

Doing Gender Cowboy Style a Qualitative Study on The Performance of Hegemonic Masculinity by Humanitarian Staff in The Field

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Abstract

The humanitarian cowboy is a phenomenon standing in a juxtaposition with the fundamental principles of humanitarian action – impartiality, neutrality, independence, and humanity. Yet he seems to survive and thrive in the sector. This master's thesis explores the performance and reproduction of masculinity in the humanitarian sector, focusing on how the work environment contributes to these behaviours and how they relate to power dynamics. A qualitative approach with in-depth interviews with humanitarian staff is used to investigate the extent to which humanitarian organisations influence the performance of hegemonic masculinity, embodied by the archetype of the humanitarian cowboy. The results show that the prevailing organisational norms reinforce these behaviours, leading to a paradoxical environment in which exaggerated masculine behaviour is both a coping mechanism and a perceived increase in efficiency. More so the underlying acceptance of this behaviour in the organisation contributes to its reproduction. The study concludes that through organisational cultures, narratives, and the valorisation of certain behaviours, the humanitarian cowboy is not just a product of individual personalities, but a construct supported and sustained by the very systems designed to alleviate human suffering.

Keywords: humanitarian action, humanitarian cowboy, gender performativity, norms