

# Men, Masculinity, and Manhood Acts

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## Abstract

In the 1980s research on men shifted from studying the “male sex role” and masculinity as a singular trait to studying how men enact diverse masculinities. This research has examined men’s behavior as gendered beings in many contexts, from intimate relationships to the workplace to global politics. We consider the strengths and weaknesses of the multiple masculinities approach, proposing that further insights into the social construction of gender and the dynamics of male domination can be gained by focusing analytic attention on manhood acts and how they elicit deference from others. We interpret the literature in terms of what it tells us about how males learn to perform manhood acts, about how and why such acts vary, and about how manhood acts reproduce gender inequality. We end with suggestions for further research on the practices and processes through which males construct the category “men” and themselves as its members.

## INTRODUCTION

Feminism has taught sociology that no account of social life is complete if it ignores gender inequality. Sociologists of course wrote about sex roles, and about masculinity and femininity, before second-wave feminism impacted the discipline in the 1960s and 1970s. But much of this prefeminist writing, done under the influence of functionalism, treated sex roles as complementary and necessary—not as stemming from unequal power relations between women and men. Masculinity and femininity were likewise seen as sex-specific and sex-appropriate personality traits that were expressed behaviorally, rather than as attributions elicited by acts of domination and subordination. By the early 1980s, these old views had largely been superseded among sociologists of gender.

Since that time, gender scholars have created an enormous body of theory and research that goes under the rubric of “critical studies of men and masculinities.” We acknowledge that defining intellectual eras by reference to decades is an oversimplification and that the emergence of this new strain in gender studies was not a discrete event. Significant changes in sociological thinking about gender, and about men and masculinity in particular, were under way before 1980 (see, e.g., Kessler & McKenna 1978, Pleck & Sawyer 1974, Tolson 1977). Yet it is possible in this case to identify a point at which the terms of the discussion shifted and the study of men and masculinity entered the mainstream. We mark this point as the publication of Carrigan et al.’s 1985 article “Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity.”

Carrigan et al. debunked sex-role theory for its blindness to power, showed how masculinity was about power relations among men, not only between women and men, illuminated the link between masculinity and heterosexuality by taking gay sexuality seriously, treated masculinity not as a trait but as a form of collective male practice that has as its effect the subordination of women, and formulated the concepts of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities. Each of these ideas can be traced to earlier

works (e.g., Connell 1983), but by integrating them into a coherent analysis, Carrigan et al. put the study of men and masculinities on its contemporary track.

By some measures, that track has been fruitful. Our initial search of *Sociological Abstracts* turned up 2999 articles (78.6% of them published since 1995) that listed “masculinity” or “masculinities” as a key word. There are now several textbooks and edited volumes offering overviews of the field (e.g., Clatterbaugh 1996, Messner & Kimmel 2007), four encyclopedias or handbooks on studies of men and masculinity (Flood et al. 2007, Kimmel & Aronson 2004, Kimmel et al. 2005, Whitehead 2006), and two massive bibliographies (Flood 2008, Janssen 2008). The important question, however, is not how much has been published, but, as we ask here, what has been accomplished?

It could be said that we know a great deal about men and every conventional category of social life. There are literatures on men and work, men and war, men and sports, men and race, men and health, men and aging, men and crime, men and sexuality, men and violence, men and family, and men and friendship. Viewed in these terms, the landscape of our knowledge appears vast. Yet the tendency for sociologists to embrace the men-and-(fill in the blank) pattern when studying men and masculinity has, in our view, become limiting. As we will argue, moving forward depends on reclaiming key insights from Carrigan et al. (1985) and from interactionist analyses of gender.

Our approach here is to avoid the *men and* pattern and instead look at what the literature tells us about what men do, individually and collectively, such that women as a group are subordinated to men as a group and such that some men are subordinated to others. This is meant to reassert the importance of studying practices and processes. Our approach accords with current sociological theory that sees gender not as an attribute of individuals but as the name we give to cultural practices that construct women and men as different and that advantage men at the expense of women (Lorber 1994, Martin

2003, West & Zimmerman 1987). We thus focus primarily on qualitative studies that provide insight into how males construct the category “men” and themselves as its members.<sup>1</sup>

## Definitions

Much of the contention and confusion in the field stems from vague definitions of key concepts, inconsistent use of key concepts, or both. Although it is impossible to impose, post hoc, a set of definitions on a body of literature, it is possible to offer a set of definitions that can be used to interpret the literature. Our definitions are anchored in a social constructionist perspective, and as such might not be congenial to all. Definitions are necessary, however, for any attempt at sense-making and for sorting out disagreements. So we begin with the basics: males, men, and masculinity.

Based on differences in reproductive anatomy, humans are sorted into the categories “male” and “female,” reflecting a belief that males and females are or should become different kinds of people. Males are taught and expected to identify themselves not only as biological males, but, depending on age, as either boys or men. Females are taught and expected to identify themselves not only as biological females, but, depending on age, as either girls or women. This distinction between reproductive anatomy and gender identity is crucial for understanding what men are and how to study them.

In this view, the category “males” is not equivalent to the category “men.” Men are (usually) biological males claiming rights and

privileges attendant to membership in the dominant gender group. For an individual male to enjoy the benefits that derive from membership in the dominant gender group, he must present himself to others as a particular kind of social being: a man. This is, as Goffman (1977) and West & Zimmerman (1987) remind us, a dramaturgical task. To be credited as a man, what an individual male must do, in other words, is put on a convincing manhood act (Schwalbe 2005). This requires mastering a set of conventional signifying practices through which the identity “man” is established and upheld in interaction.

The dramaturgical task of establishing credibility as a man and thus as a member of the dominant gender group is aided by having a male body. Because of the conventional association between maleness and manhood, a male body is a symbolic asset. It is normally taken as a sign of qualification for membership in the category “men.” However, it is neither necessary (females can mask their secondary sex characteristics, appear to be male, and attempt to put on a manhood act; see, e.g., Dozier 2005) nor sufficient (males can fail to muster the other signifiers necessary to establish themselves as creditable men worthy of full manhood status).

Distinguishing between sex and gender is conventional wisdom in sociology, yet the distinction is worth reiterating, as it remains common to mistake males for men. Even more trouble arises in defining masculinity. Carrigan et al. (1985; see also Connell 1995) define masculinity as a “configuration of practices”—practices that have the effect of subordinating women. Although this definition usefully highlights what men do to maintain dominance, it is not without problems. It is not clear, for instance, precisely which of men’s practices constitute masculinity (Martin 1998). The definition also tends to take the category “men” for granted, rather than treating the category as constructed by practices and the meanings given to those practices.

To avoid this problem, our definitional strategy is to say that males—if they are to do their part in maintaining men as the dominant gender

<sup>1</sup>We focus primarily on qualitative research for three reasons: (a) Qualitative methods are those most often used in studies of masculinity; (b) survey-based approaches tend to reify masculinity, treating it as a static psychological trait; and (c) qualitative methods provide the best insight into how men present themselves as gendered beings (which is our concern here). Though beyond the scope of this paper, sociologists interested in methodological dilemmas that arise when conducting qualitative research on men have a burgeoning literature to draw on (see, for example, Butera 2006, Gatrell 2006, Hearn 2007, Messner 1990, Schwalbe & Wolkomir 2001, Schacht 1997).

group and if they wish to enjoy the privileges that come from membership in that group—must signify possession of a masculine self. This self is, however, only a virtual reality, a dramatic effect, or a consequence of how an actor's appearance and behavior are interpreted by others (Goffman 1959). In this view, as opposed to the commonsense view, a masculine self is not a psychological entity, nor a built-in feature of male bodies. It is, rather, a self imputed to an individual based on information given and given off in interaction, but it is an imputation that matters greatly.

The qualities seen as constituting a masculine self can vary historically and culturally. The practices that are interpreted as signs of a masculine self can also vary depending on other features of the actor (age, race, ethnicity, class), the audience, and the situation. In Western cultures, and in the contemporary United States especially, the essential element is a capacity to exert control or to resist being controlled (Johnson 2005). To elicit the attribution of possessing a masculine self thus requires signifying—with or without conscious awareness—that one possesses the capacities to make things happen and to resist being dominated by others.

Two further notes may be helpful here. First, to observe that males strive to claim membership in the dominant gender category by signifying a masculine self is not a moral critique. All humans learn where they are supposed to fit in a set of preexisting cultural categories, some of which are hierarchically arranged. So just as North Americans of European descent learn to think of and present themselves as white, which is the dominant racial category in U.S. culture, males learn to think of and present themselves as men, which is the dominant gender category. The root of the problem, then, if one opposes racial or gender inequality, lies in a system of privilege, not in individuals. Examining how gender is interactionally constructed, as many scholars have done and as we do here, is a matter of trying to understand how the system is reproduced, not a matter of leveling moral judgment.

Second, we acknowledge that efforts to exert control over the environment—efforts that might be part of manhood acts—can yield positive results. Survival and the quality of human life indeed depend on controlling things in the world. Thus, it is not our claim that attempts to signify a masculine self through acts of control have nothing but oppressive consequences. Our claim is that, whatever other consequences they might have, and regardless of what individual males consciously intend, manhood acts have the effect of reproducing an unequal gender order. Again, the point of taking this analytic view is not to evaluate categories of actors but to arrive at a better understanding of how the gender order works.

### Problems with Plurality

Current thinking in the field treats masculinity not as singular but as plural. There is not just one form of masculinity, it is said, but rather there are multiple masculinities. This notion grew out of the distinction between hegemonic masculinity—the kind of manhood act most revered in a culture (Connell 1987, 1995, 2000)—and lower-status ways that manhood is enacted by males with fewer resources. Thinking of masculinity as plural usefully sensitizes us to differences and inequalities among groups of men, but it can also make it hard to see what it is that masculinities have in common, other than enactment by male bodies. We propose that the common theme should be seen not as a type of body but as a type of act: one that signifies a masculine self.

The multiple masculinities concept reflects a laudable desire to value diversity. It is ironic, then, that this concept has fostered a kind of categorical essentialism in studies of men. To invoke, for example, the existence of Black masculinity, Latino masculinity, gay masculinity, Jewish masculinity, working-class masculinity, and so on is to imply that there is an overriding similarity in the gender enactments of males who are Black, Latino, gay, Jewish, or working class. The implicit claim is that all members of the category practice an identifiably unique

form of masculinity. This strategy of using conventional categories of race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, or class to define masculinities into existence is dubious. It can cause us to lose sight of what these allegedly diverse gender-signifying practices have in common (again, other than enactment by male bodies) that makes them masculinity. It can also obscure important within-group variations.

The discourse of multiple masculinities has also had the effect of detaching men from their actions. Despite the ritual defining of masculinities as forms of practice, it is not uncommon to see masculinity invoked to explain men's behavior, as if masculinity were an independent variable that caused men to behave in more or less oppressive ways. This is, as some have pointed out (e.g., MacInnes 1998), circular. If the behavior in question—some form of practice being studied—is what constitutes masculinity, then masculinity cannot be used to explain that behavior. Attributing men's behavior to masculinity also tends to discount men's agency. Our preference for referring to manhood acts arises from a desire to discourage the reification of masculinity and to redirect analytic attention to what males actually do to achieve dominance.

All manhood acts, as we define them, are aimed at claiming privilege, eliciting deference, and resisting exploitation. As suggested earlier, body types are irrelevant, except inasmuch as a male body is a symbolic asset and a female body a liability, when trying to signify possession of a masculine self and put on a convincing manhood act. The view we take here also focuses attention on what males do to create, maintain, and claim membership in a dominant gender group. Our organization and discussion of the literature reflects this concern with practices and processes. We thus turn to considering what the literature tells us about (a) how males learn to signify masculine selves, (b) themes and variations in the construction of manhood acts, and (c) how manhood acts reproduce gender inequality.

## LEARNING TO SIGNIFY MASCULINE SELVES

Children are born into a world in which males/boys/men are differentiated from females/girls/women. Children must learn to categorize themselves and others in these terms and learn to convey to others that they understand this system of categorization and their place within it. For young males, this means learning to identify themselves as boys and signify masculine selves. They must master, in other words, the "identity codes" (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996) that are symbolic constituents of the gender order. A great deal of research has examined how this aspect of symbolic culture is learned through childhood interaction and through exposure to media imagery.

Young males' initial adoption of the identity "boy" is micropolitical. Based on 18 months of fieldwork at a preschool, Cahill (1986) found that children and adults use the term "baby" to stigmatize children's socially immature behavior, whereas they reward more mature acts by bestowing the term "boy" or "girl." Such responses do not merely affirm that males are boys and females are girls. More than this, such responses link grown-up status and approval from others with doing gender properly.

Young males also learn that gender identities are signified by using appropriate props. Initially, much of this identity work is done by parents, as newborns and toddlers are equipped with gendered names, clothes, and toys (Pomerleau et al. 1990). Preschool boys who fail to grasp the pattern and wear dresses or pink ribbons are scolded by their peers for misbehavior (Cahill 1989). Based on 42 interviews with diverse parents of preschoolers, Kane (2006) shows that parents—especially heterosexual fathers—often censure preschool sons who play with Barbies or wear fingernail polish or pink clothing. Such policing leads young males to, as Cahill (1989, p. 290) put it, "reject and devalue. . . symbols of female identity" in order to "confirm their identities as boys."

Boys and girls are often sorted or, later, sort themselves into segregated groups. Lever's (1978) field study of 181 fifth graders revealed how girls tend to play in small groups that stress cooperation and intimacy, whereas boys play in larger groups that are more competitive, goal-directed, and rule-guided. Even when boys and girls play together, they often do so in ways that imply essential differences between boys and girls and, usually, the superiority of boys (Thorne 1993). Lever argues that this gender-segregated play can lead to differential skill development that may account for some gender inequality among adults. Our point is that participation in segregated activities comes to be understood as part of how gender identities are signified. Playing or watching sports—violent sports in particular (McBride 1995)—can thus be a way for boys and men to signify masculine selves (Messner 1992).

Another lesson for young males is that emotional display must be regulated, lest it undermine a manhood act. In their ethnographic study of a summer camp, McGuffey & Rich (1999) found that high-status boys ostracized boys who cried. Males involved in sports similarly police the expression of emotion, affirming the principle that boys should not express fear or pain (Curry 1993, Messner 1992). Parents are often complicit in this gendered training because they feel accountable—for their sons' behavior—to other adults (Kane 2006). Parents who believe that their son's masculinity is threatened may be especially inclined to encourage stoicism. For example, during one of McGuffey's (2008, p. 212) 389 interviews with 62 parents of sexually abused sons, one father said of his victimized son, "He's already been made into a woman sexually. I can't let him turn into one emotionally, too!"

Boys also learn that they should feel, or at least express, sexual desire for girls. Among preadolescent and adolescent boys, this desire is signified mainly through talk about the sexual appeal of girls and women, through sharing pin-ups and pornography, and by presenting themselves as heterosexually active and knowledgeable (Fine 1987, Thorne 1993). As Pascoe

(2007, p. 114) documented in her ethnography of a high school, boys use language and sometimes violence to turn girls and women into props for signifying heterosexuality. The boys she studied sexually harassed girls with unwanted comments and touching, and talked and joked about rape (see also Renold 2007). Boys' homophobic taunting of other boys who are deemed feminine is also a means of signifying heterosexuality (Pascoe 2007).

One of the most important lessons about signifying manhood concerns aggression and violence. Young boys' play often reflects popular warrior narratives in which violence is "legitimate and justified when it occurs within a struggle between good and evil" (Jordan & Cowan 1995, p. 728). Fathers and older male relatives often encourage (subtly, if not overtly) boys to fight, and reward them for doing so (Athens 1992, Messerschmidt 2000). The importance of signifying manhood through displays of fighting spirit is reinforced in sports, as coaches and teammates celebrate aggressive play while demeaning nonaggressive play as feminine (Fine 1987, Messner 1992). The pervasiveness of bullying has been attributed to this valorization of aggression and violence (Phillips 2007). A common cultural script also portrays effective resistance to bullying as a way to assert a masculine self (Kimmel & Mahler 2003).

Learning to signify a masculine self entails learning how to adjust to audiences and situations and learning how one's other identities bear on the acceptability of a performance. Males in marginalized social groups may face special challenges in this regard (Majors & Billson 1992, Staples 1982). Research on schools shows that teachers and administrators often stereotype African American and Latino boys as unruly, prompting increased surveillance and discipline (Ferguson 2000, Morris 2005). Boys learn, however, that they can impress peers if they break rules, talk back to teachers, and disdain academics (Ferguson 2000, Fordham & Ogbu 1986, Mac an Ghail 1994, Willis 1977). Boys socialized into urban gangs (Stretesky & Pogrebin 2007) or white supremacist groups (Kimmel 2007)

learn that they can achieve manhood status through actual or symbolic acts of intimidation. The lesson—for boys who are marginalized because of class or race—is that a masculine self can be signified, and deference elicited, by evoking fear in others.

The process of learning how to signify a masculine self in situationally appropriate ways continues throughout life. Men in manual labor jobs may learn that signifying a masculine self requires displays of strength and endurance, as well as resistance to being bossed (Collinson 1992). Men training for professional jobs, such as students in traditional MBA programs (Sinclair 1995), learn to signify masculine selves by appearing to be instrumentally oriented, rational, and able to manage subordinates. Men in the military learn that toughness, in-group loyalty, and the sexual objectification of women are the marks of manhood (Higate 2007). Men entering new jobs must thus learn to signify masculine selves in ways that accord with the organization's culture and gender politics.

## Media Imagery

Media imagery provides a repertoire of signifying practices that males can draw on to craft manhood acts. For example, in their fieldwork studies, Dyson (1994) shows how boys in elementary school enact superhero narratives, and Milkie (1994) shows how middle school boys discuss, identify with, exaggerate, and imitate the male heroes of Hollywood movies. More is learned, however, than simply which models to emulate or how to do so. Media imagery also provides a shared symbolic language for identifying certain practices as signs of masculine character.

Research on children's media reveals that it often glorifies men's power. Hamilton et al. (2006) analyzed 200 of the most popular children's books and found that male characters were typically portrayed as assertive and aggressive, rarely nurturing, and more likely than female characters to work outside the home. Research on educational software for preschool

children (Sheldon 2004) and comic books (Pecora 1992) similarly finds that male characters are more likely than female characters to be athletic, aggressive, and heroic. Similarly, grade school texts still overwhelmingly depict males as argumentative and competitive (Evans & Davies 2000). And whereas video games depict female characters as "victims or sexual objects," they portray male characters as "heroes and violent perpetrators" (Dietz 1998, p. 438). A lesson conveyed by much of this children's media is thus that males naturally command the attention and deference of others by virtue of their greater strength, daring, and capacity for violence.

Media targeting adolescent and adult men also create signifiers of masculine selves. Popular low-brow men's magazines (e.g., *Stuff*, *Maxim*) root manhood in displays of heterosexual appetite and virtuosity (Ezzell 2008, Taylor 2005). As McCaughey (2008) shows, popular culture often frames men's sexual infidelity and violence against women as biologically determined and thus inevitable. In mainstream magazines aimed at male audiences, men are most often portrayed as at work (Vigorito & Curry 1998), thus affirming productivity and breadwinning as signs of a masculine self. Even television portrayals that depart from these stereotypes, such as news stories about "Mr. Moms," typically underscore heterosexuality as a sign of genuine manhood beneath a veneer of domesticity (Vavrus 2002). The theme of the peaceful, gentle male who turns into a death-dealing warrior after suffering an unbearable outrage has been recycled often in Hollywood films (Sparks 1996). Such imagery affirms the value of a male body as a baseline signifier of a masculine self.

Media imagery also shapes the value of other signifiers. Males in marginalized groups are often represented in derogatory ways. White working-class men are often portrayed on television as "dumb, immature, irresponsible, or lacking in common sense" (Butsch 2003, p. 576). Gay men, although less disparaged in recent years, are often shown as acceptable targets of others' disapproval (Linneman

2008). Black men are often portrayed as lazy, violent, criminal, hypersexual, or naturally athletic (Entman & Rojecki 2000). Latinos too are often depicted as criminal or as illegal immigrants who cause social problems (Dixon & Linz 2002). Arab men are often depicted as decadent sheiks, religious fanatics, or terrorists (Shaheen 2001). Such imagery implicitly affirms the hegemonic ideal as white, monied, and self-possessed. It also provides symbolic resources for crafting conformist and oppositional presentations of masculine selves.

### MANHOOD ACTS: THEMES AND VARIATIONS

All manhood acts imply a claim to membership in the privileged gender group. To present one's self as a man is to make this claim, whether the presentation emphasizes or deemphasizes the capacity to exert control. As this point suggests and as research has shown, males can construct and present themselves as men in various ways. It is this variation that has come to be taken as evidence of multiple masculinities. A concern that has guided much research in this genre is for showing how males compensate—that is, how they modify their manhood acts—when they are unable or unwilling to enact the hegemonic ideal.

Research on transsexuals is particularly instructive. These studies have shown how adults must relearn to use their bodies, clothing, speech, and gestures to signify alternate gender identities. Female-to-male transsexuals, or transmen, flatten their chests, take hormones to grow facial hair and muscle tissue, deepen their voices, and cultivate gestures (e.g., giving firm handshakes) to publicly claim their chosen identities as men (Dozier 2005, Johnson 2007). Transwomen likewise mask secondary sex characteristics through surgery, makeup, and vocal alteration and adopt submissive gestures and speech styles (Schrock et al. 2005). Being identified as a member of a gender category, these studies show, depends on mastering the requisite bodily, gestural, sartorial, and vocal signifiers.

Research on transsexuals also shows how the elicitation of deference depends on the type of man one is perceived to be. Based on in-depth interviews with 29 transmen, Schilt (2006) found that whereas white transmen beginning to work as men were taken more seriously, had their requests readily met, and were evaluated as more competent than they were as women, young, small Black, Latino, and Asian transmen did not gain similar advantages. Similarly, in her interview study of 18 transmen, Dozier (2005) found that, as men, white transmen reported being given more respect and more conversational space and being included in men's banter. They also experienced less public harassment. Transmen of color, on the other hand, reported being more frequently treated as criminals, and short and effeminate transmen reported being publicly harassed as gay. Gaining the full privileges of manhood is thus shown to depend not merely on being recognized as male, but on the whole ensemble of signs that are conventionally taken as evidence of a masculine self.

The multiple masculinities concept, despite its problems, has been helpful for seeing how various groups of men, using the material and symbolic resources available to them, are able to emphasize different aspects of the hegemonic ideal as means to construct effective manhood acts. For men in heterosexual relationships, occupational status and income are particularly important for eliciting deference from their partners. Middle- and upper-middle-class men can invoke job demands to avoid childcare and housework (Hochschild 1989, Pyke 1996). Based on 70 in-depth interviews with divorced and remarried men and women, Pyke (1996) showed that middle-class women's deference stems from accepting the idea that men's careers are primary. Even when women earn more than men, women "often defer to their husbands in the decision-making process" to affirm the belief that men should be in control (Tichenor 2005, p. 200). When the male is the primary breadwinner, the threat of leaving can also be used to leverage deference, as Ortiz

(2006) showed in his interview-based study of 48 wives of professional athletes.

Men with fewer economic resources may use other strategies to maintain relationship control. Research shows a pattern of more frequent use of overtly coercive behavior, including verbal abuse and physical force, among poor and working-class men (Benson et al. 2004, Pyke 1996, Strauss et al. 1980). Based on in-depth interviews with 122 batterers, Cavanagh and associates (2001) show that males are more likely to be violent when they see their female partners as insufficiently submissive and not servicing their emotional and sexual desires (see also Hearn 1998). Men of all social classes may also use emotional withdrawal as a control strategy (Sattel 1976). The status of being the dominant partner can thus be achieved in different ways. Lacking one kind of resource for eliciting deference often leads to employing another kind of resource in exaggerated fashion. It is also worth noting that no control strategy is guaranteed to succeed.

Close attention to how manhood acts are actually performed shows variation in response to situations. Men in management positions, for example, can use institutional authority to elicit deference, but they must also demonstrate the qualities of rationality, resolve, and competitiveness (Collinson & Hearn 1994), and show loyalty to the male hierarchy (Jackall 1988, Martin 2001). They may sometimes adopt a paternalistic demeanor, playing the role of benevolent guide, and at other times use humiliation and threats (Kerfoot & Whitehead 1998). Professional men may also demonstrate capability by emphasizing their special knowledge (Haas & Shaffir 1977). And as Dellinger (2004) shows in her comparative ethnography of organizations that produce feminist and pornographic magazines, organizational culture influences how men present themselves at work. Manhood acts are thus strategically adapted to the realities of resource availability, individual skill, local culture, and audience expectations.

Manhood acts often entail the sexualization of women as a way to signify heterosexuality, to demarcate gender boundaries, and to challenge

women's authority. A great deal of research has looked at how this occurs in workplaces (Prokos & Padavic 2002, Quinn 2002, Uggen & Blackstone 2004). Although the targets of gratuitous sexualization and harassment are often women of lower status, men also sexualize and harass women who are organizational superiors (Rospenda et al. 1998). The same phenomena can be found outside the workplace (Grazian 2007, Schacht 1996). Sexualizing women serves not only to signify heterosexuality and mark the boundary between gender groups, but it also protects males from homophobic abuse by their peers.

Men who publicly identify as gay reject heterosexuality as part of their manhood acts, yet the power of the hegemonic ideal is reflected in the creation of gay male subcultures that valorize large bodies and muscularity (Hennen 2005), sexual risk-taking and voracity (Green & Halkitis 2006), and macho fashion (Mosher et al. 2006). The subtext of these signifying acts can be read as, "Despite conventional societal standards by which we would be judged unmanly, we are indeed men and thus deserving of manhood status." Feminist analysts have suggested that misogyny among some gay men is similarly related to a desire on the part of gay men to distance themselves from women and retain a grip on male privilege (Frye 1983).

Research on men in low-status jobs shows another form of compensation: Instead of trying to control others, these men try to show that they cannot be controlled. These manhood acts rely on joking, verbal jousting, sexist talk, and sometimes sabotage to assert autonomy vis-à-vis bosses (Collinson 1992). Resistance may be heightened when men are expected to perform tasks conventionally associated with women. As Henson & Rogers (2001, p. 233) found when conducting participation observation and in-depth interviews with 68 male temporary clerical workers in Chicago and Los Angeles, despite their relative powerlessness in the workplace, the men resisted "demands for deference [such as] smiling, waiting, taking orders, and tolerating the bad moods of their supervisors." And, as Leidner (1993) shows in her field study of

insurance salesmen, when work requires interactional deference with customers, the interaction is redefined as a contest for control so that men will be willing to do it.

The hegemonic ideal pervades the culture and sets a standard against which all manhood acts are measured. Because it is impossible, however, for all men to meet the hegemonic ideal, adjustments must be made, not only individually, but also subculturally. We thus find some working-class men creating bar and music cultures in which they signify masculine selves through heavy drinking and aggressive posturing (Eastman & Schrock 2008, Tilki 2006); economically marginalized men of color relying on sports, fighting, and sexual conquests (Anderson 1999, Wacquant 2003); college men turning to binge drinking and high-risk behavior (Peralta 2007); and others using crime to show that they are fearless and indomitable (Messerschmidt 1993).

Research on male subcultures has documented both wide variation in what are defined as signifiers of a masculine self and consistency in what it means to possess such a self. For example, the politically liberal, middle-class white males who populated the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1990s drew on Jungian psychology to redefine qualities conventionally associated with women—emotional expressivity, nurturance, and gentleness—as evidence of the “deep masculine” residing within all men (Schwalbe 1996). Likewise, the politically conservative Promise Keepers drew on Christian theology to validate similar qualities as masculine (Newton 2005). In both cases, however, the claim was that whereas the masculine self might need cultivation, it is naturally present in males, and its other elements—strength, courage, fierceness, and willingness to sacrifice—suit males to being warriors, leaders, and benevolent fathers.

Subcultural and historical variation in how manhood acts are performed demonstrates the fluidity of what are defined as signifiers of manhood (Kimmel 1996). Variation also arises because not all males are equally well equipped—by virtue of body type, skill, or

social location—to enact the locally prevailing hegemonic ideal, thus making compensation and improvisation necessary. There remains, nonetheless, a common theme: the desire to claim an identity as a member of the privileged gender group, a desire that can be satisfied only by putting on a creditable manhood act. In competitive, hierarchical societies, especially those that are classically or vestigially patriarchal, this means signifying a capacity to exert control over one's self, the environment, and others.

## THE REPRODUCTION OF GENDER INEQUALITY

The original impetus for studying masculinity was to better understand the reproduction of gender inequality. Carrigan et al. (1985) were expressly concerned with masculinity as configurations of practice that have the effect of subordinating women. More recently, however, some theorists have retreated from the idea that masculinity necessarily produces inequality (see Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, p. 853). Other gender theorists have questioned the detachment of masculinity from gender inequality (Hanmer 1990, Flood 2002, Hearn 2004), arguing that the study of masculinity must remain part of a feminist project aimed at ending men's domination of women.

One reason for the loss of connection to the issue of gender inequality may be the success of the multiple masculinities concept. Eager embrace of this concept led researchers to document the diverse ways males style themselves as men, but with a loss of attention to what these styles have in common. Partly in response to this development, more critically inclined gender scholars (e.g., Jeffreys 2005, McCarry 2007) have urged a shift from the endless cataloging of masculinities to examining *how men's practices create inequality*. This is the path we take in this review. In keeping with the terms set out earlier, we consider what the literature tells us about the consequences of the practices we call manhood acts.

Differentiation is, before all else, basic to the creation and reproduction of gender inequality

(Lorber 1994). Manhood acts are how males distinguish themselves from females/women and thus establish their eligibility for gender-based privilege. Indeed, the existence of the category “men” depends on the collective performance and affirmation of manhood acts. And, as argued earlier, successful manhood acts elicit deference from others in concrete situations. In these ways, manhood acts are inherently about upholding patriarchy and reproducing gender inequality. We can, however, look at research that shows how specific elements of manhood acts operate to advantage men at women’s expense.

In the workplace, occupational segregation depends, first, on the manhood acts that make it possible to identify and channel different kinds of people toward different kinds of jobs (Reskin 1988). Manhood acts also have the effect of legitimating occupational segregation by upholding the illusion that men are more fit for certain kinds of jobs, especially those that involve the exercise of command. As Jackall’s (1988) field study of corporate managers shows, managers must cultivate images of themselves as winners, as able to “get the job done,” and as morally flexible and emotionally tough. Among defense intellectuals, a manhood act that features cold rationality may be necessary to be taken seriously (Cohn 1987). Men in some female-dominated occupations are put on a “glass escalator” toward greater authority and reward (Cognard-Black 2004, Williams 1992), whereas others are segregated horizontally in more highly valued specialties (Snyder & Green 2008, Williams 1992). Putting on a manhood act is part of how one establishes similarity to those already at the top of the hierarchy and gets through what others experience as a glass ceiling (Kanter 1977). And to the extent that jobs are designed by those who imagine the ideal occupant to be a male who fits the hegemonic ideal, those whose manhood acts come closest to the ideal are likely to be advantaged (Acker 1990).

Striving to emulate the hegemonic ideal may serve one well when seeking managerial power, but even compensatory manhood acts can make a difference for obtaining economic rewards.

If the hegemonic ideal is out of dramaturgical reach, it may be possible to craft a manhood act that emphasizes self-sacrificial endurance to achieve organizational goals. Cooper (2000) shows how this was the case for the 20 computer programmers she interviewed. Much like athletes who signify a masculine self through a willingness to suffer pain (Curry 1993), these programmers claimed manhood status by practicing “nerd masculinity” that involved suffering long hours of work to meet production goals and to establish a reputation for unique expertise.

In the political sphere, manhood acts approximating the hegemonic ideal may be crafted to achieve or consolidate power (Messner 2007). In the case of the presidency, the act must also serve an iconic function for the nation; that is, the act must represent the collectively imagined, idealized character of the nation (Hall 1979). George W. Bush, for example, refashioned his persona after the 2001 terrorist attacks to underscore his self-proclaimed role as a “war president” leading a great and powerful nation (Coe et al. 2007). Disrespecting the manhood acts of political opponents is also common. During the 2004 U.S. presidential election, the Bush campaign and much of the media framed the losing Democratic candidate, John Kerry, as feminine and French-like (Fahey 2007). Inasmuch as manhood acts are conducive to achieving positions of power—by eliciting deference over the course of a career of status-seeking—and inasmuch as executive positions are reserved for those who can serve as icons of collective power (whether of the corporation or the nation), gender inequality will be the outcome. Women who vie with men for such positions are often compelled to put on a compensatory manhood act or, as it is sometimes said, to “out-macho the boys.”

Research on men in social movements, as noted in the previous section, shows that manhood acts often involve collaboration among men. This is true more generally. Even men who reject hegemonic ideals may feel compelled, when in all-male groups, to appear emotionally detached, competitive, and willing

to objectify women (Bird 1996). In college fraternities, young men mutually affirm their manhood by collectively defining women as “servers” and as sexual “bait” or “prey” (Martin & Hummer 1989). In cases where men’s oppressive behavior is challenged, such as batterer intervention programs (Schrock & Padavic 2007) or prison antiviolence groups (Fox 1999), men often collaborate to outwit social workers and assert a right to control women. Inequality is thus reproduced when males uncritically affirm oppressive elements of other males’ manhood acts or conspire to resist challenges to those acts.

Eliciting deference by signifying a capacity to dominate can also affect the division of domestic labor. This is not to say that manhood acts always elicit compliance from female partners when the division of domestic labor is being negotiated. The acts that matter most may be those performed in the public sphere. When a manhood act yields career success, this may tip the balance of power in the household. Gender inequality created through manhood acts in the workplace can thus be translated into gender inequality—in terms of decision-making power and work distribution—within the home (Coltrane 2000). In some cases, a lack of power in the public sphere might lead to a compensatory manhood act in the home, an act that involves a refusal to do what is defined as women’s work (Brines 1994). Compensatory manhood acts might also involve the use of violence to subjugate female partners (Hearn 1998).

As noted earlier, manhood acts that involve displays of heterosexual appetite and prowess often entail the sexual objectification and harassment of women. In these acts, which are often competitive and tend to escalate (Quinn 2002), women become props that men use to affirm a heterosexual identity. Gender inequality is reproduced when sexual harassment, or the threat thereof, limits women’s public mobility (Gardner 1995) or undermines perceptions of women’s competence as workers and professionals (Padavic & Reskin 2002). Sexual activity undertaken as part of a manhood act may also

result in unwanted pregnancies that decrease young women’s chances for upward mobility (Anderson 1999).<sup>2</sup> Even after relationships end, males may signify their uncontrollability by refusing to pay alimony and child support (Arendell 1992), acts that hurt exes economically.

Claiming a heterosexual identity as part of a manhood act may also involve homophobic taunting, especially among boys and young men. As Pascoe (2007) shows, high school boys use “fag” as an epithet to police the boundaries of acceptable manhood acts (see also Mac an Ghail 1994). The same phenomenon has been observed among prison inmates (Thurston 1996), mental hospital patients (Leyser 2003), and athletes (Anderson 2002). Whereas this taunting mainly establishes a hierarchy among boys and men, it also reinforces sexist ideology, because the implicit insult is that a man who wants to have sex with men is like a woman—which is to say, less than a man. Homophobic taunting thus helps reproduce gender inequality by devaluing women.

### Individual Liabilities and Gender-Class Advantages

The consequences of manhood acts for the reproduction of gender inequality can be contradictory. Men as a gender class can benefit from the collective upholding of sexist ideology and of images of males as possessing essential qualities that suit them for the exercise of power. Yet compensatory manhood acts can sometimes reproduce inequalities in ways that disadvantage subgroups of men. For example, a number of studies (e.g., Willis 1977, MacLeod 1995, Anderson 1999) have shown how self-protective displays of toughness by poor and working-class young men lead to disinvestment in academic work and failure in school.

<sup>2</sup>There is, of course, more to fatherhood than our brief treatment implies. Whereas our concern is mainly with fatherhood as it relates to manhood acts and the reproduction of gender inequality, others have examined the complexities of fatherhood in considerable depth. For examples, see Gavanas (2004), LaRossa (1996), and Marsiglio & Hutchinson (2002).

Young men may also distance themselves from intellectual work, which is defined as feminine, and embrace physical work, which is defined as masculine, and thus limit their chances for upward mobility via success in school (Fine et al. 1997).

Beyond school, compensatory manhood acts can undermine employment relationships. Young men who signify a capacity to resist control by others may find it difficult to get and hold jobs in the mainstream economy (Bourgois 1995). The use of crime to signify a masculine self carries the risk of getting caught and losing opportunities for conventional economic success (Messerschmidt 1993). Compensatory manhood acts that are adaptive in some contexts can thus be self-destructive in others. Much depends on who is presenting what kind of masculine self to whom and under what conditions. This suggests a need to examine how the consequences of manhood acts are shaped by racism and the class structure.

Whereas manhood acts that emphasize the defiance of authority can undermine the mobility prospects of individual men, men as a gender class may continue to enjoy privilege because of the collective image fostered by manhood acts that involve crime, violence, and interpersonal intimidation. (The use of state violence in manhood acts undertaken by elite males is also consequential in this regard.) To the extent that such acts imply the innate dangerousness of males, women may feel compelled to seek protection from males deemed safe—protection for which they exchange subservience (Schwalbe et al. 2000, pp. 426–27). Nonviolent males can thus derive privilege from the violent manhood acts of other males.

Males can also incur health damage as a consequence of manhood acts. Research has linked men's higher rates of morbidity and mortality to failure to seek help early (O'Brien et al. 2005); to higher levels of risk-taking behavior, including drinking, smoking, and reckless driving (Verbrugge 1985); and to poor social support networks (House et al. 1988). Men's sports injuries, death by violence, and suicide have also been linked to gender enactment (Sabo 2005).

As with crime, much of this health-damaging behavior may be symbolic, intended to signify capacities to control one's own life, to be invulnerable and needless of help, and to be fearless and hence not easily intimidated by others. The effort to signify a masculine self, as some analysts have suggested (Courtenay 2000), can be toxic.

## CONCLUSION

The trends noted at the outset of this review continue apace. Research continues in the men-and-(fill in the blank) pattern. New studies regularly appear that examine masculinity in still more contexts. Although these traditions of research have produced a considerable body of knowledge about the diversity of men's behavior, there has been a tendency to lose sight of the goals of trying to understand (*a*) the social construction of gender in general and (*b*) the reproduction of gender inequality. We have suggested that these problems stem in part from a tendency to reify masculinity, to erroneously see it as an essential quality of male bodies, and to treat it as if it had explanatory power.

Moving forward will require, we have suggested, reclaiming and revamping some of the basic insights of a critical sociology of gender that emphasizes practices and processes. This means maintaining distinctions between anatomy, sex and gender categories, and the identity work that both locates individuals within categories and reproduces the categories themselves. Documenting and analyzing manhood acts—the identity work that males do to claim membership in the dominant gender group, to affirm the social reality of the group, to elicit deference from others, and to maintain privileges vis-à-vis women—may prove to be more useful, we have argued, than merely cataloging more masculinities.

Refocusing our attention on practices and processes—those constitutive of what we have called manhood acts—can generate new empirical challenges. Future research might examine, for example, how males use the interaction order collaboratively to construct manhood acts,

how they police and support each other's acts, and how they create and share the material and symbolic resources that enable various kinds of manhood acts. This would mean studying how manhood acts are both institutionalized and, in the face of changing conditions and threats to male supremacy, improvised. Further investigation into how subjectivity is conditioned—that is, how habits of thought and feeling are formed by and implicated in manhood acts—would also be useful.

Another challenge is to examine how the elicitation of deference in face-to-face interaction produces large-scale patterns of male

domination. Such research might examine, for example, how manhood acts play a part in network formation and in maintaining regimes of organizational control. Media studies are another avenue for research, especially if attention is shifted from the consumption of images to examining how manhood acts are implicated in the production of gendered images. There is, finally, a need to study both individual and collective resistance to manhood acts, no matter who performs them, presuming an enduring concern with understanding the social processes through which gender inequality can be overcome.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any biases that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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