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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

What Threatens, Defines: Tracing the Symbolic Boundaries of Contemporary Masculinity

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Abstract

A robust literature ties emasculation to a range of compensatory behaviors. The present study shifts focus away from the effects of masculinity threat toward an understanding of young adult men's experiences of emasculation in their own words. Drawing on 42 in-depth interviews with undergraduate men attending a selective U.S. university, we examine the behaviors, situations, and narratives—both experienced and hypothetical—that privileged young men perceive as threatening. We use these data not only to contribute to the empirical literature on masculinity threat, but also as a novel approach for theorizing about the meaning and structure of masculinity more broadly. This is an important task given recent social and economic changes that may have altered contemporary definitions of masculinity. Emasculation accounts provide unique analytical leverage for revealing men's often unspoken understandings of acceptable masculine behavior. We find that, while many interviewees superficially espoused egalitarian and anti-homophobic beliefs, their emasculation narratives implicitly call for the subordination of women and other men. These performances consequently obscure and maintain traditional, hegemonic power relations. We discuss the implications of our finding for scholars, practitioners, and individual men who desire a more equitable gender structure.

Keywords Men · Masculinity threat · Hegemonic masculinity · Hybrid masculinities · Boundary violations · Gender inequality

A growing body of scholarship has linked a range of adverse behaviors to emasculation. For example, threatened masculinity is associated with physical aggression (Bosson et al. 2009), victim-blaming (Munsch and Willer 2012), and the expression of sexist and anti-gay attitudes (O'Connor et al. 2017; Weaver and Vescio 2015; Willer et al. 2013). In this article, we shift focus away from compensatory responses toward an understanding of young adult men's reported experiences of masculinity threat. Drawing on 42 in-depth interviews with undergraduate men attending a selective university in the Northeastern United States, we examine the behaviors, situations, and narratives young men perceive as threatening. Emasculation accounts not only shed light on the purview of experiences that threaten masculinity, they also reveal the symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002, p. 168) privileged young adult men construct around masculinity by bringing to light the distinctions that "separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership."

Understanding these boundaries is particularly important given recent social and economic changes that may have altered contemporary meanings of masculinity. For example, male students lag behind female students on multiple measures of scholastic achievement (Duckworth and Seligman 2006; National Center for Education Statistics 2012; Voyer and Voyer 2014), equal breadwinning and the number of women who earn more than a male partner is on the rise (Fry and Cohen 2010; Raley et al. 2006), men are increasingly expected to care for children and participate in domestic labor (Gottzén and Kremer-Sadlik 2012; Townsend 2002), and

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there has been a rapid decline in homophobia coupled with an increase in affectionate relationships between men (Anderson 2011; Robinson et al. 2017). Given these changes, our investigation sheds light on the extent to which masculinity has changed and the consequences of these changes for dismantling or sustaining inequality.

In addition, we draw on these accounts to theorize about the underlying structural arrangement of contemporary masculinities. We begin by overviewing theories of hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan et al. 1985; Connell 1987, 1992, 1995[2005]; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), inclusive masculinity (Anderson 2008, 2009, 2011; Anderson and McGuire 2010), and hybrid-masculinity (Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014). As our review suggests, the structure of contemporary masculinity is the subject of ongoing debate. We show, however, that emasculation narratives add analytic leverage to these debates by exposing participants' underlying beliefs about relative status—beliefs that may be more easily withheld if men are asked direct questions about sexism or homophobia. We find that, despite acknowledging women's academic achievements and espousing egalitarian and anti-homophobic ideals, our interviewees' accounts centered around the need to exercise power over women and other men, discursively reinforcing the status quo. We use these findings to argue for the persistence of hierarchical hegemonic masculinity, obscured through young adult men's performances of hybrid masculinity, and we conclude that redefinitions of masculinity among privileged men may serve to covertly maintain existing gender relations.

To date, the most extensively cited attempt to conceptualize modern-day masculinity is the work of Raewyn Connell (Carrigan et al. 1985; Connell 1987, 1992, 1995[2005]; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) who conceives of masculinity as a hierarchy of differently-valued masculinities, with "hegemonic masculinity" occupying the most esteemed position. While never fully embodied by any one person, *hegemonic masculinity* is the most socially endorsed type of masculinity and represents an ideal set of prescriptive norms. Not all men live up to, or even try to live up to, this standard. Indeed, some men actively contest it by reconstructing definitions of masculinity over time (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; McGuffey and Rich 1999; Messner 1997). Nonetheless—although hegemonic masculinity takes on different forms across time and space—in contemporary Western society, this ideal has been characterized as heterosexual, White, and moneyed, as well as by homophobia, misogyny, stoicism, and risk-taking (Anderson 2009; Donaldson 1993; Kimmel 1997; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). In addition, hegemonic masculinity is marked by a tendency for privileged men to dominate and subordinate both women and other men (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Schwalbe 2014).

In a second stream of research, Eric Anderson and colleagues focus on changes in the structural arrangement of masculinity. For example, they document softer, less oppressive, and more emotional displays of masculinity on collegiate athletic teams (Anderson 2011), in fraternities (Anderson 2009), within "bromances" (Robinson et al. 2017), and in high schools (McCormack 2011) to illustrate the ways in which heterosexual young men increasingly embrace inclusivity (Anderson 2009; Anderson and McGuire 2010). In particular, Anderson (2009) suggests masculinity may be more inclusive under certain social conditions. In periods and places characterized by *homohysteria*—defined as mass awareness that homosexuality exists as a static sexual orientation, widespread disapproval of homosexuality and femininity, and the need for men to publicly align with heterosexuality to avoid homosexual suspicion—masculinities are arranged hierarchically with "orthodox masculinity" occupying the most esteemed position. In periods and places of declining homohysteria, however, orthodox masculinity loses its dominance and "two dominant (but not necessarily dominating) forms of masculinity…co-exist, one orthodox and one inclusive" (Anderson 2009, p. 96) with inclusive masculinity characterized by emotional and physical intimacy and other behaviors historically associated with femininity and homosexuality. Finally, in periods and places of severely diminished homohysteria, multiple masculinities flourish without hierarchy, differences between masculinity and femininity disappear, and men embody a variety of behaviors and identities without fear of emasculation or retaliation. In short, Connell (1995[2005]) contends that masculinities are arranged hierarchically with a singular, widely-recognized form exerting influence over women and other men. Anderson and colleagues contend, at least in contemporary Anglo-American culture, masculinities are increasingly inclusive and organized more horizontally.

A third stream of research acknowledges these changes, but argues they are more style than substance. This line of work, dubbed *hybrid masculinities*, focuses on the ways in which certain men—typically privileged, young, straight, White men—discursively distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity and selectively incorporate elements of marginalized masculinities and/or femininities into their gender performances and identities (Bridges 2010, 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Lamont 2015; Messner 2007; Pfaffendorf 2017). Accordingly, privileged men may frame themselves as politically progressive, for example, by explicitly expressing anti-homophobic attitudes (Dean 2013) or reframing their household contributions as beneficial to men (Demantas and Myers 2015). This reframing, however, simultaneously obscures the ways in which these men continue to benefit from existing power relations (Bridges 2014). For example, Messner (1993, p. 249) argues "men of color, working class men, immigrant men, among others, are often (in)directly cast

as the possessors of regressive masculinities in the context of…emergent hybrid masculinities." Thus, the hybrid masculinities perspective echoes previous work that acknowledges gender ideologies exist both on the conscious and unconscious level, a duality that serves to "fortify existing social and symbolic boundaries in ways that…conceal systems of power and inequality in historically new ways" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014, p. 246; also see Hochschild and Machung 1989). Thus, performances of hybrid masculinities ultimately perpetuate the unequal power structures that are fundamental to Connell's (1995[2005]) theory of hegemonic masculinity.

Each of these perspectives has its advocates and critics. Consequently, questions of definition and structure remain. How do privileged young men—those most primed to inherit the powers and privileges of hegemonic masculinity—understand contemporary masculinity? For these men, is masculinity arranged hierarchically or horizontally? Are the boundaries of privileged masculinity more inclusive than they once were and, if so, in relation to whom and with what broader repercussions for social inequality?

Method

Participants

To address these questions, our study draws on data collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 42 undergraduate men attending a selective northeastern university in the United States. The respondents were recruited through a research participant pool managed through the university's business school. The call for participants recruited "heterosexual Black or White participants (of any ethnicity), born and raised in the United States." Interviewees were paid $15. All names have been replaced with assigned pseudonyms.

Table 1 describes the sample demographics which included 7 freshmen, 11 sophomores, 10 juniors, 13 seniors, and 1 fifth-year student. The average age of our participants was 20.33 (range = 18–25). A majority (29, 69%) identified as non-Hispanic White, 6 as non-Hispanic Black, 3 as Hispanic White, 1 as Hispanic Black, 1 as biracial (non-Hispanic Black and White), and 2 as Other. Parents' combined annual income ranged from $0 USD to $800,000 USD. Participants' academic majors included business/management (22), STEM (11), social sciences (9), and interdisciplinary studies (3). Fifteen were members of Greek letter fraternities, and 12 were members of a university athletic team. Our sample largely coincides with how one of our respondents, Nathan, described the "average guy" at this university: "Opposed to the average for the country, [we're] a little more intelligent, a little more well-spoken, definitely a bit more affluent than the rest of the country."

Table 1 Sample description ($n = 42$)

Characteristics	*n*	Percent[a]
Year in school		
Freshman	7	16.7%
Sophomore	11	26.2%
Junior	10	23.8%
Senior	13	31.0%
Fifth year	1	2.4%
Race/Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic White	29	69.0%
Non-Hispanic Black	6	14.3%
Hispanic White	3	7.1%
Hispanic Black	1	2.4%
Non-Hispanic Black and White	1	2.4%
Other	2	4.8%
Parent's income		
US$150,000 or more	9	21.4%
US$125,000 – US$149,999	5	11.9%
US$100,000 – US$124,999	9	21.4%
US$75,000 – US$99,999	8	19.0%
US$50,000 – US$74,999	6	14.3%
Less than US$50,000	5	11.9%
Major[b]		
Business/Management	22	52.4%
STEM	11	26.2%
Social sciences	9	21.4%
Interdisciplinary major	3	7.1%
Fraternity	15	35.7%
University athlete	12	28.6%
Age		
M	20.33	
SD	1.39	

[a] Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100

[b] Due to double majors, percentages do not add up to 100

Procedure

The first author, assisted by two qualified undergraduate research assistants, conducted the in-depth interviews which lasted between 45 min and 2 h and took place in a research laboratory in a small room designated for interview research. Given that the interview topic was considered sensitive, to establish rapport interviewees were first asked to share their year in college, their major(s), their career aspirations, and to describe their social and academic lives including how they spent time during the school week and on weekends. Participants were then asked to share their thoughts on masculinity and femininity in general (e.g., "What traits do you think of as being masculine?"; "What traits do you think of as being feminine?"), after which they were asked to describe their

personal experiences and understandings of masculinity (e.g., "Who are some role models for the type of man you aspire to be?"). Lastly, participants were asked to recall a time when they felt "emasculated," "not manly enough," or when their "masculinity was questioned." (See the online supplement for the interview protocol.) To avoid influencing responses, questions were open-ended and no examples of femininity, masculinity, or emasculation were offered. After the interview, participants completed a demographic questionnaire in which they reported their age, racial/ethnic identity, parental income, and involvement in extracurricular activities.

In a sense, our use of emasculation narratives is reminiscent of the breaching experiments used by Garfinkel (1967) and other early ethnomethodologists. Norm-threatening situations destabilize the often taken-for-granted rules that emerge most clearly when broken. Rather than exposing participants to unexpected violations, however, we instead asked participants to recall, or imagine themselves breaking, gendered rules and to reflect more generally upon the rules that might be broken. In so doing, our approach effectively uncovers the implicit boundaries of masculinity, with the advantage of being potentially less upsetting given that participants share control, or co-construct (Mishler 1997), the interview process.

Research Positionality

Because researchers' social locations impact data collection, particularly in qualitative research, it is important to address the positionality of the interviewers. In our study, the interviews were conducted by the first author assisted by two undergraduate students (one woman and one man) trained in qualitative interview methodology. Each interviewer conducted 14 interviews.

There are longstanding debates regarding insider versus outsider status in qualitative research. We take the perspective that both statuses have advantages and disadvantages (Merton 1972; Naples 1996) and further view these statuses as points on a continuum rather than as dichotomous positions (Labaree 2002; Narayan 1993). The first author's social position (as a White woman 10-to-15 years older than the study participants) was an advantage because her outsider status helped position the interviewees as experts on the topic at hand: young adult men's masculinity. On the other hand, being relatively older had its disadvantages. For instance, in the initial interviews the first author referred to the study participants as "men." She later realized, however, that the interviewees did not refer to themselves as "men" but rather as "guys" and, after a few interviews, shifted her vocabulary. This disadvantage was additionally countered by the involvement of younger research assistants: the undergraduate woman shared ethnicity and age characteristics with the majority of the participants; the undergraduate man shared their gender, ethnicity, and age. We conducted analyses looking for variations by interviewer, which revealed no differences in themes or frequency.

Analyses

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed following the rules for simple transcription outlined by Dresing et al. (2015). Data collection stopped once we reached saturation (Goffman 1989). Our analyses followed an inductive approach to coding informed by sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954; Bowen 2006) drawn from our existing knowledge of gender and masculinities theory (e.g., masculinity threat, homosexuality). These concepts served as a starting point for our analysis (Glaser 1978; Padgett 2004). Both authors first read through the transcripts in hardcopy, discussing and comparing emergent themes, building theme sheets, and writing analytical memos to assess emerging patterns. The theme sheets and memos were then used to develop a more detailed coding scheme. (See Table 3 for codes and example quotes.) We then re-read the transcripts, coding the data using the qualitative software program Dedoose.

Interviewees' narratives of emasculation included three forms: (a) stories in which another person questioned their masculinity, (b) stories of feeling emasculated despite not having their masculinity explicitly questioned, and (c) narratives of hypothetical threats to masculinity. In recognition of the analytical distinctions between these forms, we examined our data for patterns indicating whether certain themes were more likely to be present in one form or another. With the exception of narratives about future breadwinning and fist-fighting, which were primarily hypothetical, we found no meaningful differences. Thus, with these exceptions, we incorporate all three forms into our analyses without treating one as more valid than the others.

Results

In asking participants to recall a specific emasculating event, 21 (50%) of our respondents described an incident from childhood or early adolescence. Because our focus is on contemporary masculinity, these participants were asked to recall a "more recent event." Ultimately, 34 (80.9%) interviewees recounted at least one emasculating incident that had occurred in the recent past. Six participants (14.2%) were unable to provide a specific experience, but instead described hypothetical or speculative examples. We organize our findings into two sections. The first section focuses on masculinity threats that interviewees framed in relation to women and/or femininities; the second section focuses on masculinity threats framed in relation to other men and/or masculinities. For detailed demographic information about individual participants, see Table 2. Table 3 provides an overview of emergent themes, their definitions, prototypical examples, and frequencies.

Table 2 Participants' characteristics

Name	Race/Ethnicity	Parents' income	Year	Age	Major	Fraternity?	Sport?
Aaron	White	US$80,000	Senior	21	Business	no	no
Aiden	Black	US$75,000	Sophomore	20	Social Science	no	football
Bruce	White	US$114,000	Junior	20	Interdisciplinary	yes	football
Byron	White	US$400,000	Sophomore	19	Business	yes	no
Chad	White	US$50,000	Junior	21	STEM	no	no
Connor	White	US$250,000	Freshman	18	Social Science	yes	no
Dale	White	US$120,000	Sophomore	20	Business	no	track
Dennis	White	US$75,000	Sophomore	20	Business	no	no
Drew	White	US$78,000	Sophomore	20	Business	no	no
Eddie	Black/White	US$30,000	Senior	21	Social Science	yes	no
Eric	White	US$800,000	Senior	22	Business	no	football
Finn	White	US$100,000	Senior	22	Business	no	no
Fredrick	White	US$80,000	Sophomore	19	Business	no	track
Gabriel	Other	US$0	Senior	21	Business	yes	football
Grayson	White	US$125,000	Senior	21	Business	yes	football
Harrison	White	US$120,000	Senior	22	Business	yes	football
Hector	Latino	US$50,000	Senior	23	STEM	yes	no
Ian	White	US$125,000	Junior	20	STEM	no	no
Ignacio	Latino	US$250,000	Junior	20	Business	yes	no
Jacob	Other	US$50,000	Junior	20	STEM	no	no
Justin	White	US$60,000	Junior	20	Interdisciplinary	no	no
Kyle	Latino	US$90,000	Junior	21	Social Science	no	no
Lance	White	US$100,000	Junior	21	Business	no	no
Luke	White	US$120,000	Freshman	19	STEM	no	no
Matthew	White	US$120,000	Sophomore	20	Business & STEM	yes	no
Milo	White	US$130,000	Freshman	18	Business	yes	no
Nathan	White	US$35,000	Fifth Year	25	STEM	yes	no
Nick	Black	US$95,000	Sophomore	20	Business	no	football
Oscar	Black	US$130,000	Junior	20	Social Science	no	no
Owen	White	US$65,000	Senior	22	Business	no	football
Pascal	White	US$250,000	Senior	20	Social Science	no	no
Patrick	White	US$100,000	Senior	21	Social Science	no	no
Quentin	White	US$300,000	Senior	20	Business	no	no
Reed	White	US$125,000	Sophomore	20	Business & Social Science	yes	no
Shane	White	US$100,000	Junior	22	STEM	no	no
Teddy	Black	US$40,000	Sophomore	20	Social Science	no	no
Uberto	Black/Latino	< US$40,000	Freshman	19	STEM	no	no
Victor	White	US$75,000	Sophomore	20	Business & Interdisciplinary	no	track
Wyatt	White	US$150,000	Freshman	18	Business	yes	crew
Xander	White	US$200,000	Senior	21	Business	yes	no
Yardan	Black	US$200,000	Freshman	18	STEM	no	no
Zach	Black	US$60,000	Freshman	19	STEM	no	no

STEM Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math

Masculinity Threat in Relation to Women/Femininities

Thirty-six interviewees (85.7%) framed emasculation in relation to women and/or femininities. In particular, these narratives centered around: (a) discussions of masculinity threat in the context of intimate heterosexual relationships, (b) engaging in stereotypically feminine behaviors or performances, and (c) gendered understandings of intelligence and knowledge (see Table 3a).

Table 3 Definitions and examples of masculinity threat themes and subthemes

	Definition	Example quotes	Frequency of theme *n* (%)
(a) Masculinity threat themes in relation to women/femininities			36 (86.0%)
Intimate relationships threat	An episode in which an interviewee described masculinity threats as occurring in, or in relation to, romantic, sexual, intimate, and/or committed relationships with women. The episode must be framed as in relation to or in interaction with the woman partner.	(Responding to the question, "Can you give me some examples of instances that might make a guy feel un-masculine?") "First thing that popped in my head was relationships. When, say in a relationship if the lady was cheating, then the man may feel like he wasn't doing something good enough." (Zach)	30 (71.4%)
Breadwinning subtheme	An episode in which the interviewee described not being able to support a family or earning less money than a wife or girlfriend as a threat to masculinity.	(Responding to the question, "Can you give me some examples of some instances that might make a guy feel un-masculine?") "When he can't provide for himself or his family financially." (Drew)	19 (45.2%)
Rejection subtheme	An episode in which the interviewee described being rejected by a woman who was a potential or current romantic partner.	(Responding to the question, "Do you have any specific examples [of masculinity threat]?") "I would say when I saw a girl that I really liked with her boyfriend, and I felt like I didn't know what had happened to create the situation. I was just taken aback. I was just hit in the face with this. I was like, 'really? This happened and you never told me?' It was very unfortunate. It was right before Valentine's Day so I'm like, 'Oh, God.'" (Lance)	17 (40.5%)
Being whipped subtheme	An episode in which the interviewee described being controlled by—or not having control over—a current or potential girlfriend. May be described using the term "whipped."	(Responding to the question, "Can you give me any examples of instances where a man might feel un-masculine? When his masculinity might be called into question?") "I'm trying to think of a good word, like, with girls. Just being a more, well, with girlfriends in particular, being more of a pushover." (Quentin)	8 (19.0%)
Threat by participating in feminine behaviors or performances	An episode in which the interviewee described participating in traditionally feminine behaviors or performances as a threat to masculinity.	(Responding to the question, "Do you have any other examples of why a guy might feel his masculinity is questioned?") "I mean the other thing is just for doing activities that are otherwise un-masculine, you could think of many such things: baking cakes, having tea parties, things are just usually associated with girls." (Pascal)	20 (47.6%)
Stoicism subtheme	An episode in which the interviewee described having or displaying emotion as a threat to masculinity.	"Oh, another thing related to masculinity would perhaps be being emotionless sometimes. Like, not being, well, masculinity means not being emotional, like you can't have emotions if you're a man, right?" (Justin)	14 (33.0%)
Gendering intelligence	An episode in which the interviewee described a failure in intellectual or knowledge-based capabilities as a threat to masculinity.	[Responding to the question, "Can you think of a time when this personally happened to you, when your masculinity was called into question?"] "A very stupid kind of example is like my ex-girlfriend beat me in a game of Scrabble. We both play Scrabble and she rarely had won, and she beat me one time." (Gabriel)	10 (23.8%)
(b) Masculinity threat themes in relation to other men/masculinities			35 (83.0%)
Physicality threats	An episode in which the interviewee described an embodied trait as a threat to masculinity. This could include physical abilities or physical appearance.	(Responding to the question, "Can you give me examples of instances that might make a guy feel un-masculine?") "Oh, just like, you know, not having like big enough muscles, stuff like that. Or not running quick enough, you know, in sports." (Byron)	29 (69.0%)

Table 3 (continued)

	Definition	Example quotes	Frequency of theme *n* (%)
Athleticism subtheme	An episode in which the interviewee described an embodied trait related to performance (not appearance) as a threat to masculinity.	(Responding to the question, "Any other examples of where a guy might feel his masculinity is threatened or he's not living up to this traditional notion of masculinity?") "So it's whenever somebody is accused of doing something poorly that is normally thought of as masculine so that could be strength or like sports. So if somebody's bad at sports, slow, uncoordinated, whatever it is, they might feel threatened. If like somebody else is like, 'Wow, I'm way better than you at sports' or something like that." (Pascal)	28 (66.7%)
Appearance subtheme	An episode in which the interviewee described an embodied trait related to appearance (not performance) as a threat to masculinity.	"Sometimes I'll go workout, and I think this goes along with being self-aware and taking care of myself and also just being more masculine because I'll look more fit, I'll look stronger and all that. I think that is what I do to restore my masculinity. I don't think I do it because society tells me I have to, I do it because I like to look at myself in the mirror and be like, damn, I look good. That's what's up right now, you know? And before I get in the shower in the morning, I just look, 'Oh, nice. my biceps are looking good today. Maybe I'll wear a shirt without any sleeves,' that kind of thing." (Eddie)	14 (33.3%)
Risk-taking	An episode in which the interviewee described not taking or being afraid to engage in risky behavior as a threat to masculinity.	(Responding to the question, "Can you give me some instances that might make a guy feel un-masculine?") "I guess, guys are supposed to like have this like tough demeanor, and like, not really supposed to like get scared in certain situations. And I guess your masculinity could be questioned if like, you're afraid of like heights or something, and you won't go jumping off a cliff into water, or something like that." (Dale)	17 (40.5%)
Fighting subtheme	An episode in which the interviewee described losing a physical fight with another man as a threat to masculinity.	(Responding to the question "So then what would be the physical threats [to masculinity]?) "Getting in a fight and losing could be one." (Connor)	11 (26.2%)
Heterosexuality: Hooking up	An episode in which the interviewee described not being able to keep up with male peers in heterosexual conquests as a threat to masculinity. The episode must be framed as in relation to or in interaction with other men.	(Responding to the question, "Can you give me some instances that might make a guy feel un-masculine?") "I think sexual prowess is one that certainly comes to mind. And like I would say, like, with my fraternity brothers, when we share stories about sexual exploits, you can tell that there's some guys who are like listening because they're hearing something new, and some guys are listening because they want to like, keep going back and forth, and it's a conversation, you know what I'm saying?" (Eddie)	2 (2.1%)
Heterosexuality: Homophobia	An episode in which the interviewee described male homosexuality as a threat to masculinity.	(Responding to the question, "Can you give me some instances that might make a guy feel un-masculine?") "I guess you could feel un-masculine if you dress like, I don't know, maybe people think you're gay by the way you dress." (Chad)	4 (9.5%)

n = 42. Example quotes are brief excerpts from interviewees' masculinity threat episodes. Interviewer utterances have been omitted for brevity

Intimate Relationships Threat

Thirty (71.4%) participants reported threats to masculinity in the context of intimate relationships with women including failure to maintain breadwinner status, romantic rejection, and being "whipped" [controlled] by a romantic partner.

Breadwinning Breadwinning has been characterized as a central component of masculine identity in industrialized nations (Cha and Thébaud 2009; Demantas and Myers 2015; Thébaud 2010; Tichenor 2005; Townsend 2002). Given that these young men routinely interact with highly talented and motivated young women—coupled with the fact that none of our respondents were married, supported children, or were currently employed full-time—it is striking that 19 (45.2%) participants referred to breadwinning in their emasculation narratives. In general, these men displayed an understanding and acceptance of women's widespread labor force participation, and most anticipated marrying women who would work outside the home. Simultaneously, however, they also disclosed their discomfort with the thought of a wife out-earning her husband. Finn's response was representative: "A lot of guys define themselves by their career. Without that, you don't feel like you're living up to the expectations that are set for you to bring home the bacon." Dennis also talked about the importance of breadwinning when asked for an example of threatened masculinity:

> My girlfriend, she's looking to be a physician's assistant making eighty grand a year or more. I'm looking at a general business degree which might lead to forty-five to seventy thousand a year. That reverses the roles. I don't think anybody will come up to us and be like, "Male female, what are your salaries? Who's paying more of the mortgage?" But I think subconsciously if a guy is, like, Mr. Mom or staying at home with the kids and not working, that might weigh on his psyche. (Dennis)

In short, our participants held fast to the neo-traditional belief that husbands should take the lead when it comes to breadwinning. Drew provided further explanation:

> If a guy loses his job and relies on the wife's income, it'll take an emotional toll on him, versus if it were the other way around, I feel like the wife wouldn't care. I guess it's part of our instincts, you know, men have always been the breadwinner. (Drew)

Drew's assumption is erroneous. It wasn't until the late 1700s when the industrial revolution changed the pace and scale of production that the so-called "traditional" breadwinner-homemaker family model emerged (Coontz 1992; Davies and Frink 2014). Nevertheless, the statement reveals Drew's underlying belief in two distinct and complementary sexes, each with their "instinctual" responsibilities. Failing to bread-win disrupts the prevailing gender order.

Rejection In addition to breadwinning, 17 (40.5%) interviewees described being rejected by a potential or current romantic partner as emasculating. For example, Nick reported, "I give up really easily with girls so I don't know if I'm rejected or not." Elaborating, he recalled a time in which he approached a woman to dance.

> She had been kind of chilling the whole time, not really doing anything, and I just went up to her…and she kind of seemed a little distant, and I was like, "You're not going to dance or anything?" I was going to ask her to dance, but I didn't want to do it directly. (Nick)

By asking indirectly, Nick preemptively saves face. Circumventing outright rejection allows men to maintain a façade of control over these interactions. Eddie described a similar strategy for avoiding the "flat no":

> When I hit on a girl, I try to put her at ease, and definitely establish some sort of rapport and possible mini-friendship at the time. I just like try to…know more about her so that when I do try to make my move, or ask her if she would like to go upstairs, or if she'd like a tour of the house, or whatever stupid line I come up with at the time, if she says "no," it's less awkward. If you get a conversation going with her, and you say, "Oh, would you like a tour of the house?" [and she says] "Oh, not right now." [and then I'd say] "Oh, alright. Well, then can I get you a drink real quick?" I mean, I'll feel rejected in the sense, like, "Damn, why didn't she want to go up to my room?" But I don't want to make it awkward, and I never usually get the flat "no." (Eddie)

These narratives suggest a desire to maintain control over interactions with women as evidenced by a continued reliance on traditional sexual scripts in which men initiate romantic interactions while women put on the breaks. Indeed, even though one participant bemoaned "… having to always be pursuant of" women (Oscar), he did not express the desire to be pursued by women, nor did any participant describe rejection or emasculation in terms of not being pursued. Additionally, although interviewees did not discuss this view explicitly, fears of rejection may also reflect anxieties about being compared unfavorably to other men, a theme to which we return in the second half of our results.

Being Whipped Even if men manage to avoid rejection, being in a committed relationship with a woman comes with additional potential threats. In particular, eight (19.0%) interviewees cited being "whipped" as emasculating. Participants used the term "whipped" to describe romantic over-involvement, constituting a failure to maintain independence from and dominance over female partners. Consider Ignacio's explanation: "If [a guy] hangs with his girlfriend too much, they say he's whipped. That means the girl has control, and I guess the guys are supposed to be the dominant one." Similarly, Eric said:

> If you're whipped by your girlfriend, it would be like, we're going to the bars or something and then somebody's like, "Oh, I can't. I'm going to dinner and then going to see a movie with my girlfriend.' [The guys]'d be like, "Oh, you're whipped. She runs your life." (Eric)

Again, these explanations underscore the hierarchical nature of gendered power relations. According to these conceptions of masculinity, men should exert dominance and control over women—"guys are supposed to be the dominant one" (Ignacio)—as opposed to women exerting dominance over men or having men and women make decisions collaboratively.

Given this emphasis, it is not surprising that a few men reported ending relationships due to anxieties about maintaining control and superiority over their partners. For example, when asked to describe a time when he did not feel manly enough, Aiden recalled being in a relationship with a woman who "was really on top of all her stuff." Aiden explained:

> …it was crazy. [She] made straight As, like, stuff like that. She made straight As! Like, she knew information about *everything*. If it was how to find the lowest prices on this, she knew. If it was how to have a good interview, she knew. Like, just she knew *everything*. I just felt like I wasn't even needed. It kind of, I guess, made me feel like I was useless. Like I wasn't a man because I couldn't teach her anything. (Aiden)

Aiden went on to explain that his frustration at being unable to "teach her anything" motivated his decision to end the relationship.

In summary, whether anxiously anticipating the need to provide for a future wife and family, navigating interactions with women to avoid outright rejection, or ending relationships with (overly) competent women, these men allude to an underlying ideology that calls for male superiority and dominance over women.

Threat by Participating in Feminine Behaviors and Performances

Given the previous findings, it is not surprising that, for most of our interviewees, masculinity was defined in opposition—and as superior—to femininity. Indeed, 20 (47.6%) participants described having stereotypically feminine traits or engagement in stereotypically feminine behaviors or social roles as threatening. Participants described ballet (Milo), figure skating (Drew), tennis (Drew), cooking (Aaron), a cappella singing (Kyle), theater (Finn), shopping (Owen), taking care of children (Patrick), and crying (Ignacio), among other things, as emasculating due to their specific association with femininity. Notably, 14 (33%) respondents specifically described showing emotion, or even *having* emotions, as a threat to masculinity. For example, Ignacio described "emotional strength" as an important aspect of masculinity, explaining, "guys don't want to be seen as soft. They want to be manly men …. I don't want to be seen as a crybaby or anything like that so sometimes I'll hide how mad I am or how disappointed I am." Nick similarly claimed, "I don't want to be sensitive" because "sensitive is being very susceptible to outside elements, like [other] people's words or actions or opinions…. and I don't want that."

Ironically, however, rather than giving up "girly" activities altogether, the men in our study often reframed "feminine" traits, behaviors, and roles in ways that validated their masculinity. For example, Andre admitted he likes shopping on Ebay, but described this pastime as a direct expression of his masculine competitiveness, saying:

> I'm very competitive. I always want to win, I always strive to win, and I always think I'm going to win. I'm competitive in shopping. Say it's a game I want to buy. I'm going try to search for the lowest possible price I can get it at. (Andre)

Similarly, in response to being told "only girls do yoga," Milo reported telling his friends, "Actually, it's a pretty good workout. You should try it some time." By stressing yoga as a "good workout," he recasts yoga as masculine, a discursive strategy that helped him save face. He does not, however, challenge the underlying notion that feminine-typed activities are inferior to masculine-typed activities.

Similarly, Lance discussed his job as a women's shoe salesman at a department store. Signaling his awareness of "appropriately" masculine behavior, he pleaded with the interviewer: "Don't judge me. You can't judge me," before explaining:

> I applied for men's clothing, which is jackets and shirts and ties…. I'm in the management internship so you learn how to be a department manager at the store. Last year I was a salesperson and I got promoted. And

> they're hoping to promote me again if I complete this successfully, so I'd track myself working at [department store] … it's a very hard job to get. Yeah, I think maybe a hundred kids apply per store and they only take eighteen to twenty. So, it's really low acceptance…. I work in the sixth largest store in the company, so it's deeply exciting. I'm very excited. (Lance)

By alluding to his preference for men's clothing and by emphasizing that he is on the fast-track to management in a competitive program at a large store, like Milo, Lance defends his participation in a stereotypically feminine activity by discursively establishing himself as masculine. In effect, he recasts himself as a future manager as opposed to a women's shoe salesmen. Consequently, despite engaging in a stereotypically feminine enterprise, Lance reinforces—rather than challenges—the notion of masculine superiority.

Gendering Intelligence

The last theme to emerge in relation to women and femininities revolved around intelligence, scholastic effort, and the gender gap. One explanation given for the gender gap in academic achievement is that young men avoid scholastic effort because it is associated with femininity (Heyder and Kessels 2017) and/or homosexuality (Morris 2012). Our data add nuance to this research by examining how men attending a selective university—one that requires students to have displayed significant academic achievement for admission—think about gender and intelligence. Ten (23.8%) interviewees described intelligence as an area vulnerable to emasculation. When asked to describe traits they associate with masculinity, eight respondents cited intelligence. Yet, five listed intelligence specifically as a feminine trait. These findings are striking given a 1987 study which found that intellectual inferiority was one of the primary ways men experience "masculine gender role stress" (Eisler and Skidmore 1987, p. 123). Notably, unlike previous work (e.g., Morris 2012), none of our respondents engaged in homophobic discourse around studiousness.

At first glance, these findings convey progress, at least among the men in our sample. Upon further investigation, however, the interviewees who made mention of intelligence almost universally described men and women as possessing different kinds of intelligence, along with different goals and interests. Women were consistently described as "book-smart." Indeed, there was widespread agreement that, compared to men, women were more dedicated and successful academically. When asked to describe the "average or typical girl," Drew said, "someone who's devoted to their work." Aaron similarly described "girls" as being "more studious" and explained "they go to the library, and they stay in the library, sometimes all day. My guy friends are more like me, you know? You go for a little bit, then you grab a snack, and then maybe you go home."

In addition, our respondents were quick to label academic effort as undesirable, often by distancing themselves from "nerd" stereotypes. Ignacio said: "The typical girl is usually pretty intelligent whereas the typical guy is probably not that intelligent, *not so nerdy*" (emphasis added). For men, on the other hand, intelligence implied general competence and practical skills, attributes that were often regarded as superior to women's academic accomplishments. For example, Aaron described "men" by saying, "I want to say smart, but I don't really mean smart [because] it's not, like, dorky smart but an ability to navigate your way. Street-smart is probably the closest term. Or resourceful." Similarly, Milo explained, "I possess intelligence, but not in the sense of, like, book-smarts. It's, like, just knowing what to do, like…how to like fix stuff around the house, stuff like that."

In contrast, women's academic abilities were described as esoteric, shortsighted, and inefficient, particularly in comparison to men's purportedly more strategic approach. For example, when asked whether intelligence is desirable for men, Nathan said:

> I think it is something that everyone kind of strives for, but I don't think men strive for it more than women. Because of [their] ease at getting things done, men don't have to work as hard. The retention of knowledge isn't as important as the end goal of getting to wherever.… Like, in a class, there's a push for men, maybe culturally, to finish a certain degree or to get a certain certificate, and the end goal is to get a particular job. The course tends to be more, like, pure, or true, for women. They go along a set of coursework because of something they like about the course or the major, and then apply that to whatever they do in the rest of their life. [So] women tend to be more… in the moment, I guess. Short-sighted is the wrong term because it has a bad connotation, but they tend to be thinking about short-term goals and guys tend to be more long range. (Nathan)

Nathan implies that, for men, academic knowledge is not as important as the degree or job prospect to which it is tied. Therefore, some men chose to exert the minimum amount of effort to graduate and obtain employment.

The notion of intelligence stripped of effort surfaced again and again, such as when Connor described one of his role models, saying: "You know, he's like surpassing his classes with like above a 4.0 GPA, which means he's obviously competent, but at the same time he doesn't need to put a lot of effort in, he has a natural intelligence." To be sure, these men preferred good grades to bad grades. However, spending time and energy on academic pursuits clashed with notions of masculinity that call for competency, sufficiency, and disinterest in

putting forth effort. Consequently, in the face of women's indisputable academic success our participants reframed women's attainments as less desirable and inferior. Additionally, by achieving academic success without effort, men, such as Connor, are credited with having "natural" intelligence.

This logic helps explain why several participants accounted for the gender achievement gap by pointing to policies and practices that unfairly advantage girls or women. Hector blamed "the entire feminist movement" for his complaint that "little girls are getting more encouragement and attention in school." Consequently, girls are "doing better while boys are being left behind. Young boys and men aren't being stimulated or challenged or being given the chances that they should." Likewise, Bruce lamented the addition of the writing component to the SAT: "All that stuff favors girls. Women are generally better writers, and guys are more, like, technical. So, these values favor women and girls. More girls are recently getting accepted into college and stuff like that." In other words, these men attribute women's academic success to political intervention rather than authentic achievement, reinforcing notions of innate male superiority.

Masculinity Threats in Relation to Other Men/Masculinities

Thirty-five interviewees (83%) understood their masculinity through interactions and comparisons with other men (see Table 3b). In particular, these narratives of emasculation centered around discussions of both physical prowess and (hetero)sexuality.

Physicality Threats

Concerns related to having a masculine body were the most commonly mentioned threats to masculinity in this category, with 29 (69%) participants mentioning either physical abilities or physical appearance. Indeed, 28 (67%) participants perceived failure in the realm of athletic prowess as particularly threatening, and when asked which traits they thought of as masculine, the term most often mentioned was "strength." One way this occurred was in the context of sports. For example, Bruce, a junior on the university football team, had aspirations of being a "starter" when he was benched by his coach due to poor performance: "I just felt terrible because I felt like I let the team down. And I thought, I don't know, I guess I sort of felt like a pussy." Other participants listed similar incidents that evidenced their inability to triumph over other men. For example, Aaron recalled a time when his behavior resulted in the loss of an important hockey game and Dale recounted a second-place finish in a track meet as times in which they felt particularly emasculated.

Even in less competitive contexts participants spoke of sports-related failures as potentially threatening. For example, recalling a time in which his masculinity was called into question, Zach said:

> If you're playing basketball with your friends, and you're terrible, it's going to be embarrassing. If you're doing anything as far as like an athletic competition—I mean, not a competition, but just having fun—and you're bad at it, you're going to want to be better. (Zach)

Zach is explicit that the purpose of a pickup game with friends is to have fun. Yet, even in the context of "just having fun," the inability to perform well in comparison to other men is potentially emasculating.

If participating in sports comes with the risk of emasculation, so too, does *not* participating. Drew explained: "People in my family have played football, and I was the first one not to play football and they, like, still give me a hard time about it." Drew made the decision not to play when he was six. Now 20, he reports his family still calls his masculinity into question.

In a similar manner, participants emphasized their bodies and the importance of exhibiting physical prowess in their bodies in relation to other men. For example, Aiden recounted an incident that occurred on a study abroad trip:

> We went to the Dead Sea. Obviously, it's a sea. So you need to, like, take off your shirt and wear a bathing suit, sunscreen, everything that comes with that. I felt kind of intimidated by the others. I felt like I was kind of judged for my lack of physical strength. … One of my friends was like, "Wow, if you were like physically stronger like Jordan"—who's another kid who's absolutely built—"if you were, like, physically stronger, you'd definitely be like perfectly my type." (Aiden)

Aiden then expressed frustration based on "the fact that [he didn't] have like a six pack [a sculpted abdomen] and like bulging biceps and stuff." Similarly, Lance bemoaned his short stature. When asked why, he responded:

> When someone puts you in a line of guys, you always look up at a guy, you never look down. You always think of "a guy" as the next guy who's bigger than you. It can never be the guy who's smaller than you because… because I can't beat *you*, but I can beat *you*." (Lance)

Here, Lance describes his body as insufficiently masculine and reveals the extent to which he assesses himself in comparison to other men. It is not his height that is emasculating,

but rather his height in comparison to others and what this means in terms of his potential ability to dominate or be dominated by other men.

Physical appearance was also mentioned frequently, albeit less frequently than athleticism, with 14 (33.3%) respondents noting concerns about living up to an ideal male body that was "big" (Eric), "brawny" (Bruce), and "tall" (Eddie) with "enough muscles" (Byron) and "nice biceps" (Eddie). Unwanted physical traits included being "skinny" (Oscar), "short" (Lance), having a "small dick [penis]" (Justin), and just being generally "less attractive" (Connor) than other guys. As with athletic abilities, body image concerns were typically framed in comparison to other men, with comparison groups ranging from peers and siblings to underwear models on TV. For example, Bruce admitted:

> I wish I could grow a beard, but I can't. (…) I just grow scraggly hairs and not like a big, full beard, like my brother's. He can grow the biggest beard and he's the hairiest guy. I'm not very hairy, I wish I was. (Bruce)

Thus, as with physical prowess, expectations for physical appearance are framed in comparison to other men.

Risk-Taking

Seventeen (40.5%) respondents shared narratives of risk-taking as potentially emasculating, often describing shame about being nervous or afraid to engage in risky behaviors or activities when pressured by male peers. Risks mentioned were typically dangerous or illegal and included underage drinking (Pascal), illegal drug use (Hector), driving recklessly (Byron), extreme sports like cliff-jumping (Dale), breaking into school buildings and egging houses (Bruce), riding in the back of a pickup truck without seatbelts (Owen), and being generally "reckless" (Oscar). The most frequently described risky behavior, however, was fighting.

One way men have historically displayed physical strength and dominance over one another is through fighting, with recent work demonstrating the ways in which marginalized men (e.g., poor men, Latino men, rural men) construct masculine identities through fighting (Mora 2012; Morris 2012). In a similar manner, 11 (26%) informants cited losing or backing down from a fight as potentially emasculating. Unlike previous work, however, our participants almost universally described fighting in the abstract, with only one participant admitting to his participation in an actual physical fight. Instead, fighting was framed as something *other* men did. For example, after stating "manly men" are able to "kick other people's asses all the time in fights," Shane admitted, "I've never really been in a fight." He then added: "[men] should also be civilized, [and fighting is] not really something that grown-up people do." Similarly, Justin explained his admiration of Barack Obama: "Everyone is like, they want to kill him, but he doesn't succumb to them. He's calm, nice and controlled. He doesn't start fighting back like some other guy would."

Given this reasoning, several participants proudly recounted instances in which they could have fought, but did not. For example, Jacob described fighting as "acting out," and then described the following incident:

> I was at a frat party, and somebody pushed me from behind and I spilled my drink on my friend, so I turned around, and I was like, "You just knocked into me, and made me spill my drink. Can you apologize?" And the guy flipped out on me, started yelling, started threatening to, like, kick me out of the house. He was a lot bigger than I was, but I didn't just walk away from him. I just kind of like stood in his face. I didn't yell back at him, […] I just kept talking to him, and he eventually got talked out of it and walked away. (Jacob)

There was one exception to this trend: Bruce acknowledged fighting as "hyper-macho," but described it as legitimate and desirable, stating, "getting in a fight is the best way to solve [threatened masculinity]." Bruce then expressed concern that the world was "not as tough as it used to be," claiming "My mom calls it 'the pussification of America's kids.' She's had three boys so I guess she sort of favors that [perspective]. Like you get in a lot of trouble if you get in a fight and things like that." He then recalled an incident in which he "almost got into a fight" but regrettably couldn't finish the fight because "it got broken up."

Barring this exception, there was overwhelming agreement that fighting, particularly the ability to prevail over another man in a fight, signifies strength and masculinity. Simultaneously, however, most of the men in our study did not report actually engaging in physical conflict or other forms of risk-taking. Rather, they drew symbolic boundaries constructing themselves as embodying a superior breed of masculinity—that of "grown-up" men akin to progressive heads of state—who demonstrate self-control. In so doing, they simultaneously recast other men—men who fight —as regressive.

Heterosexuality: (Talking about) Hooking up and Homophobia

To date, heterosexuality has been a central tenant of contemporary Western masculinity (Connell 1995[2005]; Kimmel 1997, 2008; Pascoe 2007). Thus, it is not surprising that 12 (28.6%) participants cited failing to engage in sexual activity as emasculating. For example, three participants disclosed

their status as virgins. Relying on the euphemism "never had a girlfriend," Lance said:

> That's probably the only expectation where another man would look at me, and go, "What the hell are you thinking? How can you not have had a girlfriend by the time you're twenty-one?" … That's the one thing I think someone would just isolate me and look at me and be like, "Why haven't you done this?" (Lance)

What we found most interesting, however, was *how* our participants framed their lack of sexual experience as problematic. Rather than pointing to a genuine desire for sexual activity itself, our participants instead spoke of needing to keep pace with their male peers and bemoaned their inability to do so. Like Lance, others who did not "hook up" risked reprisal. For example, Aaron recounted the following:

> I went out with my friends, and they're all like, on the search for girls. I was hoping to just hang out with friends, but a lot of them took home girls that night. It's like a law. They were giving me a hard time for not taking, you know, not being aggressive or competitive or whatever it is and taking a girl home... They kind of made me feel unmasculine. I was kind of like, maybe the masculine thing would be to just take a girl home. (Aaron)

Note, Aaron did not express an internal desire to have a casual sexual encounter ("I was hoping to just hang out with friends"), but nonetheless he felt inadequate. He continued: "Sometimes I've gotten drunk and I've kissed a girl but that's it. And like, you know, [my friends have] done a lot of other things and they have lot of great stories." In terms of preserving masculinity, for Aaron, his inability to tell "great stories," appears more central to masculinity than actually "hooking up." Victor mirrors this thinking:

> I was hanging out with some friends and they were talking about sex. I couldn't say anything because I, you know, had nothing to contribute, so I just felt like less of a man…I wasn't able to contribute, [I was] not able to talk about a story about hooking up…. (Victor)

With similar emphasis, Zach said: "You know, if all your friends were talking like, 'Oh, you know, I got with this girl last night,' and you're like, 'Yeah, I went home and ate cereal last night' or something, it's going to be a little embarrassing, you know?"

These narratives echo previous work that finds young masculinity is often affirmed discursively in the "backstage" of male-only spaces (Hughey 2011). For example, Pascoe (2007) finds that by engaging in weight room banter about dubious sexual exploits, high school boys are able to establish themselves as appropriately masculine. And, Grazian (2007) finds that participation in the collectively shared experience of the "girl hunt"—not engagement in sexual activity per se—is fundamental to masculine performance. Likewise, our findings demonstrate that heterosexual storytelling with other men, perhaps more so than actually engaging in sexual activity with women, shapes young men's sense of themselves as masculine and their perceived standing relative to other men in the masculine social hierarchy.

If sharing heterosexual exploits bolsters masculinity, what then of homosexuality? Although previous work finds "fag discourse" to be a primary source of emasculation, particularly for young men (Kimmel 1997; Pascoe 2005, 2007), homosexuality was rarely brought up by our interviewees. Only four (10%) participants even acknowledged that mainstream culture situates gay men as less masculine than straight men, and none defended this belief. Moreover, no participants reported a masculinity threat within the prior 3 years that involved homophobic harassment, although two recalled such events from childhood. Rather, when the topic of homosexuality surfaced, interviewees employed it to highlight their own inclusivity. For example, Oscar, who was teased in childhood, chronicled the following: "

> We were making little art projects and I drew this really nice thing. It had all sorts of colors on it. And the kid who was sitting across from me was like, "That's so gay. Don't you know purple's a gay color?" And I was like, "What?" I mean I was ignorant of all this, you know?" (Oscar)

In response, Oscar stopped wearing purple and parted with his purple lunchbox. Even in high school, "anything that had to do with being gay was just, like, anti" because he "didn't want to be called gay." Yet, Oscar soon reverses course when referring to his present, more enlightened, attitude:

> But I, like, came to terms with that, and I'm pretty open with, like, even talking about what it means to, like, be gay, and be gay in college, because I think it's important that everyone is comfortable in themselves. In terms of my own Christian belief, like, I think homosexuality is wrong, but I think it's important to accept people for who they are, and maybe even be open to them, and, like, allow them to like explain what it is that makes them feel like, you know, who they are. (Oscar)

While Oscar admits to distancing himself from homosexuality in his youth, he presents himself as a changed man. Yet, he also openly subscribes to the belief that "homosexuality is wrong," calling into question the extent of this newfound inclusivity.

Similarly, Patrick described himself as "pretty open-minded" about homosexuality which he substantiated as follows: "

> Last night I was hanging out with my friends, and my one friend who's gay was describing that he had a friend coming over. He was going into a reasonable amount of detail, and I wasn't, like, dismissive. I was, like, alright, whatever, I don't care. (Patrick)

By describing himself as nonplussed, Patrick frames himself as enlightened and "open-minded." Like Oscar, however, his choice of words ("wasn't … dismissive") suggest he is less than enthusiastic about partaking in this kind of banter. These rare and lukewarm claims stand in stark contrast to the importance these young men place on heterosexual storytelling, suggesting compulsive heterosexuality outranks homosexuality in the current gender structure. In other words, we do not see strong evidence of "inclusive masculinity" as it pertains to homosexuality.

Discussion

Although the extent of the so-called "boy crisis" is heavily debated in the United States (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013), girls outperform boys on a range of academic indicators (Duckworth and Seligman 2006; National Center for Education Statistics 2012; Voyer and Voyer 2014). Homophobia and anti-gay attitudes have declined (Pew Research Center 2017) and dual-earner families are now commonplace (Boushey 2011). Recent work suggests, in response to these changes, more inclusive expressions of masculinity have emerged enabling alternative masculine displays without reprisal (Anderson 2009, 2011; McCormack 2011; Robinson et al. 2017). In the present article, we explored the behaviors and situations—both experienced and hypothetical—young U.S. adult men perceive as threatening in order to contribute to scholarly debates regarding the meaning and structure of contemporary masculinity. Emasculation narratives offer unique insight into contemporaneous definitions by distinguishing masculinity from that which it is not. By and large, the narratives revealed a collective image of masculinity that calls for men to be athletic and strong, able-bodied with Herculean stature, heterosexual, and sexually active. In addition, the men in our study embraced a form of masculinity family scholars refer to as "modified traditionalism" (Gerson 2010, pp. 159–160). They anticipate their wives will work but also feel the need, as men, to maintain primary breadwinner status. Although recent research suggests that the overwhelming majority of young people—both women and men—prefer egalitarian relationships and resort to modified traditionalism only as a "Plan B" or a fallback arrangement in the face of institutional barriers (Gerson 2010; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015), our work suggests otherwise. Respondents are fearful of failing to maintain breadwinner status in their future relationships, revealing a "Plan A" independent of practical or situational concerns that could later surface and steer men's preferences. This finding underscores the value of our unique methodological approach to understanding how young adult men think of masculinity. By asking about masculinity threat, rather than marriage and family preferences, we circumvent social desirability pressures that may otherwise encourage young adult men to pay lip service to egalitarianism without truly favoring such arrangements.

In addition to shedding light on participants' personal understandings of masculinity threat, these emasculation narratives collectively clarify the underlying structure of masculinity by illuminating common logics regarding social order. For example, participants expressed a number of anxieties concerning their subservience to women, including rejection, "being whipped," and engagement in activities and behaviors conventionally associated with femininity. One participant summarized the underlying rationale for such concerns. After stating it would be emasculating to lose to a woman, Yarden explained: "If I lost to a man, masculinity is defeating masculinity, so it doesn't feel as bad I suppose, but if I lost to a woman, then femininity is defeating masculinity and for whatever reason that just, you know, doesn't work." Yarden points to a hierarchical social order that positions masculinity in opposition to and above femininity. Although few men were this candid, the narratives detailed here reflect a similar underlying ethos. The men in our study also expressed concern over their ability to subjugate other men, expressing embarrassment over subpar athletic performances, apprehension about their physical appearance compared to other men, and a desire to swap "great stories" of heterosexual conquest in an effort to keep pace with male peers. Taken together, these findings comport with Connell's (1995[2005]) understanding of masculinity as a hierarchy with hegemonic masculinity holding sway over femininities and marginalized, non-hegemonic masculinities.

This is not to say that understandings of masculinity have not shifted at all, and we do document some changes. For example, our participants readily acknowledged women's intellectual capabilities, refrained from and distanced themselves from fighting, and failed to engage in explicitly homophobic discourse. However, given that participants' implicit definitions of masculinity were replete with reference to hierarchy and marginalization, we do not equate these changes with a clear waning of emasculation tactics, much less the crumbling of longstanding power relations. Rather, like other accounts of hybrid-masculinity (Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014), we find that the ways in which participants discursively responded to these changes serve to reinforce the status quo. For example, despite describing young women as more academically accomplished, participants reframed women's accomplishments as inefficient and their own "street

smarts" as strategically superior. Despite eschewing "hyper-macho" physical conflict, they defined themselves as disciplined, mature, and supremely masculine, erecting symbolic boundaries between themselves and other historically marginalized men. And, despite asserting halfhearted acceptance of other men's homosexuality, participants' claims of this seemed to be employed primarily to demonstrate their own progressive inclusivity, a narrative that loses resonance when considered alongside their dramatic and much more frequent narratives of compulsory heterosexuality.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There is tremendous diversity in the meaning of masculinities across time, space, and social location (Connell 1995[2005]), and, indeed, even within seemingly homogenous social locations (Bartkowski 2004; Schwalbe 1996). Our sample is predominantly White, heterosexual, young, and middle- or upper-middle class—and all of our respondents were born and raised in the United States and attend a selective university in the northeastern United States. Consequently, our findings are not generalizable to a larger population. Future research would do well to explore the emasculation narratives of older men, gay men, racially or ethnically diverse men, and others to uncover the taken-for-granted boundaries implied in their accounts and to compare these boundaries with those detailed by our respondents. In a similar manner, our method may also help researchers better understand contemporary constructions of femininity. Although there has been a great deal of empirical research and theory published regarding threatened masculinity, there is considerably less research on threatened femininity (for an exception, see Munsch and Willer 2012) and the existence of a dominant or hegemonic form of femininity is hotly debated (Connell 1987, 1995[2005]; Schippers 2007). By asking women to detail instances of threatened femininity, researchers can more easily ascertain whether singular characterizations of femininities exist within a particular local context.

Practice Implications

The primary implication of our work is emancipatory. Previous research finds that men are more likely than women are to engage in a host of adverse behaviors. For example, men are more likely to have sex at an early age, have multiple sexual partners (Abma et al. 2004; Singh et al. 2000), and engage in extramarital sex (Petersen and Hyde 2010). They are more likely to take risks (Byrnes et al. 1999; Ginsburg and Miller 1982; Morrongiello and Rennie 1998) and to consequently suffer injury or premature death (Ely and Meyerson 2008, 2010; Faul et al. 2010). And, they are more likely to commit violent crimes (Steffensmeier 1995), including rape (Greenfield 1997), intimate partner violence (Greenfield et al. 1998), and bias-motivated offenses (Berrill 1992; Gerstenfield 2011). Importantly, researchers have begun to document a causal relationship between threatened masculinity and engagement in adverse behaviors (Bosson et al. 2009; Maass et al. 2003; Willer et al. 2013). Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to the purview of experiences that constitute meaningful and consequential masculinity threats. In other words, although we know men modify their behavior in response to internalized definitions of masculinity, policymakers, practitioners, and activists will be better able to curb compensatory behavior if they appreciate the scope of these definitions. Similarly, it is our hope that this knowledge will also empower individual men. Implicit rules of behavior, when unidentified, have extreme power over individuals. Once discerned, however, people are better able to modify their behavior and make more informed decisions.

Conclusion

The present study provides new methodological, empirical, and theoretical insights into scholarship on masculinity threat as well as the contemporary structure of masculinities. Methodologically, we demonstrate the value of emasculation narratives for uncovering the symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002) men construct around masculinity. Empirically, our findings detail the characteristics and qualities relatively privileged young men associate with present-day masculinity. Theoretically, our work complements existing debates regarding hegemonic, inclusive, and hybrid masculinities. Although the young adult men in our sample superficially espoused greater inclusivity, their emasculation narratives revealed the persistence of hegemonic hierarchies, as conceptualized by Connell (Carrigan et al. 1985; Connell 1987, 1992, 1995[2005]; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The idea that performances of modern masculinity obscure the persistence of traditional gendered power relations is a fundamental tenant of hybrid-masculinity (Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Hence, our findings provide further evidence that—although contemporary gender performances may superficially suggest greater inclusivity—in the face of change, young privileged men, as the dominant group, are able to redefine and perform masculinity in ways that maintain their advantage.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals This research involves human participants. The protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Participants at Cornell University (Protocol ID#: 0911001024).

Informed Consent Participants received two copies of the informed consent form which contained information about the study procedures, expected benefits, and risks to participation. Participants were asked to read the form carefully and were given the opportunity to ask questions. Participants granted consent by signing both copies and giving one copy to the investigator.

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