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Hegemonic masculinity: theory and social construction of crime

Abstract: The article is devoted to analysing one of the „gender-sensitive” crime theories which are strictly connected with the hegemonic masculinity concept. Two crime contexts of hegemonic masculinity are considered. The first one is related to practicing crime by men who do have hegemonic position in society, in one or another way. The second one relates to crime committed by men who are deprived of it. Also, the hegemonic masculinity is seen both in the light of gender relations (masculinity versus femininity) and in the light of social stratification of masculinities.

In the article various versions of hegemonic masculinity are reconstructed and to a certain extent confronted with cultural and social reality, also in the criminal sphere. The attention is paid to a crime committed by working class men to compensate for their social marginalization. Also, the hegemonic masculinity based on class position, status and income is compared to the black hypersexual masculinity and macho violent masculinity. In his article the author does not absolutise the hegemonic masculinity theory and does not treat it as macro explanatory. He is convinced that this concept has in the field of crime theory an interesting potential but also its obvious limitations.

Key words: hegemonic masculinity, crime, social dominance, compensation.

There are many criminological theories aimed at explaining the reasons and factors of crime. Let me recall very briefly only some of them. For example, learning theories are based on the assumption that „criminal behaviour is learned, as are other behaviors, through communication in social interactions” (Giordano,

Deines, Cernkovich 2006, p. 19). Proponents of social controls theories are convinced that crime is result of the „weak or broken” relationships of young people with such social institutions like family and school (Giordano, Deines, Cernkovich 2006, p. 19). Sharply criticized by their narrowness „intelligence theories” concentrate attention on the causal link between IQ of people and their criminal behaviours (Moore 2011, p. 230–231).

A famous sociologist Robert Merton explains the reason of criminal behaviour in American society by social inequalities and first of all by unequal access of various groups to legitimate means of achieving social and economic success. This leads some representatives of unprivileged groups to „the adoption of «deviant» [...] means to pursue [...] success” (Messerschmidt 1993, p. 2). Robert Merton belongs to strain theorists which „emphasize that crime can be attempt to achieve [...] goals [...] through illegitimate rather than legitimate means” (Giordano, Deines, Cernkovich 2006, p. 19).

Most of the theories in criminology are defined as gender-blind ones. For example, the mentioned above Robert Merton’s approach is criticized for its one-dimensionality. It is said that it may help „to explain the class differences in crime”, but is „clearly inadequate for understanding the [...] gender character of crime”. „Given the fact that economic opportunity structure are less open to woman [...] if we pursue the logic of Merton’s argument there should actually be more crime by women and less by men” (Messerschmidt 1993, p. 3). However, it is not a case.

Generally it is stated that the whole „gender blind criminology» has failed to understand how boys’ and men’s pursuit of masculinity is implicated in their involvement of with crime” (Sabo, Kupers, London 2001, p. 3). As a reaction to this approach various kinds of a „gender sensitive” or „gender responsive” criminology have been developed (Einstadter, Henry 2006, p. 265). The gender-sensitive theorists criticized traditional theories for „ignoring how gender-related factors [...] differently shape the involvement of gender groups in crime” (Walsh, Hemmens 2008, p. 197). For example, the representatives of feminist approach emphasize that „nature of girl’s and women’s crimes [...] provides evidence of the pervasive influence of gender inequalities of power – that is, the effects of patriarchal arrangements” (Giordano, Deines, Cernkovich 2006, p. 20).

However, not denying the importance and necessity of developing women-centered crime theories it is worth to recall Anthony Walsh’s and Craig Hemmen’s statement that: „Maleness is without doubt the best single predictor of criminal behaviour” (Walsh, Hemmens 2008, p. 207). „Women tends not to accomplish their femininity through criminal means” (Simpson, Gibbs 2006, p. 284). In the light of such a approach violence and crimes committed by girls and women are perceived simply as a result of their masculinization.

My article is devoted to the one of gender oriented conception, which is connected with hegemonic masculinity concept. It is aimed almost exclusively at

explaining the masculine crime. I treat my text as only a small contribution to understanding the richness of possible explanations of men's crime. In any way, I do not want to absolutise this theory as all-encompassing or macro explanatory. Hegemonic masculinity concept has in the field of crime an interesting potential but also its obvious limitations.

After analysing the literature devoted to the concept of hegemonic masculinity in a crime context, I can distinguish two dimensions of possible consideration. The first one is related to practicing crime by men which do have hegemonic position in society, in one or another way. The second one relates to crime committed by men who are deprived of it. Also, the hegemonic masculinity can be seen both in the context of gender relations (masculinity versus femininity) and in the context of stratification of masculinity various versions. In the first, hegemony is practised over the women. In the second, hegemonic man positions other „male identities as inferior and in need of being control” (Heilman, Barker 2018, p. 70).

At the beginning I want to stress that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is not an essential or universal one. In various societies, there are many systems of masculine identity stratifications, in very different dimensions. There is no „total hegemonic masculinity”, which would encompass all systems of masculine identities and masculine social roles.

The most often analysed kind of hegemonic masculinity is related to high social status, prestigious profession and high income. However, another one, that certainly can not be missed is connected to men's physicality, body and sexuality. Hegemonic masculinity is a social construction. Its „content” is different in various societies and cultures or even in local communities and social groups. However, certainly hegemonic masculinity is real and „works” in practice, even if through different and sometimes even contradictory patterns. James W. Messerschmidt writes that „hegemonic masculinities do not represent a certain *type* of man; instead they personify and symbolize an unequal *relationship* between men and women, and among masculinities” (Messerschmidt 2018a, p. 122).

There is no doubt that hegemonic masculinity is represented differently in competitive middle class managers in corporation and in working class workers in the factory. However, it must be repeated that its common pattern, irrespective of all circumstances confirms the dominance of certain men over other men and women. Furthermore, of course hegemonic masculinities do not have to be connected with committing the crime. Also, hegemonic masculinities are changed in time: „When conditions [...] change, the basis for the dominance of particular masculinity are eroded. New group can challenge the old solutions and construct new hegemony” (Connell 2005, p. 77).

Let me shortly bring closer some of versions of hegemonic masculinity. Raewyn Connell connects American hegemonic masculinity with „toughness and competitiveness”, and subordination of woman as well as gay men. She emphasizes five features of American hegemonic masculinity. First is related to „physical force

and control". „Male body comes to represent power [...], physical strength, force, speed, control, toughness and domination". Second feature means occupational success and third is connected with dominance over the woman within the system of patriarchy. Next one can be symbolized with cowboy as a „white male with working-class values". Moreover, the last one is contextualized within the frame of heterosexuality (cf. Trujillo 2000, p. 15–16). Here there is an emphasis on the connection of hegemonic masculinity with coercive sexuality where women are treated only as subordinated sexual objects (Messerschmidt 1993, p. 50).

Let us take another interesting examples into account. In Japanese society, the hegemonic masculinity is connected with the concept of a heterosexual salaryman and with the strong binary opposition between hard working husband and his wife who is closed in home to perform the family roles (Hidaka 2010, p. 3). Next, traditional Italian hegemonic masculinity refers to the ideal of man with strong personality, „sexually potent and protective [...], concerned with preserving his honor" (Reich 2004, p. 1). He rules in the public sphere (politics and professional success) while a woman is designated for the role of wife and mother (Reich 2004, p. 4–5). This hegemonic masculinity still exists in Italy. However, for last several decades the new figure of male has been more and more prevailing. It refers to the „Latin lover" concept, a man who is self-confident, very sensual and sexual, elegant and fashion oriented (Reich 2004, p. 25). In all these cases hegemonic masculinities do exist and are practiced in their specific forms.

One can ask about the hegemonic femininity existence. Mimi Schippers makes differentiation between hegemonic femininity and subordinated femininities (for example Asian) (Schipper 2007, p. 88). But also in the case of women, the situation depends on the socially accepted definition of hegemony. It can be defined by social class and status but perhaps first of all by personality features or by women's body and sexual attractiveness.

The main argument of hegemonic masculinity concept in criminology is based, to repeat once more, on the assumption that crime is a result of practising the hegemonic masculinity (in illegal way) or reaction on it; irrespective of culture and society. However, of course, hegemonic masculinity can not be perceived by its very existence only in the crime context. It can and mostly it is practised in legitimate social forms. „«Hegemonic masculinity» does not equate to violent masculinity" (Connell 2012, p. 13). Hegemony refers to masculine cultural power in society. „Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity serves as an analytical instrument to identify those attitudes and practices among men that perpetuate gender inequality, involving both men's domination over women and the power of some men over other (often minority groups of) men" (cf. Jewkes 2015, p. 113). In this context „central to hegemonic masculinity is the idea that a variety of masculinities can be ordered hierarchically" (Collier 1998, p. 18).

But also, in a stronger connection with practices which break social rules, it is said by Richard Collier critically that hegemonic masculinity concept is

used usually in the context of „violence and crime”. He recalls the „masculine turn in criminology” in which masculinity is „associated solely with negative characteristics”, uncluding lack of emotionality and aggressiveness. This is perceived as one of the reasons of „criminal behavior” (cf. Messerschmidt 2018a, p. 39). It is undertaken by type of „rigid, domineering, sexist, «macho» man” (Messerschmidt 2018a, p. 39).

So, in its „soft” version, hegemonic masculinity is treated as a socially constructed frame of reference for various analysis. But in its „hard” version, the violent identity is inscribed into this concept. Here the hegemonic masculinity can be also put against the background of sociobiological theories which stress the high testosterone level as a source of violent behaviour and aggression. But it can also be perceived as a result of masculine socialisation in the early childhood and teenager’s age when the features of competitiveness, winning in fighting (including a physical one) and orientation on dominance over female and other males may become an integral part of boys’ identity (Bozkurta, Tartanoglu, Dawes 2015, p. 255).

One of the reactions on lack of access to hegemonic masculinity understood in Western societies, first of all in the terms of high social status and high income is working class or marginalised group crime. Here the concept of hegemonic masculinity strongly overlaps with Robert Merton’s strain theory.

Such reaction is sometimes named as a „protest masculinity”. It is „a marginalized masculinity, which pick up themes of hegemonic masculinity in the society at large but reworks them in a context of poverty” (Connell 2005, p. 114). It is developed in a „marginal class situation, where the claim to power that is central in hegemonic masculinity is constantly negated by economic and cultural weakness” (Connell 2005, p. 116). In these conditions, often defined by unemployment or underemployment, the socially marginalised men use violence to confirm their masculinity (Lysaght 2005, p. 117) or to get access to hegemonic masculinity; e.g. thanks to money gained in robbery. James Messerschmidt wrote: „the robbery setting provides the ideal opportunity to construct an «essential» toughness and «maleness»; it provides a means with which to construct that certain type of masculinity – hardman” (cf. Walsh, Hemmens 2008, p. 365).

In Australia, „for the men the theft of cars allows an expression of virility where the danger, the speed, the noise and the thrill of it all is very much physical and «sexual» in character” (Ogilvie, Lynch 2002, p. 201). For the frustrated men from marginalised social communities, „crimes such a theft car are an affirmation that one [...] is indeed «a man»” (Ogilvie, Lynch 2002, p. 201). According to Chris Cunneen and Robert Douglas White car are seen „as symbolic objects of masculine power, linked to fantasies of material and sexual domination and success” (Ogilvie, Lynch 2002, p. 201). They are convinced that „it is impossible to understand the high criminalization rate of man in connection with motor vehicles without the first understanding masculinity” (Ogilvie, Lynch 2002, p. 201).

In this context „toughness is very important to the status of lower-class males”; this means to be „strong, brave, macho, sexually aggressive, unsentimental [...]” (Walsh, Hemmen 2008, p. 115). Also we can refer here to „the idea of masculine overcompensation in which men react to threats to their manhood by enacting an extreme form of masculinity” (cf. McLaughlin, Uggens, Blackstone 2012, p. 3). Lower status men are oriented towards physically and dangerous forms of hypermasculinity to compensate for their lack of access to dominant form of masculinity (Pyke 1996, pp. 527–549).

However, the relationships between men from working class and hegemonic masculinity are more complicated. On one hand they can be perceived as belonging to subordinated masculine group in the terms of social status, professional success and level of material life. But they can simultaneously epitomise the hegemonic masculinity in the terms of physicality and physical strength.

Also, the same complication can be related to the relationship between White masculinity and Black masculinity. In the sense of social position and material quality of life White masculinity, if compared with the black one, epitomises hegemonic masculinity. White hegemonic masculinity is perceived in literature as „the basis for the «subordination» and «marginalization» of black man and their masculinities” (Glynn 2014, p. 108). Moreover, logically, in the light of this theory „when black men cannot find opportunities to demonstrate a positive masculine identity, than crime becomes an option” (Glynn 2014, p. 112).

However, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is not based only on formal social position and income. An integral part of its core is men’s physicality and sexuality, sexual potency. And this kind of hegemonic masculinity is in American society materialised in many sport disciplines just by Blacks; the best examples here is American football but also basketball or boxing. Here the black masculinity become an essential part of obligatory hegemonic masculinity (Dunbar 2000, p. 266).

Also, in American society symbolic hypersexual virility of Black men are perceived often as hegemonic. Sexual hegemony of Black men, in the way White perceive it, appears to be threatening to White man’s cultural supremacy (Semmes 1992, p. 150). So, there is an obvious paradox here: Black men are socially excluded from hegemonic masculinity in the context of lack access to social power and wealth but on the other hand they are perceived as hypersexual and hyper-masculine in the bodily/physical sense (Slatton, Spates 2016, p. 4). This makes them heroes of hegemonic masculinity in the one of its most important aspects. As a result of this paradox in American society Black masculinity is often criminalised (Abdel-Shehid 2005, p. 71). Black masculinity is labelled as criminal and hypersexual, which is to lead Black men to promiscuity (Kusz 2011, p. 157).

Generally I agree that in Western societies the core of hegemonic masculinity is connected with class position, wealth and formal power. But it would be difficult to state that this is the only factor. Often hegemonic masculinity is very situational, when for example the Ferrari car worth one mln dollars suddenly

stops on the road and his masculine owner is quite dependent on the blue collar worker masculine mechanic. Also, often hegemonic masculinity is a specific group related; for example when we take into account the stratification within the masculine soccer subculture. Here the leaders are usually physically and mentally very strong, tough and aggressive persons but do not have educational credentials, money or social position. One person can function in many masculine sets of relations and can be superior in some of them and inferior in others.

However, it is worth to add that men who belong to higher social class can easier accomplish the patterns of hegemonic masculinity through legitimate ways like for example professional success and buying new Porsche or BMW. Men from lower class, excluded from the legitimate or spectacular access to hegemonic masculinity often confirm their male identity by violent behaviour. According to James Messerschmidt „an inability to achieve a dominant masculinity led young men to commit acts of assaultive violence on younger, smaller men as a way to reaffirm their masculine status” (cf. Allison, Klein 2019, p. 7). Also Kenneth Polk „found that some lower class men have used lethal violence as a means to embody a dominant masculinity in relation to both male and female victims” (cf. Allison, Klein 2019, p. 7).

I want to give only two, not very sharp, examples of mentioned above overcompensation. One is connected with breaking the law, the second one is perceived as socially legitimate. Many research show that both men with hegemonic masculinity and men from working class undertake risky, dangerous driving, breaking all road rules. Marianne Schmid Mast (et al.) analyse the research which shows that „the identification with a «macho» personality is related to aggressive [...] driving behavior” (Schmid Mast et al. 2008, p. 840). Also Gordon W. Russell shows that men with the macho personality are very aggressive and speeding drivers and drive very dangerously (Russell 2008, p. 44). There is even in a literature a concept of „hegemonic masculine driving” (McLaughlin, Uggen, Blackstone 2012, p. 3).

Driving is often treated „an expression of superiority in social and legal terms”; „speeding may thus also be considered as a form of empowerment arising out of the feeling to exist outside social and legal form” (Gossling 2017, p. 129). Among African young man smoking, drinking alcohol and reckless driving together with violence over women and other men is treated as a form of patriarchal power (Miruka 2013, p. 65). Also, Linley Walker’s research conducted on masculinity amongst juvenile offenders in Sydney showed that car are for them „the expression of competitiveness, performance, power, control, technique/skills and aggression” (cf. Redshaw 2008, p. 82). These features are correlated with the hegemonic masculinity characteristics.

Dangerous driving and speeding can be also a form of reaction on the lower social status of driver. Thanks to his talent, aggression and risky behaviour he can overtake the luxury car which symbolise high class status of his owner. The

hegemonic driving can be a form of compensation of lower social status. In general, for many men to be overtaken by another car means not only being subordinated on the road. They treat it as personal subordination to the owner of another car. And a special humiliation for masculine driver is to be overtaken by the car driven by woman.

Now, I recall one of the legitimate attempts to get access to hegemonic masculinity, although in a very reduced form: bodybuilding. We can find here an interesting dimensions. Some critics stress that the development of bodybuilding in last decades has been a reaction on women's emancipation and „masculinity crisis”. Hegemonic masculinity becomes a body oriented here. The difference between men and women is concentrated in bodybuilding on biological features and the body becomes a fundamental source of men's identity. Men's hegemony is practised here by muscles which symbolise power, aggression and violence (Melosik 2009, p. 131). Such an approach recalls this kind of old patterns of patriarchal relationships between males and females which relied on the physical dominance of men. The big powerful men's body is in a binary opposition to small and weak body of women (White, Gillet 1994, p. 33). Bodybuilder's body is perceived as source of authority, control and power over women and subordinated versions of masculinity (White, Gillet 1994, p. 20). Such an approach includes an attempt made by men to recreate the „pure physicality” as a source of hegemonic masculinity. So, it can be seen as a reaction on women's emancipation but also on the feminisation of man's body by decorating it through the means of consumption culture.

But often it can be perceived as a reaction on loss the sense of hegemonic masculinity and superiority over woman in the field of education, employment or/in personal life. It is worth to quote Connell's argument in this last context: „this is not to say that the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinities are always the most powerful people [...] Individual holders of institutional power or great wealth may be far from the hegemonic patterns in their personal life” (Connell 2005, p. 77).

So, the act of violence and crime made by man can also result from the changes in relationships between genders in society caused by women's emancipation process. These changes have questioned the sense of men's domination in relationships with women and with the world. And of course they question first of all the hegemonic version of masculinity, causing the „masculinity crisis”. In the past the man has been perceived as a person mentally strong and reliable, competitive and oriented towards success, a breadwinner and a respected head of family. Today, more and more often men are perceived in the context of their real and potential weaknesses, both personal, physical and often sexual. Their psyche and body are medicalized and pharmacologized. So, there is growing cultural anxiety among men about their masculinity. They seek the ways to confirm their traditional sense of masculinity and a sense of dominance over the world and over the woman. And they do it often by committing the crime.

The most criminal example of exercising hegemonic masculinity is macho men's violent behaviour and his law breaking orientation. It is best epitomised by Mexican macho. Machismo can be „defined as driving force of conqueror or as a man with fondness for combat” (Andrade 1992, p. 34). Macho does not see barriers or limitations in his life. Macho feels to be superior but always „demand more power and dominate these within given territory”. „Here is an individual who sees himself above all others, above the law, and above the ethical norms of community” (Andrade 1992, p. 34). Also, he wants to force „the enemy [...], whether real or imaginary, to shake in fear” (Andrade 1992, p. 34). The conqueror macho „seek to control and run over innocent people”. Often he treats woman only as sexual objects, and wants to „to use or abuse the woman sexually” (Andrade 1992, p. 36). He does not respect law, people, society and any rules.

In the last part of my article, I want to stress again that the concept of hegemonic masculinity can serve as a frame of reference to analyse masculinities and also crimes committed by men. But it can not serve as the only one way of explanation. I am convinced that both „gender-neutral” and „gender-responsive” approaches are useful to understand the crime of men and women, both from upper and lower class. Also, while analysing the relationships between masculinity and crime we must take into account that contemporary „masculinities [and femininities] are multiple, fluid, and dynamic” (Jewkes 2015, p. 113; Bridges, Pascoe 2014).

At the end it is worth to answer shortly the question: how the concept of hegemonic masculinity and idea of existence of many versions of masculinity can be adapted to resocialization? I will refer here to the well known theory of Marek Konopczyński's creative resocialization. In its light in the case of young men who committ crime the resocialization would be aimed at „developing and creating potential” instead mechanical correcting their identity (Konopczyński 2014a, p. 176–177).

There is a conviction in such an approach that „creating the future consists in initiating a process of social adaptation of own form of activity based on revealed potentials” (Konopczyński 2014a, p. 179). Marek Konopczyński assumes rightly that in every man, „irrespective of his biographical experience and how he has function in the past and functions presently, there are developmental-creative potentials”. They can be understood as „personal and social predispositions enabling innovative problem solving of specific problem situation, satsafying needs and supporting interpersonal relations” (Konopczyński 2014a, p. 181).

So, resocialization would try to create among young criminals the socially sanctioned but also related to the potentials of their identity ways of being a man. In such a situation young man materialises masculinity in the frame of reference which positively correlates with his aspirations and potentials. However, he does not use described in this article compensation mechanisms which leads towards committing crime. It is necessary here – to refer to Marek Konopczyński's theory – to try to eliminate or at least limit „occurring in community and personality developmental blockades” which are „one of the main reasons of

social maladjustment” (Konopczyński 2014b, p. 16). In the light of my article consideration these blockades are directly connected with the development of masculine identity, which should be socially accepted but simultaneously satisfying at the individual and personal level. In the case of juvenile delinquents one must emphasize the importance of Marek Konopczyński’s concept of destigmatisation of their masculine identity which is usually perceived as deviant. There is a simultaneous attempt to „recreate its dimensions in socially accepted dominant parameters” (Konopczyński 2018, p. 73). According to assumptions of creative resocialisation the aim of destigmatisation is not a „removal” of identity like it has used to be in the past but its positive reconstruction (Konopczyński 2018, p. 74). Also the importance is stressed to create for young men new spaces of social visibility as „auto presentations of maladjusted youth are usually situationally inadequate and they do not have a rich content” (Konopczyński 2017, p. 232).

Theory of creative resocialization can become an excellent answer for – leading to criminal behaviours – problems of young men with their masculine identity. It creates conditions for constructing such men’s identities which can connect masculine potentials of every individual with elements of various socially existing versions of masculinity, including hegemonic masculinity.

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