

Precarious Manhood and Its Links to Action and Aggression

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Abstract

Unlike womanhood, manhood is widely viewed as a status that is elusive (it must be earned) and tenuous (it must be demonstrated repeatedly through actions). This focus on the structure—rather than the content—of gender roles can shed new light on men's use of action and physical aggression. Here, we review theory and research connecting manhood, action, and aggression. We interpret men's aggression and aggressive displays as behaviors that effectively demonstrate manhood and thus quell men's concerns about their gender status. Moreover, we suggest that situational and cultural factors that heighten the precariousness of manhood also increase the likelihood of male aggression.

Keywords

manhood, gender roles, physical aggression, human sex differences

Theorists within various disciplines—including anthropology, sociology, political science, and psychology—portray manhood as a social status that is both elusive and tenuous. The elusiveness of manhood status lies in the fact that, in many cultures, the transition from boyhood to manhood is not a given, but instead must be earned “against powerful odds” (Gilmore, 1990, p. 11). Thus, whereas a person's maleness (the biological state of being male) is typically present at birth, his manhood status is earned and conferred socially. The tenuousness of manhood lies in the fact that, once earned, this status can be lost relatively easily via social transgressions and shortcomings. Together, these structural features of the male gender role combine to form what we refer to as precarious manhood—a gender status that is relatively difficult to earn and easy to lose. In contrast, girls and women do not typically have the same requirements of proof in order to achieve and maintain womanhood status. Whereas a woman's actions may damage her and her family's reputation, her very status as a “real woman” will not be challenged as readily as a man's status will.

Why is manhood considered more precarious than womanhood? Two perspectives—evolutionary and social-role theories—offer viable explanations. According to evolutionary theories, the precariousness of manhood may reflect evolved adaptations to a social environment in which men competed, through public demonstrations of physical prowess and dominance, for access to fertile female mates (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Trivers, 1972). Thus, men may have evolved a preoccupation with achieving and maintaining social status, along with

a heightened sensitivity to status threats, because ancestral men who exhibited these qualities were more successful at attracting mates and passing on their genes. Alternatively, social-role theories would propose that the relative precariousness of manhood has its roots in long-established divisions of labor (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Wood & Eagly, 2002). Because men have historically occupied social roles that involve status-seeking and resource acquisition, manhood itself has become associated with qualities such as competitiveness, defensiveness, and constant struggling to “prove” worth and status.

Viewing their gender status as precarious may yield wide-ranging implications for men's functioning across numerous domains (e.g., health, relationships). In our research, we examine the implications of precarious manhood for men's action and physical aggression. Because manhood is a status that must be demonstrated actively, we propose that men and women differ in how they view, interpret, and use action and physical aggression. Specifically, men are more likely than women to view action and aggression as tools for proving manhood to others. Indeed, our findings suggest that men link manhood with action and, further, that they perceive aggression and aggressive displays as effective means of restoring manhood.

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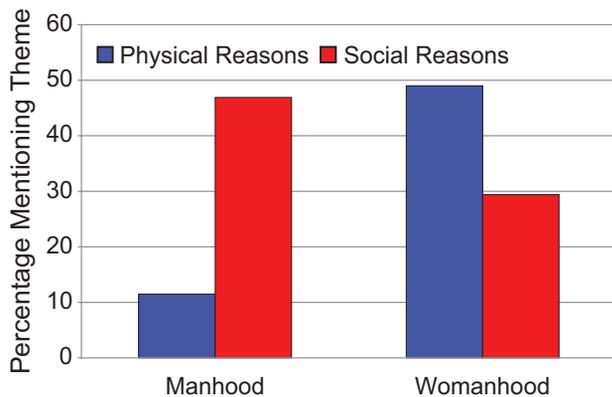


Fig. 1. Percentages of physical reasons (e.g., “Grew weak with age”) and social reasons (e.g., “Behaved badly”) that people generated to explain either how a man might lose his manhood or how a woman might lose her womanhood. To manipulate loss of manhood (womanhood), we asked participants to provide open-ended interpretations of an ostensibly autobiographical statement that read: “I used to be a real man (woman); now I am no longer a man (woman).”

Before describing this research, however, we first establish that beliefs about the relative precariousness of the male gender role are alive and well.

Beliefs About Precarious Manhood

In his anthropological survey of manhood around the world, Gilmore (1990) documented the widespread belief that “men are made, not born” by pointing to the prevalence of manhood rituals in preindustrial cultures. Such rituals often involve brutal tests of physical endurance, contests against dangerous foes, and other public, risky demonstrations of toughness that signify the transition from boyhood to manhood. Given that industrialized cultures such as the United States often lack formal manhood rituals, we wondered whether inhabitants of these cultures would still espouse the notion that manhood is precarious.

To answer this question, we presented U.S. college students with six fake “proverbs” that expressed themes about the precariousness of either manhood or womanhood (e.g., “Manhood is hard won and easily lost” versus “Womanhood is hard won and easily lost”), embedded within a series of 24 common gender-irrelevant proverbs (“A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”). Regardless of their gender, participants agreed with, liked, and understood the manhood proverbs more than the womanhood proverbs (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008).

If people view manhood as a status that is earned and maintained primarily via actions and achievements, then this should be reflected in their beliefs about the physical versus social underpinnings of manhood and womanhood. In a test of this idea, participants indicated the degree to which the transition from childhood to either manhood or womanhood results from the passage of physical milestones (e.g., puberty) versus social milestones (e.g., achieving goals). Whereas people perceived

an equally strong role of physical factors in the transitions to manhood and womanhood, they viewed manhood as requiring more social accomplishments than womanhood. People also interpreted the loss of manhood in primarily social terms (see Fig. 1). When asked to explain how a person might lose manhood, college students generated more reasons that reflected social themes (e.g., “unable to support a family,” “let someone down”) than physical themes (e.g., “sex-change operation,” “became ill”); the opposite pattern emerged in people’s explanations for the loss of womanhood (Vandello et al., 2008). This pattern indicates that U.S. college students perceive manhood, relative to womanhood, as an impermanent, socially conferred status that must be earned and can be lost.

Implications for Action and Aggression

Occupying a precarious gender status has implications for men’s attitudes and behaviors related to action and aggression. Men, as compared to women, are especially likely to define manhood in terms of action. In one study, participants filled in blanks to complete up to 25 sentence stems that began either “A real man . . .” or “A real woman . . .” Naïve judges coded the sentence completions according to whether they contained actions (e.g., momentary behaviors that people *do*, such as “drives a flashy car”) or adjectives (e.g., enduring qualities that cannot be lost, such as “is honest”). Findings revealed that men, but not women, described “a real man” with more fleeting actions than enduring adjectives, and they described “a real woman” with more enduring adjectives than fleeting actions (Weaver, Vandello, Bosson, & Burnaford, 2010). Notably, this pattern emerged when we controlled for the gender-stereotypical content of the sentence completions. When men completed “real man” sentences with gender *atypical* content (e.g., “A real man cooks dinner”), they still used action language to do so. Thus, men define their own gender status in terms of the active things that men *do* rather than the ways that men *are*.

This may help to explain why men take greater physical risks than women (Byrnes, Miller, & Schafer, 1999). Risky physical displays are a convincing way to demonstrate manhood, particularly when it has been threatened. Our work focuses on aggression as one such behavior, and we find that men are sensitive to a cultural script in which aggression is used to restore threatened manhood (see also Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Men understand certain aggressive acts as being compelled by external factors—such as a situation that demands active defense—rather than internal factors, such as the aggressor’s “hot temper.” This is noteworthy given that most people from individualistic cultures such as the United States display a robust tendency to explain other people’s behaviors as being caused by the person, not the situation. In fact, this tendency is so common that it is referred to as the *fundamental attribution error* (Ross, 1977).

To illustrate, we presented college students with a mock police report in which either a man or a woman punched a same-sex stranger who taunted him (her) publicly and questioned

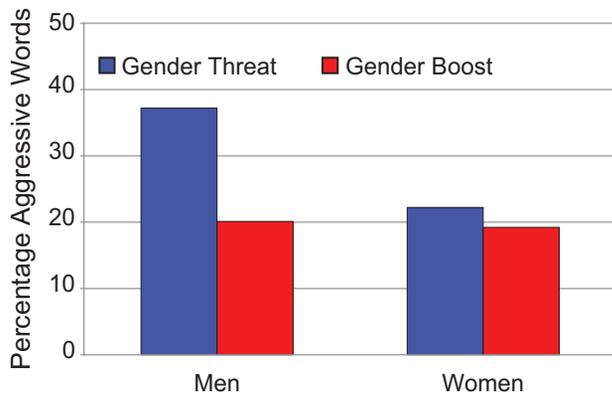


Fig. 2. Percentages of stems completed as aggressive words (e.g., *fight* vs. *right*; *punch* vs. *lunch*) by men and women who received feedback that either threatened or boosted their gender status. Gender threat/boost was manipulated via false feedback on an ostensible test of gender identity that consisted of 32 difficult questions about stereotypically masculine (e.g., cars, sports, home repair) and feminine (e.g., childcare, cooking, fashion) topics.

his manhood (her womanhood) in front of a potential romantic partner. Participants indicated the extent to which the aggressive behavior of the protagonist reflected four different internal causes (e.g., “his/her own immaturity”; “the kind of person he/she is typically”) and four external causes (e.g., “being provoked by the stranger”; “being publicly humiliated”). Findings revealed that when women read the report involving the male aggressor, and when men and women read the report involving the female aggressor, they explained the aggressor’s actions with internal reasons, as is typical. Conversely, when men read about the male aggressor, they explained his behavior more strongly in terms of the situational factors that caused it (Weaver et al., 2010). Thus, whereas most people demonstrated the fundamental attribution error, men displayed a unique sensitivity to the situational factors that compel men to defend their gender status with aggression.

If men perceive a cultural script that links gender threats to aggressive displays, then gender threats might activate aggressive cognitions more strongly among men than among women. This notion is consistent with general models of aggression (e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2002), which assert that experiences that evoke negative emotions also activate cognitive structures (e.g., goals and scripts) related to aggression. To test this idea, we had college students take an ostensible test of gender identity, and we offered some of them false feedback indicating that they scored lower than the average man or woman. Others received false feedback indicating that they scored higher than most other men or women. Thus, some people received a threat to their gender status whereas others received a boost. Next, participants did a word-completion task in which nine word stems (e.g., __IGHT) could be completed in either an aggressive manner (e.g., FIGHT) or a nonaggressive manner (e.g., RIGHT). The percentage of aggressive word completions served as a measure of aggression-relevant cognitions. As expected, men in the gender-threat condition completed

more words in an aggressive manner than did men in the gender-boost condition (see Fig. 2). In contrast, feedback about women’s gender status had no effect on their aggressive cognitions (Vandello et al., 2008).

If manhood threats activate physically aggressive cognitions among men, do they also evoke physically aggressive behaviors? To answer this question, we threatened some men’s gender status by making them perform a stereotypically feminine hair-braiding task; other men performed a gender-neutral rope-braiding task. Next, all men got to choose between hitting a punching bag or solving a puzzle. If men use aggressive displays to restore manhood, then men in the hair-braiding condition should select the punching task more frequently than men in the rope-braiding condition. Indeed, this is what happened (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009). In a follow-up study, men first did the hair- or rope-braiding task, and then all of them donned boxing gloves and hit a pad that measured the impact of their strikes. Consistent with the idea that manhood threats evoke physically aggressive displays, men who had styled hair punched the pad harder than did those who had braided rope. Finally, men in a third study did the hairstyling task and then either did or did not punch the pad. Next, they all completed a measure of anxiety. Men who punched the pad after the hairstyling task exhibited less anxiety than men who did not punch, suggesting that aggressive displays can effectively downregulate men’s anxiety in the wake of manhood threats. Thus, these findings provide converging evidence that men use displays of physical aggression to restore threatened manhood.

To the extent that aggression is a manhood-restoring tactic, however, it is likely that men use it strategically by calculating when it is most likely to pay off successfully. Thus, for example, the effects of manhood threats on aggression may differ as a function of men’s size and strength. Indeed, recent studies have shown that larger, stronger men are more prone to aggression (DeWalt, Bushman, Giancola, & Webster, 2010; Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2009), suggesting that these men might be especially likely to use and benefit from action to restore manhood.

Precarious Manhood and Male Honor

While concerns about the precarious nature of manhood are widespread across cultures (cf. Gilmore, 1990), certain cultural norms may bring masculine anxiety into sharp relief. In particular, in cultures in which *honor* is a central organizing theme, manhood and honor are intimately linked (Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996). Honor in this sense is about reputation and men’s willingness to protect their reputations and that of their families with violence if necessary. Within honor cultures, men are seen as protectors and owners of women’s honor. If female family members behave (or are suspected of behaving) in ways that bring dishonor to the family, men risk being seen as unmanly. Thus, men must be vigilant in guarding and controlling the behavior of their wives, sisters, and

daughters, because forfeiting honor is tantamount to forfeiting manhood.

To test whether a woman's perceived dishonor influences evaluations of her husband, we asked participants from an honor culture (Brazil) and a non-honor culture (the United States) to read a scenario about a wife who was unfaithful (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Brazilians, but not Americans, rated a man as less manly and honorable when his wife was unfaithful relative to faithful. Furthermore, if the cuckolded husband retaliated by hitting (versus yelling at) his wife, Americans saw him as less manly and honorable, but Brazilians saw him as slightly *more* manly, because the aggressive display restored his honor (see also Vandello, Cohen, Granson, & Franiuk, 2009). Because honor is a dominant cultural currency in many parts of the world, theories of manhood will benefit greatly from consideration of honor requirements and from samples drawn from non-Western populations.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Considered as a whole, these findings add an important element to our understanding of gender roles. Not only do male and female gender roles differ in terms of *content*—that is, the traits, interests, and behaviors that are universally associated with manhood versus womanhood (Williams & Best, 1982)—but they also differ in terms of *structure*—that is, the ease with which manhood versus womanhood is attained and lost. As our work indicates, the precariousness of manhood has important implications for understanding men's physical aggression, but several questions remain. For example, how ubiquitous are precarious manhood beliefs across and within cultures? As research on honor cultures suggests, manhood may be more precarious in cultures that hold stronger expectations regarding men's defense of their own and their families' reputations. It remains to be seen, however, whether precarious manhood beliefs differ meaningfully within cultures as well. If so, what distinguishes men who endorse precarious manhood beliefs from those who reject such beliefs? What happens when men's positions within social or economic structures make their gender status more precarious? Finally, are reactions to manhood threats mediated through physiological channels (e.g., fluctuations in testosterone and cortisol)? While the scope of these questions is far-reaching, we remain optimistic that the importance of this topic, and the promise of our initial findings, will motivate enthusiastic exploration of the implications—for men, women, and their interactions—of precarious manhood.

Recommended Readings

Bosson, J. K., Vandello, J. A., Burnaford, R. M., Weaver, J. R., & Wasti, A. (2009). (See References). Empirical research demonstrating how manhood threats are linked to aggressive displays and how such displays reduce men's anxiety about their gender status.

Cohen, D., Nisbett, R.E., Bowdle, B.F., & Schwarz, N. (1996). (See References). Explores the culture of honor in the U.S. South and demonstrates empirically how cultural influences impact

sensitivity to manhood challenges; this is a good starting point for readers who wish to learn more about male honor and violence.

Gilmore, D.D. (1990). (See References). Presents a broad cross-cultural survey of manhood from an anthropological perspective, showing how otherwise diverse cultures share a preoccupation with manhood as an achieved but tenuous state.

Kimmel, M.S. (2005). *Manhood in America: A cultural history* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. A sociological analysis of the cultural history of manhood norms in America, with an emphasis on men's continual struggle to prove their manhood in the face of ever-changing societal standards.

Vandello, J.A., Bosson, J.K., Cohen, D., Burnaford, R.M., & Weaver, J.R. (2008). (See References). A comprehensive overview and empirical demonstration of the precarious-manhood thesis.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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