Interview

Over Gravlax Sandwiches and a Coke, a Lunch Conversation on Masculinities with James W. Messerschmidt

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James Messerschmidt, professor of Sociology (Dept. of Criminology and Women's and Gender Studies program) at University of Southern Maine, USA has, since he received his Ph.D. from the Criminology Institute in the Department of Sociology at the Stockholm University, had a close relationship with Sweden and the Nordic counties. During the first week of September of 2007 he visited both the University of Oslo and the Linköping University. At Tema Barn in Linköping professor Messerschmidt presented a lecture on, “From Being Bullied to Bullying: Bodies, Masculinities, and In-School Violence”. His research interests focus on the interrelation of gender, race, class, and crime. In addition to numerous articles and book chapters, he is the author of eight books, including *Masculinities and Crime* (1993), *Nine Lives: Adolescent Masculinities, the Body, and Violence* (2000) and *Flesh and Blood: Adolescent Gender Diversity and Violence*, (2004). A co-authored article with R.W. Connell, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept” (in *Gender and Society*, 19 (6): 829–859) has been much debated since its publication in 2005. Prior to professor Messerschmidt’s lecture in Sweden, I had the opportunity to interview him over lunch.
KA: NORMA is a fairly new journal on men and masculinities, with only four issues published so far. Do you think there is a need for a new journal on men and masculinities?

JM: Definitely. The study of masculinities is an academic area still in its infancy, and such journals are essential to expanding its repertoire of research and theorizing. It’s crucial that scholars support feminist-inspired journals like NORMA that take a critical stance on masculinities – which also interestingly allows room to discuss the pleasures of certain masculine constructions for both men and women – and this journal importantly will add a Nordic dimension to the discussion. So yes, I think it’s a fantastic development – the more journals the merrier!

KA: So you believe there is a need for a Nordic journal on men and masculinities?

JM: Unquestionably. And from what I understand, the study of masculinities currently is a hot topic in the Nordic countries. Prior to coming to Sweden I lectured at the University of Oslo and the people I met there emphasized that efforts were underway to transcend what has come to be known in Scandinavia as the “Connellian perspective.” That’s how they pronounced it! I was also told that I must read Claes Ekenstam’s work on the “fear of falling” as an example of this effort. So I did – in fact, I read his 2005 article published in NIKK and I think it’s his only piece in English (‘Fear of Falling’, NIKK, 3/2005).

KA: What did you think about his arguments?

JM: Well, he presented some interesting historical and cross-cultural research on masculinities, in particular, on unmanliness, but for the most part his arguments are not new to masculinity studies researchers in North America, Australia, and much of Europe. His idea that masculine constructions are less about a drive to dominate than about the fear of falling – that is, being unmanly – has been a part of my research since the late 1990s. In fact, I published a book in 2000 entitled Nine Lives (Sage), in which I introduced the concept of “masculinity challenges,” and I defined such challenges as threats and insults from others that in various ways proclaim a boy or a man subordinate in situationally defined masculine terms – that is, as falling down. Through life history interviews I place this concept within Connell’s perspective as outlined in his book Gender and Power. Con-
sequently, Ekenstam’s argument that his notion of “fear of falling” somehow goes beyond the “Connellian paradigm” is simply not the case!

KA: Do you see yourself as a “Connellian”?

JM: I am!

KA: Would you say that that is the main theoretical perspective that has influenced you?

JM: It clearly is the perspective that has influenced me the most, but it is not the only gender perspective to impact my thinking. The “doing gender” approach of West and Zimmerman was likewise significant in my theoretical development. In fact, my work has been an attempt to integrate these two perspectives – that is the “micro” with the “macro.” The doing gender approach actually complements Connell’s perspective in the sense of allowing more depth to Connell’s theory of practice.

KA: You started out as a criminologist. Do you still see yourself as a criminologist?

JM: Actually I see myself as a sociologist – my Ph.D. is in sociology – who studies gender and crime. But most recently I have been moving away from the study of crime. For example, I am about to embark on a study of transgender youth.

KA: Ah, you are?

JM: Yes, it will be another life-history interview study and just prior to coming to Scandinavia, I was approved by my university institutional review board to carry out the project. In the United States, all universities have an institutional review board to examine research proposals and to make sure all researchers meet federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects. So, I’m about to undertake this project, which will involve interviewing 18 to 25 year old people who transitioned prior to their 18th birthday. My examination of the literature on transgenderists indicates that the bulk of the research has been on adults who transition as adults. So my plan is to study why certain individuals transition as youth. I think it’s something that needs to be done and it will also be fascinating to learn some important information from the interviewees. I’ll be interviewing
as many different transgender youth as possible throughout the New England area. In fact, I have a research assistant who has close contact with numerous transgender communities throughout New England. She currently is in transition and she will be the person arranging the interviews.

KA: Do you see yourself as a gender researcher or a masculinities researcher, because to some readers I think you are known as a masculinities researcher?

JM: Yes, I think I’m mostly known as a masculinities and crime researcher, but I see myself as a sociological gender theorist who has, as mentioned earlier, concentrated on an analysis of crime. But I also have integrated ethnicity, race, social class, and sexuality into my work. In addition to the study of transgender youth, I’m anticipating completing a paper on the two U.S. Bush presidents – Bush senior and Bush junior. The working title of the paper is: “Like Father, Like Son? Juxtaposing the Hegemonic Masculinities and Iraq Wars of Bush 41 and Bush 43.” I’m doing a content analysis of all their speeches leading up to each of the Iraq wars and how they sold those wars globally in a similar and a different gendered way.

KA: In much of your research you have focused on young people, teenagers. Is the research on youth something you always have been interested in?

JM: Yes, in fact, my doctoral dissertation was on schools and youth crime. After my dissertation I wrote a number of articles and books that were very theoretical, and then I decided to start doing life history interviews – that is, get into the nitty-gritty of qualitative research! I also wanted to go back and study youth and expand my analysis beyond the school. So my various life-history studies ended up concentrating on three different sites: the family, the school, and the street, and how gender relations are constituted differently in each of these sites, and how such gender relations impact how violence and non-violence are related to the construction of various types of masculinities – by both boys and girls.

KA: What do you see are the main future challenges for the research field of masculinities, if you compare it to the 20 year history? What do you see are the main challenges?
JM: I think an important challenge is the reconsideration of the concept of hegemonic masculinity. One of the reasons Connell and I wrote our co-authored 2005 piece in *Gender & Society* was to thoroughly examine the history, application, and criticisms of the concept, and then to consider how the concept may justifiably be reformulated. The concept had somewhat faded away, and part of the fading away was due to the emergence of post-structuralist perspectives which wrongly interpreted hegemonic masculinity as exclusively structural. Post-structuralists didn’t acknowledge the importance of discourse in Connell’s notion of hegemony; that is, of hegemonic masculinity as a cultural dynamic, which I think was one of their major mistakes, since structure and discourse are indeed not incompatible. The second reason was to promote debate on, and a re-thinking of, the concept of hegemonic masculinity. We wanted to encourage an ongoing dialogue and, thus, new developments in the field. I think the concept of hegemonic masculinity remains extremely important, and it shouldn’t go away for either intellectual or political reasons. When Connell and I examined the literature, we discovered that 20 years of research actually suggested empirically existing hegemonic masculinities at the local, regional, and global levels. And I think this is another area that will attract future studies that compare local, regional, and global hegemonic masculinities and how they influence each other. A third area is of course women, girls, and masculinities. If we are to remain true to the notion of gender as a socially constructed practice, then we must admit to and examine when and how masculine practices go together with a female body. Thus, we need extensive research on girls, women, and masculinities and how such masculinities are similar to and different from boys, men, and masculinities.

KA: Do you see this in the same way Judith Halberstam talks about female masculinity?

JM: Not really. I’m glad she wrote her book as it made all of us who study gender reconsider the relationship between bodies and masculinities. But if you examine her work closely you’ll see that it is explicitly non-sociological. Halberstam presents female masculinities non-contextually; that is, she abstracts them out of the social situations in which they are constructed. Don’t get me wrong – I learned much from her book. But in conceptualizing and understanding female masculinities as embedded in particular gender relations, Halberstam’s book doesn’t really help us much. And in addition to that, her book left unanswered the important question: If certain girls/women are “doing masculinity,” what then is the relationship between their particular masculinity and gender?
power? Can we speak of masculine power in female bodies and, if so, how? Halberstam didn’t address these types of important questions.

KJ: What do you see as the great undiscovered or unexplored areas within masculinities studies?

JM: Yes, in addition to what I have already mentioned, I think first we need to take Mike Donaldson’s piece, published numerous years ago, more seriously. That is, scholars should examine the hegemonic masculinities of powerful men, such as politicians, corporate executives, sport stars, and feature-film actors, and their relationship to hegemonic masculinity at the three levels I outlined earlier. A second area needing exploration is the question of how individual understandings of masculinities are influenced at each of the three levels. That is, are people mostly influenced through local interaction, through regional and global models, or through all three? And what actually is the nature of that influence? The most significant aspect of hegemonic masculinity is of course hegemony, or the notion that public consent significantly has been consolidated around a particular configuration of masculinity. Thus, we need to know exactly how and when that happens at each of the three levels.

KA: So you see powerful politicians, sports figures, and corporate executives as all having masculine influence on a global scale?

JM: Global and regional. I think that’s something that has been terribly missed in the literature. Most of the research has been done on the local level. If my memory serves me well, this was one of the criticisms of past research made by Donaldson. Connell of course picked up on this idea and has, I believe, developed the most sophisticated investigation of a globalizing hegemonic masculinity and how globalization sets the context for investigating local, regional, and global hegemonic masculinities.

KA: How do you see the situation in Scandinavia when it comes to masculinities research? You have a fairly good view, I guess, of what’s happening in this area?

JM: Well, I think work by, for example, Ekenstam in Sweden and Holter in Norway, as well as others, have produced some important discussions of masculinity, despite my dif-
ferences with their conclusions. I like the idea of attempting to move beyond the “Connellian paradigm,” but the question remains: how do we do so? For now, I would like to see Scandinavian researchers work on the questions I suggested earlier because answers to such questions might generate new theoretical developments, something we should see as always intellectually and politically healthy.

KA: Do you see any other theoretically influential academics, right now, that you think are bringing in a new perspective or a different kind of aspect?

JM: Yes I do! I recently read an article by Mimi Schippers – a U.S. sociologist – entitled, ‘Recovering The Feminine Other’ (Recovering the feminine other: masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony, Theory and Society, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2007). Her paper in part responds to the reformulation of hegemonic masculinity by Connell and myself, which is good! And what she attempts to do is place femininity more deeply into the paradigm. And I think this paper is a really interesting piece – I don’t agree with everything she says, but I do think she encourages scholars to think of hegemonic masculinity as always already a relational concept. Connell of course has been saying this for years and Connell and I reiterated this in our co-authored piece. And Schippers doesn’t make the mistake of looking at hegemonic masculinity in terms of a certain type of man; she conceptualizes hegemonic masculinity as an historical, situational, and changing relationship between masculinity and femininity. A really important part of her argument, which I think supports the “Connellian paradigm,” is that this relationship between hegemonic masculinity and what Connell called “emphasized femininity,” but what Schippers labels “hegemonic femininity,” is both complementary and hierarchical. And Schippers uses Judith Butler’s notion of the “heterosexual matrix” to emphasize that complementary relationship between hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity in terms of heterosexuality. And her discussion, of course, put into explicit perspective Adrienne Rich’s classic piece: ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality’.

KA: Can you give me an example of that relationship?

JM: Yes, in U.S. secondary schools the relationship between the male jocks and the female cheerleaders. The jocks are usually the hegemonic masculinity boys at school, who construct themselves as physically strong, aggressive, and heterosexual, while the femi-
nine cheerleader girls are seen relatively as physically weak, vulnerable, and also heterosexual. What this constructs is both a complementary and hierarchical relationship between an ideal masculinity and an ideal femininity within the local setting of the school, and it is this relationship that defines hegemonic masculinity in both structural and discursive terms.

KA: Thank you for taking the time to do this interview.

JM: My pleasure!

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