expansion of hegemonic ideologies within society.

Young men's engagement in risky drinking and public violence is organised in ways that subordinate and diminish forms of masculinity that are seen as deviating from the desired hegemonic ideal. One way in which we see this in the accounts of young men is through gender policing (Butler 1990), where those who do not meet hegemonic expectations face certain forms of masculine scrutiny and punishment. For example, young men who do not engage in risky drinking in the appropriate masculine ways are typically labelled using negative terms that reflect poorly on their masculine identity and bring their masculinity into question. These include being labelled a 'lightweight', a 'pussy', a 'girl', a 'skirt', 'gay', a 'faggot', 'sissy', 'soft', 'soft-cock'; and so on;

Being called a pussy... (It's) being emasculated I suppose, you get teased, you get ribbed, you get drawn on, you get called gay, a pussy, you know, all these anti-masculine terms. They're gendered as female, you're a pussy, you're a vagina, you're a woman, you're a girl.

Lucas, 21, UOW

Similarly, young men who do not meet the requirements for legitimate masculine practice when it comes to public violence face comparable forms of gender policing, such as being called 'weak', 'soft', a 'girl', a 'poofter', or a 'bitch';

I'll call them a pussy if they back down from me. It's all about your own image you know? When I walked away from that fight I was sitting there paranoid; Do Ryan and Kyle think I'm a pussy? Did they want me to beat the shit out of that guy? Am I now less of a man for not having hit that guy? It was a mindfuck!

Lucas, 21, UOW

What is interesting about these gender policing terminologies is the way in which they relate to subordinated masculinities such as homosexuality, and also to femininity. These labels are obviously terms that are meant to emasculate, or at the very least, act as tools of subordination. To be labelled in these ways causes significant damage to masculine reputation and ultimately results in a loss of masculine status and respect and slippage down the masculine hierarchy. Moreover, whilst these terms are clearly used to subordinate certain forms of masculine practice, they also indirectly act to reinforce and sustain gender inequalities that position women as inferior and subordinate to men.

Young men's engagement in risky drinking and public violence also contributes to the subordination of women in more direct ways. For example, the young men report significant differences in the ways in which men and women are required to act when it comes to the two practices, with women who engage in risky drinking or public violence often perceived in a negative light, such as 'gross' or 'unladylike'. Additionally, women who do not act within the realms of acceptable female behaviour face strong gender policing from men, with women

who deviate from perceived feminine norms often labelled as ‘sluts’, ‘slags’, ‘gronks’, or ‘gangers’^{iv};

They're gangers. We call ‘em gangers, sluts, anything like that... it just means they're out there to fuck basically, they're a ganger, you see ‘em with their fucking skirts up and all that sorta stuff, falling over and getting heaps maggots, they're fucking gangers.

Stefan, 18, TAFE

Young men’s engagement in risky drinking and public violence can also be identified as being organised in highly homosocial ways, that is, practiced primarily in the company of other men. Male homosociality – the non-sexual interpersonal bonds and relationships formed between men - has been identified as playing a distinct role in the lives of men, particularly in relation to hegemonic masculinity (Bird 1996, 121; Flood 2008, 341). The highly homosocial nature of risky drinking and public violence amongst young men contributes to the strengthening of ideologies which see the overall positioning of men as superior and women as inferior. These homosocial relationships act not only to bring groups of young men closer together, but also to exclude and subordinate women;

I definitely prefer it when girls aren’t around, just because us boys kind of just have a joke and that, it’s good... When the girls are around, you've gotta act a bit more - you can't be as nuts, you’ve gotta be a bit more calm.

Jake, 19, UOW

Within male homosocial groups, women are positioned as secondary to men and it is often a requirement of members to prioritise male friendships over female interactions, to ‘ditch the

bitch' and put 'bros before hoes'. Moreover, women are typically perceived only as sexual objects of conquest, desire, and objectification.

What these accounts indicate is that young men's engagement in risky drinking and public violence is clearly organised and structured in ways which position women as subordinate to men, and in which one form of masculinity is positioned as superior to all others. The young men report that when they do not engage in risky drinking or public violence in the appropriate ways, they face marginalisation and slippage within the masculine hierarchy into the realms of subordination. Furthermore, young men's engagement in these practices acts also to strengthen established hegemonic ideologies in which women are subject to male privilege, power and domination.

Conclusion

Young men's engagement in risky drinking and public violence is identified as being shaped and informed by their understandings and notions of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, a form of masculinity that is considered to embody authentic masculinity and acts to ensure the legitimacy of male dominance in society, has a significant influence on the ways in which young men manage and structure their engagement in these two practices. Through a cultural lens, hegemonic masculinity serves to dictate to men what is and what is not currently accepted as authentic masculine practice. The young men in this study identify risky drinking and public violence as legitimate configurations of masculine practice and draw on these practices to express masculine identities that are in alignment with a dominant hegemonic ideal. From a political perspective, hegemonic masculinity also involves a specific strategy for the subordination of women, and the domination of one form of masculinity over others. The engagement of young men in risky drinking and public violence is organised in ways that contribute to reinforcing and sustaining gender inequalities, where men who do not meet the

desired hegemonic ideal are deemed as lacking authentic masculinity and face slippage down the masculine hierarchy, and where women face patriarchal ideologies that consistently relegate them to positions that are inferior and subordinate to men. Although this study focuses on a small sample of men from a specific cultural context, it provides important insights into the relationship between young men's engagement in risky drinking and public violence and their understandings of masculinity. Furthermore, this analysis begins to articulate some of the ways in which hegemonic masculinity manifests in the everyday lives of young men, and the impacts of this across the wider gender order.

ⁱ The term 'risky drinking' refers to a pattern of alcohol consumption that leads to a high degree of intoxication and increases the likelihood of short-term and long-term harm or injury with the amount consumed (NHMRC 2009).

ⁱⁱ Drawing on the World Health Organization (1996; 2002) definition of violence, the term 'public violence' refers to the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person, group, or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury or death, that occurs in the public domain.

ⁱⁱⁱ The study of men and masculinity has been developed under a variety of different names, such as 'Men's Studies' or 'Masculinity Studies', which have recently been identified as being too limited and ambiguous (Hearn 2004). Hearn proposed that a more accurate title for the discursive framework was 'Critical Studies on Men'.

^{iv} These are derogatory terms used by some men in this study to refer to women who were perceived to be acting outside of the realms of acceptable feminine behaviour.

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