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Sociology 105

01 May 2023

Hegemonic Masculinity in High School Wrestling

High school was a very confusing time for most people. It is a cesspool of people who are just as confused about their newfound emotions and body hair as you are. This causes high school to become very cliquey, with everyone trying to “fit in”. This is only exemplified with high school sports, especially ones that are limited to the same gender. The competition was high for something so arbitrary, and much like everything else in high school, it was like life and death. The toughest were seen as the coolest, and whoever was the best at the sport was the “leader”. This causes an overall decrease in mental wellness all throughout the team, with no one speaking out because they do not wanna look “weak”. While I had many great experiences with sports and specifically wrestling, the culture amongst the team was highly toxic and causes people to fit a mold of an ideal wrestler to be able to fit in.

I wrestled for 5 years throughout my middle and high-school career. From 6th grade all the way up to Junior year where we had to stop due to COVID-19 restrictions. Coming in I was absolutely not the ideal body type or healthy in the least bit, I had done very little physical activity before so something like this was highly out of my comfort zone. Immediately I was already ostracized for my weight and athletic ability. A vast majority of people on the team were already athletes and many people were wrestling simply to train for their other sports. However I

was getting some muscle on me towards the end of my 2nd year. However these were never things that I saw, since I was still lower in the group by comparison. The cliques were decided by athletic ability, and I constantly felt like I was falling behind. Our team was winning rookie state championships, while it took me over a year to win my first match. Wrestling is one of if not the most competitive sport in high school, and I was starting way behind.

However, with enough time, I started to get it. I was winning more and more matches, getting pinned less and less, and was getting stronger. I wasn't any wrestling virtuoso by any stretch, but had one of the best records on the team by my later years in high school. I went from the kid who was basically an instant loss to someone who was expected to perform. It felt amazing, I was finally making an impact on a team that I worked so hard for, and was getting respect amongst the other wrestlers. However, there was two sides to this coin. I was assigned as one of the team captains my sophomore year, and I noticed myself acting the same way to the new kids and the captains did to me. I'm not normally a very aggressive person at heart, but I took a lot of toxic masculine traits with me as I grew better at wrestling. Never show emotions, everything was a competition, and you had to be at the top. I would basically only hang out with the other team captains, and believed I was fitting in through promoting this toxic culture that hurt me only a few years back. I would spit out phrases and insults that disgust me today, and put people down instead of picking them up. All because I believed it would help me be a part of the "cool group".

The term "hegemonic masculinity" refers to the predominant type of masculinity that is regarded favorably and praised in a particular society. This kind of masculinity is frequently

assertiveness. It can contribute to the marginalization or exclusion of those who do not uphold these norms because it is frequently employed to enforce established gender roles. Although not necessarily the only form of masculinity, the term "hegemonic" implies that this one is the most powerful and dominant, frequently to the detriment of other forms of masculinity and femininity. Recognizing and addressing issues of gender inequality as well as fostering more inclusive and equitable social norms require an understanding of hegemonic masculinity. Brett Stroudt wrote about this in an essay called *You're Either In or You're Out*. The article uses high school student interviews and observations to show how status and exclusion manifest themselves in typical youth relationships. Stroudt defines inclusion, exclusion, and passing as the three basic methods employed by youth to preserve or raise their social standing. Exclusion entails ejecting people from the dominant social group, and inclusion is drawing them in. Passing entails adopting attitudes or behaviors that are typical of the dominant group, even if they do not accurately represent the person. Stroudt's article underlines the need for more inclusive and fair social standards in youth culture and illuminates the complicated dynamics of social status and exclusion among kids in high school.

In the context of my wrestling experience, hegemonic masculinity played a significant role in shaping the culture and dynamics of the team and my personal beliefs. Wrestling itself is often associated with physical toughness, aggression, and competitiveness, which heavily correlate to the traits typically associated with hegemonic masculinity. This causes me and the other wrestlers to further conform to these norms and were praised and elevated to higher positions when these traits were met. This creates the hierarchy and exclusionary culture that I

marginalized and excluded from the group, due to me not being as good as all of the other wrestlers. Not only was I affected from the receiving end of hegemonic masculinity, but I do admit to perpetuating these toxic norms by adapting these aggressive and competitive behaviors when I got better and better at wrestling and eventually becoming team captain. Hegemonic masculinity is a culture that is difficult to break in a lot of environments, and perpetuates harmful norms and exclusionary practices that can affect the mental health and well-being by people who do not conform.

High school sports, and specifically wrestling, are heavily associated with the culture of hegemonic masculinity. This culture based on a set of norms that encourage aggression, assertiveness, emotional and physical toughness. These standards create a culture where people feel under pressure to fit into a particular mold in order to belong to the “dominant” group. The mental health and wellbeing of those who do not fit the mold can suffer as a result of this pressure, which can also result in a creation of a toxic personal environment. In my experience, I was blind to the kind of person hegemonic masculinity made me, and now being out of that environment I was able to become aware of the kind of person I was and change myself for the better. I am much more in touch with my emotions, much less aggressive, and don’t fall under the exclusionary and hierarchy based groups that I was in in high school. Promoting diversity and fairness in high school sports and beyond requires addressing and confronting the culture of hegemonic masculinity. To acknowledge and embrace all kinds of masculinity and femininity, there must be a change in societal norms. Ultimately, fostering a more equal and welcoming

flourish.

Works Cited

Stroudt, Brett. "You're Either in or You're Out": Status and Exclusion in Youth Culture." *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2006 , pp. 339-351.