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# Hard Won and Easily Lost: A Review and Synthesis of Theory and Research on Precarious Manhood

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This article reviews evidence that manhood is seen as a precarious social status that is both difficult to achieve and tenuously held. Compared with womanhood, which is typically viewed as resulting from a natural, permanent, and biological developmental transition, manhood must be earned and maintained through publicly verifiable actions. Because of this, men experience more anxiety over their gender status than women do, particularly when gender status is uncertain or challenged. This can motivate a variety of risky and maladaptive behaviors, as well as the avoidance of behaviors that might otherwise prove adaptive and beneficial. We review research on the implications of men's precarious gender status across the domains of risk-taking, aggression, stress and mental health, and work-life balance. We further consider how work on precarious manhood differs from, and can add to, work on individual differences in men's gender role conflict. In summary, the precarious manhood hypothesis can integrate and explain a wide range of male behaviors and phenomena related to the male gender role.

*Keywords:* precarious manhood, male gender role, achieved status

When considering what it means to “be a man” in contemporary America, one easily slips into caricature. TV shows and commercials often lampoon men with hypermasculine stereotypes, depicting them as coarse, rugged, unemotional, and afraid of nothing (except acting “girly”). But what does it really mean to be a man? The language people use to talk about men often reflects anxiety, as if manhood itself is in jeopardy: We ask whether men have become “too soft,” we implore them to “man up” in the face of difficulties, and we question whether someone is “man enough” for the job (seemingly equating manhood with toughness and bravery). In contrast, one rarely if ever encounters questions about whether a woman is a “real woman” or “woman enough.” To be sure, there are many concerns about the status of women as a group, but an individual woman's status *as a woman* is rarely questioned or challenged the way a man's status so often is.

The notion that manhood is a problematic, anxious status is not new; it reflects a longstanding theoretical assumption held by many contemporary researchers of men and masculinity (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987; Gilmore, 1990; Kimmel, 1997, 2006; Levant, 1996; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986; O'Neil, 2008; Pleck, 1976, 1981, 1995). In this article, we draw on this multidisciplinary work to propose that much of the anxiety about men's gender status reflects a fundamental assumption about the structure of manhood. Specifically, we propose that people view the very state of manhood as a precarious social status that is hard won and easily lost, and that requires continual public demonstrations of proof (e.g., Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008). This view of manhood, moreover, transcends cultural boundaries: Regardless of culture-specific markers of masculinity, cultures around the world view manhood as a social status that must be earned and can be lost (Gilmore, 1990). In comparison, womanhood is typically viewed as a status that follows naturally from biological changes and that, once earned, remains secure.

This article reviews theory and research concerning manhood as a precarious social status. The precarious manhood thesis has three basic

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tenets: First, manhood is widely viewed as an elusive, achieved status, or one that must be earned (in contrast to womanhood, which is an ascribed, or assigned, status). Second, once achieved, manhood status is tenuous and impermanent; that is, it can be lost or taken away. Third, manhood is confirmed primarily by others and thus requires public demonstrations of proof. In what follows, we first summarize the traits and norms associated with manhood status, and then review evidence from our research lab that supports the tenets of the precarious manhood thesis. Next, we address potential implications for men of occupying a precarious gender status in the domains of anxiety and stress, aggression, risk-taking, avoidance of femininity, and work–life balance. We next devote attention to differences and points of convergence between our work and work on men’s gender role conflict (e.g., Eisler, 1995; O’Neil, 2008), and we note how the precarious manhood thesis can add to and integrate existing perspectives. We then briefly consider the accuracy of men’s concerns about their gender status, and we end by identifying the limitations of our approach and noting several remaining questions in need of additional research.

### What Is Real Manhood?

To begin, we ask: What are the qualities that constitute “real manhood”? One answer is that research identifies a stable set of personality traits and behavioral tendencies that convey real manhood across time and cultures. Although the specific manifestations shift with time (e.g., Pleck, 1976), themes of agency and action continually underlie these traits and behaviors (Ashmore, Del Boca, & Wohlers, 1986; Bem, 1974; Brannon & David, 1976; Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Cicone & Ruble, 1978; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973; Williams & Best, 1990).

Another answer to the question is that there is no single answer: The qualities themselves shift and change across time and culture, depending on changes in larger economic, political, and social structures. Sociologist Michael Kimmel (2006), for example, notes that the specific meanings of manhood in America change across time, but the underlying need to prove masculinity has remained constant throughout history. Thus, the only enduring quality charac-

terizing “real manhood” is its continual anxiety, and this anxiety, we argue, centers around manhood’s *structure* (its precariousness) more than its *contents* (specific qualities, behaviors, preferences, or tendencies that men must display).

A third answer to the question “what is real manhood?” can be found in one of the most pervasive and salient behavioral norms of the male gender role: the *antifemininity mandate*. Avoidance of femininity as a core component of masculine identity has a long history in psychology, tracing its roots back to psychoanalytic theories of gender development (Freud, 1937; Horney, 1932; Jung, 1953). According to these theories, a healthy (e.g., “normal”) masculine identity can only develop if boys sufficiently disidentify with the female caregiver and the feminine qualities that she represents. Thus, manhood itself is defined, in part, by an aversion to femininity (Blazina, 1997; Greenson, 1968; Kierski & Blazina, 2009; Norton, 1997). By adulthood, men are expected to demonstrate their “real man” status by eschewing femininity from their behavioral, linguistic, and emotional repertoires (Brannon & David, 1976; Doyle, 1989; Thompson, Grisanti, & Pleck, 1985), whereas no comparable “antimascularity” mandate dictates women’s experiences. For example, boys and men are punished more harshly than girls and women for gender role transgressions and cross-gender behaviors (e.g., Levy, Taylor, & Gelman, 1995; McCreary, 1994; Sirin, McCreary, & Mahalik, 2004).

Masculinity and femininity may occupy statistically orthogonal dimensions (e.g., Bem, 1974; Constantinople, 1973; Spence et al., 1973), but lay conceptions of gender equate the presence of masculinity with the absence of femininity (Bem, 1993). Between the ages of 5 and 20 years, people show an increasing tendency to perceive targets who are high in masculine attributes as low in feminine ones and vice versa (Biernat, 1991). This bipolar thinking is also evident in widely held beliefs about homosexuality, such that gay men and lesbians are often perceived as more like typical members of the other gender than of their own gender (Kite & Deaux, 1987). Thus, indications of femininity can challenge a man’s gender status, and many men are attentive to this fact (e.g., Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino, & Taylor, 2005). Perhaps for this reason, we (and others) often successfully manipulate manhood threats in our lab

by inducing men to perform stereotypically feminine behaviors (e.g., Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009; Weaver, Vandello, & Bosson, *in press*) or by offering them feedback indicating that their psychological profile is similar to that of a woman's (e.g., Vandello, Bosson, et al., 2008). By raising the specter of femininity, we imply that our participants are not "real men."

### The Precarious Manhood Thesis

In the modern technoindustrial culture, it is possible to proceed from infancy into senility without ever knowing manhood. (Edward Abbey, 1989, p. 40)

It is quite common to characterize manhood as an uncertain, tenuous social status that must be earned and demonstrated. Our mind's eye readily conjures the poor sap who grows old yet never knows manhood. This man is one who fails to pass certain milestones or accomplish certain goals and thereby never proves (in the eyes of other men) that he deserves to be called a "real man."

In this section, we briefly summarize evidence in support of the three precarious manhood tenets stated earlier. Before proceeding, however, we note that our ideas about the elusive and tenuous nature of manhood share conceptual overlap with (and owe intellectual debt to) several psychological and sociological theories of masculinity. Eisler and Skidmore (1987), Pleck (1981, 1995), O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986), Herek (1986), Kimmel (1997, 2006), and Levant (1996) have all argued that the male gender role is problematic and anxiety-provoking. More broadly, Pleck (1981) noted that assumptions of precarious manhood have dominated psychological theorizing about gender roles since the 1930s. Rather than conceptualizing manhood as a developmental certainty, many gender theorists instead argued that achieving manhood (i.e., an adequately masculine gender identity) is a "risky, failure-prone process" (Pleck, 1981, p. 20). What these theorists mean, we believe, is that men (more so than women) must struggle against obstacles and shortcomings in order to achieve and demonstrate a "necessary and sufficient" level of gender-typicality in their personality and behaviors. The process is failure-prone because not all men succeed.

Some reach senility "without ever knowing manhood" (Abbey, 1989, p. 40).

Our ideas about precarious manhood also share overlap with anthropological findings. In many preindustrial societies, manhood was and is earned via formalized rituals and tests of strength, bravery, and endurance (Gilmore, 1990). For example, Samburu boys of Kenya must endure an unanesthetized circumcision procedure without flinching (Spencer, 1965). The passage to manhood among the Maasai of Eastern Africa usually involves killing a large wild animal such as a lion (Saitoti, 1986), and Sambian boys of New Guinea undergo a painful scarification ritual to become men (Gilmore, 1990). As Gilmore (1990) notes, in these societies "real manhood . . . is not a natural condition that comes about spontaneously through biological maturation but rather is a precarious or artificial state that boys must win against powerful odds" (p. 11). These "odds," moreover, often involve physical endurance, risk, and danger. In contrast, "an authentic femininity rarely involves tests or proofs of action, or confrontations with dangerous foes" (p. 12). Ironically, part of the uncertainty and anxiety associated with contemporary, Western definitions of manhood may stem from the fact that industrialized cultures no longer facilitate young men's entry into manhood by ushering them, *en masse*, through formal rites of passage like the ones described above (cf. Herek, 1986). Expected to "earn" and "prove" their manhood, but denied a formal mechanism for doing so, contemporary men may experience anxiety about whether or not their actions broadcast adequate manliness to others.

Despite the lack of formal manhood rites in industrialized cultures, subcultures such as gangs, fraternities, and militaries sometimes require painful or dangerous initiation rituals ("hazing"). Men may also demonstrate manhood informally through participation in rough sports (e.g., football; Sabo & Panepinto, 1990) and in public displays of homophobia (e.g., Herek, 1986; Kimmel, 1997). Such displays allow men to assert their "real man" status, which must be continually reinforced. A single feminine or unmanly act can temporarily reverse a man's gender status regardless of how many times he has proven it. Therefore, men's behaviors (particularly stereotypically masculine behaviors) are often motivated by an ongoing need

to prove manhood status to others (Kimmel, 1997).

### **Evidence That Manhood Is Elusive (Hard Won)**

We began a program of research to examine the prevalence and implications of beliefs about the precariousness of manhood among contemporary U.S. college students, who reflect a Westernized, largely White, middle-class, young adult population. In an initial study, we tested the assumption that people view manhood as an achieved, rather than ascribed, status (Vandello, Bosson, et al., 2008). To do this, we asked participants about the degree to which the transition from either “boyhood to manhood” or “girlhood to womanhood” could be attributed to physical factors (e.g., going through puberty) as well as social factors (e.g., achieving socially valued goals). Consistent with the notion that manhood must be earned, people attributed the transition from boyhood to manhood more strongly to social than physical factors, and they attributed the boyhood–manhood transition more strongly to social factors than the girlhood–womanhood transition. This latter transition was attributed equally to social and physical changes.

In another examination of the elusiveness of manhood, we presented participants with a survey asking them how much they liked and agreed with a series of proverbs (Vandello, Bosson, et al., 2008). Embedded among common proverbs (e.g., “A good companion shortens the longest road”) were several that presented either manhood or woman as an elusive state (e.g., “It is a rocky road from boy [girl] to man [woman]”). Across the proverbs, participants both liked and endorsed the statements more when they pertained to manhood versus womanhood, even when we controlled for how well participants understood the proverbs’ meaning. This suggests that our findings cannot be explained merely by differences in people’s facility in interpreting cultural messages regarding precarious manhood versus womanhood. In summary, using both direct and indirect measures, we found evidence that manhood (more than womanhood) is seen as an uncertain, elusive status that must be earned via social achievements.

### **Evidence That Manhood Is Tenuous (Easily Lost)**

Just as manhood is viewed as elusive, we argue that it is also seen as tenuous and easily lost. In a test of this idea (Vandello, Bosson, et al., 2008), we asked participants to interpret the meaning behind an ambiguous statement about “lost manhood” or “lost womanhood” that was supposedly extracted from a longer, autobiographical narrative: “I used to be a man [woman]. Now I am no longer a man [woman].” Participants generated more reasons pertaining to social causes (e.g., “losing a job”) than physical reasons (e.g., “growing weak with age”) when interpreting statements about lost manhood, whereas the opposite pattern was observed when participants interpreted statements about lost womanhood. Moreover, people reported that it was easier for them to interpret statements about lost manhood than ones about lost womanhood, indicating familiarity with the notion that manhood status can be lost more readily than womanhood can.

### **Evidence That Manhood Requires Action and Public Proof**

The third tenet of the precarious manhood thesis is that manhood requires public proof. Because manhood is perceived as a more socially than biologically bequeathed status, men must prove their deservingness of it with action, especially public action. To test this idea, we asked men and women to complete open-ended statements that began either “A real man . . .” or “A real woman . . .” (Weaver, Vandello, Bosson, & Burnaford, 2010). If people associate manhood with active attempts to establish and maintain gender status, then they should spontaneously mention more actions and behaviors that men must *do*, and fewer stable qualities that men *possess*, when describing a “real man.” In contrast, if womanhood is viewed as relatively assured, then descriptions of a “real woman” should contain fewer references to actions and more references to enduring internal qualities. We coded all sentence completions as either action verbs (e.g., “drives a truck”) or enduring traits (e.g., “is respectful”) and found that people used more action terms than trait terms when describing “a real man,” and they used more action terms when describing “a real man”

than they did when describing “a real woman.” Notably, this effect was driven by men; women did not vary in their sentence completions across target gender, suggesting that the notion of manhood as requiring action may be more salient to men than women.

These data, however, do not speak directly to people’s beliefs about the need for *public* action to maintain manhood. We therefore examined people’s interpretations of a man’s versus a woman’s actions following a public gender threat. We reasoned that if public action is part of men’s script for restoring threatened manhood (e.g., Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995), then people should interpret a man’s physically aggressive behaviors in terms of the situation that compelled the action. Rather than interpreting aggression following a gender threat as an uncontrollable outburst of emotion driven by an aggressive personality, people should instead view it as a deliberate act compelled by external forces. Indeed, men often perceive their own aggression in a fairly positive light, as an exercise of control over others, provoked by challenges to their self-esteem or integrity; in contrast, women tend to view their own aggression as stress-induced and precipitated by a loss of self-control that erupts into an antisocial act (Campbell & Muncer, 1987).

We asked men and women to read a bogus police report describing a bar fight in which the perpetrator was publicly insulted by someone of the same gender when flirting with a potential, other-gender romantic interest (Weaver et al., 2010). The perpetrator (either a man or woman, depending on condition) responded to the public insult by punching and kicking the victim. Participants rated the extent to which the perpetrator’s behavior was attributable to different causes, some of which were situational (e.g., “How much of his or her behavior was due to the crowd around him/her?”) and some of which were dispositional (e.g., “How much of his or her behavior was due to his or her hot temper?”). Women and those who rated a female target made more dispositional than situational attributions for the perpetrator’s violence; men, however, interpreted the man’s physical aggression in more situational terms, reflecting an awareness of the situational pressures that call for manhood displays. Considered in conjunction with the sentence-completion findings de-

scribed above, these data suggest that men are more sensitive than are women to the requirement of public action for maintaining manhood.

### Implications of Precarious Manhood

The belief that manhood is an elusive, tenuous state can shed light on a wide range of men’s behaviors. In particular, we propose three important implications of a belief in the precariousness of manhood. First, men should experience more anxiety and stress over their gender status than women do, particularly under situations of gender threat. Second, men will take measures (sometimes risky and/or aggressive) to demonstrate or reestablish manhood. Third, men will avoid situations or activities that put their manhood status at risk. Below we present evidence relevant to each of these implications.

### Anxiety and Stress

Given the evidence that men view manhood as a relatively impermanent and tenuous status, events that call manhood into question should cause distress. Across several samples and methodologies, our findings show that men, relative to women, experience greater anxiety about their gender status. Of course, gender role anxiety is central to several theories of masculinity (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987; O’Neil et al., 1986; Pleck, 1981, 1995), but to our knowledge, no previous studies have directly compared men’s and women’s anxious reactions to feedback that threatened their gender status. Thus, in one study, we (Vandello, Bosson, et al., 2008) presented male and female participants with bogus feedback about their performance on a difficult computerized test that measured ostensible common knowledge about stereotypically masculine (sports, auto mechanics, home repair) and feminine (cooking, childcare, fashion) topics. Half of the participants received non-threatening feedback (they learned that they scored well for their gender), and the other half received threatening feedback (they learned that they scored poorly for their gender, and that their responses were more typical of the other gender). We then asked participants to do a word completion task whose true purpose was to measure, unobtrusively, the cognitive accessibility of concepts related to anxiety and threat. The findings revealed that gender-threatened

men completed more anxiety-related words than people in the three other conditions (non-threatened men, threatened and nonthreatened women). In the absence of a gender threat, men completed marginally fewer anxiety-related words than women.

In another study, we tested whether men's basal testosterone levels moderated their stress response to a gender threat (Caswell, Bosson, Vandello, & Sellers, 2012). Basal testosterone is a biological marker of trait dominance- and status-striving, such that men higher in testosterone tend to seek out and prefer status competitions and other opportunities to assert dominance (Sellers, Mehl, & Josephs, 2007). Conversely, men low in testosterone shy away from public demonstrations of status and dominance. We therefore wondered whether men low in basal testosterone would exhibit greater stress responses following a gender threat, as such threats remind men of the need to demonstrate manhood. To measure stress responses, we assessed men's salivary cortisol levels both before and 15 min after they received either threatening or nonthreatening feedback on the gender knowledge test described above. Cortisol is a stress hormone that increases in response to social-evaluative threats (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). Consistent with our logic, we found that men who were lower in basal testosterone showed the largest increases in cortisol after gender-threatening feedback. In contrast, men higher in basal testosterone were relatively unaffected by the gender-threatening feedback. These physiological findings have potentially important implications for the long-term health outcomes of men who face chronic gender-based stressors, as repeated or prolonged stress has been linked to health problems such as hypertension and immune system dysfunction (Sapolsky, 1998).

One chronic manhood stressor is actual or anticipated job loss. Employment and the ability to provide for one's family have long been considered central to men's gender identity (Kimmel, 2006; Levant & Kopecky, 1995) and the male gender role more generally (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Gilmore, 1990). The recent U.S. and European economic recessions, combined with longer term trends in the outsourcing of manufacturing jobs (Hersh & Weller, 2003)—traditional pillars of masculinity—may thus serve as chronic gender stressors to the extent

that they reduce some men's ability to secure jobs. We recently examined men's beliefs about the effects of unemployment on their gender status in a nationally representative sample of American workers (Michniewicz, Vandello, & Bosson, 2012). Compared with involuntarily unemployed women, involuntarily unemployed men estimated a greater threat to their gender status (they estimated that other people saw them as "less of a man") when recalling their job loss. Similarly, employed men estimated a greater threat to their gender status than employed women did when imagining a hypothetical job loss. Finally, unemployed men's estimates of gender status loss predicted their current feelings of depression, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem. For women, there was no association between estimated gender status loss for unemployment and mental health outcomes. These findings are the first we know of that establish a direct link between men's explicit concerns about manhood loss and their mental health.

### Aggression and Risk-Taking

As we have argued, men will often take measures to demonstrate or reestablish their manhood following gender threats. The behaviors that will be most effective in demonstrating manhood should be those that are public and difficult to fake. After all, if *any* behaviors could suffice, then manhood status would lose its value and it would become difficult to distinguish "real" men from those merely pretending to be men. Game theorists use a similar logic when they describe how "hard-to-fake signals" (public behaviors that benefit others but are costly to the individual) serve the actor's interests by establishing a courageous reputation (Frank, 1988; Hirshleifer, 1987; Schelling, 1960; see also Cohen & Vandello, 2001). In the same way, ideal markers of manhood should be verifiable behaviors that are hard to fake and are perhaps even costly to the actor because they signal to others that one's manliness is genuine.

Risky behaviors may therefore be effective demonstrations of manhood. We have thus far focused on two types of risky behaviors in our lab: aggression and financial risk. Across several studies, we tested the prediction that threats to their gender status elicit, among men but not among women, aggressive cognitions and be-

haviors. For example, in one experiment, we threatened men's gender status by inducing them to perform an ostensibly public, stereotypically feminine task (Bosson et al., 2009). In what was described as a study of physical coordination with novel tasks, men were seated in front of a wigged female mannequin and received instructions on how to braid its hair and then tie in pink bows. Men in a control condition did a mechanically identical (but gender-neutral) braiding activity framed as a rope-strengthening task. Following the braiding task, we gave men a choice of follow-up tasks: a gender-neutral puzzle task or a masculine punching task. Over twice as many men chose the punching task following the hair-braiding activity versus the rope-strengthening activity, suggesting that gender threats motivate men to restore manhood through displays of aggressive posturing. In follow-up studies, we found that men punched a punching bag with greater force after braiding hair versus rope, and that punching after a gender threat reduced men's anxiety compared to conditions with no opportunity to restore manhood (Bosson et al., 2009). In another study using the gender knowledge test described earlier, we found further evidence that aggression is part of men's script for restoring threatened gender status: Men (but not women) who received gender-threatening feedback exhibited more physically aggressive thoughts (measured by word completions) compared with when they received gendered-affirming feedback (Vandello, Bosson, et al., 2008). These findings share conceptual overlap with the findings reported earlier regarding men's tendency to make situational attributions for another man's physically aggressive response to a public gender threat (Weaver et al., 2010). In both cases, gender threats were linked to physical aggression more readily among men than they were among women, whether in terms of cognitive accessibility or interpretations of others' actions.

Although physical aggression is often an effective demonstration of manhood, it may be an option that is largely unacceptable to men in many cultural milieus, particularly professional, educated subcultures that proscribe fighting. However, a man's penchant for taking risks can be demonstrated in other ways. Some suggest, for example, that risk-taking in the financial industry is a phenomenon at least partly driven

by male hypercompetitiveness and a culture of masculinity (e.g., Meers & Williams, 2009). Several studies have shown that men take greater financial risks than women do (Bernasek & Shwiff, 2001; Sunden & Surette, 1998), and merely priming masculinity increases financial risk-taking (Meier-Pesti & Goetze, 2006). In our lab, we recently examined whether men would take greater financial risks after experiencing a gender threat (Weaver et al., in press). We invited men to participate in what they thought was a marketing study involving consumer product testing. Half of the men tested a fruit-scented, feminine hand lotion by applying it to their hands (which they reported made them feel less masculine) and half tested a power drill by holding it and imagining using it. Next, all men played a gambling game in which they could win real money. After testing the hand lotion, men placed significantly larger bets than they did after testing the power drill. This suggests that financial risks may serve as effective manhood affirmations, especially after gender threats. The implications for the (strongly male-dominated) world of Wall Street are potentially far-ranging.

### **Avoidance of Femininity**

We have suggested that gender status threats motivate men to pursue risky or dangerous activities in an effort to demonstrate their manhood. However, the precarious nature of manhood can evoke avoidance motivations as well. As noted earlier, manhood is defined, at least in part, in opposition to femininity (e.g., Kimmel, 1997). Thus, one way to forestall questions about one's manhood is to eschew feminine behaviors, preferences, traits, and desires. This lesson is taught to boys at a young age: Although both boys and girls are socialized to engage in gender-appropriate play behavior (e.g., Lytton & Romney, 1991), boys are punished more harshly for gender-atypical behavior than are girls (e.g., Levy et al., 1995). In adulthood, both men and women face backlash (social and economic sanctions) for gender-atypical behaviors (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004), but the repercussions for men are often especially severe.

One consequence of avoiding femininity is that it can reduce men's pursuit of experiences that might otherwise benefit them. In one experiment, men who performed an intrinsically



engaging, novel hair-braiding activity actually benefited psychologically from the experience, but only if their concerns about their manhood status were assuaged by allowing them to proclaim their heterosexuality to their ostensible audience (Bossou et al., 2005). When unconcerned about their manhood, men in this study reported heightened feelings of autonomy (volitional self-determination) following the hair-styling activity, which indicates that the enactment of this novel behavior temporarily boosted men's psychological well-being (for reviews of the links between self-determination and psychological well-being, see Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryff, 1989).

Taking this idea in a more applied direction, we recently examined men's avoidance of femininity in the workplace. As women have increasingly entered the workforce over the past half century (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008), traditional divisions of labor—with men working outside the home and women caring for children—are giving way to new norms. Both men and women must negotiate competing demands between work and family. In response, organizations have shown an increasing willingness to accommodate work–life balance by developing flexible work arrangements (e.g., Bond, Galinsky, Kim, & Brownfield, 2005). But work-flex programs are underutilized, particularly by men (Allen, 2001; Hill, Hawkins, Martinson, & Ferris, 2003; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006). From our perspective, this trend likely reflects, at least in part, men's resistance to work arrangements that prioritize stereotypically feminine concerns such as childcare and family.

To test this idea, we asked college students who were preparing to enter the job market about their thoughts on flexible work arrangements (Vandello, Hettinger, Bossou, & Siddiqi, *in press*). Unexpectedly, among a number of valued work features, both men and women ranked *work flexibility* and *work–life balance* as equally essential to them when selecting employment (with only *financial compensation* ranking higher than work flexibility). However, when asked whether they intended to use work flexibility in their own careers, men reported substantially lower intentions than women. To understand why, we examined people's beliefs about how others would view them if they sought work-flex opportunities. An important

finding was that men reported weaker intentions to seek work flexibility to the extent that they expected others to view them as less masculine for doing so. In a second study, participants evaluated a hypothetical male or female employee who either sought a flexible work arrangement or worked traditional hours after the birth of a child. Those seeking work flexibility (both male and female targets) received lower job evaluations and were seen as less masculine and more feminine in personality. Thus, men's concerns about losing gender status for using work-flex programs may be accurate, in that flexibility seekers are deemed unmanly in other people's eyes. Although these data can only speak to men's stated intentions, they at least suggest the possibility that men actually avoid work-flex programs out of a desire to avoid femininity. If so, then men's aversion to femininity may interfere with their ability to effectively integrate work and family life.

### Another Look at Manhood and Risk

Men take greater risks than women across a wide range of domains (Byrnes, Miller, & Schaffer, 1999; Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Eckel & Grossman, 2002; M. Wilson & Daly, 1985), and risk-taking is closely tied to the male gender role (Baker & Maner, 2009; M. Wilson & Daly, 1985). One typical explanation for this gender difference is that it results from sexual selection pressures (i.e., men compete with each other for access to women, and risk-taking is part of this competition). From our perspective, risk-taking is an effective means of both restoring and maintaining manhood status as it helps men out compete other men and is attractive to women (Courtenay, 2000; Gilmore, 1990; Griskevicius et al., 2009).

These explanations suggest an approach or promotion orientation (e.g., Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000; Higgins, 1997), in that men are portrayed as motivated to seek out risk. However, as noted earlier, men are often motivated to avoid behaviors that might threaten manhood status. Thus, we argue for a more expansive view of risk than is traditionally discussed. To the extent that gender-atypical behaviors are risky (because they threaten a person's gender status), gender role violations may represent a domain in which men are more risk averse than women. Stated differently, men may take

greater risks than women when considering the possibility of physical, bodily, or financial harm, but they may be more risk-avoidant than women when considering the possibility of harm to their gender status.

Viewing gender-atypical behaviors as risky complicates discussions of risk. Consider health risks, for instance. Some suggest that men take risks with their physical and mental health by avoiding doctor visits (e.g., Addis & Cohane, 2005; Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Courtenay, 2000, 2003). However, an alternative view is that seeking professional help is itself a socially risky act given that men risk being seen as less manly for such behavior. Similarly, eating a stereotypically masculine (but artery-clogging) steak may carry greater physical health risks than opting for the arugula salad, but eating the salad may carry social risks to manhood status. Thus, a fuller understanding of the links between gender and risk requires an expanded understanding of “risk” to include not only behaviors that can threaten men’s physical and mental well-being, but also behaviors that can threaten their social standing.

### **Ties to Work on Men’s Gender Role Conflict**

Although much of our work thus far treats men as a homogeneous group, we assume that there are individual differences in the degree to which men personally endorse the notion that manhood is precarious. Speaking more broadly, there are stable individual differences in the extent to which men experience anxiety and stress surrounding their gender role. Researchers who study men’s *gender role conflict*—the “psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences for the person or others” (O’Neil, 2008, p. 362)—tend to use one of two scales to measure this construct: the O’Neil et al. (1986) Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS) and the Eisler and Skidmore (1987) Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale (MGRSS).

The GRCS measures the amount of psychological conflict, anxiety, tension, and general negative emotion that men experience surrounding the male gender role. Men’s scores on the GRCS predict a host of negative psychological outcomes including lower self-esteem and well-being; greater depression, anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness; and poorer coping

skills (for a review, see O’Neil, 2008). Despite these maladaptive outcomes associated with gender role conflict, scores on the GRCS also predict men’s negative attitudes toward psychological help-seeking (e.g., Berger, Levant, McMillan, Kelleher, & Sellers, 2005; Good & Wood, 1995; Groeschel, Wester, & Sedivy, 2010; Levant, Wimer, & Williams, 2011; Robertson & Fitzgerald, 1992; Wisch, Mahalick, Hayes, & Nutt, 1995). Thus, the very men most vulnerable to depression, low self-esteem, and other psychological difficulties associated with male gender role conflict might also be those most resistant to seeking help for their troubles.

The MGRSS assesses men’s tendency to appraise gender-relevant situations—especially those involving feminine behaviors and a failure to appear manly—as stressful. Much of the research that uses the MGRSS focuses on its links to aggression and violence. For example, higher scores on the MGRSS predict self-reported aggression and violence among college student samples (e.g., Jakupcak, 2003; Jakupcak, Lisak, & Roemer, 2002), tendencies toward verbal and physical partner abuse among substance-abusing men (Copenhaver, Lash, & Eisler, 2000), and greater levels of aggression among clinical samples of violent men (Moore et al., 2008). Men’s scores on the MGRSS also predict risky health behaviors (e.g., Eisler, Skidmore, & Ward, 1988), anger and aggression in response to gay men (Parrott, 2009), more severe alcohol abuse (Isenhart, 1993), increased severity of symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (McDermott, Tull, Soenke, Jakupcak, & Gratz, 2010; Morrison, 2012), and greater cardiovascular reactivity to stress (Cosenzo, Franchina, Eisler, & Krebs, 2004; Lash, Eisler, & Schulman, 1990).

Clearly, these individual differences approaches contribute much to our understanding of men’s gender role anxiety and its implications. Given our thesis that the precariousness of manhood poses a chronic stressor for men, one might assume that this stress should be reflected in men’s scores on the GRCS or MGRSS. If so, then scores on one of these scales might interact with a manipulated gender threat to predict men’s anxious or aggressive reactions or their attempts to restore manhood. Instead, our empirical attempts to demonstrate such an effect have not met with success. In the few (unpublished) studies in which we included

the GRCS or MGRSS in our designs, we found no support for the notion that men who are chronically high in gender role conflict are also more vulnerable to laboratory-induced manhood threats. What might account for our inability to find moderation by men's gender role conflict?

One possible answer is that anxiety surrounding the male gender role is highly responsive to situational cues, even among men who do not typically experience manhood-related concerns. Although men differ reliably in terms of how much gender role stress they generally experience, momentary contextual features can temporarily heighten or quell men's concerns about appearing manly. After all, gender-relevant cognitions and behaviors are elicited by, and respond to, specific contexts and cues (Deaux & Major, 1987). Thus, some types or aspects of gender role conflict may be situation-specific rather than chronic, elicited by subtle contextual cues, and difficult to capture with self-report scales whose accurate completion requires a nontrivial level of self-awareness. Alternatively, measurements of behaviors in high-impact lab contexts may be more powerful and sensitive than trait-like measures such as the GRCS and the MGRSS, which assess gender role conflict at a more abstract and hypothetical level. Consider the possibility that the young, male undergraduates who constitute the majority of our research participants are largely unaware of their gender role anxieties. If completed honestly, self-report scales like the GRCS and MGRSS capture people's beliefs about who they are, and many college-educated men may view themselves as gender flexible and/or nontraditional in their gender role ideologies. If so, men may score low on gender role conflict scales while still reacting with anxiety to gender-threatening laboratory manipulations. Indeed, our gender threats seem to elicit consistent, predictable responses from men despite their self-reported gender role conflict, not because of it.

Another possibility is that chronic gender role conflict does heighten men's vulnerability to the negative repercussions of situational gender threats, but the links among these variables are more complex than our designs thus far can detect. That is, perhaps gender role conflict operates in conjunction with other variable(s) to predict men's reactions to gender threats. Con-

sider research by Vincent, Parrott, and Peterson (2011) that showed that men who were high in both gender role conflict (as measured by the MGRSS) and sexual prejudice reported the most anger in response to a vignette depicting romantic male-male intimacy. Related work showed that MGRSS scores partially mediated the link between men's endorsement of anti-femininity norms and their anger in response to male-male intimacy (Parrott, Peterson, Vincent, & Bakeman, 2008). Similarly, one study found that the link between men's gender role conflict (as measured by the GRCS) and their behavioral aggression toward a same-gender opponent was strongest among men who exhibited more labile emotion (larger increases in negative affect; Cohn, Zeichner, & Seibert, 2008). Thus, accruing evidence points to a role of gender role conflict in shaping men's angry and aggressive reactions to gender-threatening experiences, but primarily when considered in conjunction with other, related individual difference variables.

Ultimately, despite these variations in our approaches, procedures, and findings, we believe that both individual difference (*trait*) and situational (*state*) perspectives are essential for understanding men's gender role anxiety. At least theoretically, traits ought to shape people's state-like reactions just as states can serve as the individual building blocks for traits. That is, men who suffer chronic concerns about their manhood should display more intense, negative reactions to at least some types of context-specific gender threats, and repeated experiences with situational gender threats should lead at least some men to develop chronic concerns about their manhood. In partial support of this logic, recent work showed that men's scores on the GRCS, when treated as dependent measures rather than predictors, changed in response to manipulated messages about traditional masculinity (Jones & Heesacker, 2011). Thus, a comprehensive model of men's reactions to manhood threats should accommodate both chronic and situational sources of variance, as well as more complex, higher level interactions among these factors.

Finally, note that the precarious manhood thesis pertains to a structural feature of the male gender role—that is, the ease with which manhood status can be earned and lost—whereas the individual difference perspectives summarized here pertain primarily to the contents and cor-

relates of the male gender role, that is, the specific traits, norms, and anxieties that accompany men's gender status. Although we can only conjecture at this point, we believe that many of the specific anxieties and behaviors associated with manhood (and assessed with measures of gender role conflict) arise because of the elusiveness and impermanence of manhood. The precariousness of manhood, for example, can explain why men: value status and achievement; display traits such as assertiveness and dominance; engage in risky and aggressive behaviors; avoid femininity in their appearance, personality, and conduct; and experience anxiety and stress when they fail to achieve cultural standards of masculinity. Thus, if gender role conflict perspectives have made great strides in understanding how manhood concerns manifest, we propose that the precarious manhood thesis can tell us why manhood is so troubling in the first place. We hope that researchers interested in the male gender role will further consider how these different perspectives can extend and complement one another.

### **Are Men's Concerns About Manhood Overblown?**

The work reviewed here suggests that men perform—and avoid performing—gendered behaviors because of concerns that their manhood will be questioned. How accurate are these concerns? Evidence from our lab suggests that, in some instances, men hold distorted and exaggerated beliefs about the levels of masculinity that their peers expect and desire from them. For example, men overestimate the aggressiveness of their peers, and they overestimate how negatively others will view them if they respond to an affront nonaggressively (Vandello, Cohen, & Ransom, 2008; Vandello, Ransom, Hettinger, & Askew, 2009). When we presented men and women with hypothetical scenarios in which a man faced a manhood-threatening provocation, men incorrectly estimated that women would prefer an aggressive to a nonaggressive response. Women themselves claim to be more attracted to nonaggressive men, but men believe that women prefer aggressive men (Vandello et al., 2009).

Similarly, men may overestimate how harshly others will judge them for losing a job.

In our study of involuntarily unemployed adults (Michniewicz et al., 2012), not only did men expect harsher denigration of their gender status than women did, but men also predicted harsher evaluations of their manhood than a separate group of raters actually gave a hypothetical unemployed men. In fact, men and women who considered a hypothetical unemployed man gave him very low ratings on “loss of gender status,” and their ratings of an unemployed man's gender status loss did not differ from their ratings of an unemployed woman's. In this study, then, men displayed more inaccuracy than women did with regard to their gender status in other people's eyes.

If men's beliefs about how others view their manhood are distorted, then perhaps they need not worry so much about projecting an image of masculinity. Manhood as a social status may be less susceptible to loss in others' eyes than men think it is. However, even if men's fears are misplaced or exaggerated, they can still motivate maladaptive behaviors and negatively affect men's mental health. As we noted previously, for instance, unemployed men's estimates of manhood loss (whether accurate or inaccurate) predicted their negative mental health symptoms. Similarly, men's aggression is often driven by false expectations about what their peers prefer (Vandello, Cohen, et al., 2008). Many examinations of aggression emphasize how male aggression can be motivated by self-presentational concerns and note that men, privately, are often more reluctant to fight than their public personas would suggest (Felson, 1978; Toch, 1969). Thus, some problematic male behaviors can become self-reinforcing even if they are rooted in biased thinking and overblown fears. It is interesting that men's concerns about their audiences' perceptions of them pertain primarily to male observers: Men appear especially concerned about their manhood status in the eyes of other men (Bosson, Taylor, & Prewitt-Freilino, 2006; Kimmel, 1997). Thus, investigations of the accuracy of men's manhood concerns should take into account the gender make-up of their (real or imagined) audiences.

### **Criticisms, Limitations, and Future Directions**

Considering manhood as a precarious social status that can affect cognitive, affective, and

behavioral reactions can help synthesize a number of past theoretical treatments of manhood and masculinity. One of the strengths of our program of research is the emphasis on empirical, experimental findings, an approach that is lacking in the field. Whorley and Addis (2006), for instance, noted in their review of methodological trends in research on the psychology of men that very few studies have included a manipulation of any independent variable.

The precarious manhood hypothesis is not without limitations, however. One issue that remains unresolved is the possibility that the findings reviewed here are not reflective of manhood *per se*, but rather status more broadly. When we talk about threats to manhood, are we really just talking about social status threats? After all, men in virtually all cultures have greater social status than women, and the pursuit of status is central to masculine norms (Mahalik et al., 2003). Masculinity and manhood are naturally confounded with status, making it difficult to disentangle their unique effects. To address this issue, future studies might attempt to experimentally manipulate status independent of gender and gender independent of status. In such a study, we would expect that men would be more troubled than women by a non-status-relevant gender threat, whereas men and women might be similarly troubled by a non-gender-relevant status threat (or at least the gender difference should be smaller for a status threat than a gender threat). It is important to note that, among women, a status threat should be more troubling than a gender threat. However, if men were equally bothered by the gender and status threats, this would still leave open the possibility that gender status and social status are inextricably linked in men's experience, an interpretation that is consistent with social role models of gender differences (e.g., Eagly & Wood, 1999).

Another criticism of the idea that manhood is precarious is that this represents an overly stereotypical and caricatured view of manhood, and one that many men do not personally endorse. For example, a number of qualitative studies of adolescent boys suggest that even as they are acutely aware of cultural definitions of masculinity and the degree to which they measure up, they simultaneously question and deconstruct traditional (hegemonic) masculinity ideologies (Bamberg, 2004; Korobov, 2005;

Pascoe, 2003). This would suggest more flexibility with respect to manhood than is suggested by the precarious manhood thesis. However, two lines of evidence prevent us from endorsing this alternative view. First, cross-cultural explorations suggest that manhood is seen as similarly elusive and tenuous across a variety of different cultures (Gilmore, 1990). Thus, although there is undoubtedly variance in people's beliefs about manhood within cultures, the cross-cultural similarity speaks to a general consensus that transcends cultural boundaries. Second, even if men do not internalize or personally endorse the notion that manhood must be earned and can be taken away, this notion can have a powerful effect on behaviors to the extent that boys and men conform to prescriptive norms. For instance, as we noted earlier, men erroneously believe that their peers endorse aggression more than they themselves do, and they believe there will be penalties for not behaving with appropriate levels of aggression (Vandello, Cohen, et al., 2008; Vandello et al., 2009). Similarly, research on pluralistic ignorance shows that mutual misperceptions about norms can lead to cultural perpetuation of those norms when individuals' private beliefs do not align with their public behaviors (Miller & Prentice, 1994; Vandello & Cohen, 2004). Thus, although not all men may enthusiastically endorse the idea that their own manhood status is elusive and tenuous, data collected from hundreds of young men in our research lab indicate that they nonetheless act as if it is.

That being said, we write this at a time of shifting societal gender roles. Traditional notions of manhood are giving way to new, more complex and nuanced definitions of what it means to be a man. In the postindustrial workplace, men and women increasingly work side-by-side in similar occupations (Huffman, Cohen, & Pearlman, 2010; Reskin, 1990). In the home, men are expected to do domestic labor including childrearing (Coltrane, 2000; Magnuson, 2008). Moreover, the gay civil rights movement has brought greater visibility and acceptance to nonheterosexual persons, as well as broader definitions of manhood that reject the "compulsory heterosexuality" of the traditional male gender role (Anderson, 2009). This all suggests that cultural definitions of manhood may be in flux. How this shifting landscape will affect entrenched beliefs about manhood is an

open question, however. Change may lead to a gradual rejection of the belief that manhood is precarious; however, change may also compound men's anxieties about how to prove their manhood, resulting in a reaffirmation of traditional male role norms as men struggle to find new ways to assert an uncertain manhood status. Research on precarious manhood will benefit from an examination of how sociohistorical changes in gender stereotypes, roles, and expectations affect beliefs about the structure of manhood.

The links between broader social changes and specific conceptualizations of the structure of manhood may be either direct or indirect, depending on the underlying reason for precarious manhood beliefs. In earlier work (Vandello, Cohen, et al., 2008), we discussed the possible origins of precarious manhood beliefs, focusing on both evolutionary (e.g., Buss & Schmidt, 1993) and social roles (e.g., Eagly & Wood, 1999) explanations. These explanations, although sharing some conceptual overlap, bear very different implications for the possibility of rapid social change. If the tendency to perceive manhood as elusive and tenuous reflects an evolved adaptation to a socially competitive ancestral environment, then widespread beliefs about manhood may be quite resistant to modification. Conversely, if precarious manhood beliefs reflect ongoing divisions of labor, then such beliefs should shift with shifting social norms and roles. All of the work reviewed in this article has examined static samples at single time points, and longitudinal work and studies of historical trends documenting stability or change in precarious manhood beliefs will provide us with a richer understanding of the structure of manhood, as well as insight into the underlying origins of precarious manhood beliefs.

Given the nature of our theory, the focus of this article and our research has necessarily been on men. This can, and has, led to charges that our research ignores or misunderstands the experiences of women. Reviewers point out, for instance, the wealth of research showing that women who deviate from traditional gender roles are often punished (Berdahl, 2007; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Rudman, 1998). Does this not suggest that womanhood is just as precarious as manhood? We certainly acknowledge the restrictions placed on women and agree that

womanhood is at least as difficult and problematic as manhood. Gender policing is not limited to men; however, a key difference is that when a woman commits a gender transgression, she may be punished or viewed negatively, but her very status as a woman is less likely to be challenged in the same way a man's status often is. Thus, our point is about relative rather than absolute differences in the structure of women's versus men's gender status—women are simply less likely than men to lose their gender status in others' eyes. Still, we acknowledge that one major limitation of our research is that most of our studies (with the exception of Michniewicz et al., 2012) employ young adult college samples, for whom the salient features of manhood and womanhood may be very different than those at other life points. More research is needed among samples of older adults to explore whether, for example, womanhood status might be threatened with the onset of menopause or manhood status might be threatened with the transition from breadwinner to retiree. In short, manhood cannot be fully understood without also understanding the meaning of womanhood.

Similarly, cross-cultural work will help us better understand the universality or cultural specificity of beliefs about precarious manhood. Our samples have been almost all American college students. Although ethnographic work suggests that people the world over share the beliefs that manhood is hard won and easily lost (Gilmore, 1990), there may be cultural variations in the degree to which people endorse these views. Future work may look at the demographic, economic, and social factors that correlate with endorsement of precarious manhood beliefs. For example, in subcultures in which routes to earning status via occupational achievement are cut off, aggression might be a particularly attractive option for demonstrating manliness (Anderson, 2000; W. J. Wilson, 1996). This speculation requires confirmation, but it suggests that although precarious manhood is a salient concern for many men, it may be more salient for some than for others, and certain chronic (and temporary) contexts might bring this concern to the foreground.

Finally, although we have made an effort to connect our research to the existing literatures on masculinity and manhood, we certainly acknowledge that more work is needed in articu-

lating the points of convergence and divergence among related approaches. We look forward to continuing to draw these connections between our work and those of other scholars as we create a fuller picture of the meaning of manhood.

### Conclusions

As we have acknowledged throughout this article, the notion that manhood is precarious is not novel. Anxiety and uncertainty about men's ability to achieve and maintain manhood status have been continual themes in many theoretical treatments of gender roles. In studying the elusive and tenuous structure of men's gender status, we hope to bring greater precision to our understanding of this aspect of manhood and its implications for men's functioning. In particular, our approach (a) identifies and clearly articulates the structural features of manhood that differentiate it from womanhood; (b) demonstrates the existence of precarious manhood beliefs among educated inhabitants of an industrialized, modern culture; (c) relies on both correlational and experimental methods to demonstrate the links between men's gender status concerns and their cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions; and (d) highlights the implications of precarious manhood for men's outcomes across numerous domains of functioning. Although important questions remain, we hope that the research summarized here at least forms a solid foundation upon which to build.

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